
The second half of the twentieth century has yielded an enormous body of research and theory on the relationship between the spoken and written word. Known in the discipline of communication as the orality/literacy question or hypothesis, this inquiry has been pan-disciplinary. It has involved historians, anthropologists, and psychologists, as well as communication scholars. The issues examined have ranged from the nature of civilization itself, to fine points of ethnographic methodology. Rather than staking out a niche in this continuum, Khosrow Jahandarie has done something that at this point might be even more valuable: he has become its cartographer.

The book begins with what serves as an overture for the extensive discussions to follow: a critique of the pioneering studies of Milman Parry and Alfred Lord. Their work on “oral theory” provided important groundwork for subsequent scholarship to both build on and challenge. Jahandarie considers their breakthroughs and blindspots, then follows with an assessment of a pantheon that includes Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Jack Goody, and Davis Olson.

As might be expected, there is little new in the discussion of Innis and McLuhan, although good use is made of extant commentaries. However, when dealing with the others, the author provides valuable insights. Havelock’s overprivileging of the Greek alphabet and dismissal of earlier prototypes as mere syllabaries is respectfully and convincingly challenged. Ong, who has traditionally been considered more rigorous and precise than his MA thesis advisor, McLuhan, is shown to be not without his own ambiguities and contradictions. The assessment of Goody both explicates his position and challenges several of the alleged shortcomings other anthropologists have claimed mar his work. The chapter on Olson documents his shift in position in response to critics, and serves as a segue into a consideration of the contributions made by psychologists and linguists.

Of particular concern to the author is the fact that many orality/literacy theorists have not utilized the research from cognitive and language acquisition studies that assess the relative importance of listening versus reading. Useful summaries are provided of this surprisingly vast literature. Then, in an important example of the author’s ability to apply, rather than merely critique theory, he uses the results of said research to assess a range of historical examples from Homer to Gutenberg. Anyone interested in media history will derive considerable benefit from this aspect of the book.

The remaining chapters focus on the cognitive aspects of orality/literacy as revealed in ethnographic studies, from Vygotsky and Luria in the 1920s and 1930s respectively, to Scribner and Cole over the past several decades. The limitations of this work are highlighted, along with points where it both diverges and converges with that of the previously discussed macrotheorists. The author also shows how a number of recent anthropological studies have been less than enamored with the grand dichotomy view of orality/literacy. Jahandarie points out that what this critical literature ultimately succeeds in doing is disproving some of the more extreme contentions of the macrotheorists, while occasionally revealing unsuspected points of complementarity.

The breadth of this book is impressive and it is made totally accessible by the author’s engaging style. As an appendix, rather than a criticism, it might be worth noting that discussion of the orality/literacy question predates the era examined and dates back at least to the Enlightenment. It is an explicit theme in Rousseau and in the work of the Englishman Robert Wood (who has perhaps the first to extensively argue that Homer might not have been literate), and an implicit one in Monboddo, Vico, and a number of others.

One figure, however, who is overlooked and falls within the time frame covered by the author, is the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, who collaborated with McLuhan on the
Explorations project and journal during the 1950s. His work among the Avilik Inuit and sensitivity to a wide literature on non-Western cultures helped McLuhan develop a sense of comparative history not limited to the tradition of Western civilization. Much of Carpenter's work has focused on the different sensory worlds that oral and literate cultures inhabit. Apart from McLuhan, no one dealing with orality/literacy issues has reached as wide an audience as Carpenter, especially in his book, *Oh What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me!* (1973).

Perhaps Jahandarie's (Ablex should be chastised for not providing a blurb about the author) most original contribution is his critique of the critics of the orality/literacy project. He shows how they have often misperceived the sources they chastise, most of whom are not as rigid as portrayed. Even macrotheorists such as Havelock and McLuhan, whose positions verge perilously close to determinism, have, as the author shows, made valuable contributions.

Of course, orality/literacy is a continuum, not an ontological divide. It is also an "ideal type," to use Weber's term. Those who have struggled with its implications have made some of the most significant revelations in twentieth-century humanistic and social science scholarship. In his comprehensive and compelling study, Jahandarie has done full justice to this legacy. Anyone wanting to work in the area, or who is just curious about the issues involved, would be well advised to start by reading this book.

**Reference**


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