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Orality and Literacy: Epic Heroes of Human Destiny?

Main Description

Human Speech has often been presented as the crucial line dividing humanity from animals, with Literacy then entering in as the fulfiller of human destiny, the redeemer from primitive orality, and, in alphabetic apotheosis, the all-conquering hero of the west's civilising mission. This epic tale, pervasive as it still remains, is now under attack from many directions, not least in the expanding work on multiple literacy practices. This paper takes the complementary line of starting from the 'oral' end of the apparent equation. Building on anthropological fieldwork, experience of teaching at the UK's Open University and the gathering comparative literature, it questions the limiting linguistic bias of this tale – itself a kind of myth explaining and justifying the social order. Verbal language is just one of many modes and media of human communication and can only be fully understood in conjunction with them. The traditional myth also underplays the multiplex nature of language itself: researchers across several disciplines are now increasingly revealing the multimodal nature of human speech and writing. To focus on narrower definitions of language and, as in the heroic elevation of 'orality' and literacy', to propose the treatment of language as *the* crucial factor in human culture is to proffer a thin and single-line tale of human history and, with it, a misleading and ethnocentric account not only of humanity more generally but also of many of our actual educational practices. It needs to be replaced by a broader, more cross-cultural and more generous model of both learning and communication.

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Short Description

The western myth of the centrality of language gives a misleadingly incomplete account of communication and of learning. 'Orality', 'literacy' and learning are multimodal.

Keywords

Orality
Literacy
Myth
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Person as Subject

N/a

Orality and literacy

Organisation as Subject

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Place as Subject

Comparative

As an anthropologist my particular interest has been oral expression and communication, both everyday and ‘artistic’ – topics like story-telling, oral poetry, oral performance. I later became intrigued by ‘literacy’, the seeming counterpart of orality, and the western ideology in which these concepts play such a large part, further reinforced by my experience as a university teacher at the UK’s Open University. This paper charts how, travelling by this different route, I arrived at similar perspectives on multiliteracies to those developed by the ‘New London Group’ (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) but in the process had to confront certain widely shared presuppositions about the role of writing and the nature of learning.

A fieldwork preamble

Like many intellectuals of today I grew up to a stirring tale about writing – how literacy marked the division between educated and uneducated, between civilised and uncivilised. How writing was among the greatest achievements of humanity and remains a weapon against poverty and oppression. And how it behoves us fortunate inheritors of that blessing to transmit and extend it to coming generations throughout the world, above all in our schools and universities.

There is so much that is uplifting and inspirational about that tale, with literacy as its heroic figure. As a rationale for the *whole* of human life it might scarcely seem convincing – except that it is seldom enunciated in that clear cut way, but implicitly conveyed, sanctioned in the established educational system and the skills engendered there. Like others, I accepted it as a beacon for a life’s commitment to teaching and learning.

My first experience of fieldwork proved a shock however. It was conducted among the Limba people in northern Sierra Leone where (for a variety of reasons) I came to focus especially on their stories. This fitted my established love of literature and language, intensified by undergraduate study of Greek and Roman literatures.. I knew the stories were unwritten, but documenting them seemed the closest I could get to capturing Limba literary formulations. I assumed my task would be to reveal the stories’ meaning - their essence. – by recording and then transcribing them into written texts, and in doing so to gain a deeper insight into their culture.

It didn’t turn out the way I had expected. I was taken aback to discover – reluctantly, because I was resistant to the notion - that they did not seem to share the values I took for granted. I had implicitly assumed that verbal expression was somehow their ‘top art’ and that recording their stories – their literary productions - would provide a peculiarly intimate route to the heart of their culture. But in terms of acclaimed expertise, training, admiration and specialist terminology, story-telling ranked below the expert activities of dancing, singing, and

drumming. The shock was not so much their assessment as my recognition of how linguistically-prioritised *my* assumptions were. I had pictured myself going off to collect far-away myths (non-literate and colonised people naturally had ‘myths’). What I had not anticipated was discovering a myth of my own.

A second discovery was how much about these stories lay *not* in the element capturable in written transcription but in their performance. This was emphatically a multimodal, multidimensional affair. It was not just spoken ‘words’ but performers’ artful use of volume, intensity, repetition, pitch, timing, length, singing and acoustically resonant ideophones (mini-images in sound). The tellings were visual too as narrators dramatically deployed gesture, facial expression, bodily orientation, and movement. The audience was part of it, replying to the teller, singing the choruses, building the changing phases of excitement, humour, mystery, irony, or foreboding - co-creators of the tale. All those dimensions disappeared when I compressed them into the western conventions of single-line print. The story-telling, it turned out, was not just a matter of words nor of cognitive information but a co-ordination of multiple modes and participants.

Orality, literacy and multiplexity

These two points are fundamental to my discussion here: first, that ‘oral’ expression is multimodal - it may be verbal but is emphatically not *just* verbal; and second that one reason this has so often been overlooked is the potent western ideology privileging linguistic expression.. I have used a specific fieldwork experience to introduce them; but that is just one example from many, and many parallel points have come up from studies elsewhere.

‘Oral’ communication turns out to be highly complex and diverse. The conventions and contexts of any form of ‘speaking’ vary by culture, language, genre, situation, and participants, but whether relatively ‘ordinary’ or recognised as expert artistry, it is always liable to contain many elements beyond the ‘words’ themselves. So-called ‘non-verbal’ sounds are a significant part of our speaking. Visual dimensions come in too: gesture, bodily positionings, facial expression, visible movement, sometimes the clothing and adornment of participants, spatial arrangements, material accoutrements. At least two and perhaps multiple participants are doubtless contributing, together with temporally-unfolding dynamics, atmosphere, and expectations. All these dimensions and more are likely to lie not at the margins but at the heart of the action. Studies of the manifold forms of oral expression – from interpersonal dialogue, oral poetry, sung lyrics, speech-making, ritual pronouncements, judicial proceedings, rhetorical display and lengthy epic to smaller-scale verbal arts like proverbs, puns, anecdotes or children’s playground rhymes – have increasingly revealed the subtle multidimensionalities of oral communicating as it is actually practised.¹

The older notion of ‘orality’ as something pure and simple is now under challenge from two angles. On the one side, it is now clear that oral communication is neither uniform nor peculiar to some so-called ‘primitive’ past

but used for a multiplicity of purposes and settings in 'modern' and contemporary society too. There are multiple oralities. Meantime linguistic anthropologists and others have been uncovering not just the importance of gesture (so closely coordinated with speaking that some would widen the definition of language to include it.²) but the multifarious array of media humans utilise in communicating: pictorial, bodily, artefactual, tactile. Oral communication is not just verbal but multiplex - multimodal, multi-media..³

This has striking parallels with recent approaches to literacy: as multidimensional and multiple. We are now increasingly aware of the variegated ways people read and write, interacting with far more than just written words or verbally articulated information.⁴ Counterintuitive though it might seem to those brought up within a perspective that envisages 'the written word' as something abstract and unmediated, our literacy practices are in fact consistently multimodal. In approaching a piece of 'writing', we go beyond just lettered words: the typography shows whether it is presented as poetry, prose, dialogue, statistics, title page, or whatever; layout, spacing and orientation (non-verbal all) are essential; and visual images, illustrations, maps, or diagrams come into many genres of writing, from 'scholarly' texts and children's books to newspapers or comics. The visual arts interpenetrating written words have long been with us, but have attained special prominence in the 'new typography' of electronic text and the images, icons, colours and extravaganzas of web displays. Writing often has an acoustic side too. Classical and mediaeval European literatures were commonly delivered aloud while now too parents and teachers read to small children, pupils to their teachers, and sacred writings are realised in auditory declamation not just visual text. Even 'silent' reading can be experienced acoustically, perhaps intershot with sonic echoes from heard performances. And now 'audio books' and computer 'multi-media' increasingly blur the boundaries between sounded and visible text. Touch and even smell come in too, from the feel of paper or binding to the distinctive smell of newspapers or of new or of old books. In its actual practice writing emerges as both material and multidimensional. As with the multiple practices of oral expression, we draw our meanings not so much – or anyway not only - through a system of objective referentiality as through the contexts, overtones and multisensory intertextualities which we bring to the process.

Just as 'orality' has come to dissolve as a monolithic and separable entity, so too with 'literacy'. Both are utilised in a plenitude of diverse forms and for a multitude of purposes. Literacy and orality, furthermore, are not simple counterparts of each other, or even distinctive positions along some single-line continuum. As themselves multidimensional, they interpenetrate one another, interwoven through the multiplex constellation of interdependent resources that humans deploy so creatively in their communicating: spoken, sung, instrumental, visual, auditory, pictorial, graphic, material, gestural, proxemic, kinesic, material - and more. The repertoire varies of course according to locale, purpose, social situatedness, genre, ideologies and available technologies: there are constraints as well as opportunities for particular actors. But any form of human expression –

and of learning – is in practice, and in any era, likely to draw not just on language but on a remarkable spectrum of communicative resources.

This leads back to the ideas so well formulated by scholars such as Cope, Kalantzis and Kress.⁵ Coming by a different route, I join with their emphasis on multiliteracies and on the multimodal and multi-media nature of literacy – indeed, going beyond this, I would include the multidimensionality of all communicating.

The great epic: a linguistic tale

All this now seems obvious: communication and learning are multiplex, and depend on more than just language. But that of course runs counter to the tale of human history in which the central hero is literacy – that unacknowledged presupposition I discovered in myself during my first fieldwork experience. I want now to return to that account and examine it further. Behind it, we will discover, lies a longer story in which the interactions between the epic heroes Orality and Literacy between them encompass the history and destiny of humankind.

Like any good tale, it opens with the entry of the hero, Speech, who separates the human and animal worlds. It was Speech – ‘Orality’, spoken oral language – that took humans up and away from animals, forming them as intelligent beings capable of symbolic and rational thinking. Thus was achieved the ‘qualitative leap’ between humans and apes in ‘the development of language as a referential, time- and space-transcending sign system’ (Luckmann’s formulation (1995: 176) but one that would be widely shared). ‘Only with language did we become really human’ (Rosengren 1999: 28) for here is ‘the essence of our humanity’ (Keesing and Strathern 1998: 26).

And then came a yet stronger hero, Writing, carving out a new separation, this time within humankind. Thus was drawn the crucial line dividing humanity into two, oral and literate: ‘those’ (in UNESCO terminology) ‘who master nature, share out the world’s riches among themselves, and set out for the stars’, and ‘those who remain fettered in their inescapable poverty and the darkness of ignorance’ (UNESCO 1966: 29). The non-literates are excluded, for literacy brings freedom and civilisation, the ‘prerequisite for citizenship and for human and social development’ (UNESCO 2001); it lies ‘at the heart of world development and human rights’ (Federico Mayor, UNESCO Director-General, in Wagner et al. 1999: xiii).⁶ Jack Goody, initiator of many debates about literacy, similarly sees the social and cognitive effects of writing as of ‘primary importance in the history of human cultures’ (Goody 2000: 3-4), with primitive-versus-advanced differences attributable ‘to the advent of writing and the subsequent developments – the formalization of discourse, the extension of some forms of abstraction, of logic ... and of rationality. ... Cognitively as well as sociologically, writing underpins “civilization”’ (1987: 291, 300).

In this great tale of unfolding human history the two leading heroes – Speech and Writing – are each born of language. Time and time again the story is told of

how the development and transformations of verbal language structure human destiny. It is language, especially in its 'rational' and referential aspect, that is the unquestioned mark and fulfilment of true humanity: 'the quintessential human attribute' (Pilbeam in Jones et al. 1992: 4), 'the specific human attribute, the critical means of interaction between individuals, the foundation of the development of what we call "culture" ' (Goody 1987: 3). The swarming contemporary versions recycle a tale that in various forms has long been powerful in western tradition.. In the fifteenth century Antonio de Nebrija, author of an early European vernacular grammar, depicts alphabetic writing as the greatest invention of humankind:

Among all the things that human beings discovered through experience, or that were shown to us by divine revelation in order to polish and embellish human life, nothing has been more necessary, nor benefited us more, than the invention of letters (Nebrija 1926 [1492]: 234 Book I, chap. ii, quoted in Mignolo 1994: 95)

The eighteenth-century Keeper of Records at the Tower of London, Thomas Astle, invokes strikingly similar terminology,

The noblest acquisition of mankind is SPEECH, and the most useful art is WRITING. The first, eminently, distinguishes MAN from the brute creation; the second, from uncivilized savages (1784: i).

As he continues, 'without speech we should scarcely have been rational beings' (1784: 2), while writing is the means to human progress, 'an invention which hath contributed more than all others to the improvement of mankind' (1784: 10).

This tale of the linguistically-defined destiny of humankind, repeatedly recounted and recycled through the centuries, takes us up from animals through our acquisition of human speech, then up again through the wondrous development of writing. Orality and Literacy, the children of Language, account for the binary and all-encompassing classifications of our world, separating, first, humans from animals and then primitive from civilised, undeveloped from developed, oppressed from democratic and free.

Deep-seated, persistent and resonant accounts like this are commonly referred to as 'myths': perhaps not often explicitly stated, but part of 'what everyone knows', a kind of mythical charter that explains and justifies the present state of things. The same could certainly be said of our epic tale of orality and literacy. It projects a long-standing and inspirational vision of the nature and destiny of humankind, and at the same time provides a rationale for the current hierarchies of the world: for humans' pre-eminence over animals, and for the moral supremacy and leadership of those educated in the skills of writing as they extend the civilising mission of rationality and western science through the generations and throughout the civilised world. Like all myths it is somewhat differentially believed and deployed of course, even amidst its primary proponents, and it can be turned to many different purposes. But it has unquestionably been profoundly influential in classifying and explaining the human order.

This is no neutral account however. It may look universal and in a way uncontroversial; but its prioritising of language privileges one specific model of humanity. The defining and central essence of human-ness is set as language; and it is language (first oral, then written) that structures and motivates the great

unfolding of human history.

It is a loaded myth. It is not only the West African Limba who might query the assumption that verbal language is *the* distinctive human attribute or that other human arts and achievements rank below it. The model of language, furthermore, so often reflects the referential, Enlightenment view, in which language (and especially writing) is taken as the mark and condition of rationality and progress.⁷ The arts of music, dance and drama are tacitly swept aside, so too are the gestural, pictorial, sculptural, sonic, tactile, bodily, affective and artefactual dimensions of human life. What is being portrayed, essentially, is a cognitive language-centred model of the nature and destiny of humanity. This may indeed be one illuminating vision— but one not inevitably subscribed to by all cultural traditions.

As with other mythical charters the tale is not innocent. Language and writing are notoriously linked into power structures and have long formed one element in conquest and conversion, whether Arabic writing in the expansion of Islam or the imposition of their script by Spanish invaders of Mexico. As Griffiths well puts it ‘the script is the ultimate tool of conquest – as mastery of it is of acceptance by the conqueror’ (Griffiths 1997: 144). We might now query the once-conventional view of the alphabet as ‘the most highly developed, the most convenient and the most easily adaptable system of writing ... now universally employed by civilized peoples’ (Diringer 1968, vol. 1: 13). But the politically-loaded image of writing in its alphabetic apotheosis as the hero of the west’s civilising mission is not just a matter of the past; nor are its educational applications, informed as they often are by the tale of language and alphabetic literacy moving humanity onward into the scientific and democratic regimes of the west.

The linguistic myth propagates one particular model. It is also at the same time a remarkably thin and ungenerous story of humanity. To take spoken and written words and the relations between them as the prime backbone of human history gives a limited view indeed of the vast and astonishing array of communicative forms developed by human beings and used so exuberantly in their multiplex practices throughout the world. If Orality and Literacy are to be our heroes then much of the variegated tale of human endeavour remains untold.

Myth and learning

For all our rightly critical approaches to literacy nowadays, it is still easy to let this persuasive myth about the centrality of language – and language of a particular kind - shape our understandings of what actually goes on in learning. The linguistic myth is still very much with us. In the press, in official circles, in everyday conversations, there is constant talk of literacy hours, reading tests, national and international literacy league tables; and panics over ‘falling standards’, over literacy ‘undermined’ by telephone texting or over younger generations incapable of proper spelling. All this taps deep emotions - the end of civilisation!

Challenging such interpretations is of course nothing new. Teachers and learners often break away from the narrownesses of the restrictive tale, and ‘visual

aids', practical learning, and multi-media approaches are well established in the language and practice of education. And yet the myth of the overwhelming importance of spoken and (especially) written language is still amazingly strong. It seems natural to focus just on *that* when we explore what learning means: our awe of the epic figures of Orality and Literacy between them bestriding human history blinkers us to other dimensions of learning.

Let me refer here to my experience at the Open University (UK). Opening in the early 1970s, the university was designed for distance-learning students - so pedagogic assumptions that seemingly needed no scrutiny in 'conventional' teaching contexts had to be articulated and rethought. For me this process became rather like another experience of fieldwork, where, again, I (and others) learned not just about new situations but about our own unexamined assumptions. Among them was an implicit model of teaching as basically a matter of *words*: a spoken lecture, discussions in seminars, marking students' written work, providing written or spoken feedback, grading written examinations. But would that work in distance situations? Should we draw on a more considered mix of media and think of ways students could use these too in their learning?

So the written word, yes - always one important element. But not the dreary undemanding typescripts of the then-current correspondence courses, but visually rich material interspersed with diagrams, images, activities and annotations, high-quality products that felt as well as looked good (some outsiders thought it really rather *too* glossy and extravagant!). From the start there was also television, radio, scientific 'home experimental kits', telephone communication, and some opportunity for face-to-face interaction in tutorials and summer schools. Audio-cassettes provided structured routes for specific learning activities and for relating them to accompanying visual material. As time went on there were videos, computer activities, electronic communication, CD-ROMs, web resources At the outset - even sometimes now - this range of media startled some colleagues in other universities who queried whether such media could really carry the true intellectual demands made through conventional written- and speech-based teaching..

My point is not to laud the Open University (much as I admire it) but to stress that one reason for its undoubted success has been its *mix* of media: not just the written word but visual, auditory and tactile modes of many kinds, together with a tapping into students' diverse experiences outside the university 'walls'. My experience there could not but reinforce my conviction that there is more to learning - and to human culture - than speech and writing.

Because the Open University was new and different we had consider its range of learning media explicitly. But some mix is actually a feature of most forms of learning - something easy to miss if we conceive the overriding framework as linguistic, prototypically written. There is of course something in this picture (and many forms of assessment have indeed been dominated by the verbal) - but it is scarcely the whole truth: I am not thinking so much of 'audio-visual aids' as of the wide range actually utilised in so much teaching and learning. Writing may perhaps be at the apex. But remember the spoken word in schools and universities

over the centuries - and that also means all those non-verbal dimensions that (we have seen) are inextricably interwoven within this multiplex communication channel. And even writing: *not* just a matter of abstract referential content but of inescapably multidimensional qualities. Visual modes not primarily centred on verbal language emphatically come into learning too, from mathematical, musical and cartographic notation systems, scientific diagrams, and book layouts, to the patternings of pictures, buildings, icons, human-made displays. Tactile manipulation and bodily movements (or restraint of movement) are relevant also: control of writing implements, acceptable ways of sitting or walking or greeting, practical skills like drawing, handling printed documents, using calculators, lab work, computer control. Demeanour, proxemic stationing, and gendered or age-defined behaviour are all in one way or another learned through a mixture of channels: visual, auditory, tactile, bodily, artefactual. The linguistically-privileged fiction too easily makes us overlook the multi-media multimodal nature of our learning.

And this matters. Unpacking the overly-linguistic tale of human destiny and re-awakening a conscious awareness of the multiplexity of human communication is not just a question of academic theorising but directly pertinent for how we view learning. This is not a plea for giving up reading or suggesting books are outdated (as some might urge ...). Rather it is to highlight the need to see 'writing' in the context of, and working in tandem with, the many other media through which we actually educate and learn; recognising at the same time the multiplexity of literacy itself - multimodal, manipulated in diverse ways by its manifold users. New computer and internet developments may make multimodality particularly topical today - but in various combinations it has been around for centuries. Not to recognise this is to substitute a parochial and narrow fiction for a proper awareness of the multiple and diverse media that actually feature in our educational processes.

We might also do well to recognise the constellation of extra-institutional forms in which learners are in practice involved.. Even if teachers try to limit the types of communicative media they are prepared to give credence to, their students will not. All learners draw on a huge - though no doubt culturally and situationally variable - range of resources to integrate and interpret their learning, whether as mature students bringing to bear their experiences of work, parenthood, films or the web or as children building out from multimodal family worlds or creating imaginative playground games around Pokemon cards or Harry Potter (Pahl 2002, Grugeon in press, Hull and Schultz 2002). For teachers to fix their gaze on the verbal heroes and screen out this range as if it did not exist is to substitute myth for reality.

Those with formal responsibilities in education may indeed choose to highlight certain elements - and rightly so when this is done knowingly and with some sense of humility amidst the wealth of cultural diversity within which the myth of the triumph of language in its western alphabetic form is only one strand; remembering too that communicative media at one time outside the academic pale may later get re-classified within it. We need to be open to these diverse and

perhaps changing resources: not dismissing the traditional skills of 'literacy' but appreciating their multiplexities and setting them in their place alongside others.

Bringing into the open the myth of the linguistic highroad to learning can startle us into greater recognition of the other actors in our shared and varied human drama than the two pure verbally-clad heroes. As participants in education, in whatever role, we should capitalise joyfully – and knowingly – on that multiplexity both within and beyond the walls of our formal educational institutions..

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¹ For example Brown 1999, Coleman 1995, Cooper 1995, Finnegan 1992, 2002, Foley 2002, Sherzer 2002.

² See MacNeill 2000, Scollon 2001, Streeck and Knapp 1992, Tracey 1999.

³ 'Multiplex' is a convenient shorthand for the arguably more accurate but ponderous 'multimodal and multi-media' (terms themselves somewhat elusive, both differing and overlapping; see further Finnegan 2002 Chapter 2); it implies less a multiplicity of identical or comparable elements/units than a spectrum of differing dimensions, each with their own multiplicities, intertwining and reacting together.

⁴ For perspectives on this large subject see Boyarin 1993, Coleman 1996, Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Finnegan 2002: 229ff, Foley 2002: 65ff., Kress 2003, Mignolo 1994, Pahl 2002, Street 1993; on non-alphabetic systems (an important and often neglected topic but too lengthy to discuss here), see Finnegan 2002: 159ff

⁵ See especially Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Kress 2003.

⁶ Some recent UNESCO pronouncements (2003) are more open and pluralistic, however.

⁷ See the illuminating analysis in Bauman and Briggs 2000.