

Gunther Kress Interview: February 16, 2011

Interviewers: Matt Davis, Josh Mehler, Tony Ricks

Josh: So, it's not so much of an interview; it's just questions to get to know you, and, sort of, learn more about your professional background...so, you know, we won't grill you too hard.

Tony: As I was reading through these questions, I felt like, at least some of it, was covered this morning. I don't know if you guys...

Matt: Yeah, there may be some things that we talked about this morning...

Tony: So we may direct it, maybe, towards topics maybe some of the topics that we're interested in as well but definitely we want to build on what we heard this morning to learn about your work and your scholarship.

Josh: Alright. Here we go...so, actually Matt and I had a discussion about this first question. The question is: How did you get into "literacy studies"? And what we were talking about was: is "literacy studies" is the apt thing to call it? You have, you know, your expertise in semiotics, in education, linguistics...so how did you get to where you are now in your scholarship?

Gunther: Um, literacy studies...I have a...in England, I have this, sort of, a slightly notorious reputation for not liking the term. And particularly not liking the term when it's, kind of, spread to cover all sorts of things. The reason for that term--before I answer your question—is that, if one is attempting to persuade politicians that they should be attending to all sorts of other things or when one is attempting to get money, fair enough, let's use a term that everyone seemingly understand. If we want to actually understand how representation functions, then the term, like most names, the name tends to suggest you know what is being named, which usually isn't the case. So it's kind of an obstacle to people, kind of, attempting to understand forms of representation of other than, let's say the written....
Um, I got into an interest in writing because of seeing my children learn to write. The first two made me realize that's there's something which is not understood...or rather, there are two things that aren't understood. The first is: that the learning of writing is actually, in societies and cultures like our English-speaking cultures, very much like the learning of a new representational system--maybe not quite like learning a new different language, a fundamentally different language. That was one thing and I wanted to understand what that was about. The second thing was that in 1978 I went back from England to Australia and nearly the job that I...well, the job that I got was in a teacher's college which had to turn itself into a multi-purpose institution otherwise it was going to be closed down. And I was brought in to kind of change this college into a multi-purpose institution. But while I was doing that, I thought I'd like to do some teaching and I discovered a) that all the emphasis in teacher education was in reading with some really bizarre, kind of, theories of

that...but, the other thing was—that was more bothering to me—that children’s learning to write was always talked about in terms of insufficiency. So what children did was never what adults, maybe, could do and thought children should be able to do or move towards, rather than saying something which, I think, in a way, both comes from Chomsky and from and Halliday. That children view what we do and they represent the world as they see it with a means they have for representing it. Which is a very different kind of thing. So, for instance, when I represent the world in France by speaking French, I have roughly, perhaps, five or six hundred lexical items and an enormously limited syntax and, with that, I have to kind of represent the world of France to other French people. But I think that’s actually not unlike all of us. I think we can only use the means we have, we have a position in the world, and from that position we see the world and represent the world and children are like that. Now Chomsky’s position was a bit...that when he talked about children learning language he talked about them having successively new formulations, new hypotheses about the grammar of the language they were learning. So what they were doing was never insufficient, but it was always a speculation about what the grammar of this entity actually is. And, in as far as we never stop learning language, we continue doing that all the time. But I think the Hallidaean position and the Chomsky position each, in a sense, gives a dignity to the person who is doing this representing and also says what they are doing is like us. And of course it moves the emphasis away from reading, which was regarded as a passive skill, which, of course, isn’t, and towards writing which was regarded as an active skill. So that was really it. And I thought I would like to write something that clearly said that children, for instance, children write something: they have, initially, no notion of the sentence because all they have is a kind of notion of the textual units which come from speech. And, with that, they attempt to understand what a sentence is. The teacher makes corrections, but the children don’t quite know what they are. Nor does the teacher know what the unit was that the children wanted to make. But sometimes the children make corrections too—or rather, alterations. I mean, the notion of error—sort of what I wanted to get away from—the children make alterations and you see that they’ve actually thought about what a sentence might be. And, successively, they work their way into the notion of a sentence as a meaningful unit, a meaningful and a syntactical unit. And when you attempt to do that you see intelligent people at work. So, that was my start and from then I got interested in the problem that existed in Australia in the eighties which was a lot of immigrant...a big immigrant population and some people whose English wasn’t, kind of, good enough, in a way, to help them or make them succeed in university. So, in a sense, again, the very same sort of issue: What are the things that somebody needs to have by way of resources for Aboriginal populations or, for that matter, lower class white Australians. What is it somebody needs in order to be successful in this community, which is now being picked up a lot on Jim Gee’s notion of “discourse” is exactly right. So those were my interests...and then, as I said this morning, I got interested in the issue of genre, which at that time, wasn’t being talked about; I wrote about genre in this book *Learning to Write* in 1978 which was, I found out afterwards, exactly at the same time as...who was the Frenchman who wrote *La Loi du Genre*. . . Derrida.

So genre, somehow was in the air, it was about, of course it was about because it was just about the time when the stability of genre definitively came into crisis, because social changes made it impossible for stable genres. That's broadly it. And then, I suppose, when I came to England first in 1991, I went there as a professor of English in relations to the schools and so my task was to think about English and what that might be, and what the function of English might be. And there I had two ideas: on the one hand, say, how should young people be, what kinds of resources should they have for them to be effective and able to, kind of, implement their own desires when they entered society. And that was partly the multimodal issue. But also, of course, there was a huge debate about literacy. And so I sometimes, occasionally, turn <unclear> Really I was strengthened by my Australian friends in the New London Group because of the work I had done previously in Australia.

Matt: So, you mentioned Halliday and you mentioned Chomsky, but who are the other folks that, sort of, formed and influenced your thinking as you developed, as you moved from transformational linguistics to, I guess, if you would consider yourself a literacy studies person now...multimodal social semiotics.

Gunther: Really I think Chomsky and Halliday were the two, for me, forming influences; I didn't, in fact, other than the notion of Chomsky's misconceived--in my own mind--notion of the innate linguistic capability but, nevertheless, his idea that children constantly reformulate hypotheses, that seemed to me fine and that, in a sense, was a response to his politics. And I think that is a really positive thing about Chomsky. But Halliday and Chomsky were it—you know, I mean, I obviously had come across other people but I hadn't read any anthropology of literacy; I hadn't read...I hadn't met Brian Street, I didn't know, sort of, how radical some approaches are....I was pretty ignorant...and I think because I've moved from disciplinary place to disciplinary place, I always appear ignorantly in a new place...<laughter>...and, in a way, it gives you a lot of freedom. You know, you're not, kind of, bound to things that people have thought for a long time, and you don't, you're not forced into attempting to knock somebody else down in order to, kind of, establish your own...you know, you just say something. So literacy, for me, that was it. I thought I knew what the thing was about; a very strong notion of the social being prior which is, of course, a Marxist notion for me. And that it is the social which forms the superstructural, a social and economic base which forms this superstructural. And, really, beyond that, I didn't think I needed much more and I still don't. <laughter> And, of course, which isn't to say that ethnographers have their way of looking, anthropologists have their way of looking and psychologists have their way of looking and that no one should, in any way, kind of dismiss them but that's probably what most do.

Tony: What about your life experiences and how they shaped your thinking as a scholar. Maybe if you could select one or two examples—obviously that's a broad question. I know this morning you talked about...

Gunther: Nothing too intimate!

<laughter>

Tony: . . .this morning you talked about your apprenticeship...

Gunther: yes.

Tony: ...and how that work informs your scholarship; any other significant life experiences that have impacted your thinking as a scholar?

Gunther: Somebody this morning, well, talked about different societies and different cultures and their incommensurability and having been dragged, unwillingly, to Australia as a sixteen year old, you know, as a sixteen year old, you tend to be interested, if you're heterosexual, in the other sex. So I left a girlfriend behind and, sort of, had to attempt to establish relations with the other sex as a sixteen year old and found out very quickly that there are quite specific cultural rules about that, social rules about that and that these are very specific and I didn't know them and. . . <laughter>

Josh: Very problematic!

Gunther: Very problematic. I was lucky because where I worked was somebody who was, an Australian man, who I thought was very odd, I was sixteen—who invited me to one of, a party and, in Australia, they had these sort of big moving sheds, sort of where you can ...local, kind of, meetings and dances and whatever...probably the same in America. And I went there and this was my first experience of this kind of event and in this big shed. . .with a keg, a keg of beer and then there were the women and in between was a big open space with nobody in it. And I saw that there were women over there, including some young women, so I strolled over there only to be kind of accosted about an hour later by a young man, a bit older than me, saying: "you just talked to my girlfriend" . . . <laughter>. . . and he invited me to come outside—so...<laughter>

Tony: Sounds like a movie...

Gunther: It's that kind of experience, learning language with learning a culture and there was the person this morning was asking about how do you get from this culture and its formulations it's kind of making its naming of its significant things to this culture it's different naming of different kinds of significant things. So becoming bi-cultural and bi-lingual was, for me, enormously important. It just simply made it beyond question that these things—that representation and the social--are utterly linked.

And then, I suppose, when I, later on, had gone back to England, well , I had gone to England, I hadn't been in. . . sort of becoming politically conscious in the early seventies when people at universities, in England anyway, had Marxist reading

groups and I'd sort of fill in for the Marxist reading group. And while they were talking about literature and the formation of literature and its relation to the social and economic background, I thought, "well actually this applies to language." And so with a friend, Bob Hodge, and with <unclear> Tony Trew began to develop means of looking with the linguistic means we have like transformation, particular kinds of transformations, like nominalization or, you know, the making of complex sentences, began to look at how power is actually expressed in linguistic form and why is it that English has the kind of possessive forms that it has which are unlike those in other languages; you know: "alienable/inalienable" position very differently. And we wrote a book called *Language is Ideology* which is usually misquoted as *Language and Ideology*, but we wanted to say that language is, in itself, the concretization over long, long periods of the social organization of particular communities. So, I think it's both those things: becoming politically conscious and having this experience of moving into a different culture with its different language and utter connectedness of these things that I think has never...so that's exactly what I do now. And so, when I now care about the motivated sign rather than the arbitrary sign it's simply that expression that—in fact, I wrote the first article on it in 1977 because it seemed, to me, implausible, the Sausurrean notion of the sign, not the Piercean notion of the sign in which the interpreting is, of course, something in which a person makes from their experience of an encounter with the sign.

Tony: Thank you.

Josh: We talked a little bit about this at lunch, but we'd just like to know a little bit about your experiences as a teacher...what classes you've taught—I know you are not teaching right now but—what classes you've taught in the past that you enjoyed teaching and why they were your favorites, why you enjoyed them.

Gunther: I never taught in school. And I'm not going to find it really a problem, I mean, my colleagues being in an institute which is a pedagogical institution. But I did teach from the age of twenty-six in universities. My first proper teaching job was as a lektor at a German university. One of my teachers in Australia if you want, after your graduate, I can get you a job as a lektor with my former professor in Germany, and I said "Yeah, I'd love to!" So here I was, because a lektor in Europe is somebody who is a native of, a native speaker of the language and teaches that at another place, so I was there as a native speaker of Australian, I suppose... <laughter> . . . teaching Australian.

That was my first teaching job and then I went to England; I had a job as the research fellow and a lecturer in acquired linguistics and, again, that was a challenge because it was exactly the time when the newer reel-to-reel tape recorder had become, sort of, popularly available and as every technology is always seen as, kind of, the answer to the problems that haven't been solved before, and so there used to be these language centers where, sort of, cubicles and cubicles of people come, somebody at the front—a very traditional classroom except with the, sort of, the trappings of contemporary technology—but they were hearing language and speaking language in order to gain *reading* competence. And I thought: "That's a bit

strange.” So the Hallidaean notion of the essentialist speech and writing that already, sort of, been bad for me a bit—so that was strange. But the other thing that was strange was, of course, if you speak English as your first language and then you learn German, what you encounter is an entirely different syntactic organization; German sentences are simply...I mean, a man called, I think, Miller, a psychologist talked about “left-branching” and “right-branching” <unclear> structures in languages, German is enormously left-branching: that is, it is an endless number of things before it comes to the resolution of a sentence which, of course, trains you in certain kinds of memory—you have to store these things up and make, kind of, hypotheses about the sentence is going to end, whereas in English, you have these, kind of, sequential, so it’s, kind of, a paratactic structure, sort of, simple entities, normally, that link to simple entities in a long sequence--I mean, that’s an oversimplification—whereas German is hypertactic. English right-branching, German left-branching: and I thought really one should find means of bridging, for an English speaker, the path to the very difficult structure of German, so that was interesting. But as somebody this morning said, I think Katie, it was a practical problem which led me to think about sentence complexity and its effects in language teaching and language learning. And then I moved to East Anglia and in East Anglia I taught all the other kinds of things like transformational grammar, Hallidaean linguistics but also psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and, for me, the real question was: how could one find a kind of a regular account or an account of the regularity of sociolinguistic variations. And the model at that time, one model was Jakobson’s feature analysis--that I never knew,--in any way feature analysis of sounds. And somebody said to me: “Is that what you’re going to do?” And I thought: “No, I’m not going to do that.” It seems to me the explanation for linguistic variation was Labov’s work on speech and <unclear>. The account seems to me to be power: if you use power as the key to understanding linguistic variety, and then that was the, really, then the beginning of the work with some of my colleagues around language and power with Tony Trew who was a philosopher of language, with Bob Hodge who was a literary person, sort of, developing a means of providing accounts of how language is shaped by the social but by power in the social. That was actually, for me, crucial and it hasn’t left me; I mean, people now say to me: “Oh yeah, but you’ve forgotten about politics and you don’t address that. Well, I haven’t forgotten about it—for me, it’s sort of, it’s kind of a rock, rock bottom, base, kind of, assumption that power shapes action and interaction. So that would be my. . .ok?”

Tony: Ok. If I can ask a question just for clarification, when are referring to power, are you referring back to that idea of institutional power that you refer to in Foucault’s sense of discourse shaping the relations, shaping relationships and the social?

Gunther: Well, power, I think, even Foucault, exists not only in hierarchical organizations but also horizontally. Or exists horizontally when it, sort of, momentarily skews horizontally in the direction of the vertical, but... So it would be power from bottom up, in the sense of a refusal of some kind; a refusal to occupy the position which is coded for you in a genre, or a refusal to, kind of, carry out a simple

task which you could, of course, but, you know, you won't. So, power actually working in all directions and then my serious question this morning and, of course then a case as a means to kind of explore that whereas, say, Foucault assumed that power is at the bottom of social organization, Habermas had assumed or, at least, ideally proposed, that the absence of power should be taken as the basis for social organization and I'm on the side of Foucault. It's interesting that roughly contemporaries, one growing up in France under German occupation, one growing up in Germany with the German oppressors of Europe, and their response to the exercise and the effects of power, <laughs> them being exactly opposite.

Matt: Their publics look much different . . .

Gunther: yes, yes, exactly.

Matt: . . .and because of it they, sort of, reflect... project and reflect these very different publics. So the next question is . . . on a totally different topic. <laughter> And we usually ask it as: what's on your nightstand? Meaning what do you read for fun, or what do you read in your free time, what do you read before you go to bed, that sort of thing.

Gunther: Well, it's lots of things; I mean, I, sometimes I get a bit of a, somebody gives me a book and then I read all the things that person has written; some years ago there was W.G. Sebald who is a . . .that I early came across him; a German émigré, in fact, he and I were, I didn't know when I came across him as a novelist, he and I were, I knew him at East Anglia, we were contemporaries but I didn't know anything about him as a writer. So, that and, of course the shared experience of how, born, in my case, in the war, the beginning of the war, in his case, a little bit later--he was four or five years younger than I--how do you make sense of the German. . .well, the madness that overcame Germany. I've read Gunther Grass and, in fact, I meant to quote a little bit from one of his recent books called *Peeling the Onion* in terms of framing. This is sort of a—I'm remain interested in that because I can't write literary stuff. <laughter> I sort of have a wish that I could. And at the moment I'm reading a German sociologist in German, a very, very interesting man called Neikt [unclear] who is not known in English at all...

Matt: So it sounds like your free time reading tends towards German—it's not J.K Rowling or Graham Greene or well-known British or Australian writers. . .

Gunther: Sebald was suggested to me by my daughter--in English--she bought me the English version of *Rings of Saturn*. And, after that, I then read all of his stuff in English; he was fortunate having a very good translator; Gunther Grass isn't. But then, I think you're right: that at the moment I'm sort of wishing because Anglo-Saxon thinking has been more influenced by French theory than by German theory. And I think it's not—of course they're very different—but I think there is a lot in German theorizing which is really interesting...so I wish I kind of had done that before. But also, at the moment, I'm reading a book by the man who is more known

for his. . . the name escapes me...the person who talks about art. . .Gombrich...he's written a little book on the history of the world. It's a big book on the history of the world but it's written for children. And it's a fantastically, sort of, nice book. And it's not Rowling, because nothing is alright when she's. . .she's very close to Dan Brown. <laughter> But in terms of success and in terms of skill--or the absence of it. <laughter>

Matt: What was the name of the person who wrote that?

Gunther: Gombrich. Who's known for his writings on art. *Art and Illusion*, I think, is one of his famous books. But here he wrote at the age of twenty-seven and still in Vienna somebody asked him—he didn't have any money—to write a book on the history of the world for children and he did and it's just been republished. And it's a very simply, sort of, and thoughtful—a *lovely* book. So I read, kind of, a bit like that.

<pause>

Tony: Sorry, we listed our names with each question and it fell on me and I wasn't ready. <laughter> But the next question is, sort of, what you would, what you think some of the most important questions for students or scholars today to be thinking about. Our program is Rhetoric and Composition or Writing. What are the most important questions that our field could or should be considering?

Gunther: Well, I think it is the kind of ...I hate the prefix "re" and I hate the attitude "new"... <laughter>

Matt: So we've got literacy, reading, ok....

Gunther: Because everything is now new : somebody or other is "re-thinking", "re-making" blah. . .But multimodality opens a door to considering again, all range of issues like the one I mentioned this morning, recognition of passages or....the normal, the everyday normal actions of humans in their interactions, for instance, about assessment...it really opens it....So that seems, to me, important: it opens a different perspective on writing because writing will now have to have a say. I'll be happy with whatever linguistics has given us of various forms as a description of the resource that we've dealing with. And also the place of writing; I mean, I take Kristie's point this morning—of course, there's always been multimodal representation but the dominant ideologies have been that writing is central. Eco said in one of his more recent books that it's capable of expressing everything that is human and rational and I think it ain't. <laughter>

Gunther: And a complete re-assessment of the notion language—I think there is a huge problem with the notion of language, and also it is meant for abuses. So, people who sign, a community of signing people, have a system which is entirely different to speech or writing; of course, there has been an enormous amount of work on that

now—there wasn't thirty years ago. But what does one say when one says language is the <unclear> of all human rationality. Does one say that signing is exactly like what we understand about language or that we do not care about it? Or, when Chomsky says there is an innate language capacity, does he mean that there's an innate capacity to make signs? And those things actually, kind of, change how...things about who we are, what we are and what we do. So that, for me, in my little area, is the big question. So the book I'm writing at the moment—well, I haven't started on writing—is a book...I thought nobody would, kind of, take me seriously, but it's a book called *Language*. And, of course there's <unclear> before him....a kind of, German-American...when you get old the names go, but it will come to me in a moment. . .also *Language*, I mean, the greats—how dare you write a book called “Language”! So it has a subtitle called “The Social-Semiotic Approach” to something or other, meaning. Because I do think that linguistics has come, language has, kind of, limited our understanding of what language is. And so I'd like to say how would this semiotic approach change that but that's, kind of, a local, domestic undertaking.

Josh: OK, well, this one is, sort of, a continuation of that question. Where do you see the field of, again, literacy studies, rhetoric and composition going from here?

Gunther: Well I think that—I have to have a few minutes because I'm going to change my presentation for this afternoon...But, at the moment, one of the things I'm involved in is the semiotics of the operating theatre. In the operating theatre, you see people who don't talk much but do a lot. And it raises the whole question of what is called tacit knowledge or implicit knowledge but isn't. It must be absolutely explicit, otherwise, every operation would end in disaster. Because it's a cooperative practice of a team of people but also...so, what it means is how do we begin to understand meaning-making, forms of knowing, the implementation or the sensation of forms of knowing beyond, beyond, say, the spoken and the written or the written alone. So, apart from the, kind of, you know, we must look at each, I think we also need to understand a whole range of ways in which humans instantiate knowledge. One of my friends and, not colleagues but, we, sort of, work a bit together, talks a lot about mimesis as a means of learning and how can we, kind of, use, extend the notion of mimesis to understand why it is that maybe, I don't know, to be precisely <unclear> <laughter> comes by mimetic, you know, engagement with the world and the transforming and the shaping of one's identity. So that's, for me, is the field.

And, well, people talk about visual rhetoric; there's no reason why the notion of rhetoric has, sort of, a political, an attempt to understand the politics of interaction should be confined to things which are inscribed on surfaces. So, and I think that would be interesting for people in . . . I mean, when a surgical team is assembled they're also engaged in compositional processes or practices or representation practices. And when the patient is, kind of, stitched up again. . .<laughter>. . . then, something has been performed and done...well, notions of performance, then, for instance, of course, you probably use them in the work you do here. So, that, sort of, expanding that field and then seeing, when you've done that, after five hundred

years. . .<laughter>. . .or really to stuff that twenty or thirty, that something else will have emerged and probably something richer, more nuanced, and more able to appreciate all sorts of things. When I came a furrier, it was said by the, you know, the older, kind of, furriers in the workshop that a good furrier is born not made. <laughter> And then I heard the same thing in Australia when I was trying to establish a degree in journalism we had to get people from the profession in to validate our degree and they said “good journalism are born not made”; and then with the surgeons, it’s a fact: “good surgeons are born, not made”. . . <laughter>. . . as, of course, are writers. <laughter> So, undoing all that, sort of, stupidity, and then, kind of, attempting to understand what it is that makes a good writer or the good surgeon, because there are still differences. But there are courses that teach people writer and there are, kind of, hospitals where you are taught to become surgeons. So undoing all that, sort of, covering over unrecognized knowing. Undoing that.

Josh: A tall order. <laughter> Well, does any one else have any more questions?

Matt: I mean, I’ve got plenty, but we we’re...we won’t record the answers to them.

Josh: I think we’re out of time.

Matt: So thank you. . .

Josh: Thank you very much.

Gunther: Thanks for taking that care and your time.

Josh: Oh, our pleasure, our pleasure.

Tony: No problem.

Josh: Thank you very much.

Tony: Thank you, again.

Matt: So, I mean, I do have a question. . .

Josh: As do I. . .