

# Orality in Culture & Education

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## **Abstract**

Our education and culture involve us daily in one of the defining activities of humankind - the expression of knowledge and emotions through oral language. However sophisticated communication technology becomes, we remain living and breathing creatures of oral habit. We express ourselves through songs and poems, through narrative, through anecdote and language play, as well as through rational argument and exposition. Print culture has obviously brought great advantages for both the storage and the dissemination of information. However, I shall argue that we should not carelessly ignore the relevance of oral culture to the postulation of knowledge. In the context of language knowledge oral communication is crucial both to language learning and to language use. It is a defining characteristic of being human. Therefore, in this paper, I shall emphasise the importance of incorporating theories of orality in the development of materials for language education.

## **Interaction between Orality and Thought**

Walter J. Ong (1982: 1) says that we have had to revise our identity due to the fact that many of the features that we have taken for granted in thought and expression in literature, philosophy, and science and even in oral discourse among literates are not directly native to human existence as such but have come into being because of the resources which the technology of writing makes available to human consciousness. Ignorance of the true nature of human discourse makes us blind about our true identity and further complicates our efforts to master human languages. The recent interest in human discourse kindled by the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Milman Parry, Adam Parry, Albert Lord and other linguistic anthropologists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could pervade an enthusiasm about orality among academic circles in several places but the understanding of orality has not gained ground in many parts of the world where it is highly indispensable.

The term orality is the nominal form of the adjective *oral* which is defined in almost every standard dictionary as "spoken," "by word of mouth," "verbal," "uttered by mouth," "related to speech" and so on. Linguistic anthropologists present orality as the opposite of literacy that signifies "the ability to read and write" because in pristine oral cultures this ability was not known at all. (See Webster's Dictionary 1994) Yet orality cannot be defined as "the inability to read and write" or a handicap because even in modern literate cultures today that are known as chyrographic and typographic on the basis of the facilities they have for writing and printing the human thought, orality plays a dominant and unprecedented role. Orality, in modern industrialised settings, is represented by the radio, the television, the telephone, the tape recorder, the compact disc player, and all other types of communication apparatus that involve sound production, sound transmission, and sound preservation. When it comes to vocal communication, even though the medium is electronic, orality plays an intrinsic role in verbalising and articulating or voicing the mentally formulated thought.

Language pathologists, psychologists, and psycholinguists claim that thinking is oral as we think in terms of concepts that are represented by words. It is obvious to any mentally sound person that every idea before it is spoken out or typed or printed appears as an auricular string of sounds developed in the mind. The auricular effect is experienced even while silently or loudly reading the printed or written word. This is why modern linguists and literary critics who emphasise dialogism argue that a text actualises only when it is read, depending on the intellectual capabilities of the readers. It appears to one reader in a fashion totally different to another. This is because the quality of the presentation is realised by the reader in a tonal system always peculiar to him or her. A text can be read by one reader with a high degree of apathy while another with a high degree of sympathy. This even shows the independent and variable role of orality in literate cultures.

In fact orality can exist without writing; but writing cannot exist without orality. The indispensability of orality comes to light every time a written material is to be read or interpreted. Both oral and written expressions have to be reflected upon for further interaction with them, and that part is always carried out through orality. Once the contents of a text are to be transferred by one reader to another in his or her own way the format of the new version, which appears as a note or a set of utterances is designed through the intervention of orality. The same way an often-related story if it is not available in a written form exists only as a memory or an imagination dormant in the storyteller's mind. Thus orality is always to give life to thought or idea in whatever form, it is present to the presenter.

### Voice in Oral Expression

The sound or sounds formed in the larynx or the boxlike space at the top of the windpipe, containing vocal cords, and uttered through the mouth of living creatures, especially, of human beings in speaking, singing, shouting, etc. are called voice. This definition of voice represents only its materiality, production technique, and origin. The synonyms of voice in *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* are classified under speech, grammar, sound, cry, choice, affirmation, opinion, and the action of voicing under speech is presented in a list: to utter, breathe, cry, exclaim, shout, ejaculate, vociferate; raise, lift, or strain the voice or lungs; to vocalise, prolate, articulate, enunciate, pronounce, accentuate, aspirate, deliver, mouth, rap out, speak out, speak up. All these actions imply power of expression. By all these actions the human asserts control over the others. S/he imposes his/her command on the others, and influences their thinking and behaviour by means of voice. Here, in fact, voice is an instrument possessing a great material value.

Voice by its nature is ephemeral. Once a word is voiced or uttered it leaves no residue. Yet we cannot call voice abstract or inexistent. While intellect supplies cognitive material, voice supplies physical material for the mechanism of orality to function. By means of voice cognitive material undergoes in the operation of orality a transformation from the abstract to the concrete. In the memory of the hearer, the contents of an utterance once it is heard remains glued in terms of the voice of the speaker, depending on the hearer's brainpower and the speaker's empathy. This shows that voice finds its existence only in the memory of the hearer other than in its origin in the speaker.

Tonal variations in voice are effected by the cognitive and emotional quality of

the thought it is meant to present. Sad thoughts are produced in sad voices and happy thoughts are produced in happy voices. Thus the colour of the voice is determined by the colour of the thought intermingled with the colour of the feeling. The speaker's quality and mood known in numerous terms such as happiness, sadness, peacefulness, agitation, anger, friendliness, compassion, cruelty, dullness, radiance, intelligence, foolishness etc. actualise through the voice quality s/he retains while making her/his expressions. The capability of voice in achieving the colour of the very thought the speaker wishes to express endows it with a great deal of malleability and flexibility. This makes it clear that voice is a representation of the speaker's personality. Voice epitomises the speaker's characteristics, qualities, and moods and imposes an impression of him/her on his/her hearers.

Today the challenge of preserving voice in an expressible condition has been well overcome by means of various types of sound equipment ranging from tape recorders to compact disc writers. The ephemerality of voice is no more a complaint we can make while operating in a high-tech environment. Sophisticated equipment is invented and now commonly involved in the production, transmission, and preservation of sound. Speakers and singers even after death come back to life thanks to such equipment. That is how we hear today speakers and singers - living or dead - from different parts of the world. As we are supported by such equipment are we to forget the challenges posed by voice in orality? The answer to this question which is liable to vary under the influence of different ideologies is a determinant factor of the degree of efficiency in the various methods followed in preserving language and culture and promoting education in various societies.

### **Language in Oral Cultures**

Oral cultures depend on spoken language in all their efforts to manage thought. Spoken language is composed of words. Words are there to name all concepts in the environment. In terms of phonology each word is either a phoneme or a group of phonemes produced through the vocal system. A phoneme is any one of the set of the smallest distinctive speech sounds in a language that distinguish one word from another. In terms of morphology each word is either a morpheme or a group of morphemes. A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit into which a word can be divided. The oral production of a word is utterance. The way in which a word is uttered is pronunciation. Meanings do not emerge just because words are uttered with correct pronunciation. They have to be presented in grammatically structured groups or in the form of sentences. That alone does not fulfil the real requirement for generating meaning. While producing sentences orally, they should be properly articulated with correct pronunciation and intonation. The material value of voice is crucial at this stage. In order to produce the full force of the words in a meaningful sentence, voice generates power endowing the expression the particular emotional hue it should have. It is the power of voice that highlights meaning and that establishes it linguistically in an oral society. The members of that society retain the gist of what is said due to the power of voice breathed into the expressions or declarations made.

In addition to the sound effects produced through the vocal system, a set of psychodynamics of orality have evolved to help the speakers in oral societies in formulating, presenting, and preserving thought in terms of oral expression. We experience these as an oral poetics or a poetics supportive to oral cultures where

language and grammar maintain a clearly aesthetic character. In this sense, words, too, retain tremendous concrete value in the treatment they receive. As the challenge of retaining orally delivered ideas has to be overcome, the oral poetics maintains the following characteristics.

In oral cultures every word is an occurrence or event. One simply calls a word or recalls it but does not look for a word like in literate cultures, as one does not have lexicons, dictionaries, thesauruses, or encyclopaedias. This sheds light on the plainness of the conceptual system of the member of an oral culture. Words such as "the palace," "the royal congregation," "the combat," and "the gladiator" breathe with life as all the essential features of the concepts they represent are suggested in the mere sounds.

Thoughts are formulae. They are well developed into forms that can be recalled any time required, as there are no reference books in oral cultures. "Failures are the pillars of success," "All that glitters is not gold," etc. are formulae that are applied in conversations on a daily basis.

Mnemonics or remembering techniques are installed in all such expressions so that they can be recalled with a reasonable speed. "As the days lengthen, so the storms strengthen;" "Needles and pins, needles and pins, when a man marries his trouble begins;" "The mackerel's cry is never dry;" and "a sunshiny shower won't last an hour" are some of the mnemonically powerful expressions created in oral cultures. Alliteration, assonance, rhyme and various forms of repetition mingled with rhythm are used in the formulae for a clearly mnemonic purpose.

Rhetoric is employed lavishly in order to make an imprint of every rendition of an oral declaration on the mind of the hearer. By means of rhetoric the speaker makes his/her speech appeal to the listener and helps the latter remember the gist of it. The following riddles are such creations made elegant with rhetoric: "As soft as silk, as white as milk, as bitter as gall, a thick wall, and a great coat covers me all - a walnut," and "Little Nancy Etticoat, in a white petticoat, and a red nose; the longer she stands, the shorter she grows - a candle".

More features of oral poetics, which have evolved as the psychodynamics of orality can be experienced from a song like this:

#### MERRY OLD CUCKOLD

As I went into my stable there did I see  
Gentlemen's horses standing there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen's horses here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty milking cows my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, milking cows with saddles on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in."

As I went into my entry there did I see  
Gentlemen's hats hanging there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen's hats here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty milking pails my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, milking pails with brims on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in."

As I went into my passage there did I see

Gentlemen's coats hanging there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen's coats here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty milking cloaks my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, milking cloaks with sleeves on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in."

As I went into my kitchen there did I see  
Gentlemen's boots lying there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen's boots here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty pudding bags my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, pudding bags with spurs on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in."

As I went into my parlour there did I see  
Gentlemen's watches lying there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen's watches here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty cheesy vits my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, cheesy vits with chains on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in."

As I went into my chamber there did I see  
Gentlemen lying there by one by two by three  
I called unto my loving wife and unto her did say,  
"How came these gentlemen here without the leave of me?"  
"You, old cuckold, you, blind cuckold, and cannot you very well see?  
'Tis three lofty milking maids my mother has sent to me."  
"Hay bob, there's fun, milking maids with beards on, like was never seen.  
And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in." (Lines 48, words 538)

Performed by Andrew Wright of the Budapest University English Department at the University of Umea in 1976.

This oral poem, however long it is, can be easily retained due to the following psychodynamics of orality. From this song presented just now it is clear that the idea units in oral poetry are often additive rather than subordinate. There are not always complex sentences containing many subordinate clauses. Expressions are aggregative rather than analytic. Passages are redundant rather than copious. Concepts are conservative and traditionalist and close to the human life world. As oral poetry is composed in a challenging situation or the audience is considered to consist of rivals of the poet the verses are agonistically toned. As the poet depends to some extent on the reactions of the audience, the whole creation is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced. Also the ideas are homeostatic or addressing the present, and representing the here and now. And finally the imagery in oral poetry is situational rather than abstract. (See Ong 1982: 36-57) Before going further let us try another oral poem designed under the same principles but for children.

## THE OLD WOMAN

There was an old woman, who swallowed a fly,  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed the fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a bird  
Oh how absurd, she swallowed a bird  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed the fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a cat  
Fancy, she swallowed a cat  
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed a spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed the fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a dog  
Oh what a hog; she swallowed a dog  
She swallowed the dog to catch the cat  
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed a spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a goat  
She opened her throat and swallowed the goat  
She swallowed the goat to catch the dog  
She swallowed the dog to catch the cat  
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed a spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a cow  
I don't know how, she swallowed the cow  
She swallowed the cow to catch the goat

She swallowed the goat to catch the dog  
She swallowed the dog to catch the cat  
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider  
That wriggled and wriggled and trickled inside her  
She swallowed a spider to catch the fly  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly,  
Perhaps she'll die.

There was an old woman, who swallowed a horse  
She died of course. (Lines 55 words 397)

Collected by Mervyn Whittaker in *Yong Verse* (pp 62-63)

By means of the above list of features of psychodynamics of orality presented by Ong these poems can be analysed very effectively. However, anybody can try remembering complete texts of oral poems if they can familiarise themselves with these features. There are numerous creations as such which people retain in memory to deliver on festive or social occasions.

From a language pedagogical point of view too they are very effective. Poem 1 relates what items the speaker saw in several places of his house in terms of things belonging to "gentlemen," what explanations he received from his wife to each of them, and how he finds it difficult to believe her. This is an example of variation. The places, the things, the explanations, the disagreeable features vary but are all well inter-connected in each stanza, for example, "stable" - "horses" - "milking cows" - "milking cows with saddles on," in forming a seven-part paradigm of cuckoldry which is emphatically established in the concluding line of each stanza, "And every time when I goes out a cuckold I comes in." Poem 2 relates what happened to an old lady who went on swallowing different creatures. This is a classic example of cumulative repetition. Each creature she swallows joins a group that increases in the course of the poem. The poet tells that each creature is swallowed to catch another that had been swallowed before. Each new creature is often introduced in a line marked with a pair of rhyming words, e.g., why - fly, spider - inside her, absurd - bird, hog - dog, throat - goat, how - cow, and horse - course. Taken together, both are rich in mnemonics. Both poems graphically and dramatically portray the relevant situations and present a fund of language functions, vocabulary, and grammar that is useful in real-life communication.

### **Conclusion: Support from Orality in Education**

As it was said before oral cultures do not have lexicons, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and other types of reference books. They do not have do-it-yourself manuals either. They learn things by imitating the experienced and clever. They conceptualise the relevant know-how in concrete terms by observing their expert mentors and by practically taking part in the relevant activities and processes. They store whatever knowledge they have to internalise in terms of oral poetry by listening to the others, by reciting, by taking note of the mnemonic features, by developing strategies to remember the wording, and by genuinely feeling and appreciating the relevant concepts as part of their life world. This is how in oral cultures people follow their religions and morals, practise their medicine, pursue their astrology and other intellectual interests, execute their justice, carry out their occupations, and achieve the required

capabilities in all aspects of life. What we consider metacognition in education is in their veins, as they have to ensure their survival through an eternal struggle made by trial and error. What we call cultural competence, they achieve by constant interaction with the situations they have to face in their societies. Thus the education of the oral people is perfect in its own right.

If we can adopt strategies applied in these societies for their education we can overcome most of the learning problems of our children. Having realised this, Philip Riley (1996) poses the following questions to consider while planning educational projects for humans: "What does it mean to be a human being? What are our capacities and limitations as members of our species? What do we share with all the other members of the human race by virtue of our human nature?" These questions address a crucial area in educational planning as certain individuals tend to be difficult learners because of various social, psychological, and even physiological reasons. Though we have books for every type of pursuit we cannot get such learners to study the relevant material, especially the language learning material. For problems arising in this type of context, strategies developed in oral cultures may be effective.

Experiments have proved that oral poetry is a good medium to introduce language to children learning in resource-poor environments. Through a carefully developed series of songs children can be taught various language functions and semantic, grammatical, structural, and phonological concepts in language. In fact oral poetry has a strong educational sector. Even entertainment in oral societies is part of education and part of what they call cultural competence. Therefore educational planning for initial stages can be carried out on the basis of practices in oral cultures. (See Fonseka 1997)

Understanding the features of oral thinking is thus useful in planning language lessons. In the initial efforts to master a language it is effective to use oral poetry presented in strictly formulaic, strictly patterned, and strictly mnemonically designed lines. Rather than introducing language to the children in complex copious prose texts full of subordinate clauses and abstract ideas it is better to use material, which is close to the life world. In implementing these ideas a drastic step has to be taken in the traditional classroom setting. As language teachers following a humanistic approach, this should be our mission today.

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