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THE MYTH OF ORALITY AND LITERACY

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In my research on discourse over the last few years, I became aware that theoretical work done in the fields of anthropology, rhetoric, and psychology on oral and literate tradition sheds light on a variety of discourse phenomena. In investigating how this is so, I concluded that it is not orality and literacy per se that accounts for the findings of the oral/literate research, but rather that typically oral and typically written discourse reflects relatively more focus on interpersonal involvement and content, respectively. However, there is something very tantalizing about dichotomies, and something catchy about the notion of orality versus literacy. People continued to walk away from my talks and my articles with the oral/literate split more prominent in their minds than what I intended as my main idea: that it is not orality vs. literacy per se that is the key distinction, but relative focus on involvement vs. content.

That is why I have titled this paper "The Myth of Orality and Literacy," hoping to make more memorable the observation that, though research on orality and literacy underlies many of the observations I am going to make, findings of that research nonetheless reflect phenomena cutting across spoken and written modes. In particular, here I will trace my thinking about spoken and written language and orality and literacy and then show that many features that have been associated exclusively with literacy are rhetorical strategies found in spoken discourse. I will suggest that one major hypothesis about literacy and written language -- the decontextualization hypothesis --

is indeed a myth, but another -- the cohesion hypothesis -- is not.

HOW I DISCOVERED ORALITY AND LITERACY

I "discovered" orality vs. literacy as a theoretical framework when I was stumped by my own data. I was working on a project analyzing narratives told by people who had seen a film. On this project,¹ we had a short film made which had sound but no dialogue, showed it to twenty women between the ages of 18 and 26, had each one tell another woman of roughly the same age what she had seen in the film, and tape-recorded and later painstakingly transcribed the narratives. This process was repeated in many different countries in order to introduce a cross-cultural component to the research. I took the film to Greece and showed it to twenty women in Athens, repeating the procedure of the experiment there. Then I set about comparing the narratives told by Greek and American women about the same film.

I found that the American women in our study tended to approach the telling about the film as a memory task, whereas the Greek women tended to approach it as a storytelling task. The Americans seemed to struggle to recall as many details as possible, and to get them in correct chronological order ("Let's see is it while he's up in the ladder? or ... or before"). They also tended to talk about the film as a film, using cinematic jargon ("camera angle," "soundtrack," "the scene shifts"). When they exercised their critical acumen, it was directed at the filmmaker's technique. They criticized the soundtrack ("it was REALLY LOUD"), the costumes ("they were supposed to be farmerish and really just had clothes like a person with like ... store levis and a new red bandana around his neck"), and the acting ("He'd never make it as a fruitpicker").

In contrast, the Greeks told better stories. They included only those details which contributed to some main point they were building toward, and that main point was never about the film as a film, but about the film's message -- for example, that it showed the beauty of agricultural life. As a result, the Greek narratives were significantly shorter, an average of 84 "idea units"

(Chafe, 1980). Moreover, the Greeks interpreted more; they ascribed social roles and motives to the characters, and they offered explanations, judgments, and even philosophization about their actions. The Greek tendency to interpret more showed up on every level of discourse, from the broadest (for example, the "main point" of the narrative or the addition of a long soliloquy about the meaning of the film) to the narrowest (such as lexical choice, whereby, for example, with striking uniformity, the Greek speakers referred to the man in the film as a farmer or worker, whereas the Americans referred to him as a man or a pearpicker). The former categorizations entail the interpretation of the man's status and role, whereas the latter do not.

I was intrigued by these findings, but I was not sure what to make of them. At this point of consternation, John Gumperz suggested that I look at the literature on oral vs. literate tradition.

I turned once again to the classic article by Goody & Watt (1963), and to Goody's more recent book (1977), Domestication of the Savage Mind; to Walter Ong's (1967, 1977) work, and Havelock (1963), who inspired him. I turned as well to an article by David Olson which was then being passed around in manuscript and which finally appeared in the Harvard Educational Review (1977). In addition, an article by Paul Kay (1977) deals with similar issues from the point of view of the evolution of language.

A number of hypotheses run through these sources. One is that the introduction of writing (although perhaps one should say "print") introduced new attitudes toward knowledge and information. It made possible and set value on rote memory as opposed to constructive memory, the former aspiring to slavish accuracy of detail, the latter aspiring to accuracy of spirit but not of detail. (Here the work of Lord, 1960, on oral formulaic tradition was inspirational. Lord, and his teacher, Parry, determined that oral epics were not memorized but recreated at each telling by stitching together formulaic expressions, and draping them over the skeleton of a familiar plot). Olson summarized, catchily, that in writing "the meaning is in the text" and in speaking "the meaning is in the context."

In these primary sources, and in much writing about language and in particular about composition that has been inspired by these sources, there has developed a decontextualization hypothesis: that in literate discourse the accuracy of detail is valued, and that literate discourse is decontextualized or text-focused rather than context-focused.

In a sense, the Americans in my cross-cultural narrative study were approaching the film narrative as a more decontextualized task, as they struggled to achieve accurate recall of details, whereas the Greeks strove for an effective story and were more inclined to omit or alter details. In this sense, the Americans used more literate strategies in their tellings. However, there is another sense in which the Americans' narratives were not decontextualized at all. They were not approaching narrative as a task contextualized in interpersonal interaction, but rather as a task contextualized in school. They were using strategies that seemed appropriate to the context they in fact were in: a university setting.

This perspective reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the notion that any discourse can be decontextualized (for example, Rader, 1982), and that what has been thought "literate" is in fact associated with formal schooling. (This conclusion is elaborately and meticulously demonstrated in Scribner and Cole, 1981). The emphasis on correct memory for detail, chronological sequence, and getting facts straight without personal evaluation, which the Americans in this study exhibited, is associated with this kind of literate or school-based strategy. The Greeks, on the other hand, being less concerned with slavish accuracy of detail and more concerned with telling a good story, were approaching the task using strategies learned in everyday interaction. Indeed, there is indication that Greeks (and members of many other cultures as well) employ such interactive strategies more regularly, in both school and business settings, where many Americans think it more appropriate to conventionally ignore interpersonal concerns and focus on content.

The point here is not that the Greeks are oral and the Americans literate. That is the misconception I specifically want to caution against. Quite the contrary, the findings

of the study demonstrate that these oral and literate strategies all appear in oral language.

Thus we have exploded two myths about literacy: (1) that writing is decontextualized and (2) that text-focused discourse is found only in writing.

Another strand of my research (Tannen 1982a; 1982b) brought me face to face with a second hypothesis about literacy and orality which I believe is not a myth -- what I call the cohesion hypothesis: that spoken discourse establishes cohesion through paralinguistic features, whereas written discourse does so through lexicalization.

THE COHESION HYPOTHESIS

In speaking, everything that is said must be said in some way: at some pitch, in some tone of voice, at some rate of speed, with some expression or lack of expression in the voice and on the face. All these nonverbal and paralinguistic features reveal the speaker's attitude toward the message and establish cohesion -- that is, show relationships among ideas, highlight relative importance, foreground and background information, and so on. Just as Bateson (1972) observes that in a social setting one cannot not communicate (the act of keeping silent is a communication within the frame of interaction), just so, one cannot speak without showing one's attitude toward the message and the speech activity.

In contrast, in writing, the features of nonverbal and paralinguistic channels are not available. A person may wrinkle his or her face up until it cracks while he or she writes, but this will not show up on the written page. He or she may yell or whisper or sing while composing sentences, but the words as they fall on the page will not reflect this.

Therefore, in writing, the relationships between ideas and the writer's attitude toward them must be lexicalized. This can be done by stating outright (one thinks of the contrast between laughing while saying something, or writing "humorously;" by winking while speaking, or writing "I don't mean this literally"), by careful choice of words

with just the right connotation, by complex syntactic constructions and transitional phrases, and so on. Thus a number of linguists have found that in spoken narrative (and I think the genre narrative is important), most ideas are strung together with no conjunctions or with the minimal conjunction "and" (Chafe, 1982; Kroll, 1977; Ochs, 1979). In contrast, in written narrative, conjunctions are chosen which show the relationship between ideas ("so," "because"), and subordinate constructions are used which do some of the work of foregrounding and backgrounding which would be done paralinguistically in speaking.

Thus we have the second hypothesis: that typically spoken discourse relies on paralinguistic and nonverbal channels, whereas written discourse relies on lexicalization for the establishment of cohesion.

ORAL AND LITERATE STRATEGIES IN DISCOURSE

The idea that spoken discourse can exhibit strategies associated with orality or literacy (that is, with typically spoken- or written-like discourse) can be traced back to what Bernstein (1964) called restricted and elaborated codes. Bernstein found that children's discourse, as elicited by experimental tasks, fell into two stylistic types, which he identified as different "codes." The two codes might be represented by something like this: in describing a picture, a child using restricted code might say, "They hit it through there and he got mad"; a child using elaborated code might say, "The kids were playing ball and hit the ball through the window. The man who lived in the house got mad at them." Now a person will have found the second version easier to understand, only because he or she does not have the picture in front of him or her.

Bernstein did not associate these two codes with orality and literacy, but this connection is observed by Kay (1977). Furthermore, Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1981) point out that the overt lexicalization of background material which is perfectly obvious in the context of interaction is akin to literacy. (See Michaels and Collins, 1982, for a demonstration of how primary school teachers prepare children to use literate strategies in speaking).

ORAL AND LITERATE STRATEGIES IN CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

I would like to turn now to my own research on conversational style. By tape-recording and transcribing two and a half hours of naturally occurring conversation at Thanksgiving dinner among six participants of various ethnic and geographic backgrounds, I was able to describe the linguistic and paralinguistic features that made up participants' speaking styles in this setting. I focused on such features as pacing, rate of speech, overlap and interruption, intonation, pitch, loudness, syntactic structures, topic, storytelling, irony, humor, and so on (Tannen 1979b). Many of these features turned out to cluster in the styles of participants such that three of them seemed to share what might be called one style, while the other three clearly did not share this style. I have called the "dominant" style "high-involvement," since many of the features which characterized it could be understood as placing emphasis, or what Gumperz calls the "signalling load," on interpersonal involvement, or the interpersonal dynamic of the interaction. In this sense, this style can be associated with oral strategies. The others who did not share this style expected strategies that may be seen as more literate-like in style, for they placed more of the signalling load on content.

One way in which this pattern emerged was in attitude toward and tendency to use overlap or simultaneous speech. Three of the participants in the conversation I studied were what I have called cooperative overlappers. That is, two or more of them often talked at the same time, but this overlapping speech did not mean that they were not listening to each other, and it did not mean that they wanted to grab the floor -- that is, to interrupt each other. Often, a listener talked at the same time as a speaker to show encouragement, to show understanding by uttering "response cries" (Goffman, 1981), even by telling little mini-stories to show understanding, to finish the speaker's sentences to demonstrate that the listener knew where the sentence was headed. All of this overlapping gives the speaker the assurance that he or she is not in the conversation alone. The active listener often asked questions of the speaker which the speaker obviously would have answered anyway, not to indicate that they thought the speaker was not going to tell, but to assure

the speaker that the information was eagerly awaited. (Space does not permit the presentation of examples to demonstrate this, as they require detailed discussion of line-by-line explication. However, such examples and analysis can be found in Tannen 1979b; 1981a; 1981b; in press).

The preference for overlapping talk in some settings has been reported among numerous ethnic groups (Armenian-American, Black-American, West Indies, Cape Verdean-American, to name just a few). The preference for overlapping talk sacrifices the clear relay of information for the show of conversational involvement. In that sense, it is typically interactive or oral as opposed to literate in style. The effect of overlapping or "chiming in" with speakers who share this style is to grease the conversational wheels. But when speakers use this device with others who do not expect or understand its use, the effect is quite the opposite. The other speaker, feeling interrupted, stops talking. (The paradoxical aspect of this style clash is that the interruption is actually created by the one who stops talking when he or she was expected to continue). This is the obvious and natural reaction of anyone who assumes that in conversation only one person speaks at a time. Such a strategy is literate in style in the sense that it puts emphasis on content: uttering a complete message, a kind of elaborated code. (It is important to note however that this is simply one kind of elaboration, that of the message channel. The other style is using elaboration of another channel: the emotive or interpersonal one. This is discussed in Tannen, 1980b, 1981c).

Another aspect of the oral/literate strategy differences that emerged in this study of conversational style is how speakers got to the point of their stories (i.e. when they told about experiences) and what the point of their stories was likely to be. Speakers of the style I have characterized as using oral strategies (1) told more stories, (2) were more likely to tell stories about their personal experiences, (3) were more likely to have the point of their stories about their own feelings about those experiences, and, finally, perhaps most important, (4) generally did not lexicalize the point of their stories but dramatized them by recreating the speaker's own reaction or mimicry of the characters in the narrative.

These differences in storytelling styles left all participants feeling a bit dissatisfied with the narratives told by those who used a different style. Both tended to react to stories told in the other style with a variant of "What's the point?" -- the rejoinder Labov (1972) has aptly called "withering."

Only the briefest examples can be given here, but detailed examples and discussion can be found in Tannen 1979b (with somewhat fewer examples reproduced in Tannen, 1980b).

Following is an example of a story by Kurt told during Thanksgiving dinner.

- (1) K: Í have a little sèven-year-old student ...
a little girl who wears those. She ..
is too — p
- (2) T: [She wears those? [chuckle]
- K: múch. Can yóu imagine? She's séven years
acc
old, and she síts in her chair and she goes...
acc-----]
[squeals and squirms in his seat.]
- (3) T: Oh:: Go::d. ... She's only SEVen?
- (4) K: And I say well .. hów about let's do sò-and-
so. And she says ... Okay. ... Just like thát.
acc -----] [squealing]
- (5) T: [Oh:::::
p
- (6) D: [What does it méan.
p, acc
- (7) K: It's just so ... She's acting like such a
p
little girl already.

K = Kurt
D = David
T = DT (the author)

Transcription conventions:

p = pianissimo (soft)

acc = accelerando (fast)

: indicates lengthening of vowel

∩ indicates high pitch. ∩∩ indicates very high pitch.

— indicates speech continues uninterrupted (look for continuation on next line).

It is clear from the transcript that the two listeners, David and I (represented in the transcript as D and T respectively), have different reactions to the story. In (3) and (5) I show, through paralinguistically exaggerated responses, that I have appreciated it. In contrast, David states in (6) that he does not understand what the story is supposed to mean. When I played this segment of the taped conversation to David later, he said that Kurt had not said what it was about the girl's behavior that he was trying to point out. Moreover, when Kurt answered David's question in (7), he did not explain at all; David said that "such a little girl" to him means "such a grownup," whereas what Kurt meant was "such a coquette." David seemed to feel that Kurt was not telling the story right: he should say what he means. To Kurt, the point was obvious and should not be stated.

At other times in the transcript David tells stories, and there the reactions of Kurt and the other oral-stylists indicate that they feel David is unnecessarily stating the obvious and not getting to the point quickly enough (see Tannen, 1979b, for detailed analysis).

By expecting the point of a story to be made explicit, and by finding events more important than character's feelings, some of the participants in this conversation were exhibiting expectations of literate-like strategies in speech. By expecting the point of a story to be dramatized by the speaker and inferred by the hearer, and by finding personal feelings more interesting than events, the other speakers were exhibiting oral-like strategies.

It is particularly significant that the speakers in my study who used what I am calling oral strategies were highly literate. Many of the studies which have distinguished between oral and literate strategies in spoken style have

done so to explain the failure of children of certain ethnic groups to learn to write and read well. The speakers I have found using oral strategies in speaking are New Yorkers of East European Jewish background, a cultural group that has been documented as having a highly oral tradition (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1974) as well as a highly literate one. Thus, individuals and groups are not either oral or literate. Rather, people have at their disposal and are inclined to use, based on individual habits as well as social conventions, strategies associated with either or both in speech and in writing.

ORAL AND LITERATE BASED FLUENCY

I would like to present one final example of how both oral and literate strategies surface in spoken discourse, suggested by recent work by Fillmore (1979) on fluency. Fillmore distinguishes four different types of oral fluency, the abilities to:

1. talk at length with few pauses
2. have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts
3. talk in semantically coherent, reasoned, and dense sentences
4. be creative and imaginative with language

I would suggest that the first two of these types of fluency are associated with strategies that have been called oral. They grow out of interactive or social goals, to keep talk going, where the message content is less important than the fact of talk. In contrast, the last two are literate-like types of fluency, since they depend on the intra-textual relationships (as in (3)) and build on words as carrying meaning in themselves rather than triggering social meaning (as in (4)).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, both oral and literate strategies can be seen in spoken discourse. Understanding this, let us not think of orality and literacy as an absolute split, and let us not fall into the trap of thinking of literacy,

or written discourse, as decontextualized. Finally, the examples presented of conversational style make it clear that it is possible to be both highly oral and highly literate. Thus, let us not be lured into calling some folks oral and others literate.

NOTE

¹The project was funded by NIMH Grant 25592 to Wallace Chafe, at the University of California, Berkeley. Findings of this project are reported in papers collected in Chafe (1980), as well as in Tannen (1979a). The specific research discussed here, comparing Greek and American narratives, is presented and discussed in Tannen (1980a). Other parts of the present chapter are adapted from Tannen forthcoming.

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SOVIET PSYCHOLINGUISTICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING OF WRITING

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In the last decade the work of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky has finally begun to receive the attention in the United States that is so rich deserves. The genius of Vygotsky shines through his work despite the years of suppression in the Soviet Union, despite the frequent behavioristic misinterpretations placed on his work in this country, and despite the mistaken identification of his approach and concerns with those of Jean Piaget. Vygotsky's Thought and Language and Mind in Society have been widely read, and his insights into inner speech, the zone of proximal development, the dialectics of thought and language, and the development of word meanings and scientific concepts have proven significant, especially for those of us who are concerned with the learning and development of reading and writing abilities. Yet increasing acceptance has its own dangers.

While interest in Vygotsky and in his work in the fields of psychology and psycholinguistics is high, less attention is being paid to the context from which Vygotsky's work comes. This is particularly true of the philosophical, semiotic, and historical grounds of Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky's work is, in this country, generally viewed to be comparable to that of Jean Piaget and is generally categorized as that of a cognitive psychologist. Yet Vygotsky viewed his work in much broader terms than these. His study of the classics of Marxism-Leninism is highly original and deeply philosophical. His application and extension of Marx's basic concept of activity is itself