“Literacy” is one of those words that everyone uses as a technical term but that is actually really hard to pin down. When I asked the new students in my “Literacies” unit last week what they thought “literacy” meant, they came up with quite a variety of definitions.

The most popular definition of “literacy” was that it is simply a cover term for “reading and writing”. That understanding of literacy contrasts with spoken language. Closely related to this first understanding of literacy is a second of literacy as “the ability to read and write.” Students with a background in language teaching readily referenced the “four skills” – speaking, listening, reading and writing – that make up language proficiency.

The latter understanding of literacy has spawned a significant expansion of the use of “literacy”: today, “literacy” is no longer exclusively about language but may be used to refer to all kinds of knowledge and competences: financial literacy, computer literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, news literacy, environmental literacy, ethics literacy, health literacy, spiritual literacy, artistic literacy, emotional literacy, etc. etc. While the connection with written language is more obvious in some of these literacies than in others, the reason for the extension of the meaning of “literacy” to “competence” is clear: in the contemporary world, the acquisition of most competences is mediated through the written word and at least some reading and writing is involved in the vast majority of learning.
The multiple meanings of “literacy” from “written language” to “ability to use written language” to “all kinds of language-mediated competences” make the link with social practices obvious and give us yet another perspective on literacy: literacy is a way to do things with words. Literacy practices are intricately linked to the way we manage our social affairs and organize our social lives. In short, literacy is a tool of power.

While some people like to pretend that literacy is a neutral technology and that “the ability to read and write” will be equally beneficial to everyone and have the same consequences for any individual and in any society, nothing could be further from the truth.

One simple way to start thinking about the power relationships inherent in literacy practices is to consider its semantic field. A semantic field is constituted by all the words in a language that relate to a particular subject. In English, the key terms in the semantic field “literacy” are obviously “reading” and “writing”. Both words have Germanic roots: “read” derives from Old English “rædan”, which meant “to advise, counsel, persuade; discuss, deliberate; rule, guide.” Its German cognate is “rate”, which means both “to advise, counsel, guide” but also “to guess.” So, reading was associated with thought and cognition early on.

“Write” derives from Old English “writan” meaning “to carve, scratch.” Well, writing started out as a way to scratch marks on bone, bark or clay, or to carve them in stone or wood. So, it’s not surprising that the word for “write” originally meant something like “to carve or scratch” in many languages. Latin “scribere” is no exception.

You may wonder why I’m bringing up Latin here. Well, it is not to show off my classical education but to draw attention to the fact that – apart from basic “read” and “write” – most English words in the “literacy” field are actually derived from Latin.

The Latin verb “scribere” has given us “ascribe”, “describe”, “inscribe”, “prescribe” and “proscribe”, to name a few. The latter two in particular point to the fact that the written word is closely connected to the enactment of power: so close, in fact, that the written word may be equal to the law. The expression “the writ runs” makes this connection obvious: where a particular written language is used, a particular law applies.

English words that make the power of literacy obvious are usually derived from Latin (and, of course, “literacy” itself is another example). This demonstrates the strong hold that not only the written language per se but Latin writing in particular had over Europe for almost two millennia. Latin was the language of the law and the language of religion – two domains that took a long time to separate from each other. The close association of writing with religion is also obvious from the word “scripture” – where a word for “writing” generally has come to stand specifically for religious writing.

There are many other fascinating associations to explore in the semantic field of “literacy” but I’ll close with an example from German, which makes a neat point about the fact that the relationship between written and spoken language is also a power relationship in itself. The German word “Schriftsprache” literally translates as “written language” but specifically refers to the standard language. The expression “nach der Schrift sprechen” (“to speak according to writing”) means to not use a regionally marked dialect but to speak the national language in a standard manner.
As linguists we like to insist on the primacy of speech but “nach der Schrift sprechen” reminds us that power usually runs in the opposite direction and, in literate societies, the power code is either written or writing-based speech.

What does the semantic field for “literacy” look like in your language? What is the etymology of the translation equivalents of “read and write” or of “literacy”? And what do they tell us about literacy as a social practice embedded in relationships of power?

Reference

Details of the vice-presidential transgression in the image are available in this *Time article.*

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