

## TOWARDS A LINGUISTIC DEFINITION OF ORALITY

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### **Introduction**

The term **orality** only exists, for purposes of scientific interest at least, in so far as it refers to and evokes a particular continuum <sup>1</sup>: orality-literacy. I am concerned, in this article, with highlighting the problematic nature of only the first pole of this continuum. Literacy, however, poses problems of its own, and the question **What is writing?** has no simple answer. Moreover, depending on one's definition of the latter, even the (generally accepted) chronological relation suggested by the continuum (orality was first, then came literacy) can be a matter of dispute. I shall consider orality in relation to a writing conceived of in only its, to us, most obvious form, namely **phonetic writing**: visible marks that are intended to represent specific sounds of a specific language. This approach will quite obviously also place my argument within the framework of the above-mentioned chronology.

### **1. Sorting out Orality from Oral Literature**

If one were to distinguish between, on the one hand, **literacy** as the ability to write, and on the other, **literature** as a particular **application** of that ability (whether it be 'cultural', 'artistic' or 'creative'), then there should be no logical reason why an analogous distinction could not be drawn between **orality** and **oral literature**. It turns out, however, that the relation between **oral literature** and **orality** is far from one of application to ability, if, indeed, any distinction is drawn between the two terms at all. The scientific inquiry into oral forms of linguistic expression as distinguished from the written (often referred to as *Orality-Literacy Studies* <sup>2</sup>) has generally failed to provide a clear theoretical distinction between the two terms. In this respect the following two factors might be worth considering:

- i. Studies in orality tend to concentrate on those societies or languages in which literacy has been a relatively belated and not particularly widespread phenomenon; the "oral" amounts, in fact, to the 'pre-literate'. As such the dichotomy oral:written (orality:literacy) takes on a particular anthropological significance; it becomes a criterion by which to evaluate perceived differences between certain societies and peoples. This case is strongly put by Jack Goody, who regards other dichotomies of

this nature (for example the logical:pre-logical and domesticated:savage respectively devised by the anthropologists Levy-Bruhl and Levi-Strauss), as examples of '(European) ethnocentric binarism'. (Goody, 1977:8). The oral:literate dichotomy, indicative as it is of a **material change** in the system of human communication and human interaction generally, provides a far more specific criterion for differentiating between different types of societies. But what is orality within this anthropological dichotomy? We can conclude, in fact, that the term ends up by referring less to the context of speaking *per se*, than to the context of speaking in the (more or less) complete **absence of writing**. Orality is therefore viewed in terms of what it is not; it is given a distinctly negative definition.

- ii. We may agree, based on the above, that orality pertains generally to linguistic expression in so far as the latter has remained relatively uninfluenced by literacy. But that will only be partly correct, for the study of orality deals specifically, not so much with speaking in its everyday sense, but, in fact, with particular culturally defined forms of speaking. As such, orality studies are about oral genres: the praise-poem, proverb, folktale, epic, burial chant etc. In this respect it may be enlightening to briefly refer to the origins of what Walter Ong calls the 'new understanding' of orality: the demonstration by Milman Parry in 1928 that the distinctive features of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for so long seen as the literary (therefore literate) embodiment of classical Western culture, were, in fact, 'due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition'. (Ong, 1982:21). The awakening to the contrast between the oral and the written is therefore credited, not to linguistics, but to the field of literary studies. Whatever areas of research may have come to the fore within the field of Orality-Literacy <sup>3</sup>, the link between orality studies and literary studies remains as strong as ever. Researchers into the oral have indulged in the study of oral genres in much the same way as students of literature may choose to focus on the novel, the short story or the Shakespearian sonnet. In other words, the study of orality generally does for the oral what the study of literature does for the written.
- iii. Although extensively used (and with some justification no doubt, given the interaction between studies of orality and literature), the term *oral literature* is at best a somewhat vague metaphor for oral linguistic creations, at worst a contradiction in terms. To describe the products of oral culture as literature is, according to Walter

Ong, akin to describing a horse as a 'wheelless automobile'. (Ibid:12). (He suggests, instead, the terms 'oral texts' or even, 'voicings').

Within an anthropological perspective orality amounts to non-literacy, within a literary context it becomes oral literature. Research in Orality-Literacy Studies has in fact tended to fall within the broad framework of these two perspectives. The study of orality as pre-literacy has led researchers to circumscribe in great detail what they perceive to be differences between the oral and literate 'mindset' <sup>4</sup>, while, veering towards the oral as genre, they have documented peculiarities of oral themes, expression and style. Of course, the 'anthropological' and 'literary' perspectives do overlap: while features of an oral production as genre are analysed and explained in the light of peculiarly oral prerequisites (for example the need to have a metric pattern that facilitates memory recall, or - given that the oral is always performed - the need to make a certain impression upon the audience), researchers may also, on the strength of these features, make certain inferences regarding the mentality of the people concerned. This link between style and thought process is emphasised by Ong: '(h)eavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in chirographic cultures (i.e. as an aid to memory), but in doing so they of course determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized'. (Ibid:36. My emphasis). This kind of differentiation between an oral and a literate culture is on the whole, it must be stressed, characterized by a high degree of circumspection. In an article on the highly reflective attitude of the Limba people of Sierra Leone towards their own language, Ruth Finnegan, for one, strongly criticizes any simplistic differentiation between cultures merely on the basis of literacy:non-literacy: '... the distinction commonly made between literate and non-literate societies may not be as clear-cut as is often assumed; and ... some of the specific characteristics of at least one non-literate society (the Limba) may not be as wholly attributable to the fact of their non-literacy as it might seem at first'. (Finnegan, 1988:58).

## 2. Orality as Language

Can there be more to orality than non-literacy/oral literature? The question may be asked, of course, given the depth and variety of research into the oral, whether this implied redefinition of orality is at all necessary. In considering the need for a more proper linguistic definition

of orality, the most salient characteristic of the spoken word in relation to the written, namely **sound**, might be an obvious place to start. We shall also have to briefly consider the extent to which such a perspective on the oral might actually contradict commonly held theoretical perspectives on language.

### 2.1. Orality as Sound

Ong (1982:71-4 as well as 1967:111-38) goes into a detailed analysis of the peculiarity of sound or, more precisely, of our **sense** of sound as compared to the other senses (in particular that of vision). I shall here consider only the two main characteristics he mentions.

Sound, to the extent that it is perceived in hearing, exists only as it vanishes; it is essentially evanescent. Its movement (or flow), unlike that of vision, cannot be arrested: '(v)ision can register motion, but it can also register immobility. ... There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound'. (Ong, 1982:32). Sound intercepted in its passage through time is, immediately and irrevocably, **silence**. This means that the auditory perception of sound, more strongly than other kinds of sensory perception (and significantly more strongly than vision, the sense of literacy), evokes the **here and now**, unmediated physical reality. The evanescence of sound also links it with **energy**; one cannot apprehend sound other than in its very process of production. Hence, the association of sound with **power**, aptly illustrated in the following example related by Ong (ibid:32): '(a) hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on'.

In spite of its fleetingness sound reveals objects in ways other sensory phenomena cannot: **from the inside**. The sound made by a container when one knocks against it tells us, for example, whether the container is empty or full. In order for us to receive the same information from any of the other senses, we will have to first open the container. Hearing is the only sense capable of '(registering) interiority without violating it'. (Ibid:71). Sound, in other words, reveals interiority **as such**. Light, by contrast, is always perceived as a surface, an exterior, even when it is supposed to show up what is inside something.

Sound is also 'interior' in a further sense. Apart from expressing that which is inside, it also situates the hearer of the sound at the center of what is being heard. Whereas vision comes to us only from the direction in which the eyes are turned, sound is simultaneously perceived from all around us. Ong refers to this quality as the 'centering effect' of sound; it

establishes the perceiver 'at a kind of core of sensation and existence'; he is immersed in his sensory (auditory) perception to a degree unequalled in any of the other human senses. Coming from all directions at the same time, sound is, consequently, always perceived as a totality, as a whole. This once again is in strong contrast to vision which, through operating only in a given line of sight, breaks the visual world into parts. Vision is, therefore, 'the dissecting sense', hearing, 'the unifying sense'. (Ibid:72). Light makes things distinct, moves them apart; sound brings things together, harmonises them.

## 2.2. Sound as 'Gesture'

The above reflections on the nature of sound can be given a further dimension in the light of Marcel Jousse's idea of 'laryngo-buccal gesticulation': sound (the production of sound) as gesture. Sound in relation to power and interiority (dealt with above) becomes, in Jousse's conception, sound in relation to nothing less than the cognitive process itself; the production of sound in humans is 'gesticulation of consciousness'. (Jousse, 1990:43).

What is consciousness? Jousse puts it as follows: '(o)ur intelligence has only one mode of action. Whatever fact it apprehends, it is always in the domain of experience ... that it finds it. I cannot know what it means to think, feel or want if I no longer experience (or revivify) in myself thought, emotion or volition'. (Ibid:44).

The idea of 'experiencing thought', if one regards thought as already being at a remove from experience, may well seem contradictory. But the basic point made by Jousse is clear enough: there is no consciousness that is not rooted in experience. And this experience is always concrete; it is the very way in which the physical reality impacts upon us through our senses. To be conscious is therefore nothing less than the ability to re-experience (or 'revivify') the 'concrete fact' of a particular experience. Before it manifests itself as intellectual, consciousness is something fundamentally physical.

Let us now turn to Jousse's notion of gesture (gesticulation). All experience (as related via sensory perception) is physically harnessed by the body. This takes place as a muscular reaction, a 'gesticulation'. As such, the sensual impact of perceived phenomena is 'mimed by our muscles'. (Ibid:44). The production of sound by means of our vocal ('laryngo-buccal') organs represents an act of consciousness in so far as the very process of muscular contraction it involves constitutes a reminder ('revivification') of original experience.

### 2.3. Sound as Language?

If we could devise a theory of language incorporating the **distinctiveness of the sense of sound in relation to the other senses** (a distinctiveness which, in an environment where the production of sound is the **only** means of linguistic expression, would be vital to the existence of language itself), we would, of course, arrive at a linguistic definition of orality. I do not want to reflect here on the **possibility** of such a definition being formulated. But the **theoretical need** for it can be made apparent in the face of some of the most prominent concepts of modern linguistic theory, at least as formulated by the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure.

Not all sounds that emanate from the vocal canal constitute speech. There can only be speech when, in Saussure's words, '(the) sound, a complex acoustical-vocal unit, combines ... with an **idea** to form a complex physiological-psychological unit'. (Saussure, 1959:8. My italics). Speech sees the sound become **sign**: the functional sound unit or phoneme combines with other units of the same order to form an 'acoustic image' or **signifier**, which serves to express the **idea** referred to above (the concept or **signified**). This leads us to the well-known definition of the sign as the union of 'a concept and a sound-image'. (Ibid, p.8).

Seeing the signified of the sound-image as something purely psychological is, for Saussure, a methodological choice: it holds the pragmatic advantage of accounting for the fact that language may be used to talk about things that either never existed or would be impossible to identify. (Baron, 1981:20). (If one adopts Jousse's point of view one may argue, of course, that the psychological concept is rooted in experience anyway). But the notion of the sound-image and signified belonging to two entirely different realms (the physiological as opposed to the psychological) also underlies a Saussurian concept which, to us, concerned as we are with the distinctiveness of sound, is crucial: the **arbitrariness** of the linguistic sign. This arbitrariness is, for Saussure, evidenced by the fact that different languages use different sound-images for what may be considered as essentially the same signified. In fact, the very existence of different languages may be seen as an illustration of this principle. (Saussure, 1959:67-8).

It is appropriate, at this point, to re-examine Jousse's idea of 'gesticulation as consciousness'. In the context of 'laryngo-buccal' (vocal) sound as language, he refers, in fact, to gesticulation as **semiological** gesticulation: the gesture is itself a sign, it carries a specific meaning or, for that matter, signified. But the signified, in this case, can never be

psychological to the same extent as the one described by Saussure. Neither can the relation between the sound-image and signified be totally arbitrary.

We have already seen how vocal gesticulation as such implies the 'recapture' within the body of a particular sensual experience. Jousse (1990:46) concedes that the gesture as sign might well, under the influence of what he terms our 'disassociating' (highly visual, highly literate?) civilisation, lose this link with the concrete. The result is a language with a 'dissicated abstract vocabulary', words (sound-images) whose referents are entirely psychological. Jousse refers, however, to numerous examples of languages (notably Hebrew, Amharic and Chinese) in which (or, more precisely, in whose linguistic signs) '... the original union of sensation and idea has always remained, (where) neither of the two terms has ousted the other, ... (where) the process of idealisation, in a word, has never been completed'. (Ibid:48). In Hebrew, for example, anger is expressed 'by a host of picturesque expressions, all of which are borrowed from physiological traits. On one occasion the metaphor will be taken from the rapid animated breathing that accompanies passion ...; on another from heat ..., or from boiling ...; on one occasion from the actions of loudly snapping something ...; on another from quivering ...'. (Ibid:47).

Significantly, the examples quoted by Jousse are from communities where literacy (in our sense of phonetic writing) has been interiorised on a relatively small scale. On the strength of observations such as these, we may deduce the following:

- i. in a language primarily characterised by orality, i.e. where the sign has no support other than sound and is strongly evocative of physical experience, the 'two-sided' definition of the linguistic sign is inadequate.
- ii. the definition of the linguistic sign as the arbitrary union of sound-image and (psychological) concept is the result of a particular linguistic experience in a particular type of society.

These reflections may lead us, finally, to concur with Jacques Derrida, who sees the definition of the linguistic sign as actually excluding the oral: '... the exteriority<sup>5</sup> of the signifier is the general exteriority of writing ... (T)here is no linguistic sign before writing'. (Derrida, 1967:26).

#### 2.4. 'Criteria' for Orality

It is tempting to summarise the above arguments by advancing possible standards by which orality could be distinguished from literacy. The two most obvious ones would be:

- i. **sound.** Of course, all languages make use of sound. But in some languages particular sounds may be more evocative of a particular meaning (signified) than in others. This criterion will obviously need to be developed more fully in the light of concrete linguistic data. Suffice it to say that it should extend far beyond an analysis of so-called **onomatopoeic** use of language.
- ii. **metaphor.** The vocabulary of all languages is, to some extent, metaphoric. But some languages may be more metaphoric than others, at least from within a purely synchronic perspective. Also, the imagery evoked in a particular metaphor may be more pertinent to the actual experience of members of one linguistic community than in another. The sound or rhythmic pattern of a metaphor may well provide important clues in this regard.

The criteria in question here probably apply more readily (and more easily) across linguistic boundaries. It needs to be stressed, however, that there is no reason why they could not also be applied **within** a particular language, as for example between different socio-linguistic or regional dialects. These variations are indeed of crucial importance when dealing with the oral, given the generally weaker degree of standardisation in oral language than in the written.

#### 3. Conclusion

If our 'linguistic' approach to orality has failed to provide us with a watertight definition of the latter, we may at least make certain inferences as to what it should dictate orality is not: orality does not necessarily coincide with speaking; something is not oral merely because it has not been written down. By the same token, a linguistic production should not be regarded as a manifestation of literacy as a result of the mere fact that it has been written, even if this writing amounts to an actual composition. The crucial factor in distinguishing between orality and literacy lies in **certain characteristics of the language used**. An oral conception of language may well, at times, manifest itself as writing, just as a highly literate conception of language may be put across orally.



Finally, all languages are primarily oral, but can it be said that some languages are more oral than others? Many may find this assertion to be potentially dangerous. As Goody (1977:8) reminds us: '(h)uman languages appear to display few differences in their potentiality for adaption to development'. Indeed, the most important lessons of modern linguistics has probably been that of the complexity of all languages, and their equal capacity to express that which their users need to have expressed. It also cannot be said that one language is more 'logical' than another: '... languages are not instruments for discovering the truth. For individuals as for societies, they constitute available resources of expression'. (Hagège, 1985:145. My translation).

These considerations notwithstanding, we should be careful that our reluctance to regard orality (in a linguistic sense) as more characteristic of one language than another, does not just reflect our own prejudice against an orality which we persist in regarding as non-literacy, with the inevitable connotations of 'primitiveness' and lack of development we associate with the latter. Of the various approaches to orality, the linguistic is, in my view, best equipped to give account of orality as a positive content. If we heed Finnegan's warning and avoid seeing differences of expression as obvious differences of mentality<sup>6</sup>, orality as a linguistic concept (rather than anthropological or literary), may yet provide the study of the oral with its most distinct and meaningful perspective.

### Notes

1. 'Continuum' in the sense of the link between phonetic writing and the speech on which it is based.
2. The influence of Walter Ong has been considerable in this regard, given the particular prominence he lends to the term *Orality-Literacy*.
3. In conclusion to his *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Ong mentions, amongst others, the fields of literary history, literary theory, philosophy, biblical studies, studies of human consciousness (what I have termed 'anthropological') as well as the media.
4. Ong lists the following characteristics of what he calls 'orally based thought and expression': '(a)dditive rather than subordinative', 'aggregative rather than analytic', 'redundant or copious', 'conservative or traditionalist', 'close to the human lifeworld', 'agonistically toned', 'empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced', 'homeostatic', 'situational rather than abstract'. (1982:67-88).

5. "Exteriority" in the sense of form. In the most common Saussurian definition of language (language as 'system of signs'), the sign is conceived of as a purely abstract or formal entity, lacking in specific content (substance) and existing merely to the extent of its difference (opposition) relative to the other signs in the system.
6. This is not to say that some of the grammatical differences between languages highlighted by proponents of the 'relativist' theory (which emphasises the influence of grammatical structure on conceptual framework), might not be of relevance to an orality-literacy perspective - at least in so far as they may reveal certain structures to be suggestive of a 'concreteness of experience' as explained by Jousse.

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