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The Oral Communicative Moment

Orality as a nervous condition

In the flow of daily life, each one of us lives in an ever-changing chain of experience in which thought, memory and perception interact with our immediate environment of other people and material conditions. Beyond the physical environment of our lives there lies the world of ‘social’ reality – people who have defined roles in relation to our freedom of action: parents, teachers, policemen, judges, tax collectors … In all of these relationships, it is the nature of the interchanges between them and us that give reality to the social roles they play and the imagined structure that lies behind them – behind the policeman lies the idea of the laws and regulations that we must not break or we will be punished. The manifestation of these constructs is in the concrete utterances and behaviour of these categories of individuals; it is when the teacher says, ‘Open your books’ that you are inclined both to do what you are told and to understand something of the institution they represent. The flow of daily life is the succession of such moments of experiential interactions, manifested in words. In contrast with the words lying at rest and undiscovered between the covers of the book, or the relative permanence and immutability of objects, the spoken words in which we swim are always gone as soon as they arrive. The linearity of speech in time obviates the possibility of the constant gaze; while we can contemplate the crystal bowl from above or below, from front or back, the spoken word cannot be viewed from another perspective – it may be repeatable (play it again, Sam!), but in contrast to the written words on the page you cannot read them backwards or upwards; the paradigm can be ‘read’ upwards or downwards on the page, but the living syntagm of the flow of speech cannot be stilled, as no one can still
the flow of the river from standing within it. The silence of aloneness is inhabited by the words of reflection, and few are the people whose life is dominated by silence. For most of us, the focus of our minds is the puzzle of understanding the intentions of others and determining the way to express our own perspectives, be they wants, needs, thoughts, reactions. This permanent, unavoidable presence at our elbow nudging us all the time, like a tic that won’t go away, or a constant companion of which we are only occasionally aware, is not simply music in the background but the vehicle of our waking consciousness, a nervous condition with which we have to live.

We are surrounded by the spoken word and we are unable to shut it out, or deliberately invoke an ability to avoid understanding it. I may choose to ignore those words which were spoken in my hearing in a language I understand, but I cannot guard my mind from perceiving them and dealing with the meanings I have to take from them. The meanings I take may not be those which you intend, but it would be unusual for me to believe (in my usual state of mind) that when you say, ‘The house is on fire!’ you are saying that you have dropped a glass of milk. The conscious mind must deal with the perceptions that percolate through the sensory windows, and the conventions of language point to a range of available meanings – orality is the condition of so much of that process of perception that we have to deal with. And the perception of visual images of the constructed world around us often evoke words that are intimately associated, culture by culture, with those visual images. The clear blue water lapping the sand below the palm tree evokes both feelings and words.

Even the visual image of the written word plastered across the poster ‘Your country needs you!!’ shouts a deafening message of self-sacrifice and action. Orality, then, lies at the heart of our daily experience as individuals and as communicating beings within the social groups we inhabit. The condition of the spoken word has been the subject of much contemplation, from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to the ‘ethnography of speaking’. Philosophy and linguistics have pored over the nature of language, mind and meaning; linguistic anthropology, rhetoric and poetics have examined the condition of the spoken, and the contexts in which the action of speech effects a change in human relations. A number of these academic approaches to orality are discussed in Chapter 5.

**Oral communication as model and ideal**

As more and more of the messages we receive are lodged by their authors in the waiting rooms filled with now electronic and previously paper