Book Reviews

Literales Bewußtsein: Schriftlichkeit und das Verhältnis von Sprache und Kultur [The Literate Mind: Literacy and the Relation Between Language and Culture], by Jens Brockmeier. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997, 348 pages.

Psychology emerged as an institutionalized academic discipline in its own right in the second half of the 19th century. Yet, pioneers of psychology have held very different views on the character, methodology, and subject matter of psychology. While, for example, H. Ebbinghaus promoted a natural scientific psychology, W. Dilthey suggested a research program in which the mind could be understood in terms of its historical and cultural context. W. Wundt's program reflected this dilemma: He advanced a dualistic conceptualization of psychology in which experimental psychology was considered appropriate for simple psychological processes whereas a *Völkerpsychologie* should do justice to more complex, culturally determined psychological issues. Yet, in the course of history the cultural approaches lost out to experimental psychology.

In the second half of the 20th century, and after the decline of behaviorism and the rise of the cognitive framework in the 1960s and 1970s, one finds a comparable situation, and – from the perspective of an optimist – the outcome is still open. Brockmeier points out that the 'cognitive revolution' led to two different results: A cognitive psychology oriented towards an information-processing model of the human mind, and a cognitive-oriented psychology that incorporates the cultural-historical dimension of human consciousness. Moreover, he suggests that the computer metaphor must be perceived as the counter-paradigm to the cultural-historical perspective.

Brockmeier locates himself within the cultural-historical program, and analyzes and synthesizes, from this perspective, studies on literacy and its relation to mind and culture. He pursues vigorously the question of what it means to live, think, and act in a culture in which the written word seems so important, and which seems firmly established on literacy. He raises the question of what it means to exercise two

Interchange, Vol. 31/1, 95-110, 2000.

seemingly antagonistic modes of language, a written and a spoken one, and what consequences this has for the human mind.

But Brockmeier is too sophisticated to oppose orality and literacy. Indeed, one of his objectives is to show that the opposition between the two is unfounded. In order to elucidate their relationship, he discusses extensively what he refers to as the "strong literacy hypothesis," according to which a qualitative difference between written and spoken language exists, an oral and a literate mind can be discriminated, and Western culture is based on literacy. He uses persuasive arguments and empirical data to demonstrate that this hypothesis cannot be upheld and that it reflects a Western logocentric fantasy of superiority.

Instead Brockmeier suggests that in so-called highly literate cultures, oral language does not fall silent, and written and spoken language infiltrate, assist, and mask each other. In short, he claims, one should conceive this relation in terms of an interaction. In order to demonstrate this interplay, he discusses the *Rigveda* and Luther's German Bible translation. In addition, he demonstrates the alliance of oral and written language in Descartes' writings. His suggestion to view Don Quixote as a representative of literacy and Sancho Panza as a representative of orality is ultimately rejected as both are moments along a continuum. Consequently, the idea of an alphabetic mind must also be abandoned.

In times, in which specialized knowledge had become so fragmented that it can only be understood by small scientific communities, Brockmeier's book represents a compelling counterpoint. He discusses literacy and the relation between language and culture not only from a psychological perspective but incorporates positions and results from anthropology, history, linguistics, pedagogy, and philosophy. Literacy and the literate mind are analyzed developmentally but also cultural-historically.

In order to answer the question of how the literate mind emerged, Brockmeier outlines the historical episteme in which the "discovery of literacy occurred and became a topic in many academic disciplines." This account includes, for example, reflections on the caves of Lascaux, the importance of media, and why Jorge Luis Borges's novel on the library may be considered conducive in understanding the significance of literacy in Western culture. Little gems, such as a critique of contemporary definitions of intelligence that assume implicitly a literate constitution of intelligence, are very enlightening. Similarly, he provides

a concise analysis of the term culture and of the meaning of meaning for which he analyzes dialectically its subjective and objective dimensions.

Brockmeier suggests that the "interpretive turn" in the social sciences has also prepared developmental psychology for its cultural-theoretical sensibility. As language acquisition is considered a central – and probably *the* central process in a subject's psychological ontogenesis – Brockmeier is not interested in the development of mental operations, but in the acquisition of symbol and sign systems, in both their cognitive and emotional aspects. Chomsky and Piaget are criticized for formulating an important problem in ways that excluded a priori the cultural-historical scope of the mind.

In reflecting on the genesis of literate consciousness and on the mediation of human thought through language and other symbolic forms, Brockmeier argues that small children do not learn the logical and conceptual meanings of words, but rather their pragmatic usage, the social dimension of language, from which the other functions of language are derived. In a similar vein, he reasons that it is not literacy as such that changes the child's cognitive style, but rather the cultural event of going to school. Literacy in this sense is understood as a cultural practice, and from the perspective of the subject, as an individual's action potency. He demonstrates convincingly that it is not the intrinsic cognitive nature of alphabetic writing, but rather the specific cultural contexts in which writing practices take place, that are responsible for cognitive changes.

In discussing the relationship between literacy and mind, Brockmeier challenges traditional assumptions while not rejecting the notion that the experiences of writing and reading lead to a certain consciousness. But Brockmeier emphasizes the specific material experiences of the active writing process and the significance of the literate language for meta-linguistic awareness. He argues that the practical-operational, discursive, and intellectual experiences with the objective material of written language and the development of meta-linguistic awareness lead to the transformation of language into an object that enables a literate mind. The common assumption that literate development goes hand in hand with decontexualization is reinterpreted in terms of a context shift. While providing several fascinating examples of his empirical research, he also underlines the aesthetic function of language as constitutive of literacy. In demonstrating the subjective meaning of written language for children,

he also points out that personal styles of writing are free and not free at the same time.

What are the important sources for Brockmeier? Although authors such as Bruner, Chomsky, Derrida, Donaldson, Goody, Havelock, McLuhan, Piaget, Peirce, Olson, Wittgenstein and many others are discussed extensively, it is Vygotsky, with his holistic approach to developmental psychology, his tool theory of language, and his cultural accentuation, who connects the parts of the book and inspires his arguments. But Brockmeier is not a Vygotskian in a narrow sense. He stands – to use this metaphor again – on the shoulders of Vygotsky, in order to look further. Indeed, he uniquely integrates the positions of many authors and research programs into his own framework, which allows for a new perspective on the problem of literacy.

In his dialogue with the literature, Brockmeier proceeds in a systematic way. He demonstrates in over 300 pages how the research field of literacy emerged. He discusses the relevance of cultural psychology, Vygotsky's role in it, and literate perspectives of developmental psychology. He analyzes thinking as a thinking on literacy and the *Gestalt* of the written language. He does not hesitate to use the "I" form in his analyses, indicating that a concrete person has written this monograph and that the text has not written itself. What makes this book special and outstanding is that Brockmeier not only discusses the importance of interdisciplinary studies – he accomplishes interdisciplinary work. As most North American psychologists – in contrast to the first generation of psychologists – do not speak German anymore, it is hoped that the book will be translated, and that English-speaking readers can verify for themselves that this scholarly work is among the best of German thought.

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