LITERACY IN THE NEW MEDIA AGE

Gunther Kress

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

MAIN
302.2244
K921

First published 2003 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2003 Gunther Kress

Typeset in Baskerville by The Running Head Limited, Cambridge
Printed and bound in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted
or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–25355–1 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–25356–X (pbk)

CONTENTS

1

THE FUTURES OF LITERACY

Modes, logics and affordances

It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. Together they raise two questions: what is the likely future of literacy, and what are the likely larger-level social and cultural effects of that change?

One might say the following with some confidence. Language-as-speech will remain the major mode of communication; language-as-writing will increasingly be displaced by image in many domains of public communication, though writing will remain the preferred mode of the political and cultural elites. The combined effects on writing of the dominance of the mode of image and of the medium of the screen will produce deep changes in the forms and functions of writing. This in turn will have profound effects on human, cognitive/affective, cultural and bodily engagement with the world, and on the forms and shapes of knowledge. *The world told* is a different world to *the world shown*. The effects of the move to the screen as the major medium of communication will produce far-reaching shifts in relations of power, and not just in the sphere of communication. Where significant changes to distribution of power threaten, there will be fierce resistance by those who presently hold power, so that predictions about the democratic potentials and effects of the new information and communication technologies have to be seen in the light of inevitable struggles over power yet to come. It is already clear that the effects of the two changes taken together will have the widest imaginable political, economic, social, cultural, conceptual/cognitive and epistemological consequences.

The two modes of writing and of image are each governed by distinct logics, and have distinctly different affordances. The organisation of writing – still leaning on the logics of speech – is governed by the logic of time, and by the

logic of sequence of its elements in time, in temporally governed arrangements. The organisation of the image, by contrast, is governed by the logic of space, and by the logic of simultaneity of its visual/depicted elements in spatially organised arrangements. To say this simply: in speaking I have to say one thing after another, one sound after another, one word after another, one clause after another, so that inevitably one thing is first, and another thing is second, and one thing will have to be last. Meaning can then be – and is – attached to 'being first' and to 'being last', and maybe to being third and so on. If I say 'Bill and Mary married' it means something different to 'Mary and Bill married' – the meaning difference perhaps referring to which of the two is closer to me. In a visual representation the placement of elements in the space of representation – the page, the canvas, the screen, the wall – will similarly have meaning. Placing something centrally means that other things will be marginal, at least relatively speaking. Placing something at the top of the space means that something else will likely be below. Both these places can be used to make meaning: being *central* can mean being the 'centre', in whatever way; being *above* can mean being 'superior', and being below can mean 'inferior'.

The point is that whether I want to or not I have to use the possibilities given to me by a mode of representation to make my meaning. Whatever is represented in speech (or to some lesser extent in writing) inevitably has to bow to the logic of time and of sequence in time. The world represented in speech or in writing is therefore (re)cast in an actual or quasi-temporal manner. The genre of the *narrative* is the culturally most potent formal expression of this. Human engagement with the world through speech or writing cannot escape that logic; it orders and shapes that human engagement with the world. Whatever is represented in image has to bow, equally, to the logic of space, and to the simultaneity of elements in spatial arrangements. The world represented in image is therefore (re)cast in an actual or quasi-spatial manner. Whatever relations are to be represented about the world have inevitably to be presented as spatial relations between the depicted elements of an image. Human engagement with the world through image cannot escape that logic; it orders and shapes how we represent the world, which in turn shapes how we see and interact with the world. The genre of the *display* is the culturally most potent formal expression of this. 'The world narrated' is a different world to 'the world depicted and displayed'.

To get closer to the core of that difference we need to ask more specifically about the affordances of each of the two modes. Is the world represented through words in sequence – to simplify massively – really different to the world represented through depictions of elements related in spatial configurations? Let me start with a very simple fact about languages such as English (not all languages of the world are like English in this respect, though many are). In English if I want to say or write a clause or a sentence about anything, I have to use a verb. Verbs are, by and large, words that represent actions, even if the actions are pseudo-actions, such as *seem*, *resemble*, *have*, *weigh* and so on. There is

one verb which is not really about action, the verb *be*, which names relations between entities – 'John is my uncle', or states of affairs – 'the day is hot'. But whichever I choose, and normally it is an actional verb, I cannot get around the fact that I have to name the relation, and refer to either a state or an action, even if I do not want to do so at all. 'I have a holiday coming up' is not really about ownership stated by *have*; nor is 'I think that's fine' really about what I think – it is saying that I feel fine in relation to whatever 'that' is. Yet both speech and writing absolutely insist that I choose a name/word for an action, even though I do not wish to do so.

To take another example, if I am in a science lesson and I am talking about cells, and the structure of cells, I might want to say 'every cell has a nucleus'. As in my example above, I have to use a word to name a relation between two entities – cell and nucleus – which invokes a relation of possession, *have*. I actually do not think of it as being about possession, but it is a *commitment* which language forces me to make. If I ask the class to draw a cell, there is no such commitment. Now, however, every student who draws the cell, has to place the nucleus somewhere in the cell, in a particular spot. There is no way around that, whether the nucleus actually has this or that specific place in the cell or not. There is a demand for an epistemological commitment, but it is a totally different one in the case of the two modes: commitment to naming of a relation in one case – 'the cell owns a nucleus', and commitment to a location in space in another – 'this is where it goes'.

Let me make another comparison of affordances, to draw out the impact of the shift. In writing, I can use 'every cell has a nucleus' without having any idea what a nucleus actually is, does, looks like and so on. The same applies to *cell*; nor do I know what *have* actually means in that structure – other than a kind of 'there is'. The reason for that is that words are, relatively speaking, empty of meaning, or perhaps better, the word as sound-shape or as letter-shape gives no indication of its meaning, it is there to be filled with meaning. It is that 'filling with meaning' which constitutes the work of imagination that we do with language. In what may seem a paradox given common-sense views about language, I want to say that words are empty of meaning, relatively. If someone says to me 'I have a new car', I know very little indeed about that person's vehicle. It is this characteristic of words which leads to the well-known experience of having read a novel and really enjoyed it – filling it with our meaning – only to be utterly disappointed or worse when we see it as a film, where some others have filled the words with their very different meanings.

At the same time, these relatively empty things occur in a strict ordering, which forces me to follow, in reading, precisely the order in which they appear. There is a 'reading path' set by the order of the words which I must follow. In a written text there is a path which I cannot go against if I wish to make sense of the meaning of that text. The order of words in a clause compels me to follow, and it is meaningful. 'Bill and Mary married' has a point of view coded in the reading path which makes it different from 'Mary and Bill married'. If I have

two clauses – 'The sun rose, the mists dissolved' – then the order in which I have put them structures the path that my reader must follow. 'The mists dissolved and the sun rose' has a quite different meaning, a near mystical force compared to the mundane 'the sun rose and the mists dissolved'. But the affordance which is at issue here is that of temporal sequence, and its effects are to orient us towards causality, whether in a simple clause ('the sun dissolved the mists'), where an agent acts and causes an effect, or in the conjoined clauses just above. The simple yet profound fact of sequence in time orients us towards a world of causality.

Reading paths may exist in images, either because the maker of the image structured that into the image – and it is read as it is or it is transformed by the reader, or they may exist because they are constructed by the reader without prior construction by the maker of the image. The means for doing this rest, as with writing, with the affordances of the mode. The logic of space and of spatial display provides the means; making an element central and other elements marginal will encourage the reader to move from the centre to the margin. Making some elements salient through some means – size, colour, shape, for instance – and others less salient again encourages a reading path. However, I say 'encourages' rather than 'compels' as I did with writing. Reading the elements of an image 'out of order' is easy or at least possible; it is truly difficult in writing.

However, while the reading path in the image is (relatively) open, the image itself and its elements are filled with meaning. There is no vagueness, no emptiness here. That which is meant to be represented is represented. Images are plain full with meaning, whereas words wait to be filled. Reading paths in writing (as in speech) are set with very little or no leeway; in the image they are open. That is the contrast in affordance of the two modes: in writing, relatively vacuous elements in strict order (in speech also, to a somewhat lesser extent); and full elements in a (relatively) open order in image. The imaginative work in writing focuses on filling words with meaning – and then reading the filled elements together, in the given syntactic structure. In image, imagination focuses on creating the order of the arrangement of elements which are already filled with meaning.

This is one answer to the cultural pessimists: focus on what each mode makes available, and use that as the starting point for a debate. There is then the further question of whether in the move from the dominance of one mode to the other there are losses – actually and potentially – which we would wish to avoid. On the one hand, the work of imagination called forth by writing – even in the limited way I have discussed it here (and the kinds of imaginative work and the potential epistemological losses I have suggested – the loss of an underlying orientation towards cause as one instance) may make us try to preserve features of writing which might otherwise disappear. On the other hand, I may actually not want to live in a semiotic/cultural world where everything is constructed in causal ways, whether I want it or no t– as just one example. I will

return to the question both of affordances and of gains and losses in other places in the book.

Affordances of mode and facilities of media

The shift in mode would, even by itself, produce the changes that I have mentioned. The change in media, largely from book and page to screen, the change from the traditional print-based media to the new information and communication technologies, will intensify these effects. However, the new media have three further effects. They make it easy to use a multiplicity of modes, and in particular the mode of image – still or moving – as well as other modes, such as music and sound effect for instance. They change, through their affordances, the potentials for representational and communicational action by their users; this is the notion of 'interactivity' which figures so prominently in discussions of the new media. Interactivity has at least two aspects: one is broadly interpersonal, for instance, in that the user can 'write back' to the producer of a text with no difficulty – a potential achievable only with very great effort or not at all with the older media, and it permits the user to enter into an entirely new relation with all other texts – the notion of hypertextuality. The one has an effect on social power directly, the other has an effect on semiotic power, and through that on social power less immediately.

The technology of the new information and communication media rests among other factors on the use of a single code for the representation of all information, irrespective of its initial modal realisation. Music is analysed into this digital code just as much as image is, or graphic word, or other modes. That offers the potential to realise meaning in any mode. This is usually talked about as the multimedia aspect of this technology, because with the older media there existed a near automatic association and identification of mode (say, writing) with medium (say, book).

With print-based technology – technologically oriented and aligned with word – the production of written text was made easy, whereas the production of image was difficult; the difficulty expresses itself still in monetary cost. Hence image was (relatively) rare, and printed word was ubiquitous in the book and on the page. With the new media there is little or no cost to the user in choosing a path of realisation towards image rather than towards word. Given that the communicational world around us is moving to a preference for image in many domains, the new technology facilitates, supports and intensifies that preference. What is true of word and image is also increasingly true of other modes. The ease in the use of different modes, a significant aspect of the affordances of the new technologies of information and communication, makes the use of a multiplicity of modes usual and unremarkable. That mode which is judged best by the designer of the message for specific aspects of the message and for a particular audience can be chosen with no difference in 'cost'. Multimodality is made easy, usual, 'natural' by these technologies. And such naturalised uses of modes

will lead to greater specialisation of modes: affordances of modes will become aligned with representational and communicative need.

The new technologies allow me to 'write back'. In the era of the book, which partly overlapped with the era of mass communication, the flow of communication was largely in one direction. The new technologies have changed unidirectionality into bidirectionality. E-mail provides a simple example: not only can I write back, but the moment I hit the reply or forward button, I can change the text that I have just received in many ways. If an attachment has come with the e-mail I can in any case rewrite it and send it anywhere I wish. In that process the power of the author, which has been such a concern in the era of the dominance of the old technologies and of the mode of writing, is lessened and diffused. Authorship is no longer rare. Of course the change to the power of the author brings with it a consequent lessening in the author's or the text's authority. The processes of selection which accompanied the bestowal of the role of author brought authority. When that selection is no longer there, authority is lost as well. The promise of greater democracy is accompanied by a levelling of power; that which may have been desired by many may turn out to be worth less than it seemed when it was unavailable.

Ready access to all texts constitutes another challenge to the former power of texts. There was a certain fictionality in any case to the notion of the author as the source of the text. Just as no one in a speech community has 'their own words' – the frequent request in schools for putting something in 'your own words' notwithstanding – so no one really ever originated their own texts. The metaphor of text-as-texture was in that respect always accurate: our experience of language cannot be, is never, other than the experience of texts. Our use of language in the making of texts cannot be other than the quotation of fragments of texts, previously encountered, in the making of new texts. The ease with which texts can be brought into conjunction, and elements of texts reconstituted as new texts, changes the notion of authorship. If it was a myth to see the author as originator, it is now a myth that cannot any longer be sustained in this new environment. Writing is becoming 'assembling according to designs' in ways which are overt, and much more far-reaching, than they were previously. The notion of writing as 'productive' or 'creative' is also changing. Fitness for present purpose is replacing previous conceptions, such as text as the projection of a world, the creation of a fictional world, a world of the imagination.

The dominance of the screen as the currently most potent medium – even if at the moment that potency may still be more mythical than real – means that it is these practices and these conceptions which hold sway, and not only on the screen but also in all domains of communication. The affordances and the organisations of the screen are coming to (re)shape the organisation of the page. Contemporary pages are beginning to resemble, more and more, both the look and the deeper sense of contemporary screens. Writing on the page is not immune in any way from this move, even though the writing of the elite using the older media will be more resistant to the move than writing elsewhere. It is

possible to see writing, once again moving back in the direction of visuality, whether as letter, or as 'graphic block' of writing, as an element of what are and will be fundamentally visual entities, organised and structured through the logics of the visual. It is possible to see writing becoming subordinated to the logic of the visual in many or all of its uses.

Right now, an objection

It may be as well to try and answer here and now three objections that will be made. One is that more books are published now than ever before; the second is, that there is more writing than ever before, including writing on the screen. The third, the most serious, takes the form of a question: what do we lose if many of the forms of writing that we know disappear?

To the first objection I say: the books that are published now are in very many cases books which are already influenced by the new logic of the screen, and in many cases they are not 'books' as that word would have been understood thirty or forty years ago. I am thinking here particularly of textbooks, which then were expositions of coherent 'bodies of knowledge' presented in the mode of writing. The move from chapter to chapter was a stately and orderly progression through the unfolding matter of the book. The contemporary textbook – since the late 1970s for lower years of secondary school and by now for all the years of secondary school – is often a collection of 'worksheets', organised around the issues of the curriculum, and put between more or less solid covers. This is still called a book. But there are no chapters, there is none of that sense of a reader engaging with and absorbing a coherent exposition of a body of knowledge, authoritatively presented. Instead there is a sense that the issue now is to involve students in action around topics, of learning by doing. Above all, the matter is presented through image more than through writing – and writing and image are given different representational and communicational functions.

These are still called 'book', though I think we need to be wary of being fooled by the seeming stability of the word. These are not books that can be 'read', for instance, in anything like that older sense of the word 'read'. These are books for working with, for acting on. So yes, there are more 'books' published now than ever before, but in many cases the 'books' of now are not the 'books' of then. And I am not just thinking of factual, information books but of books of all kinds.

And yes, there is more writing than ever before. Let me make two points. The first is, who is writing more? Who is filling the pages of websites with writing? Is it the young? Or is it those who grew up in the era when writing was clearly the dominant mode? The second point goes to the question of the future of writing. Image has coexisted with writing, as of course has speech. In the era of the dominance of writing, when the logic of writing organised the page, image appeared on the page subject to the logic of writing. In simple terms, it

fitted in how, where and when the logic of the written text and of the page suggested. In the era of the dominance of the screen, writing appears on the screen subject to the logic of the image. Writing fits in how, where and when the logic of the image-space suggests. The effects on writing, as is already 'visible' in any number of ways, tiny at times, larger at others, will be inescapable.

That leaves the third objection. It cannot be dealt with quickly. It requires a large project, much debate, and an uncommon generosity of view. On one level the issue is one of gains and losses; on another level it will require from us a different kind of reflection on what writing is, what forms of imagination it fosters. It asks questions of a profounder kind, about human potentials, wishes, desires – questions which go beyond immediate issues of utility for social or economic needs. I attempt some answers at different points in the book.

What do I hope to achieve with this book? There is a clear difference between this book and others dealing with the issues of literacy and new media. The current fascination with the dazzle of the new media is conspicuous here by its absence. I focus on just a few instances and descriptions of hypertextual arrangements, internet texts, or the structure of websites. I am as interested in understanding how the *sentence* developed in the social and technological environments of England in the seventeenth century, as I am in seeing what sentences are like now. The former like the latter – in showing principles of human meaning-making – can give us ways of thinking about the likely development of the sentence in the social and technological environments of our present and of the immediate future. In that sense the book is out of the present mould; in part it looks to the past as much as to the present to understand the future. It is a book about literacy now, everywhere, in all its sites of appearances, in the old and the new media – it is about literacy anywhere in this *new media age.*

So what can readers hope to get from the book? My sense is that what is needed above all is some stocktaking, some reflection, a drawing of breath, and the search for the beginnings of answers to questions such as: Where are we? What have we got here? What remains of the old? What is common about the making of representations and messages between then and now, and in the likely tomorrow? I think that what we need are new tools for thinking with, new frames in which to place things, in which to see the old and the new, and see them both newly. That is what I hope the book will offer its readers: a conceptual framework and tools for thinking about a field that is in a profound state of transition.