Orality versus literacy: the Great Divide debate

The Great Divide has been viewed as a set of characteristics that, in generalizing about societies, distinguishes between ‘oral societies’ and ‘literate societies’. While acknowledging the very broad-brush nature of such a typology, proponents have seen a grouping of repeated characteristics around these two poles, and have generally concentrated their attention upon the significant changes and ‘advances’ that are made with the introduction of literacy. Along with the polar typology go a wide variety of seemingly natural correlates. Not only are ‘oral societies’ small-scale, community-based, face-to-face societies, but they are, according to Ong, typified by particular ways of thinking – ‘aggregative’ rather than ‘analytical’ thought processes, situational rather than abstract thinking, ‘empathetic’ rather than ‘objective’ relations between thinker and object thought about, and many others (Ong 1982: 36–57). The notion that societies move from such characteristic ways of thinking to another more advanced mode is summed up by Ong as follows:

It will be seen that most of the characteristics of orally based thought and expression discussed earlier in this chapter relate intimately to the unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound as perceived by human beings. A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies (which would come with the inscribed, visualized word: vision is a dissecting sense). It is consonant also with the conservative holism (the homeostatic present that must be kept intact, the formulary expressions that must be kept intact), with situational thinking (again holistic, with human action
at the center) rather than abstract thinking ... The denominators used here to describe the primary oral world will be useful again later to describe what happened to human consciousness when writing and print reduced the oral–aural world to a world of visualized pages. (Ong 1982: 73–4)

Constructed upon the edifice of supposed inevitable differences in ways of thinking typical of ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ are then a series of further correlates that reinforce the paradigms. Finnegan summarizes these paradigms in the following manner:

Orality – and hence oral transmission – has been seen as characteristically and essentially found in cultures without writing and also, going back in history, without modern commerce or transport systems, resting on traditional and communal norms. Correspondingly, literacy has been associated with cultures characterized by the development of urban and bureaucratic systems and the rise of secular and scientific enquiry, patterns arguably further intensified with the advent of printing ... This dichotomizing framework may sound extreme, but it has been extremely influential in comparative study. It is less popular nowadays than in the past – certainly in an explicit form – but the assumptions underlying it are still persistent. They surface from time to time in both general discussions and specific treatments of orality and literacy ... The one (is) the characteristic setting for oral tradition, typified as small-scale and face to face, rural and non-industrial, communal and conformist rather than individualist, and dominated by ascribed kinship, religion and revered traditions; the other – the locale for written transmission – typically industrial, urban and bureaucratic, characterized by a respect for rationality, individual achievement and impersonal norms, heterogeneous and secular. (Finnegan 1988: 140)

Finnegan’s own discussion and that of many other scholars who have worked on the functioning of oral communication in ‘non-literate’ cultures, and on cultures in which literacy is a socially restricted phenomenon, points to complex relations between the modes of oral and written communication that have to be seen embedded in their own social and historical contexts, and that the supposed typical ‘ways of thinking’ just do not hold water when examined in particular ethnographic contexts. Furthermore, not only are the overall dichotomies unhelpful, they obscure a clear understanding of the significance of oral