

Literacy and the Critical Intelligence

Sudesh Mishra

To begin with a caveat: literacy, at least in the third world, is considered a term possessing certain magical properties. To be literate often implies that one has charmed oneself into the occidental universe of lightning communication and stellar technology. At its very basic level literacy refers to an individual's ability to read and write; in our context, it often means the ability to read and write in English. There is something strange about this assumption and, even more so, our unquestioning acceptance of this assumption - that one can be literate only in English. As if those individuals who can acquit themselves, orally and in writing, in languages such as Hindi and Fijian are somehow less literate - and thus less capable - than our communicant in English.

One reason for this, of course, is our continuing servitude to the appurtenances of colonialism, even though colonialism as a formal organisation has been disbanded. We tend to profess independence from colonial paradigms and colonial modes of thought, conveniently forgetting that our professions (often) have their origins in precisely these paradigms and modes of thoughts. In a nutshell, we look at ourselves in their looking-glass. The upshot of this is that our yardsticks, whether they are social, moral, cultural or political, owe much to the yardsticks brandished by our colonial educators. The problem, however, is that we are stuck with English as our *lingua franca* and, in the context of its dominance in international relations, it is a useful commodity. Not to possess a knowledge of English, in the realm of both national and international relations, is a veritable handicap. It is imperative, nevertheless, that we start to properly acknowledge the users of Fijian and Hindustani, instead of gratuitously penalising them for their lack of English.

In any third world nation the question of literacy is vital since, in the wider post-modern world of word processors and fax machines, most transactions take place through the written word. To be illiterate is to be marginalized; one may live in a society but without either understanding it or participating in its continuing evolution. To some extent such persons become resident aliens by dint of their inability to comprehend the swift changes occurring around them. Literate people have thus a distinct advantage over them. To raise an important question then: is functional literacy enough for the individual in our society? Functional literacy involves the ability to write words that make sense and the making sense of the written word. To have access to a language, especially a second or acquired language, is not the same as having access to the subtle nuances, the sediments of meaning, inscribed in that language. It is this factor which provokes me to declare that functional literacy is not sufficient since it leaves the individual with a mechanical, rather than an organic, grasp of a language. At one point Stephen Dedalus, the Irish protagonist of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, rattled by an English priest's reaction to his use of a particular word, reflects on the problems associated with acquired speech:

The language in which we speak is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.¹

Stephen Dedalus' predicament is decidedly more subliminal and certainly more convoluted than a simple question of language-acquisition. The one aspect of language, however, that he picks on which is pivotal to the problem of basic literacy, is the aura of a language, that is, the manifold associations of certain words, phrases and allusions in a language which may elude the second language speaker. Proverbial speech, for instance, often tends to show up the flaws in one's grasp of a language. To say that someone's comment was a red herring implies that the person in question

diverted attention from the main issue. One can appreciate the confusion resulting from a literal interpretation of such proverbial language.

What I'm proposing is not a country replete with people who are exceptionally proficient in an acquired language, but the development of a critical sensibility which goes beyond the simplistic apprehension of language. Literacy without critical intelligence may get you on the local bus to Saweni, but it might tell you nothing about where the political bus is taking your children and your country. We live in a land where there is a dearth of sagacity, where the general populace is liable to accept what the newspaper or an "educated" person might say. We have sanctified language to the extent that we fail to see that, like clay or colours, it is a medium *always* manipulated by its user. Yet it is not the manipulation of language that is interesting but the motive behind the manipulation; paradoxically, however, to understand the motive behind the manipulation it is necessary to disentangle the coding language: the rhetoric disentangled will lead us not only to the smithy but into the very mind of the artificer, the forger of the language: that is, the wordsmith. I'm not suggesting that one should go around with a magnifying glass scrutinizing every detail of a speech or an article. But it is extremely important that we critically evaluate what we write and, especially, what we read. The literal message is not sufficient; it is vital to have an awareness of the perspective behind the word.

Some people, for example, speak of 'apartheid' in reaction to a new constitution for Fiji while others refer to the protection of indigenous rights. It is for the recipient of the language to decide whether he or she agrees or disagrees with the perspective encoded by the language. The more informed the receiver the more skilful would be his or her evaluation of the information.

All of this might seem rather rarefied and, perhaps, it is asking too much from both the teacher and the taught. My intention in this paper was to enumerate certain problems with functional literacy. Without the requisite awareness of the rhetorical (i.e. persuasive) features of a language, the basically "literate" individual may misread or overread the message, or wilt under the pressures of a language that has been formulated by a good

rhetorician. Tonal irony, for instance, is a device often used by satirists. If one weren't sufficiently aware of the penumbra of a language, then, the more subdued and understated irony will be difficult to pick up. And if this occurs, then the message is grotesquely misread. Successful communication and the critical reception of information involves more than functional literacy, though functional literacy is the very first stage in the development of language awareness. We should neither underrate the power of language nor sanctify it and, obliquely, its skilful architect; language ought to be treated like fire, the servant of knowledge and creativity when understood but the master of ignorance and ruin when misunderstood; in any case, as the old adage goes, it should always be taken with a pinch of salt.

¹ James Joyce (1988), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, London: Grafton Books, p.172.