

## **Comments on Brian Street's paper: "Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies"**

**by Dorle Dracklé, Bremen Institute for Cultural Research, University of Bremen, Germany**

In this fundamental survey of current approaches in new literacy studies, we are given a precise summary of the discussions of the last 30 years and learn of the direction in which this field has developed. Only at the end of his article does Brian Street outline an idea of how the fields of literacy studies and media studies are connected.

According to an older concept, literacy is seen as a set of skills, a technology of the mind, a human capacity that must be activated. In the new literacy studies, on the other hand, literacy is looked upon as a social practice, dependent on context, on power relations, and on the relationships that people form with each other when literacy comes into play. Street designates two models of literacy: the "autonomous model" and the "ideological model", in which the previously mentioned differences manifest themselves. In the meantime there have been many local ethnographic studies on literacy, yet this multitude of unconnected examples harbours a danger: one exotic local study is collected after the other and the cross-cultural perspective and globalisation are lost sight of, theoretical developments included. The discussions in recent e-seminars and in the workshop have plainly demonstrated the same deficit in media anthropology.

On the one hand, I have the impression that we are familiar with quite a few interesting theories which could here be effectively applied; on the other hand, when it comes to complex questions such as that about the connection of literacy and media, none of us knows how to proceed.

Street now proposes a combination of three theoretical approaches: Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the actor-network theory and the theory of multimodality. In my opinion, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is, by itself, too narrow to depict real historical change and micro-processes. Next on the agenda is the actor-network theory, and I ask myself how it could be effectively transferred to our work – I think Street asks himself the same question. ANT shows again from another aspect that literacy can never be seen as independent of the people that apply it, that is, from the actants. What I don't understand is whether, on this view, literacy itself can or must be seen as an actant. If so, wouldn't this perspective then correspond to that of the autonomous model of literacy? Perhaps literacy cannot even be compared to media, which because of their thing-character can be included in the analysis as independent actants.

Finally, the semiotic concept of multimodality: To include other modes of representation besides writing and speech in our analyses (e.g., visual, gestural, kinaesthetic modes) is entirely logical. Here at last the description becomes really "thick"; but then it abruptly breaks off with an ethnographic example about the stories of small children in their London flats: an ethnography that shows how many diverse forms of the representation of families through children are used and how important it is that literacy practices are seen within the context of other modes of communication.

Unfortunately, Street's text ends before we have seen anything of its connections to media anthropology. How can we begin to compare media and literacy, how can we think them together? During the preparation of my commentary I therefore attempted to apply Street's ideas to my own research on e-literacy, and the more I reflected on this, the more questions occurred to me.

Especially electronic, and therefore multimedial, media are multimodal – they combine diverse textualities, diverse visualities, etc., they are totally different in different human contexts – and yet there are also unifying moments; there is a confrontation with identity and power in their use, but also a pleasure in technology. The media are fast, the analysis is complicated; there are infinitely many aspects that must be taken into account in the research, whether in the media (the actant) or the networks in which they play a role. Multimedial media are multiform, and yet still hotly contested. Media technology has at the same time high moral claims. The idea behind its development is that to have a good democracy, we need a “good” technology. And we need only a sufficiently clever policy in order make people appreciate our fantastic computer technology. Thus concurrent with forms of creative appropriation is the forced development of “good” media technology. As in the models of literacy, here too power has its effect by referring to the reality of the sign. This holds especially for e-literacy, a field where media anthropology and literacy studies of course meet. How can we conduct further research at this point? Where does it lead us when we link media technology and literacy studies?