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AUTHOR Street, Brian V.
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ABSTRACT

"Autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy are discussed in the context of the literacy-culture-politics relationship. Assumptions underlying literacy, nationalism, assessment, and the links among them are questioned, and approaches to alternative assessment procedures are considered. Arguments about the formation and reproduction of the nation-state proposed by scholars such as Gellner and Anderson are examined and their relationship to theories about literacy are suggested. Two further sets of literacy relations are then described: the relationship between literacy and pedagogy, and the relationship between literacy and orality. It is proposed that the question "Why assess?" can be answered in terms of the analysis of the broader issues involved in the literacy and nationalism debate. The question "How to assess?" is integrally linked to the association between literacy and pedagogy. Finally, the question "What to assess?" depends upon answers to the questions raised by new conceptualizations of the link between orality and literacy. Contains 48 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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Literacy, Nationalism, and Assessment

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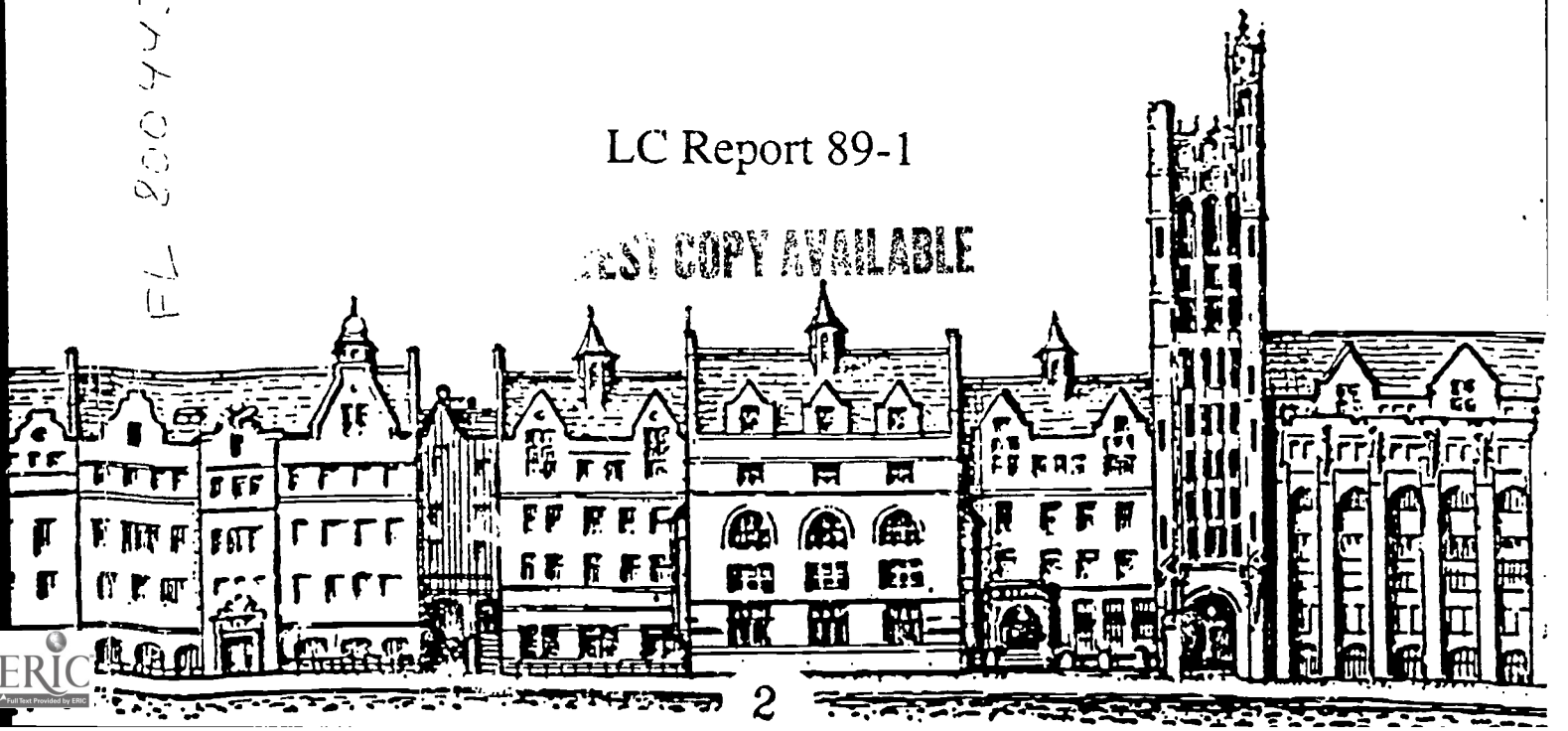

LITERACY, NATIONALISM, AND ASSESSMENT

Brian V. Street
University of Sussex

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Literacy Center
Teachers College
Columbia University

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Introduction

Ernest Gellner suggests in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) that among all the claims for democracy and liberalism made by modern nation states, the only one that is actually borne out in social reality is that made for literacy. Literacy, he believes, "really plays some essential part in the effective working of modern society" (p. 29). He argues that the education system actually does the things educators and politicians alike claim for it: it provides a means of authenticating knowledge through "reasonably impartial centres of learning, which issue certificates on the basis of honest, impartially administered examinations" (p. 29).

Walter Ong similarly connects modern society's achievements with belief in the efficacy of literacy, in particular its ability to facilitate impartial and detached modes of thought:

> By distancing thought, alienating it from its original habitat in sounded words, writing raises consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and is indeed essential for fuller human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for, thereby accelerating, the evolution of consciousness as nothing else before it does (in Baumann, 1986, p. 32).

These claims bring out the link between assumptions about literacy, the character of the nation state and the role of assessment in modern society more explicitly than is usual in the educational literature itself. They suggest that non-educationalists have a contribution to make to contemporary educational debates.

The claims made by Gellner, Ong and others may, for instance, help explain the current concern about literacy standards voiced by E. D. Hirsch (1987, 1988) whose concept of "cultural literacy" is similarly couched in terms of a "shared national standard". He likens this need for uniformity in literacy standards to uniformity in economic laws and interstate commerce. Just as this hard-won uniformity is crucial to the workings of the modern economic state, so literacy uniformity is crucial to the formation and underpinning of the nation: "the two kinds of uniformity are closely allied" (1988).

During a recent work period in America, I was struck by the extent to which literacy there has come to carry this burden, being held responsible for not only uniformity but also national standards of education in general and for the very identity and claim to civilisation of the culture as a whole. Often the term literacy is used where people in the United Kingdom would employ a more general one, such as "education". One explanation for this difference might be that Europe has a longer history of associating literacy with the higher social ranks only. Until recently there was no necessary expectation that poorer people would be literate, so literacy only carried the burden of civilisation and culture for a small proportion of the population. There was also, probably, more recognition there of different literacies rather than assuming a single entity carrying the same meaning in all circumstances. Keith Thomas (1986), for instance, points out that to be literate in early modern England could refer to a number

of different practices: reading Latin, writing cursive script, reading a printed Bible, or reciting certain prayers from a reading board. In the United States there appears to have been a somewhat different history: less willingness, for instance, to stratify overtly (whatever the social reality of inequality may be) and to see different forms of literacy as signifying different social strata. Everyone has to have the same literacy as a mark of being a full and equal member of the society, a whole person, a participant in the democratic process--an "American".

Dan Wagner complains about a similar burden imposed on literacy by radical educators such as Paulo Freire. In a recent review of a new book (1989) by Freire and Macedo (1987), he complains about assertions that literacy teaching must be revolutionary: Why can people not come to literacy for narrow functional or personal reasons, he asks, or teach it because they want to help others, rather than putting on literacy the burden of changing society and overcoming evil? Literacy, he argues, should be freed from association with politics. And yet, in Wagner's own society, the burden is equally heavy, albeit couched in terms of a different political discourse. Perhaps what we should be asking is not whether literacy ought to bear such a heavy burden, but why it has come to do so. Until we can answer that question, I would suggest, we cannot really tackle the more precise questions associated with assessment that are the concern of educators.

I will consider these questions against the background of what I have termed "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy (Street, 1985, 1988). I will focus on the ideological aspects of literacy rather than accepting at face value, as Gellner, Ong and others appear to do, claims for its autonomous, causal nature. A questioning of the assumptions underlying literacy, nationalism, assessment and of the links between them in terms of the ideological model, should, I hope, help provide a conceptual framework from which to approach the difficult task of alternative assessment procedures. I will first examine the arguments about the formation and reproduction of the nation-state put forward by scholars such as Gellner and Benedict Anderson and consider their relationship to theories about literacy. I will then describe and begin to analyse two further sets of literacy relations: the relationship between literacy and pedagogy, and the relationship between literacy and orality. I suggest that the question "Why assess?" can be answered in terms of the analysis of the broader issues involved in the literacy and nationalism debate. The question "How to assess?" is integrally linked to the association between literacy and pedagogy. And the question "What to assess?" depends upon answers to the questions raised by new conceptualisations of the link between orality and literacy.

Literacy and Nationalism

I would like first to consider recent attempts to link literacy with nationalism. The key question that arises in the work of Anderson, Gellner and Jack Goody has been to what extent the modern nation-state attempts to make its cultural boundaries coterminous with its political boundaries. I would argue that literacy teaching and practices play a significant role in any such attempt to homogenise the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity within the borders of a nation. Anthony Smith, for instance, sees Gellner as interpreting the education system to be the crucial element in the emergence of a modern nation-state:

> Modern industry requires a mobile, literate, technologically equipped population and the modern state is the only agency capable of providing

such a work force through its support for a mass, public, compulsory and standardised education system. Modern societies require cultural homogeneity to function (1986, p. 10).

This requires an ideology that overcomes the cultural divisions that otherwise divide large-scale social units.

Anderson argues that the nation is an "imagined community". Its members conceive of a relationship amongst themselves that differentiates them from members of other such communities. The criteria for this identity are socially constructed and may vary from one nation to another, but each conceives of its criteria as being central to the definition of nationalism itself. Anderson sees this as one of the many "paradoxes" of nationalism:

> The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept--in the modern world everyone can, should, will "have" a nationality, as he or she "has" a gender--versus the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, "Greek" nationality is *sui generis* (1983, p. 14).

How these particular imagined communities, with their varying criteria for differentiation from "others", yet their common attachment to the principles of "nationalism", are constructed, reproduced and given such emotional force in modern society is a key question that, I think, literacy studies can help to clarify. Smith, for instance, points out the role that academic disciplines have played in the emergence of the state and its maintenance of cultural homogeneity. As a new state develops, it often calls back its intelligentsia who had migrated abroad:

> It needs a living past into which it can re-enter, and it uses disciplines like archeology and philology to reconstruct those poetic spaces and golden ages in which the "nation" can and must locate itself. The monuments of nature and history, and the cult of heroes, help to keep, "disenchantment" at bay and shape the nation through the ethnic "maps" and "moralities" they evoke (1986, pp. 4-5).

To this list of disciplines that help create the imagery and ideology of the modern nation-state should be added the various disciplinary approaches to literacy: this has included, in Europe and America, the school subjects of English, literary studies and history, to which have recently been added Hirsch's *cultural literacy*, Flesch's *back to basics*, Freire's *literacy for conscientization* and Giroux's *critical literacy*, amongst others. Literacy teaching and the control and dissemination of specific literacy practices across different cultural groupings within a polity, then, represent a crucial element in ensuring that the whole nation speaks and writes (and thinks?) according to cultural conventions disseminated from the centre, derived from spurious images of homogeneity and of unity--the imagined community.

"Nationism", Nationalism and Literacy

Joshua Fishman has provided some of the best-known analyses of the relationship between language and nationalism, although he does not pay specific attention to the implications of literacy for his argument. In "Nationality-Nationalism and Nation-Nationism" (1986), he suggests a distinction between the concept of

nationism, where the emphasis is on politico-geographic boundaries and identity, and *nationalism* where the emphasis is on socio-cultural and ideological identity. Many of the "old" nations may have begun as forms of nationalism, in which the socio-cultural identity emerged first and only later became attached to the geographical boundary of nation. For these nations language was a prior criterion of what defined identity, in the sense of nationalism, and only later became an issue at the level of nation, once these societies had made the transition from nationalism to nationism.

For the new nations, however, Fishman identifies a different development. They have begun in many cases as geographical-political entities and

> are not yet ethnic nations. . . . They are not yet socio-cultural units as a result of the long and painful common struggle of a population to unite across local differences, to create heroes and histories, songs and dramas, in order to attain certain common goals" (1986, p. 46).

In these cases, he suggests, the trend in language and politics is more likely to be towards "diglossian compromises": local languages may continue to be used for local purposes and a central standard language will be employed for specific educational and technological purposes. This trend, he anticipates, will be stronger than the counter-trend towards the abandonment of diglossia on behalf of new standard languages with undisputed hegemony in all domains of national expression. New nations stress nationism and diglossia, involving a language of wider communication than that of monoglossic nations. Success in these new contexts will be in the direction of the eventual development of a wider diglossic-nationalism where national identity will correspond to wider geographical boundaries. Lack of success will be in terms of a narrow diglossic-nationalism, corresponding to smaller regions that are already defined in terms of sociocultural unity. Language problems in the contemporary world are related, then, to which stage of national integration and of nationalism a society has reached.

Ignoring for a moment the overemphasis on stages rather than varieties in Fishman's account, I would like to consider the implications of his argument for the role of literacy in the nation-state. I would suggest that the effect of developing literacy campaigns and of attempting to introduce all members of a nation to a single literacy, defined in terms of both the language in which it is taught and of a standard register, is to counter the trend to diglossic compromise that Fishman identifies and to underscore the process of nationalism rather than nationism. Literacy teaching tends to stress a common, national identity through common texts, agendas and language uses: it works toward the uniformity to which Hirsch and Gellner aspire and against the retention of varieties of discourses. Whilst at the level of oral language alone, the tendency may well be for nations to retain a number of different languages at once performing different functions, at the level of literacy the tendency is towards "exclusivistic sway of a single [discourse] in all domains of national life" (1986, p. 47).

This is true of economically developed as well as economically underdeveloped societies. In the latter, literacy campaigns have been a prominent feature of the post-war era, and "national" statistics have been collected on literacy rates as part of the credentials of new states. This applies in both socialist and capitalist contexts, the recent Nicaraguan literacy crusade representing a particularly clear example of the uses of these statistics for international legitimation as well as for building nationhood. Recent research on Mexico helps put these kinds of campaigns into perspective by

demonstrating the long history of struggle between centre and periphery, in which language and literacy have for centuries been key ideological counters, a principle that can be generalised to many countries and to many literacy campaigns. The uses of literacy to assert central hegemony in Aztec times were, according to Linda King (forthcoming), similar structurally to the deployment of literacy campaigns in modern Mexico (only the idiom has changed so that today the cultural and ideological discourses within which they are conducted are those of nationalism). Peasants are encouraged to acquire literacy in order to participate in and to become members of the nation-state. In the first phases of the recent Mexican literacy campaign, monolingual Indians were, by definition, ignored, since it was assumed at the centre that the whole nation must speak Spanish. When those leading the campaign eventually convinced the central authorities that this was creating difficulties in teaching, assessing, and recording "success" of the campaign, it was agreed that indigenous languages and literacies could be taught--but as a bridge to Spanish. Monolingual, non-literate Indians, because of the difference and autonomy represented by these very traits, represented a threat to the uniformity of the nation as culture. In Fishman's terms, the pressure was towards nationalism rather than nationism; in Gellner's sense, the boundaries of the polity were being treated as though they also represented cultural boundaries; in Anderson's sense, an imagined community was being constructed via the dissemination of a single, culturally determined set of literacy practices. The tendency to diglossian compromises which Fishman expects to find is countered by the ways in which the literacy campaign stresses linguistic and cultural uniformity. The Indians, to become "Mexican", must read and write the dominant language, just as Americans of all ethnic and class groupings are required to conform to a literate standard.

A similar anthropological analysis of literacy in Ethiopia and Somalia, by Ioan Lewis (1986), brings out the extent to which oral discourses play a similar role in modern nationalism and may, it is hinted, supersede literate channels even in the modern nation-state. Linking Ong's assertion that "writing heightens consciousness" with Gellner's belief that literacy is an indispensable qualification for the development of national identity, Lewis demonstrates that the situation on the ground is more complex and more equivocal. In Ethiopia, writing may seem to play a crucial part in national identity and consciousness, but closer examination suggests that it is Christianity that is the crucial variable: the dissemination of the dominant religion through indigenous literate traditions leads, as in many cases, both to central focus on literacy and to local resistance via ethnic languages and literacies. In Somalia, on the other hand, oral conventions of poetry and song have been the crucial focus for political expression: a leader acquires status through his ability to represent political and ideological issues in the form of praise poems and songs and through culturally valued forms of rhetoric. During the classic "mass" literacy crusade of the 1970s, oral conventions continued to provide the framework for much literacy activity and when the central government was weakened through wars with Ethiopia, it was this oral tradition that survived and provided the focus for political identity and resistance. This was often in the form of what Ong calls *secondary orality*--radios and tape recordings which had become available to the mass of the population, nomads and settled alike, who

> listened avidly to Somali broadcasts from local stations and from places as distant as Cairo, London and Moscow. In this context, as they produce new works, poets now frequently use tape recordings to supplement their memories. New pop radio songs, with musical accompaniments, beat out the party line. Opponents of the regime, inside and outside the country, compose stinging attacks on its leaders, sometimes in the form of opaque

love songs. As in traditional Somali politics, the President's poets exchange vitriolic verse with his opponents outside Somalia (1986, p. 148).

Poetic exchanges consist of oral chain letters, using traditional alliterative devices:

> In this surge of electronic rhetoric Somali politics retains its overwhelmingly oral character, bypassing the written word which, if indispensable in certain contexts, falls into second place as an ancillary medium of communication--an extension of writing in oral culture (ibid.)

Those, like Goody and Gellner, who see literacy as simply a neutral technology functioning to assist the modern nation-state in its requirements for "impartial" knowledge and technical expertise, are liable to miss the message spelt out by examples such as these: that literacy and orality, as forms of communication, are embedded in ideological and political processes, their meanings and functions determined by context rather than by some essential nature of their own. It appears just as likely that literacy may be bypassed in some modern nation states in favour of oral, rhetorical conventions of political discourse, as that it will be used to reinforce national identity and the notion of an imagined community. This only makes more apparent the extent to which the claims for literacy in the modern world are ideological rather than scientific.

Indeed, this process is not confined to economically underdeveloped countries, where literacy campaigns have tended to have a high profile. In the economically developed world, too, the functions of literacy derive from the meanings and cultural conventions ascribed to it within particular political contexts. In the context of nationalist rhetoric, literacy is a key component of central hegemony, reinforced to the extent that its ideological role is "naturalised" beneath quasi-scientific discourses about its essential difference from oral communication and its consequences for cognition, logical functioning, social progress, etc. In the adult sector, for instance, there are national literacy campaigns to "eradicate" illiteracy as though it were a disease. A crucial aspect of this is bringing into the fold, into the nation, those whose cultural and ideological difference is apparently marked by their commitment to other discourses and channels of communication than those of the central nation-state. Arlene Fingeret (1983) has demonstrated that, in fact, many adults in the United States may not see the need for literacy for themselves as individuals, since it is available to them from others within their network. Here literacy skills are one set amongst many that may be reciprocated: A mechanic may exchange his technical skills for those of a friend who can help him fill in a form; a businessman may use tape recordings to store commercial transactions and get a trusted colleague to type them out for him to sign, as did kings and rulers in medieval Europe for whom writing was a menial task to be performed by paid employees or scribes (cf. Clanchy, 1979). In these contexts, there may be no more stigma to lacking the particular set of skills we associate with literacy than to lacking mechanical or entrepreneurial skills. The stigma only develops in relation to national standards and expectations. As King (forthcoming) found with respect to Mexico, in the Indian communities where literacy was not a regular part of everyday life there was no stigma attached to not having it. It was mestizos, attempting to be socially mobile and often moving into urban areas where literacy was normative, who began to see themselves as inferior, even "mute, if they lacked literacy skills."

If the evidence from King, Fingeret and others suggests that literacy is not so important for functioning in modern society as many believe it to be, then how can we explain the persistence of the stigma of "illiteracy"? One explanation, in terms of the present argument, is that the stigma is not simply an unfortunate side-effect of modern life, to be overcome by a combination of changing attitudes and of expanding literacy training for adults, but rather that it is an integral part of the construction of nationalism. The stigma is not intrinsic to literacy but to definitions of national identity. The pressure to become literate, within the narrow conventions of what is appropriate literacy laid down by the nation-state, is in reality a pressure to join the nation, to wave its flag, to speak its language and write its script--to identify with its imagined community. The "illiterate" represent a challenge and a threat to the very roots of the political order: they do not share the conventions of communication that characterise the nation; they can not even read the orders that are continually sent out via bureaucracies and state institutions, in the form of identity cards, lists of instructions, timetables, etc. Recent attempts to assess literacy skills by using "relevant" tests, in place of overly academic examinations, make frequent use of exactly these aspects of the state's literacy hegemony: subjects are given examples of tax forms and social security documents to which they have to apply the discourses of bureaucracy and state power that they have, perhaps, been attempting to avoid. The tests are not neutral but part of the wider hegemony.

As Clifford Hill and Kate Parry (1988) point out in their aptly named "The Test at the Gate," literacy tests are part of the initiation into membership of the nation as well as serving to allocate the individual a specific place within it according to their performance. They quote Socrates' comments in *The Republic* on the use of ordeals to sort out leaders from others in the commonwealth:

> As people lead colts up to alarming noises to see whether they are timid, so these young men must be brought into terrifying situations and then into scenes of pleasure, which will put them to severer proof than gold tried in the furnace. If we could find one bearing himself well in all these trials and resisting every enchantment, a true guardian of himself, preserving always that perfect rhythm and harmony of being which he has acquired from his training in music and poetry, such a one will be of the greatest service to the commonwealth as well as to himself. Whenever we find one who has come unscathed through every test in childhood, youth and manhood, we shall set him as a ruler to watch over the commonwealth. . . All who do not reach this standard we must reject. . . (Cornford, 1981, pp. 102-3; quoted in Hill & Parry, 1988, p. 1).

Hill and Parry relate this to the uses of literacy tests in contemporary life:

> Modern societies differ greatly from Socrates' republic, but they too share the basic features of economic differentiation and a system of ordeals for selecting their guardians. In fact, a system of ordeals is now used to select guardians not only for the state but for its various sectors of production (Hill & Parry, p. 2).

If we were to add a similar attention to the role of literacy in the political order to their consideration of the economic processes of modern industrial life--to substitute the term "nations" where they use "societies"--we would see a wider application of their views on the uses of literacy testing and an explanation for their findings that does not

depend upon economic factors alone. Not only can such testing be interpreted as serving to "sort out" the economic order and to provide leadership for the political system, but it is also crucial to the ideological levels through which that system operates, specifically the notion of nationalism. It is at this level that we might begin to explain both the importance of such tests and their nature: the emphasis on supposedly objective and "culture-free" skills that Hill and Parry rightly criticize is precisely the feature that Gellner sees as the source of the success of the modern nation-state. It is because this detachment and universality separates those involved from their cultural roots and ethnic specificities that the nation is able to assert an identity beyond that of its separate, cultural components--the key element of nationalism. The deception, as Hill and Parry (1989) go on to demonstrate through their analyses of the cultural assumptions embedded in even the most neutral testing, is that the ideology and values of a single cultural group are thereby represented not as ideology and values at all but as neutral and universal.

As in all societies, the attempt to locate a given cultural system in nature rather than in culture is an attempt to legitimise and validate that system in terms that place it beyond challenge and dispute. This is the character of all universalistic claims, whether embedded in scriptures, traditional myths, or national constitutions: they are drawn up by particular groups at particular times but attempt to deny these constraints and limitations through a discourse of neutrality and universality. In the present era, that discourse is heavily rooted in the empiricist, scientific paradigm, and appeals to universality are couched in terms of "objectivity", "proof" and empirical verification. Through the application of this discourse to the tests it applies to its members, the nation-state claims the authority of nature for what are, in fact, the mechanisms of particular cultural groupings and ideologies. It is these claims that are being validated when Gellner (1983) writes of "reasonably impartial centres of learning, which issue certificates on the basis of honest, impartially administered examinations" (p. 29).

Literacy and Pedagogy

One aspect of the link between literacy and nationalism that has not received much research attention and yet is significant for understanding the role of assessment in modern society, is the relationship between literacy and pedagogy. If the analyses of literacy and nationalism help to explain decisions regarding "Why to assess?", it is the relationship between literacy and pedagogy that helps determine, for educators and politicians alike, the answer to the question "How to assess?" The definition of literacy in terms of pedagogy both conveniently excludes those areas of non-pedagogised experience that are difficult to assess or that require broader definitions of assessment and evaluation (cf. Charnley & Jones, 1979; Holland, 1989) and gives the legitimacy and authority of the "scientific" assessment establishment to the particular literacy that subserves the interests of the nation-state.

By "pedagogised" literacy I refer to the variety that Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986) has more narrowly called "schooled literacy": it is a form of literacy that is acquired via explicit pedagogy and institutionalized teaching, in most cases within the context of school, though not always. In its schooled form, it only came to prominence within the last hundred years, yet it is now conceived in many sectors of modern society as the only significant literacy, the standard by which all others are judged. There are, in fact, many varieties of literacy, and they are not all necessarily dependent upon either pedagogy or schooling: they include the acquisition and use of literacy for story telling and reading; for immediate functional purposes in the home and work; for leisure and pleasure

purposes; and for personal exploration as in diaries and private notebooks. In all of these cases actual literacy practices may be linked to other values, ideologies and purposes than school achievement, particularly as measured by success in school tests. How, then, does pedagogised literacy become the standard, the "signifier" of national identity, against the competing claims of other literacy varieties? The modern educator, in collusion with children's publishers, appears determined to assimilate alternative practices to the dominant pedagogic model: instructions on children's toys, books and tapes in the average middle-class home in the United States, are concerned with stressing how the activity can be employed to scaffold school-type learning and improve readiness for school. The claims are validated with reference to academic research and expertise, thereby marginalising the non-pedagogic aspects of the literacy practice involved. Nothing, it seems, can be allowed to escape the hegemony of the modern pedagogue. Moreover, these interventions are not politically innocent: they subserve the wider hegemony of the nation-state and its attempt to homogenise the cultural variety within its boundaries.

We need, then, to investigate these processes and the assumptions underlying them further. One approach might be to compare the meanings and uses of literacy in specific classroom situations with those of the home settings from which the children come. Such research needs to address the larger structure of ideas and practices that underpins the construction and dominance of schooled literacy and its links to concepts of nation and nationalism. Amongst educators, however, the discovery that home literacies may differ from those of the school has been generally treated more narrowly, and more normatively, as a sign of something wrong with the home--of deprivation and inadequacy. Recent efforts to "improve" school performance have involved taking schooled literacy to the home and attempting to make it replace and supplant the home varieties: as a result of this, it is hoped, children will arrive at school ready to do well in the school variety and to pass the tests based upon it.

For instance, Teale and Sulzby (1987), researching how a mother "scaffolded" her child towards the reading characteristics expected in school, comment critically on the example of home literacy described in Shirley Brice Heath's study (1985). Where Heath saw the difference between home and school literacies in anthropological terms--as evidence of cultural variety--and suggested that school should perhaps build on children's home literacies rather than supplant them, Teale and Sulzby see only "poor" performance and want to bring school pedagogy into such homes.

In a current research project to examine the relationship of home and school literacies (Street & Street, 1990), we have hypothesised that it is precisely this association between school pedagogy and literacy that is the source of the dominance of schooled literacy. By means of the linkage between literacy and pedagogy, literacy itself comes to be viewed and practised, by parents and teachers alike, within a framework of learning, teaching and schooling. Classroom observations in an elementary school in the United States, for instance, indicated that much of the teaching experience is about procedure, involving metalinguistic discourses that define and articulate the particular literacy that is appropriate. The bureaucracy and mechanics of everyday classroom practice signify that literacy is to be conceptualised, whether implicitly or explicitly, in terms of the school's requirements on its pupils: "write this on yellow paper"; "begin Journal Writing Time"; "this schedule gives you ten minutes to write. . . ." Some parents, in interviews, provided accounts of their children's literacy that did not conform to this institutional definition: a child may read only comics or car manuals for instance. But rather than seeing these practices as "alternative" literacies, they were sources of

anxiety, conceptualised as deviations from proper literacy. Research projects into alternative literacies amongst school children and their parents (Miriam Camitta, forthcoming; Amy Shuman, 1987) might help to open up the definition of literacy in modern society, or at least to provide data for understanding the real variation that is hidden beneath the dominant model. Again, academic research has a role to play not in providing disinterested accounts of the nature of literacy, but in exposing the ideological nature of such accounts and raising questions, therefore, of their relationship to forms of cultural domination and to the politics of nationalism.

The Literate/Oral "Mix"

Related to issues of literacy and nationalism and of literacy and pedagogy is one further aspect of literacy practices that requires attention, namely, the ways in which literacy itself is defined vis-a-vis orality. From the perspective of a system dependent on assessment of "literacy", the "how" and "why" of which have been discussed above, the definition of literacy and its distinction from orality helps answer the question "What to assess?"

Most scholars until recently have considered literacy and orality as entirely separate and different. This is, of course, essential if one assumes, as do Goody (1968, 1977, 1986), Ong (1982), and Olson (1977) for instance, that the acquisition of literacy has large consequences for logic, mentality, and higher order cognition. A "great divide" between literacy and orality is intrinsic to their claims and to the underlying premises of many, if not most, educators. Recent work, however, has focused on similarities as well as differences, a perspective with considerable implications for assumptions about literacy and its associations with nationalism and pedagogy. Deborah Tannen (1982), for instance, has referred to "oral-like" and "literate-like" forms of speech, to indicate that some oral utterances have the characteristics traditionally associated in the culture with literacy, such as planning, explicitness, detachment (e.g., lectures, sermons, speeches) while some literacy practices have the characteristics associated with orality, such as immediacy, interactiveness, involvement (e.g., letters, dialogue journals, love notes). Tannen (1985) has recently moved even further away from the misleading metaphors of "literate-like" and "oral-like" and concentrates instead on the function of a discourse, what she calls the "relative focus on involvement", irrespective of channel.

Similarly, Heath (1985) has drawn attention to the ways in which much written practice is embedded in oral situations and conventions, such as the negotiation that may accompany receipt of a letter or the writing of a reply. Janet Maybin (1988) has referred to an *oral-literate continuum* as the basis for studying children's dialogues around texts in school. Niko Besnier (1986, 1988) has elaborated the concept of *register* to allow him to describe, without falling into oral-literate dichotomies, the writing of sermons and of love letters that he encountered during field work amongst Pacific Island peoples. And I have referred to the *mix* of oral and literate conventions to be found in literacy practices in both Iran and the United Kingdom (Street, 1988). The unit of study is still problematic, but we need to find ways of describing these overlaps and interrelations between channels that avoid the misleading aspects of the great divide.

In the study of an elementary school classroom in the United States referred to above, we found, for instance, that the communication of a group of students around a table was best understood by not reducing it to either channel: the students read from

text books, spoke to each other about the content, wrote down syntheses and then read those aloud to each other or read silently over each other's shoulders (Street & Street, 1990). The whole was greater than the sum of its parts and someone practiced in any one of the separate skills of reading, writing and speaking would not necessarily have been able to handle the conventions involved in the total discourse. Similarly, comparison of home and school discourses has indicated different "mixes" or "oral/literate continua", opening up to investigation large areas of social interaction and communication that are currently overlooked. This research suggests that the emphasis on schooled literacy alone is only part of the picture and that real-life practices are too varied and complex to be squeezed into the school paradigm. As Harvey Graff points out in describing the limitations of traditional conceptualisation and measurement of literacy: "The measurement and distribution of literacy in a population may, in fact, reveal little about the uses to which such skills could be put and the degree to which demands on personal literacy could be satisfied with the skills commonly held" (de Castell, 1986, p. 81).

What, then, out of this rich and broad experience, does the society want to test? Hill and Parry (1989) have suggested that the answer is a rather narrow, culturally-biased selection that serves to reproduce dominant "autonomous" models of literacy. I would like to look beyond these present practices and to suggest that if the answer to "what is tested" were to be "a 'mix' of channels", then the ideological implications of the whole testing paradigm might be rather different. In this case, the decision no longer belongs to educationalists but requires explicit social and cultural judgements. It is a move away from representing literacy as having distinctive autonomous characteristics associated intrinsically with schooling and pedagogy and away from the characterisation of the literate person as intrinsically civilised, detached, logical, etc., in contrast with "illiterates" or "those who communicate mainly through oral channels." If the qualities of logic, detachment, and abstraction conventionally associated with the acquisition of literacy turn out to be available in oral discourse, as Ruth Finnegan (1988), Fingeret (1983), Besnier (1986) and others have demonstrated, or even in some mix of channels that does not require the conventions and rules usually associated with literacy-in-itself, as I have been suggesting here, then literacy loses some of the status and mystification that currently underpin the investment of vast resources in both teaching and assessing it. From this perspective, too, the uses of literacy within the nation-state as a means to homogenise culture appear less easy to achieve: an oral/literate mix may be less easily pedagogised, less easily reduced to a single, narrow set of cultural norms to which a whole society must conform, and less easily subjected to testing and evaluation, as Maybin (1988) has demonstrated, than can the conventions of a single channel. The separation of the channels and the emphasis on literacy in itself in the modern nation-state may be part of the way in which that state asserts control and marginalises alternatives. The academic study of a mix of orality and literacy, and of the varieties in such a "mix" as between home, school and varied cultures within the state, is itself politically charged.

Conclusions

It is within this context that I would like to suggest we address questions of assessment. If we move away from the neutralist and quasi-scientific discourses within which most literacy practices are currently researched, taught and assessed, then the questions as to why to assess, how to assess and what to assess become, as we have seen, more complex, but also perhaps less immediately embedded in the narrow definitions and aims of either the educator or nation-state. The broader framework for literacy

research that I am suggesting requires attention, then, to the three major relationships raised here: the relationships between literacy and nationalism, between literacy and pedagogy, and between literacy and orality. The question of why to assess can be directly related to issues arising out of the relationship between literacy and nationalism; how to assess can be better understood if we consider the relationship of literacy and pedagogy (in terms, for instance, of social as opposed to cognitive assumptions about learning); and what to assess is addressed by problematising the relationship of literacy and orality, so that the unit to be tested may be a "mix" of oral/literate conventions rather than literacy-in-itself. Out of such an approach we might derive different research models and different data that will enable us to understand more fully the role and significance of literacy in modern society and to facilitate what Habermas (1986) refers to as more "reflective and democratic" forms of communication.

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