

Language Strand

Unit 3: Language as Social Practice

## **Module 3.1 Language as Social Practice**



**Student Support Material**

## Acknowledgements

Materials written and compiled by Dr Joan Kale.

Layout and diagrams supported by Nick Lauer.

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## Unit outline

Unit	#	Modules
<b>Unit 3</b> <b>Language as social practice</b>	3.1	<b>Language as social practice (Core)</b>
	3.2	Language development in a first and second language (Core)
	3.3	Language at home and at school

## Icons



Read or research



Write or summarise



Activity or discussion



Suggestion or comment for lecturer

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# Language as a Social Practice

## Rationale

In this module, we relate language to the social systems, or cultures, that make up our world of experience. The relationship between language and culture is studied in some detail because of the importance of language and social structure to education. Learning is a social process; the environment, or setting where education takes place is a social institution, and knowledge is transmitted in social contexts through relationships such as parent/child; teacher/pupil, adult/apprentice. These are defined and set out by the value systems of the culture. The meanings conveyed at such times are also a feature of the beliefs and ideologies of the culture. We commence with a description of culture and study its relationship to language and, thus, to schooling.

## How to use this module

As with other modules in these Units on Language Studies, this module introduces you to *ways of analysing texts* that arise out of the social practice of language in diverse situations and for different purposes.

The *content* of the module is designed to introduce you to alternative ways of thinking about and responding to text developed in different situations.

The *activities* are most useful if carried out in small groups, then reporting back to the whole class.

The readings and Case Study provide you with the opportunity to develop analytical skills that will be useful in classrooms.

## References

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## Section 1. Language for getting things done

### Introduction

Language as social practice, or, what we do in, with and through language.

In using the phrase “language as social practice” we take the position that we do not study ‘language’ and ‘society’ as separate entities. Rather, language is seen as one of the mechanisms/strategies that speaker-members of any society use to regulate and reproduce that society, to order and control it and transmit it to the next generation.

As we study language we study it in relation to the society, i.e. the contexts of situation and the contexts of culture (See Module 2, Unit 2) in which it occurs. So we could say that language is ‘in’ rather than ‘alongside of’ society, and inseparable from it.

What we will study in this Module, then, is the way in which social practices of a social group *are* language itself, and are *in* language. (This is a big ask!) We will view talking as social action – talking as *doing* – talking as taking account of what others are doing/saying, and organising and re-organising one’s own saying/ doing accordingly.

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### 3.1 Activity 1

*Make a list of how many groups you are a member of, i.e. do you move in and out of groups in a day, a week or even a month? (i.e. class, women’s/men’s group, church, social club (name it) sports club (name the sport) , music etc.*

*Choose three of these groups. Then, note for each one, anything that identifies you with the group. For example, do you dress in a certain way, do you do certain things, do you say things in a particular way? Are there particular things you believe because you are a member of the group? Do you behave differently in these different groups?*

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### 3.1 Activity 2

*Read Appendix 1, ‘Language and Culture’, then answer the questions below.*

1. *How do the authors of this chapter define ‘culture’? What, if anything, would you add to their definition?*
2. *If you can speak the language of another cultural group, why is that not enough to be able to ‘fit in’ with that group?*
3. *What do the authors mean when they refer to culture as ‘a blueprint for personal existence’?*
4. *Explain what the words ‘culture acts as the fabric of shared meanings which exist between different people’ means.*

5. *Talk with a person who has spent time in a country/cultural group other than their own. What were the things they had to learn about, even if they spoke the same language?*
6. *How does Gee's notion of 'discourses' relate to 'culture'? (Answer this later, after we study Gee's theories).*

*Now answer True/False to the following:*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The beliefs a particular group has about land are derived from culture</li> <li>2. A person behaves toward people of another group because of the ways his cultural group has taught him to behave</li> <li>3. The colour of a child's eyes is decided by its culture</li> <li>4. There are some groups in the world that have no culture</li> <li>5. How a person behaves towards a spouse's relations depends on his/her culture</li> <li>6. Making eye contact with the person you are speaking to is a matter of culture</li> <li>7. Your culture determines where you should live</li> <li>8. Children are born with their culture already in their brains</li> <li>9. You can't be a member of more than one culture at a time</li> <li>10. A culture is maintained mainly through its language.</li> </ol>	True/False
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*Now read on!*

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Any individual culture is made up (constituted) of many *social groups*, all of them a part of our human lived experience. To be able to take part fully and effectively in our culture, we also participate in many different social groups, all of which have particular ways of 'being in the world', as we saw above in the discussion of your own social groups. Social context depends on cultural context; culture shapes the social context. And what is the place of language? What does it mean to refer to '*language as social practice*' in relation to culture and social groups? It is this issue we want to examine in this module.

Let us start with some definitions.

- We have previously defined language in Unit 2, module 1. Refer back to that module to refresh your memory here.
- What is the definition of 'practice'? Look this up in your own dictionary.

Here are some more definitions:

- the doing of something
- a way of doing something that is habitual
- something done regularly
- frequent or systematic repetition in doing something.

Language, then, is something we do, something done regularly and *systematically*.

What is the definition of 'social'?

- living in groups, not separately
- of people living in communities
- of, or in society
- companionship

*Now explain the meaning of 'language as social practice' to a classmate.*

One way of understanding about language as a social practice is to study texts, either spoken or written. One example of a spoken text, written down, follows. As you read, ask yourself,

- What is the social context here?
- What social goals are being achieved by the participants?
- What are they learning from the interaction?
- What are they able to **do** through language?

### Transcript

*Two four-year-old boys were playing together at Nursery school. They have been talking together as they played with toy cars. They were looking at a shoe box and discussing whether it was suitable for making into a garage.*

<i>Mark</i>	I, you know, garages have to have doors	(sets himself up as 'knower')
<i>John</i>	Sometimes they don't.	(challenge)
<i>Mark</i>	Garages have to have doors that will open and shut	('knower' role)
<i>John</i>	My grandad has one and he puts his car in and that hasn't doors.	(challenge)
<i>Mark</i>	But a garage has doors – and you lock the door so nobody can take it – the car, you see.	(justifies his knowing)
<i>John</i>	My grandad has a car thing and it hasn't doors on. It just keeps the rain off you.	(challenge)
<i>Mark</i>	Oh – well – shall we make a garage or a car thing like your granddad's?	(seeking agreement)
<i>John</i>	Well, I don't know how to put doors on.	(admits not knowing)
<i>Mark</i>	I would think of glue or pins or something like that.	('knower')
<i>John</i>	No – put it this way up, see? and cut it.	(challenge – also knower)
<i>Mark</i>	Yes, that might be all right	(seeks 'togetherness' through agreement)
<i>John</i>	Right – Mark – right – I'll get the scissors.	agreement

- In this interaction, the boys are maintaining social relationships as they work, negotiating opinions and points of view to come to a consensus. Here, their language is doing *social work*



- They are also reflecting on prior knowledge about ‘garages’ – with and without doors (carport?). Mark, because of his previous experience of seeing garages, maintains that garages have to have doors that will open and shut. John, however, disagrees and bases his prior knowledge on the one his grandad has, that hasn’t got doors. Yet he acknowledges that sometimes they do have doors.
- As the boys negotiate their way toward the task, they each have to make their language more explicit as they each present their valid arguments for the kind of garage they know about.
- After they have reached agreement about the kind of garage they are to build, their talk turns to how they will get the doors to fit on the garage, and Mark suggests glue or pins as a program of action. Finally, John states a personal plan of action “I’ll get the scissors”.

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### 3.1 Activity 3

*In this short interaction, see if you can identify the way the boys use language to:*

- achieve social purposes – maintaining a good working relationship around a task they are working on;
- express information about past experience that has relevance to the present task
- reflect on that information and call up more detail to support their point of view
- express possibility
- come to agreement about how to proceed
- decide on a course of personal action

*Here we see an example of two small boys already able to use language to act on their world and the people and objects in it. Their language makes the event – without language they would not be able to accomplish anywhere near the end point they reached.*

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## Status and solidarity

There is one other aspect of interaction that we can identify in this short transcript. Gee, whose theories about ‘discourse’ and ‘Discourses’ are studied in the next Section, raises another important issue here. He maintains that when humans interact with each other, they bring with them two paramount needs.

- First, he says, we all need to get close to each other, to have a sense of community, to feel that we are not alone in the world. We need to feel accepted and involved, to achieve rapport with others.

- But, says Gee, we also need to keep our distance from each other, to preserve our independence and protect our privacy, so that others do not impose on us or engulf us.

Unfortunately, as you can see, these two needs often conflict with each other. They are competing concepts: that is, we want to be respected, to stand out, to earn esteem, in our community, yet at the same time we want to be in unity with our fellow community members. So we can see that we humans are both social beings, and individualists, at the same time!

At different times, one or the other of these competing needs can be stronger than, and clearly identified in, the language practices of speakers. In fact, as participants in human interaction, we keep balancing our needs for involvement and independence. These two needs are competing with one another in every conversational interaction. We must serve both needs at once in all we say, and this often creates tension within us. That is, if what we say shows our involvement with others, it may ‘crowd’ us personally, or it may affect the other person’s independence. On the other hand, if we opt to maintain our individuality, we may threaten both their and our own need for solidarity.

Individuals and cultures place different values on these needs, and also have different ways of expressing them. This is one of the reasons why there may be ‘communication breakdown’ when people from two different cultures talk to each other.

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### 3.1 Activity 4

*Identify these competing drives of each of the boys in the interaction above. Some key words have been added to help your analysis.*

*Which of the two needs is stronger for each of the boys in this conversational interaction?*

*Discuss the ways in which people in different walks of life try to balance out these two competing motives. Think about, e.g.*

- Footballers
- Students at Teachers' College
- Others?

*Examine the transcript that follows for evidence of these two competing concepts.*

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Here are Elsey and Grandmother again, talking about Elsey's visit to the Nature Reserve. As well as wild animals, there were farm animals in pens, and one of these is the subject of the conversation here.

<i>Elsey</i>	Black pig.	(introduces the topic)
<i>Grandmother</i>	Yeah?	(agrees to be conversational partner)
<i>Elsey</i>	Yeah, but this mother pig/ it were a pink pig that's all.	('knower')
<i>Grandmother</i>	Pink or white?	(challenge to 'knower')
<i>Elsey</i>	Maybe, because I don' know white one.	(acknowledges superior knowledge of grandmother)
<i>Grandmother</i>	Ah?	(asserting own knowledge)
<i>Elsey</i>	I seen a pink one.	('seeing is believing')
<i>Grandmother</i>	There's no pig colour pink	(superior knowledge)
<i>Elsey</i>	Well, I saw it	(challenge)
<i>Grandmother</i>	True?	(concedes challenge – doubt)
<i>Elsey</i>	You never know that!	(superior 'knower'!)
<i>Grandmother</i>	Mus' be they paint that pig. Paint it pink !	(uses humour to find a way of agreeing with Elsey)

- Were you able to identify the competing needs of involvement and independence in the conversation above?
- Can you identify how Elsey is learning to be a member of her cultural group? (Learning how to be a 'knower', learning how to take turns in conversation, learning how to construct an argument etc.)
- Will her participation in this kind of dialogue with an adult help her in interactions of the classroom?

## Section 2. 'Discourses' and 'discourse' – James Paul Gee

Look up the meaning of 'discourse' in the dictionary. It may list the meaning of 'discourse' as 'speech', and give examples such as 'conversation', 'sermon', 'political speech' etc.

A new branch of linguistic investigation has developed, whose members study language at higher than the sentence level, since they maintain that sentences are organised into longer stretches of language. These longer stretches of language, which can be oral or written, are referred to as 'texts'. This new branch of linguistic studies is referred to as 'discourse analysis' or 'text linguistics'. This indicates that the studies involve longer stretches of language than the sentence.

Now another use of discourse has been developed – that of James Paul Gee. Gee refers to 'little-d discourses' and 'big-D discourses'. What does he mean by the terms?

By 'little-d discourses', he means 'any stretch of language (spoken, written, signed) which 'hangs together' to make sense to a community of people who use that language. That is, he means basically the same as in the definition above, but adds a further meaning.

He explains 'big-D discourses' in this way:

'Discourse' with a big D is more than just language. Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothing.

A big –D Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate clothing and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a social role that others will recognise.

Another way to look at Discourses is that they are always ways of displaying (through words, actions, values and beliefs) membership in a particular social group or social network (people who associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals, and activities

Yet another way to look at discourses is as 'clubs' with (hidden) rules about who is a member and who is not, and (hidden) rules about how members ought to behave if they wish to continue to be accepted as members. Being a member of a family, a peer group, a community group, or church, a drinking group, a classroom, a profession, a research team, a sub-culture or a culture, all require special events/ways of behaving, to continue to be accepted as an 'insider'.

Some examples are given below.

Being 'trained' as a teacher meant that I learned to speak, think and act like a teacher, and to recognise others when they, in turn, spoke, thought and acted like a teacher. I

learned what values and attitudes teachers were likely to hold, although sometimes they seemed to be in conflict with mine

But Discourses cover much more than that. The Discourse of teaching only makes sense if we include the whole *institution of teaching/learning*. The *institution of teaching* is made up of:

- concrete things like buildings, books, people, etc,
- abstract things like bodies of knowledge, values, beliefs, attitudes
- a mixture of concrete and abstract things like libraries, departments and divisions, publications etc. and shared histories.

So I learned how to use the ‘artifacts’ of being a teacher – books, writing equipment, teaching aids etc. I learned how to relate to the buildings that helped make up the discourse of teaching – classrooms, Government offices, personnel etc.

I also learned the Discourse of gender – the ‘ways of being’ female or male in my society. Sometimes that conflicted with the theories about teaching that I also held !

I learned the Discourse of ethnocentrism – theories about how various groups in my society are ranked socially, economically, politically, and this also had an effect on the Discourse of teaching I held.

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### 3.1 Activity 5

- Imagine, for a moment, that you are a dentist, or a business manager.
  - Make a quick list of all of the elements of ‘big-D’ Discourse you would need to learn, to be able to act out the ‘role’.
  - You can use the categories above to help you.
  - Compare your list with a classmate.
  - If you were travelling one day and met another person whom you hadn’t met before, how would you recognise a dentist or business manager?
- 

Here is another example. A lecturer from one College that was run by a Uniting Church agency transferred to another College that was run by a Catholic Church agency. To show solidarity with the students and staff, the new lecturer wanted to join in the Mass that was held on campus each week.

The lecturer went inside –

- Some people kneeled as they went inside – was that compulsory or not?
- What did it mean?
- Did only women kneel, or only men?

She tried to find a place to sit. There were seats at the back or right down the front –

- Should she walk down, or not?

If she sat at the back, it was the side where mostly men seemed to be sitting.

- Was it all right to sit there?
- What did it mean that all the women sat on one side, and men the other?

Then the congregation began to sing –

- Was it necessary to stand or sit when singing?
- There were some people doing both – were the ones standing dressed in the robes of nuns and priests, or were they sitting?
- Some people didn't sing at all – was that all right?

When the Bible was read, it was with a special ceremonial act that the lecturer could not interpret

- She did not know the rules for reading the Bible in this church.
- Who was allowed to read the Bible?
- Who was allowed to preach from the Bible?
- What were the reasons for why some people up at the front were expected to read from the Bible, and some were not?
- What responses were expected of the congregation before, during and after the Bible was read?

When the priest/bishop (she didn't know the difference) said the Mass,

- What did people reply, and
- When were they expected to reply?
- What were they expected to say?
- Why were they expected to say it, anyway?
- Why were so many people going down the front of the church at that time?
- Could she go too,
- Should she go?
- Was it permitted?
- How did people know to open their mouths at the right moment, and when to close their mouths?
- Look how people were holding their hands, in a special way as they returned to their seats. What was the significance of that?

When it was time to go,

- Who had the right to go first? and why?
- How soon could our friend the confused lecturer leave? and
- Why did some people turn towards the altar as they left?

Some people dipped their hand into a shell that contained water as they went through the door, and made a signal with their hand.

- What did that mean, and why did they do it, and what if they didn't do it? what if they did it when they shouldn't? who would know?

Now, our lecturer friend prided herself on her ability with the English language. But it didn't seem to help her much as she tried to participate with this particular group of people in this religious ceremony. She knew the language the Mass, was delivered in, but she could not seem to say the 'right' thing in the 'right' way at the 'right' time for the 'right' reasons. In fact, on a couple of occasions, she replied with a hearty 'Amen' when everyone else was silent, so it seemed to her that EVERYONE knew she didn't 'belong' here !

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### 3.1 Activity 6

*Using Gee's notion of 'Discourse' how could you explain her experience to her in such a way that she understood what was happening to her?*

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 **3.1 Activity 7**

*What are some of the beliefs about the 'roles' of men and women in society, i.e. ideology of gender that are held in your class of students? Make a list of them.*

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 **3.1 Activity 8**

*Read the Appendix 2 Language and Groups and relate it to Gee's notion of Discourses:*

- 1. Identify and name some Discourses that are referred to.*
  - 2. 'Reading between the lines' of this text, what do you think is meant by the term 'in-group'?*
  - 3. What do the writers suggest sometimes excludes some people from feeling they are part of the 'in-group'?*
  - 4. What is the term the writers use to describe the specialised language used by members of different professions?*
  - 5. What is the reason the writers give for the rapid changes in the special ways of talking of drug users?*
  - 6. Describe/retell one way of using language to control who participates in interaction that you have experienced at College or elsewhere.*
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**Note:**

Gee takes the position that what is at issue in separating 'in-groups' from 'out-groups' is not just the issue of specialised use of language (i.e. 'jargon') although that is part of it.

As we have seen, when he speaks of Discourses he is not just referring to ways and kinds of talk. Rather, he maintains that particular social groups have particular ways of 'doing' language and of 'being in the world' which have special rules.

Communicating effectively means being able to operate effectively within particular discourses: to say the right things, to act appropriately, to share the values, attitudes belief systems, expectations and assumptions embedded in the Discourse – to play the appropriate 'role'. So we could say that Gee takes a much stronger position than the one presented here by Emmitt and Pollock.

### 3.1 Activity 9 (Optional)

*This text is a useful example of how writers use cohesion to weave a text together. The authors of this article have used a particular Noun Group, with different features of cohesion. In your copy, underline the Noun Groups listed below.*

*How many features of Cohesion can you identify? (Refer to Unit 1, Module 2, 3. for help).*

*What different kinds of verbs are used?*

those	who	are	not		members	of the group	out-group
those	who	are				in their profession	in-group
those	who	are	not			in the group	out-group
those (of you)	who	are being		trained		as teachers	in-group
those	who			belong		to the group	in-group
those	who	do	not				out-group
those	who			belong			in-group
those	who	do	not				out-group
those	who			share			in-group
those	who	do	not				out-group
your parents, teachers, peers	who	were	not			members of the group	out-group
those						members of the drug culture	in-group
those	who			belong			in-group
those	who	do	not				out-group
those	who	are		admitted		to membership	in-group



## Section 3. Language and ideology

The word ‘ideology’ has meant different things to different people. In this module, it will be used in the way in which Gee uses it. His argument goes like this:

People who are members of a Discourse hold ‘theories’ in their heads about what a ‘normal’ person is like, and the ‘right’ ways such a normal person should believe, act, think and be. These theories are *implicit*, hidden in people’s minds, and those who hold such theories are often unconscious of even holding them.

We could make a useful comparison, for example, between the implicit theories held by a conservationist and those of a miner. The conservationist might hold to a theory that a ‘normal’ person believes:

- the land is entrusted to humans as caretakers of its wealth
- humans have the power to protect or exploit it
- we owe future generations of humans a well-balanced world
- (name other points of view they might hold)

The miner on the other hand, believes that:

- land is there to be used in whatever way humans see fit
- what is in the ground is there for the benefit of humankind
- (name other points of view the miner might hold)

Both persons will act, talk, value and believe, in line with the ‘theory’ they hold in their heads. Gee calls these ‘theories’ ‘*ideologies*’, and suggests that they are an inseparable part of every Discourse. He argues that language is *inextricably* bound up with ‘ideology’ and cannot be understood, or analysed apart from it.

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### 3.1 Activity 10

*Imagine you work for an advertising agency, and you are asked to prepare a newspaper advertisement that will encourage your fellow citizens to buy a certain brand of vehicle. Part of the Discourse of advertising is an ideology about consumerism – it’s good to consume – to shop, to spend, to acquire possessions. While people are buying lots of goods, the shopkeepers are happy, their employees are happy, since they rely on people buying lots of goods to keep their jobs. This consumer activity keeps the market economy turning, the banks happy, the shopkeepers happy, and the consumers who buy the goods happy.*

*However, in the case of the vehicle you are to encourage people to buy, you know it is not suitable for the road conditions in PNG. Your ideology of nationalism tells you that your countrymen could well be wasting their hard-*

*earned income buying this kind of vehicle. Your ideology of Christianity leads you to believe that you are to be truthful at all times. What will you do about the advertisement?*

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We hold *ideologies* about many things, depending on the number of discourses we have become members of in the course of our lives. And as we have seen, sometimes these are in conflict with one another.

In Australia, for example, teachers may believe that most children have the intellectual capacity to achieve the outcomes expected of them at school. However, a conflicting ideology of racism may predispose some teachers not to expect as much of children of colour in their classes.

In Papua New Guinea, teachers may also hold the view that all children are equally able to learn what the school has for them to learn. However, they might hold competing ideologies about children of different cultural groups, and this will have an effect on the way they teach those children.

We could ask, “*Why do we need to know about ‘ideologies’?*” One good reason is that social beliefs can actually make real what they are about. Here is one example to show the power that ideologies have in our lives.

A little child from a rural area enrolls at an urban school for her first year of schooling. The teacher, who has grown up in the urban area, has taught other children from that same rural community and has found them to be rather ‘slow learners’. That is, s/he believes children from that particular rural group are not quick learners.

Believing this, how might s/he act toward the child? Because s/he believes the child is a slow learner s/he may:

- give that pupil easy work all the time
- not expect as much from him/her
- not encourage or praise him/her as much as other children in the class
- not give as many opportunities for the child to have new experiences to promote further learning
- not pay much attention to the child during the school day.

By acting/believing in this way, the teacher is partly helping to create the ‘reality’ s/he believes. Research into classrooms has clearly shown that if someone, usually the teacher,

undermines someone else’s (usually the pupil) motivation, or  
shows that s/he doubts the pupil’s learning capacities, or

leads them to feel badly about their abilities as learners and knowers,

it is likely that the pupils will adopt that image of themselves, and become reluctant, discouraged, and therefore slow, learners. For this reason, it is essential that we as teachers continually examine the beliefs we hold about children, teachers, schooling and society.

Emmitt and Pollock have this to add:

*“As language is a social practice and part of a culture, it is inextricably tied to ideology which has been defined as a ‘systematic body of ideas organised from a particular point of view’. In any complex society, different ideologies operate, often competing in different discourses and texts. Texts are here defined as ‘the product of any language event’ hence a text can be oral, written or visual.*

*Over time, certain viewpoints become embedded in the language and come to be seen as natural. In this way language users’ choice of options in making and sharing meaning are influenced.*

*Through the ideologies in our language, a particular reality is produced which seems like commonsense to the users, but may be in conflict with others’ view of the world. As language is a means of communication and control, we can be both informed and manipulated by texts – often at the same time ...*

Critical theorists maintain that some ideologies seem to carry more power than others, and command more attention than others. And in any society, some members or groups may not be in a position to speak or be listened to. All texts, both oral and written involve hidden relations of power, such as:

- parent and child
- doctor and patient
- employer and employee
- name some others.

In all interactions, the participants choose the features of language that are appropriate to the roles they have assumed in the conversation. All producers of texts take up a certain *position* in relation to each other, and the word ‘*positioning*’ is used to talk about, e.g.

- ‘subject position,
- ‘ideal reader position’.

Of course, it is possible to *contest* and *challenge* the role one has been assigned. Most native speakers are very aware of how they are being ‘pushed around’ in a conversation, and may refuse to play the conversational game by the same rules as the other interactant.

One example of a person who knew he was being manipulated, took steps to avoid it, but ended up not being able to because of the relationships of power hidden in the conversation, is given below. It is a conversation between a police officer from the Southern United States, and a black doctor:

*‘What’s your name, boy?’ the policeman asked  
 Doctor Poussaint, I’m a physician  
 What’s your first name, boy?  
 As my heart palpitated: I muttered in profound humiliation – “Alvin”.*

A final word on discourses:

*How do we become competent users of particular Discourses?*

Gee suggests that it is NOT by being told about them; NOT by being formally instructed in how to be and become a member, BUT by joining the particular group which uses/does the discourse, and learning by doing.

That is, we become ‘apprentices’. We don’t know much at the start, but we learn through watching what mature members do, say, believe, value, wear and following their ways of doing, saying, etc

How did you learn:

- the Discourse of schooling?
- the Discourse of being male/female?
- the Discourse of church membership?
- the Discourse of consumerism?

We could name any one of the many ‘clubs’ we belong to in life, and ask the same question. As we settle in to these different ‘clubs’, we move into the Discourse, usually quite unconsciously, if and when we are accepted as potential members of the group.

Otherwise, we remain ‘outsiders’, and may never acquire the Discourse. Not acquiring the relevant Discourse may often be the experience of children who are labelled in certain ways at school – they are not considered to be potential members of the ‘club’ of ‘*educated/schooled*’ persons, so they do not have the chance to learn the powerful Discourse of schooling, that would be a liberating experience in their lives. Without access to the social practices of classrooms, they don’t have it, and they may not get it.

## **Section 4. Socialisation practices and ideologies**

We have been making the case that language is social practice, that it is social action, a way of acting on the world.

In Module 3 of this Unit, we will study children learning their ‘primary discourse’, that is, the first Discourse they learn in infancy and on into childhood. Our particular interest is in the social context in and through which children learn their first language, and how language constructs and is constructed by, that context.

The social context into which children are born is constructed of people organised in particular ways, such as whether the family is extended/nuclear, the particular community in which families are embedded, the material conditions such as dwellings, events, occupations of the members, etc.

Each such community, whether in industrialised/urban societies or rural/agrarian societies or many which are combinations of both, have particular ‘ideologies’ of childhood. These ideologies relate to the way the family and group are organised, their beliefs and values, their ways of being in the world. Further, these ideologies arise out of and shape what the group considers ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ ways of behaving, believing, valuing, and being.

As they grow to adulthood, children in their turn learn the ideologies of the group, including what behaviours, and ways of talking, are expected of them as young children and later as adults. In their family and community, certain patterns of interaction occur between young children and their caregivers. As we would expect, the communicative interaction patterns between the caregivers and young children are culturally constructed – and take place - largely through the medium of language. What is also becoming clearer is that different social and cultural groups socialise their young children into very different language practices. These language practices, as we have seen, relate to the specific ideologies of the groups.

### **Case study – Samoan socialisation practices**

In order to establish how language, ideologies and social practices are linked in the lives of children and their communities, we study below the socialisation practices of a society from Western Samoa, which is a highly-stratified society. That is, individuals are ranked from very high to very low.

Children grow up in a family compound that is made up of several households, and is headed by one or more titled persons. These titled persons are expected to follow certain patterns of behaviour in public, that is, to move only slowly or to stay in one place, and they like to detach themselves from the activities of the lower status persons around them. They have little to do with the immediate care of young children, and leave tasks such as bathing, changing, entertaining and carrying of infants to lower status members. As well, older relatives are of higher status than younger family members.

How people are ranked is of major importance to all members of the society, and something that children have to learn very early in their lives. They are ‘apprenticed’ from birth into the ways of being and belonging of their family and society, and learn by observing, listening, and doing what higher-and lower-status members expect of them. They learn to be ‘Samoan children’ in the ways that the group think are natural, normal ways to belong in their society.

How does language feature in these socialisation practices? That is, how does language shape what and how and why children learn the ways of their social group? And what ideologies of childhood can we identify from studying the ways with words of this society?

Young children are cared for from birth by people who are low-ranking, such as older siblings, unmarried sisters of the baby's mother and of course the mother. From birth to about 6 months the infant is referred to by others as 'baby-thing-thing'. When awake, the baby is with or near the mother for feeding, but otherwise is looked after by other children.

Some language is addressed to the baby, but mostly songs or rhythmic language. The baby is not treated as a conversational partner. If the baby shows some need or distress, what an adult thinks the baby is expressing is told to an older child as a directive, that, "do ...", "take ...", "get ...".

Once the infant can crawl or walk, older members describe him/her as cheeky, mischievous and wilful. Young children learn from a very young age not to touch valuable possessions of others, first by being told not to touch, then by being threatened in a tone of voice they quickly learn means they are doing something and they have to stop it – now! They also learn not to approach guests, and people of higher status only by invitation.

The children are thought of by Samoan adults as highly-assertive, angry and defiant. Adults listen for the child's first use of the word *tae* (= shit), which is a curse-word used to reject someone, retaliate against someone, or show they are displeased at someone's actions. The adults admonish the child for the use of this word. Yet the qualities of defiance and wilfulness are in fact deeply valued, and considered to be essential in some social situations.

Young Samoan children are immersed in an environment of talk. When a child begins to speak, s/he learns to make his or her needs known to the higher-ranked caregiver. This person then directs a lower-ranking person to meet the child's needs. So children learn not to expect an answer directed to them. The answer will usually come through a third person.

Quite young children are coached in ways of speaking that the group accepts as appropriate. For example, a speech act the child will be expected to produce later, when s/he is the lower-ranking person, will be the reporting of news and information to older, higher-ranking family members. So, children are explicitly instructed by their elders to notice what other people are saying and doing, and to report this information to high-ranked adults. This role is given to young children because high-ranking people like to think of themselves as detached from the daily routines and lives of others, but they still need to know what is going on in their community! By the time children are 3 years of age, they are expected to be able to deliver word-for-word messages to and from older family members. So we could say that a preferred social behaviour of quite young children of these Samoan families, is to notice others, listen to them, and learnt to adapt their speech to the status and needs of the adults.

Children also learn while very young that they must make themselves understood to higher status people. It is not the role of a ranked person to try and guess what a lower ranked speaker is trying to say. Also, if the talk of a higher-ranking adult is unclear, the burden is on the hearer to work out what is being said. Adults do not ask children what they mean; it is up to the children to make themselves clear.

What you have just read is an account of one society's child-rearing practices and the beliefs and values that cause them to think of their ways of bringing children into their

cultural group as what is normal and natural. However, as we shall see in Modules 2 and 3 of this Unit, there are many and varied ways of being in the world, with their associated beliefs and values.

After answering the questions in the activity to follow, you are asked to consider the ideology of childhood of your own particular group.

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### 3.1 Activity 11

*From the information given, what could we say is the 'ideology' of childhood held by this group of people? On a sheet of paper, write out what you can identify as the beliefs of adult members of the society about young children and what is expected of them. You should be able to make at least five statements that help construct the ideology of childhood of this society.*

*What difficulties might a child from this social group have when s/he comes into a classroom of a school in your community, with teachers from your community?*

*What learned behaviours of a child from the community would make it easier for her/him to fit in well in your community school?*

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### 3.1 Activity 12

*Below are a number of questions to help you construct the ideology of childhood of your own primary group.*

- 1. How are individuals ranked in your society? Do some people have higher status than others? How do they achieve this status?*
- 2. How do young children in your family group learn who has status? Identify 2 –3 speech acts or language routines that are examples of a typical daily interaction, where children learn about the status of other family/group members.*
- 3. What ranking do a) infants, b) young children, have in your social group?*
- 4. What words are used to refer to the baby or young child?*
- 5. At what age do adults believe the child has begun to talk? What are the signs they look for?*
- 6. When children are held on somebody's lap, which way is the baby facing? Is there any social significance in this position?*
- 7. At what age do adults consider the baby to become a 'real person'?*
- 8. Is the first birthday of the child significant? Why is this so?*
- 9. How do adults believe young children come to be learners? Are there special routines and speech acts that adults use to help young children learn?*

10. *How do adults describe the personality of young children?*
11. *Are there special behaviours/qualities that adults look for in young children? What are they, and why are they considered to be important or valued?*
12. *How do adults describe a child who has favourable behaviours/qualities and one who does not?*
13. *What do adults expect young children to be able to do in daily life?*
14. *Do adults hold different expectations/beliefs about girl babies/boy babies?*
15. *Do adults ever leave the baby/young child alone? Why, or why not? Under what conditions?*
16. *Finish this sentence: 'Adults highly value a boy/girl child who.*

*What are their reasons for valuing the child who demonstrates these qualities?*

- *Now write two paragraphs stating what is the ideology of childhood of your social group/first-language community.*
  - *Include an explanation of how language shapes what children learn, and how they learn it.*
  - *The answers you have given to the questions above will assist you in developing your thesis.*
  - *Remember that an 'ideology' is a cohesive fabric of beliefs about what is the normal and natural way to live in a particular society.*
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## Section 5. Literacy as social practice

In this section, we will study situations where written text is central to the interaction that is taking place. What we will see is the way in which young children are being empowered to develop an identity of themselves as literate persons, and of being apprenticed into membership of the 'literacy club'. Here is the first example:

### Quick learner

My husband and young son were sitting on the couch, both immersed in the Sunday paper. Following Dad's cue, Master Three scrutinised his page, gave out little 'humphs' and half-chuckles at intervals, and finally laid the paper in his lap, rolled his eyes heavenward, and pronounced his verdict: '*I don't believe it!*' Pretty clever for a non-reader.

This anecdote was sent in to a women's magazine for inclusion on a page where children's sayings and doings were reported. It is one very powerful example of what we mean by 'literacy as social practice'.

In this example, it is clear that the father is acting as a powerful role model for his young son. The boy is being 'apprenticed' into the Discourse of being a literate person (at least, of one important kind of literacy). He has observed many times what his father did when it was newspaper-reading time, where his father sat, what his father said as he read (scanned the page, laughed, made comment about what he read). Already this small boy has an understanding of *the social purpose* for this kind of print. It is for entertainment in leisure time, and also for informing about things of interest to the reader. So, one way of 'doing' literacy in this home is the social practice of reading the newspaper.

Here is another example:

A 3-year old girl accompanied her father to the lecture room one day. While he worked, he gave her a piece of paper and a biro to keep her busy. She worked on her piece of paper, doing what looked to an adult's eyes as 'just scribble'. However, when she had finished her work, she gave it to her father and directed him to pin it on the wall for her. She too was being apprenticed to literacy. She also understood that marks on paper had power, and that there was a purpose for different kinds of print – this was a notice to be pinned on the wall, like other notices she had seen around the college that seemed to excite interest from many readers.

Some researchers talk about children '*learning to read culturally*'. By this, they mean that the specific practices that people engage in around literacy and the kinds of literacy they learn, are an outcome of the society of which they are a part, and of the uses and functions of literacy in that society. Children learn all of this cultural knowledge through the particular habits and practices that adults engage in as they maintain their lifestyle.

### 3.1 Activity 13

*Draw up a table like the one below. Fill out the cells with the information requested.*

	What kinds of literacy do you use? Name as many as you can think of	What is the purpose for which you use the literacy (reading and writing)	Who are the people who are involved with you in the interaction?	How are the practices different for different social contexts?
Home				
Church				
College				
At the stores				
At the bank				
At the hospital				
Other				

From this chart, you can see how literacy is a part of our everyday social and cultural practices. We use literacy, which is another mode of language, to make and share meanings for a range of purposes in many different social settings.

We could say that literacy is woven into everyday events such as

- looking up TV programs
- finding out the sports results
- getting money from the bank
- writing a letter home
- writing a note to a friend about Saturday's sports game
- reading the labels on clothing and packets at the store
- reading notices on boards
- reading names on shops and stores
- reading billboards
- finding telephone numbers
- reading letters from home
- filling out application forms of different kinds

and much more.

Also, the different kinds of literacy require different skills and knowledge in their use, depending on where and with whom we are interacting. For example,

- making a shopping list
- writing a letter
- filling out an application to go to college
- drawing a road map for someone
- sending an email message.

All the above require us to think, write and say differently. The texts look very different, and we can generally recognise one from the other. For example, we don't often confuse a shopping list with a letter from home, or a telephone number. As we write, or read, we have in mind the person(s) for whom we are writing, and the purpose, and that helps us to decide what 'shape' the text will have.

What researchers into social and linguistic aspects of literacy now maintain, is that literacy is not something people either have, or don't have. Rather, literacy (or more correctly) 'literacies' are best thought of as *sets of practical activities engaged in by many different people in many different interpersonal and cultural contexts for many different purposes.*

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### 3.1 Activity 14

*Working in a small group, identify some of the different kinds of texts which can be found on the classified pages of a daily newspaper. Consider:*

*Who is the text written for?*

*Who might have written it?*

*What is its purpose?*

*What kind of information does each give?*

*What is its shape? (i.e. identify different features of each text)*

*What is the social setting of each kind of text?*

*Are there some texts they find harder to read (understand) than others?*

*Why?*

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## Section 6. Literacy practices and classrooms

Let us think now of the particular kinds of literacy that are practiced in the social setting of classrooms. This topic is developed more fully in Unit 2 Module 2, *Spoken and written language*.

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### 3.1 Activity 15

1. *What kinds of print texts are found in classrooms? Make a list.*
  2. *Who are the texts for?*
  3. *For each kind of text, name its purpose in the lives of the children/ teachers.*
  4. *Do some children find some texts harder than others to interact with?*
  5. *Why do some texts give some children difficulties?*
  6. *Identify some texts that might present difficulties for some children.*
  7. *What assumptions could you make about children who have having problems with some of the classroom uses and functions of literacy?*
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Gee, and also Heath, remind us that some children have already been apprenticed into some practices that help them when they come to classrooms. These children appear to learn very quickly how to be literate in ways valued in classrooms, and teachers sometimes think they are more clever than others. That may be so, but it may also be that they have learned some literacy practices in their out-of-school lives, that make a bridge to the learning they have to do at school.

Think back to Gee's discussion of 'primary' discourses. He has more to say on the subject when it comes to literacy practices. You will recall that our 'primary' discourse signals our membership in a particular community of people 'just like me'. Gee uses the notion of 'secondary' discourse to refer to our ways of being in any groups, or institutions other than our primary group. These are the contacts we have outside of our immediate family group, such as stores, businesses, offices, churches, doctors, sports clubs, preschools, schools, Colleges, etc. And just as we learn our primary discourse by being apprenticed, by learning to belong and learn the ways of the group, in just the same way we learn to belong and be members of the secondary group as we learn the associated discourses. So, Gee maintains, we learn the secondary discourse of literacy by learning how to 'do' literacy, as we learned how to be a member in our social group.

And just as different cultural groups socialise their young into the ways of the group, so different cultural groups socialise their young into different ways to behave in the presence of text. So secondary discourses of literacies may in fact be as widely different as primary discourses of language!

This theme will be developed more fully in Module 3 of this Unit.

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## Appendix 1: Language and Culture

What is culture? The term 'culture' is used frequently in daily conversations and the media but rarely is it defined. For some people 'culture' means 'high culture' that is, opera, the kind of art shown in galleries and the like. Here, we refer to culture as 'a way of life', the context in which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. Culture acts as the fabric of shared meanings which exist between different people; it is the glue that binds people together and as such is the linchpin of national and personal identity. Culture determines what we place significance on and the way in which this is done. Thus culture provides the substance of meaning and the process of making meaning. Language, as you can appreciate, plays a central part in this. A famous writer wrote: 'No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main'. Culture is our continent, the collective identity of which each of us is a part. Culture mediates personal meaning and social structure. It draws people together and alienates those that don't belong.

Culture may be described as the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools which characterise a given group of people in a given period of time. Language is a part of all this. Culture provides guidelines for behaviour. It establishes for each person a context of cognitive and affective behaviour – ways of thinking and feeling – a blueprint for personal existence. We tend, however, to perceive reality strictly within the context of our own culture and to be critical of other cultures and others' realities or to be unaware of, or disregard, the realities of others. This can result in great culture clashes, for example the European settlement of Australia in which Europeans perceived land as a commodity to be owned, occupied and traded, while the Aborigines saw the land as part of their 'Dreamtime', part of a continuum of the past, present and future.

Our culture influences our way of thinking and acting. To learn another language we need to learn to appreciate the culture of which the language is a part. We can't really learn a second language – or, more precisely, learn the uses of that language – unless we learn about the culture because many of the meanings constructed in the language are culture-specific.

As teachers we need to appreciate that individuals who possess another language as their first language possess a different culture and a different way of creating meaning and reality. We need to accept what students from different backgrounds bring to the learning context and not reject their language and customs as being inferior.

It is important to remember that there are non-verbal differences as well between different languages. For example, in most European languages nodding the head means 'yes' but in the Eskimo culture it means 'no'. In a language in Japan 'yes' is conveyed by moving the arms to the chest and waving them. Other languages in Ceylon and India have other ways. Eye contact, too, varies in different cultures. For example, in the Australian culture, when conversing with someone it is considered courteous to maintain eye contact; if you do not it would be thought that you were not interested and not paying attention. In contrast, in many Asian cultures it would be considered rude to maintain eye contact, particularly if you were of lower status. There are also differences in body contact and concepts of personal space. It is important to familiarise ourselves with the non-verbal culture differences of our students. Through our ignorance we could misinterpret or offend them.

Emmitt, M. and Pollock J. (2001). *Language and Learning. An Introduction for Teaching*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chapter 3, pp.47-48.

## Appendix 2: Language and Groups

All too often language serves as a barrier, rather than as a flexible and efficient means of communication. We do not all possess the same language. Even within a particular language community, individuals do not speak in the same way. It is by our language that we generally describe and define ourselves to others. Our language enables us to belong to a group and to exclude others from the group.

There are numerous ways of using language to control who participates in interactions. Various 'in-groups' have particular ways of speaking and writing that keep the interactions within the control of the group and make it difficult for outsiders to participate. Every professional group develops its own jargon that serves as a code for specialised meanings that are important to the group. However, in the process, the jargon that is developed isolates the meanings from those who are not members of the group. Doctors and lawyers, and more recently computer experts, all use language to share meanings that are important to those who are in their professions. At the same time this specialised language can be used to enhance the power and importance of the users as they deal with those who are not in the group.

Those of you who are being trained as teachers are already learning the jargon of your profession and you may already have had the experience of irritating your friends or family by 'talking like a teacher'.

Different professions are not the only groups who use language in ways that distinguish those who belong to the group from those who do not. Skiers and sailors are notorious for using language in ways that demonstrate that they possess knowledge which is unknown to the rest of the community. Members of the drug culture use language as a test to help discriminate between those who belong to the culture and those who do not. The problem for drug users and other groups is that others can quickly learn their particular ways of talking so that the special language eventually loses its power to discriminate between those who share the group's values and those who don't; thus the special terms and expressions change more quickly than language normally changes in the wider community.

Young teenagers are another group who use language to establish the limits to group membership. You may remember the secret languages or secret words that you and your friends used as a private language. Your parents, teachers and peers who were not members of the group may have been quite irritated by it all but, as users of the secret language, you would have drawn a sense of belonging and camaraderie by excluding other people from the group. Of course, just like those members of the drug culture, or other groups who use language to distinguish those who belong from those who don't, teenagers' secret languages have to change frequently so that the power to include only those who are admitted to membership is not compromised.

It is probably just this power of language to identify those who belong from those who don't that drives the rapid changes to teenagers' slang. You will have noticed just how 'off' the use of last year's slang sounds, particularly when it is used by an older person who is trying to sound 'with it' or relevant to younger people.

Emmitt, M. and Pollock, J. (2001). *Language and Learning. An Introduction for Teaching*. pp. 45-46

## Appendix 3: Introduction to: '*Social Linguistics and Literacies. Ideology in Discourses*' by James Gee

“This book is written by a linguist. However, despite my profession’s central concern with language, I will argue that to appreciate language in its social context, we need to focus not on language, but rather on what I will call ‘Discourses’ (with a capital ‘D’). Discourses include much more than language, and in them language has no necessary pride of place. Consider for a moment the unlikely topic of bars (pubs).

Imagine that I park my motorcycle, enter my neighbourhood ‘biker bar’ and say to my leather-jacketed and tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down: ‘May I have a match for my cigarette, please?’ what I have said is perfectly grammatical English, but it is ‘wrong’ nonetheless (unless I have used a heavily ironic tone of voice)P It is not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it. In this bar, I haven’t said ‘it in the ‘right way’. I should have said something like ‘Gotta match?’ or ‘Gimme a light, wouldja?’

‘Now imagine that I say the ‘right thing’ (‘Gotta match? Or ‘gimme a light, wouldja), but while saying it, I carefully wipe off the bar stool with a serviette to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty. In this case, I’ve still got it wrong. In *this* bar, they just don’t do that sort of thing: I have *said* the right thing, but my ‘saying-doing’ combination is nonetheless wrong. It’s not just *what* you say or even just *how* you say it, it’s also what you *are* and *do* while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right ‘lines’; one needs to get the whole ‘role’ right (like a role in a play or movie). In *this* bar, the biker bar, I need to ‘play’ the ‘role’ of a ‘tough’ guy, not a young urban professional person, relaxing on the weekend. Other bars cater to different roles, and if I want to, I can go to many bars so long as I play many different roles.

A ‘role’ as I am here using the term, is a combination of saying the right sorts of things in the right way, while engaging in the right sorts of actions and interactions, and appearing to think and feel the right way and have the right sorts of values. I call such integral combinations of ‘sayings-doings-thinkings-feelings-valuings’ – Discourses.

What determines what is ‘right’? Obviously the bar you’re in. And how do you learn to engage in the right Discourse? Certainly *not* by overt teaching and instruction. The bar doesn’t have any overt rules to be learned in any case; all it has are *social practices* that have evolved over time. You learn the Discourse by becoming a member of the group: you start as a ‘beginner’, watch what’s done, go along with the group as if you know what you’re doing even when you don’t, and eventually you can do it on your own, even with something of your own style. By the time you are an expert, however, you often can’t say what you do, how you do it, or why. Though you could *show* someone.

I have pointed out that bars, schools, churches, business, subject matters like math and history, and many more institutions, have their own Discourses. But so do families, communities and different cultural groups. Each different community and social group masters a home-based Discourse that integrates words, actions, interactions, values, feelings, attitudes and thinking in specific and distinctive ways. Each such home-based Discourse is connected to a particular social group’s *way of being in the world*, their ‘form of life’ their very identity, who they take themselves to be”.

Reference:

Gee, James (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies. Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.