Acta Academica 2006 38(1): 200-232

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Oral people can be literate: some reflections on aurally based literacy

First submission: November 2004

The concept of literacy, in its "autonomous" view as a language derived skill offering certain cognitive advances, can be situated within the context of primary orality. Aurally based literacy becomes possible to the extent that sound (the "musical") fulfils the function of a second order of linguistic representation in an oral society, a function fulfilled by writing in a society which uses writing (visually based literacy). The paper describes a model for aurally based literacy, drawing strongly on musicological insights (in particular those of Jean-Jacques Nattiez) on the meaning of music. It then reflects on the implications of the acceptance of an aurally based literacy for the study of orality, reconceptualised as "aural linguistics". Conceiving of an aurally based literacy represents a particular way of undermining the notion of technological determinism, which has already received much criticism in research on orality (the oral tradition).

Orale mense kan geletterd wees: enkele gedagtes oor 'n klankgeoriënteerde geletterdheid

Die begrip geletterdheid, in sy "outonome" toepassing, word as 'n taalgebaseerde vaardigheid beskou wat sekere kognitiewe voorbeelde bied, en dit kan binne die raamwerk van primêre oraliteit tuisgebring word. Klankgeoriënteerde geletterdheid tree na vore in soverre klank (die "musikale") die funksie van sekondêre linguistiese representasie oorneem in 'n orale samelewing, 'n funksie wat deur skrif vervul word in 'n skrifgebaseerde samelewing (visueel-georiënteerde geletterdheid). Die artikel hou 'n model vir klank-georiënteerde geletterdheid voor, wat sterk steun op musiekwetenskaplike insigte (veral dié van Jean-Jacques Nattiez) aangaande betekenis in musiek. Voorts behandel die artikel enkele implikasies wat die aanvaarding van 'n klank-georiënteerde geletterdheid sal inhou vir die studie van oraliteit, hervoorgestel as 'n "klank-georiënteerde linguïstiek". Die indink van 'n klank-georiënteerde geletterdheid moet gesien word as 'n bepaalde manier om die idee van tegnologiese determinisme — wat reeds aan heelwat kritiek onderworpe is in navorsing op oraliteit (orale tradisie) — te ondermyn.

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This paper is about people for whom the written word, if they have ever come into contact with it, has little or no significance. They may perhaps be able to read or write at a very basic, functional level (such as signing their names or recognising brand names and price tags), but they have not sufficiently interiorised the skills of reading and writing to be considered "literate". They belong to societies which, whatever inroads modern technology may have made, continue to place great store on the oral tradition as a vehicle of social cohesion. To these "oral" people, the main source of wisdom and knowledge remains the oral tradition, not the printing press or the electronic media, nor, for that matter, formal education. Large parts of rural and peri-urban populations in the developing world are oral in this sense, even in highly industrialised countries, such as South Africa. Walter Ong's concept of primary orality offers an apt characterisation.

But people in oral societies may be literate after all, or, at the very least, have the possibility of being literate within the oral tradition of which they form part. (Even in the most literate of societies, only a relatively small "educational elite" read and write well enough to be considered fully literate). The literacy in question here clearly has nothing to do with reading and writing. In truth, though, the word "literacy", even though it still does mean "the ability to read and write", has long taken on more ambitious dimensions — of reason, rationality and progress. For the purposes of the present argument, the following working definition of literacy could be offered. Literacy is a function of language. It refers to the ability of a language user to represent speech, which constitutes the first order of linguistic representation (Baron 1981: 149), at a further, second level of representation. Integrating meaning at this second order of representation enables the language user to (re-)structure knowledge at a distance from immediate lived experience (that of the flow of speech), which favours higher degrees of intellectual abstraction and the analytical processing of sequential thought.

This definition is, of course, very much intended to fit the "autonomous" view of literacy, most strongly associated, within the field of the oral tradition,[1] with Walter Ong (1967, 1982 & 1987) and, in anthro-

1 Depending on particular emphases within it, this interdisciplinary field is also referred to as "oral studies", "orality-literacy studies" or "oral literature".

pology, with Jack Goody (1968, 1977 & 1987). Its only innovation, really, lies in its use of the term "second order of linguistic representation" rather than "graphic" or "visual" representation — which allows for the possibility that this more abstract level of meaning-making could also be constituted in sound, for example aural. The second order of linguistic representation could be aural in two different ways: either within the very sounds of the language people speak (the sounds of their speech), or in any other meaningful sounds they make, whether vocal or instrumental (with the body also being an instrument). From the Western point of view, the latter "making of sounds" will be termed "music". Presumably these two types of second-order aural linguistic representation would exist in combination to the extent that they form, for all practical purposes, one order of sounded meaning beyond that of speech. It is in this way that oral people who do not know reading and writing but are able to apprehend the meaning of the sounds they speak (in addition to the meaning of the words) would be "literate".

Of course, this concern with the "literacy" of the oral may well appear to be at odds with recent developments in the field of the oral tradition. The technological determinism apparent in the way in which the autonomous model of literacy conceptualised the relation between orality and literacy (orality and writing) has been strongly criticised, and with reason (cf, for example, Finnegan 1977; Street 1984; Vail & White 1991). Decrying the autonomous model's neglect of factors of ideology and class in its attribution of a whole set of cognitive virtues to a particular technology (of writing), research in the oral tradition has shown itself to be particularly sensitive to questions of historical, social, and political context. Rather than drawing attention to orality as a broad category different from written textuality, it has tended to focus on the particularity of the situation in which the oral performance occurs. This argument is a convincing one. It is the situation that gives the oral text its meaning, rather than the medium — orality — through which it comes to pass.

But what if the autonomous model of literacy — even in its "strong" version of an orality that is other — has not been fully exploited? What if, quite literally, there is more to literacy than meets the eye? In the sections to follow, this paper will explore the possibility that the term literacy — as an order of meaning abstracted from the immediacy of

speech, and therefore likely to promote "sequential analysis" or "articulated conception" — could be applicable to the situation of primary orality. At first glance this procedure may appear to be broadly supportive of the notion of literacy as an autonomous variable. But it is not really so, for it will undermine the autonomous model of literacy at the very level on which it has presented itself as reductionist: the assumption that oral-aural language must of necessity be a stage of evolution, in cognitive and intellectual terms, towards written-visualist language.

Given its enduring interest in orality, the oral tradition is well placed to undertake the study of aural literacy. In 1986, John Miles Foley likened the oral tradition to an interdisciplinary field essentially orientated around the disciplines of anthropology and literary studies. On the whole this characterisation has held true.[2] In order to explore the possibility of aural literacy, however, the oral tradition will require a significant expansion of this interdisciplinary basis. It will have to draw strongly on musicology, which already has some profile within the oral tradition (largely as a result of ethnomusicology), as well as on linguistics, which has remained distant from it.

Section 2 of the paper will consider musicology and the insights it can provide concerning the musical as a specific order of (linguistic) meaning, drawing in particular on Jean-Jacques Nattiez's (1990) work on musical semiology. The key question will be how the musical, at the level of meaning, can "enhance" the meaning of the linguistic (speech). Section 3 will consider the consequences of these insights as far as the first order of linguistic representation (speech) is concerned. This is where the position of linguistics comes under scrutiny. If, in orality, the musical may be conceived of as (a second order of) linguistic representation, sound becomes fundamental to language, contrary to the teachings of linguistics, in any of its modern guises. There will be a brief reflection on the susceptibility of linguistic theory, in particular pragmatics or "speech act" theory, to give account of the linguistic communication of an orality conceived in this way. As a result of the interface of the two orders of linguistic representation (speech and the musical), it will also be im-

2 Generally speaking, of course, the oral text has made virtually no impact on literary theory (in either its modernist or its post-modernist guise), largely as a result of the distance between the oral artist and his (potential) critic (Yai 1989: 57; cf also, on this question, Alant 1996 & 2002).

portant to consider the implications for the linguistic sign which, to the extent that it embraces the musical, will need to be reconceptualised as an "aural-linguistic" sign.

The final section will briefly touch on particular oral-cultural phenomena — also involving non-vocal musical sound — that may "give access" to the aural literacy (and hence "aural linguistics"?) that is the subject of this paper. Metaphor, particularly strongly attested to in oral societies, offers a particularly intriguing vantage point. Ultimately, however, actual demonstrations of aural literacy will have to be the subject of future research, depending on the viability of the theoretical model under discussion.

1. Musicological theory

1.1 Orality and music as meaningful sound

From the perspective of the autonomous model, orality — just like literacy — becomes an isolable, independent variable within the broader social context. As such, it can be defined as follows. It pertains to the use of a specific medium, the human speech organs, in the production of language, and in the absence of any reference, whether real or potential, to the graphic/visual representation of such language.

Defined in this way, the minimal condition for orality is neither the performance or (oral) "text" (which would immediately raise the spectre of social context), nor the word (which raises the spectre of writing), nor, as has been strongly argued, rhythm (see Jousse 1990). All of these are a consequence of orality's minimal condition, which is vocally produced sound.[3] Not just any vocally produced sound, but vocally produced sound that has meaning, and that is recognised as having meaning by both the producer of the sound and the hearers to whom it is addressed.

This minimal condition is also essentially true of music — with the proviso that musical sound can also be produced instrumentally (Nattiez 1990: 43). That the minimal condition (definition) of music is sound, may not be immediately obvious to people raised with a Western con-

3 The use of the term "vocal" refers here not only to the voice, but to all organs used in the production of speech, such as the mouth cavity, the tongue and the lips.

ception of music. In the Western tradition, "music" may include a particular emphasis on the conditions of production (music as organisation) or the conditions of effect (music as something "pleasing"), resulting in an altogether more complicated definition than the one suggested above. Such a definition would be an etic one, reflecting, in Nattiez's words, the "methodological tools and categories of the [Western-orientated] researcher". But musicology (or, perhaps more accurately, ethnomusicology) has gone to great lengths to provide analyses of "musical phenomena" or "symbolical sound" (the word "music" may well be too restrictive to use in this context) that are based on the emic conceptions of the native informant. In fact, ethnomusicology attempts to avoid the etic concept of music altogether, using emic categorisations — appropriately paraphrased where necessary — instead (Nattiez 1990: 58). Emic categorisations are about music as sound.

This insight is also crucial for language. To the extent that the emic conception of music canvassed by ethnomusicological research concerns the limitations of music, these imply concerns with the limitations of speech. In fact, questions relating to the boundaries of language as the materiality of language (see Culler 1987: 183) are probably more pertinent to musicology than to linguistics (where the notion of language generally reflects a preoccupation with method: language as a "system of signs", a "set of rules" or a "communicative act"). Emic conceptions of music point to the impossibility of defining the concept of music without in some way also referring to language.[4] If, as Nattiez (1990: 54) argues, "the semantic surface of the concept 'music' is displaced from one culture to another", the emic concept of language/speech is displaced along with it.

Orality, which is meaningful vocally produced sound, therefore exists on a continuum between speech, which is studied in linguistics, and what may be termed "symbolical" (or "culturally patterned") sound, which is studied in (ethno)musicology. The main implication of this conception

4 Nattiez (1990: 56) cites as an example the Inuit concept of *nipi*, which, in the Western conception, refers to music, speech and noise. John William Johnson has noted how, in the Somali tradition, little or no distinction is made, in the context of performance, between music and poetry, reflecting a general intertwining of the musical with prosody (Johnson 2001: 3).

of orality is that music and language cease to be the autonomous cultural discourses that they have become in the Western perspective. It makes no sense to conceive of one to the exclusion of the other.

How would the above insight apply to a literacy that is not visually, but aurally based? At issue is the relation between the two orders of linguistic representation (speech and writing for visually based literacy, speech and symbolical sound/music for aurally based literacy) at the level of meaning.

At face value, writing reflects (records) the meaning of speech. People speak before they write (cf Hall 1987: 19-21); writing as a representation of speech was also invented at a given point in history (see Hagège 1986: 73-8). Both in the lived experience of the individual who reads and writes as well as in the course of human history, writing occurs after speech.[5] It is on the basis of this chronology that writing is thought of as a mnemonic device, a repository of memory. Clearly, in this sense, writing could not be said to have any meaning different from — or in addition to — the meaning of the first linguistic order it represents. But this is far from the meaning that writing takes on in societies with a long history of writing, where entire intellectual disciplines are devoted to uncovering the meaning of written texts that can in no way be thought of as mere "transcriptions" of speech.[6] What is more, writing as a mere "storage" of speech is only a relatively small part of the much more powerful role writing plays with regard to literacy. In fact, it can be argued that literacy — in Ong's sense of the fully interiorised skills of reading and writing — refers to the ability of an in-

5 Placing itself within the framework of the autonomous model of literacy, the argument developed here deliberately sets aside "deconstructionist" positions which see writing as, somehow, "prior" to speech (cf Derrida 1967), as well as all types of writing, such as ideograms, or, for that matter, graphic signs or drawings, that can be said to represent concepts rather than (the sounds of) words. (With regard to ideograms, cf Hagège 1986: 80-1). The concern here is specifically with phonetic writing. Of course, the spelling of languages with a long history of writing, such as English or French, is far from phonetic, but the development of their orthographic conventions can at least be said to be phonetic in intention, to the extent that specific combinations of letters represent actual sounds.

6 This divorce between (the meanings of) speech and writing has been most radically manifested in Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist theory.

dividual, not merely to use writing to record a previously constituted meaning (of speech), but to use it in such a way that its meaning is, somehow, distinct from that of speech. The meaning of writing is enhanced, deeper, more accessible to mental categories of subordination and articulation. Writing, states Ong (1982: 28), "restructures" thought and consciousness. In this way, it brings to the fore certain levels of analysis and abstraction (cf Hagège 1986: 73) that speech — the meaning of speech — has to do without. Literacy interferes with the very way literate people conceive of things; it is "pre-emptive" (Ong 1982: 12).

Reflecting on the cognitive faculties supposedly favoured by writing, the linguist Claude Hagège refuses to fall into an oral-literate reductionism. He argues (1986: 73) that people from oral societies are in no way deprived of these faculties, but develop them by "other means". Hagège does not elaborate, but these "means" will be aural — at least to the extent that literacy is considered a function of language. For literacy to exist by aural means, the "musical" second order of linguistic representation which it employs will have to serve a function that is more than mnemonic, enhancing the meaning of the first order by making it more accessible to abstract mental categories. As will be seen below, there has been little consideration of such meaning in the disciplines concerned with orality.

1.2 Musical meaning in the oral tradition and musicology

In a footnote at the beginning of *Oral poetry*, Ruth Finnegan (1977: xii) excuses the absence of musicological analysis from the book on the basis that she is focusing on the "literary aspects" of oral poetry and its "social context". This statement, one feels, to a large extent summarises the position of musicological analysis within research in the oral tradition.[7] It is not as if researchers are unaware of the importance of the musical — far from it. The close alliance between music and words within the context of oral performance is frequently remarked on. Yet within the literary-anthropological bias of the oral tradition, which sees meaning fluctuating between textual meaning on the one hand and con-

7 An interesting recent example of musicological research being brought to bear on a South African oral tradition is the study of Pedi Kiba music by the musician Sello Galane (2005).

textual meaning on the other, musical meaning more often than not escapes attention.[8]

The attention which the oral tradition pays to music is, in fact, largely limited to how the music supports the oral text. This reveals an overwhelming concern with the mnemonic function of music, of comparatively little use in furthering the interests of an aural literacy. The preoccupation with the mnemonic value of music can be discerned in research paradigms as far removed from each other as oral-formulaic theory and the performance-centred (or social context-orientated) approach.

Certainly, the concern with meter and rhythm that lies at the heart of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's oral-formulaic theory does point to a concern with sound. But this concern is at best of a minimalist nature. What counts is not so much the sounds as the rhythmic pattern constituted by them. That the singer of the Balkan texts described by Albert Lord (1960) sang (rather than spoke) and chose to do this to the accompaniment of a musical instrument (the gusle) was certainly noted, but was never going to be important enough to alter in any way the definition of the formula Parry had earlier devised through his analysis of the (by then long silent) *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[9] "It is the tale that counts", Lord (1960: 68) famously stated. A notable example of how music can serve as a mnemonic device is also furnished by Ong. Reflecting on the Japanese *Tale of the Heike*, he mentions how the music acts as a "constraint" (metrically similar to the formula) which "stabilises the text" (Ong 1982: 64).

In the performance-centred approach, the function of music is still — as within the oral-formulaic paradigm — related to the "proper fit between the pace of the music and that of the words" (Okpewho 1992: 253). It also, however, extends more generally to the idea that,

8 At the bottom end of the oral tradition's presumed interest in music, one could mention the formalist "taxonomist" concern with the identification of "constituent motifs" and how they interrelate in the development of plot. This is essentially a matter of textual or linguistic content, relegating matters of style — and of sound — to the periphery (Okpewho 1983: 35). As Dennis Tedlock (1977: 508) complains, even when working from taped recordings of performances, researchers still manage to listen with "the same old alphabetic ear".

9 "[A] group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Parry 1971: 272).

through his astute use of music (rhythm, intonation, sound scale), the oral performer is able to render his performance memorable. As such, the meaning of the music (to the extent that music would be thought of as having "meaning") is more immediately relevant to the understanding of the text/performance as part of a particular social context, than about the relation of the meaning of the music to the meaning of the words.[10] Music is integrated into the contextual aspect of the oral performance where, alongside a myriad of other "performance factors", it serves to fulfil a particular social function.[11]

Generally, as noted earlier, musicology has shown itself more aware of the relationship between music and language than has linguistics — or, for that matter, the oral tradition. In a notable article on trends in ethnomusicology with regard to this relationship, Fox & Feld (1994: 25-30) draw attention to a similar functionalist trend in ethnomusicological research. Once again, this approach to the value of the musical in the oral text/performance bypasses the possibility of a specifically semantic relation existing between speech (as vocal sound) and the musical (as vocal or instrumental sound) within orality. As such, it contributes little to the conceptualisation of music as a second order of linguistic representation. Some of its insights may, however, be useful. Situating himself within a context-orientated paradigm, the anthropologist David Coplan (1994: 8) has suggested the term "auriture" (rather than "oral literature", or "orature") as the proper concept by means of which justice may be done to the "mutual constitution of literary and musical processes" so characteristic of oral performance.[12] The concept of auriture may well point in the direction of an aural literacy — on condition, though, that it comes to refer to the linguistic (speech) in relation to the musical, rather than being limited to the relationship between the musical and the aesthetic or literary form.

10 As Coplan (1994: 87) phrases it: "[the articulation] of social forces and processes with cultural principles, processes, and forms".

11 Such as the performer's physical appearance, the place of performance, the prevalence of gesture and dance, the participation of the audience, particular political, economic and historical factors.

12 On the subject of terminology, note also the term "technauriture", suggested by Russell Kaschula (2004), referring to the growing interplay of oral performance with recent technologies — especially the Internet — within the broad context of "secondary orality" (Ong 1982).

1.3 Towards musical meaning as a second order of linguistic representation

The "scriptist bias" of literary studies has also been noted in musicology. This means that music which does not exist in written form (as a score) has often been assumed to be "too simple" to warrant serious study (Finnegan 1986: 75). Differentiations between Western (written) music and the music of oral societies on the basis of "complexity" vs "simplicity" have, however, also reflected a deeper bias: that melody is more prestigious than rhythm. Music with a predominantly melodic structure — and Western classical music is the benchmark — has been regarded as more rational than music with the predominantly rhythmic structure (Court 1976: 50) generally characteristic of the music of oral — notably African — cultures.

Ethnomusicology's attention to emic definitions of music has obviously contributed to rectifying biases of this kind. In the process, ethnomusicologists, in particular Bruno Nettl (1964), have made strong assertions as to the actual complexity (rationality?), in both rhythmic and melodic (polyphonic) terms, of the music of many oral cultures. Of course, complex musical structure does not necessarily have to imply complex musical meaning. But there seems no reason to believe that music will in any way have a "simpler" meaning in oral societies than in societies with writing. Nor, for that matter, that what may be conceived to be characteristic of the meaning of the musical in the literate Western context may not, in principle at least, also be applicable to the meaning of the musical in oral societies — except, of course, for one fundamental difference. In the Western conception, music and language are two separate autonomous discourses and the meaning of the one is largely unrelated to the meaning of the other. In oral societies, as was argued earlier, music and language exist on a sounded continuum, with the result that musical and linguistic meanings are in constant interplay. In such a context, musical meaning should be capable of enhancing linguistic meaning in ways beyond the scope of the Western.

Orality's breakdown of the music versus language polarity calls for the breakdown of yet another polarity: thought versus emotion. It has become something of a *cliché*, in the Western conception at least (and the role of linguistic theory has been particularly influential in this regard) to think of language as representing "thought", and music, by contrast,

as being "directed primarily at the emotions" (Nattiez 1990: 62).[13] Durant (1984: 3) comments that music "is often valued as a kind of immediate sensuality, seemingly something literally breathed into the body from the air". But such a view of music is untenable if the possibility of an aural literacy is to be taken seriously. If the musical, like writing, can represent a certain degree of abstraction in relation to (the meaning of) speech, the polarity language-thought versus music-emotion becomes redundant. The communication of thought and emotion will be equal features of both the first and the second orders of linguistic representation.[14]

As argued previously, the value of the musical in the context of orality tends to be associated with its support, either in mnemonic or expressive terms, of oral performance as a "communicative event in time" (Finnegan 1986: 74). How could the meaning strictly relevant to the musical as a second order of linguistic representation be distinguished from this more "functional" meaning? This brings to the fore the question of the musical as a sign, which underscores the interrelatedness of music and language. A consideration of the musical sign needs to be informed by a consideration of the linguistic sign.

In what terms is the linguistic sign conceptualised? The two most obvious ones derive from De Saussure's (1959) "binomial" definition of the sign as the indivisible unit of a signifier (an aurally or, in the context of writing, visually perceptible trace) and a signified (the idea or concept: meaning).[15] Before considering the musical signified, it will be useful to reflect on the musical signifier. In the context of aural literacy, it will be necessary to identify the physically perceptible musical "trace" that most plausibly lends itself to being considered the basic unit of music likely to be endowed with meaning (as opposed to the meaning

13 There are, however, counter-examples. According to Nattiez, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Pierre Boulez is primarily believed to represent not emotion, but thought.

14 The question of language as a vehicle for "thought" will be further explored in Section 3.

15 De Saussure, of course, excludes written language from what he considers to be the proper object of linguistic study, namely speech. But the concern with literacy — which traditionally implies writing — as a linguistic phenomenon justifies the view of the written trace as a signifier in addition to the purely aural signifier of speech.

of music *per se*). Here, a brief detour through Saussurian Linguistics will be useful. The basic linguistic unit endowed with meaning is the moneme.[16] It is constituted by phonemes, broadly defined as that part of speech sound that is conditional for distinguishing between different linguistic signs.[17] All the languages of the world can be broken up into phonemes. Can the same be said for the world's musics?

The phoneme is, of course, of particular significance to writing (and literacy), to the extent that it constitutes the isolable "essential feature" of the speech of a particular language, and hence the basis of its graphic representation (see note 5). This insight opens up an engaging parallel between the linguistic and the musical. The linguistic phoneme and the musical note, as definable essential features of the two respective symbolic orders, are equally isolable, equally "discretized" (Nattiez 1990: 81). As Nettl (1964: 102) points out, however, the note is really an essential feature of Western classical music. In other musics, it may be the "glides between notes" that are distinctive, or "slight deviations from pitch, hardly audible to Western ears used to the tempered scale". But the principle is clear enough. The musical, as culturally patterned meaningful sound, can (in principle at least) be analysed in units similar to the linguistic phoneme.

From here on, though, the semiological parallel (in Saussurian terms) between the linguistic and the musical becomes decidedly messy. The fact that a language, which is a system of signs, is made up of meaningful units (monemes) that are, in turn, made up of non-meaningful units (phonemes) is referred to as the "dual articulation" of language (Martinez 1980: 16). But the relation between the basic constitutive unit (or essential feature) and the larger unit endowed with meaning is far more complicated as far as music is concerned. Attempting to establish a dual articulation of a particular music is by and large a

16 This is the terminology of the linguist André Martinez (1980). The moneme is frequently the equivalent of the "word", but it also refers to meaningful elements like tense, plural or diminutive indicators that are not, in themselves, words.

17 Existing solely by virtue of the difference between signs, the phonemic needs to be distinguished from speech sound as such (the phonetic). For example, /b/ and /c/ are phonemes in English to the extent that they differentiate between signifiers like /bat/ and /cat/. How /b/ and /c/ are pronounced is not important, as long as their specific differential relation is not compromised.

futile exercise. Raymond Court (1976: 13) finds evidence for a type of dual articulation in music, to the extent that musical sound as a culturally organised system can be said to derive from the "fundamental" sounds of nature. But "nature", in this sense, would be the ultimate meaning of music; it can hardly be thought of as a "basic musical unit endowed with meaning". No, the basic musical unit endowed with meaning could only be described as, at best, suprasegmental; it is not a "unit" but, rather, a (rhythmic and melodic) pattern.

The above association of musical meaning with nature is, of course, quite common. As essentially "natural", particular musical sound structures derive their meaning either from their association with certain psychological states (calm, excitement, tension, etc) or from their association, essentially through rhythm, with the movements of the human body: the heart beat, muscular contraction, or the depth of respiration (Nattiez 1990: 121).[18] Yet whatever difficulty there may be in delimiting its basic meaning-carrying unit (its moneme or signifier), this type of "natural" musical meaning does reveal a certain similarity to linguistic meaning, to the extent that it is extrinsic (Nattiez 1990: 108). In the extrinsic sense, music is taken to refer to something "outside" itself, some kind of spatio-temporal, kinetic or affective "state" (Nattiez 1990: 121). When the linguist Emile Benveniste (Nattiez 1990: 115-6) argues that music does not consist of units individually endowed with meaning and that there is thus no such thing as a musical sign, Nattiez counters that this type of dismissal of the musical sign is precisely the result of the (linguistic) tendency to see the sign as "referentialist", as "limited to something that refers to the outside world" (Nattiez 1990: 116).

Nattiez's use of words like "referentialist" and "outside world" to characterise the linguistic signified is, of course, somewhat insensitive to the structuralist (or post-structuralist) perspective, which argues that linguistic signs refer only to other linguistic signs. The "outside world" really has nothing to do with it. So it may be appropriate to rephrase Nattiez's "referentialist meaning" in this way: the linguistic signified is referentialist (in Nattiez's terms) to the extent that it participates in

18 It is worth pointing out, in passing, that this view of music clearly embraces the association of music with emotion — rather than thought — which was critiqued earlier.

a modality of the linguistic sign — the signified, associated with the mental concept or idea — that is not the signifier.[19]

Instead of the extrinsic, Nattiez suggests an alternative modality of musical meaning, which he qualifies as absolutist, formalist or intrinsic, and in terms of which music "means itself" (Nattiez 1990: 110). This implies that the meaning of the signifier (as a unit endowed with meaning) lies not in the order of the signified (the order of the conceptual — or, for that matter, the emotional) but in the order of the signifier itself. The basic musical sound structure — the musical "signifier" — is endowed with meaning, not in terms of the "feelings" or spatio-temporal/kinetic associations it evokes but in terms of its evocation of similar signifiers already heard and — crucially — on the basis of which certain musical signifiers may be expected. Robert Austerlitz (1983: 4) states that this meaning is

> ... basically deictic, cataphoric, in the sense that it is a prediction. The musical text makes reference to the future, in that it challenges the listener to predict the shape of the musical substance to come.

In the intrinsic sense, then, musical meaning becomes the knowledge, deriving from one's experience of a perceived musical "substance" (pattern), that a particular musical substance is to follow in time.

What would be the relative advantages, for aural literacy, of either the extrinsic or intrinsic views of musical meaning? As characterised earlier, literacy, being a set of cognitive skills deriving from the use of language, is essentially autonomous, existing apart from societal and cultural variables. Against this background, the extrinsic view of musical meaning, in terms of which the musical sign refers to spatio-temporal, kinetic or affective states, would (strictly speaking) be irreconcilable with the idea of a second order of linguistic representation (the musical) "enhancing" the meaning of the first (speech). The reason appears obvious. Extrinsic meaning opens the door to societal and cultural factors. As Nattiez (1990: 122) shows, associations of high notes with an impression of light and happiness, a certain kind of resonance with an impression of openness and calm, a certain kind of low note with an impression of darkness and gloom, are fundamentally cultural conven-

19 The latter is, of course, the physical trace or, in De Saussure's terminology, the "acoustic image".

tions and by no means universal.[20] The same cultural relativity applies to rhythm (Finnegan 1977: 91). At the same time, however, there should be no reason why a particular community's extrinsic associations with the musical could not also — apart from their broader cultural implications — have a bearing, at least in certain instances, on the meaning of the speech of that community.[21]

But it is the intrinsic conception of musical meaning that best lends itself to a language-based literacy. In the intrinsic perspective, music means, quite simply, time. Not time as some kind of "external" kinetic or affective physical or psychological state, but as something that is inherent to the musical signifier — and, in orality, also to the linguistic signifier. Could one say: time as a category of analysis, time as something abstract? Time, in other words — to paraphrase the characterisation of the presumed cognitive virtues of writing — that facilitates and makes accessible mental categories of subordination, articulation and analysis? Seen (or rather, heard!) in this way, the musical sign, existing in a complex relation with the linguistic sign which it represents at a further order of meaning, should open up an array of cognitive possibilities broadly similar to those associated with writing-based literacy. The only difference would lie in the mode of perception, which is aural rather than visual.[22]

20 Greek, Arab and Jewish music offer examples of contrary interpretations (Nattiez 1990: 122).

21 Feld's (1982: 21) study on Kaluli expression may well point in that direction. He motivates his study as follows: "I particularly felt that, as forest dwellers, the Kaluli must be acutely aware of sound, and able to use sound to advantage over vision. I was convinced that in a rainforest environment, auditory adaptation — in biological survival terms — must co-evolve with expressive traditions […]. I have studied the way Kaluli language, music, and aesthetics are interdependent. This has […] taken the form of […] a study of sound as a cultural system, a system of symbols that articulate and embody deeply felt meanings through verbal and musical conception and action, while simultaneously linked to sensory processes, to environmental awareness, and to physical adaptation".

22 Ong (1967 & 1982) makes reference at various points to a "hierarchy of the senses" in terms of which the visual, which he calls the "distancing" sense, would, by definition, be more analytical than the auditory sense, which is characterised as "unifying" (Ong 1982: 72). A critique of this type of argument falls beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that such a visualist bias needs to be set aside in the context of aurally based literacy.

Writing "spatializes" speech in visually based literacy; the musical "temporalises" (or further temporalises) speech in aurally based literacy.

2. Some aspects of linguistic theory

2.1 Sentence and sign-based linguistic theory

In the opening chapter of his *The language-makers*, Roy Harris gives an interesting account of the insights that have informed the development of Western, etic conceptions of language. (Linguistics, unlike musicology, has been impervious to emic conceptions of its object of study). Most influential in this regard is the educated European experience of writing, which invited the conception that "articulated sound" was no longer essential to linguistic expression (Harris 1980: 6). This 'scriptist bias', solidly anchored in linguistics, refers essentially to the conceptualisation of languages as systems "amenable to representation in a medium other than sound" (Harris 1980: 16). Nowhere is this scriptism more apparent than in transformational generative grammar (as represented by Noam Chomsky) which, with its focus on generative ("deep structure") and transformational ("surface structure") grammatical rules — which are, in fact, cognitive rules — turns sound into a "superficial garb to a basically non-phonic structure" (Harris 1980: 18; *cf* also Culler 1987: 174).

The accusation of scriptism can, however, also be levelled at De Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign. His preferred metaphor for the signifier, "acoustic image", is — somewhat ironically, given his insistence on the primacy of the spoken word — drawn from the visual, and uncomfortably reminiscent of phonetic writing. In fact, De Saussure concedes that it is only in writing that the sign attains anything approaching tangibility, that it can be "captured" (Harris 1980: 16).[23]

23 This scriptist critique of De Saussure has, of course, been taken to its extreme by Derrida, not in defence of orality, but — perversely? — in order to claim the all-pervasiveness of writing: "[T]he exteriority of the signifier is the general exteriority of writing. […] There is no linguistic sign before writing" (Derrida 1967: 26). For a severe refutation, from a linguistic point of view, of Derrida's contention of the priority of writing, *cf* Hall 1987.

2.2 Language as a social instrument: speech act theory and pragmatics

Scriptism may well be an unfair charge to level against a third linguistic perspective, namely pragmatics, the most readily advanced definition of which is the study of language usage (Hagège 1986: 229). In fact, pragmatics developed at least in part in reaction to Chomsky's treatment of language as an abstract set of rules, dissociable from its functions (Levinson 1983: 35). Conceiving of language as a social instrument, pragmatics calls for the integration of language into the concretely contextual — a call not unlike that of Finnegan, Barber, Vail & White (and others) as far as oral performance is concerned.

Certainly, the study of orality — as a study of speech — has much to gain from pragmatics and "speech act" oriented conceptions of language (as represented by John Searle). Through the distinction between speaker-meaning (the "message") and sentence meaning (linguistic meaning),[24] speech features like stress, intonation, tempo and pause, (dis)regarded as 'paralinguistic' in sign-based (Saussurian) and sentence-based (Chomskyan) linguistics (cf Tobin 1990), can be properly integrated into the question of the meaning of an utterance (or performance). Intonation can, for example, play a crucial role in conveying to the hearer the possible irony of an utterance like "Linguistics is fascinating", which would have the effect of giving the utterance, as a message, a totally opposite meaning to the semantic meaning it has as sentence (Levinson 1983: 17).[25] These advances notwithstanding, one may still question the suitability of the concept of "message" to an orality conceived of as a continuum of musico-linguistic sound. John Searle's (1969) "principle of expressibility" is particularly significant in this regard.

24 This distinction, elaborated by Paul Grice, may also be thought of as that between the "intention of the speaker" and "semantic" meaning (Levinson 1983: 16-7).

25 It stands to reason that intonation as a mode of (extremely severe) irony is a common feature of praise poetry, yet collections and analyses of praise poetry invariably situate textual meaning at the level of the words as transcribed on paper — and translated into English. In the process much irony (to mention but one aspect of message meaning) is lost, notwithstanding the fact that the text may well, at the level of performance-based analysis, be "properly" interpreted in light of its social and historical context.

In pragmatics, linguistic communication is generally conceptualised in terms of an "inferential" approach, based on the idea that speakers communicate on the basis of shared "presumptions" and "inference strategies" (Akmajian *et al* 1990: 316).[26] The presumptions in question here refer to what would more generally be called "familiarity with the culture" — the habits (gestures, facial expressions, etc) that, in a particular culture, would tend to accompany linguistic expression. Such familiarity enables the hearer to "disambiguate" statements by relating them to the (cultural) context in which they occur, and, consequently, to make accurate inferences regarding the speaker's use of the language. Communication between speaker and hearer is successful to the extent that these inference strategies "take the hearer from hearing the expression uttered to the speaker's communicative intent" (Akmajian *et al* 1990: 330). In other words, underlying the act of communication is an intention which, for all practical purposes, is the actual message that is being communicated. In the words of Levinson (1983: 16), drawing on Paul Grice: "Communication is a complex kind of intention that is achieved or satisfied just by being recognized".

What is the content of this intention? It is what the speaker "thinks". Whether such thought is seen as an autonomous activity of the human mind in relation to which language serves merely as a means of externalisation, or as part and parcel of language *per se*, is not immediately relevant. At root, though, communication is seen as "telementational", meaning "the transference of a thought from A's mind to B's" (Harris 1988: 99).

This notion of the interdependence of speech and thought underlies Searle's principle of expressibility: "whatever can be meant can be said" (Searle 1969: 19). Searle is quick to concede that this is, of course, not necessarily true in fact. A speaker may not know the language she is using well enough to adequately express what she means, or the language may lack the expressive resources required. But the speaker can, in the former case, improve her knowledge of the language and, in the latter, "in principle at least enrich the language by introducing new terms or other devices into it" (Searle 1969: 20).

26 The inferential approach has come to replace the "message model", which fails to account for ambiguity, figurative and indirect use of language, and so on (see Akmajian *et al* 1990: 309-11).

It is possible to take the principle of expressibility a step further. How does a speaker know that what she means is, in fact, something that she thinks? Is it not because she can (in principle) put it into words? So she cannot mean anything — indeed, there cannot be any meaning — that cannot be expressed in words. The principle of (linguistic) expressibility therefore follows something of a circular argument. When Searle says that whatever is meant can be said, he is, in fact, limiting the concept of meaning to what he has predetermined — within his (scriptist?) linguistic conception — as the expressive potential of language. If language always expresses thought, then it goes without saying that whatever meaning a particular utterance has must be expressible in other words. What Searle's principle of expressibility means, then — in addition to "what can be meant can be said" — is this: whatever can be meant can be said in a different way.

In orality, however (at least as it has been defined in this paper), what is communicated is the subject not only of a word, but of a word-as-sound. What happens to the "message" in this context? The musicologist Charles Seeger has pointed out that "a large proportion of what is communicated by systems of human communication other than speech is not communicable by speech" (Seeger 1977: 39).[27] Searle may to some extent entertain such a notion when he observes that "the principle of expressibility does not imply that it is always possible to find or invent a form of expression that will produce all the effects in hearers that one means to produce". At this point, in fact, he calls for a distinction to be made between the meaning of the speaker, on the one hand, and the effects she wishes to produce in her hearer, on the other (Searle 1969: 20). What becomes clear, however, is that Searle regards only certain "effects" as falling within the ambit of the speech act: those that are, once again, expressible in (other) words, more specifically, the words defined by John Austin as "perlocutionary acts": to scare, alarm, convince, enlighten, edify, and so forth (Searle 1969: 25). Once again, a message (or intended meaning), even if reconceptualised as "effects intended to be produced in the hearer" is predetermined according to what can be analysed by means of words, or, in simple terms, said in a different way.

27 Seeger (1977: 19) proposes the following definition of communication, intended for music, but perhaps also useful for the language of orality: communication is "transmission of energy in a form".

Whatever meaning a speaker may have intended to convey to a hearer through the use of certain words, could have been achieved by the use of alternative words. No linguistic message is irreducible. Clearly, this conception of linguistic communication remains foregrounded in a conception of language (a language) as a system in which the signs, deriving their meaning purely in terms of differential relations, are able to convey essentially the same meaning by various permutations. The same signified (meaning) can be expressed by different (combinations of) signifiers. Why? Because the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (cf De Saussure 1959: 67-70).

How appropriate would this view of communication be to the language of orality, where sound carries meaning in addition to the words (or linguistic signs) it manifests? One may rightly question the extent to which the "perlocutionary acts" mentioned by Searle are universal to all linguistic communities.[28] Also, do all societies necessarily have the same conception of "commanding", for example, as the Western-orientated linguist has? But for a start, the whole conception of a message as something essentially paraphrasable, expressible in other terms — but also as something "unified", resulting from some kind of single-minded "act" — may have to be modified.

2.3 Towards an "aural-linguistic" sign

The ideal would be to arrive at a conception of the linguistic sign which would address the kind of emic conceptions of language that this paper has envisaged as the language of orality, conceptions which derive from the experience of a language which, exactly like music, is fundamentally made up of sound. Yet such a conception clearly lies beyond the scope of linguistic theory. At best, one could point to the most obvious ways in which the aural-linguistic sign will differ from the binomial linguistic sign.

In Saussurian terms the sign is determined by two types of relation. First, there is the distinctiveness ("discreteness") of the signifier in relation to all the other signifiers in the system, which implies that the

28 Levinson (1983: 40) mentions the need for "independent evidence" that speech acts like ordering, questioning, and asserting are, indeed, "predominant in [the] social life" of the world's diverse language communities.

identity of the signifier (its meaning or signified) can be only what the identities of the other signifiers are not. Secondly, there is the relation between the signifier (or "acoustic image") and the signified (the concept) which De Saussure sees as an indivisible relation, as "two sides of a coin".

The aural-linguistic sign will share the abovementioned characteristics of the Saussurian sign (setting aside, for the moment, the post-structuralist point of view, which criticises the Saussurian conception). But it will also have a further dimension. The identity of the signifier will depend, too, on its position within a larger suprasegmental signifier, which we can think of as "musical". In other words, the "purely" linguistic signifier will be part of a musical signifier. The musical dimension of the aural-linguistic sign will have certain consequences with regard to its meaning, which becomes meaning in addition to meaning in a purely linguistic (Saussurian) sense. Certainly, one cannot exclude the possibility that the musical meaning of the aural-linguistic sign will to some extent be extrinsic (of a different order to the signifier). But essentially its meaning will be intrinsic, the implication being that the identity of the aural-linguistic signifier (as a musical signifier) will be dependent on its temporal relation with other (musical) signifiers.

The most problematic aspect of the aural-linguistic sign relates to the question of the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified. Given the aural-linguistic sign's indebtedness to sound, this relation cannot be purely arbitrary. One will not be able to paraphrase an aural-linguistic sign — "express it in different terms" — without incurring a serious loss of meaning. Different permutations of signifiers will not yield the same signified — or, for that matter (at the level of communication), the same message. (For the oral tradition, this could be a particularly fruitful insight insofar as the metaphor is concerned.) At the same time, of course, the "lack of arbitrariness" of the aural-linguistic sign should not necessarily imply that the signifier-signified relation is completely "motivated" either.[29]

29 If certain signifieds could be expressed only through certain signifiers all of the time, oral people would presumably have enormous difficulty in learning more than one language. But the opposite is true: oral people are frequently more polyglot than people who read and write, certainly in Africa.

The aural-linguistic sign is certainly difficult to make sense of — at least using the "standard" terms of linguistics. But it is useful to remind oneself that the Saussurian sign is not exactly without controversy either. Some have castigated it as the "abolition of reality" (cf, for example, Falck 1989), an accusation repeated with even greater vehemence against its post-structuralist critique which, in the light of Derrida's "deconstructionist" view, conceptualises an endlessly "postponed" signified (Selden 1985: 85) by virtue of an infinite chain (or "play") of signifiers. From the point of view of communication, this latter view is nothing if not absurd (cf Hall 1987: 119).

Against this intellectual background, the aural-linguistic sign may not necessarily fare all that badly. A particularly interesting point relates to the question of polysemy. The fact that the musical signifier is not, like the linguistic one, subject to a dual articulation (compare 1.3), significantly increases its polysemy. In this context, Nattiez (1990: 37) talks about the inherent "looseness" in the associations between music and "what it evokes". Clearly, Nattiez's reference to what music "evokes" places this observation within the ambit of extrinsic musical meaning. Associations of musical signifiers with psychological or physical states will not only be subject to cultural conventions, but will vary from person to person. Yet this confusion does not have to be completely without limits. The intrinsic meaning of the musical signifier — meaning as knowledge of impending form — will in all probability limit the "associations" that the music "evokes", placing them within a certain sense of time. Superimpose this view of musical meaning onto the linguistic sign (even if taken in the strict Saussurian sense of a one-to-one relation between signifier and signified), and the result is a relatively flexible aural-linguistic sign, polysemic most certainly, but not limitlessly — absurdly — so. Conceptualised in this way, the aural-linguistic sign may yet have a particular contribution to make to the deconstructionist view referred to above. Maybe linguistic meaning is only "endlessly deferred" if it is never thought of as rooted in, and limited by, sound.

3. Some aural-linguistic "access points"

To say that the musical constitutes the second order of linguistic representation does not mean that it simply "relates" to the meaning of speech. We may find the meditative, melancholy aspect of a certain piece of

music (say, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*) to relate, in its evocation of space and emotion, to the meaning of a Romantic poem (say, *Le lac* by Alphonse de Lamartine). But such a "meaningful" association of the musical with speech — obviously a cardinal factor in the setting of text to music or, for that matter, any type of songwriting — is only a part of what aural literacy is concerned with. Aural literacy presupposes that there is some kind of organic relation, in oral culture, between the meaning of speech and the meaning of the musical. Put differently, the meaning of the speech is already present in the meaning of the musical — and the other way around.[30]

Some types of speech (oral text) may be particularly accessible to the aural-linguistic conception, in the sense that they offer relatively privileged illustrations of the interplay between the two orders of meaning relevant to aural literacy. An instance of speaking that comes to mind is the metaphorical, so abundantly noted in the language of predominantly oral societies.[31] Metaphors are commonly thought of as "witty" or "entertaining" and, in that sense, as exceedingly useful stylistic devices employed by the oral performer to make the message "stick" better. But is that all there is to it? Is a metaphor really only an indirect — albeit particularly memorable — way of saying something? What if a metaphor actually means something that cannot be meant otherwise?

Vail & White's (1991: 71) view of the oral metaphor as an "evaluative precedent", serving as a basis upon and through which historical events can be interpreted by subsequent oral poets, goes some way towards breaking down the scriptist notion that the metaphor is "reducible". They observe that, "by fusing abstract concepts with concrete images, [metaphors] have the characteristic of uniting physical and metaphysical elements into a rich compound of meaning". The study of orality

30 An analogy with the relation between speech and writing may be useful. The graphic marks of writing appear to be completely arbitrary, for there is absolutely nothing to suggest that they serve as the representation of speech. And yet the literate person knows, at the level of meaning, that the relation between the two orders of linguistic representation is, in fact, highly motivated. The meaning of the one is, in this sense, "already present" in the meaning of the other, no matter how great the perceptual distance that separates the two orders.

31 IsiZulu, for example, has a much higher frequency of metaphorical "catchphrases" than English (cf Koopman 2001: 154).

as "aural linguistics" will pay particular attention to how the meaning of the metaphor, including the image that it evokes, is the result of how it sounds.

Many examples have been documented of the metaphor's interplay between the linguistic and the musical (both instrumental and vocal). In the penultimate chapter of his *In the time of cannibals: the word music of South Africa's Basotho migrants*, Coplan (1994) turns to the sound of the Basotho songs he is concerned with. Particularly interesting is the instrumentally produced "sonic metaphor" found in a certain Sesotho oral performance. Expert players of the *lesiba* are able to produce "breath-rhythmic tone passages" on it, that "are intended as sonic representations of specific events that at once reveal, express and explain them" (Coplan 1994: 203).[32] This metaphor, produced on a musical instrument, evidently reminds one of the ideophone, in which the metaphor once again lodges in sound (but vocally produced, as the sound of a particular word), and which, according to Coplan (1994: 210), is common in ordinary as well as aesthetic Sesotho (Coplan 1994: 210).[33]

But sound and semantic meaning interpenetrate in broader ways, not only in specific instances of speech (such as the metaphor), but in speech in general. So-called "tonal" languages have been particularly mentioned in this regard. The musicologist Hugh Tracey (Vail & White 1991: 126) has noted how, in the Chopi *migodo*, "the sounds of the words themselves almost suggest a flow of tunes". Reflecting on how, in an oral society, poetry is often part of the very process of socialisation, Finnegan hints at the possibility that such a sensitivity may well be grounded in the sounds of the language. Yoruba children, she remarks,

> ... grow up with an increasing awareness of the potentialities of their tonal, metaphor-saturated language which in its ordinary prose

32 The *lesiba* "consists of a single string fixed along a straight stick, bound and bridged at one end with a braided chord. At the other end, a short section of quill feather is attached to the string and fixed to the stick by bending and wedging the point of the quill into a split plug. The quill end of the stick is held to the mouth with cupped hands, and haunting, vibratory tones are produced by forcibly inhaling and exhaling over the quill" (Coplan 1994: 101).

33 The ideophone is, in fact, common in all the Sotho and Nguni languages spoken in Southern Africa.

> form is never far from music in the aural impression it gives (Finnegan 1977: 197-8).[34]

Yoruba children are able to use their language (Yoruba) in a constantly increasing awareness of the "potentialities" — which are potentialities of metaphorical meaning — offered by its tonality (musicality). Is what Finnegan describes here not really the process through which Yoruba children acquire literacy?

The tonality of a language can, of course, also be the vehicle through which linguistic meaning becomes represented, not just vocally, but instrumentally — and through strong reliance on metaphor. Examples of this extraordinary interplay of two orders of linguistic meaning are offered by the "speech surrogates" of West Africa: the "drum" languages of the Kele (Congo) and the Akan (Ghana). The tonal and rhythmic patterns of these languages are reproduced on a two- to three-toned drum, through which the drumming comes to represent "spoken utterances in a way intelligible to the listeners, and heard as actual words and groups of words" (Finnegan 1977: 120).[35] Drumming amounts, in fact, to a "musicalisation" of the linguistic signifier; the drum language "eliminates segmental features of the spoken language, and represents only its suprasegmental features" (Kawada 1986: 161). Drum languages no doubt offer a special illustration of aural literacy: the development of linguistic meaning through its integration into an essentially abstract second order system of musical sound.

But observations about the interpenetration of the musical and the linguistic do not have to be confined to tonal languages. According to Coplan (1994: 219), the syntactic structure of Sesotho "possesses an inherent wealth of alliterative and assonantal sound patterns and parallelistic rhythms, of which [...] performers make full use".[36] Noting the insistence of performers on the importance of listening[37] to a perform-

34 Finnegan here partially quotes an observation from S A Babalola's *The content and form of Yoruba ijala* (1966).

35 Finnegan is drawing here on J Carrington's *Talking drums of Africa* (1949).

36 This is common in all of South Africa's Sotho and Nguni languages, largely as a result of their noun class grammatical structure.

37 The close link between "hearing" and meaning (as opposed to "understanding the words" and meaning) also comes to the fore in Johnson's study of Somali

ance (as opposed to merely understanding its verbal content), Coplan furthermore finds some justification for Parry's contention than word choice in the oral text frequently depends on rhythmic patterning rather than semantic content (cf Coplan 1994: 9), on condition that the definition of the formula (see note 8) be extended "to indicate any set of structured formal devices that aid in composition and performance through repetitive patterning" (Coplan 1994: 220). Coplan's redefinition is particularly appropriate for music, and can be related to what was earlier highlighted as the intrinsic meaning of music, where meaning derives from the predictability of musical structure.

Observations as to the relation between sound and meaning in the language of orality, particularly at the level of the metaphor, are common. But one is struck, frankly, by their anecdotal nature. Maybe a concern with aural literacy (through the study of orality as aural linguistics) could suggest a more systematic approach to the important oral phenomenon of "metaphorically saturated speech" that "sounds like music"?

4. Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that oral ("illiterate") people could be "literate" through their knowledge of a second order of linguistic representation that exists in meaningful sound, and that interacts in various ways with the first order of linguistic representation (speech) — notably as an abstraction of its meaning. Even though this argument adopts the "cognitive tools" of the (much criticised) autonomous model of literacy, the latter is, in fact, undermined. The autonomous model of literacy uses the ability to read and write as a basis for the essentially evolutionist argument of a technological determinism. As a technology of writing, literacy brings about, as Street (1984: 2) puts it, consequences of "uptake" (civilisation, progress, etc), generally represented in terms of cognitive skills. By contrast, this paper has suggested that, from the point of view of language, such literacy could in principle be achieved without the use of the prescribed technology.

oral poetry. He observes that, "having found irrefutable evidence of Somali perception of their oral poetry in some of my research, I still cannot 'hear' the poetry in many ways that Somalis are able to hear *and interpret* it" (Johnson 2001: 3, my emphasis, JA).

A noteworthy consequence of this approach is that the "oral" is, as it were, put back into orality. Speaking from the point of view of African oral literature, Isabel Hofmeyr (1999: 24) has noted how, on the subject of the relation between orality and writing, researchers in oral literature have tended to become more interested in reading for "impurity" and "hybridisation". This "postcolonial turn" has manifested itself in the concern with "reading" the oral text with a particular emphasis on its historical origination and context; it is read both as history and, in a way, against history. Its meanings are "socially embedded".

There is nothing wrong with this approach. But it has had the effect of eliding (silencing?) the "oral" in "oral tradition". The fact that a text is performed in the particular oral medium is not regarded as relevant to its meaning. What is relevant, is that the text, while part of a tradition, is performed in specific contexts at a particular juncture in history. It is fully as a result of this perspective that an *exposé* on say, Zulu beadwork, can quite legitimately be presented at a conference on oral tradition. There is nothing "oral" about beadwork; it is a totally visual medium like sculpture or painting. But, of course, the knowledge required to do beadwork and to appreciate its symbolism is part of an oral tradition. In the same way, it has become perfectly legitimate to include in books on "oral literature" articles on autobiographies.[38] An autobiography is a written document, and it is, by definition, produced by a very highly literate person. (Most people who are able to read and write would, nevertheless, not be able to write an autobiography.) But the inclusion of such studies in works on oral literature is justified on the basis of the contexts and histories of their authors. Irrespective of their literacy (or even their academic qualifications), and even though they may well live in a technologically sophisticated city, their roots lie in "traditional society". The upshot of this approach is that "orality" becomes, to all intents and purposes, synonymous with a certain type of sociological structure. It is juxtaposed, not with "literacy" (or writing, or the visual) but, more likely, with "modernity".

Contemporary studies in the oral tradition/oral literature have, in this way, marginalised the question of the actual orality of oral perform-

38 See, for example, various articles in Duncan Brown (1999), notably an article by Michael Chapman on Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long walk to freedom*.

ance. This trend results at least in part from the altogether understandable fear of falling into an evolutionist way of thinking. Evolutionism makes researchers "uncomfortable". It is to be hoped that the possibility adumbrated in this paper, namely that oral people could, in principle, be literate "just like us", may, to some extent, be able to exorcise the spectre of the evolutionist trap, and free orality to be viewed not just as tradition, or history, or society, or textual form, but as language.

This is where linguistics should, really, be more substantially involved — alongside the generally received interdisciplinary collaboration, within the oral tradition, of anthropology, history and literary studies. Of course, linguistics has been present at a kind of secondary level, to the extent that its various theories of system and structure, whether "generative" or "structuralist", have provided models for textual analysis. But linguistics has had comparatively little to say about the language of orality, about the ways in which the language of orality may be different.

This invites a further breakdown of disciplinary boundaries, specifically that between linguistics and musicology. If orality is to be studied as language, it is to be studied as language-in-and-with-sound. The aural needs to be taken seriously as constitutive and supportive of linguistic meaning. This paper has tentatively pointed to some areas of linguistic theory (concerning the sign, the message, and the content of communication) from which such a move towards an aural linguistics could set out. There is a real challenge in this, one which, in a very real sense, will threaten the linguistic — but also the cultural and ideological — bias of the "literacy" that is the product of long-standing familiarity with alphabetic writing.

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