

## Three Forms or Three Kinds of Oral Literature

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### ABSTRACT

There are several modern works on oral literature, but they do not distinguish one from the others among three forms of oral literature: the everyday orality (a), orality in the folklore (b), and the professional orality (c) (where official historic narratives, sacred texts or literature exist, from the time before the use of literacy). The author contrasts just the three forms according to the terms of communication theory: addresser – addressee – coding – decoding – message. The chart makes possible to put the question: whether the three forms are the forms of the same “orality”, or they are three different kinds of it. The second alternative will also help the theory of literature and the theory of genres.

The term “oral literature” is a denomination *fault de mieux*: it comprises texts, genres and phenomena, which use, as the way of communication, the oral, and not the written channels. Alternatively another term, “oral poetry” is used too, but oral “literature” is a broader area, since it includes also prose forms. In the title of my paper the term “text” is another imprecise name, because in oral literature we just do not have “texts” in the proper sense of the word. Therefore we use now the mentioned terms in a loose way.

The fact that “oral” literature can develop into “written” literature has as long a history, as literature itself. People know that Homer’s epic was first performed in oral form, and then there came Pisistratus, Athens’s tyrant, who ordered after 560 B.C to fix it in a written version. Giambattista Vico in his *“principi di una scienza nuova”* (about 1725) used the same event to delineate oral/written poetry. The long lasting debate in France, *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* (from 1680 on) contrasted the Old Greek and Roman writers with the contemporary French writers – and in the debate there are often important statements concerning oral versus written poetry (see Fumaroli, 2001). From the beginning of folklore collecting in Europe, both the English scholars (e.g. Bishop Thomas Percy (1756), and the Germans (first by Johann Gottfried Herder around 1773) used manuscripts for their publications of folk poetry – but they always realized the existence of oral variants behind and before the written documents. Starting from the Brothers Grimm throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the “original” forms of folklore were considered oral – living “on the mouth of the folk”, but at

the same time folklorists were excellent experts of written texts. Theodor Benfey was looking for the origin of European folktales the oldest Sanskrit books, and Joseph Bédier found the origin of European fabliaux in Medieval Romance literature. When the first theory of “simple genres” was elaborated, André Jolles (1929) analyzed the “forms” of *Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* – in some cases they were in essence oral, in other cases written – and in important cases – both oral and written. Handbooks of early comparative literature (as e.g. Chadwick and Chadwick, 1932–1940) included both forms too. The famous Harvard school of “oral formulaic poetry” since 1959 offered a theory of oral composition of long epic songs – made by Homer and similarly by the contemporary South Slavic epic singers (see Lord, 1960). A broad perspective was suddenly opened, when the Africanist priest Jan Vansina published his dissertation on “Oral Tradition” (first in French 1961, later in English 1965) about the royal histories from Belgian Congo. It was surprising, for how many generations the “official history” was transmitted there simply by oral performances. The new trend of involving primitive oral forms into the theory of literature and folklore, referring to the oral traditions from Africa and Oceania was summarized several times by Ruth Finnegan (see her first attempt: 1977). Scholars of folk literature and professional literature have accepted those works as the necessary innovative basis in shaping a “new” theory of literature. There are in fact hundreds of such innovative suggestions for theories of works of art. Perhaps among them the most frequently used one is by Walter Ong (1982) on “technologizing” of the word. The anthropologist Jack Goody (1987) describes the interface between the written and the oral, as the form of social interaction. It is surprising to notice how late the theoreticians of literature (in proper sense of the word) realized the new perspectives of studying poetry from the point of the dichotomy between the oral and written. See the excellent summary by the French Medievalist, Paul Zumthor (1983).

I could continue the list<sup>1</sup> of more or less recent books on various oral forms written by folklorists, anthropologists or literary theoreticians – but the judgement will be the same: nowadays literature is regularly understood as a form of communication, where oral forms play also an important role. It is a fact of positive development – but I have to discuss it with further remarks.

I started many years ago to formulate my ideas concerning the communicative system of folklore phenomena, and the theory of literary genres. (In Hungarian: Voigt, 1972, in English: Voigt 1985). Thus I should not repeat here my arguments in detail, and I shall focus only on the two critical remarks.

My first intervention is that the above mentioned descriptions of oral literature(s) and their product(s) do not represent systematically the communication theory. They just pick up here and there some intriguing features, but do not follow the same routine in analysing other parts of the communication. As for showing the multiplicity of the problem I could just present my diagram below, contrasting genres and forms of literature. I find the most important feature in analyzing the oral forms: whether they are parts of everyday oral communication (a) – of oral communication in folklore (b) – or of professional oral communication (c). In contrasting the phenomena

I follow the generally accepted theory of communication, adapted in studies of language and literature. I list only some examples of “genres” and similar phenomena in each position in parenthesis. Sometimes the same names of genres or communicative events occur twice or more, because the terms of genres (and the social phenomena behind them) may be contrasted with different other ones and in different directions. The logical order of communication theory events will be the following: addresser – addressee – coding – decoding – message. (It is important, in which order we investigate them.)

1. Distinctive features in terms of the *addresser*

individual (e.g. saying)	communal (children’s games)
creative (memorate)	performative (folk drama)
original (true story)	accepted and adopted (mystery play)
improvised (gossip)	traditional (prayer)

2. Distinctive features in terms of the *addressee*

individual acceptance (magic formula)	communal acceptance (wedding song)
direct communication with the addresser (oral performance face to face communication)	indirect communication with the addresser (song collections in manuscript form)
isolated acceptance (passive listener in storytelling)	interaction between addresser and addressee (riddle contest at wedding)
definitive acceptance (church painting or sculptures)	creative tradition (pupils of storytellers)

3. Distinctive features in terms of the *coding*

A. According to the functions

one function (weather lore)	two or more functions (wedding)
natural – normal (secular, pragmatic) (lyrical song)	supernatural – supranormal (magic, sacred) (chant, charm)
serious (ballad)	entertainment (joke)
poetical (love song)	didactic (health prescriptions)
informative (inscription)	agitative (slogan)

B. In terms of the manner of the coding

simple coding (proverb)	double, triple, etc. coding (song, dance)
lingual coding (tongue-twister)	non-lingual coding (gesture)
acoustic coding (rhyme)	kinetic coding (dance)

gestural coding (“Shanghai” gesture)	dance coding (Morris dance)
vocal coding (lament)	instrumental coding (gypsy band music)
solo song (e.g. humorous song)	choral song (soldiers’ song)
oral (greeting)	written (love letter)
segmented coding (stanza forms)	non-segmented coding (lamentations)
verse (carol)	prose (riddle)
metrical (rondeau)	free rhyme (counting rhyme)
narrative (legend)	dramatic (folk play)

4. Distinctive features in terms of the *decoding*

artistic decoding (hymn)	pragmatic decoding (food recipes)
understandable (animal tale)	cryptic (incantation)
contemporary (memorate)	posterior (tomb inscription)
conservative (sacred formulas)	variable (city cries)
original (magic tale)	adaptation (numskull tale about a particular person or place)
homolingual	translation (macaronic text)
linguistic (anecdote)	translinguistic or paralinguistic (game, custom)

5. Distinctive features in terms of the *message*

individual (carving)	mass product (broadsheet)
separate, homogenous (stone cross)	complex, e.g. cyclic work of art (piece of a wedding costume, songs in a song-cycle)
one meaning (counting rhyme)	double meaning (e.g. symbolic work of art, exemplum)
decorative (textile)	expressive (icon)
concrete (animal name)	abstract (proverbial lore)
realistic (work-song)	unrealistic (fantastic) (tales of magic)
reliable (historical song)	fictive (myth)
objective (murder ballad)	ironic (ethnic slur)
lyrical (love song)	impersonal (work-song)
tragic (drama)	comical (mocking proverb)
epic (outlaw stories)	non-narrative (greeting formulas)
short form (riddle)	long form (heroic song)
many acting heroes (puppet theatre)	one acting hero (memorate)
simple plot (formula tale)	complex plot (romantic tale)
continuous in time (memorate)	discontinuous in time (origin myth)
spatial (sculpture)	spaceless (weaving)
ordered message (cosmogony)	non-ordered message (baby talk)

From the above listed contrasts we should start the analysis of the texts, in the order used above. (However, in this paper I cannot show it in a detailed form.)

My second remark is that (as I have said before) we should always draw distinction between (a), (b), and (c) kinds of oral language. Everyday oral language (a) is as old, as language and culture are by themselves. It has subclasses, but I am going to second out only the oral language of folklore (b). The third kind is the professional oral language (c) as it was used by oral poets, old historians, priests, orators and different kinds of professional entertainers.

We can sum up the following chart of differences according to the *addresser*:

	(a)	(b)	(c)
the <i>sender</i> is	everybody, socially in a random set	in theory everybody in practice selected individuals, according to their talents	in professional status
separate <i>addresser</i> or <i>spokesman</i>	very rarely	usually, but hidden (as the grammatical “ego”, a hero in songs or tales, the knowledgeable spokesman in the didactic genres, etc.)	generally the main forms are: a) dialogues in the stories are imitated by different persons, b) author and actor may be different individuals

Differences in terms of the *addressee*

the <i>receiver</i> is	everybody, socially in a random set	in theory everybody, in practice determined by the actual audience and usually associated with a common social activity (work, war, imprisonment, etc.)	the audience demands aesthetic values and satisfaction
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separate  
*addressee* or  
*interpreter*

very rarely

usually, but  
hidden or  
generalized (as  
in the motto,  
closing,  
moralizing  
stanzas in  
ballads, etc.)

generally  
(critics,  
aestheticians,  
etc.)

Differences in terms of the *channels*

complex forms  
of singular  
channels(e.g.  
speech, writing,  
singing, mime,  
gesture,  
kinesics, etc.

each of them  
according to the  
actual  
circumstances,  
usually  
combined with  
each other

speech, song  
and dance  
predominate,  
but are not  
exclusive,  
differences in  
the various  
genres are  
significant

special forms  
are favoured  
depending on  
the various  
genres and are  
usually in a  
hierarchical  
order (e.g. in  
heroic song the  
sequence of  
importance is:  
text > song >  
mime > dance

Differences in terms of the *coding*

network or  
interplay of  
linguistic,  
paralingual,  
kinetic, etc.  
codes

of  
sociolinguistic  
and occasional  
character

of  
sociolinguistic  
and traditional  
character

traditional and  
occasional in  
both cases for  
aesthetic usage

(in both forms – in other than linguistic codes, according to similar principles)

Differences in terms of the *setting*

framework conditions and extrapolation	amorphous, applied, irregular, based on direct social functions	variable and varying, regular but of occasional character	in practice invariable(in general the whole work of art in a social setting, where parts of it are directed according to the artist's will
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Differences in terms of the *message*

forms of message (genres, kinds, forms, styles)	content based, actual, amorphous	genres, kinds, systems of genres, styles in dynamic social model	according to the plot and structure of the individual works of art (the generic and greater stylistic regularities exist in frames of individual works of art or the artist's life work)
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Differences in terms of the *events* and *participants of the communication*

varying circumstances of communication acts	based on social, educational patterns and respective psychological reactions for direct social needs	accepted as self-oriented social entertainment possessing continuity, to some extent creativity	artistic creativity, specialized talent
IN PRINCIPLE:	spontaneous	traditional	creative

Another way of comparing the three forms may be the technical—historical one: the inventing of the writing, stenography, of multiplying the texts, recent techniques of fixing oral performances (for broadcast, discs, audiovisual archives, etc.) Even the simplest new technique could influence the texts themselves. The first phonographs could register up to three minute length, the first film reels were not longer as well.

And the oral performers learned quickly the limits, and have shortened their texts or choose pointed genres. For the first SMS-phones the number of letters was restricted, creating a special kind of short narratives.

However, my aim is not to construct a third chart – according to the technical development of oral registering.

If we look through again the above charts, one could ask: whether the (a), (b) and (c) phenomena are three different kinds of orality, or they are three forms of the same phenomenon?

In order to approach the question we may use radical restriction in the interpretation of the texts in question. By its origin (a) is an important part of the everyday life, and usually is exercised in a face-to-face communication. It is spontaneous and of ephemeral character. On the other hand (c) works for greater public, represents the interest of the society, and its topic is above the everyday life. The performance is more or less ritual, and can be interpreted also in religious terms. (See the use of “Old Church” languages in several religions of today.) Between them stands (b) – which is a part of the common knowledge, and theoretically can be performed by anybody, and in variants, non-canonical forms as well. Such oral form is creating its own limits: both in the length of the text, and the actual audience. The interaction between the performer and the audience is very close. Everybody, who participates in a wedding ritual, is an undisputable part of it – also as regards the texts used therein. The collective memory in (b) is limited. It is nice to know that in some parts of Europe one can “collect” folk tales, songs, some ballads, etc. even today. But if we compare the actual repertoire with the folklore collections from the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, we realize soon that 99 % of the texts from the old tradition are not longer alive: if people know some of them today, it is because of the intermediary function of the new (written) tradition: folk poetry anthologies, schoolbooks, gramophone and compact disks, folk festivals, etc. There are also new forms of folklore performances, which look like the (c) events. By the way (c) underwent in the last centuries important changes too. I refer only to one of them. Political oratory was one of the most developed forms of (c) through the centuries. Until the invention of the broadcast and movie films the famous speakers used the thousand years old ways of the speech: in front of an interactive audience. On the other hand, Hitler or Churchill spoke already directed towards the broadcast and for the screen, also for people who were not present at the same place and time. The oral art of Fidel Castro is as old-fashioned today, as the consenting speech of the Indians in the works of James Fenimore Cooper or Karl May. *Ugh* and *how* are originally words of approval in Muskogee dialect of Creek Indians, registered only about 1872, with reference to a tribal council meeting in 1825. This style of imitation the Indian speech is out of use today.

The (a) form of orality will probably live forever. The form (c) shows a radical changing in our days. Despite of much efforts of safeguarding folklore (b) loses its importance. This situation helps us in giving an answer the question: are (a), (b) and (c) different forms? My answer is – not. There are not three forms of the same orality, but there exist three different kinds of it.

If we look carefully for the similarities and differences in the charts above, we find

hints for studying the genres (especially the problem of “system of genres”) and of the origin of written literature. Needless to say, the charts above reflect only an abstract orientation, which may be proved by texts from different time periods, different cultures, etc. Orality versus written forms differ from one another e.g. in Old Egypt, China or in Ancient Greece and Rome, during the Middle Ages, or in our days. (See e.g. Ayatollah Khomeini’s use of oral texts of actual religious—political discourse by distribution on tapes.) All forms of orality face historic and technologic changes. In everyday orality the invention of telephone, mobile phones, etc. have created new forms: e.g. the temporal limits of communication became different. The traditional face-to-face communication has turned into a new technical frame. In folklore orality the phenomena of *folklorism* have gained more and more place: original folklore items appear on very different areas and in communicative situations. (On folklorism see my booklet Voigt, 1990.) Folk songs and folk dances are shown in films, song festivals or in touristic advertising. They may be of typical and traditional character, but their use is different, usually it is served for the larger group of consumers and not for the members of their original community. Professional orality is changing too. Central Asian epic singers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at first performed traditional epic songs in the courts of the Emir of Bukhara, the Khan of Khiva, the feudal ruler of Samarkand, etc., and then, from the 1920 years. Under the Soviet rule the epic singers pleased the new heroes, and the protagonists in the heroic epic songs gradually met Lenin and Stalin, participated in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), etc. Epic singers, who lived long enough (e.g. the Kazakh Zhambil Zhabayuli /in Russian: Djambul Djabayev/ 1846–1945) modified their (c) orality several times. And today the actual heads of state follow the megalomaniac and honourifying tradition there. The Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov called by himself as *Turkmenbashi* ‘Leader of the Turkmen’, renamed the months of the year after members of his own family. The Kazakh President Nursultan Abishuli Nazarbayev ordered a movie film on his boyhood. The same cultic oral tradition is finding there its new communicative forms. Powerful preachers from John Tillotson to Billy Graham or to Father Popieluszko have continuously innovated the church sermons. Sport reporters commented on various matches first for the radio broadcast, then for TV programs, reaching more and more million listeners and viewers. They represent also the new forms of (c).

The communicative system of oral texts can be better understood by a comparative study of the three kinds of orality. And, as from a nymph a butterfly, from old orality the new orality arises, and the scholar can understand better the “old orality” also from the “new orality”. It is not the topic of my present paper, but I have to draw a conclusion: the existence of so many various forms of “new orality” is proof of the above outlined statement: there are not three forms, but three kinds of orality.

In modern orality also the role of a “court poet” (c) was modified in a new way, different from that in the Middle Ages. The Romanian writer Adrian Păunescu (1943–2010) was a national poet, praising Nicolae Ceaușescu beyond any taste, but after the death of the tyrant, the poet did not lose his own popularity, and he was appearing on television several times a week, singing his new verses in praise of Romania, following the style of the popular poetry (b).

Bohumil Hrabal in his novels imitated the endless everyday discourse (a), but at the same time his *pábitelé* was a literary product, and contained complicated stories and views.

Proverbs (b) are often used today for slogans, advertising, etc. A special form is the *anti-proverb*, in which a proverb will be distorted, and its meaning will be very different, often controversial or humorous. See e.g. “*Different strokes for different folks*” which is based upon a Volkswagen advertising slogan: “Different Volks for different folks”. (For first anthologies of Antiproverbs see: Mieder, 1982–1989. An anthology of “anti-quotations” in literature and in the media: Mieder, 1997.) There are excellent collections of proverbial lore connected with politicians, newspapers, etc. In all cases (b) is used for very different purposes. (On actual problems of paremiology see: Mieder, 2004.) A witty label for the new form is. “Twisted Wisdom” (Mieder and Tóthné Litovkina, 1999). If thus in the proverbs, i.e. in one limited genre of (b) we find dozens of books publishing thousands of actual “overformed” proverbs – we might suppose the modern forms of other genres will not die out soon. But the new variants are not the same, as the old ones were. We know, production and “twisting” the proverbs is not in itself a new phenomenon. Already the Pest—Vienna humourist, Moritz Gottlieb Saphir (1795–1838) was noted during lifetime for reconstructing proverbs, and both Hungarian and Austrian journalists did the same.

When studying orality, in all its three kinds we should look into differences between “old” and “new” orality. And in this paper it is needless to say, the Slovak school of “aesthetics of expression”, contrasting operativity and iconicity of literary texts will help the thorough study of “orality”. (See just for orientation Miko, 1969 and Plesník 1995.) For the studies of communication of the “high” literature it offers a basic introduction.

Theory of communication and literature will not be complete, if we do not study the different kinds of orality. We should investigate all the various forms of it, in order not to be trapped into the proverbial warning: “Out of sight, out of mind”.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the usual reservation of the authors dealing with fundamental topics: I was not able to present here an exhaustive bibliography; even I did not quote some of my papers, devoted to similar topics. The then new structural—morphological study of folklore from the 1960 years paid much attention to the communicative forms of literature, including both folklore and oral texts. Again, I have here no place for listing them. The bibliography of structural studies of oral narrative (Holbek et al. 1978) contains about 800 publications only from a relatively short time period, i.e. between 1950 and 1977.

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## TRI FORMY ALEBO TRI DRUHY ÚSTNEJ SLOVESNOSTI

**Oral Literature. Orality in the Folklore. Professional Oral Literature.  
Communication Theory. Theory of Genres. Oral versus Written Texts.**

O ústnej slovesnosti jestvuje viacero moderných prác, ale tie nerozlišujú tri druhy ústnej slovesnosti: každodennú orálnosť (a), orálnosť vo folklóre (b) a profesionálnu orálnosť (c). (pričom existujú historické naratívy, sakrálne texty a literatúra z čias pred písomníctva). Autor tieto tri formy dáva do kontrastu v zmysle pojmov komunikačnej teórie vysielateľ – adresát – kódovanie – dekódovanie – odkaz. Táto schéma umožňuje položiť si otázku, či tieto tri formy sú formami tej istej „orálnosti“, alebo sú to tri rozličné druhy. Druhá alternatíva je nápomocná aj pre teóriu literatúry a teóriu žánrov.

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