Orality and Literacy: A Comparative and Historical Perspective

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The Differences Between Orality and Literacy: The Classic View

What is the relationship between writing and orality? A now classic distinction suggests that oral statements are fluid and subject to interpretation, while textual statements are fixed (Ricoeur 1971:531). Because of these differences in orality and literacy, Thus, the spread of written texts is commonly assumed to have widespread consequences because it changed how humans processed, authenticated, and legitimated information (Clanchy [1979] 1993:3; Goody 1986; Ong 1980:199; Zaret 2000:10; review in Reder and Davila 2005:170–171). Because writing imparts permanence, written words can be transmitted through space and time in permanent and unchanging form (review in Finnegan 1988:17). This ease of communication over space helps to create and integrate large states and empires, as well as modern forms of governance such as passports, prescriptions, and driving licenses (review in Finnegan 1988:17–18). Permanence over distance, in particular, also creates an independent and withdrawn author and abstract meditation separated from the pressures of an audience or the need for action (Finnegan 1988:18). Permanence over time, in particular, makes possible bureaucratic organizations, both privately and publically (Finnegan 1988:19). Writing makes it possible to accumulate, transmit, and verify information over time, making possible

scientific and historical knowledge (see review in Finnegan 1988:19–22). Writing facilitates economic development because it makes complex monetary and financial transactions possible (Finnegan 1988:23). In oral cultures, a spoken presentation was always an interpretation, while in written cultures, a verbatim reading could be separated from an interpretation of the read text. Written cultures made it possible to keep authoritative records that could be consulted as a separate authority. In contrast, in an oral culture, the authority of the person giving the statement was paramount.

Are there Intrinsic Differences Between Writing and Speaking?

Despite the great insights of this literature, it often poses writing and orality as opposing forms of knowledge and often suggests a linear replacement of orality with writing (Parsons 2017:113). There is, however, no sharp divide between orality and literacy (Weissenrieder and Coote 2015:xii; review in Reder and Davila 2005:172). In cultures without writing, oral text could be fixed through memorization techniques (Carruthers 1990:9, 14). Literacy and orality are also embedded within social institutions in specific ways, so they have particular meanings and relationships and interact in site-specific ways. Even in cultures where writing is widespread, orality may also be a different, yet complementary form of knowledge and performance. For example, Ong (1980) distinguished between societies of primary and secondary orality. In societies without written text, features of orality were different than in societies in which literacy and orality coexisted. Literacy transformed orality in these societies. Furthermore, electronic media blurs the distinction between orality and writing, so the relationship between orality and literacy has changed over time (Robertson 2013). Although the internet features many written texts, the ease of revising and erasing gives it features that are

similar to oral presentations. Furthermore, by making it possible to record and disseminate spontaneous oral presentations, the internet fixes them, giving them properties like written text.

Because of these considerations, these global theories of literacy and orality have been largely replaced by single studies showing the relationship between literacy and orality in particular settings. The insights of these local studies are invaluable, but they provide few comparative or historical analyses of the different interactions of literacy and orality. Here I develop a framework for the comparative and historical study of the interaction between orality and literacy. I theorize three dimensions that affect this interaction: 1) how orality and literacy are complementary forms of communication that borrow elements from each other in social processes of interpretation, social positioning, authority, and legitimacy; 2) the technologies that make orality and literacy possible; and 3) the processes of creation, reception, and distribution of text.

Towards A Theory of the Relationship Between Orality and Literacy

Complementarity and Borrowing: Interpretation, Social Position, Authority, and Legitimacy

I view communication, writing and speech, as intentional acts of agency, aimed at making sense and gaining mastery over the social world. Individuals' acts are embedded within sets of power relations that are manifest structurally through institutions and through actors' differential location in them. Thus, literacy and orality are institutionalized forms of social action and deployments of power. First, as social practices, they entail the meaningful orientation of actors embedded within a social setting (dialectical Weberianism). Writing and speaking are interactive processes aimed

towards social action, that is, action that is oriented to a social situation (Weber 1978). These processes entail a subjective orientation and an interpretive process, whereby individuals make sense of their surroundings and interact with other individuals. Both writing and speaking are forms of communication and aspects of cultural systems of symbols (Weissenrieder and Coote 2015:ix). Second, writing and speaking are deployments of power. Through them, social actors make claims to resources and control over other humans. Finally, both literacy and orality, for their survival depend on social institutionalization that that involves a technology for reproduction as well as social institutions that transmit the knowledge of how to use it. From this perspective, writing and speech are similar.

Despite these similarities, the advantage—as well as disadvantage—of writing is that it disembodies words. This disembodiment makes it possible to transmit writing at a distance, but it also removes elements of subjectivity that help individuals to interpret the meaning of the communication. As Berger and Luckmann (196627:) noted, face-to-face communication is prototypical, and all other forms of communication are remote in time and space from face-to-face interaction (cf. Weissenrieder and Coote 2015:xii–xiii). (Writing removes the "face" so to speak.) Thus, other forms of communication are judged in reference to this format. The more remote the communication is in time and space, the more that individuals must engage in typification to understand it (Berger and Luckmann 1966:29–31). I argue that to be effective, written text must compensate for the elements lost in these typifications. Thus, I suggest that orality and literacy interact by: 1) complementarity, one starts to take up what functions that other is not doing with the technology at hand (e.g., the conveyance of embodied skill versus fast, widespread

diffusion); 2) borrow from each other (e.g., written text re-embodies the ideas through references to authorship and subjectivity). Thus, I argue, that literacy does not replace orality; rather, literacy adopts elements of orality as individuals interact through both forms of communication.

I consider here four social relationships that display this sort of complementarity and borrowing: interpretation, social position, authority, and legitimacy. First, speech among individuals has opportunities for interpretation, misunderstanding, and conversational repair. Writing is not interactive in the same way. This interpretative element is reintroduced into written formats in various ways, most notably through reviews and other forms of commentary. Nor does it explain how knowledge is to be applied in a social content, which face-to-face interaction accomplishes (e.g., are these rules really followed; if yes, exactly how are they followed).

Second, speech comes attached to persons with particular social positions, and these locations are used to interpret the meaning of the speech. In classic texts on literacy, writing has been assumed to be impartial, but all knowledge, including writing, is created in a social context and has positionality. The speech of insiders, for example, is generally interpreted with more authenticity than outsiders, which can be embodied through socially interpreted features such as dress, accent, demeanor, and phenotype. In writing, this social location has to be recaptured, either through a textual feature such as quotations marks that marks direct dialogue as slang or informal speech or description of the persons. It has become relatively common for academic articles, for example, to include dimensions of positionality in methods sections, especially in interview or ethnographic articles that may depend on insider knowledge.

Third, because writing disembodies words, for it to be successful, its authority cannot be established interpersonally, so it must be established in some alternative way. Some mechanisms re-embody the author directly, such as a direct attribution of authorship through a byline or a biographical note. Government publications exhibit authority through the use of authorship and institutional approval. Institutional authority can be established in other ways as well, for example though processes of reviewing, publishing, and organizational censure or adoption. Authority can also be established indirectly through ideology, such as the position that writing is a superior, objective form of communication. For example, literacy was used as test for voting rights in the Reconstruction US South (but often waived for Whites). Similarly, writing was used in colonial contexts to uphold European rule. In communities through late medieval and early modern Europe, individuals recognized the power of writing (such as in witnessing notarial documents), even though they were not able to write (Clanchy [1979] 1993:2). Finally, scientific writing in the third person or first person plural is a similar claim to power based on an attempt to disembody scientific knowledge, taking knowledge from something that a researcher creates and couches it in a language that everyone "knows." Thus, the claim that writing is superior is a deployment of power to establish the authority of the communication.

Fourth, writing must be established as legitimate. In oral communication, the authority of the speaker is visible and can be deemed legitimate, illegitimate, or contested in person. Social institutions that surround the speech accomplish this social work of establishing legitimacy. Writing again has to establish this legitimacy through social institutions such as peer review that authors implicitly agreed to follow. Journalistic

norms for example establish an objectivity of reporters that confers legitimacy on the writing.

Technology

Literacy and orality are technologies in and of themselves. Language capacity is generally thought to be innate in modern humans, but children generally cannot speak if they are isolated from other people. Skilled oration is a highly developed skill, which like writing prose, must be learned and cultivated. At an individual level, writing requires knowledge of some sort of representational form (pictographs, alphabets), the skill to make use of it, and media for creating it. In addition, however, literacy and orality also interact with other technologies to produce, reproduce, and distribute the information. These technologies are socially institutionalized. I consider here roughly four stages of the link between literacy and orality (primarily in Western Europe the United States, and to some extent, their colonies).

Prealphabetic Systems

First, cultures without formal systems of writing often had pictorial or other visual representational systems that could serve functions similar to writing. Text could also be transmitted orally. Memorization and word-for-word repetition and transmission of material was possible through a variety of mnemonic devices (Carruthers 1990:9, 14; Clanchy [1979] 1993:178; Finnegan [1977] 1992:73). Oral performances could be more performative; poets could compose material during the performance, adapting it to the circumstances at hand (Finnegan [1977] 1992:55). In poetry, standard metrical or formulaic units could be used to ease the task of composition (Finnegan [1977] 1992:59).

Manuscripts

Second, once writing was invented, it was possible to record material on various materials (paper, animal skin, etc.). Manuscripts were produced in scroll or codex form, often in religious institutions such as scriptoriums, as religious institutions were primary sites of education (Clanchy [1979] 1993:1). Monastic authors often wrote on wax tablets first, and then copied the text to parchment (Clanchy [1979] 1993:119). This form of reproduction was effective, but slow and expensive, limiting the extent of the distribution of such materials. This technology made it possible to write down speech as text and re-read it. Written texts were often authoritative but came to life through oral disputation and dissemination. Reading aloud was common (Clanchy [1979] 1993:135).

Print

Third, printing, started roughly in the 1400s, but picked up speed in the next few centuries. Printing is a type of writing (Finnegan 1988:25). With movable type and paper, written text in general and books in particular made it quick, easy, and inexpensive to distribute written text, so that multiplied rapidly and became widely distributed, so that the effects of writing became widespread (Finnegan 1988:28; Zaret 2000:9–10). The production and distribution of materials was institutionalized in the publishing industry, libraries, and bookstores.

In many ways, this development was matched by the mechanical reproduction of sound that could capture performances and reproduce speech. It became possible, with device such as music boxes, phonographs, and records to preserve and distribute sound and spoken material relatively inexpensive. The development of radio similarly permitted the distribution of sound live. Oral text, like written text, could be fixed, and transmitted, in at least a partially disembodied way, through time and space.

Digitization

Fourth, digitization has made it possible to transmit printed text much more informally through email and texting, relegating remaining forms of manuscript communication, such as letter writing, to specialty tasks. Book publishing has been slower to be completely transformed, although the widespread accessibility of material on websites and digitized books is eroding the publishing industry. The direct effect of digitization on bookstores is less clear, as brick and mortar bookstores were declining because of online ordering.

Finally, with linked audio and visual recording, reproduced speech could be embodied, and captured live.[1] In many ways, electronic media reintroduces elements of embodiment that written text eliminated. For example, videos convey some of the embodiment of oral communication by combining speech with pictures, providing a demonstration that written text lacks.

The Social Processes of the Creation, Reception, and Distribution of Text

Finally, the creation of text by an author, the performance of that text by an audience, and the organizational and institutionalized transmission of the text (cf. Finnegan [1977] 1992:17) interact with the technologies of literacy and orality. These three points in the social process have oral and written dimensions that are often intertwined. For example, authors can create text through writing and speech. Authors can compose text directly through processes of speaking, memorization, and performance. But they can also

[1]This point can be extended to visual images as well as orality and literacy, and to the technology to record images (e.g., painting, cameras, digitization).

compose text through writing itself. In some cases, the composition process is mixed. Musicians, for example, frequently, play, sing, or simply hear music as they compose it, but then write down and replay the sections as well. Similarly, the process of writing in manuscript form may have intrinsically involved oral composition: authors often dictated to scribes who wrote down the actual words (Clanchy [1979] 1993:125). Thus, reading and dictating were often coupled together, not reading and writing (Clanchy [1979] 1993:125). Thus, the skill of composition was done orally, in tandem with the "art of dictation," while the skill of writing, putting pen to paper, was a separate art (Clanchy [1979] 1993:125–126).

Similarly, these texts can be received by the audience in either form. Plays, for example, are clearly meant to be performed live, while novels are meant to be read. Yet, plays are routinely published in printed format as well. Some oral material is intended for individual use, but most of it includes the audience in some way in the performance (Finnegan [1977] 1992:216). Legal proceedings, similarly, have written and oral dimensions. While legal briefs are written, trials and depositions are conducted orally.

Finally, the institutionalization of the creation of these texts can have written and spoken elements. Classical music for example, is written as text, to be played by musicians. Yet, much of the transmission of musical skill is oral through lessons and more generally conservatories. Similarly, most educational practices include oral and written elements that are institutionalized through textbooks and lectures. Law provides an another interesting example: most of the oral testimony from trials and testimony is preserved in written format as legal records. Cases and decisions can be published in various legal registers to guide future decisions.

Oral poetry is an interesting example where all three elements—the composition, the reception, and the social transmission—are oral. The social mechanisms of the transmission of oral poetry vary. Exact verbal transmission can be accomplished through the careful training and strict supervision, as well as by a belief in the religious duty to perform such recitation (Finnegan [1977] 1992:151). In other cases, oral material was recreated, recomposed, or composed in performance (Finnegan [1977] 1992:152). Communally known songs or poetry are often performed by the community members, who thereby learn them, reinforce their knowledge, and transmit them in the process (Finnegan [1977] 1992:154). Transmission by analog technology, radio and television, also occurs (Finnegan [1977] 1992:156). Oral poems and music, however, are frequently transmitted through writing. Even in societies with high degrees of illiteracy, there is often a written literature that stands alongside oral music and poetry (Finnegan [1997] 1992:156). Similarly, novels are examples in which all three elements are written: the author composes the text in writing, readers similarly read text, and the publishing industry institutionalizes the process of the physical production and distribution of the material. Other examples given above, such as education and law, combine oral and written formats at different stages in the creation, reception, and transmission of material.

Some Illustrative Empirical Examples

The relationship between orality and literacy, as well as the way that this relationship works through technology and the social process of transmission, is not inherent, but historically specific. Thus, I examine how the relationship between writing and orality varies across format and content, using methodological tools of historical sociology, comparison and narrative. I use three examples of cultural content—academia, news, and

music—that have long historical trajectories and that engender debates about interpretation, social position, authority, and legitimacy. I then consider this relationship in three formats—manuscripts, books, and electronic media—in Western Europe and the United States, and to some extent, their colonies. This obviously excludes much of the world, including many interesting cases where early literacy developed.

[in the examples below, the three elements of the theoretical argument above need to be more explicitly developed]

Academic Argumentation

In medieval Europe, of course, there was writing, but it was still a largely oral and aural culture (Finnegan 1988:28). In the case of academic treatises, in medieval Europe, scholars wrote texts in manuscript form, but it was expected that these texts were not authoritative unless they were defended orally through debate. Universities were largely run on spoken lectures and disputations (Cobban 1988:162). Lecturers gave detailed expositions of primary texts, as well as glosses of those texts (Cobban 1988:162). Lecturers were to give detailed expositions of stipulated texts and to give definitive rulings on difficult points stemming from the text or glosses (Cobban 1988:163). Lecturers and students engaged in disputations to sharpen oral skills (Cobban 1988:168). Courses of study took the form of critical evaluation of prescribed texts, learned through these lectures and disputations (Cobban 1988:170). Thus, the basic analytic method was to understand the meaning of the text, to resolve seeming contradictions, and to adjudicate among different interpretations of the text (Cobban 1988:170).

In the modern period, these two formats continued in the form of publications in books and journals and in the form of conferences and meetings, but the written text,

peer-reviewed and published by a well respective press, became the method of legitimation. Tenure procedures for university professors at research institutions in the United States formalized in the 1930s and 1940s, stemming from disputes about dismissing junior faculty members (Geiger 1986:227). Written publications thus became the primary criteria for tenure (Geiger 1986:227). Heavy teaching loads were seen to interfere with research, and thus downplayed or reduced (Geiger1986:228–231). The oral presentation became a method of developing the argument (e.g., by presenting preliminary findings) or of disseminating it (e.g., through book talks). With print culture, books became much less expensive and readily available, so it was possible for students to use books from the library or to purchase their own books. Thus, the process of interpreting written texts orally diffused among professors and students. The lecture style was usually maintained in large classes, but seminars and discussion sections developed that made it possible for the students themselves to participate widely in oral debates.

It is not yet entirely clear how the internet will change this pattern. However, the internet has not replaced traditional publications as methods of legitimating findings or in-person conferences as mediums of dissemination. However, the internet dramatically increases the possibilities of disseminating arguments in fixed, text-like formats, whether these were originally oral presentations or written texts.

News

In medieval Europe, there was a small literate elite and a large illiterate nonelite (Finnegan [1977] 1992:167). This gave rise to multiple mixed forms of oral and written transmission. In the case of news, in the Middle Ages, rulers could send written proclamations to be read by messengers throughout their reign. These proclamations were

legitimated through official seals on the manuscripts read by an official who was entrusted with reading the text verbatim. The carriers of the news, though separated from the source, often exhibited physical symbols of their authority (e.g., dress, seals).

In the modern era, news was legitimated in writing and orally through a trustworthy institution (as an academia) that disseminated it through print or orally (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio, TV). The newspaper developed historically as an inexpensive way to distribute news to a relatively widespread segment of the population. The reputation of the newspapers was key to the legitimacy of the text. Oral delivery was often premised on reading of written material, just as in earlier periods of time. However, the distribution of the material could be much wider with the advent of analog television and radio. Even interviews, though somewhat more spontaneous, were often based on extensive written preparation.

The internet widely changed this pattern, as social media brings the possibility of fixing eye-witnesses' accounts, wide-spread dissemination of material, crowdsourcing, and legitimation through popularity. Much of this material is indeed spontaneously composed orally and then transmitted through digital media. Some content is transcribed into a written format and transmitted then in this form. Written materials are of course also widely disseminated on the internet as articles, often from news sources that developed out of print medium (e.g., newspapers). Some of these still exist in physical format (e.g., magazines, books) though others have largely disappeared (e.g., newspapers).

Music

Finally, in the case of medieval music, manuscripts were explicitly written for aural improvisation, as they were scarce. Such manuscripts were often large in size, so that the single text could be visible to multiple performers. Large books were often placed on lecterns and displayed or read aloud (Clanchy [1979] 1993:135). At the same time, many musicians played by ear, picking up the music by listening to other performers and learning to improvise around standard chord progressions and melodies. In medieval Europe, music was commonly transmitted through a mixed mode of literary distribution: popular songs arose from a knowledge of written texts, and written literature was often transmitted by oral means through recitation, chant, and reading aloud (Finnegan [1977] 1992:167).

In the early modern period, musicians used written and manuscript texts, as well as oral traditions and oral learning (MacKinnon 2008:37–38). Music was often taught aurally and orally first, and then written notation was introduced (MacKinnon 2008:38). Books of texts could be sung because people remembered the melodies (MacKinnon 2008:37). Men, women, and children of households, together with servants and professional musicians, played and sang music (MacKinnon 2008:38–40). Music was something considered suitable for males and females (MacKinnon 2008:46). Before the Reformation, the Catholic church's elaborate rites demanded trained singers, but with the Reformation, congregational singing was encouraged, and households increasingly played an important role in producing religious music (MacKinnon 2008:42).

In the modern period, printed music was intended to be a composer's authoritative and detailed record; an authoritative performance, written or recorded, was supposed to correctly replicate this intention. However, much of the tactic knowledge of the

transmission was institutionalized through the social institutions of lessons and conservatories, which transmitted the knowledge of how to interpret the music on the page. In the contemporary period, these various models of music coexist. This had three primary modes: classical music, which was conveyed through print; jazz music which was improvised based on print, and rock music, which was wholly oral in composition and conveyance (Finnegan 1988:135).

The internet blurs the line between writing and orality perhaps more than in the other cases: electronic media has made it possible to write sound electronically, reproduce it, and disseminate it. However, far from replacing performance, these electronic possibilities encouraged the rise of the singer/songwriter culture and live venues as particularly authentic performances in contrast to the highly produced music that is digitally enhanced and polished and then disseminated through recordings. The internet also makes it possible to transmit musical knowledge, as the combination of images and speech embodies at least some of the embodied skill necessary to learn to produce music. This "how to" genre provides an important opening for adult beginners to access musical production.

Conclusions

These three cases show that writing and orality were related in different ways depending on format and content. However, in none of these cases did writing replace orality. In some cases, the text legitimated the oral performance, but in other cases the reverse was true. Furthermore, the internet, with its ability to fix both oral and written content in a text-like way, has possibly increased the use of written formats (academic), fixed, oral formats (news), and live, oral formats (music). In these three cases, the widespread

dissemination of text increased the possibility for oral use. In music, news, and academia, once texts were widespread, a wider segment of the population could engage in oral discussion of the ideas. This is perhaps clearest in academia where the proliferation of books made discussion about the texts among students much easier. For music and news, this transformation has occurred more with the advent of digital media, which in many ways partially re-embodies the transmission of information. In news, the positionality, authority, and legitimacy of the speaker can be viewed along with the speech, at least to some degree. In music, the internet makes possible the transmission of embodied skills associated with learning and performing music. In other cases, the format of knowledge is clearly a historical transmission, such as the continuing important of debates, talks, and lectures in academia, combined with the ways that spoken text retains embodiment that written text cannot.

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