Introduction: The Power of the Spoken Word

The central theme running through this book is the nature and significance of the oral communicative moment and the situations in which such moments occur. This exploration pursues the ‘magic of the moment’ and the potentialities that lie in the necessary simultaneity of articulation and perception that is peculiar to all oral communication experienced unrecorded and unfilmed. It is that dimension to orality that this book focuses upon.

What is it about oral communication that means that people feel the need to come together to discuss rather than conduct their business by paper, by e-mail or by recorded message? With all the communications technology at our fingertips, why do business people fly halfway round the world to look each other in the eye as they make arrangements? Why do people meet in debating chambers to make rules and reach political positions when they could surely more easily handle the complexity of the issues and the large amount of relevant data by exchanging documents and be done with it? In this book, I explore related dimensions of these simple questions.

Is it about orality versus literacy? Only insofar as it focuses upon the communicative conditions of the co-presence of speaker and listener and the dynamics of the real-time events that occur in that oral situation. These do not constitute a separate class of event from those involving the written or recorded word. Time and again the oral communicative moment is intricately interwoven with the written word and the graphic image. So, while the focus is upon ‘orality’, the discussion will range across ‘the written as spoken’, ‘the graphic encompassing the written and evoking the oral’, ‘the recorded spoken or sung’, ‘the spoken as then inscribed’. This discussion moves away from a view that contrasts the ‘oral/spoken’ with the ‘written’ – either as supposed
characteristics of types of society, or as modes of communication which throw up contrasting limitations and possibilities relating to memory, thought processes, or the accumulation, durability and accessibility of ‘knowledge’. Rather, the focus here is upon orality as sets of communicative conditions inherent in oral situations common to all human societies whether ‘literacy’ is absent, restricted or general. The emphasis here is on the ‘oral’ in the ‘oral/literate mix’ as outlined by Brian Street in his discussion of the ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy (Street 1984). In a way similar to Street’s focus upon the cultural practices of reading and writing and the power relations in which such practices are embedded, this discussion looks at aspects of the cultural practice of speaking and being spoken to. Where Street argued against a model which established ‘literacy’ as a feature with inherent qualities having consequences for society (the autonomous model) and in favour of an approach which situated the activity of reading and writing in a variety of social and political contexts (the ideological model), so this discussion looks to explore aspects of ‘oral communicative situations’ without essentializing ‘orality’ as a set of a priori features contrary to those of ‘literacy’.

A second general theme of this book is the dynamics of cultural production and the associated notions of private and public culture. The mercurial experience of the communicative moment is the site of a range of aspects of cultural production. Creativity and spontaneity of the moment building upon the power of the unexpected may lead to the creation of new perceptions and understandings in the listener/audience. A search for creativity can be a defining element in the performer’s improvisation, or it can be manifest in the listener’s response to a strictly ‘scripted’ performance. A search for creativity is, of course, only one aspect of the many and various processes of cultural production – which are frequently driven through the creation and distribution of the written word and the graphic and visual image. In the interplay between the written and the spoken, the parties to the communicative transaction move in and out of the private and public spheres, as is discussed later.

The third general theme, a dimension of the second, is the issue of the dynamics of persuasion. This is an issue that students of rhetoric have debated since before the time of Aristotle and which continues to exercise the minds of anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers and students of language and literature. In this discussion, persuasion is explored as a phenomenon that is not, of course, unique to the ‘oral situation’, since persuasion by text and by visual image is a predominant feature of much modern communication, but as a dimension of much