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# Orality

Like most technical terms, *orality* has taken on a specific sense in linguistic anthropology through the way it is contrasted with something else—in this case with literacy. Structural linguistics asserts the primacy of spoken language over written, and has often treated the latter as merely parasitic on the former. This view has a certain plausibility with respect to alphabetic or syllabic writing, where we can regard each letter or character as the (more-or-less accurate) representation of a given sound. It is less plausible with respect to ideographic scripts such as the Chinese, and even less so with respect to gestural systems such as American Sign Language. For these do not simply transpose spoken language into a different medium, but instead take advantage of their realization in three-dimensional space, allowing for the building up in signed discourse of a kind of "random access memory" whereby the characters or objects referred to in an ongoing narrative can be literally "placed" at various points within the signer's hand-reach, momentarily left aside as she introduces new ones with different placement, and then taken up again by redirecting her gaze and/or hands toward the place associated with the earlier referent. This is functionally analogous to the anaphoric or "reference tracking" systems of spoken language, but by no means a mere transposition of any of them.

This example shows how the physical properties of a communicative medium figure crucially in establishing potentials and limits on what can be done with it. This has long been understood to be true of alphabetic writing, but it wasn't until more recently that the oral-aural (mouth-to-ear) channel came to be thought about as a medium in its own right, with equally fateful consequences for the peoples and cultures that were identified with it. This was done by various theorists more or less independently in several branches of the human sciences, but for linguistic anthropology one of the most important has been Milman Parry, who in the 1930s argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer were orally composed. Drawing upon their study of these and formally similar epics still being performed by bards in

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Yugoslavia, Parry and Lord showed how the process of oral composition was facilitated by the use of regular metrical lines and what they called formulae—fixed wordings each of which was regularly employed under the same metrical conditions.

Cross-cultural studies of verbal art have been strongly influenced by this work, which treats the form of Homeric and south-Slavic texts as exemplary of oral epic or even oral poetry in general, and oral composition as a special process that eventuates in formally similar textual products wherever it is used. Theorists such as Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong took this even further. For example, Ong posits a universal category of "primary orality," which he characterizes as additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant or copious, agonistically toned, and empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced. Drawing on the psychological studies of Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky, Ong sees these characteristics not just as features of language or language use, but as aspects of a distinct mode of consciousness shared by "oral" peoples everywhere. In a somewhat more tempered, but equally dichotomizing, vein, anthropologist Jack Goody has argued that the differences between forms of thought that Claude Lévi-Strauss had attributed to "hot" vs. "cold" societies can be better understood as consequences of literacy vs. orality, respectively.

More recently there have been a number of case studies by anthropologists who have argued that the introduction of literacy does not have a single, cross-culturally uniform set of consequences, but that these depend very much upon the nature of the sociocultural setting into which it is introduced. A project for linguistic anthropologists in the New Millennium is a parallel critique of the dichotomously related notion of orality as a cross-culturally uniform phenomenon. My sign language example already shows that the orality-literacy dichotomy is not exhaustive; other modes of inscription are possible. And, as shown in different ways by both Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin, many of the features that we associate most closely with writing—its iterability, detachability from its source, etc.—pertain to speech as well. Furthermore, in their actual contexts of use, no single channel of communication or mode of inscription is ever self-sufficient. Each is deployed within an overall economy of inscriptive and interpretive practices that are shared within a given social field. Thus, for example, even in the most "literate" of societies, no book is ever written or read except in relation to an extended series of oral speech acts: those through which literacy is taught, authors socialized, readers' ears attuned, books bought and sold, etc. And even in supposedly "oral" societies, the oral-aural channel is never the only one used. Among central Australian Aborigines for example, widows were prohibited from speaking for many years after their husband's death and instead used a highly developed form of sign language. And in the same communities, the most highly valued narratives, those that tell of the creation of the world by ancestral beings, are, *pace* Ong, neither formulaic nor copious, but prosaic and extremely condensed in the telling. This can be related to the fact that the main form in which the creation stories are thought to be preserved is not human speech, but *the landscape itself*

("There," people say, pointing to a rock formation, "*That's* the story"). Of course this topographic form of inscription could not be read without the support of speech, any more than could the book in my previous example. But the role of speech here is avowedly exegetical rather than self-sufficient: the landscape is read primarily by *walking over it*, "following up" the actions of the creator figures.

From such examples we can see that it is misleading to use the term *orality* in reference to an entire society, culture, or communicative regime. This is not to deny the importance of differences among the various media used in such a regime. Rather, the point of my recommended project (already begun by Ruth Finnegan) is to elucidate the wide range of ways in which the various media are brought into interaction with each other in locally specific constellations of communicative practices.

(See also *deaf, gesture, iconicity, improvisation, indexicality, literacy, meter, narrative, oratory, signing, voice, writing*)

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