

Orality and Oral Cultures

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- **Gutenberg Parenthesis**
 - HS3.304
 - Spring 2023

Some Definitions

- Orality
 - Sum total of oral communications
 - The state of being oral
- Oral : Consisting of, or using, Speech
- Oral Cultures
 - Societies where the primary mode of communication is Oral
 - Even if text exists it is confined to niche work, or people
 - Society will survive, and even thrive, without text
- Oral Traditions
 - Mediums through which information and knowledge is passed over time, and generations, in the absence of script and text

Some Definitions

- Primary Orality
 - How societies communicate and store information and knowledge when they have no recourse to script and text
- Secondary Orality
 - Oral Cultures with the technology of script
 - Orality which has recourse to script
 - Orality which is modified by textual traditions

Some Definitions

- Language
 - System of arbitrary oral and aural signs, (gestures), and written symbols to communicate thoughts across a large number of people
- Script
 - Visual symbols engraved on a medium to represent language sounds
- Orthography
 - Correct system of writing; spellings, sequence of words, usage...
- Chirography
 - Drawing the symbols which represent letters
- Grapholect
 - Established and standardised written language
- Dialect
 - Spoken language differing from standard Grapholect

An Oral Species

- Homo Sapiens have been in existence for 50,000 years
 - Domestication of fire
 - Domestication of animals and plants
 - Shift from pastoral to agricultural societies
 - Shift from nomadic to settled (urban?) life
- Earliest scripts have been in existence for 5,000 years
 - Sumeria, Egypt, China, Mesoamerica
 - Proto-language

Oral Character of Languages

- Humans communicate using all senses
- “Articulated Sound” remains paramount
 - “Aural Image”
- Language is -- foundationally -- spoken and heard
 - “...of the tens of thousands of languages spoken in all human history, only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature.”
 - “...how many languages have disappeared or been transmuted into other languages before writing came along.”
 - “The basic orality of languages is permanent”
- “Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality”.
 - Is that really true?
 - Computer Languages

Orality in Linguistic Theory

- Ferdinand de Saussure
 - Language is a system of Signs
 - Signs made of two parts (binaries)
 - Signifier : Acoustic Image (The sound which plays in your head)
 - Signified : The Thing, Concept that the signifier points to...
- Grammar
 - Rules drawn from patterns of speech
 - Should not impede speech
 - Grammar comes after speech

Can We *Study*?

- “People in primary oral cultures learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not ‘study’”.
- “They learn by apprenticeship – hunting with experienced hunters – by discipleship, ... by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs, and ways of combining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection...”
- “...abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading.”

No Literature!

- Contemporary world is “pre-emptively” literate
 - We cannot think of a word without soon enough visualising it as text
- “Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever”
- “...a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people... without subtly but irremediably reducing these somehow to variants of writing”
- “Putting the Car before the Horse” example
- Impossible to talk of “Literature” which pre-supposes “literacy”

Oral Memory

- Needs Mnemonic aids
 - Meter, Rhyme
 - Formula
 - Physical Artefacts
- Limited by human ability to remember
- Expanded by associative / corporate systems to remember together
- No lasting record of laws, customs, events
- Variations are default
- Encourages personal, face-to-face communications

Homer

- Semi-Mythical poet from ancient Greece who composed
 - Iliad : Epic Poem about the Trojan War
 - Odyssey: Epic Poem about the return of Odysseus after the Trojan War
- Both 24 “books”
- Composed in the Dactylic Hexameter
 - Six pairs of long and short syllables
- Detailed descriptions of people, situations, geography, emotions, actions
- Well structured, consistent characterisation : Genius!
- Written down in 7th century BCE

Milman Parry's Discovery

- “...virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition”
- Choice of words and word-forms depended on the shape of the hexameter line
 - “...Homeric epithets used for wine are all metrically different and that the use of a given epithet was determined not by its precise meaning so much as by the metrical needs of the passage”.
- Oral poets had an abundant repertoire of words and word-forms from which they stitched together their verses
- Homer was repeating formula after formula, “stitched together pre-fabricated parts”
- “Instead of a creator, you had an assembly-line worker”

Formulaic

- Study of oral compositions from medieval and early modern Africa, ancient China, medieval Arab cultures showed a similar prevalence of formulas : prefabricated parts
- “Standardised formulas were grouped around equally standardised themes”
- Epic poetry, Oral traditions all had the same structure
- “In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration”.

Plato Banishes Homer

- Plato (3rd – 4th C BCE) wanted to banish poets from his ideal Republic
 - Represent irrationality and lacks rigour
- Three centuries after the invention of the Greek alphabets
- Took that much time to “interiorize alphabetical literacy”
- New technology to store knowledge was not mnemonic formulas but...
- Written text
 - Allowed the development of abstract, analytical, original thought
- “The importance of ancient Greek civilisation to all the world was beginning to show in an entirely new light: it marked the point in human history when deeply interiorised alphabetic literacy clashed head-on with orality”.

Oral Cultures

- Limits how big society can be
 - Number of members
 - Territorial Expanse
- Social organisation
 - Fluid
 - Decentralised
 - Group consensus rather than single leader
- Flexibility to adapt and change over time
 - Dependant on collective memory