1 | AN OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

| FOCUS |

This chapter focuses on the understanding that:

explicit knowledge of language is important for fostering language learning

language can be viewed from different dimensions or perspectives

language is more than speech or writing

language involves a number of verbal and non-verbal codes

language and learning are about making and sharing meaning

literacy is part of language, and understandings about language are relevant to literacy

language is an integral part of culture and, as such, is tied up with politics and the distribution of power.

| PRE-READING ACTIVITIES |

1. Write down why you think people want to study language. Why do you want to know more about language?
2. What do you use language for? Reflect on a day's activities and list the times when you used language, the context, purposes and what type(s) of language you used; for example, speech, writing, digital or body language.
3. What type of language did you use most frequently?
4. Did you find that you used non-verbal language more frequently than any other type?
5. What are the implications of your responses for a program to assist students' language and literacy development?
6. What uses and types of language should you focus on in developing students' language (and literacy)? Why?

We suggest that you write your answers to these questions and file them for comparison with your views as they develop throughout the course of this book.

> A few years ago, there was a university student named 'Tyler'. He was participating in a class discussion and he blurted out, 'Dude, I know the answer!' The class looked at him in confusion as he explained what he knew. The professor took advantage of the 'teachable moment' and talked to the class about language and its many uses and contexts.
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> 1. What was Tyler's 'mistake'?
> 2. Do you know what 'pragmatics' means?
> 3. What do you need to know to be able to use language appropriately in different contexts?

IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter introduces you to many of the key concepts about language that we believe are most critical in supporting language and literacy education. These are then explored in more detail later in the book. We begin by considering why learning about language is important for all teachers—at all levels and of all subject areas. From there, we briefly outline the history and scope of the study of language; in particular, the development of the different branches of linguistics to demonstrate the changing emphases in the study of language that we inherit. In the next section we explore the nature and function of language, noting that language is both an individual and social practice used for creating and sharing meaning, and it uses both verbal and non-verbal codes. As a means of unpacking the complexity of language we view it from many different dimensions, including sociocultural, linguistic and developmental. However, while we focus on only one dimension at a time, it is important to remember that all aspects of language are interrelated. In addition to the function and form of language, and the personal and sociocultural aspects of language we discuss the role of ideology and power in language use and the importance of critical literacy, the concept of multiliteracies and the role of language in thinking and learning. We invite you to begin to articulate your definition of language.

WHY STUDY LANGUAGE?

Language arguably is the most significant human invention and hence worthy of studying in its own right. However, for educators, valuing the language, culture and lives of students, and empowering them to take control of their lives, is the foundation

of language and literacy education. Language is integral to the process of conceiving meaning and a necessary pre-condition of the cultural process: 'It is not as though we have meaning and then have language—in order to express our meaning. Rather, language is integral to realizing meaning' (Lankshear, 1997, p. 23). In 1921 the philosopher Wittgenstein said: '*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world' (italics added; see Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 115). If he meant by this that our understanding of the world is set by the limits of our language, then it is vital that we expand our students' language if we are interested in their learning and growth as individuals. It is also true that, as teachers, we need a language to think and talk about language. We need to extend the limits of our language and the assumptions underlying our views of language and language use so we can best assist others in language learning, and learning more generally.

The way we use language in the classroom has great impact on what and how students learn, and, importantly, how they see themselves as learners and people.

Language is so much a part of us and our lives that it is very difficult for us to distance ourselves from it, and to reflect and examine it. However, as we emphasise throughout this book, language is central to living and learning. As users of a language, we all have intuitive knowledge of language, but as teachers we must have explicit knowledge of what it is that we use all day in our teaching and what it is that we are trying to develop in our learners. We can be truly professional only if we continually reflect upon and evaluate our practices. We need to know what we are doing and why. Then, and only then, can we make informed decisions.

Our aim is to assist you in developing a more explicit understanding and appreciation of language, in particular an appreciation of the power of language and the importance of your students having access to that power. With your knowledge of language and language learning, you will have greater and more precise insights into your role in teaching–learning contexts. With the development of the national English curriculum there is an emphasis on students having a more explicit knowledge of language, including grammar; all teachers will need explicit knowledge of what is appropriate for students to learn about language and how to assist them to use language for sophisticated purposes.

Language and how we use it is rapidly changing in our working, public and personal lives (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004) and there appears to be an increased community awareness of the significant role language plays in work. For example, nearly all jobs demand that workers engage in face-to-face and group interaction as speakers and listeners, and possess a range of literacy skills. Almost all job descriptions now stress communication skills. It seems that the way language is being used in the workplace is changing along with the restructuring of work practices, and is playing a different role in social control in the workplace. With changes in relations between groups, there have been changes in the way language is

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Our ability to use language is central to the making and sharing of meaning; therefore it is critical for teachers to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the qualities and characteristics of language in order to support student learning.

used; for example, between doctors and patients, women and men, and politicians and the public (Fairclough, 1992a). We need to help our students understand the role of language in different contexts for them to be able to use it effectively. In addition, with the widespread use of new communication and information technologies, language is being used differently for different purposes and values, and attitudes about language are changing. As teachers, no matter what our content or subject area, we need to understand:

– the relationship between language and learning; in particular, how language can enhance learning
– how our use of language can impact on our students' learning and their developing sense of identity
– how language structures and reflects meanings
– how language differs depending on the context
– how language use is changing with new technologies
– how the texts of language can both inform and manipulate us.

As teachers of language and literacy we need to understand:

– the nature of language so we know what it is we want to develop and why; what it is we need to observe; and what we need to do to enable our students to become effective language users
– what knowledge of language or language awareness our students need to assist them to become effective and discriminating users, and to appreciate the richness of language and its role in our lives
– the language competencies and cultural understandings of children from diverse backgrounds
– the factors involved in language learning so we can best support language and literacy learning
– that our use of language and literacy and what we validate as literacy practices in the classroom will impact on our learners' development of literacy.

Shifts in workplace demands and power relationships, along with the influence of technology, mean that teachers need to be aware of the influences and effects these rapid changes exert on their students' learning.

HOW HAS LANGUAGE BEEN STUDIED?

Language has been a focus of study for centuries, but as Table 1.1 indicates, the study of language has been located in different disciplines and with different foci. Many of our language terms, such as gender, number, case and person, come from medieval studies of language in philosophy.

Only in the twentieth century, with the incorporation of a more scientific approach to language, was a special discipline devoted to the formal study of language: **linguistics**. Many schools of linguistics have developed since, and linguistics

linguistics
A field concerned with the study of the system and structure of language.

has been incorporated into interdisciplinary studies—such as **sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics**, applied linguistics and **neurolinguistics**—that have enhanced our understanding of language in the classroom. More recently, the discipline of computational linguistics has emerged, the applied study of which is concerned with improving human–machine interaction (see Huang & Lenders, 2004). Now the sub-discipline of applied internet linguistics is emerging (Crystal, 2006a).

While linguists have and will continue to develop different models of language and grammar, any such model will only provide a partial view of language. Nevertheless, by selectively focusing on key insights from different models or views of language, we can provide a picture of language that we think will be most useful to teachers and supportive of the Australian Curriculum: English.

sociolinguistics The study of language in social contexts.

psycholinguistics The study of the relationship between language and human thought, perception and behaviour.

neurolinguistics The study of the neurological processes underlying the development and use of language. This has been made possible by new technological developments in medicine.

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There are many branches of linguistics but all are concerned with the system and structures of some dimension of language learning.

TABLE 1.1 FORMAL STUDY OF LANGUAGE

Grammar, rhetoric, etymology Greco-Roman times: writing-centred, prescriptive; linked with composition, the study of literature, logic, philosophy	
Philosophy Late eighteenth century: historical studies of language; descriptive, comparative	
Linguistics Late nineteenth century: the scientific study of language; descriptive, concerned with system and structure; linked with sociology or psychology; focus on language for conveying information	
Historical linguistics Origin and development of a language; how a language has changed	**Psycholinguistics** Investigation of processes involved in language
Descriptive/structural linguistics Describes what is being used at a given time; focuses on the sentence	**Sociolinguistics** How the language is used in varying social contexts
Generative–transformational linguistics Describes the rules by which a language user operates; focuses on the sentence	**Applied linguistics** Language and education; second language learning
Systemic linguistics Functional perspective: how language structure changes with different functions; studies of larger structures of language text	**Computational linguistics** Combination of linguistics and computer science; applied to the practical outcomes of modelling human language
Critical linguistics Combination of theories and methods of text analysis of systemic linguistics and theories of ideology and power	**Applied internet linguistics** Study of the language of the internet and its use for language learning
Neurolinguistics Study of the neurological processes underlying the development and use of language.	

ACTIVITY	In the 1920s, a project known as 'Basic English' claimed only 800 words were needed to say anything humanly needed:

> Passages of Shakespeare were 'translated' into Basic with little loss of meaning (although the art and form were instantly gone) … But between the 2000 words you need to survive in a modern society, and the 20,000 a college graduate has accessed, and the 75,000 his professors profess to know, beside the million or so in a current dictionary … there seems to be a wide gap in the numerical count. Are all the terms used in Linnaean identification really necessary, except to a biologist? … Is the forest richer for having names for the flowers and birds, or is this just a part of our in-built mania for putting a tag on everything, so that we can almost algebraically refer to it without actually touching it with our hands? (Harris, n.d.)

1. What do you think about the Basic English project's claim that we only need 800 words to say anything we need? What beliefs may underlie such a perspective?
2. What do you think about the questions Harris raises? Does only a biologist need Linnaean terms? Is nature (or, for that matter, other things) richer for being named and described?

WHAT IS LANGUAGE AND WHY DO WE HAVE IT?

In one sense, we all know the answer to the question 'What is language?' because we are language users, but our knowing is often imprecise. It is important, however, to attempt to answer this question more explicitly because in the process we can learn much about language and its use, which can inform our decision-making in the classroom.

Many definitions and texts imply that language is speech alone, or speech and writing; that is, codes based on words. Language certainly involves producing and receiving information (speaking or signing and listening or watching) and decoding and coding text (reading and writing), but it is also more. Recognition of the legitimacy of the native sign languages of Deaf communities has extended this definition to include signs. Sign languages are manual visual–spatial languages that are not derived from the language spoken by the surrounding hearing culture, although many sign languages have elements drawn from that culture. Signs are visual symbols constructed with particular elements, including facial expression. All natural signed languages show the structural properties of human languages even though they have evolved independently of spoken language: 'The visual-gestural-(tactual) (sign) medium is biologically normal and universal. Probably every known group of non-speaking deaf people observed around the world uses some sign language, and even isolated deaf individuals have been observed to develop a sign language to communicate with hearing relatives and friends' (World Federation of the Deaf, n.d.).

It is not only in sign languages, however, that non-verbal cues are important. If you think of a situation where you use spoken language, such as in a conversation with a friend, you will realise that you frequently use more than one way of conveying and interpreting meaning. Speech is prominent, but so is a range of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body gestures. Hence, we see language as being more than speech and writing: it is a complex and abstract phenomenon that can be realised through a number of verbal and non-verbal codes. Today, language is seen as one of many social practices that operate interactively in a society to represent and make meaning (Hodge & Kress, 1993; Fairclough, 2001, 2006).

In learning to make sense of our world, we learn language and to do this we use verbal and/or non-verbal systems. For example, speech, sign language, gestures, scribbling, drawing and writing are all used for making and sharing meaning. In the classroom it makes sense to acknowledge that there is a variety of ways to make and share meaning; for example, listening, reading, talking, writing, viewing films and videos, drawing, making diagrams, producing or viewing computer graphics and producing plays—and that separating the learning experience into little boxes of oral language, reading, writing, music, drama, etc. distorts the learning process and authentic use of language (although there will be times when you want to focus attention on aspects of a particular sign systems).

We would still argue, however, that the verbal codes of speech (or sign language for deaf people) and writing are very important. Words enable tremendous flexibility in thinking: try to think about such abstract concepts as democracy and education without words. It is virtually impossible! In addition, our society places great value on verbal skills. Success at school depends to a large extent on verbal competence, but success with words depends to some extent on non-verbal support, as do communicative competence and interpersonal relationships. Speech is the major symbolic system available to humans.

Language is the most powerful and pervasive means humans have for making and sharing meaning. Because language is centred on meaning, which is shared culturally, it follows that it is rooted in the culture of the group that uses it. It makes no sense to think of a language used by only one individual. This concept is basic to our understanding of language and the teacher's role in fostering language development.

Language includes verbal and non-verbal systems, many of which are developed through language learning in the classroom.

DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE

Language is so complex that it is difficult to study comprehensively—at any one time we tend to view language from a particular perspective using a particular model, depending on our purposes. The story of the blind men trying to find out what an elephant looked like is an interesting analogy for different researchers trying to find out what language is. One blind man touched the elephant's side and thought the elephant

was like a wall; another touched its legs and thought the elephant was like a tree trunk; another touched its tail and thought the elephant was like a rope; another touched an ear and thought the elephant was like a fan; and another touched the elephant's trunk and thought the elephant was like a hose.

In this book we discuss language and learning from different perspectives, such as sociocultural, linguistic and developmental perspectives, and use insights from different models of language, such as traditional and functional models. In addition, we view language as a process (the social and cognitive processes involved in learning and using language); as a product (the demonstrations of our use of language including sounds, marks and gestures); and as having uses or purposes (communicating, thinking and expressing feelings). We can view the **deep structure** of language (that is, the underlying meaning embodied in language) or the **surface structure** (that is, the form that language takes: the sounds or letters and words used). However, you need to keep in mind that language is more than any one dimension or perspective. All aspects are interrelated, although for study purposes we focus on one aspect at a time.

Function and form of language

We can examine language from either side of the one coin: function or form. We can study the functions of language; that is, how we use language to fulfil all sorts of purposes. We can also study the structure or form of what we use as language. Previously these two aspects were studied quite separately, but we now appreciate how closely they interact—the function or purpose of language determines the type or form of language we use. Meaning cannot be divorced from the form of language. How we use language and how it varies in different contexts is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The form or structure of language is discussed in Chapters 6–8.

Language is both personal and sociocultural

Individuals learn language and use it for a whole range of purposes, and different people use language for different purposes. However, it is learned and used in a **sociocultural** context. What one learns has been developed by the group, but is redeveloped by the individual. The individual's use of language influences the group and vice versa. Also, as we are most interested in language in education, we need to remember that learning is a social process and the environment in which school learning takes place is a social institution: 'Knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, through relationships, like those of parent and child, or teacher and pupil, or classmates, that are defined in the value systems and ideology of the culture' (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 5). Thus it is important that we understand what is to be learned as language, how an individual learns it, how sociocultural factors influence an individual's language,

deep structure
The basic form of a sentence containing the meaning that underlies the sentence as it is actually spoken or written (the surface structure).

surface structure
The spoken and the written form of sentences actually used derived from the underlying basic sentence structure (the deep structure).

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In language and literacy education teachers often focus on function, but to understand language and its effective use, we need to consider both its function and form.

sociocultural
Phenomena that include both social and cultural factors.

and how groups use language. Our thinking and language are shaped by our culture, hence the continuing focus on how race, gender, sexual orientation and other forms of diversity are represented in language.

Language is a part of a culture: what the language is and how it is used depends on the culture. You cannot know a language unless you know the culture (and vice versa). This sociocultural view of language pervades the book, but is particularly emphasised in Chapters 2 and 3, where language in use and language variation are discussed, and it underlies the approach to linguistics in Chapters 6–8. The personal and social aspects are discussed in Chapters 9–12, which consider language learning.

LANGUAGE, IDEOLOGY AND POWER

The language we use is never neutral or value-free because the texts, words and other symbols that comprise language cannot be separated from cultural and **social practices**, and are hence inextricably woven with values, beliefs and ways of thinking. Since the late 1980s, language and literacy educators have been concerned with the way in which meanings constructed in text produce, reproduce and maintain power inequitably (see Cambourne & Brown, 1987; Gilbert, 1993; Johnston, 2004; Janks, 2010; Gee, 2001). Language is both representational and constitutive, and, as such, 'It actually creates realities and invites identities' (Johnston, 2004, p. 9). Gee (2001) argues that reading and writing cannot be separated from other aspects of language (such as speaking and listening) or from using language to think about and act on the world.

Because language is integral to the cultural process, it plays a central part in the struggles and politics of cultural groups. Dominant groups establish their language (as well as knowledge, pedagogical preferences and so on) as the legitimate form in education and society in general:

> [F]or language, communication and meaning to be sociocultural is for them to be political, for them to be inseparable from the production and operation of institutionally structured power. Language is deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal.' (Lankshear, 1997, p. 46)

If we believe that teaching is about making a positive difference in our society, then it is important to consider the role of language education. What we teach and how we teach needs to assist students in developing the skills to participate effectively in a democracy and to understand issues of justice and equity in our world. They need to understand the relationship between power and language, and how domination is reflected in language; and learn ways to deconstruct such uses of language and reconstruct texts to reflect alternative views.

The culture in which we live shapes language through social practices that come from and are influenced by individuals who use language for many different purposes. Teachers need to consider how the varied backgrounds of their students influence language usage in the classroom.

social practices
Cultural patterns and forms inscribed into everyday lives; for example, eating breakfast.

ideologies System or sets of ideas and beliefs that guide ways of thinking and acting, generally associated with particular social, economic and political groups.

transformation A rule of changing one grammatical structure into another by adding, deleting or rearranging constituents.

text The product of any language event—written, oral, electronic or visual.

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Because language is sociocultural, it is also political. Teachers need to bring a critical awareness and create learning opportunities for students to understand the role of ideology and power in language.

critical linguistics The study of how language use manifests social structures and ideologies.

A critical view of language and literacy encourages scrutiny of attitudes, values and assumptions about social knowledge (such as gender relationships); the multiple reading of texts, depending on how one is positioned in relation to that text; and the privileging of particular meanings in text:

> To explore the social context of language practices is inevitably to explore the networks of power that are sustained and brought into existence by such practices. It is to explore how language practices are used in powerful institutions like the state, the school, the law, the family and the church, and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of inequalities and injustices.
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> Gilbert (1993, pp. 324–5)

Gilbert (p. 325) goes on to say: 'For teachers, it means engaging with issues that are often controversial, certainly contemporary, and perhaps quite volatile', to which we could add 'and not always popular with politicians and bureaucrats'.

In any complex society, many different ideologies operate, often competing in different discourses and texts. The term 'ideology' generally refers to a group's 'consciousness' that underlies the socio-economic, political and cultural practices of group members in such ways that their interests are realised. **Ideologies** are complex cognitive frameworks that control 'the formation, **transformation** and application of other social cognitions, such as knowledge, opinions and attitudes, and social representations, including social prejudices' (van Dijk, 2008, p. 34). **Texts** are defined here as the product of any language (literacy) event; hence a text can be oral, written, electronic or visual, or any combination of these. Over time, certain viewpoints become embedded in the language and come to be seen as natural. In this way, a language user's choice of options in making and sharing meaning is influenced; it is seen as the norm or natural, and hence, difficult to appreciate that there are other valid perspectives.

Through the ideologies in our language, a particular reality is produced that 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. One of the goals of **critical linguistics** and **critical literacy**, therefore, is to 'unpack' the ideologies underlying texts and assist us to become aware of how texts may be manipulating us, and to consider alternative readings of a text (see Freebody, Muspratt & Dwyer, 2001). Critical literacy theorists are also concerned with changing power relationships in classroom talk about text, identity formation and textual practices, and politicising the curriculum and textbook production (see Comber & Simpson, 2001; Simpson & White, with Freebody & Comber, 2013).

Halliday's functional linguistic theory (1985, in Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Halliday, 2009) provides us with a way of viewing power relationships in language,

which are always present. He sees language as something that derives from a context of a situation. In any situation, users take on roles and adopt certain styles of language appropriate to the role. Hence, any text consists of three major functions. Halliday calls the first the *ideational function*, which involves the information of the text. The second, the *interpersonal*, deals with the relationships between the speaker/writer and listener/reader/viewer. The third and final function, the *textual function*, makes a text coherent rather than just a collection of words. Halliday's second function foregrounds the relationship between the text producer and the interpreter of that text; the listener/reader/viewer is placed in some sort of interpersonal stance. In critical literacy, it is this function of text that is analysed. It is also through this function that language helps to create classroom relationships and learner identities so central to learning and achieving the goals of education. Halliday's views of language underpin many current approaches to language curriculum.

Users of a language make choices as to what roles are appropriate. We make assessments of the power relations involved—for example, between parent and child, teacher and student, husband and wife, or doctor and patient—and choose certain linguistic features appropriate to the roles assigned. A term used to describe this is 'positioning'. Speakers, writers and film producers ascribe social positions to their listeners/readers/viewers and take on social 'stances' when using language. The positions we ascribe and the stances we take depend on how we perceive our role and that of others in a group. Even in friendship groups, some individuals take on more 'power' than others; that is, they command more attention than others.

In any society, some members may not be in a position to speak or be listened to. The positions we construct generally conform to appropriate institutionalised behaviours and (culturally determined) values. Texts present information in particular ways (based on ideologies) and construct subjectivities (the ways people come to see themselves and the value positions they take up) in certain more or less predictable ways. For example, in popular romance novels authors tend to construct males as active and females as passive. Advertisements aim to position readers/viewers to construct certain images of modern life and persuade them to take on a product or service as socially desirable. People with differences are often constructed as disabled or deficient. We position ourselves and others through language.

Language users (speakers or sign-language users, writers and readers, creators and viewers) use language for some purpose in varying social contexts. As such, language users draw on their power and status in particular social groupings. The use of language involves positioning others in certain ways. It creates certain kinds of subjectivities that express or reflect particular cultural values and power orientations. For example, media reports on asylum seekers trying to reach Australia often use terms such as 'illegals' or 'queue jumpers'. We would advocate that educators teach students to be aware of these textual devices and strategies in order to resist such manipulation.

critical literacy
An approach and perspective in reading and analysing texts for underlying socially constructed concepts as power, inequality and injustice in human relationships.

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Critical literacy teaches students to recognise the underlying ideologies in texts and assess the power relations involved.

An alternative construction on the issue of asylum seekers would be to talk about them as 'displaced or dispossessed peoples'.

It is important to note that from this perspective of language use the focus is on the nature of representations or subjectivities, and certain kinds of representations or subjectivities are seen as oppressed, dominated or subordinated, while others are seen as oppressive and dominating. Subjectivity constructed along the lines of race, gender and disability are other examples. Students need to become aware of the beliefs and values (ideologies) operating in texts (their own and others') and consider other ways of constructing texts that are less oppressive. This perspective underlies current views on what knowledge of language students need to have, which is explored in Chapter 4.

ACTIVITY

Select a significant event and read related articles in different newspapers or websites. See if you can determine the different ideologies (belief systems) underpinning each article by identifying the different uses of linguistic forms, such as choice of vocabulary and the use of passives and nominalisations (where verbs are turned into nouns, and sentences have no explicit subject or agent—refer to Chapter 8 for more details). Note the descriptors and metaphors that are chosen to characterise those involved and the event itself.

1. Consider the grade levels that you may be teaching. How might you construct a similar activity for that group? What would you expect the students to learn?

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

In our concept of language as discussed above, language is perceived as being more than speech—it consists of a number of codes. What are these codes? If we investigate what we use for communication, we can begin to appreciate the potential range of language codes, both verbal and non-verbal, at our disposal.

ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

A selection of language codes is listed below. Classify the codes into categories of your own choice:

body language	gesture	sculpture
Braille	graphics	semaphore
cries	instrumental (played)	song
dance	interior design	speech

design	mime	sport (rules)
drama	native sign language	textiles (art)
finger-spelling	painting	traffic code
flower arrangement	score (music)	writing

1. What categories did you make?
2. Why did you classify them that way?
    Share your responses with others.

One way of classifying language codes is by the method of production; for example, oral, graphic or gestural. Another classification is by deciding whether or not words are the basis of the code; that is, whether it is verbal or non-verbal. Table 1.2 uses these categories to classify the different codes we use to make sense of our world. In addition, you could add such mixed codes as drama, opera and interior design.

TABLE 1.2 LANGUAGE MATRIX

MODES	ORAL	GRAPHIC	GESTURAL	MULTIMODAL
Verbal	Speech Song	Writing Braille Digital texts	Finger-spelling Lip-reading Semaphore Morse code	Websites Film performance Video clips
Non-verbal	Cries Laughter	Signs (directional) Signs (mathematical) Music score Art Object arrangement	Sign language Signs (in sport) Body position Posture Movement Facial expression	

By considering all the possibilities associated with language codes and the ways they can be classified, we begin to appreciate the complexity of and variation in language use and how language use today involves **multiliteracies**. First coined by the New London Group in 1990s (Cazden et al., 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), multiliteracies encompasses both the method of production and the basis of the code (verbal and non-verbal). The authors describe 'modes of meaning-making' where the textual is related to the visual, audio, spatial and behavioural. But there is another dimension to multiliteracies that acknowledges the cultural and linguistic diversity common in a globalised world: that of the sociocultural dimension of meaning-making.

multiliteracies
An understanding of literacy that acknowledges the changes in communication due to new technologies, shifts in language usage within different cultures and the effects of globalisation.

The New London Group members argue for the importance of thinking about design—not only what multimodal patterns are possible, but also how students are designers of meaning in these different ways. They stress the importance of students to be active participants in creating social change and making social futures through access and understanding multiliteracies.

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ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

1. List the characteristics that the codes shown in Table 1.2 have in common, then list the functions of these codes. Share your responses with others. Should the different codes be taught in isolation from each other? Why or why not?

2. Blogs and wikis are just two examples of internet communication tools that are readily available. Identify a blog or wiki topic that you would like to try and invite several others to join you (wikispaces.com, pbworks.com and blogger.com are some sites that can help get you started). Choose a topic that interests you and experiment with the dimensions of multiliteracies associated with the media to communicate ideas about the topic.

    a. What verbal and non-verbal codes did you use?

    b. How was your activity design work rather than writing?

    c. How important was the collaborative aspect of your blog/wiki in creating and sharing meaning?

    d. Are they appropriate to use within the classroom, for which grade level, and why?

    e. What possibilities and challenges would you see in using this in the classroom?

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From the activities above, it becomes very evident that there are many features that can be ascribed to the characteristics of language and language codes. For instance, language is systematic—signs and symbols are selected and used according to rules. These rules have been developed by the users and determined by the culture, and have to be learned by new language users such as children and second language learners. Language is also arbitrary—there is no inherent reason why the word 'cat' refers to the small, furry animal; it has been agreed to by a group of language users. For meaning to be shared, the signs and symbols, and the way they are to be used in any language, have to be agreed upon by the language users.

In other words, the agreement is a convention. Language is symbolic. In the example above, the word 'cat' is a symbol for a particular type of furry animal. There is no inherent relationship between the animal and the word or symbol 'cat'. What is

wonderful about language is that it is generative; with a limited set of symbols and agreed rules for structuring (or stringing together) these symbols, we can always create new meanings. Language is continually changing to meet the needs of language users. Words come and go, and the meanings of words change over time. New words enter the language when there is a need to do so, such as those generated by new technologies.

The nature and use of our language sets us apart from other animals. Through language we symbolise experiences; the mental representation is something that lasts in time and doesn't disappear when the phenomenon disappears. By putting our experiences into language, we distance ourselves from them, transforming them into something that can be worked upon, and creating new meanings. Others can respond to our representations and work on them with us. We can learn from these responses. This enables us to make great advances in our knowledge and understanding of our environment, and makes language so powerful in our learning.

Given all these characteristics, we can begin to define language as:

A system of arbitrary signs agreed to by a community of users, transmitted and received for a specific purpose, in relation to the shared world of the users.

LANGUAGE, THINKING AND LEARNING

Language, which is culturally determined, influences what we think and how we think. Furthermore, language gives us a way of reflecting on our thinking, and talking about our thinking, thereby enabling us to have greater control over our thinking. In this way language is like a pane of glass through which we can view our thinking. Language, meaning, thinking and learning are all very closely interrelated. This concept is basic to understanding the role of language in learning. With changes in language, particularly through the new communication technologies, questions are being asked as to whether how we learn is changing.

But what do we mean by 'learning'? We have said that language is central to both learning and teaching. Learning occurs when we change or elaborate what is already known by us. Learning is a process of making connections, identifying patterns and organising previously unrelated bits of knowledge, behaviour and activities into new (for the learner) patterned wholes. It is about making meanings; that is, about comprehending. We learn by attempting to relate new experiences to what we already know or believe. Learning is therefore about making new meanings for the learner, and these meanings are generally developed and articulated through language. Learning and the role of language are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 12.

Language is systematic, arbitrary, symbolic and generative. Talking to students about the characteristics of language within the context of their learning develops an appreciation for its diversity and flexibility.

Language is central to thinking and learning because it enables us to challenge familiar patterns by relating to or changing what we know.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Human beings are born with an innate ability to learn and to acquire language; however, we are not born with the same innate ability to acquire the written language.

1. What do you remember about learning to read?
2. Do you have *one* specific memory of learning to read? If you can't remember something, why do you think this may be the case? Think about some of the challenges you may have experienced in learning to read.

literacy A collection of competencies needed to read, view, produce and interpret language and symbols in multiple contexts and formats for understanding and communication for various purposes.

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Literacy has come to mean much more than teaching reading and writing; rather it refers to a range of competencies associated with language and symbol systems that students need to know.

Written language is one code of language, therefore whatever is discussed about language in general has implications for understanding reading and writing. Written language is different from speech, but there are many similarities between the codes because they are both verbal; that is, based on words. They are both processes. Reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening and interacting; or from using language to reflect and act on the world (Gee, 2001). Development of one certainly enhances the development of the other. Learning oral and written language is discussed in Chapters 9 and 11.

One important factor to keep in mind when thinking about language and literacy is the relationship between language and culture. Language, as discussed above, is a part of culture. It is used to pass on culture, but its use is also determined by the culture. Contemporary social life is 'textually mediated' (Fairclough, 1999). The huge uptake of email, Twitter and SMS, and the use of chat rooms, blogs and Facebook, and more recent platforms such as Tumblr, are examples of the way text is being used to establish and develop relationships.

The concept of **literacy** is also culturally determined and constantly changing. Once literacy was defined narrowly as reading and writing using print, but contemporary definitions emphasise that literacy is more than print-based. As discussed above, educators now think about multiliteracies, which acknowledges not only the multiple nature of literacies but also the multiple uses to which literacy is put: 'It is not simply that the tools of literacy have changed; the nature of texts, of language, of literacy itself is undergoing crucial transformations' (Costanzo, 1994, p. 11). To be considered literate today, you must know how to use literacy for a wide range of culturally determined purposes. Literacy has come to refer to a range of competencies associated with language and different symbol systems (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011b).

THINK ABOUT…

While the term 'illiteracy' dates back to the seventeenth century, the word 'literacy' first appeared in the late nineteenth century and the term 'literacy education' was not used in Australia until the latter half of the twentieth century.

1. Some languages do not have a term for literacy—what social or cultural events might have influenced the need for such a term?
2. Do you ever hear the term 'illiterate' used? If so, in what contexts?
3. Are there contexts when one is illiterate? What factors are involved in such contexts?
4. Think of the different ways the term 'literacy' is used today. What is meant by these different uses?

Different cultures place different values on aspects of literacy and have different uses for reading and writing. McNaughton (1995) has described how literacy, as practised by families, socialises children into appropriate ways of using written language for a specific family within a specific sociocultural environment. Literature is one particular way literacy is used within a culture, but not all members of a culture will necessarily support the same literate values. Some may regard fiction negatively, perceiving it as not representing reality. In some families, literacy will be valued for the support it gives to getting particular tasks done. Pahl and Rowsell (2012, p. 8) comment, 'Looking across cultures, religions, races, book sharing is one way to become literate, but it is not the only way. What we have found … is that certain fields still privilege paradigms and models that narrow their scope.' In a society, different types of literacies are valued more than others; certainly some literacies in schooling have been valued more than others, which has implications for those coming to school with the less-valued literacies.

The widespread use of technology in our society is leading to different uses of reading and writing—to the development of different literacies, such as digital literacy. For example, a new symbol system has been developed by the widespread use of mobile phones and other communication technologies. Use of computers, tablets and other new communication technologies in classrooms has led to different teaching and learning strategies: 'No previous technology for literacy has been adopted by so many, in so many different places, in such a short period, and with such profound consequences' (Coiro et al., 2008, p. 2). Further, 'literacy … has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of change in the ways in which we read and write, view, listen, compose and communicate information' (Coiro et al., 2008, p. 5).

It is important that, as adults, we consider the type of texts we give students to read, as this will greatly influence how they perceive literacy, their world and their place in it. To learn to read is more than learning decoding skills; it is also about learning to use reading and writing for a wide range of socially constructed purposes, which allow us to make social sense of the vastly different forms of print we encounter, including those on the internet. Hence, it is important that we consider the content of texts for their social values; for example, in relation to gender, racism and ageism (Meek, 1989). The approach taken in critical literacy is to urge the reader to interact with and question texts; to look behind a writer's words and images to the underlying sociocultural and political assumptions (Freebody & Luke, 1990). 'Literacy is a social and cultural construction … its functions and uses are never neutral or innocent … the meanings constructed in text are ideological and involved in producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal' (Comber & Kamler, 1997, p. 31). Critical literacy encourages a critical perspective on *literacies* themselves, a critical perspective on particular *texts* and a critical reading of the wider *social practices* mediated through texts (Lankshear, 1997).

As everyday lives become more pervasively textually mediated, people's lives are increasingly shaped by representations that are produced elsewhere: representations of the world they live in, the activities they are involved in, their relationships with each other, and even who they are and how they (should) see themselves. The politics of representation becomes increasingly important: whose representations they are, who gains what from them, what social relations they draw people into, what their ideological effects are, and what alternative representations there are (Fairclough, 1999, p. 75).

In addition, we need to consider which literacies are important for empowering our learners. Merely teaching reading and writing skills is not enough without enabling learners to become more aware of their world and be in creative control of it. This is the view of Freire (1996), a renowned liberatory educator who wrote at great length on the importance of literacy for functioning as a human being. Through his work with peasant groups in Brazil and Chile, he emphasised the need to 'read the word and the world'. Freire invited group members to speak about their experiences, thus establishing oral language as the basis for their learning to read and write. The contextual significance of their literacy skills enabled them to understand the social and cultural conditions in which they lived and to realise that such an existence was not inevitable but rather the result of inequitable power practices. One of Freire's most compelling ideas is *conscientização*, a Portuguese word to mean something like 'consciousness raising'. Freire was concerned that people should become aware of political and cultural structures in which they lived, and understand their own complicity in this oppression. Central to his position is the argument that all humans must function equally if any are to function as human. His view is overtly political and has come to be associated with

Teachers need to be sensitive to the texts they use with students as they form a powerful part of the socialisation process.

the terms 'critical pedagogy' and 'critical literacies'. **Critical pedagogy** is a philosophy of education where the aim of schooling is seen in terms of social justice and equity. The pedagogies derived from this philosophy focus on students being encouraged to question the assumptions that underpin or inform policies and structures; in particular those that lead to all types of injustice. Freire's insights have global implications. Critical literacy grows out of critical pedagogy and provides powerful tools of analysis to serve the purposes of critical pedagogy.

critical pedagogy
A philosophy of education that addresses inequality through the study of power in teaching and learning, and where students are encouraged to question dominant or common notions of meaning and form their own understandings.

It is not enough merely to recognise that language use is a social construction; understanding can be created most fully only if language users are wide awake both to the voices of others and to their own part in that construction. When we are aware of our own ability to choose how we constitute ourselves and how we constitute others, the nature of the conversations in which we participate becomes a kind of negotiation with others. In these circumstances, both our language and our understandings of one another change and grow (Fleischer & Schaafsma, 1998, p. xix).

The more one engages in conscious action to understand and transform the world (one's reality) through the interplay between reflection and action, the more fully human we become; that is, we have greater control over our destinies. If we just accept the world as set by others, we allow ourselves to become dehumanised—an object shaped and made by others rather than a person expressing their uniquely human potential to be involved actively in creating what they become. As human beings, our shared vocation is to become active individuals engaged on an equal basis with others in the process of creating (or naming) the world; a world that we hope is fair and equitable for all. We should engage in the ongoing creation of history and culture rather than exist merely as passive objects accepting reality and the world as ready-made by other people. In creating history and culture, we create our own beings in the process. This is a great challenge for literacy education and education more broadly.

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Paulo Freire influenced the development of critical literacy through his impassioned argument for learning to 'read the word and the world'. His message reminds us that the context in which we learn is very important.

Clearly, our understanding of literacy has broadened greatly from just referring to reading and writing, and continues to change as new technologies and practices emerge. Nevertheless, we can develop a working definition of literacy:

A collection of competencies and practices needed to read, view, listen, produce and interpret language in multiple contexts and formats for understanding and communication for different purposes.

ACTIVITY

Consider the following report filed by reporter Alex Murdoch (Australian Associated Press, 26 May 2005):

Corby Case Transfixes a Nation

Her plight has kept millions of Australians glued to their television screens, clogging up talkback radio lines and pledging their hard-earned cash.

> But just who is Schapelle Corby? And why has an entire country taken her to heart? To Corby's supporters the 27-year-old is a unique mix of naive surfie chick, Gold Coast beauty student and beautiful divorcee who they claim has been framed for a terrible crime.

Contrast this with the following report aired on Australian television (*National Nine News*, 13 September 2005):

> Convicted drug smuggler Schapelle Corby's appeal hopes are in doubt after Indonesia's highest court refused to intervene in her case so potential witnesses from Australia could testify via video link.

1. Why would the first author refer to Corby as a 'naive surfie chick', 'Gold Coast beauty student' and 'beautiful divorcee' in contrast to the second author's reference to Corby as 'convicted drug smuggler'?
2. What effect does the author's choice of words have on the reader?
3. Can you develop students' language and literacy without considering issues of power, control, relationships and actions?
4. In what way is teaching people to read a political exercise?
5. Draft a working definition of literacy that would be helpful for you as a teacher.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

The different dimensions and complexity of language have been highlighted. Before you read on, it is important for you to determine your own working definition of 'language'. In looking at different definitions, it becomes obvious that views of language have changed over time and they differ depending on the background (discipline) of the writers. Definitions have generally moved away from language as speech and language just for communication to a greater emphasis on the social nature of language.

ACTIVITY

To help you determine your definition of 'language', consider the following definitions and how they have changed over time (publication dates appear after each quotation). Can you identify which definitions fit under the following categories?

– Language as predominantly speech
– Language as more than speech
– Language as linguistic symbols (words)
– Language as used predominantly for communication
– Language as about making meaning

– Language as used to serve social functions
– Language as a way of acting on the world.

> Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory, and they are produced by the so-called 'organs of speech'—animal communication, if communication it may be called, as brought about by involuntary, instinctive cries, is not, in our sense, language at all.
>
> Sapir (1921, revised in **1949**, p. 9)

> Language is an organised system of linguistics symbols (words) used by human beings to communicate on an abstract level.
>
> a. Language is basic to all communication through words.
> b. Encompasses all forms of expression.
>
> Wood (**1964**, pp. 6–7)

> Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.
>
> Wardhaugh (**1969**, p. 34)

> Language ... [is] human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for purposes of communication. Occasionally language is used for purposes other than communication; for example, to let off steam ... or as a vehicle for our own thoughts when no one else is present. But such uses of language are secondary.
>
> Crystal (**1971**, p. 243)

> Language is the sum total of explicit and implicit systems used by the individual to structure the environment.
>
> Cameron and Saunders (**1977**, p. 217)

> Language is for negotiating meaning, building understanding and relationships, and the activity of using language for any of these purposes always involves creating what is technically called a text—a stretch of language which is coherent and meaningful.
>
> Christie (**1987**, p. 207)

> Language, the possibility of making meaning, is the essence of being human. It is at the centre of individual empowerment. Through it, instead of simply being subject to the structures and activities that define the indifferent societal system, one interacts with and participates in the creation of the system. Through it one engages in the continual, active process of being.
>
> Courts (**1991**, p. 137)

Whenever language is used, it is used in events—events that capture and create relationships among people and between people and objects (material and otherwise) in the culture. What is learned when people learn language includes all those relationships that were part of the events carried out through language use. The language used within those events is usually used for some purpose other than instruction in or evaluation of the language use itself—for informing, persuading, joking, warning, teasing, explaining, cajoling and so forth.

Edelsky (**1996**, p. 91)

The view of language as social action differs considerably from the view of language as a medium or vehicle of communication. The notion that language is made for communication suggests that writers or speakers simply convey or try to get across a message as 'pure content' in some shape or form. This kind of view, which is very pervasive in Western thought and history, tends to imply a view of language users as transmitters and receivers of neutral information. … [L]anguage is a tool for acting in an interested and engaged way, on and in the material and social world.

Hodgens (**2000**, pp. 19–20)

Languages are not purely linguistic entities. They serve social functions. In order to define a language, it is important to look to its social and political functions, as well as its linguistic features. So a language can be thought of as a collection of dialects that are usually linguistically similar, used by different social groups who choose to say that they are speakers of one language which functions to unite and represent them to other groups.

Holmes (**2001**, p. 130)

Humans have many ways of making meanings, including gestures, dance, painting, singing and other forms of making music to name a few. Language is an important semiotic system we use, though it is in practice sometimes hard to separate it from other forms of semiosis in which we engage.

Christie (**2005**, p. 8)

[L]anguage is not a mirror of society. It is an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used. … [L]anguage is not a neutral and objective conduit for description of the 'real world'. Rather, linguistic descriptions are not simply about the world but serve to construct it.

Kincheloe (**2007**, p. 15).

Language varies according to its uses as well as its users, and according to where it is used and to whom, as well as according to whom is using it.

Holmes (**2008**, p. 235)

1. What is your definition of language?
2. Compare your response with your previous definition and file this response with others for future comparisons. It would be useful to also look at definitions of literacy and how they have changed over time.

Tyler wasn't aware of pragmatics (the way the context influences how we use language). When he spoke he was greeting his professor as he would a friend. Pragmatics plays an important role in social situations, and can impact how people are perceived. As you continue to read this book, think about the situations where you use different 'languages' when you speak. Are there languages you use in the classroom versus when you are with family or friends? Be aware of when you start to change languages in different contexts.

REVISITING THE VIGNETTE

-SUMMARY-

This chapter briefly discussed the complexities of language and indicated the different aspects of language that we are focusing on. First and foremost, we defined language as a social practice rooted in a culture, and that ideologies and power relations are embedded in language. We emphasised that language is more than speech, and is also more than reading and writing. Rather, we use a number of systems, both verbal and non-verbal, to construct and convey meaning. Hence, we see language as consisting of a number of codes. Different codes and combinations of codes are used, depending on the purpose and context. We need a range of language codes if we are to be effective language users.

We discussed the characteristics of language: that it is systematic, arbitrary, conventional, symbolic and generative. Language is dynamic—it is agreed to by the users, and it changes with needs over time. Currently, with the introduction of new information and communication technologies, language and its use is changing rapidly. As such, the language of the internet provides a wonderful site for studying language change and growth as a basis for learning about foundational language concepts.

We emphasised that written language is a part of language and that the many factors that influence language use are also relevant for literacy. We also emphasised that literacy is much more than alphabetic texts and that understanding multiliteracies is important for understanding the complexities of using and producing in a digitally connected world. Language and literacies enable us to control our world.

Finally, literacy includes a number of linguistic and other symbolic competencies, and defining literacies often is motivated by political agendas.

-IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING-

1. In our classrooms we have the enormous responsibility of ensuring that we enable our students to develop the skills to participate effectively in a democratic society, to have access to the language of power, and to have the skills to use it effectively and appropriately. We need to empower our students. As teachers we need to be aware of how our use of language impacts on students' developing identities and how they see themselves as learners.

   Activity: Choose a grade level and plan an activity that invites students to create representations of themselves as language users. Encourage them to take a multiliteracies perspective.

2. Language is a teacher's most powerful tool in fostering learning across the curriculum. The way a teacher uses language will determine the classroom learning environment; whether it invites collaborative learning, risk taking, sharing of ideas and respect for the views of others.

   Activity: Articulate the type of classroom environment you wish to create and then consider how you can use language to foster this environment.

3. As teachers we need to have better knowledge of language in order to be more effective in assisting our learners to be competent, critically aware language users.

   Activity: As professionals we are required to be lifelong learners and extend and deepen our understanding of teaching and learning. Part of this is to assess your knowledge and taking steps to improve areas where there are gaps. Reflect on your understanding of language and literacy. Write down any areas where you feel uncertain about your knowledge and skill level. Decide how you can access that knowledge or develop the skills.

4. We need to have greater awareness of the language practices we validate in the classroom and their impact on our students.

   Activity: Consider the following situation and discuss your thoughts with a colleague if possible:

   > As a teacher in a classroom, you observe that when students ask for your help in spelling, they only type in the first few letters and wait for the computer spell-checker to highlight the error. They then select from the alternatives provided. What would be your reaction?

    a. Do you consider they are 'cheating' and not attempting to spell appropriately?

    b. Would you value that as language users they are being efficient and using an innovative strategy suited to the context?

5. We need to be aware of the types of texts we provide for our students to read because these influence not only how students perceive literacy but also their values.

   Activity: View some of the books used in a classroom and take note of who is portrayed in the texts, who is missing, and how different groups are portrayed.

    a. What values are the students being exposed to?

    b. Are these the values that are conducive to an equitable, democratic society?

-CHILDREN'S LITERATURE-

The following are titles that can be used to build on or connect with the themes of this chapter:

Bloom, S. (2005). *Splendid Friend Indeed*, Honesdale: Boyds Mills Press.

Henkes, K. (1996). *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, New York: HarperCollins.

King, S. M. (2008). *Leaf.* Gosford: Scholastic.

Stewart, B. (2012). *The Red Wheelbarrow.* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Online picture books that use sign language:

Herman and Rosie in Auslan—m.youtube.com/watch?v=_rXuWfyhYfw

Kids Corner—http://auslanstories.weebly.com/kids-corner.html

-WEBSITES-

Reddit—www.reddit.com

An online community where users submit and vote on the content, which is an interesting way to see how social and cultural influences can determine messages.

-FURTHER READING-

Byram, M. (Ed.). (2004). *The Routledge encyclopedia of language teaching and learning.* London: Routledge.

Cummins, J. (2001). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.

Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power.* New York: Routledge.

Johnston, P. (2012). *Opening minds: Using language to change lives.* Portland: Stenhouse.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New literacies: Everyday practices and social learning* (3rd ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press; eBook: Maidenhead: McGraw Hill Education.