

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE LITERACY DEBATE?

Jim Miller

INTRODUCTION

To be literate is to control written language. Many people see literacy not just as the key to education and a career but as enabling members of a society to have access to information and the opportunity of playing a part in social institutions. Others see literacy as essential for the economic success of the country. The author shares the view that it is eminently desirable to have every member of our society literate, but an unpleasant possibility is that this goal is unattainable, for reasons described below. Moreover it has never been attained in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK nor in any other country. The paper makes a second crucial point: literacy is a very complex social and linguistic phenomenon which cannot be reduced to techniques for teaching reading and writing in the early years of primary school nor to lists of 'good' books. The third major point is that the discussion of literacy standards by politicians, employers and journalists has been flawed by a misunderstanding of the following facts.

- No reliable comparison can be made between current school-leavers and school-leavers before 1965.
- There is no evidence that literacy standards were higher before 1965 and what evidence there is points in the opposite direction.
- Concepts of literacy and expectations about standards of literacy have changed, both over the past four centuries and in the twentieth century.
- Major differences between standard and non-standard English, accompanied by other cultural differences, lead many school pupils to reject the attitudes and information supplied by schools.

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- Widespread written materials follow patterns of grammar, punctuation and vocabulary that differ from the patterns demanded in schools. Different patterns of literacy operate, for instance, in magazines, in comics and on television. Even worse, unofficial patterns of literacy operate in public spaces, for instance the names of shops, lists of items for sale, forthcoming events, and so on. Children follow some of these patterns in their writing.
- Most users of English do not realise that any language changes over time, that patterns of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary are conventions, and that different groups of people in a society subscribe to different conventions. These differences are most obvious with respect to standard and non-standard English but even written English is subject to large variation.
- It is not clear if employers and politicians have a coherent concept of literacy. They certainly never give an account of what they think literacy is.

Literacy is central in a literate society but the concept and practice of literacy are not simple. The above points are discussed in more detail below in order to demonstrate the complexities and in the hope of raising the level of public discussion.

SCOTTISH EDUCATION BEFORE AND AFTER 1965

At a conference on education organised by **The Scotsman** in September 1999 the Senior Chief Inspector of Schools, Douglas Osler, warned that it was fruitless to look for Brigadoon High School in some golden age of Scottish education. He was correct. Both World Wars revealed a high level of illiteracy among ordinary soldiers; many men could read letters from home but not write replies; others could neither read nor write. This illiteracy was one reason why, towards the end of the Second World War, teachers serving in the British Army were drafted into army schools. Where did all these illiterates come from? The Scottish ones had, after all, gone to school at a time when the Scottish education system was supposedly at its apogee.

The Scottish education system was organised in a very different fashion before comprehensive education was introduced in the mid sixties; the large majority of pupils took no formal, public examination and no large-scale, controlled information is available on their level of literacy. In small rural communities such as Stromness education was perforce comprehensive, but

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in central Scotland pupils were divided by the Qualifying Examination taken in March of the last year in Primary School. In the southern half of West Lothian, for instance, the most academically successful non-Catholic pupils attended Bathgate Academy, the pupils from outside Bathgate travelling every day from the surrounding towns and villages. Pupils less successful academically attended the Lindsay High School in Bathgate, travelling every day if necessary. The pupils least successful academically attended Junior Secondary Schools, in Bathgate, Armadale, Whitburn or Fauldhouse. Pupils at the Junior Secondary Schools left school at age 15 (in the fifties, at age 14 in earlier decades); many pupils at the Lindsay High School left school at age 15; very few pupils at Bathgate Academy failed to stay on till their fifth year to obtain some qualification in the leaving certificate examinations, whether at Higher or Lower level (both taken in fifth year).

The organisation of schools in the southern half of West Lothian was typical of central Scotland, though not necessarily repeated in exact detail in every county. The general principle was the same, however; pupils were divided into those preparing, and those not preparing, for the leaving certificate examination. The set of pupils obtaining some sort of leaving certificate qualification was very small. Even in 1962, for example, only 13% of the cohort of sixteen year olds obtained one subject at Higher level (and this at a time when the minimum entrance requirements for universities were three Highers and two Lowers). Even in 1965, after the introduction of O-Grade examinations taken in fourth year, only 30% of fifteen and sixteen year olds obtained one subject at either Higher or O-Grade. In 1971 only 25% of sixteen year olds obtained one subject at Higher level, although the numbers of pupils obtaining a qualification at O-Grade were rising. In 1972 and 1973 60-65% of the relevant cohort obtained one subject at either Higher or O-Grade. Also to be taken into account is the fact that before the nineteen sixties far fewer pupils stayed on at school after age 14 or 15, regardless of ability. Either they were required to work in order to supplement the family income or the leaving certificate was not considered important.

The key point, which is worth repeating, is that even though junior secondary and five-year non-academic schools had their share of dedicated staff, none of the pupils at junior secondaries and only a small proportion of the pupils at five-year non-academic secondaries sat formal public examinations in which their literacy skills were exposed to the scrutiny of outside examiners. It would not be an exaggeration to say that before 1965 two systems of secondary education operated in parallel, one system for the pupils deemed capable of staying at school till age 16 and sitting one or more subject in the Leaving Certificate Examinations and another system for the pupils who were to leave school at age 15.

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The existence of parallel systems of education, one offering much more than the other, is not peculiar to Scotland nor an invention of the late nineteenth century. (In fact it dates from only 1923 (Devine 1999, p.405) when Circular 44 established junior secondary schools with lower standards of staffing and resources. The division was reinforced in 1924 when the SED abolished the Intermediate Certificate.) Smith (1984) describes how in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries only the children of the gentry, the aristocracy and the professional classes were offered what could be called complete literacy. Other children were offered a reduced literacy, and children who were to work in commerce were even taught a special handwriting. A limited range of reading was made available to these other children, typically religious stories or stories with a moral about appropriate behaviour and ideas for people in the lower stations of society. Smith describes the connection between literacy, knowledge and political power. Control of literacy, in particular literary English, gave access to knowledge and political power, and for this reason the bulk of the population was excluded from complete literacy. At an age when few people had the right to vote, petitions could be presented to Parliament, but Parliament regularly rejected petitions on the ground that they were written in inappropriate language. Real linguistic power was an instrument of real political repression. Resnick and Resnick (1977) point out that in France, from about 1870 up to 1945, two systems of public education existed, a limited one for children who were to be workers on farms or in industry and a rich one for the children who were to enter the professional elite.

CONCEPTS OF LITERACY AND LITERACY STANDARDS

The concepts of literacy and being literate have not always been the same. Devine (1999, pp.97-98) refers to Houston's work (Houston 1985) in measuring literacy by examining signatures on legal and other documents. Houston concludes that the literacy rates in seventeenth century Scotland were no greater than in Northern England, Prussia, Sweden and some Catholic areas of north-eastern France (though greater than for England and Wales as a whole). Devine remarks that 'reading literacy was widespread and education available in most parts of the country at low cost'. The crucial term is 'reading literacy'. Resnick and Resnick (1977), focusing on Sweden, point out that the Protestant ideal was that everyone should be able to read the Bible. The ideal did not include writing, and certainly not writing about the Bible. Nonetheless, many people did also learn to write. According to Resnick and Resnick the reading test for potential church members was probably not very demanding, since candidates were tested on passages from the Bible, but typically well-known passages which many people knew by

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heart. There is no point in conducting a debunking exercise; it is a serious error to judge actions and standards of the seventeenth century by the standards in force three centuries later.

These remarks about schools and literacy standards can be usefully concluded with a comment on the views of employers. The latter, or at least the leaders of their various organisations, complain regularly about standards of literacy among school-leavers. Since no data is ever cited, it is unclear what provokes them. (Some employers are quite secretive about their literacy requirements. Motorola did not respond to a written request from the author to be allowed to see their literacy tests.) One factor should be mentioned, a change which has happened gradually over the past twenty years and which has been noticed by teachers. With the introduction of comprehensive schools, improvements in teaching methods and the drive to extend higher education to many more school-leavers, pupils' expectations about jobs have changed. Forty years ago pupils with very respectable results in the School Leaving Certificate examinations would leave school and find jobs without going to university. They would work as bank clerks, as secretaries, as trainee accountants, as office assistants. Pupils with a similar level of qualification now go to university and expect to take up different types of job. The jobs that they would have had forty years ago are now being sought by school-leavers who may well be less successful academically, who might not have had a School Leaving Certificate forty years ago. In other words, the schools are not necessarily performing worse, as the employers would have it, but the 'same' jobs are being given to a different set of school-leavers.

LITERACY AND THE PRESS

In the light of the above discussion it is instructive to examine two articles that appeared in **The Scotsman**. The first, by **The Scotsman's** then education correspondent, Tom Little, and published in the paper on the 16 November 1999, was a response to a report entitled **The Assessment of Achievement**. The headline was 'Victims of complacency' and the minor headline was 'The latest report on literacy shows the sorry state that Scotland's schools are in...The system is failing our children and it is time for radical change'. The first paragraph reads:

Sometimes I just despair. I really do. For 127 years the state has schooled Scottish youngsters in the hope of maximising both their individual potential and that of society as a whole. For 27 of those years, schooling has been compulsory up to the age of 16, and this year £2.6 billion of our taxes is being spent on this entirely laudable aim.

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What is the end result? A generation of children which has no idea of the purpose of an apostrophe, cannot spell simple words such as 'corridor' or 'grateful', and requires a calculator to work out the most basic of sums.

The article refers to the Edinburgh University researchers who surveyed the reading and writing skills. Certain results were highlighted: only one in three Primary 7 children hit their writing targets last year; by second year in secondary school the success rate was one in five. Little cites specific examples of poor spelling, punctuation and grammar, is scornful of Douglas Osler, Sam Galbraith (education minister), and the committee on teachers' pay and conditions chaired by Gavin McCrone and refers in positive terms to Clinton's liberals in the United States and to the right-wingers in Ontario.

The first two paragraphs of the article, cited above, invite the reader to infer that there has been a serious decline in standards of punctuation, spelling and arithmetic and that this decline has been caused by the changes introduced twenty seven years ago. In fact Little does not hold this view but he does refer to the introduction of some damaging teaching methods and a decline in teachers' expectations of pupils such that children of all levels of ability would gravitate towards the median. (This picture is not one that the author recognises from his experience of Edinburgh state schools, nor one that is recognisable to his wife, a mathematics teacher since 1961. If the picture were true of Edinburgh schools, it would be difficult to explain how Edinburgh comprehensive schools not only send large numbers of pupils to university every year but send them to universities and to subject areas with high entrance requirements - Edinburgh, St Andrews, Bristol, Cambridge, Oxford, York, and so on.)

With respect to punctuation and spelling, and indeed the construction of sentences, paragraphs and whole texts, Little has no evidence for his assertions. (Nor have politicians and employers.) We have no idea about the standards of punctuation and spelling or sentence construction among the bulk of the population before 1960 because the vast majority sat no formal leaving certificate examinations. What about the top 10% of academically successful children currently at school? An interesting light is shed on this topic in the article by Helen Silvis in the Education Section of **The Scotsman** for the 1 December 1999. The article reports the comments of one of the researchers who surveyed the test results analysed in **The Assessment of Achievement**. Silvis states that some children are doing extremely well, and the researcher comments that the target for 14-year-olds would be no walkover, even for a literate adult. She is quoted as saying 'I think if you (Helen Silvis) look closely at level E of the 5-14 curriculum, you would see that you wouldn't always pass'.

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On the one hand, then, are children meeting or exceeding the targets? On the other hand, how many children cannot use apostrophes and cannot spell 'corridor' or 'grateful'? Is this a change in circumstances, as Little and many politicians believe, or is it that the children whose poor command of literacy would have been hidden before 1965 are now being exposed to public scrutiny? Such evidence as there is - numbers of illiterates revealed by the World Wars, the very small proportion of the population successful in the Qualifying Examination at the end of Primary education - strongly suggest the latter answer. (This article neither proposes the latter answer as the truth nor suggests that no changes have taken place which might be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as a decline.)

The other key points in Little's article do not stand up to scrutiny either. Sentences such as 'For 127 years the state has schooled Scottish youngsters in the hope of maximising both their individual potential and that of society as a whole' turn out to be misleading given the above account of education before 1965 and the facts presented by the Resnicks. Little moves from the subset of children who have serious trouble with spelling and punctuation to talking of a generation of children who cannot spell or punctuate. This is typical polemics but bad logic. (It is worth noting that the researchers merely calculated and analysed statistically the numbers of answers meeting or failing to meet particular targets. Whether the targets themselves are sensible is a different question.)

The article by Helen Silvis cited appeared in a section of **The Scotsman** whose front page carried the text

Something is rotten in our schools as an increasing number of children fail to achieve literacy targets. What went wrong?

It is clear by now that this statement is wrong. Since Silvis herself says that the previous survey of achievement was slightly worse, there cannot have been a decline relative to 1995. If Silvis is silently inviting readers to infer that there has been a decline since 1965, this invitation meets the same objection as the assertions by Little; there is no direct evidence that would permit a comparison between pupils in 1999 and pupils in 1960, say, and the indirect evidence suggests that the situation was no better before 1965.

Silvis' article is not completely off-beam. She does mention various possible causes for the putative decline: teachers with no instruction in grammar, lack of time in a crowded syllabus or the fact that society in general places no importance on details such as spelling and punctuation. (The last is followed by a reference to a split infinitive in the Queen's Speech to Parliament in

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November 1999.) The article mentions the puzzling discrepancy between the results of the report on literacy and the results gained in Standard and Higher grades in the Scottish Leaving Certificate examinations. These are points that do deserve investigation, even if not as causes of an alleged disastrous decline in literacy. It alludes to changes in teaching methods in the seventies, whole-class teaching, early intervention, a return to phonics and the alleged replacement of books by computer games.

LITERACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Silvis's article leads to two larger topics. Street (1995) distinguishes between what he calls the 'technicalities of literacy' - spelling, punctuation, syntax - and what might be called literacy and society - the role of literacy in a given society and the various uses which its members make of literacy. The currently fashionable term is 'literacy practices'. Different literacy practices have not even been mentioned in public discussions but are crucial to any assessment of literacy teaching. The second large topic has to do with the technicalities of language, but in a entirely different perspective which encompasses the co-existence (not peaceful) of different varieties of language in any society and the fact that every variety of every language changes inexorably.

It is now accepted that children have difficulty learning to write unless they understand what written language is for. (See Garton and Pratt 1998.) In how many households in the UK are writing and reading prominent? There are certainly households in which little or no reading is done and households in which little or no writing takes place. Children from such households start school with the great disadvantage that they do not know why they are being asked to make letters on a page, and some children may even be puzzled as to why they are obliged to interpret letters and sequences of letters. Children from households where reading and writing are prominent do not have to ask why, since they know that sequences of letters on the page convey stories which obliging adults relate in sound. They know that friends and relatives send letters (and nowadays e-mail messages) coded in marks on the page or screen and decoded by adults. Indeed, a good many children from such households arrive in school having already taken the first steps towards reading and writing. (It has been suggested that children who have the opportunity to use computers at school have much better literacy skills. This does not necessarily indicate some magic property of computers, merely that access to computers increases social standing among children as well as adults and that children therefore have motivation to be able to use computers. This requires some level of literacy.)

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Children from households where reading and writing are not practised not only have a much harder task even in the first year of primary school but are at another subtle but vicious disadvantage thereafter. Of course the introductory technicalities of literacy must be properly taught, but the technicalities are retained and reinforced only by constant use. Opportunities for this use are abundantly available to children from reading and writing households but unavailable to children from households where reading and writing do not take place.

The mere fact of being born into a household where the adults read and write does not guarantee successful reading and writing at school; the simple but important fact is that literary practices, the use to which reading and writing are put, are not uniform throughout the UK (or throughout any country). Barton and Hamilton (1998) describe the widespread use of written language that has 'escaped' from the control of the school or the business world - personal diaries, agendas and minutes of the meetings of allotment holders, personal messages in Christmas and birthday cards, personal notices on notice boards, and so on. Some households studied by Barton and Hamilton considered literacy skills important but believed that reading stories was a waste of time. The message from Barton and Hamilton is that some people who do not perform well at school may practise different literacies; they are not illiterate and they may hold the attitude that school literacy is not relevant to their lives. Barton and Hamilton also describe how with distressing frequency children can fail to benefit from primary or secondary education for personal and social reasons which cannot be eliminated by special literacy programmes.

The daunting complexity and sensitivity of literacy issues were analysed in Heath (1983), writing about her experiences in a small semi-rural, semi-industrial town in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Heath showed that two communities in the town differed greatly in their literacy practices from the practice taught at school. The community of African-American labourers had a rich oral tradition but it did not involve the telling of stories starting at the beginning, proceeding coherently through the middle and bringing the whole to a satisfying ending. The community was not illiterate, but literacy did not centrally involve the reading of written stories; in fact, any individual who indulged in reading indoors instead of participating in community life conducted on verandahs, in gardens and in the streets would have been thought most odd.

Much of the community's experience with literacy focused on the church, with the singing of hymns, Bible-reading and the writing of prayers by members of the congregation. But in the singing and even in the saying of

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prepared prayers improvisation, oral composing on the spot was typical. The community also came into contact with written documents from the local authority in connection with medical services, inoculations for the children and school business. These documents, which are usually linguistically complex in any literate society, were dealt with communally, the appropriate interpretation being arrived at via the literacy skills of several individuals and their past experience of dealing with the local authorities. The genre of church language is not what is used in school and the cultural differences in what counted as a story did not help. Even in the show-and-tell slot in the primary school classroom African-American children were (and perhaps still are) interrupted by teachers and not allowed to have their say because they were following a different literary recipe. The fact that the community worked together to understand and respond to written documents meant that the lack of school literacy had no obvious effect on people's lives, though very few members of the African-American community in this particular town held even low-grade white-collar jobs.

The second community whose literacy practices were observed and analysed by Heath was that of the white skilled and semi-skilled manual workers. The problems for the children of this community were different and of a lesser degree but still constituted barriers between them and the culture of the school. Young children were encouraged to read books but in their own stories they had to be truthful rather than imaginative and were discouraged from inventing events and characters. Primary school teachers, in contrast, do encourage pupils to be creative in their writing; the culture clash was more subtle than in the case of the Afro-American children but nonetheless had a significant effect on the children's progress in literacy. Another hindrance (from the school's point of view) was the desire of boys over the age of eight to join in their fathers' pursuits: hunting, shooting, fishing, some sport, some tinkering with car or motorbike, but no reading.

Heath was describing two communities in a town in North Carolina. There are many cultural differences between these communities and communities in Scotland but Scottish students of mine who read Heath's book recognise the literacy practices, the communal interpreting of written documents, the insistence on truth rather than inventiveness and the appreciation of good jokes and funny stories, which are not central to the school curriculum either in Scotland or in North Carolina.

One last comment must be made on literacy practices. Politicians pronouncing on literacy in the past fifteen years have felt obliged to recommend this or that 'classic' of English Literature, and the English curriculum, at least in England and Wales, has been taken under central

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control and revamped so as to include a larger number of items from the classics, plays by Shakespeare and novels by Dickens. In making these pronouncements and curriculum changes, politicians and the upper echelons of educators have in mind some golden age in which children and their parents read serious works of literature.

Two problems arise with this conception. The first is that, as shown in the classic work by Williams (1961), the British 'public' has long preferred what Matthew Arnold called 'the tawdry novels which flare in the bookshelves of our railway stations' (quoted in Williams). One retired headteacher interviewed by Silvis for her article stated that television and computer games have sidelined reading and family discussion in Scottish homes. This diagnosis needs to be adjusted. It reflects a panic about television which was fashionable in the late fifties and the sixties and continues today, although muted, and it reflects the current panic about computer games. As Graff (1987) remarks in his epilogue, why has nobody panicked about the effect of radio, which had just as big an effect on family life when it became widespread in the late twenties? The focus on television and the exclusion of radio does not make sense with respect to changes in literacy skills and practices but does make sense with respect to worries about a technology that is more intrusive than radio. Whether computer games really interfere with reading time as opposed to time for sport is something that should be investigated. And how many families did spend their evenings reading or in family discussion? Douglas Osler's reference to Brigadoon High School is most apposite.

The second problem is that school literacy focuses on novels. Now, many children read books, including novels, but many children do not. Gillian Foy is a research student at Edinburgh University who is investigating literacy practices and attitudes to literacy among pupils in their second year of secondary education. She worked with a second year class in an Edinburgh state school for a year. The pupils in the class ranged from a boy who wrote poems but kept his writing very quiet to boys who saw (or professed to see) written language and indeed school as a necessary evil. In between were, e.g., some girls who enjoyed some of the material they read in school but who also spent part of the school holidays writing short stories on computer. The stories were intended only for the girls in that particular group and were deleted once they had been read and revised and re-read. The girls themselves did read, but expressed astonishment that anyone would want to read a book. Their reading material consisted of magazines, some produced for the teenage market and some produced for adult readers. Magazines are not written in one-clause sentences with a stultifyingly narrow range of vocabulary, but the general style and the topics are not consonant with school and classic literacy.

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Many boys read magazines about sport, cars, fishing or some other hobby. As with the girls, the type of reading material and the topics are not recognised as literacy by schools but this rejection merely heightens the feeling among the pupils that school literacy has no point of contact with the literacy in their lives out of school. Unmotivated and alienated pupils are not good learners.

STANDARD AND NON-STANDARD LANGUAGE

One final barrier to literacy remains to be mentioned, and that is language itself, or rather the different varieties of language that meet in the school classroom. The majority of pupils (indeed the majority of the population) in any country with a centralised government and a standard written language speak a non-standard variety of the language. As sociolinguists typically put it, standard languages start life as merely one among a number of geographical varieties in a given political unit but one variety gains prestige for reasons to do with military, economic and political power, and is accepted as standard. It is then elaborated, that is, the structure of written sentences is made complex and its vocabulary is extended to suit all the uses to which the standard variety is put. Finally, the standard variety is codified, that is, grammars are written with two goals, to enable people to learn the standard variety but also to protect it against change and mistaken usage.

Williams (1992) observes that the above is an anodyne and misleading account. The reality is that in any given political unit a particular group of people build up their military or economic power, gain political control and impose their language and culture on the groups under their dominance. The imposition of cultural and linguistic power operates at all levels, from the attempted refusal of a copy-editor to accept a particular Scots word, say, to the alleged refusal of the British Council in the early eighties to give financial help to performances of Sir David Lyndsay's play **The Thrie Estaites** in Poland on the ground that they were charged with supporting English literature.

Part of the panic about literacy among politicians, employers, journalists and the cultural establishment is that the obligatory use of a certain kind of grammar, vocabulary and text organisation in certain circumstances is an instance of power being exercised. Considerable cultural and linguistic power is exercised in schools in Scotland (and England and Wales and every country). Clearly the curriculum is imposed from above, but the questions raised by this imposition are not our concern here; pupils do not come to Primary School with a knowledge of arithmetic or chemistry that is peculiar to a particular social group, nor do they come with a knowledge of a foreign

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language that will be contradicted by the school teaching. They may have, or acquire at home, an interpretation of historical events, such as the miners' strike in 1984, which differs from the interpretation supplied in the classroom.

The most powerful imposition on pupils affects the language allowed in the classroom, the language they use when speaking and the language they use when writing. Many pupils are effectively told that the language they use with their parents, other relatives and friends is not adequate for the classroom. In Scotland these are the pupils whose native language is what for convenience sake can be called 'Broad Scots', whether urban or rural. Children who arrive in school speaking 'Standard Scottish English' receive no such message but fit in linguistically without ado. (They may have to adjust to the playground language, but that is relatively minor.) There are two strands to the above-mentioned linguistic inadequacy. One is that the negative reception sets up a severe culture clash. Some children just accept that they need to speak two languages; others reject the culture and language of the school. The second strand is that, as has now been demonstrated in some detail and in many publications such as Milroy and Milroy (1993), the grammatical differences between standard and non-standard varieties of English are numerous, systematic and affect central grammatical constructions. Add the differences in vocabulary, and the enormous task faced by children speaking non-standard varieties is clearly visible. Children speaking standard Scottish English have to cross the barrier to written English; every child has to do that but some children not only start with the variety of English used in the school but have large exposure to reading and writing at home. Children speaking non-standard English have two barriers to cross, the one between them and written English but also the one between them and the spoken language of the classroom.

These facts are well-known to teachers, witness the hoary joke, which was quoted in an EIS journal from the twenties, to the effect that most pupils in Scottish school are already learning a foreign language - English. (Many a true word is spoken in jest.) They appear not to be known to other groups of people, or at least the effects on learning and attitude to school are not understood. The total effect on standards of literacy is certainly never mentioned in public discussions.

VARIATION IN PATTERNS AND USAGE

The final component of the situation is language itself, in this case standard English and other varieties of English. Codification was mentioned above in

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connection with the emergence of standard languages - the writing of grammars, dictionaries and manuals of style for different kinds of text. The problem with codification is that grammar writers have different aims. Some grammar writers (past and present) set out to describe what they see as the correct forms and to fix them. Sometimes they succeed. In 1653 John Wallis published a grammar of English in which he listed three past tense forms for the verb SPIN, 'spun', 'span' and 'spinned', and three forms of the past participle, 'spun', 'spunnen', 'spinned'. Late eighteenth century grammars give only one form, 'spun', which functions both as the past tense and as the past participle. The speakers who used the forms listed by Wallis had not given them up; a consensus had emerged among the influential and elite users of written English that only 'spun' would be used in writing. A late eighteenth century person could insist on using one of the rejected forms, but the recipient of the document might jeer, refuse to offer employment or financial help, and so on. Business people would insist on 'spun' (say in documents relating to the textile industry), and in the nineteenth century state schools inculcated the 'rule' in their pupils - along with many other rules of equally arbitrary origin.

The history of SPIN illustrates a general characteristic of language codifiers: they do not like variation. Printers and publishers also detest variation. One small instance is the spelling of verbs such as ORGANISE. In Scottish (and presumably English and Welsh) schools in the early fifties the spelling taught was 'organise', with the comment that there was an alternative spelling, 'organize'. The latter spelling is the only one accepted by publishers in the United States, and many British publishers now insist on -ize. The use of both spellings in the same paper or book causes editorial grief. Users of grammars and dictionaries tend to think that the language (be it English or French or some other language) is fixed, unchanging and with a single set of grammatical patterns and vocabulary that are 'correct' in written texts, but the reality is quite different.

All languages vary in the sense that alternative grammatical patterns and alternative vocabulary are available. For instance, the allegedly logical and orderly grammar of a language such as Latin is a fiction created by grammarians working on a limited number of classical texts from a very short period in the history of the language. It is known from non-classical texts, from commentaries by ancient Romans on frequent 'mistakes', and by inference from the modern Romance languages that what appears in the standard grammars of Latin represents only a fraction of the grammar and vocabulary that were used in speech and in writing. The language codifiers in Ancient Rome were able to control only a small part of language use, the Latin used in formal speeches and the Latin used in certain written texts.

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There is variation even in controlled written English. Little's article in **The Scotsman** contained the sentence (in the first paragraph) 'For 27 of those years, schooling has been compulsory up to the age of 16, ...'. The author is puzzled by the comma after years, this being a usage that was not part of his schooling. **The Scotsman** of 7 December 1999 carried an article by Alan Massie containing the sentence 'Elderly patients are soon going to view the prospect of hospital with the same horror that Victorians regarded the workhouse'. This sentence appeared in the body of the article and also in bigger bold type underneath an accompanying photograph. It contains the relative clause 'that the Victorians regarded the workhouse'. The author expected 'with which the Victorians regarded the workhouse' or even 'that the Victorians regarded the workhouse with'. The construction used by Massie, a relative clause introduced by 'that' and lacking a preposition, is, however, frequent in spoken English. It is another pattern that is available and this example neatly illustrates the way in which patterns available and frequently used in speech eventually find their way into writing.

The second major property of languages which is concealed by the codifiers is that languages are always changing. Pronunciation changes, grammatical patterns change, vocabulary comes and goes. Change affects standard and non-standard English. Novelists such as Margaret Forster or A.L. Kennedy do not write in the same way as Jane Austen and Susan Ferrier. Seventy-year-olds do not have the same pronunciation as seventeen-year-olds (even ignoring the various physical effects of old age). Two changes that have happened in the author's lifetime are the use of 'different than' and the use of 'may' where 'might' was formerly standard. 'Different than' is of course a standard American construction, both in speech and in writing. In the fifties and sixties in British schools pupils were taught never to write (and preferably never to say either) 'different to'; the approved usage was, and still is, 'different from'. At some point in the early seventies the author and his colleagues noticed that their children and their children's friends were using 'different than', which has since become the norm in speech. A look at Burchfield (1996) reveals that the author and his colleagues were aware of only a limited part of the picture; the first example of 'different than' in the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1644, the first example of 'different to' is from 1526 (and was frequently used by, e.g., Mrs Gaskell), and the construction has appeared regularly in print in the UK throughout the twentieth century in spite of disapproval from the arbiters of standard English.

In a BBC news bulletin some years ago the father of a policewoman who was stabbed and killed said 'Even if she had been wearing a [bullet-proof] vest, she may not have been saved'. The author would use 'might not have been

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saved', since the degree of possibility is very remote, indeed counter-factual. The author became aware of this usage in the late eighties in television news bulletins and then in newspapers; Burchfield (1996) has examples going back to the late seventies. Language change is permanent, pervasive and unstoppable.

PRINT IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

The amount of language appearing in print nowadays is so huge that the codifiers and the censors (copy-editors and the like) cannot control it. What they do control are books published by reputable publishers, textbooks for all sectors of the education system, formal technical documents (banking documents, legal documents, civil service documents and so on), the language of specialist and highly-technical areas such as mathematics, physics, medicine, linguistics, literary criticism, etc. The huge flow of language outside these areas is either much less rigidly controlled or not controlled at all. At this point we return to the distinction (over-simple but not false) between households where reading and writing are prominent and households where they are not. Children in the first type of household are regularly exposed to written material, possibly of all sorts, comics, magazines, and books. The reading of books at home is important because children who read books at home immerse themselves in just the sort of controlled written language that is used in school. Children whose experience of print is mainly via the notices in shops, and the labels on packets and bottles, and who read a minimum of comics, magazines and books, do not receive the same intense experience of controlled written language. (A caveat: the author is not arguing that one sort of language is good and the other sort bad but merely that a particular type is used in schools and is mastered only with regular experience of it. Experience of it only in the classroom is not sufficient.)

Let us return to the apostrophes lamented by Little. He says 'One enterprising 11-year-old seemed to have gone round collecting all the apostrophes neglected by the others, and wrote of collecting "muscle's and crab leg's" at the seaside'. Little's analysis of this usage is nonsense. In the first place, it is clear that an alternative pattern is in general use, one in which the apostrophe is used to mark off the plural inflection on the noun. This pattern is not the one recommended by codifiers of English and required in schools but it is in very wide use and can be seen every day on all sorts of notices, even in reputable stores such as Sainsbury's. Children are regularly exposed to this usage and it is hardly surprising that children who experience no other usage in depth should imitate this one.

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The second interesting fact about this usage of the apostrophe is that it is not new. Burchfield (1996, p.60) says

from the 17c. onwards an apostrophe was often used in the plural number when the noun ended in a vowel, e.g. grotto's, opera's, toga's. Since the mid-19c. grammarians have condemned this usage but it continues to appear. ... Henry Alford (**The Queen's English**, 1864) reported, 'One not uncommonly sees outside an inn, that fly's and gig's are to be let'.

Burchfield also notes an example of 'who's' instead of 'whose' which escaped the copy-editor. This example demonstrates very clearly the power of analogy in language use.

That is, Tom Little's 11-year-old was using apostrophes consistently and following a widespread pattern, but not the pattern demanded in schools and in the assessments. The boy's usage also exemplifies a fact of social and linguistic life unpalatable to codifiers but whose recognition is essential for rational literacy standards, coherent discussions of literacy and attainable literacy goals. Most adults follow consistent patterns of grammar, vocabulary and punctuation that differ from the patterns advocated by codifiers. These adults do not know the recommendations of the codifiers and undoubtedly would care very little for them if they did. Many children are exposed to these patterns and imitate them. They are not illiterate, and it is not clear what schools should be expected to achieve. Writing on a tabula rasa is one task, substituting one pattern of usage for a different, widespread, pattern, is quite another.

CONCLUSION

Most contributors to the recent debate on literacy assume that there is one set of invariable patterns of grammar, vocabulary and the organisation of texts and one set of conventions governing the use of written language. The preceding discussion shows this assumption to be incorrect. Most contributors to the debate, indeed perhaps most of the educated classes, think that they know what literacy is because they regularly read and write complex English. The preceding discussion shows that the conventions and practices of literacy are both complex and variable and are embedded in a matrix of social, cultural and political facts which require study. It is essential to emphasise that this article does not argue for one set of practices and grammar and against another set of practices and grammar and it does not criticise standard written English. Nor does it argue that literacy standards should be entrusted to some specialists. On the contrary, there is a great deal

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of knowledge readily available and which should be known to politicians and journalists engaged in the literacy debate. Politicians and journalists read up relevant literature and consult relevant specialists when they take an interest in, say, EU funding, Russia, or the National Health Service. Literacy requires the same sort of study.

Equally there is a regrettable lack of knowledge about language in society generally. The teaching of grammar is invoked as a panacea but those who invoke it do not understand how difficult it is to stand back and analyse the structure of one's native language, do not remember that the schools abandoned grammar partly because the available grammar did not apply easily to many common English constructions, and do not entertain the idea that there is usually more than one analysis for any given sentence. Grammar is not a product to be bought off the shelf and applied automatically. Moreover, 'grammar' and "'good" grammar' are generally confused, which brings us back to the resistance of speakers of non-standard varieties. Finally, it is likely that people who pronounce about a decline in grammar have in mind their own linguistic prejudices about particular structures or turns of phrase. Politicians, employers and journalists (and for that matter teachers) who comment in public on grammar should be obliged to specify what grammatical phenomena they refer to.

There is no quick fix for literacy. The basic mechanics of reading and writing have to be taught, but this is only the first and small, albeit important, step in the process of becoming fully literate. **Treasure Island**, **David Copperfield** and **Macbeth** are wonderful works of literature. What their role is in teaching literacy skills in twenty-first century English is an interesting question; certainly insisting that every sixteen-year old reads them is self-defeating, given the fact mentioned above that many pupils at secondary school do not read books but do read magazines. Perhaps magazines for teenagers should be persuaded to serialise abridged versions of classic novels edited into modern English and set in cartoon form (as was tried in the early fifties). Cartoons can carry a lot of text, as shown by the **Tintin** books. Whatever the eventual solution, imposing the classics of English literature in their original form has never worked and will certainly not instil the early and life-long interest in reading that is the only sensible goal.

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