Oral cultures; or, the effect of literacy on thought

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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*.
