

The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations

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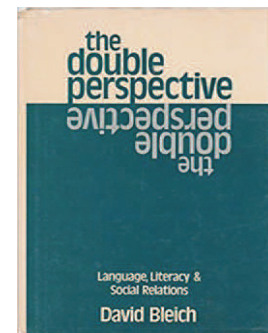
The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations

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Erudite and polemical, *The Double Perspective* by David Bleich is a book that explores the relationship between language and literacy in the context of culture and social relations that help shape it. To this complicated mix, Bleich adds the element of teaching and pedagogy. The understanding of the meaning of the word "language" and the content of language achieves a depth that is nuanced manifold because of the author's incisive insight into the modalities of language learning. Bleich builds upon his previous work in reader response criticism as he challenges the prevalent assumption that language is an

individual transaction completely bereft of any social linkages. Interestingly, Bleich links his earlier understanding of concepts such as intersubjectivity, mental stereoscopy and the role of affective logic in reading, to the heady mix of emergent arguments about pedagogy, gender roles and literacy.

The author draws upon a voluminous body of research in areas such as feminist schools of thought, linguistics, anthropology, etc., to question and discuss the basic premises that form the foundation of pedagogy of education in the West. Bleich revisits these theorists

in order to question the basic premise of knowledge in society. The modern-day university classroom is seen with fresh eyes, when Bleich tries to understand the ramifications of teaching the social and collective nature of language. The book adds a greater depth to the area of the phenomenology of reading, as the author moves through a series of interrelated essays by feminist epistemologists, and essays on social conceptions of language and knowledge by luminaries such as G. H. Mead, L.S. Vygotsky, Ludwig Fleck and Mikhail Bakhtin, amongst others.

The traditional views that Bleich critiques pertain to those that we accept unquestioningly, for achievement of knowledge is purely an individual matter, something best done entirely on one's own; the university classroom is non-socialized (p. 17); and most damagingly, the classroom environment assumes an adversarial stance. Bleich's greatest concern is around the implication of these views and how they have impacted classroom discourse. Most importantly, he deplores the fact that modern day societal discourse has not been encouraged nor developed in the academic classroom, thus bestowing upon the university classroom the dubious honour of privileged ideology. The author insists that alternative styles such as those found in most feminine discourses are non-oppositional (p. 57), flexible (p. 57), and incorporate a greater fluency of inference (p. 147). These values, he feels, add to our perspective on language, and consequently to its teaching.

The book comprises of ten chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. The introduction sets the mood for an erudite discourse by putting forward an analysis of literary gems such as *Death of a Salesman* not as literature, but as a slice of discourse put in a frame (p. xiii). Literary reading, reasserts Bleich, "spontaneously elicits in us a new second perspective on language and human

relationships" (p. xiii). By virtue of his/her individuality, each person brings into the classroom certain privileges. Language does not simply appear in each of us, contends Bleich, but its acquisition is closely bound to the individual's socio-cultural context (p. x).

Bleich begins his treatise with summaries of the theoretical positions of Derrida and Husserl. The opening chapter goes on to elaborate on the concept of intersubjectivity. There is an extensive emphasis on the feminist theories of knowledge, such as that of Susan Handelman and Sandra Harding, the theories of these luminaries are the fulcrum needed to build a theoretical framework on which to peg arguments on varied discourse styles and for creating a much-needed paradigm shift. Further, Bleich also elaborates upon the historical import of the gradual separation of literacy from orality in the West. The priority placed upon literacy of the individual relegates oral habits to a secondary position. Quite incongruously, this impoverishes the teaching of literacy in the formal school classroom (p. 84).

Despite the strong emphasis on the theory of language, the overall focus of this book still remains on pedagogy. This is obvious from the genre and the kind of topics selected for analysis—collaborative learning, relationship between the teacher and the taught, course design etc. Chapter 4 is insightful and expansive in the manner in which it explores the idea of "cognitive stereoscopy"; it presents an analysis of how Hellen Keller acquired language through her relationship with Anne Sullivan (p. 87). Bleich describes by stating "any language/literate act depends on double or multiple perspectives held by the members of the speaking community, and that to analyse any language/literate act, the stipulation of double or multiple perspectives will be part of the explanatory procedure" (p. 88).

Many of the intricate processes of language learning and assimilation are explained with examples from practical life, and with references from other psychologists and theorists. Social conceptions of language and knowledge located in the works of Vygotsky, Mead, Fleck and Bakhtain are juxtaposed with the process of language development to showcase the social character of the classroom and academic communities.

"Gender Interests in Language and Literature", is a chapter devoted to viewing language use through a sociological and psychological lens as Bleich draws upon Leo Stone's and Ralph Cohens' arguments. Using examples from literature, his arguments and attitude build a fresh viewpoint with regard to sociological processes, and language and literacy. The author explains how the outlook of the two genders together form a unified human perspective or a double perspective. The author's main contention throughout the book is to show that literacy and language use are inherently social rather than exclusively individual.

The classroom, which Bleich terms as a "ubiquitous institution with a long history", moves centre stage in Chapter 6. Here he discusses how it can be reconceived, reused, reenlisted, and/or recast to work with this greatly enlarged sense of English (p. 158). The classroom does not merely convey knowledge, but its primary activity is created as a result of testing and grading. Bleich's main argument is that language and literacy cannot be reconceived without making the corresponding change in the social relations within the classroom. He posits that it should be visualized as a collective rather than as a collection, with the focus shifting from the teacher to the collaborative action of the students. A simple shift can, for example, take the form of a change in the seating layout of the learners, from audience seating to circular seating, thereby allowing the

students to look at each other as well as at the teacher. The author stresses that relationships that form as a result of group work need to be nurtured and developed into contributing units. Moreover, teachers too need to work collaboratively (faculty writing workshops are excellent examples of this), to promote collaborative work in the classroom (p. 180). The focus should be on the social nature of the classroom, which has great potential and needs to be tapped and developed.

This is further elaborated upon in Chapter 10, "Collaboration among Students". The detailed narratives in this chapter help to highlight the problems related to group work—lack of knowledge of how groups work, how to maintain discipline within the group and how to textualize group interaction. What emerges from the discussions is the fact that authority and compliance share the stage with other matters such as confidence, success and gender, but most importantly, language use. The author's arguments bring out how language use is related to every social instinct in human beings, and disregarding this fact would unfortunately transform the very nature of language itself.

The analysis of classroom processes by the author are not mere whimsical musings of a philosopher or a writer with philosophical leanings, but are carefully thought arguments, with supporting evidence from various disciplines. Bleich stresses that redistributing classroom authority proactively improves individual discipline and cultivates the habits of collective and collaborative work. He further elaborates that how individuals perceive themselves will change as a consequence of the sustained attention they give to their language use. The connections between the abstract idea of the double perspective (mentioned earlier) and the concrete facts of human growth and development in a university

classroom are examined with care, while laying great emphasis on refashioning educational experience into a fully evolved social experience. The author believes that mutuality and reciprocity are at the heart of enriching classroom experiences and presents this argument through cursory examples throughout the book. He elaborates on this towards the end, in the chapter "Mutuality Between Student and Teacher". By incorporating personal narratives (as he has done consistently throughout the book), Bleich is able to lend greater credibility to his argument and the importance of student - teacher mutuality in the classroom.

In writing this book, Bleich has written a classic on language that is deeply rooted in pedagogy, with a verve and passion rarely found in scholarly writing. The book is the first of its kind in academic writing, especially in the sphere of language development and learning. Multiple perspectives comprising of the ethnic, the economic, the geographic and the religious form the basis of understanding the use of language and the processes that shape these uses and implications they have on language teaching and learning. This is what adds philosophical dimensions to the book, making it a mandatory read for students of language and social psychology.