

THE COMMINGLING OF ORALITY AND LITERACY IN GIVING A PAPER AT A SCHOLARLY CONFERENCE

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PREFACE

IN AUGUST 1984 I received an invitation to participate in a symposium on "Questions of Orality and Literacy," organized as a tribute to Walter J. Ong, S.J., the scholar who has inspired so much work on this topic with nearly a score of books. (See, in particular, Ong 1967, 1977, 1979 [1958], 1982.) The symposium was to be held 29–31 July 1985 at Rockhurst College in Kansas City. Knowing that I would not be able to be present at the symposium, I agreed to prepare a paper which would be read aloud by someone else. Wanting to write a paper which argues that orality and literacy are intertwined in discourse, I took advantage of the fairly unusual circumstances to dramatize rather than simply argue my point, with reference to the discourse genre GIVING A PAPER.

Goffman (1981, 160) says (or writes) of his lecture (or paper) "The Lecture," "It was designed to be spoken, and through its text and delivery to provide an actual instance—not merely a discussion—of some differences between talk and the printed word." I am indebted to Goffman for providing, in his celebrated lecture/paper, both license and model for what I have tried to do in my current humble one. Moreover, his justifications for publishing a printed version very close to the text he wrote for oral presentation are relevant to mine as well, and I therefore excerpt them from his preface (160–61):

With a modest amount of editorial work, the original format could have been transformed. Reference, laconic and otherwise, to time, place, and occasion could have been omitted; footnotes could have been used to house appropriate bibliography, extended asides, and full identification of sources mentioned in passing; first-person references could have been recast; categoric pronouncements could have been qualified; and other features of the style and syntax appropriate to papers in print could have been imposed. Without this, readers might feel that they had been fobbed off—with a text meant for others and a writer who felt that rewriting was not worth the bother. However, I have refrained almost entirely from making such changes. My hope is that, as it stands, this version will make certain framing issues clear by apparent inadvertence, again instantiating the difference between talk and print, this time from the other side, although much less vividly than might be accomplished by publishing an unedited, closely transcribed tape recording of the initial delivery, along with phrase-by-phrase parenthetical exegesis of gesticulation,

timing, and elisions . . . Of course, both this abuse of readers and what they can learn about framing from being thus abused are somewhat weakened by the fact that the original speaking was not extemporaneous talk, merely reading aloud from a typed text, and that all spontaneous elaborations added to the script on that occasion . . . have been omitted. . . . Moreover, here and there I have not forbore to change a word or add a line (indeed, a paragraph or two) to the original, and these modifications are not identified as such. Finally, a prefatory statement has been added, namely, this one. . . . Thus, however much the original talk was in bad faith, this edited documentation of it is more so.

With this (borrowed) explanation (and borrowed wit), I present a slightly edited version of the paper I wrote which was read aloud by Charles Kovich at the symposium honoring Father Ong. I hereby acknowledge my debt not only to Goffman but to a number of colleagues who generously offered a close reading and reassurance that the somewhat unorthodox form is justified by its topic: David Bleich, Wallace Chafe, Stephen Tyler, and David Wise. To David Wise I am grateful as well for many constructive suggestions which contributed to the emendations and additions to which I allude above.

THE PAPER

The presentation of a paper at a scholarly conference is always occasion, willing or no, for reconsideration of orality and literacy. When the subject of the conference is orality and literacy, such reconsideration is likely to be willing. What we commonly refer to as “giving a paper” is a genre familiar to all those present. But is it an oral or a literate genre? A paper given at a scholarly conference is always the result of a series of transformations to and from speaking and writing, and the act of presenting the paper invariably combines a variety of aspects, some idiosyncratic and some culturally conventionalized, associated with orality and literacy.

“A paper” is created, first, from the culturally relative constraints on discourse of this type which is learned from previous experience at scholarly conferences. A person who had never heard such a paper presented in such a setting would not know how to prepare one. Second, the material from which the paper is created is gleaned from a variety of sources—from the reading of texts written by others, from the hearing of ideas expressed by others (which also were developed in these oral and literate ways), from observations of various sorts, and from consideration and discussion of all this as filtered through the individual imagination. All this material is transformed into various forms of writing and then transformed again into some form of speaking when it is read aloud. Perhaps, as is the case with the paper you are hearing now, earlier drafts were read aloud at interme-

diate stages of preparation, and then reshaped again into writing.

Although the giving of a paper is clearly oral—the performer is speaking, and the audience is hearing—yet there is really a great range of orality and literacy that can be embodied in what can be seen as either an oral or a literate genre—the oral “giving” of a paper, or the written production, “the paper.” At one end of an oral/literate continuum is the speaker who, in keeping with the advice of professional speech coaches, speaks extemporaneously, producing speech that has many of the features of ordinary conversation. Significant among these are conversational syntactic constructions which prefer parataxis to hypotaxis: coordination rather than subordination (Chafe 1982); linking of propositions by the coordinating conjunction *and* rather than presenting them as discrete sentences; using *which* as a conjunction rather than a subordinator (Beaman 1984); and frequent repetition and paraphrase. Such extemporaneous talk is accompanied by fairly continuous eye contact between the speaker and some members of the audience, or the audience in general. At the other end of an oral/literate continuum is the verbatim reading of a paper from a written text, accompanied by little or no eye contact with the audience, as the speaker’s eyes are fixed on the page from which the text is being read.

Yet even these descriptions do not adequately represent the richness of range from oral to literate that may be represented by the activity called “giving a paper.”

An extemporaneous talk may be given for the first time ever, or many times over; it may be thought up as one goes along or constructed from an outline or from notes; it may be reconstructed from a paper that has actually been written down but is being used as an outline rather than a text; it may be memorized verbatim; if memorized or read from a prepared text, it can be reproduced more or less precisely like the original text, or altered more or less in phrasing during production. Verbatim segments—memorized or read—may furthermore be interspersed with off-the-cuff, spontaneously produced segments. But by the same token, apparently off-the-cuff digressions or comments may themselves be vaguely planned, well planned, or actually rehearsed. (Perhaps the extreme case of such double identity is not found in scholarly settings but is common in other arenas: seemingly extemporaneous talk which is actually being read from cue cards or prompters.)

If a speaker who is speaking extemporaneously has given similar “talks” many times over, certain phrases will come tripping off the tongue ready made, and jokes one has supposedly just remembered, or small stories suggested by the subject matter, uttered as the speaker removes glasses to signal the departure from notes, shifts at the podium, leans forward toward

the audience, maintains eye contact for longer periods—these very spontaneous-seeming asides may be well practiced and honed by previous performances. In other words, many aspects that Lord (1960) discovered in oral epic performance—the stitching together of formulaic segments—can also be found in the giving of a scholarly paper.

The difference between listening to someone speak extemporaneously and listening to someone read a written text is evident to all at scholarly conferences, and becomes more so the later it gets in the day and in the conference (as sleep deprivation and sensory overstimulation increase). It takes far greater effort to listen to, and make sense of, a paper read from a text than one extemporaneously spoken. In the latter case, you may sit back and listen, the meaning (or some meaning) coming clear with no special effort beyond the attention of listening. In the former case, you must keep on your mental toes, making a sustained effort at comprehension.

A good example of this is in the preceding sentences. Terms such as *latter* and *former* present little problem when you are reading a written text. Perhaps you must briefly glance back to verify which proposition was *latter* and which *former*, but you can do this fairly quickly, while the ensuing text patiently awaits your return. But if you are hearing the same text read aloud, you have to do a bit of mental scrambling to retrieve what was *former* and what *latter*, based on a text which has already vanished from direct perception, and causing you to miss the immediately ensuing text, which did not stand idly by while you backtracked, but barrelled ahead while you were mentally looking back.

An extemporaneous speaker is unlikely to use the terms *former* and *latter* but would instead repeat or rephrase the propositions to which those terms refer. In this way, talking and listening are nicely suited to each other, as are writing and reading, in terms of the time available to produce and comprehend the discourse. A speaker lacks time to construct complex phrases, and this is a boon to hearers who lack time to comprehend them. Whereas a writer takes extra time to shift words and phrases around in constructing the text, a reader also can take extra time (not as much as the writer, of course, but as much as needed) to rearrange the words in comprehension.

In speaking, even formal speaking, the rhythms established by intonation, stress, and tempo are natural reflections of the flow of thought, issuing in spurts that reflect the perches of consciousness, as Chafe (1980) has shown. In reading aloud, these rhythms are altered, and the rhythms of utterance rarely reflect the spurt-like nature of consciousness.

Another aspect of reading aloud that results in semantically more dense discourse is the lack of hesitations, fillers, and false starts which may actually enhance communication (see, e.g., Levin and Gray 1983), by slowing

down the flow of information and providing organizational markers. Thus, when a written text is read aloud, the processes of production and comprehension don't match, and listeners pay for this mismatch in their effort to comprehend and their loss of comprehension. The person giving the paper pays for the mismatch, too, in the failure to communicate material carefully packed into the paper which is not unpacked and received by many hearers. This is in ironic contrast to the satisfaction felt in knowing that by writing the paper beforehand, taking advantage of the time available to work it over, one has gotten all one's ideas into it and gotten them right. The irony lies in the likelihood that many of the ideas thus gotten into the paper stay right there, without getting into the heads of the hearers.

There can be, moreover, great variation among written texts which are read aloud. A text may be written with the reading aloud in mind, or it may be written in the manner of a text written for publication (hence, to be read silently). A text written with the reading aloud in mind will not have such oral features as hesitations and false starts, but it will also avoid many typically written features such as cataphoric deictics or certain anaphoric deictics such as (again) *former* and *latter*; it will link propositions in temporal and logical order rather than playing syntactic games with them; and it will include such features of oral discourse as frequent repetition and rephrasing, even if the repetition takes slightly different forms from the spontaneous repetition found at all levels of extemporaneous speech (Tannen 1987a, 1987b). These factors of orality and literacy result in great variation in the genre collectively thought of as "giving a paper," even within the parameters of a written text read aloud.

All these dimensions make the genre, "giving a paper," a goldmine for insight into orality and literacy. And the paper you are listening to (or reading) now is even more layered in this respect than most. As Goffman (1981, 167) observes in "The Lecture," his brilliant treatment of speaking and writing as matters of framing, it is generally characteristic of lectures that "animator, author, and principal are the same person." Goffman defines ANIMATOR as "the talking machine," "the thing that sound comes out of." (Here, from the distance of time and place, I offer apologies to the animator of these words, Charles Kovich, for calling him a talking machine—but I point out that the AUTHOR of that metaphor is not me but Goffman, and when Goffman first used it, the animator he was thus describing as a talking machine was himself, making the metaphor an instance of charming self-mockery rather than discourtesy toward another—especially one so generous as to volunteer to animate someone else's paper.)

The AUTHOR, as Goffman explains, is the person who has "formulated and scripted the statements that get made"—the one who wrote the paper.

Who then is the PRINCIPAL? The PRINCIPAL is “someone who believes personally in what is being said and takes the position that is implied in the remarks.” A political speechwriter, for example, is the author but not the principal of the political speech. Writers of fiction and drama also author material that does not represent their personal beliefs, for example, in the dialogue attributed to characters of their creation. In a scholarly paper, however, it is assumed that the author is also the principal, even if not (as in this case) the animator: The author is assumed to believe the statements made and opinions expressed, with the exception of cited material ascribed to others. Thus I may make use of this distinction to point out that although I put the metaphor *talking machine* into this paper, and therefore authored it, I do not personally regard the animator of these words as merely a talking machine.

The distinction between authorship and principality with regard to the likening of the one who is standing before you as a talking machine is small compared to the larger confusion confronting you at this moment (*this*, of course, refers not to the moment when I write, seated alone at my word processor, not confused at all, nor the moment at which future readers may confront the text.) The potential confusion experienced by listeners to a reading aloud of this text is enlightened by Goffman’s analysis of the component characters in what is commonly referred to as a “speaker”—that is, that in this case the animator is not the author. That the present animator is, moreover, of a different gender from the author is perhaps a blessing, making it less likely that the two will be confused. On the other hand, so accustomed are we to identifying animator with author that your current animator might wish, at this point, to hold up a photograph of the author, in an attempt to replace that image in the minds of hearers in place of his own, and thus deflect any impatience or criticism you may feel welling up against the author onto that image rather than his own.

To make a final observation based on Goffman’s tripartite analysis of roles lumped together in the common notion of *speaker*, even though I am the author, I cannot know how the words I have authored will be uttered and thus do not control certain aspects of the orality or literacy of the presentation. For example, did the animator read, following my first reference to Erving Goffman, “nineteen eighty one, page one sixty seven”? Or did he omit that in-text reference as appropriate to the published version but not the oral performance? Furthermore, did he make clear each time the written text included quotation marks—in the quotations from Goffman’s article, for example, and in the instances of quotation marks used to set off a word or phrase—as for example in the very beginning, where the phrase *giving a paper* is enclosed in quotes? And if so, did he do so verbally—for

example, "quote giving a paper endquote"—or nonverbally, for example by gesturing a pair of quotation marks with two fingers of each hand held aloft and flexed as he uttered the words enclosed in quotes?

The inclusion of in-text references to year of publication and page of citation would make the giving of this paper a more literate genre; the indication of the incidence of quotation marks when they appear in the text would do so as well. Furthermore, the indication of quotation marks verbally, by saying "quote endquote," is I think more literate by virtue of being more explicit (cf. Olson 1977, Tannen 1982a), whereas the use of gesture is, I think, more oral—as is the use of intonation rather than explicit marking to show that a phrase is being used in a special way. I am trying to be merciful to my kind animator, who by now may be hopelessly self-conscious in his generous animation, by not remarking on his handling of the hyperliterate convention *cf.* in the preceding sentence (i.e., "cf. Olson 1977"). Similarly, I will not call into question whether or how he animated the literate convention of parentheses and *i.e.* And so on.

All of this has been intended to dramatize that orality and literacy should not be seen as elements of a dichotomy. Rather, any particular instance of speaking and writing is a rich texture of features associated with these two modes. Just as in listening we tend to edit out false starts, repetitions, and hesitations in order to perceive and remember a coherent discourse, so in perceiving and remembering spoken and written genres, we tend to ignore their complexity and diversity and focus on the ways in which they are typically spoken or written. Only thus are we able to conceive of the genre of a scholarly paper presented at a conference, or the act of giving a paper, as a unitary entity. Really, these are idealizations abstracted from highly complex and diverse individual instances of discourse types and activities.

The idea just expressed—that orality and literacy are not dichotomous, but complex and intertwined—is the main point of a number of articles I have written (for example, Tannen 1982a, 1982b) and two books I have edited (Tannen 1982c, 1984b). My current understanding of the complexities of discourse derives from analysis of strategies that have been linked to orality and literacy and was inspired by the vast and deep body of work Fr. Ong has given us, as well as by the work of many others who were inspired by his work. Nonetheless, I have recently moved away from the terminology of orality and literacy, even of oral and literate tradition, continuum, or strategies. In a recent paper on the subject (Tannen 1985), I talk instead about relative focus on involvement. I was driven to this because the power of the terms *oral* and *literate* is far greater than the power of the nouns to which they may be attached: *tradition*, *continuum*, or *strategies*. No matter how much I insisted that orality and literacy should not be seen as dichot-

tomous, hearers and readers came away from my talks and articles with the dichotomy reinforced: "Tannen says this is oral and that literate." And it seems an irresistible temptation for people to place themselves in one or the other camp, so it is a short step from "This is oral and that literate" to "You're oral and I'm literate."

This seems to me particularly dangerous in cases where a distinction between orality and literacy is used to explain the failure of children of minority cultural groups (often blacks) in school. Although most researchers intend nothing of the sort, and many explicitly disclaim any such contention, nonetheless it is common for audiences to come away with the idea that it is the orality of this group that is holding its members back. Someone active in educational activities in Alaska, for example, told me that he has talked to school principals in Eskimo communities who have heard of the research on orality and literacy and concluded that it is their task to ensure the advancement of Eskimo children in their charge by wiping out Eskimo culture and thus ridding the children of the handicap of orality.

In other words, correlation can be confused with causality. The thinking seems to be: these children don't do well in the literate environment of the school; these children come from oral cultures; therefore, their oral culture is preventing them from doing well in school and at literate tasks.

It is the causal link that I would like to question. There are many other reasons that children of certain groups may not do well in school. John Ogbu (In press) has made a similar observation and suggested what some other reasons may be. Scollon and Scollon (1981) argue that reading and other literate tasks are too "focused" to be congenial to Athabaskan Indian culture. Athabaskan culture, they contend, favors mutual participation in sensemaking. An author of words does not have the right to control the interpretation of those words by others. The literate approach to reading which requires a reader to be a slavish recipient of the writer's meaning, therefore, offends a deep Athabaskan cultural value. Such values have little to do with the act of reading *per se*. One could easily treat books or other written materials in a more Athabaskan (i.e., less focused) way.

There are many examples of written materials approached in ways that Scollon and Scollon would describe as nonfocused. Elsewhere in their own writing (Scollon and Scollon 1984), they provide an example in the way Athabaskan children read a test passage, supplying words and hence interpretations that make their own sense of the sentence. Heath (1982) provides vivid documentation of what the Scollons would call nonfocused use of written texts in a Piedmont community of the Carolinas. For example, a young mother who receives a letter about day-care placement for her son takes the letter onto the porch of her house where its interpretation be-

comes the subject of extended conversational negotiation among the mother and an assortment of neighbors.

Underlying the imputation of causality between orality on the one hand and a deficiency in literacy on the other is an assumption of mutual exclusivity—in other words, that individuals and cultures are either oral or literate, not both. Father Ong's monumental work has shown the complex interrelationships between orality and literacy (his bibliography lists eighteen books; for a succinct statement of his views see Ong 1982). My own research affords crucial counterevidence as well. I would like to end, therefore, by briefly summarizing that research, presented in detail elsewhere (Tannen 1982a, 1985), in order to bolster the argument that our view of orality and literacy should not be dichotomous.

I have shown, through close analysis of tape-recorded, transcribed casual conversation (1984a), that many features of the conversational style of New York Jewish speakers can be understood as making use of what might be thought of as oral strategies. For example, more meaning is carried by expressive intonation and tone of voice rather than being lexicalized; speakers switch topics more abruptly and develop topics in an episodic way rather than developing one topic at length before switching to another; they tell more stories, and the points of their stories are more likely to be personal and dramatized in the telling rather than general and explained; the metamessage of rapport and involvement carried by simultaneous speech is more highly valued than the content-focused benefit of allowing a speaker to develop fully a proposition without vocalization from the hearer. Yet Jewish Americans do not typically fail at literate tasks. On the contrary, they do particularly well, as a group, in school and other literate contexts. Jewish culture is BOTH highly oral AND highly literate.

I have tried in this paper to reinforce the point frequently stated by Father Ong but sometimes forgotten when his theories are applied, that orality and literacy are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complex and intertwined dimensions, the understanding of which enriches and enables our understanding of language. I have tried to demonstrate this in the preceding text and performance by showing that the highly literate genre of a scholarly paper is also a highly oral one. I thank you for thus participating in the giving of this paper, and I thank my esteemed and generous animator for transforming my written paper into an oral performance.

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