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**FROM ORALITY TO E-LITERACY: THE
INTEGRATION OF COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS**

SEMIOTICS OF ORAL AND WRITTEN CULTURES

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INTRODUCTION

As noted by Mizrach, research into the differences between oral and written cultures and the extent of impact the shift in communication systems had on further development of the Western civilization was initially grounded in the scholars' 'dawning awareness of a third term in this equation', the realization that a new shift in semiotic technologies is taking place (n. d.: 1). Thus, Ong described 'The electronic age [as...] an age of 'secondary orality', the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence' (1982: 2). Mizrach, on the other hand, settles for the term *teleliteracy* as a designation of the 'new form of communicational competency' evolved with the advent of 'digital revolution', though *telecomprehension*, on his view, would be more appropriate (ibid.: 4; 1). It has also been referred to as digital literacy or e-literacy, defined by IGI Global as 'the skill set required to make efficient use of all of the materials, tools, and resources that are available online' (2016). Consequently, the goal of this paper is to review the previous traditions of orality and literacy in order to see how the need for their integration has led to the development of electronic culture. In order to achieve this aim, a comparative analysis of theoretical literature will be done, focusing on the characteristics of each communication system and the semiotic use of new technologies. My hypothesis is that limitations of existing semiotic systems have induced technological shifts that complimented and altered but not erased previous forms of communication.

As a result, the study has set the following enabling objectives:

- 1) to read and analyze theoretical writings concerning the research subject;
- 2) to draw the methodological framework applicable to the research;
- 3) to analyze the research data by applying the research method selected;
- 4) to compile a comparative summary of the results;
- 5) to reflect the research data analyzed in the empirical part of the research;
- 6) to draw relevant conclusions.

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the historical development of technologies and their impact on semiotic systems based on works by Harari, Mizrach, Eilam, Sampson, and Ong. *Chapter 2* describes the features of orality as contrasted to literacy and the effects of the development of writing according to Ong, Rosenberg, Eilam, Havelock, Hutton, Harari, and Mizrach. *Chapter 3* analyzes the consequences of the latest technological shift to electronic communication in reference to Mizrach, Edwards-Groves, Jewitt, National Council of Teachers of English, and Sherwani, Ali, Rosé, and Rosenfeld.

1. TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

According to Harari, the key reason for human development and dominance over other species is their ‘ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all’, the invention of ‘fiction [which] has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so *collectively*’ (2011: 27), believing in ‘gods, nation and corporations’ (ibid.: 36). Thus, language and imagination were sufficient for people to manage their affairs through ‘an Ice Age, the agricultural “revolution”, the domestication of plants and animals [...and] settling in villages [...] all without any change in their communicational “technology” of primary orality’ (Mizrach, n. d.: 2). Although, as Ong reminds, ‘Homo sapiens has been in existence for between 30,000 and 50,000 years[, t]he earliest script dates from only 6000 years ago’ (1982: 2). Until then, the only graphic means used was ‘simple image-making [...like] cave paintings’ (Mizrach, n. d.: 2). Moreover, writing first appeared not ‘in order to copy spoken language, but rather to do things that spoken language failed at’ (Harari, 2011: 140). Consequently, the first scripts were only partial and used for ‘essential record-keeping’ (ibid.: 138).

However, as noted by Sampson, ‘[a]nything that can be invested with emotional or political associations [in the human culture] probably will be’ (2014: 13). People realized the benefits of ‘an external form of information storage [...], a form of communication that was portable’ and gradually different types of script developed (Mizrach, n. d.: 2), leading to even ‘[e]ntire fields of knowledge, such as physics and engineering [being] maintained solely by mathematical script’ (Harari, 2011: 148). According to Eilam, ‘different scholars [...] attribute[...] cardinal importance to a different turning point’, mentioning ‘the transition from primary orality to literacy’, ‘the invention of Greek alphabet’ and the introduction of printing technology as facilitators of deep ‘changes in the structure of perception, memory, and thought’ (2002: 11). As Harari observes, ‘Free association and holistic thought have given way to compartmentalisation and bureaucracy’ (2011: 146).

Another important shift in the technologies of communication occurred when direct ways of transmitting oral and visual information across wide distances appeared in the 20th century. As Mizrach emphasizes, although, with the advent of the printing press, books could reach large audiences, they cannot yet be considered as true means of ‘mass communication’ the way radio and television are because literacy still ‘required some degree of formal training’ whereas perception of information transmitted via the new electronic media did not demand any additional skills (n. d.: 3). But, with ‘the invention of the electronic computer’ (ibid.: 4) and ‘an even more revolutionary writing system, a computerised binary script

consisting of only two signs: 0 and 1' (Harari, 2011: 148), human communication has become multimodal 'combining and seamlessly incorporating sound, music, computer graphics and animation, video, and text' (Mizrach, n. d.: 5). More importantly, unlike the invention of writing or early forms of electronic media like radio and television, the latest digital communication systems have liberated the audience from the state of passive reception by introducing interactivity that gives the audience 'control over content' (ibid.: 6) and enables it 'to participate in the creation or production of electronic media' (ibid.: 5). To illustrate the impact of the latest digital technologies on human lifestyle, Harari reminds that although '[t]he Internet [...] came into wide usage only in the early 1990s [...] Today we cannot imagine the world without it' (2011: 409). As it is impossible to foresee the extent to which the digital revolution will change human communication habits and cognition, '[t]he Toronto School [...] decided [...] to examine what happens when orality gives way to literacy' (Mizrach, n. d.: 6).

2. ORALITY AND LITERACY COMPARED

Although Eilam states that according to ‘the studies of E. Eisenstein, J. Goody, E. Havelock, W. Ong, and R. Thomas [...] communicational means such as writing’ are considered to have greatly impacted ‘not only [...] cultural development and achievements, but also [...] the structure of cognitive functions’ (2002: 10), Mizrach argues that ‘contra Ong, Goody, and the Toronto School, Finnegan denies the existence of any Great Divide between orality and literacy’ (n. d.: 10), grounding her arguments in empirical research that made her conclude that none of the supposed effects of literacy can be exclusively attributed to the change in the communication system but rather ‘depended on the *uses* to which writing was put in a particular society, and who had control over the means of literate expression’ (ibid.: 11). Also Rosenberg agrees with Finnegan, maintaining ‘that oral and literate societies exist in a continuity, not a dichotomy, as do their lyrics and narratives’ (1987: 74). As a result, ‘[t]he two kinds of society [...] are not purely separate’ (ibid.) and the advent of literacy can be seen as having opened different perspectives to the human mind, which in turn have led to the formation of different prevalent habits in modes of social conduct, reflection and memorization but not to entire substitution of the previous tradition of oral culture.

Thus, while the potential of human communication and information storage expanded, what changed was the human focus of mind rather than cognitive abilities per se. Ong sketches the oral culture prior to the arrival of writing as an ephemeral, dynamic world where ‘words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual’ (1982: 31), where ‘[a]ll sensation takes place in time’ and ‘language is a mode of action’ that has ‘great power’ and even ‘magical potency’ (ibid.: 32). It is a world rooted in present, where all knowledge is passed on via ‘recurring oral performances’ (Eilam, 2002: 16) and ‘[u]seless data are forgotten [...], while remembered phenomena are updated – made consistent with current beliefs and attitudes’ (Rosenberg, 1987: 78-9). Consequently, both oral performances and thinking were structured employing mnemonic strategies that aided recall of essential data to be elaborated and adapted as needed in each particular situation (Ong, 1982). As Hutton points out, people in the oral culture

possessed robust memories because of the inseparable association they made between images and ideas in their comprehension of the world. They thought metaphorically, and the metaphors that they uttered were easily mimicked and remembered because they were richly expressive, grandiose, and full of wonder at the world (1987: 377).

Similarly, ‘heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, [...] repetitions or antitheses, [...] alliterations and assonances, [...] epithetic and other formulary expressions, [...] standard

thematic settings [... and] proverbs' all served as memory guides (Ong, 1982: 34). Although Ong admits that 'all expression and all thought is to a degree formulaic [... the] formulas characterizing orality are more elaborate' so that '[t]he more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is likely to be marked by set expressions skillfully used' (ibid.: 35-6).

But, since memory in oral culture centered on actions and people tended 'to integrate new information with that of their world knowledge before storing; at recall it [was] often difficult to remember which pieces of information were acquired when' (Rosenberg, 1987: 83). As a result, audience had an important role in the reconstruction of stories. As Rosenberg emphasizes, 'the auditors participate in the performance in a creative way' and have the chance of expressing immediate feedback so that '[t]he performance situation is vital; it throbs' (ibid.: 86). Thus, although not all information could be preserved and past could be easily manipulated to fit new political and social situations, people who lived immersed in an acoustic world maintained close communal connections, had strong memories and integrated knowledge about practical life. As Harari points out, '[t]he human collective knows far more today than did the ancient bands. But at the individual level, ancient foragers were the most knowledgeable and skilful people in history' (2011: 55).

According to Havelock, the appearance of literacy meant 'a reform of that ancient Greek school curriculum which had depended upon memorized recitation' (n. d.: 2) and required a 'new virtuosity of a special kind of poet – the poet turned thinker' (ibid.: 3). Thus, although '[o]ne of the innately appropriate uses of literacy is the compilation and preservation of data sets' (Rosenberg, 1987: 77), written communication system altered the whole system of social interaction. While 'the most important aspects of life' such as 'beliefs and values' were still 'related orally, face-to-face, and [...] held in human memory' (ibid.: 75), given the distance between authors and their readership, information presented in a written form could no longer be changed although the facts might be disproved as 'a written text is basically unresponsive' (Ong, 1982: 78). Consequently, oral debates shifted to written compilations, eroding the necessity of direct communication.

Moreover, as feared by Plato, literacy did affect memory (ibid.). As noted by Hutton, '[t]he mnemonist's task was to attach the facts he wished to recall to images' which in turn were arranged 'in an architectural design of places with which he was readily familiar' (1987: 371). Literacy, on the other hand, advanced analytical thought and memory by causal and subordinate relations detached from the human life world, 'separat[ing] the knower from the known' in the name of 'objectivity' (Ong, 1982: 39-45). However, 'the increased cognitive abilities of abstraction, decontextualization, and objectification' noted by Olson (Mizrach, n. d.: 13) did not fully erase the ancient mode of mnemonics. As suggested by

Hutton, it might have been, in fact, preserved in ‘the art’s intimate association with model-building’ (1987: 373) and remains innately accessible, as proved by modern mnemonists, for example, ‘Shereshevskii [who] devised [it] intuitively’ (ibid.: 374). Thus, literacy generally shifted attention from memorizing information as contextualized with ‘the phenomena of the world’ in the direction of ‘introspection’ and forming associations in relation to personal meaning, developing a new genre known as ‘autobiography’ (ibid.: 379; 383).

As a result, a new type of personality originated with a focus on individual achievements and concern for identity. As Mizrach acknowledges, ‘[l]iteracy elevates a person out of “group thinking” and into self-centered, abstract perception’ where ‘imagination’ is employed to devise ‘*contrafactuals*’ (n. d.: 15). Thus, ‘[t]he solitary, introspective reader [became] the polar opposite of the gregarious participant in an oral culture’ (Rosenberg, 1987: 77). However, Mizrach reminds that ‘[o]n the scale of biological human evolution, literacy was a very recent, upstart arrival’ (n. d.: 9), therefore, as Harari points out, ‘a need shaped in the wild continues to be felt subjectively even if it is no longer necessary for survival and reproduction’ (2011: 385). Consequently, human evolution is not necessarily tied to an increased level of happiness (ibid.: 109; 421) and every technological development that initially seems to provide a solution to an existing problem, leads to new challenges and unexpected consequences, perpetuating the cycle that Harari likens to an escape from one ‘imagined order’ only to end up in ‘a bigger prison’ (ibid.: 133).

So, by forsaking orality in favor of the hegemony of literacy, humans, first, initiated a break from the communal life-style that gave rise to the self-sustained but isolated individual. Secondly, analytical inspection of written texts led to increased retrospection and preoccupation with unravelling of past riddles, detaching the literate culture from the dramatized present the foragers viewed as magical. Thus, though the dynamics of information accumulation and scientific discoveries augmented, the individual human life became more static and governed by intrinsic tension induced by heightened awareness of the linear flow of time.

3. E-LITERACY AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF MULTIMODALITY

During the times of orality, human cultures learnt to cooperate but lacked the means of distant communication facilitated only with the technological invention of writing systems and the spread of literacy. The printing technology enabled a wider access to reproduced texts and images, but the electronic communication system developed options reminiscent of primary orality. Thus, not only sound and moving images could finally be recorded and transmitted world wide, also the branching of '[h]ypertext stories [resultant in] interactive narratives [that are] dependent on the choices of the reader/viewer' (Mizrach, n. d.: 5) resemble the dynamics of interaction between the audience and storytellers of oral culture. The same ancient human instinct for gathering and gossiping (Harari, 2011:...) fulfilled in the oral culture via reliance on family and local community, has found a new channel via social networks which now allow humans to connect with a global community. As Mizrach observes, due to the development of electronic media, 'storytelling and image creation [already] combine seamlessly in presidential debates' (n. d.: 13), and the shorter '[a]ttention spans of students', hypothetically caused by television, (ibid.: 14), in fact, seem to be a sign that the new generation subconsciously feels the need to regain active co-participation in the definition of narrative turns and content generation.

According to Jewitt, 'The multimodal resources available to readers are central to rethinking what reading is and what it might become in a blended, digital communicational environment' (2005: 327). As noted by Edwards-Groves, modern technologies 'have enabled students in their everyday life and in their classrooms to become multimodal designers of text, as writing now requires multimodality, creativity, technological and technical complexity', altering the traditional perception of written texts (2012: 99). Consequently, as National Council of Teachers of English observe, in order to prepare students for modern careers, today, 'writing [should] be seen as holistic, authentic, and varied', embedded in a 'real-world' setting and aligned with 'students' lived experiences' (2008: 3). Not only that, '[a]uthentic writing instruction affirms the importance of collaboration' (ibid.: 4), thus attempting to remedy the negative effects of previous perception of literacy as an isolated and silent activity and renewing 'the dialogic features of orality' as envisioned by Mizrach (n. d.: 16). Similarly, human-computer interaction methodologies for the developing world (HCID) are being revised in order to meet the needs of end users. Thus, Sherwani, Ali, Rosé, and Rosenfeld demonstrate how application of Ong's framework of orality in designing interfaces has already proven to be more efficient than previous design aimed at users with a high degree of literacy (2009).

Consequently, although it can hardly be believed that modern human cultures will return to conversing in verse in order to enhance individual memory, many characteristics of primary orality as well as traditional perception of literacy and writing skills are being readapted to fit the needs of an integrated personality. Hutton writes that '[w]hether in the guise of Bruno's magic, Vico's poetics, or Freud's psychoanalysis, mnemonics was based upon the premise that imagination is born of memory' (1987: 390-1). Historical overview of the technological developments of communication systems from orality to e-literacy shows that, with the latest shift from linear to multimodal and globally connected interactive communication types and user-friendly interfaces, human civilization aims at re-establishing the importance of semiotic aspects characteristic to orality, which, though neglected by literacy, have fueled new creative solutions. Thus, modern technological bards are closing the cycle of rewriting the dismembered tale of human potential, and, as noted by Mizrach, once again '[i]ndividuals who are masters of all [communication systems] will have great power in their society' (n.d.: 18).

CONCLUSIONS

In order to understand how the emergence of the latest electronic communication systems might have been driven by the limitations of previous technological solutions, a brief chronology of major technological developments in relation to semiotic systems has been provided and the features of orality and literacy have been examined in greater detail based on a comparative analysis of theoretical literature. The study has proven the hypothesis that although orality did succumb to the advent of literacy, traces of old traditions continued to stir the unconscious mind to find new means for their modified return to daily life. As a result, both orality and literacy continue to coexist and shapeshift in the digital era, demanding reassessment of social communication modes and school curricula. But human civilization has broadened both its cognitive perspective and technological abilities, allowing everyone to become a modern bard who can connect with global audiences in order to share stories and exchange knowledge, without even leaving one's home.

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