

# WRITING AND LITERACY



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# LAST WEEK: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERACY

"New Literacy Studies" see literacy as  
"the social practices of reading and writing which can  
be ethnographically studied in particular contexts"  
(Prinsloo & Baynham 2008: 1)

So what are "old literacy studies?"

# LITERACY VS. ORALITY

## Examples:

- Goody, Jack & Ian Watt. 1963. The consequences of literacy. *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 5, 304-345.
- Havelock, Eric. 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Ong, Walter. 1982. *Orality and literacy. The technologizing of the word*. London.

## Central thesis:

Literacy (the invention and spread of writing) brings along essential changes for culture and society.

There are important differences between "literate" and "oral" societies/cultures/individuals.

# THESES

- "Literacy ... is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself."

Ong [1982] 2002: 14-15.

- Culture, after all, is a series of communicative acts, and differences in the mode of communication are often as important as differences in the mode of production, for they involve developments in the storing, analysis, and creation of human knowledge, as well as the relationships between the individuals involved.

Goody, Jack. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. (cited from: <http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/goody-on-the-differences-between-orality-and-literacy>)

- **The specific proposition is that writing, and more especially alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinise discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semipermanent form; this scrutiny favoured the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, scepticism, and logic to resurrect memories of those questionable dichotomies. It increased the potentialities of criticism because writing laid out discourse before one's eyes in a different kind of way; at the same time increased the potentiality for cumulative knowledge, especially knowledge of an abstract kind, because it changed the nature of communication beyond that of face-to-face contact as well as the system for the storage of information; in this way a wider range of 'thought' was made available to the reading public. (Goody 1977)**

# GOODY'S THESES

- a written text is stable, lasting
- a written text can be studied differently
- alphabetic writing makes us look at what is said in a new way
- examining written texts develops critical thinking
- knowledge can be cumulated and stored
- abstract knowledge increases

# ONG: WRITING SEPARATES, DISTANCES...

1. the known from the knower
2. interpretation from data
3. the word from sound
4. the source from the recipient
5. the word from the plenum of existence
6. ... and therefore enforces precision

Ong, Walter. 2001 [1986]. Writing is a technology that restructures thought. In Cushman et al., 19-31.



## (CONTINUED)

Writing separates

7. past from present
8. "administration" from other types of social activities
9. logic (thought structure of discourse) from rhetoric (socially affective discourse)
10. academic learning from wisdom
11. writing provokes diglossia
12. writing distances grapholects from other dialects

## ONG'S CONCLUSION

"We know that all philosophy depends on writing because all elaborate, linear, so-called "logical" explanation depends on writing. Oral persons can be wise, as wise as anyone, and they can of course give some explanation for things. But the elaborate, intricate, seemingly endless but exact cause-effect sequences required by what we call philosophy and by extended scientific thinking are unknown among oral people, including the early Greeks before their development of the first vocalic alphabet."

Ong 1986 (2001)

# ACCORDING TO ONG (1982), THINKING AND SPEAKING IN ORAL CULTURES IS...

- additive rather than subordinate
- aggregative rather than analytic
- redundant and 'copious'
  
- conservative or traditionalist
- close to the human lifeworld
- agonistically toned
- empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
- homeostatic
- situational rather than abstract

- **additive rather than subordinate**

English Bible from 1610: oral strategies, additive constructions

In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters.

English Bible from 1970: literate strategies, subordination

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.

- **aggregative rather than analytic**

aggregative: "formed by the collection of units or particles into a body, mass, or amount,,

- **crystallized formulaic expressions, clusters**

- **redundant and 'copious '**

- **Repetitions and pause fillers in speech**

- **conservative or traditionalist**

"Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation." (41)

- **close to human lifeworld**

"In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience

oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings." (42)

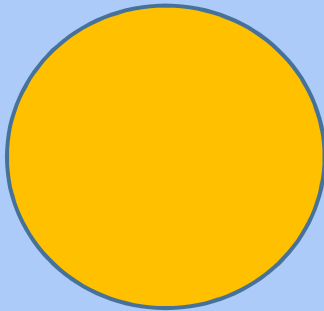
- **situational rather than abstract**

"Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames close to the living human lifeworld."

# LURIA'S TESTS AND RESULTS

## 1. Naming

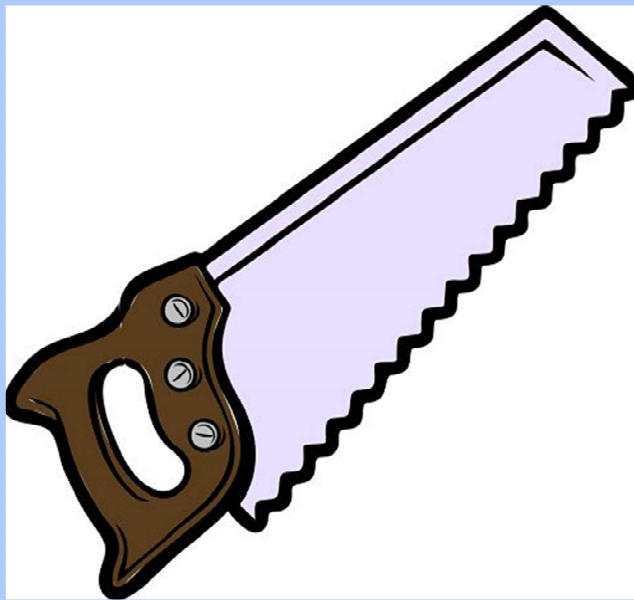
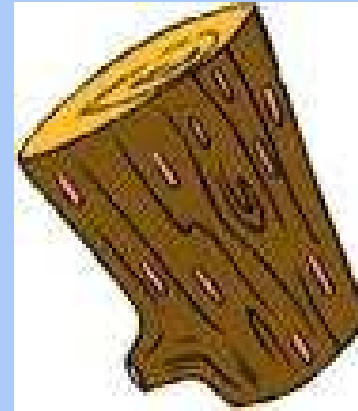
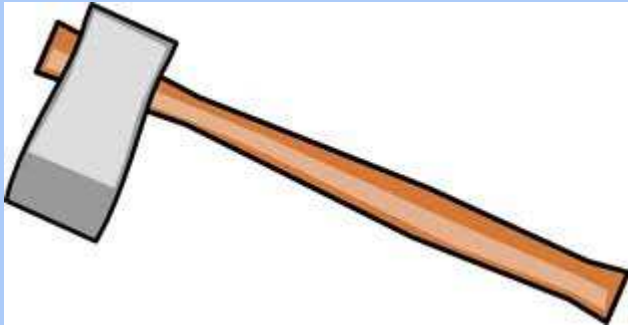
What is this?



Answers by illiterate persons: the moon, a plate, a bucket...; a mirror, a house, a board...



# CATEGORIZING: WHICH ITEM DOES NOT BELONG TO THIS SET?



# DEFINING

**Researcher: Try to explain to me what a tree is!**

**Illiterate informant: Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them.**

# LOGICAL REASONING, SYLLOGISM

Researcher: In the far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlja is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears?

Illiterate informant: I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others... Each locality has its own animals.

- Luria, Alexandr Romanovich, fieldwork in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia 1931-1932

published as *Об историческом развитии познавательных процессов* (1974)

English: *Cognitive development: Its cultural and social foundations* (1976)

- "When the syllogism is given to him a second time, a barely literate 45-year old chairman of a collective farm manages: 'To go by your words, they should all be white'. [...]

Ong's interpretation:

A little literacy goes a long way." (52-53)

"it takes only a moderate degree of literacy to make a tremendous difference in thought processes". (50)

Is this so?

# CRITIQUE AND OTHER OPINIONS

- "In reading through this literature, it is often difficult to escape the conclusion that human beings are basically passive objects who become affected by literacy in ways they are neither fully aware of nor able to control."  
(Kulick & Stroud 1993: 31)
- "What matters is what people do with literacy, not what literacy does to people" (Olson 1985: 15)

"Writing is a strange invention. One might suppose that its emergence could not fail to bring about profound changes in the conditions of human existence, and that these transformations must of necessity be of an intellectual nature. The possession of writing vastly increased man's ability to preserve knowledge.

Yet nothing we know about writing and the part it has played in man's evolution justifies this view. "

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1955 (1976), cited from <http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/levi-strauss-on-the-functions-of-writing>

(continuation of the quote)

"One of the most creative periods in the history of mankind occurred during the early stages of the neolithic age, which was responsible for agriculture, the domestication of animals and various arts and crafts. This stage could only have been reached if, for thousands of years, small communities had been observing, experimenting and handing on their findings. This great development was carried out with an accuracy and a continuity which are proved by its success, although writing was still unknown at the time. If writing was invented between 4000 and 3000 B.C., it must be looked upon as an already remote (and no doubt indirect) result of the neolithic revolution, certainly not as the necessary precondition for it." (compare with Goody's claims on slide 5)

- **"Anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and sociolinguists, among others, have provided evidence that literacy neither stands in a dichotomous relationship to orality nor carries with it necessary consequences. Specifically, this research documents that speaking and writing are means of communication that condition, but do not determine, what is done with them; that neither literacy nor orality are unitary and constant across cultures; that orality and literacy, far from being opposites, are intimately intertwined in both use and character; and that there is no uniform, sequential path whereby a move from orality to literacy necessarily signifies individual or societal development or progress."  
(Hornberger 1994: 424).**



# REFERENCES

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