WHAT IS ORALITY?

A Term Paper

Presented to

Dr. Lovejoy

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

MIS6535 Orality Theories

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January 25, 2008
What is orality? It is a very uncommon word in the English language. This is not surprising since highly literate individuals have always shaped the way that language is used. Even the “trusty” spell-check on Microsoft Word 2007 is convinced that the word ‘orality’ is misspelled. This paper is an attempt to understand what is meant by the word ‘orality.’ To do this, this paper will look at a few of the most important developments in the history of oral theory. This paper will also defend and explain the great need for more oral approaches to methods in Christian ministry. Finally, this paper will show some of the many ways in which orality can shape Christian ministry.

In his article, “The Extent of Orality,” Dr. Grant Lovejoy says that many dictionaries define orality as “a reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication.” As the history of oral theory will show, this is a very narrow definition. The term ‘oral’ is a positive term. It focuses on what a person can do instead of what they cannot do. The term ‘illiterate’ has negative connotations. There are three main problems with using the word ‘illiterate.’ First, this word implies an absolute lack of literacy skills. By using the term ‘illiterate,’ one completely obscures any middle ground between oral and literate. Secondly, in some societies, the term ‘illiterate’ can mean ‘stupid’ or ‘uninformed.’ Finally, it is grossly unfair to characterize a culture or a person by what they are not. A larger aspect of orality is that it shapes the way that communities are. This can be clearly seen in an example that comes from two neighboring villages in the South Pacific. The first village had a song which contained lyrics clearly laying out the boundaries of everyone’s property. This included their possession of the land between the two villages which was always disputed over. In their song, the first community claimed that they were the rightful owners of the disputed land. However, the second village also had a song. Their song clearly

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2 This example was given in class.
stated that they were the rightful owners of the land. This is just one example that shows how, on a larger scale, orality refers to the oral tendencies that societies have. Dr. Lovejoy says that “a fuller description of orality takes into consideration the collection of characteristics (cognitive, communicational, and relational) that are typical of cultures that function orally.”³ To better understand the term orality, it is helpful here to look into the development of oral theory over the years.

Oral theory really has its beginning with the “Homeric Question.” McCarthy says that the Homeric Question is a “philological inquiry… that goes back at least to the late 18th century scholar F.A. Wolf.”⁴ Central to the development of oral theory was the question of whether Homer’s famous poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, were composed orally or in writing. To answer this question, Milman Parry, an associate professor at Harvard, closely studied epic singers in Yugoslavia. With him, he took along his brilliant graduate assistant Albert Lord. Parry wanted to know, “how the South Slavic Muslim epic singers created the epic songs that they sang night after night in the coffee houses during the month of Ramadan.”⁵ How was it that these singers could recite poems consisting of over 100,000 lines? How was it that these songs were never sung the same way twice? Parry believed that these singers must be modern day equivalents of the ancient poet Homer. Their research was published in 1960, by Albert Lord, in the book entitled, “The Singer of Tales.” They found that there were several factors that enabled these epic singers to continually create their songs as they preformed. Their research led Parry to believe that “virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition.”⁶ First of all, they found that through the years, these poets had learned many standardized themes such as “the council, the gathering of the army, the challenge, the despoiling of the vanquished, the hero’s shield, and so on and on.”⁷ These themes were gathered from

³ Lovejoy, 122.
⁵ McCarthy, 62.
⁷ Ong, 23.
listening to other, older poets recite their songs. Throughout the years, these poets had amassed a large database of common themes which they would remember during their performances. Secondly, Parry and Lord discovered that “the use of a given epithet was determined not by its precise meaning so much as by the metrical needs of the passage in which it turned up.” These poets, by long experience, had developed an intuitive feel for weaving the memorized themes and the didactic hexameter (metrical needs) together during a song. This process is very technical but it was second nature to these brilliant oral epic singers. This showed the researchers that the singers were very competent. This study created a lot of debate in the fields of oral theory and epic studies. Because of this, these two areas of study began to flourish and expand rapidly by the 1980s and ’90s. McCarthy writes that “the volumes by Milman Parry and Albert Lord... provide the foundation for oral studies.” In particular, these studies influenced a man named Walter Ong.

Walter Ong has been extremely influential in the development of oral theory. In 1982, Ong, a Catholic scholar, wrote a book called, “Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.” This book was part of a series of books designed to give the current state of thinking in a variety of select disciplines. This book not only represented his views but also represented a current consensus in the field of oral theory. From the research conducted by Parry and Lord, Ong thought that it was possible to “generalize somewhat about the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures.” Ong believed that there were significant differences between the oral and the literate mind. He described primary oral cultures as those cultures “with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even the possibility of writing.” In his book, Ong went on to describe in depth what he believed to be the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures. He said that, in primary oral cultures, their thought and expression tended to be “additive

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8 Ong, 21.
9 McCarthy, 62.
10 Ong, 31.
11 Ong, 31.
rather than subordinative.”¹² He said that was because primary oral cultures tended to look towards pragmatics rather than syntactics. Ong said that primary oral cultures also tended to be “aggregative rather than analytic.”¹³ This characteristic meant that oral expression “carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage.”¹⁴ They also tended to be “redundant or ‘copious.’”¹⁵ This feature helped the speaker and the audience to stay on track. Primary oral cultures were also “conservative or traditionalist.”¹⁶ Whenever they could get a story in a memorable package they would keep it that way. This explained why primary oral cultures used clichés a lot and why they were reluctant to learn anything new. Ong believed that primary oral cultures structured their lives around their rituals to help them remember. He thought that they were “close to the human lifeworld.”¹⁷ They were rooted in actual events rather than abstract ideas. Also, Ong wrote that primary oral cultures were “agonistically toned.”¹⁸ This meant that they were detailed, emotional, physical, and captured the struggles of life. Ong believed that they tended to be “empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced.”¹⁹ This meant that during their performances, the performer wanted the audience to be emotionally connected to his story. Ong said that they also tended to be homeostatic, “that is to say, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.”²⁰ They were relative to the present. Finally, Ong said that primary oral cultures are “situational rather than abstract.”²¹ What he meant by this was that “oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract.

¹² Ong, 37. ¹³ Ong, 38. ¹⁴ Ong, 38. ¹⁵ Ong, 39. ¹⁶ Ong, 41. ¹⁷ Ong, 42. ¹⁸ Ong, 43. ¹⁹ Ong, 45. ²⁰ Ong, 46. ²¹ Ong, 49.
in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld.22 Here, Ong used research from A. Luria’s book, “Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations,” to show that, in the absence of literacy, primary oral learners had not developed reasoning. Ong also thought that oral societies had trouble with self-analyzing. In addition to primary orality, Ong describes what he calls “secondary orality.” Secondary orality describes oral communication which is transmitted electronically and made possible by the literacy of the people who create the electronic media. Secondary orality has taken oral culture and used electronic media to reinforce it.

Today, many scholars have begun to ask the question, “Was Ong wrong?” One scholar who has dealt greatly with this question is James Paul Gee. In his article, “From the Savage Mind to Ways with Words,” Gee has criticized the strict distinction that Ong drew between orality and literacy. Gee argues that literacy is a sub-category of language use and that what is taught in school is language use. He says that so much of what Ong attributes to the effects of literacy is actually only using language differently. Since different cultures use language in different ways they will naturally have different literacy skills. To prove his point, Gee uses an example from Trackton, North Carolina that was taken from Heath’s “Ways with Words.” Trackton was a working class African-American community. What Heath found was that the Trackton children, whose education at home was primarily orally based, “had failed to gain the necessary written composition skills they would need to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.”23 This meant that the children’s teachers asked the children questions that they did not understand and expected the children to give answers in a way that they did not understand, all because their reasoning was more analogical than analytical. Gee concluded that “literacy in and of itself leads to no higher order, global cognitive skills; all humans who are acculturated and socialized are already in possession of high order cognitive skills, though their expression and the practices they are

22 Ong, 49.
embedded in will differ across cultures." Gee also attacked the view that literacy had created the Western mindset. Ong, or the proponents of Ong, argued that literacy produced certain mental effects. In his rebuttal, Gee uses an example drawn from "The Psychology of Literacy" by Scribner and Cole. In their example, Scribner and Cole used the Vai, a people group in Liberia. The Vai were literate in three different languages: Arabic, English, and Vai. What they found was that "each of these literacies is tied to a particular set of uses." They showed that the Vai had literacy without the effects Ong had proposed. Gee said that these results "call into question much work on the cognitive consequences of literacy." He said that the effects Ong tied to literacy were more likely to be caused by formal schooling and all that is involved in that process than just literacy itself. Another example that Gee uses is drawn from Scollon and Scollon and their book, "Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication." Scollon and Scollon pointed out how the Athabaskans in Alaska had different discourse practices than Canadian and American English speakers. In particular, the Athabaskans had real trouble when they were asked to write anonymous letters. In Athabaskan culture, communication was always done face to face. If an Athabaskan was to write an anonymous letter, it would be showing off and would be considered very bad. In this example, a particular aspect of literacy was running into cultural values and world views. Finally, Gee criticizes the view that "literacy leads to higher cognitive skills" which was drawn from the research of Vygotsky and Luria (and used by Ong). They had concluded that in the absence of literacy, the people that they had interviewed had not developed abstract reasoning processes. Gee argued that this was not the case. He said that the research could not show whether the "results were caused by literacy, by schooling, or even by the new social institutions.

24 Maybin, 189.
25 Maybin, 177.
26 Maybin, 178.
27 Maybin, 176.
that the Russian Revolution exposed these subjects to.”

Gee argued that it was not that the subjects were unable to reason but just that they had a different starting point than the researchers did.

Another scholar who has criticized some of Ong’s views on orality is Ruth Finnegan. Finnegan has a wealth of knowledge drawn from the many years she has spent studying oral cultures in Africa. She believes that the use of language in written and oral artistry have similarities and connections. That is why Finnegan refers to oral art/performance/forms as “oral literature.” In her book, “The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa,” Finnegan says that she has “long held the view that there is nothing strange or unusual in the interaction of oral and written forms...it is time to move decisively away from the idea that such interactions are ‘transitional’, as if some half-way position between two separate stages.” Finnegan is trying to show the problem with Ong’s either/or distinction between orality and literacy. She is one of many who believe that there is little difference between performance and written art. Both have artistry, skill, beauty, variety, and use language in the same way.

The above mentioned authors pointed out that Ong was incorrect in some of his assumptions. He has been criticized for his stark either/or thinking between orality and literacy. He was also incorrect to assume than oral people do not think logically. Ong tended to do a lot of ‘us’ and ‘them’ talk, but he did not emphasize that all of us are oral in varying degrees. He drew the line between orality and literacy a bit too distinctly. Also, he should have avoided language such as ‘cannot’, ‘never’, or ‘always’ because, as Finnegan showed, every genre in written literature has it counterpart in oral literature. However, these scholars also agree that Ong got not a few things right. First of all, Ong put the subject of orality squarely in the minds of researchers, educators, and scholars. He also demonstrated that oral cultures were very competent. Today, most scholars agree that gaining literacy in school changes one’s thinking.

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28 Maybin, 177.
Ong also showed that gaining literacy is not always a good thing. He really brought attention to how oral contemporary society is. Finally, he showed that a people are identified by their stories.

So why does orality matter? To understand this question, it is important to look closely at an example that comes from some of the recent developments in Christian missions. Then, it will be helpful to look at the extent of orality in the world today and what this means for Christian ministry.

Throughout the history of the Church, certain individuals have ‘rediscovered’ the importance of communicating the gospel to oral communicators using oral methods. One such individual was Hans-Ruedi Weber. Weber was a missionary in Central Celebes, Indonesia in the 1950s. Soon after arriving in Indonesia, Weber realized that the Christians there had not received much discipleship after baptism. Many of them had chosen Christianity over Islam because they could keep their dogs and pigs! Weber realized that about two-thirds of these people were illiterate and that they were not responding to the highly literate teaching methods he was using because it was not their preferred learning style. This led Weber to understand that “if these people were to learn the Scriptures, they first must be liberated ‘from the abstract ideas of our catechisms and doctrines… We must proclaim picturesquely and dramatically rather than intellectually and verbally.’” 30 Weber knew that he had to change his teaching methods if he wanted to be effective. The gospel message must be understood before it can be believed. As Ong showed (almost 30 years later), oral learners find it hard to “understand, internalize, and recall messages that do not come through... their learning preference and cultural presentation style.” 31 Therefore, Weber chose to use methods of communication that were appealing to the Central Celebes peoples learning preference. In order for the gospel to be understood, it must be presented in an understandable way. Because he knew this, Weber used orally based methods such as “chalk and talk.” In this method, Weber used tribal evangelism that incorporated story-telling that was

accompanied by drawings. He “became their student, learning from these ‘imaginative artists who thought and spoke in colorful, glowing pictures, actions and symbols.” Because Weber was willing to learn how the native people communicated, and he was willing to change his established teaching methods, the people there understood the gospel and began to grow in their faith. This shows that how we communicate the gospel makes a big difference in a person’s response to it. Our understanding of orality will shape the way that we present the Gospel. Weber wrote a book called, “Communicating the Gospel to Illiterates” which has been influential in the development of Chronological Bible Storying (CBS).

One of the men behind the development of the CBS method was Jim Slack. Influenced by Weber’s book, Slack realized that literacy was a very big deal. He wanted to determine the level of orality in the world today. Because countries only measured literacy levels, Slack determined that where literacy was not, orality by necessity must be. Slack found that “nearly two billion (36.4%) of the world’s five and one-half billion people are oral communicators.” This means that nearly one third of the world’s population would have great difficulty in understanding the gospel if it was presented to them in a literate format. Not only this, Slack found that about two-thirds of the world’s population “possess an oral communication learning preference.” To make this figure even more startling, Slack explained that “over 90% of the world’s ministers are literates who use expositional formats when presenting the Gospel.” This has immense implications for Christian missions. In his research, Slack wrote that “to communicate effectively with oral communicators, presentations must match their oral communication learning preference.” This is what Weber had come to learn. Slack noted that the majority of oral learners would never become literate in their lifetime. This means that in order for oral learners to hear

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32 Steffen and Terry, 324.
33 Slack, 1.2.
34 Slack, 1.5.
35 Slack, 1.2.
36 Slack, 1.11.
and understand the gospel, “it is imperative that the Gospel be presented to them by means of a narrative format.” Slack showed that this was not happening very frequently and that is why it is important that ministers, and everyday Christians, understand the differences between oral and literate communication styles. Because of the sheer volume of oral preferred learners, the nature of communication, and the dire lack of oral presentations of the Gospel, understanding orality is a very important!

Now, it is important to ask the question, “How can what we understand about orality be applied to Christian ministry today?” To answer this question, it will be helpful to look at a few current examples of how orality is shaping Christian ministry. There are many ways which Christian laymen, pastors, and missionaries are using oral strategies to impact the world. One way that is very effective is using biblical stories during face to face conversation. This can sometimes take the form of Chronological Bible Storying (CBS). One missionary who was very successful using bible stories in his ministry was Calvin Fox. He was a missionary in Orissa, India for many years. Orissa is an area in India where there is still great persecution of Christians. Fox was able to use his talents as a farmer to start an agricultural training center there. During the day, local believers were trained at the center to be agricultural consultants, but at night they were taught how to use biblical stories to plant churches. Fox realized that for the gospel to effectively spread in Orissa, he would have to turn farmers into pastors, not the other way around. The local believers did all of their training at the agricultural center and never took any materials with them. This enabled them to get into areas that were very dangerous for Christians. Because they were local farmers, they were also able to fit in well with the surrounding community. This helped their ministry to expand rapidly. In the safer areas, Fox allowed the pastors to take cassettes of stories with them and they would gather together in small groups and listen to the cassettes. This is another way that orality is being applied to ministry. This approach is also used in the One Story

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37 Slack, I, 16.  
18 This example was given in class.
In this project, missionaries are trying to put biblical stories into the heart language of many of the world's unreached people groups who have no written Bible. Working closely with local storytellers, the missionaries help them to craft biblical stories, paying close attention to relevant world-view and cultural issues. The missionaries then record the local storyteller as he performs the crafted story. The first distribution medium of these stories is face-to-face storytelling. In addition to this, the recorded stories can be distributed by cassette to the local population and the missionaries, using the help of the local church (if possible), can follow up the stories with discussion and explanation of the important points in the stories. In the One Story project, missionaries also try to get local radio stations to broadcast the recorded stories.

Broadcasting radio programs is another way in which orality has made a difference in Christian ministry. A good example of this comes from another missionary in India named J.O. Terry. Terry realized that radio broadcasts could be used to penetrate the harder to reach areas with the gospel. They are also helpful because they do not single out individuals for suspicion as a personal house visit from a missionary would. J.O Terry wanted to put together a radio broadcast and he used local songwriters and nationally known musicians to make the program attractive to the local audience. He used radio listening groups and distributed many radios that were tuned to his radio station only. Each group was lead by a trained Christian who had the complete script of the radio broadcast beforehand. This approach has been very successful. Using radio broadcasts has also been effective in a country in North Africa and the Middle East. In this country, missionaries have also learnt the importance of text messaging on cell phones. During normal radio broadcast feedback, the missionaries were swamped by text messages from locals who had all sort of questions relating to the broadcasts. In today's developing world, cell phones and other technological devices are going to play a large role in Christian ministry.

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39 This example was given in class.
40 This example was given in class.
41 This example was given in class.
Another way in which orality can be used in Christian ministry is in the area of health care. In East Africa, there is a missionary couple who are working with the Safwa people. They have a medical ministry which creates opportunities for them to share stories with unbelievers. They have also trained their medical staff to share stories with their patients. This platform gives the missionaries a chance to talk with local people in private and in their homes. This helps to keep their visits from causing suspicion from other locals who persecute Christians. It also gave them a platform with repeated contact with the people there. Not just this, it gave great credibility to them as messengers. This was important because in oral cultures there is a greater tendency to evaluate the messenger alone than the message apart from the messenger.

In North America, there are many ways in which orality is affecting churches. One good use of orality in churches is using bible storying in ESL classes. Bible stories can be used to test listening comprehension, and the student can also be asked to explain what a specific story means. This method can help to expose many non-believers from other countries to the gospel. Storying can be used in children’s ministry, especially during Vacation Bible School. Oral approaches can make a difference among teens, prison inmates, inner city residents, Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, and people in mountain regions. These are just a few of the groups who would benefit from a more oral presentation of the gospel. Although much is being done, there is still a great need for more oral approaches to ministry in our churches today.

The statistics are shocking. The world is full of individuals who will never have the gospel presented to them in a way that they can understand. If one cannot understand the gospel, how can one believe the gospel? It is impossible! If Christians ignore oral methods of communication in gospel ministry they will become like ostriches with their heads stuck in the sand. It is our responsibility as Christians to share the gospel with the whole world, not just the part of the world that understands the

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42 This example was given in class.
way we communicate. For this reason, understanding orality is vital to the global growth of Christianity in the world today.


