

Aula 6

ORAL NARRATIVE

META

To present the formal criteria for the distinction between oral and written narratives.

OBJETIVO

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

- To make clear the distinction between oral and written narratives in formal terms.
- To recognize and identify the typically oral narrative strategies in written narratives.
- To read African oral tales with a theoretical basis.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the historicity of the concept of literature;
Notions about the concept and classification of the discursive genres as well as their relations with literary genres.

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, dear student! In this class, we are going to review a topic that you all have already studied in Teoria da Literatura II, which is to learn how to differentiate, in formal terms, oral narratives from written ones, since from a cultural standpoint, every time we analyze an oral literary composition, we tend to take it as inferior in relation to a written piece, associating the former with the primitive stages in Western civilization.

You will realize that such perception stems from the modern notion of alphabetization or literacy, and from the prejudice usually held against societies who have no writing. By mentioning a few examples from classical literature and from Anglo-Saxon epic poetry coupled with the studies by **Milman Parry**, we will try and demonstrate how the production of oral narratives can coexist with the uses of writing, and how some works – in particular the epic poems of old – composed orally are anachronically understood, as if they originally had a fixed text or were produced by individual authors.

Ver glossário no final da Aula

Thus, some elements that characterize oral narrative compositions will be defined with the aim of identifying them in their written versions. Next, we will talk about the role played by tradition and how the modern notion of authorship can not only hamper our understanding of orally-composed old epic poems, but also of singers and Northeastern singer-poets – repenistas – who make use of such skill to this day.

PREJUDICE AGAINST FORMS OF ORAL NARRATIVES

Probably, the beginning of the narrative art in the Western world is linked to the moment in which, for the first time, man repeated vocal sounds that pleased him, even before thinking of recording or (re)-actualizing them on special occasions. In the modern world, the difficulty of relating Literature – which is by proper definition the art of letters, of writing – to oral narrative forms emerge from many misunderstandings, which only now are being duly clarified by the literary criticism and historiography.

The main one amongst them is linked to a prejudice, nourished by an ethnocentric view, according to which the art of the spoken word is a product of primitive or barbaric peoples, whereas the art of the written word is the expression of a civilized society. To Scholes and Kellogg (1977, p. 11), the oral narrative is profoundly different from the written one, but only in formal and compositional terms, not culturally, as it is commonly believed. By mentioning Milman Parry, an expert in heroic oral poetry, they write that literature can be divided into two grand segments, not necessarily due to the existence of two types of culture, but because there are two

types of form: an oral literature and a written one.

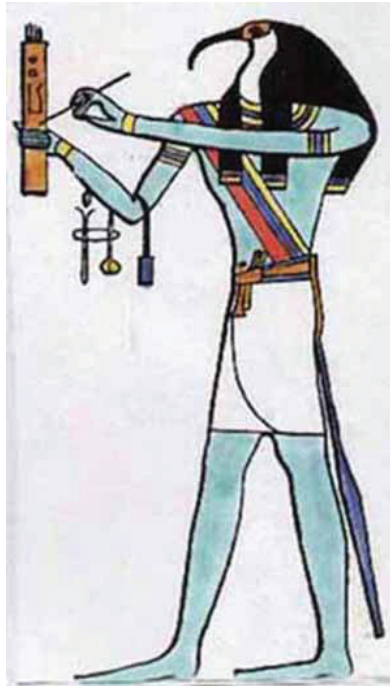
Indeed, there is nothing more erroneous and prejudiced than supposing that societies who have no writing are culturally inferior. Such a prejudice attaches itself to the modern notion according to which illiterate people, or individuals who do not know how to read and write, find themselves in a state of total ignorance and cultural poverty, which leads us to elevate the written culture, especially the European one, to the status of “High Culture”.

However, this has not always been the case. In Phaedrus, for example, Plato retells, through Socrates, the myth of Thoth, the Egyptian deity who invented writing. In showing his invention to the god Tammuz, who reigned in Egypt, with the intention of demonstrating how the letters would increase both the memory and the wisdom of the Egyptians, Thoth would have heard the following answer.

As it turns out, for King Tammuz, writing did not represent an advance for wisdom and for culture, but a backward step, since men would no longer make use of memory to trust in something that was alien to their mind. More than a regression, Thoth's invention in the eyes of Tammuz was a threat to public life, for it would give authority to men who would seem wise without truly being so, something that is not too far removed from our own contemporary reality, in which politicians and legal professionals who display an air of knowledge, often masked by pompous gestures and formal attire, cause real “public disturbances.”

However, the written word in our society has reached such prestige that it became truer than the sounds that come from the lips of living men. In this way, any lie or outrageous statement that reaches printing becomes much more threatening than any “truth”. Our contemporary society is full of examples of false denunciations, conveyed by modern media, which reach the status of truths, even if later denied by their victims. Today, we can say that the written word, in a certain way, dictates what it is real.

Taking this fact into account, it is hard to imagine that among the ancient Greeks, the writing system known as Linear Minoan B (B Minoano) was a monopoly of the servants and accountants, being mocked by the poets and teachers. Indeed, Milman Parry's research indicates that the composition of Homeric epics occurred long before the diffusion of the Phoenician alphabet, around the 8th century BC, in ancient Greece.

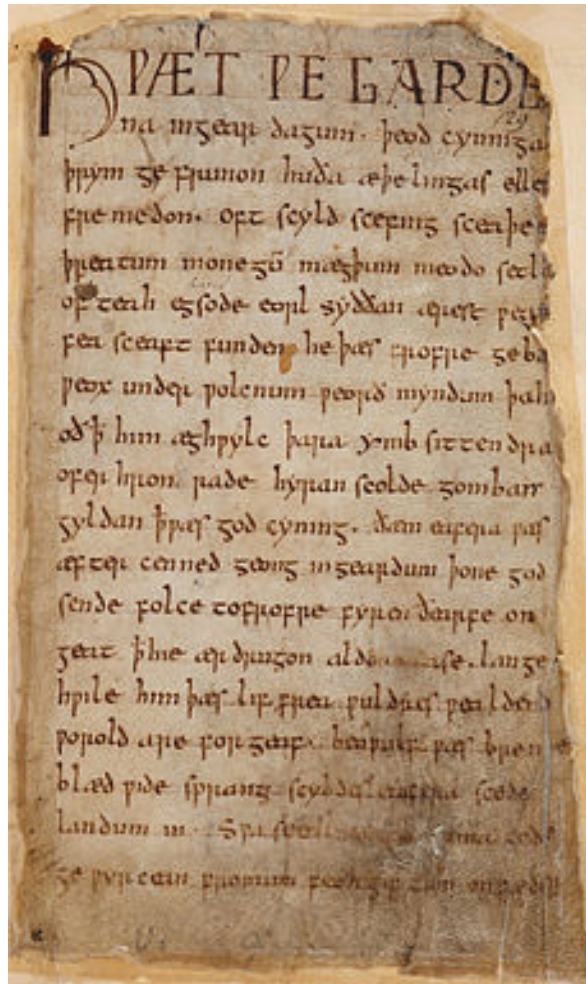


Depictions of Thoth. Source: <https://drxujian.wordpress.com/page/613/>

THE COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS OF ORALITY

Based on the research carried out by Parry, Scholes and Kellogg (1977, p.13) demonstrate how some compositional elements of orality that are present in the Iliad and the Odyssey can be identified. The epithets and locutions, for example, taken as characteristic of the epic style, are used by Homer in the same metrical and semantic situations, functioning as formulas, which are defined as “a group of words regularly employed under the same metric conditions to express a certain essential idea”.

Thus, fixed epithets as “son of Atreus” and “king of men” for Agamemnon, or “glittering helmet” for Hector, or “resounding” and “echoing” for the sea, considered characteristic of Homer’s style, were imitated by all writers of literary epics. This feature is also present in Beowulf, the first epic poem in English literature, which makes use of various epithets and locutions to refer to the warrior Beowulf, hero of the poem, King Hrothgar’s castle, or the monster Grendel. It was only after Parry discovered that the entire Homeric corpus of about 27,000 hexameter verses was formed of formulas that critics understood that what looked like a feature of Homer’s style was in fact a concrete proof that the Iliad and the Odyssey had been composed orally.



It is an Old English epic poem consisting of 3,182 alliterative lines. It is arguably one of the most important works of Old English literature. The date of composition is a matter of contention among scholars; the only certain dating pertains to the manuscript, which was produced between 975 and 1025. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf>

With this, the said researcher wanted to prove that the oral poets, unlike the “literary poets”, so to speak, improvised using conventional formulas of their tradition to form metrical and syntactically appropriate verses. This is more or less the same process used by our Northeastern singer-poets who, by having a motto, or a theme to develop their verses, employ a series of formulas, with chorus repetition or refrain, so that each stanza is rhythmically and semantically coherent, as opposed to a type of composition – the proper “literary” one – that seeks to avoid repetitions, making it possible for each verse to look original, since repetitions serve only as special rhetorical effects. Thus, what happens to the singer-poets is not a repetition, a memory, a fixed oral text, but the use of formulas, that is, of epithets and locutions, in metrical and semantically similar situations.

Thus, unlike a poet, the singer-poet does not compose or decorate a fixed text, for it depends entirely on tradition. The plots, episodes and phrases with which he elaborates his verses are, so to speak, “formulaic.” His singing only exists at the moment of its actualization, of its “performance”, ceasing to exist when it comes to an end. In the same way, before being sung, the poem only has potential existence, or virtual, assuming some aspect of permanence only when the singer or his audience learns something new in the course of its representation.

CONCLUSION

An obscure question to this day has been the hypothesis of the transcription of the Homeric texts. It is well known that written documents, even telegrams, can coexist with an oral literary tradition, because the introduction of writing does not necessarily result in literacy, the way we see it today, which is a relatively recent idea, since it dates from the sixteenth century (OLIVEIRA, 2003). According to Parry’s assumptions (Scholes and Kellogg, p. 20), however much familiarized with tradition the scribe is, and even if the singer dictates his poem more slowly than he normally would, the rhythm of his thought will be different and the result of the written text will never equal the oral composition in its actualization. In the case of the Homeric text, the most likely hypothesis is that oral representation allied itself to the oral recitation of the resulting written texts, transforming into a “quasi-literary” tradition, thanks to the archaeological work of the **philologists**.

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Chartier (2002, pp. 24-25) states that it is possible to identify indexes and representations of orality in written texts, especially from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. These elements, which are presented explicitly in certain episodes of narrative works, as in *Don Quixote* (3), at the moment when Sancho Panza tells his story to the “knight-errant”, in a narrative full of repetitions and digressions, can reveal themselves in the oracles of the publisher in the publication of certain theatrical plays, as well as in the observations that the poets make to their readers, indicating to them the ways the poems should be recited. Although this is a type of research of great relevance, there is no way to recapture, through modern texts, the ways of composing and listening to orally composed works.

However, we need to be able to distinguish between oral narratives written in formal terms from the point of view of their compositional strategies, so as not to repeat and consolidate ethnocentric prejudices based on the modern notion of literacy, according to which non-literate societies produce a lower type of culture, as if every type of literary oral composition were only a primitive stage of development in “Literature” as we conceive it today.

READ THE FOLLOWING TALE:

Holidays with grandmother (Violet Otieno Catherine Groenewald)

Odongo and Apiyo lived in the city with their father. They looked forward to the holidays. Not only because school was closed, but because they went to visit their grandmother. She lived in a fishing village near a large lake.

Odongo and Apiyo were excited because it was time to visit their grandmother again. They packed their bags and got ready for their long journey the next day. They could not sleep and talked about the holiday the whole night.

Early the next morning, they left for the village in their father's car. They drove past mountains, wild animals, and tea plantations. They counted cars and sang songs.

After a while, the children were tired and fell asleep.

Father woke up Odongo and Apiyo as they arrived in the village. They found Nyar-Kanyada, their grandmother, resting on a mat under a tree. In their language, Nyar-Kanyada means "daughter of the people of Kanyada." She was a strong and beautiful woman.

Nyar-Kanyada welcomed them into the house. She danced around the room singing with joy. Her grandchildren were excited to give her the presents they brought from the city. "First open my gift," said Odongo. "No, my gift first!" said Apiyo.

After she opened the presents, Nyar-Kanyada blessed her grandchildren in a traditional way.

Then Odongo and Apiyo went outside. They chased butterflies and birds.

They climbed trees and splashed in the water of the lake.

When it was dark they returned to the house for dinner. Before they could finish eating, they were falling asleep!

The next day, the children's father drove back to the city leaving them with Nyar-Kanyada.

Odongo and Apiyo helped their grandmother with household chores. They fetched water and firewood. They collected eggs from the chickens and picked vegetables from the garden.

Nyar-Kanyada taught her grandchildren to make soft ugali to eat with stew. She showed them how to make coconut rice to eat with roast fish.

One morning, Odongo took his grandmother's cows to graze. They ran onto a neighbour's farm. The farmer was angry with Odongo. He threatened to keep the cows for eating his crops. After that day, the boy made sure that the cows did not get into trouble again.

On another day, the children went to the market place with Nyar-Kanyada. She had a stall selling vegetables, sugar and soap. Apiyo liked to tell customers the price of items. Odongo would pack the items that customers bought.

At the end of the day they drank chai tea together. They helped grandmother to count the money she earned.

But too soon the holidays were over. The children had to go back to the city. Nyar-Kanyada gave Odongo a cap and Apiyo a sweater. She packed food for their journey.

When their father came to fetch them, they did not want to leave. The children begged Nyar-Kanyada to go with them to the city. She smiled and said, "I am too old for the city. I will be waiting for you to visit me again."

Odongo and Apiyo both hugged her tightly, and said goodbye.

When Odongo and Apiyo went back to school they told their friends about life in the village. Some children felt that life in the city was good. Others felt that the village was better. But most of all, everyone agreed that Odongo and Apiyo had a wonderful grandmother!

Holidayswithgrandmother

Author - Violet Otieno Illustration - Catherine Groenewald Language - English Level - First paragraphs

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RESUMO

In this lesson, we saw that much of the difficulty we have in theoretically understanding oral narrative forms stems from a prejudice in relation to societies that do not make use of the written culture. Such a prejudice is an evolutionist and ethnocentric - not to say Eurocentric - view linked to the idea of alphabetization and literacy, according to which the production of oral narratives is the result of primitive cultures that have not yet reached the stage of the so-called "civilized nations". Thus, we have seen that many of the ancient epic poems, both of the Greek-Roman and Anglo-Saxon traditions, were composed orally, and that later, with the work of scribes, philologists, historians and literary critics, they obtained the status of "Literature", with all its implications: the idea of a fixed text belonging to an individual author, among others.



ATIVIDADES

Based on the content of the story you have just read, and taking into account the previous classes about narrative structure, answer the questions below:

- 1) What is the main theme of the tale, in your opinion? Explain yourself.
- 2) How is the story narrated?
- 3) Who are the characters of the story and what is their importance?
- 4) Is there any moral of the story? How could you explain that?

COMENTÁRIO SOBRE AS ATIVIDADES

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer com que você construa uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta aula e do curso, desenvolvendo o senso interpretativo e o senso crítico. Antes de fazer esta atividade, no entanto, o tutor deverá aproveitar-se da experiência de leitura dos alunos, através de fóruns ou de chats, buscando ver que tipo de narrativa eles mais lêem, com o intuito de, a partir de tais informações, discutir as questões levantadas pelo texto com base nas narrativas por eles lidas (ou assistidas, no caso dos filmes).



PRÓXIMA AULA

The tradition of narrative

GLOSSARY

Milman Parry: A scholar of epic poetry (1902-1935). Studied at the University of Berkeley, California, and the Sorbonne in Paris. He is currently considered the founder of the discipline “oral tradition”.

Anacreon: Greek lyric poet (563 a.C.-478 a.C.). He was an advisor to Polycrates, tyrant of Samos. The poetry of Anacreon has come to us in the form of fragments. He sang of the muses, Dionysus and love. He was much appreciated by the Greeks and one of the most imitated poets.

Philology: A discipline that studies a language, literature, culture or civilization under a historical vision, from written documents. However, the scientific approach to language development or families of languages, especially the research of the history of its morphology and phonology, traditionally called philology, was encompassed by what is now called Historical Linguistics. Although there are still philologists of the most varied nuances, philology today is mainly associated to the material and critical study of texts, aiming at its establishment, dating and attribution of authorship. See the disciplines of Ecdótica, Textual Criticism, Paleografía and Epigraphy.

Venerable Bede: Bede (Old English Bæda, English Bede), Saint Bede or still Venerable Bede or The Venerable Bede (of the English The Venerable Bede), born about 672 and died on May 27, 735, was the Anglo-Saxon monk of the Jarrow monastery in Northumbria. He became famous for its Ecclesiastical History of the English People (History Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum), from which he derived the title of “Father of English History”, although he wrote on many other subjects
(Source www.wikipedia.org).

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