

Olson D R. From utterance to text: the bias of language in speech and writing. *Harvard Educ. Rev.* 47:257-81, 1977.
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This paper addressed four basic questions about language and its use—its structure, its meaning, the nature of comprehension, and the nature of reasoning—and tried to show that the answers to those questions depended upon whether one was talking about oral or written language. It argued that our current models are not of the "native" speaker but rather of the highly literate, those who speak a written language. [The *SSCI*® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 205 publications.]

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Following the leads of such cultural historians as Havelock, Goody and Watt, Ong, and McLuhan, I argued that psychologists and linguists were making universal claims about the nature of language and cognition that could, more correctly, characterize the explicit knowledge possessed by literate speakers and thinkers. Models of comprehension, I claimed, were models that assumed "textual" or "sentence" meanings uniquely available to literates rather than the intended meanings attended to by nonliterate, whether children in our own culture or adults in a traditional, nonliterate culture. Becoming literate, therefore, involved not just learning sound-symbol correspondence but learning to treat language in a new way, namely, as an object in its own right. With my colleague, Nancy Torrance, I have devoted much of the time since this article was written to making good on those claims.

I wrote the paper in the summer of 1974, but it evoked little interest from any of the people I showed it to. It was rejected by the

journal *Cognitive Psychology*, and the book I agreed to publish it in never materialized; but then, by a stroke of luck, Frank Smith, who had been invited to contribute an article, told me of the *Harvard Educational Review's* intention to publish a special issue on literacy and language. I submitted the article, unsolicited; the editors were very enthusiastic, and it was published as the lead article in that special issue late in 1977.

What has become much clearer in the decade since "From utterance to text" was published is that literacy has its place and impact primarily not on the language, but on discourse. Literacy encourages the specialization of a variety of "genres," such as prose, fiction, deeds, contracts, rules, laws, formularies, and the like.^{1,2} Competence does not result simply from learning to read and write but from learning to deal with the resources of a literate culture.³ Consequently, speakers who are competent with literate forms can employ them almost as well when speaking as when writing; it is a matter of competence rather than modality.

Second, literacy raises the consciousness or awareness of linguistic structures.⁴ Nonliterate speakers use words and sentences; they just do not know what a word is or what a sentence is. I now believe that literacy is in principle metalinguistic. Just as speech makes the world the object of contemplation, reflection, and awareness, so writing makes the world of language the object of contemplation, reflection, and awareness. A large part of metalanguage, that is, language about language, is a set of terms for referring to aspects and properties of written discourse.⁵

The paper has helped to change literacy from an unexamined goal of the school into an intellectual problem in need of careful interdisciplinary examination. It is not too much to say that part of the preoccupation with language that characterized the 1960s has been passed over to a preoccupation with literacy in the 1980s. A number of anthologies on the topic (see, for instance, reference 6) mark the rise of this new domain of inquiry.

1. Eisenstein E. *The printing press as an agent of change*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 852 p. (Cited 45 times.)
2. Stock B. *The implications of literacy: written language and models of interpretation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986. 616 p. (Cited 25 times.)
3. Wells G. *Language development in the pre-school years*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 500 p. (Cited 10 times.)
4. Bertelson P, ed. The onset of literacy: cognitive processes in reading acquisition. (Special issue.) *Cognition* 24(1-2), 1987. 192 p.
5. Olson D R, Torrance N & Hildyard A, eds. *Literacy, language, and learning: the nature and consequences of reading and writing*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 420 p.
6. de Castell S, Luke A & Egan K, eds. *Literacy, society, and schooling*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 350 p.