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Chapter 1

Learning Language as a Matter of Learning Social Languages within Discourses

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Introduction

In this chapter, I argue for a sociocultural perspective on what is involved in literacy and language learning at any level, whether for children or adults. This perspective makes two key claims. First: people do not primarily learn language at the level of things like ‘English’ or ‘Russian’. Rather, they learn one or another of a great many different varieties of English that I will call ‘social languages’ (Gee, 1996, 1999a). Each social language offers speakers or writers distinctive grammatical resources with which they can ‘design’ their oral or written ‘utterances’ to accomplish two inter-related things:

(1) to get recognized by others (and themselves) as enacting a specific socially-situated identity (that is, to ‘come off’ as a particular ‘kind of person’) and
(2) to get recognized by others (and themselves) as engaged in a specific socially-situated activity.

Thus, each distinctive social language allows a speaker or writer to be recognized as a socially-situated ‘who doing what’ (Wieder & Pratt, 1990).

The second claim is that, in anything like the traditional ways in which philosophers, linguists, and psychologists have talked about meaning for things like words, phrases, and sentences (e.g. in terms of definitions, concepts, stored representations), at the level of social languages, there is no such thing as meaning. In social languages, meaning is not something that is ‘stored’ in the head and then looked up or accessed. It is actually ‘customized’, built, or assembled (however we want to phrase the matter) here and now, on the fly, on the spot, ‘on line’ when and as we speak/write or listen/read (Barsalou, 1999; Clancey, 1997).

Below, I will first lay out the key elements of a sociocultural perspective
on language and literacy. I will then show these elements at work in concrete examples. The most extended example involves a Korean graduate student trying to use, not ‘English’ per se, but a social language that will allow her to enact successfully the identity of an advanced doctoral student accomplishing the very consequential activity of getting a faculty member to take her on as a thesis student.

In the final section of this chapter, I will briefly discuss what is required for teaching and learning language in the sociocultural sense developed here, with particular reference to learners I will refer to as ‘authentic beginners’. Let me take a moment here and say what I mean by the term ‘authentic beginners’. In other work, I have used the term ‘latecomers’ for such learners, since they are people who arrive at learning sites after some other learners have already engaged in a good bit of consequential learning practice in terms of which they come to look smart or gifted and the latecomers come to look ‘slow’. But, as Pippa Stein (personal communication) has pointed out to me, the term ‘latecomer’ has the unfortunate (and untrue) implication that it is the latecomers’ fault that they have arrived ‘late in the game’. So, I will switch to the term ‘authentic beginner’.

I will use the term ‘authentic beginners’ for people, whether children or adults, who have come to learning sites of any sort without the sorts of early preparation, pre-alignment in terms of cultural values, and sociocultural resources that more advantaged learners at those sites have. For example, it has long been argued in the educational literature (e.g. Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996) that schools resonate (in many cases, for historical and arbitrary reasons) with the values and practices of certain types of (usually middle-class) homes. Children from these homes are ‘false beginners’ when they enter school to begin their formal introduction into literacy and school-based learning. They come to look like ‘quick studies’ when they pick up early school-based literacy so quickly. On the other hand, children from some minority and lower-socioeconomic homes are ‘authentic beginners’, having come from homes with other sorts of (often equally complex) values and practices with regard to literacy and language, ones that do not resonate with early schooling. They are treated as if they are ‘slow’ even when they are, in fact, making substantive progress. Worse yet, their induction often skips things that teachers assume they ‘should’ already know because, in fact, ‘false beginners’ already take these things for granted.

The Korean doctoral student I will discuss below, like many foreign students in the United States, came to her US graduate school as an ‘authentic beginner’, as, indeed, do many native English speaking minority and lower-socioeconomic students. She was, of course, well educated, and no beginner in that sense. But she was an authentic beginner in her attempts to master the sociocultural identity (and concomitant practices) of being a graduate student in a US research-based university. When she entered graduate school, she was treated as if she were a co-equal beginning graduate student, while, in fact, many of her fellow students were false beginners who came to graduate school ‘pre-aligned’ for success, based on their earlier experiences – in this case experiences that may have taken place anywhere between (or throughout the course of) their early home-based socialization and their college careers.

As the Korean student failed to make rapid progress, she was progressively treated as a ‘failure’ in relation to her fellow students. And, of course, no one ever felt the need to teach her what they assumed any graduate student in a US research university already knew, even when, perhaps, it was obvious she did not know such things. In fact, some of what she needed to know was so taken for granted and unconscious to her fellow graduate students and her professors that they could not in any case have articulated the knowledge she needed.

What I want to concentrate on here is not just the injustice of pretending that people are all equivalent beginners when some are authentic beginners and some are false ones. I want to concentrate, as well, on just what it is that authentic beginners often don’t know but do need to know if they are to ever ‘catch up’ with false beginners, but which ‘insiders’ often can’t or won’t tell them. However, I must also admit that our whole idea of ‘catching up’ is itself in serious need of interrogation (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). In many sites, especially in schools, we set the ‘norm’ in terms of the performance of the most advanced false beginners and then pretend that learners making quite ‘normal’ and adequate progress, by any rational standards, are not ‘really learning’.

**Teaching Social Languages, Not ‘Language’**

So, my first claim is this: Teaching and learning language and literacy is not about teaching and learning ‘English’, but about teaching and learning specific social languages. The best way to see what I mean by a ‘social language’ is to consider some examples (Gee, 1996). First, consider the two excerpts below from the talk of a young woman (we’ll call her ‘Jane’) who recorded herself speaking to her parents and to her boyfriend. In both cases, she was discussing a story she had already discussed with her classmates in a college class earlier in the day. In the story, a character named Abigail wants to get across a river to see her true love, Gregory. A river boat captain (Roger) says he will take her only if she consents to sleep with him. In desperation to see Gregory, Abigail agrees to do so. But when she arrives
and tells Gregory what she has done, he disowns her and sends her away. There is more to the story, but this is enough for our purposes here. Students in the class had been asked to rank order the characters in the story from the most offensive to the least.

In explaining to her parents why she thought Gregory was the worst (least moral) character in the story, the young woman said the following:

**To parents at dinner:**

Well, when I thought about it, I don't know, it seemed to me that Gregory should be the most offensive. He showed no understanding for Abigail, when she told him what she was forced to do. He was callous. He was hypocritical, in the sense that he professed to love her, then acted like that.

Later that night, in an informal setting, she also explained to her boyfriend why she thought Gregory was the worst character. In this context she said:

**To boyfriend late at night:**

What an ass that guy was, you know, her boyfriend. I should hope, if I ever did that to see you, you would shoot the guy. He uses her and he says he loves her. Roger never lies, you know what I mean?

Note that Jane designs or crafts her language in the two cases quite differently. She is using two different grammars; she is speaking two different social languages. To her parents, she carefully hedges her claims ('I don't know', 'it seemed to me'); to her boyfriend, she makes her claims straight out. To her parents, she uses formal terms such as 'offensive', 'understanding', 'callous', 'hypocritical' and 'professed'; to her boyfriend, she uses informal terms like 'ass' and 'guy'. She also uses more formal sentence structure to her parents ('it seemed to me that...'), 'He showed no understanding for Abigail, when... ', 'He was hypocritical in the sense that...' than she does to her boyfriend ('... that guy, you know, her boyfriend', 'Roger never lies, you know what I mean?').

Jane repeatedly addresses her boyfriend as 'you', thereby noting his social involvement as a listener, but she does not directly address her parents in this way. In talking to her boyfriend, she leaves several points to be inferred, points that she spells out more explicitly to her parents (e.g. her boyfriend must infer that Gregory is being accused of being a hypocrite from the information that, though Roger is bad, at least he does not lie, which Gregory did in claiming to love Abigail).

Now, what is the point or purpose of using two different social languages with different grammars here? Why can't Jane just use one of these social languages both to her parents at dinner and to her boyfriend at night?

Different social languages allow Jane to make visible and recognizable two different versions of who she is, two different socially-situated identities. In one case, to her parents at dinner, she is 'a dutiful, intelligent, and respectful daughter' in the terms of a certain sort of upper-middle-class culture. In the other case, to her boyfriend at night, she is 'an intimate, but cautioning, girlfriend to and for her boyfriend.' These socially-situated identities are inherently social and relational. Jane fashions for herself a position in social space that, in turn, creates positions (relative to hers) for others to occupy. In one case she creates a position or identity for her parents as people who have done 'right' by her education; in the other case, she creates a position or identity for her boyfriend as an intimate who had, nonetheless, better realize what her expectations for romance and relationships are.

Different social languages allow Jane to make visible and recognizable two different doings, two different socially-situated activities. It is a common activity, in certain sorts of middle-class homes in the US, that children from a very early age display their knowledge in school-based forms of language at dinnertime. Though she is a college student, Jane still carries out this activity with her parents at dinner in the context of school topics. While people like Jane may sometimes talk to their parents at dinner in this way, not all people do. This is a distinctive activity that research has long connected with both success in school and the formation of school-based identities and identifications. To her boyfriend, Jane is using language to carry out a quite different activity. She is both bonding to him and fashioning for him the sort of value system and identity she wants any boyfriend of hers to have.

Let me give one more example of two different social languages used by the same person to enact different identities and activities. This example will make clear that social languages, enacting distinctive identities and activities, are highly relevant in professional and academic settings. To see this, consider the two extracts below, the first from a professional journal, the second from a popular science magazine, both written by the same biologist on the same topic (examples are from Greg Myers's excellent and important book, *Writing Biology* (Myers, 1990: 150):

1. Experiments show that *Heliconius* butterflies are less likely to oviposit on host plants that possess eggs or egg-like structures. These egg-mimics are an unambiguous example of a plant trait evolved in response to a host-restricted group of insect herbivores. (Professional journal)

2. *Heliconius* butterflies lay their eggs on *Passiflora* vines. In defense the vines seem to have evolved fake eggs that make it look to the butterflies as if eggs have already been laid on them. (Popular science magazine)
The first extract, from a professional scientific journal, is about the conceptual structure of a specific theory within the scientific discipline of biology. The subject of the initial sentence is ‘experiments’, a methodological tool in natural science. The subject of the next sentence is ‘these egg mimics’, note how plant parts are named, not in terms of the plant itself, but in terms of the role they play in a particular theory of natural selection and evolution, namely ‘co-evolution’ of predator and prey (that is, the theory that predator and prey evolve together by shaping each other). Note also, in this regard, the earlier ‘host plants’ in the preceding sentence, rather than the ‘vines’ of the popular passage.

In the second sentence, the butterflies are referred to as ‘a host-restricted group of insect herbivores’, which points simultaneously to an aspect of scientific methodology (as ‘experiments’ did) and to the logic of a theory (as ‘egg mimics’ did). Any scientist arguing for the theory of co-evolution faces the difficulty of demonstrating a causal connection between a particular plant characteristic and a particular predator when most plants have so many different sorts of animals attacking them. A central methodological technique to overcome this problem is to study plant groups (like Fassiflora vines) that are preyed on by only one or a few predators (in this case, Heliconius butterflies). ‘Host restricted group of insect herbivores’, then, refers to both the relationship between plant and insect that is at the heart of the theory of co-evolution and also to the methodological technique of picking plants and insects that are restricted to each other so as to ‘control’ for other sorts of interactions.

The first passage, then, is concerned with scientific methodology and a particular theoretical perspective on evolution. By contrast, the second extract, from a popular science magazine, is not about methodology and theory, but about animals in nature. The butterflies are the subject of the first sentence, and the vine is the subject of the second. Further, the butterflies and the vine are labeled as such, not in terms of their role in a particular theory. The second passage is a story about the struggles of insects and plants that are transparently open to the trained gaze of the scientist. Further, the plant and insect become ‘intentional’ actors in the drama: the plants act in their own ‘defense’ and things ‘look’ a certain way to the insects, who are ‘deceived’ by appearances just as humans sometimes are.

So the scientist has designed his language differently in the two cases. In turn, he has accomplished different activities (in the professional case, a report of experimental results; in the popular case, an illuminating description of nature) and enacted different identities (in the professional case, experimental scientist; in the popular case, expert observer of nature).

Situated Meanings and Cultural Models

I now want to turn to the second key claim I made at the beginning of the chapter: in anything like the traditional ways in which we have talked about meaning for words, phrases, and sentences, at the level of social languages, there is no such thing as meaning. Traditional work in linguistics and psychology has argued that words are associated with general meanings, concepts, or representations that are ‘stored’ in the mental lexicon and ‘looked up’ (accessed) when they are required for speaking/writing or listening/reading (see Clancey, 1997 for an overview). And, this is certainly the view that has informed most traditional language and literacy pedagogy.

More contemporary work, however, especially that stemming from recent ‘connectionist’ (or related) approaches to the mind, suggests that this traditional viewpoint is not, in fact, true (Barsalou, 1999; Clancey, 1997; Clark, 1997; see Gee, 1999a for an overview and more citations in the literature). Words do not have general meanings. In fact, in an important sense, they don’t have any stable meanings at all. Rather, they are associated with different ‘situated’ or ‘customized’ meanings in different contexts. A situated meaning is an image or pattern of elements from our embodied experience of the world, including our experience of texts and conversations, that we assemble on the spot, in context, as we communicate, based both on the way we construe that context and on our past experiences.

For example, consider the following two utterances: ‘the coffee spilled, get a mop’; ‘the coffee spilled, get a broom’. In the first case, triggered by the word ‘mop’ in the context, for ‘coffee’ you assemble a situated meaning something like ‘dark liquid we drink’. In the second case, triggered by the word ‘broom’ and your experience of such matters, you assemble either a situated meaning like ‘grains that we make our coffee from’ or like ‘beans from which we grind coffee’. Of course, in a real context, there are many more signals as to how to go about assembling situated meanings for words and phrases.

Situated meanings don’t simply reside in individual minds. Very often they are negotiated between people in and through communicative social interaction (Hutchins, 1995; Shore, 1996). For example, suppose a partner in a relationship says something like ‘I think good relationships shouldn’t take work’. A good part of the ensuing conversation might very well involve mutually negotiating (directly or indirectly through inferencing) what ‘work’ is going to mean for the people concerned, in this specific context, as well as in the larger context of their ongoing relationship. Furthermore, as conversations, and, indeed, relationships, develop, participants often continually revise their situated meanings.
Words such as ‘work’ and ‘coffee’ seem, of course, to have much more general meanings than are apparent in the sorts of situated meanings we have discussed so far. But words have no such general meanings. Whatever generality we sense them to have is due to the fact that words, with their situated meanings, are always associated with or trigger the application of what I will call ‘cultural models’ (D’Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gee, 1999a; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996; Strauss & Quinn, 1997). Cultural models are ‘storylines’, familiarities of connected images (like a mental movie), or (informal) ‘theories’ shared by people belonging to specific social or cultural groups. Cultural models ‘explain’, relative to the standards of the group (though often at a fairly taken-for-granted and unconscious level), the sorts of situated meanings that people tend to assemble for their words and phrases. Cultural models are usually not completely stored in any one person’s head. Instead, they are distributed across the different sorts of ‘expertise’ and viewpoints found in the group, much like a plot to a story (or pieces of a puzzle) that different people have different bits and pieces of and which they can potentially share in order to mutually develop the ‘big picture’.

The cultural model connected with ‘coffee’, for example, is, for some of us, something like this: berries are picked (somewhere? from some sort of plant?) and then prepared (how?) as beans or grain to be made later into a drink, as well as into flavorings (how?) for other foods. Different types of coffee, drunk in different ways, have different social and cultural implications, for example, in terms of status. This is about all I know of the model; the rest of it (I trust) is distributed elsewhere in the society should I need it.

Cultural models are nearly always ideologically laden – for example, the cultural model of coffee held by many groups of people involves correlations among various coffee practices and diverse social and class identities. It is also important to note that to ‘know’ a situated meaning is not merely being able to say certain words (e.g. ‘a cup of coffee’) but to be able to recognize a pattern (such as a cup of coffee or ‘yuppie coffee’) in a number of settings and variations.

To look at this point in a more consequential domain than coffee, consider the notion of ‘light’ in physics. First of all, our everyday cultural model for ‘light’ is not the same as the model (theory) of ‘light’ in physics – that model is the specialized theory of electromagnetic radiation. It is more overt and articulated than most cultural models. In physics, ‘light’ is associated with a variety of situated meanings: as a bundle of waves of different wave lengths, as particles (photons) with various special (e.g. quantum-like) properties, as a beam that can be directed in various ways and for various purposes (e.g. lasers), as colors that can mix in various fashions, and so on.

If one wants to start ‘practising’ with light so as to learn physics, then one must acquire experiences that lead to the acquisition of a few situated (‘in situ’) meanings. Otherwise, one really cannot understand what the theory of light has to explain, at least not in any way that could efficaciously guide pattern recognition and action and reflection. And what does it mean to ‘recognize’ situated meanings? Situated meanings are patterns of associated features from embodied experience, such as ‘light as a particle that behaves in term of various sorts of contrived (experimental) observations in certain characteristic quantum like ways’ or ‘grains of a certain color and texture associated with certain sorts of containers’. To recognize such things is to be able to recongnize (reconstruct in terms of one’s pattern-recognizing capabilities) and to act-on-and-with these various features and their associations in a range of contexts. One’s body and mind have to be able to be situated with – coordinated by and with – these correlated features in the world.

A Final Example Relevant to Teaching Language and Literacy

To get at the workings of social languages, situated meanings, and cultural models, I want now to develop an extended example. After a number of years of graduate work, a doctoral student from Korea had been ‘dropped’ by her advisor. She went to see a different faculty member to ask if he would take her on as a doctoral student, even though it was clear to both of them that her prior work had not been evaluated all that highly by her previous advisor. However, that work had been carried out in an area that was both notoriously difficult and not really all that relevant to what the student wanted to do for her thesis. It was clear, however, that she would need a good deal of further training in the new faculty member’s area before she could start her thesis work in earnest. In the course of a discussion about her past work and her future prospects, when the faculty member was showing some reluctance to take her on as a student, the student said the following:

It is your job to help me, I need to learn.

This utterance is, of course, in impeccable English. But it is, nonetheless, all ‘wrong’ (a strong term, I know, but I use it on purpose: real consequences happen to people when they get things wrong in this way). In this context, it had the wrong ‘design’. In a profound sense, in a sense crucial to teaching language and literacy, it was ‘ungrammatical’. It used a wrong social language, one that communicated a wrong identity, a wrong activity, wrong situated meanings, and operated within a wrong cultural model in the context of this (sort of) department and university.
Here’s what went wrong. Considering the whole conversation between this student and faculty member, it appears that one of the cultural models the student was operating with was a distinctive model of faculty–student relationships, a model that made situated sense of many of her words and of her utterance as a whole. Her cultural model worked something like this:

**Cultural model:**
A faculty member (who is in a ‘helping’ profession) is morally obligated, by virtue of the definition of the position and job he or she holds, to give aid to a student (who in a sense is in the role of a ‘client’ or ‘patient’) who is having problems and who needs help learning – just so long as the student wants to work hard. It does not matter how much time or how much effort this will require from the faculty member. In return, the student will give the faculty member deference, respect, loyalty, thanks, and certain forms of assistance.

I have no idea whether this cultural model is connected in any way to Korean culture, nor does it matter in the least for my purposes here. And, indeed, in some settings (e.g. in many elementary schools), lots of US teachers do, in fact, operate by something much like this model. Unfortunately, this model is not one with (or within) which many doctoral advisors at research universities operate. Many of them operate with a cultural model something like the following:

**Cultural model:**
A faculty member is willing to give a good deal of time and effort to doctoral students who are near their thesis work (especially students he or she has not trained from the beginning) only when they have shown they can ‘make it’, produce good work, and become a ‘credit’ to the faculty member, thereby justifying the effort that the faculty member puts into the student (and takes away from his or her own research).

The Korean student, having the wrong cultural model, also enacted the wrong socially-situated identity. She enacted the identity of a needy, problem-plagued, supplicant. In fact, her cultural model implied that the needier students were, the more the faculty member was obligated to help them (provided they were willing to keep working hard). This is just the identity that is guaranteed, in many doctoral programs in US research universities, to get you no advisor or, indeed, to lose one you already have. The identity this student needed to enact was that of a self-motivated, advanced graduate student with goals that no longer fit her previous advisor, but with growing interests and potential strengths and skills in the other faculty member’s area.

In addition to her wrong cultural model and situated identity, this student enacted the wrong socially-situated activity. In fact, she enacted several different wrong activities simultaneously. In the overall context, her utterance enacted simultaneously the activities of an exhortation (for the faculty member to do his ‘duty’), supplication (for the faculty member to help a needy person), persuasion, and a request for the faculty member to be her new doctoral advisor. Exhortation and supplication are wrong activities for this setting. Thanks to this fact, and all the other aspects of this student’s performance, her persuasion and request were not likely to work either.

Exhortation for the faculty member to do his moral duty can be heard as insulting (implying he doesn’t know his duties) and inappropriate in a professional context in which the morality to which the student is appealing comes across as ‘extra-professional’. Indeed, this student also brought up her Christian faith in the midst of the conversation. She told the faculty member (though in a low-key way) that she was confident that God had brought her to him and meant him as the ‘right’ advisor for her. This, too, created an ‘extra-professional’ reference that keyed the faculty member to see her exhortation as, in some sense, ‘spiritual’, and not just ‘professional’.

The student’s other activity – supplication – served to suggest weakness, when a potential doctoral advisor is, in fact, looking for strengths that will merit his or her efforts. Of course, all these features (her wrong socially-situated identity, cultural model, and activities) undermined her further activities of request and persuasion, rendering both ineffective (eventually not only with this faculty member, but with every other relevant doctoral advisor in the department).

Finally, the student’s wrong identity, activities, and cultural model communicated the wrong situated meanings for her words, while, in turn, these situated meanings helped create the wrong identity, activities, and cultural model. These things – identity, activity, cultural models, and situated meanings – are all reflexively related. Each both creates and reflects – at one and the same time – all the others. They are a ‘package deal’ and that’s why one has to get the whole package right.

For example, in the student’s utterance, within its overall context, the word ‘help’ took on the situated meaning, here and now, of something like ‘charitable assistance’. For success here, it needed to have a situated meaning something like ‘professional guidance’ (as it might have had she said something like: ‘With your help, I believe I can write a really good thesis’). Or, to take another example, the student’s word ‘need’, in this context, took on the situated meaning of ‘neediness’ in the sense of: ‘my ability to learn is inadequate without a good deal of effort on your part’. Instead, it ought to have taken on the situated meaning of ‘good, but still
able to be supplemented' in the sense of something like: ‘my high-level ability to learn will be supplemented by your advanced professional expertise’ (as it might have had if she said something like ‘though I have a pretty good beginning background in your area, I need your help to deepen my knowledge of the area’).

Of course, much more went into this Korean student’s situation than I have covered here, and my analysis is, in reality, based on my knowledge of a much wider context. But I want to stress, nonetheless, that there were no ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ judgments independent of discursive interactions to be made about the student, for example about the answer to the question, ‘Was she a “good student”? ’ Her grades, papers, and the comments of other faculty members were, of course, themselves the products of discursive interactions in which social languages, socially-situated identities and activities, situated meanings and cultural models were at play.

Discourses

The Korean student did not need to learn more ‘English’ (in fact, she was well aware that her English was better than, or certainly no worse than, other Asian students who fared better than she did with the faculty). She needed to learn how to design utterances within a specific form of language (a specific social language) so as to trigger a specific identity, as well as specific activities and specific situated meanings, with their associated cultural models. So more – much more – is at stake than ‘just’ language.

Let me say, then, that what this student needed to get right was not English, but what I will call a ‘Discourse’ (with a capital D; see Gee, 1996, 1999a). Just using the ‘right’ social language will not, in and of itself, ensure that you are successfully recognized as enacting the ‘right’ socially-situated identity and activity. You have to get more than just the language right. You have to get ‘other stuff’ right, as well. The notion of ‘big D Discourse’ is meant to capture this fact. By a Discourse I mean ways of combining a specific social language with specific ways of acting-interacting-thinking-believing-valuing-feeling, as well as ways of coordinating, and getting coordinated by, other people, various tools, technologies, objects, and artifacts, and various ‘appropriate’ times and places in order to be recognized as enacting a socially-situated identity and an appropriately-related activity. Examples include being-and-doing an advanced graduate student recruiting a thesis advisor (Figure 1.1); being-and-doing an urban Latino gang member warning another gang member off one’s turf; being-and-doing a cutting-edge nuclear physicist arguing the unique virtues of one’s teams detector, etc.

Learning Social Languages within Discourses

The Korean student knew English (whatever that really means). She did not, however, even after years in graduate school, know the Discourse of being-and-doing a graduate student in a research university in the United States. She did not have the social language(s) that go with this identity. She could not enact the activities that this identity requires. She could not situate her meanings in actual contexts in ways that communicated the right ‘on the spot’ meanings and triggered the right cultural models.

Now someone is bound, at this point, to ask, perhaps in exasperation, ‘But what’s this got to do with literacy? How well did this student write?’ Of course, I want to suggest that these are the wrong questions. For students like this one, teaching and learning language and literacy ought, I believe, to be about learning social languages within Discourses, not about oral or written ‘English’ per se. And Discourses always involve multiple ways of acting-interacting-speaking-writing-listening-reading-thinking-believing-valuing-feeling with others at the ‘right’ times and in the ‘right’ places so as to be recognized as enacting an ‘appropriate’ socially-situated identity. It’s a ‘package deal’ – it does you no good to get bits and pieces of the Discourse ‘right’, you have to get the whole thing ‘right’.

![Figure 1.1 Discourse](image-url)
The fact that the Korean student did not understand the social language, situated meanings, and cultural models required for her to be-and-do an advanced graduate student seeking a thesis advisor certainly led the faculty member to suspect that the student did not understand the sorts of related social languages, situated meanings, and cultural models required for diverse writing tasks in the Discourse in which she was seeking his mentorship. Reading her work (as well as reading new work she wrote at the faculty member’s request) simply bore that out. The grammatical errors in her writing were a minor matter. Her failure to situate (customize) meaning in terms of the sorts of experiences, conversations, texts, and cultural models that instantiate the Discourses that she was attempting to write within was the problem. In fact, ironically, perhaps, her words, phrases, and sentences had only the sorts of general and ‘canned’ meanings that have traditionally been thought, incorrectly, to be what meaning is all about. Yes, someone had taught her ‘English’ – and it did her little good.

**Political complications**

Discourses are inherently and irredeemably ‘political’ and so is the process of acquiring them. They are political in three ways:

1. Internal to a Discourse there are almost always hierarchical positions (e.g. doctoral advisor–thesis advisee).
2. Discourses are partly defined in relationships of alignment and conflict with other Discourses (e.g. the Discourse of being-and-doing a certain sort of middle-class child is more compatible with the forms of language, practices, and values of early school-based Discourses than is the Discourse of being-and-doing a child in some non-middle-class homes and in the homes of some non-Anglo ethnic groups).
3. Discourses are harder to acquire and often tension-filled for many of those whom I called ‘authentic beginners’ above – people who are often marginalized by the Discourse they are attempting to acquire ‘late’. Authentic beginners (whether children or adults) are people who come to the acquisition of a Discourse without the sorts of early preparation, pre-alignment, or sociocultural resources that have given more advantaged learners a ‘head start’.

When I first developed this example in an address at the annual US TESOL conference in New York in 1999 (Gee, 1999b), it was clear that many in my audience were growing progressively more uncomfortable, as, indeed, they should have been (and were intended to). In fact, I purposely did not say what had happened to the Korean student, so as not to obscure the fact that what was going on in this meeting most certainly involved the workings of power. And, of course, status, age, gender, and ethnicity were all part of the workings of power here – though, I must also add that the student had already been turned down by several other potential advisors, including several female professors.

In the questions after my talk, one member of the audience suggested that the remedy here was more ‘cultural understanding’ on the part of faculty. This remark drew approval from the audience, mostly people who were ESL teachers or teacher educators (the session was sponsored by the Teacher Education Interest Section of TESOL). Though, of course, I am all for more cultural understanding, there was also a part of me that wished to respond to this remark by saying: ‘I certainly wouldn’t want YOU training foreign graduate students at my university’ – at least if the person’s remark was meant to suggest that faculty advisors should (or would) simply and charitably accept any sorts of cultural understandings in lieu of those demanded by their academic Discourses and often also by the ‘economics’ of graduate education as it actually exists. After all, doctoral degrees are training people to participate in (and even excel at) a new ‘culture’, namely the one constituted by their discipline.

Of course, this is not to imply that academic Discourses and academic institutions do not badly stand in need of political and cultural revitalization. Nonetheless, it may be the case that ESL teachers and teacher educators, who often think of their profession in terms of ‘service’, in fact, often accept and act in terms of the cultural model that I have attributed to the Korean student (the ‘moral response to neediness’ model). If this is true, it might indicate a rather deep irony. The people responsible for helping students like the Korean student I have discussed here may unwittingly, as part and parcel of their own social and political positioning within the Discourses of the university, pass on or, at least, reinforce cultural models that will help those students to fail.

So, while I certainly advocate much greater cultural understanding on the part of everyone in the university, at the same time, I do not want students like the one I have discussed here to pay the price while she waits for us to bring off a revolution in the political, economic, and cultural relationships within powerful institutions in our society. While we go about fighting for that revolution, I would suggest that we make both ourselves and our students more aware of how language works in terms of social languages, Discourses, situated meanings, cultural models, situated identities, and situated activities. But, then, perhaps, this is what my questioner meant by ‘cultural understanding’.

Thus, I think it a first task (hard and long enough in its own right) that we
make ourselves and other faculty across disciplines aware that students who are struggling may be ‘authentic beginners’, operating with distinctive situated meanings and cultural models, who do not realize that the faculty member is, however unconsciously, looking for different ones. In turn, we need, then, to make ‘authentic beginners’ meta-aware of the sorts of social languages, situated meanings, and cultural models in terms of which ‘false beginners’ are operating and succeeding.

The Korean student I have discussed here, even within the confines of our current institutional structures, did not need to fail. If a call for more ‘cultural understanding’ is a way to avoid acknowledging that, then it is, itself, an evasion of responsibility. Since I have now made the points I have wanted to make with this example, I can tell the ‘end of the story’. The faculty member worked for many months with this student, conducting normal and consequential interactions with her (e.g. office hours, courses, directed research) while often rising to the meta-level, within the interactions themselves, in order to ask questions about and to discuss the forms of language and the sorts of situated meanings and cultural models that seemed to be at play both in her speech and writing and in mine. Of course, she made progress. Unfortunately, she was nearly a decade into her graduate school and eventually both her visa and her University eligibility lapsed. It was ‘too late’ – she needed to have been recognized and treated as an ‘authentic beginner’ years before.

Finally, let me say, too, that the points I have made about this example are not meant to be about foreign graduate students only and per se. They are meant to apply to all types of ‘authentic beginners’, whether they be first graders learning to read or college students seeking access to academic Discourses.

**Teaching and Learning Social Languages**

A key question, then, is this: What is required for the acquisition of a social language within a Discourse, and not just bits and pieces of a ‘big’ language like English, especially for authentic beginners? This should, to my mind, be the leading issue in research on language and literacy learning of all sorts. As a start, I would hypothesize that it requires at least the following (see New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2000):

1. **Situated meanings**: Learners must learn, in production and reception, how to situate/customize meaning in the midst of practice, that is, how to assemble, here and now, the detailed, nuanced meanings that both construct and reflect specific identities, activities, and cultural models. They must gain feedback, inside and outside actual practice, as to whether they are producing and recognizing the right situated meanings – see (5) below for a related point.

2. **Cultural models**: Learners must gain meta-awareness about what cultural models are relevant to specific identities and activities within specific Discourses. They must come to see how these cultural models are triggered in actual contexts of practice by specific situated meanings.

3. **Identities**: Learners must come to know (eventually at an unconscious and automatic level) what it feels like, in mind and body, to enact a specific identity. Authentic beginners, in particular, must also gain conscious meta-awareness about how specific identities within specific Discourses align themselves with or conflict with their other identities in other Discourses.

4. **Activities**: Learners must be able to ‘pull off’ not just language, but ‘moves’ in the ‘game’. They must know where in the game (activity) they are, what game (activity) they are in and how it is placed within larger activity systems.

5. **Social languages**: Learners must come to see how the form (design features) of a specific social language – as they craft and comprehend utterances within it – fit with or fail to fit with specific identities, activities, situated meanings, and cultural models. They must get feedback about this matter both inside and outside actual practice.

6. **Critical framing**: Discourses do not often encourage a critique of their own values and practices – they usually ensure that their core members are ‘true believers’. For authentic beginners to a Discourse, though, such critique is often important, both to allow them to work on any conflicts that may exist between their old Discourses and their new ones, and to acknowledge the fact that ‘mainstream’ Discourses have often denigrated immigrants, minorities, and lower socioeconomic people. Critical framing involves juxtaposing the ways and values of different Discourses, and framing one Discourse within the ways and values of another. This process allows learners to compare and contrast different Discourses (and their values and their practices) as part and parcel of the learning process. For example, the Discourse of academic psychology treats intelligence in ways that almost completely ignore what some people in their 'lifeworld' Discourses (i.e. when they are being-and-doing 'everyday', non-specialized people) call 'street smarts'. Comparing and contrasting 'school smarts' and 'street smarts' is a good way both to learn and to critique approaches to intelligence in academic psychology.
(7) Transformed practice: It is often the case that authentic beginners to a Discourse are allowed to master the Discourse only enough for them to become 'colonized' members of it, and never really experience the power of transforming their own practices and changing the values and practices of others in the Discourse. They never become real producers and innovators in the Discourse, but only ritualized producers and consumers of it. Giving authentic beginners and marginalized learners the power to transform practice is an important aspect of social justice. One way to do this is to allow learners to 'reflect' practices in the new Discourse they are acquiring with features of their old Discourses, but never as a substitute (always as a supplement) to mastery. For example, some African-American academics can, to quite effective purposes, reflect some of their academic practices, some of the time, with features of talk and interaction from their African-American family or community-based Discourses, while still getting recognized as having successfully pulled off the academic Discourse. For authentic beginners, I believe it is a sine qua non, in most cases, that they become, in the acquisition of any one 'mainstream' Discourse, sociologists and critical theorists of Discourses in general. It is necessary that they come to understand how Discourses work to help and harm people, to include and exclude, to support and oppose other Discourses. It is necessary that authentic beginners develop strategies to reflect the gatekeepers of Discourses when their newly-won and hard-fought-for mastery may be challenged or begin to fail them. It is necessary that they develop the power to critique and resist the impositions of Discourses when these Discourses are used to construct people like themselves as 'inferior' (often because they are authentic beginners). Authentic beginners must learn to 'play the game', but they must also learn to 'talk strategy' and, at extreme points, to 'call the game'. Their teachers must not only be masters of the Discourse or Discourses to which they are apprenticing their learners, they must be masters, as well, of what we might call the 'political geography of Discourses'.

References