

## REVIEWS

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GRAHAM FURNISS, *Orality: The power of the spoken word*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. vii, 184. Hb \$75.00.

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Most books written on the subject of orality and literacy are constructed upon an edifice of binary oppositions between the “oral” and the “written” traditions – a typology of supposed differences between the “primitive” or “preliterate” and “civilized” or “modern” cultures. In *Orality: The power of the spoken word*, Graham Furniss deliberately sets out to flatten this Great Divide that has characterized works of scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and his longtime student Walter J. Ong. On the one hand, there are people like McLuhan who nurse a certain nostalgia for the “premodern” era, arguing that by gaining literacy, society in a sense loses its expressive and sensory existence as a result of the dislocation caused by modern technology. On the other hand, scholars such as Ong view the written text as being in many ways a form of representation superior to the oral because the written word asserts itself (its truth or falsehood) with finality and it is thus a more credible way to communicate. Moreover, Ong sees the written text as having object permanence; it can therefore be easily “re-called” to memory by the reader (Ong 1982:31). Thus, he would argue that the written text occupies a higher level than the oral on the logos hierarchy.

Furniss’s book, however, opposes this kind of discourse that creates dichotomies and hierarchies between the written and spoken word. For him, creating such typologies is misleading because it seems to imagine both forms of communication as being mutually exclusive. If we hierarchize literacy over orality, what would be the object of such a project? Referring to Perry Nodelman’s discussion of the interplay of binaries that underlie our pleasure of reading children’s literature, Margaret Higonnet argues:

I am always suspicious of hierarchies of knowledge, such as the claim that language is the medium of knowledge – as if dancers or painters could not know or express in their own way the nature of being. Rather than relying on binaries, I find it useful to think of our many senses collaborating in the construction of our world. (Higonnet 2000:34)

A discourse that creates dichotomies between the spoken and written word does not want to imagine our senses collaborating in the construction of the commu-

nicative moment in our daily lives. Instead, it tries to disembody us by projecting orality and literacy as though they were mutually opposed processes of communication.

This is the thesis that is foregrounded in Furniss's book. It is a thesis many readers will find attractive and even recognize in his earlier edited volume, *Power, marginality and African oral literature* (1995). This is not to say that Furniss is the first to discuss this vital point, nor does he advance this claim in his book. Other works, including Finnegan 1988 and Okpewho 1992, have in different ways vouched for the intertextuality of these forms of communication. Among other scholars, Isabel Hofmeyer (1991:633) has also opposed perceptions that project oral forms as "vulnerable, tenuous and on the verge of extinction," and printing and writing as "powerful, durable media that almost inevitably erase all forms which they encounter." She dismisses this scholarship that sees literacy as being synonymous with "power," modernization, and "a precondition for rationality itself."

*Orality: The power of the spoken word* supports this argument and is consistent in its assertion that the written word is not a "replacement" of the spoken in any historical or evolutionary sense. The uniqueness of the book further lies in the writer's exploration of what he terms the "oral communicative moment" and the situations in which such moments occur in oral communication, whether recorded or filmed. By the oral communicative moment, Furniss is talking about "the magic of the moment," which he describes in the book as the "potentialities that lie in the necessary simultaneity of articulation and perception that is peculiar to all oral communication experienced unrecorded and unfilmed" (1).

He contends that although writing gives us the opportunity to skim, reread, jump forward, and re-experience what we read, it is an inappropriate medium for us to grasp the "intangible elements" in the oral communicative moment in the same way we do through speaking. Some readers may find this argument quite controversial. But as he asserts in his Preface, the book is about "being spoken to and speaking," for it is that element of orality, Furniss argues, that still draws people together to discuss instead of doing their business via e-mail or other electronic means. In short, orality is an aspect of human communication for which no other form of written or visual communication can be substituted.

After reading the book, I wondered why the author waited till chap. 5 to deal with "the Great Divide debate" between orality and literacy. Was he reserving the best for last? I thought by opening with this debate in chap. 1, he would have helped frame his discourse on the subject, which he ably does in the Introduction. Instead, in chap. 1, "The oral communicative moment," he begins by debunking the notion that postmodern society is increasingly moving away from orality. Does it mean, he asks, that a literate society is less oral than a so-called oral society? On the contrary, Furniss would argue that modern mass media are increasingly moving us away from the written word and back to the world of the oral, as television, video, telephones, and the Internet have demonstrated. In fact,

as Finnegan points out, in actual communication practice we do not have a choice between the two as such, for we use a mixture of the oral and the written rather than relying on just one (Finnegan 1988:141). A genre that integrates the two modes, as secondary orality is doing today through television and computer technology, is bound to be more popular and by far the most effective approach to communication. This is why computer and television technology is increasingly becoming more dialogic in its programs (interactive dialogue boxes, chat rooms, TV ads, opinion polls, etc.), because interaction is an essential ingredient of human communication. Even then, these programs obviously come with preset responses (“Yes,” “No,” “Cancel”) which limit our ability to “dialogue” with them.

Chap. 2, “Cultural parameters of speech: Genre, form, aesthetics,” deals with the whole question of the relationship between culture and communication, and the author draws on his knowledge of Hausa to foreground issues of speech genres, aesthetics of spoken language, and the inevitability of linguistic hybridity and cultural translation today. In chap. 3, he continues the debate by focusing on audience cultures and what it means to move communication from the private to the public realm. Ultimately, Furniss believes that verbal communication is embedded in a history, and once it is extracted from that context and recorded, it automatically goes “out of context.” I do not know, however, how he would address this shift between private and public cultures, since dissemination of messages obviously cannot take place without some form of reproduction. And reproduction is always already bound up with ideology, an issue he probes in chap. 5, which is appropriately titled “Ideology and orality.” The book concludes with the chapter on “Academic approaches to orality” and another on the centrality of the evanescent.

The strength of Furniss’s book thus lies in the way he shifts the orality debate to another level by exploring the inevitable and mutual relationship between oral/aural and written/visual elements in reinforcing the oral communicative moment in our daily lives as we interact with various media. The rich examples he draws from to demonstrate his arguments – such as the Native American case of Chief Standing Bear, Sir Geoffrey Howe’s resignation speech at the House of Commons, Hubert Humphrey’s address to the 1948 Democratic Convention, or his incredible knowledge of the Nigerian Hausa language – will no doubt appeal to many a reader who has no time for “dry” theoretical texts. I think the book is a must-read for scholars and students who are interested in the orality and literacy debate but want to hear a new and refreshing perspective on the subject.

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FÈLIX MARTÍ, PAUL ORTEGA, ITZIAR IDIAZABAL, ANDONI BARREÑA, PATXI JUARISTI, CARMÉ JUNYENT, BELEN URANGA AND ESTIBALIZ AMORRORTU (eds.), *Words and worlds: World languages review*. Clevedon, Buffalo, & Toronto: UNESCO Etxea and Multilingual Matters, 2005. Pp. xv, 328. Hb. \$89.95

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This volume reports on the World Languages Review Project, financed by the Basque Government in cooperation with UNESCO. The project's technical committee members have coauthored much of the book, with highlighted contributions from experts from around the globe. Content is based on responses to open questionnaires, distributed through the project committees' networks to individuals knowledgeable on the linguistic situation of each of the 525 languages considered. Other data come from continental meetings, expert consultations, publications, catalogues, atlases, and language centers. This information is analyzed in 12 chapters describing aspects of diversity, indices of vitality and/or decay, and key domains for language maintenance. Chapters conclude with recommendations for the development of language policy. In these ways, the authors achieve their goal of increasing awareness and "appeal[ing] to the responsibility of everyone" (p. xii) to protect languages around the world.

Chap. 1 introduces the reader to the context and terminology of linguistic diversity. It outlines the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of book – explaining (and debating) concepts such as "language" and "community," and presenting theories of multilingualism and the ecology of languages. In chap. 2, ways of measuring linguistic diversity and vitality are described. This chapter covers types of diversity, and the extent of typological diversity on each continent (based largely on statistics from *Ethnologue*). Evidence of and factors contributing to threats to diversity are put forth. The authors recommend policies to enhance awareness, respect, and learning of the world's languages.

Chap. 3 addresses language policies and their role in advancing or detracting from a language's assessed worth. Official recognition is seen as prerequisite to