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ORALITY AND LITERACY.
UNMARKED AND MARKED ELEMENTS
IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Introductory comments marking the occasion of
an international conference on orality and literacy,
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§0. It is such an honor for me that my friend Karol Zieliński has asked me to say some introductory comments marking the occasion of the splendid conference that he has so valiantly organized at the University of Wrocław. The text of what I am saying has been preserved by way of audio-and-video, that is, by way of a technological pre-recording that can be heard-and-seen at the conference. And this text is also preserved in a one-page handout that I have prepared for those attending. Further, the same text is available online in Classical Inquiries, <https://classicalinquiries.chs.harvard.edu>, where the posting dated 2019.12.04 is meant to be simultaneous with the audio-and-video pre-recording.

§1. The hoped-for simultaneity of the posting and the pre-recording creates an illusion that is instructively relevant to

questions about orality and literacy. The illusion that is being attempted here is that I am performing “orally,” here and now, what I have to say here and now. But the here-and-now of oral performance is in this case really a there-and-then of written composition. What I have to say has already been written and read by me, and, further, my words had already been written down by me even before I ever had a chance to read them into a microphone and a camera. It is all something that is pre-recorded. To say it another way, this pre-recorded thing is a text that needed technology for its reproduction – and I mean not only the electronic technology of audio-and-video for recording with microphone and camera but also the more basic technology of writing. And of course this more basic technology needed the cognitive aptitude of being able to read the writing. To which I add something that is almost needless to say: the writing itself, just as much as the reading, required its own set of cognitive aptitudes. So, what can we learn from the illusion that I playfully attempted here? To me the answer to my own question is most telling in its simplicity: it is a mistake to use the terms “oral,” “orally,” and “orality” as a foil for “literacy,” which, as I understand it depends on the technology of writing.

§2. For me the best way to contrast “orality” and literacy is in terms of “markedness theory,” for which I offer a summary in Bibliography (NAGY 1990, pp. 5–8). To show how this theory works, let us take as an example the functional opposition of unmarked “day” and marked “night.” When this opposition is absent, the idea of “day” can include the idea of “night,” as when I say “I worked on this problem for seven days”. What I just said can mean that I worked on this problem for seven days and seven nights. But when I say “I worked on this problem for seven nights,” then I am excluding the days from the week and including only the nights. As we see here most clearly, the idea of “day” as the unmarked member of the opposition can include the idea of “night” when there is no

opposition, whereas the idea of “night” as the marked member of the opposition excludes the idea of “day” when the opposition is in effect.

§3. With this example in mind, let us now contrast “orality” and literacy in terms of “markedness theory.” In what follows, I quote a formulation that I offered in *Bibliography* (NAGY 1990, p. 8): The descriptive term oral as in oral poetry has come to have an overly narrow meaning, restricted by our own cultural preconceptions about writing and reading. We feel the need to define oral in terms of written: if something is oral, we tend to assume a conflict with the notion of written. From the general standpoint of social anthropology, however, it is written that has to be defined in terms of oral. Written is not something that is not oral, rather it is something in addition to being oral, and that additional something varies from society to society. It is dangerous to universalize the phenomenon of literacy. To restate the problem in terms of the distinction between marked and unmarked: if we juxtapose oral and written, it is written that functions as the marked member of the opposition, while oral is unmarked. The definition of written is predicated on the given of oral.

§4. This formulation, as I just quoted it, is cited (with approval) by Albert Lord (LORD 1995, p. 105n26). I followed up with this further formulation (NAGY 2001, p. 535): [T]he only universal distinction between oral and literary traditions is the historical anteriority of the first to the second. Beyond this obvious observation, it is pointless to insist on any universalizing definitions for the “oral” of “oral tradition.” “Oral tradition” and “oral poetry” are terms that depend on the concepts of “written tradition” and “written poetry.” In cultures that do not depend on the technology of writing, the concept of orality is meaningless. (I cite again the book by Lord [LORD 1995, p. 105n26]).

§5. In terms of markedness theory, then, as I argued in an article (NAGY 2017b), we cannot assume that the written and the oral “are as different as night and day.”

§6. I hope that the convergences as well as the divergences between oral and written traditions will emerge in the splendid conference that is humbly introduced by my words here. And I hope that the ensuing debates will be friendly as well as productive. An example of what I mean by “friendly” is signaled in Bibliography (MUELLNER 2011). That said, let the debates begin!

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