

Oral cultures; or, the effect of literacy on thought

Robert Frederking

Language Technologies Institute

School of Computer Science

Carnegie Mellon University

September 2017

Literacy changes the way you *think*!

- Reading/writing has changed the way your *brain* works!
 - This is a relatively recent realization.
- Walter J Ong wrote a great book about this: *Orality and Literacy*.
- It starts with the beginnings of Western Civilization

The Ancient Geeks

- Why did the Greeks invent *everything* (in Europe)?
 - Philosophy, science, mathematics, theatre, history, medicine, ...
- Writing had been around for thousands of years already
 - But it had always been done by “scribes”
- Classical Athens was the first culture where the *smart* people were reading and writing
 - Homer (Iliad/Odyssey) was earlier, and oral!

Plato: Writing is bad

- Plato described why orality is better!
 - Written word is a made thing, not a living thought
 - Written text can't answer questions
 - Written text can't have a discussion
 - Writing weakens the memory
- But he *wrote* it down!!
 - Just like old fogies complaining about the internet

Orality is our natural situation

- Historically, *literate* people are weird!
Normal people don't know how to read, and don't know *anyone* who does. But everyone talks.
- Try to imagine that you've never known *anyone* who could write, or even what writing *is*.
- Eg, most Native Americans before Europeans showed up

What orality is like

- Knowledge is organized as folklore: proverbs, folk stories, poems
- Words are only seen(!) (experienced) as sounds passing from one mind to another
- Words never stored outside of someone's head; only kept alive through retelling
- Only orally repeated things survive
 - Knowledge vanishes unless actively preserved
- No dictionaries! You never hear an unknown word, because unused words vanish

Information in oral cultures

- Only encountered as narrated *events* related to your life now
- Never fixed in form or content; adaptive
 - No lists, tables, charts, bullet points(!)
- Memory aids are crucial since speech vanishes
 - When reading, you can backtrack, so you get lazy
- Rhythm, rhyme, clichés, repetition, repetition, drama

School's out forever!

- Learning through apprenticeship
 - You work for/with and talk with a master
 - No “studying”
 - No manuals or textbooks
 - No “tests”, no multiple choice
- Note that these people are *not* dumb
 - Can you or your friends *make* a cell phone?
 - Dumb people do not live to reproduce
 - Or, ask General Custer

Why this is relevant to ELs

- There are over 6000 languages today
 - Only 1000-3000 even *have* a writing system
 - Many that have a writing system don't really use it (written Pashto is mostly the BBC Website)
 - Only about 80 languages have a *literature*
- But cell phones are becoming ubiquitous
- At the Language Technologies Institute (LTI), we want to
 - Help save languages by using LT
 - Provide LT-based services in many languages
- We have to adapt LT to oral cultures

Full context video

- “Normal” instructions don’t work at all
 - Abstract points are alien; unimportant, uninteresting, trivial. Unworthy of paying attention to.
- Show people a dramatic story, with people and places they *really* know (or they’ll ask).
- Employer needs to build a wall; posts an audio job ad; a friend shows a brick-layer how to use the system; the brick-layer gets the job!
- “Oh, I never understood what computers were for. Now I see why I should use this.”

J Sherwani's HealthLine

- Problem: in many places, villages have no medical services at all
- Current solution: community health workers
 - Not much training, many can't read
- HealthLine provides medical info over the phone
- But it must be designed so oral people can use it

Design for oral users

- No abstract instructions.
- No menus/hierarchies.
- No unusual words.
- Tell a dramatic, grounded story.
- Use simple sentence structures.
- The source *always* matters. All info must be traceable to someone. Otherwise it will be ignored as untrustworthy.

Dialect issues

- The HealthLine experience in Dadu
- National language: “Urdu should be fine.”
 - Only 33% understood Urdu at all
- Switch to provincial language, Sindhi
 - Only 70% understood Sindhi at all
- Okay, how about Balochi?
 - It’s a local, minor, oral, unintelligible “dialect”
 - (Is it “really” Balochi? What does that even mean, in a fluid continuum of oral dialects?)
- (Written languages have dictionaries, etc., that define a standard dialect.)

Sources

- Plato. *Phaedrus; Seventh Letter*.
- Walter J Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 1982.
- Jahanzeb Sherwani, Nosheen Ali, Carolyn Rose, Roni Rosenfeld. *Orality-Grounded HCID: Understanding the Oral User*. In *Information Technologies & International Development*, December 2009.