

Orality and Literacy

Let us consider the dynamics and structures of two ways of communicating, each with its own implications and effects on how *hnxhwelkhwlnet* is conveyed.

Orality. The varied storytellers, indeed the very words they speak, share other qualities in common (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:141-47; Schitsu'umsh and Frey 2001:188-204). They share in communicating through the *oral* tradition, through what is called, orality. Orality is not a form of communications simply devoid of writing; it is not to be equated with illiteracy. Orality has unique forms of communication, from the nature of disseminating information to the storing of that information. As distinct from literacy, the orality of storytelling has implications for the meaning conveyed.

Consider the physiological nature of this auditory experience, of this clustering of phonemes, of distinguishing sounds within the act of storytelling. As a heard experience, orality is a transitory, effervescent incident, here one moment and gone the next, a continual stream. No permanence, no objects. And further, the sound emitted envelops and surrounds the listener, involuntary unifying him or her in that momentary event. Once spoken, the word is heard, is registered and envelops a recipient, ears unlike eyes not as easily closed to the influx of a physical stimulation, be it auditory or visual. At this physiological level, "Orality is thus a transitory *event* that *unifies* the listener *involuntarily* with the sound and its sources" (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:143).

Consider the syntactic and semantic nature of the story experience, of this clustering of morphemes, of meaningful units of sound within the story text. Indigenous texts are often characterized by their general lack of function words, words that provide relationship and connect thoughts, such as prepositions, e.g., "about," "for," "of," "with," and conjunctions, e.g., "and," "but," "or." In fact, Indigenous texts are generally noted for their rather terse, stark use of words and of descriptive phrases altogether. As pointed out by the Nimíipuu scholar Archie Phinney, it is intriguing to realize that in the combined Indigenous oral literature of Coyote, "No clear image is offered or needed" of this trickster (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:149). This was indeed the case for all the First Peoples, lacking not only imagery but detailed descriptions of their actions, their motivations, and of the landscape on which their exploits unfolded. Hence to complete the thoughts between words and phrases, to know the gender of a character, to complete the image of Coyote, or of a landscape, each listener is called upon to engage the story text and add the connections, to make the links, to complete the picture. A story is only whole when its participants are an integral part of it, integrated within a larger context of interpersonal relations and a particular landscape. No passive listening allowed, no viewing from a far. But everyone can also connect the dots a little differently, discovering this meaning or that meaning, embedded within the richly layered story, relative to his or her own experiences and maturation level, lessons specific and relevant to him or her alone. Meaning is contextualized.

Finally, consider the Indigenous spoken word itself, this special kind of symbols (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:154-58; Schitsu'umsh and Frey 2001:197-99). Upon departing from a great evening's visit, one never says "goodbye," but instead, "see you later;" "goodbye" is too final, rendering it possible. Ceremonially bestowing an "Indian Name" can bring about in that child, or in that adult, that which is described in the name. For Indigenous peoples, the spoken word can be infused with the sacred, having the power to bring forth what they describe. When woven into the fine tapestry of a story retold in the

native language, “The world is made and rendered meaningful in the act of revealing Coyote’s story of it.” And the blue in Lake Coeur d’Alene is perpetuated. The transformative power of *hnhwelkhwlnet*, of an Indian Name, and of story itself is vividly brought forth in the personal essay by Rodney Frey, Tom Yellowtail and Cliff SiJohn (2007).

When all these orality elements and dynamics – the storytelling techniques, the physiological experience, the syntactical qualities, and the power of the spoken word – come together and coalesce, they can transform a passive audience into participant travelers within an unfolding landscape. Coyote swirls around you and talks to you. As the elders have said, a story is only brought to life when all those in the “canoe” of the storytelling session – the storyteller and participating audience – equally help with the “paddling” up the “river,” exploring the territory together, with the raconteur guiding the way (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:172). It is indicative to note that traditionally, when participants began waning, disengaging from a storytelling session, they would cease to verbally or visually provide cues acknowledging continued engagement, for example, ceasing to periodically voice, *ée*, “yes.” Upon such feedback, the raconteur would stop the re-telling, immediately, regardless of the story’s completion or not (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:148). The paddling has ceased. As an interaction between storyteller and listeners, the raconteur monitors participation, fluctuating an emphasis here, employing a technique there, guiding participants within and through a territory. The storyteller’s responsibility is to encourage the listeners to remain paddlers, engaging them as participants, while “keeping the canoe on course,” navigating each bend and fork in the river of the story’s landscape, the story’s bones. In turn, the listener-participants’ responsibilities are to fully engage the story, keeping the canoe moving, and to listen deeply, discovering what might await within, “a gift” unique for each participant, unique each time the story is engaged. The elements and dynamics of orality bring about the transitory intersection of those participating, an event always in the making, allowing you and the Coyote to swirl and talk with each other. This multi-dimensional expression, when conducted in the native language, is understood as “ceremony,” as the ritual act of participating in the renewal of the world, in a shining through of a hierophany. In re-telling of Coyote, stories of transformation, during the dormant winter the flowering of the spring is brought forth. Orality is participatory.

Literacy. The contrasts between orality and literacy, the written word, another sort of symbolic clusterings, could not be more stark and revealing, with critical implications. As we know, writing is itself a technological invention, involving some sort of physical medium or surface (e.g., wood, clay, or stone surface, hide, parchment, paper, computer screen) and some sort of marking device (e.g., etching or imprinting device, ink and pen, press, electronic keyboard), to record and share a standardized symbolic code (e.g., an alphabet with consonants and vowels). An early example is represented in Sumerian cuneiform of some 3,500 BCE. Fundamentally a series of pictographs stamped on clay tokens, cuneiform was used for recording ideas and numbers associated with economic transactions. With the Semitic languages, such as Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew and Phoenician, a consonant system was developed as early as 1,050 BCE, and with the Greeks vowels were added as early as 400 BCE. Among the Olmec and Maya of Mesoamerica, we have forms of writing dating back at least to 900 BCE. This is the technology that has moved the once oral traditions of Gilgamesh and Homer to what we now can hold in hand. The organic nature of orality is anything but technologically based.

The dynamics of literacy are further revealing, contrasting with orality (Aripa, Yellowtail and Frey 1995:141-47).

Consider the physiological nature of the literacy experience. Literacy is composed of visual images and symbols, of written words fixed to the pages of a book, to a material object, an object with some degree

of permanence, having a quality of “thingness.” A story is accessed and conveyed through the physicality of visually seen and tactily touched “pages.” In addition, the eye of the reader can scan the lines of the pages at his or her own pace, voluntarily, stopping here to reflect on this word, on that idea, moving on, speed reading through this section, skipping that altogether, and putting the whole thing aside, at his or her pleasure. It is not an involuntary engagement asked of you. To the extent that the medium mediates and influences what is viewed, the world envisioned tends to be understood as made up of objects, a world objectified, with you as a detached, independent viewer.

And consider the syntactic and semantic nature of literacy. Anchored from a much more formalized and standardized set of grammatical rules, literacy seeks to render meaning independent and autonomous of an interpersonal context. A sentence, a story itself, has completeness onto itself, with minimal need of an infusion of links and connections made by a reader. The author endeavors to convey a constant and indelible denotation, remarkably detached from an immediacy with any particular audience. A preposition added here, a conjunction there, personal pronouns throughout. Coyote is richly adorned with imagery and motivation, a landscape endowed with color and texture beyond imagination. Both author and reader would subscribe to a stylized grammatical convention, formalized, for example, in the APA Style for the social and behavioral sciences, the MLA Format for the humanities, or the Chicago Manual of Style for anthropologists, to inform, structure and encase the dissemination and the accessing of meaning. Meaning is decontextualized.

Taken together, the qualities and attributes of literacy contribute to an understanding of reality as made up of discrete objects, with some degree of concreteness and permanency, to be observed from afar, as if behind the neutrality of a thick glass pane. Born out of this dualism is an impetus to invest in and bring forth a story separate from and descriptive of the experience, in “belief” about reality, in “propositions and equations” predictive of “sense datum” results, in analytical stories. It certainly can be argued that the dynamics and nature of literacy not only supports, but is a precursor and if not a precondition for the observations of Aristotle’s octopus and of the scientific method of Descartes and Bacon. Born out of this dualism is invest in story separate from and descriptive of experience, in sonnets and poems and prose, in essays, short stories and novels, in the great tradition of Shakespeare and Dickens, in literary stories. Literacy can *object*-ify and dichotomize.

The contrast between orality and literacy could thus not be more revealing. The shift is from viewing stories as explanations about and descriptions of the world, as predictors of reality or suspenders of disbelief about reality, to experiencing the stories as the world, as intensifiers of what is most real. The shift is from understanding an author of a novel or a scientist of a hypothesis as its originator and you the observer of what is being observed, to experiencing the unfolding of a story with its storyteller in consort with you and the other engaged listener-participants, all as co-facilitators, as co-creators of that transitory intersection. The shift is from compartmentalized cubicles to dynamic amalgamation.

Copyright: Coeur d’Alene Tribe and University of Idaho 2015.