

## **Orality - a description** by Durk Meijer, August 4, 2016

Whether I was serving the Guarani in Bolivia, the Himba in Namibia, or the Dani in Papua Indonesia, it has always been fascinating to experience their ways of life as predominantly oral preference communicators. They are fully functioning societies that have been and still are considered oral. They have detailed social infrastructures and their cultures are very rich. They are proud of their identity and this includes their language, which until recently has been surviving without any writing system in place. Many of us from literate societies question that it is possible for those kind of societies to exist. Let's think about 'orality'! There are many written definitions of the word, but I am sharing here actually a description of the wider phenomena.

We humans are born helpless. The only familiar things for a newborn are the body of the mother and the sounds the infant became familiar with during pregnancy. For example, if an unborn baby has been exposed often to the sound of a vacuum cleaner or the pounding of a pestle, then those sounds can be of great comfort after birth. As this little new life starts to grow, it learns by repeating things, testing things, observing every movement and expression, and hearing every sound. As they are confirmed and receive approval from others or are confronted by disapproval, they start to recognize and respond to patterns they detect. Likewise, they respond to everything in life and before long the patterns start to make sense and they become part of a life-long learning process. Learning to communicate is a key part of this process, and unless a person is deaf, this will be primarily through oral communication or spoken language. No wonder that the term heart language was coined, since it is the language of our formative years, together with all body language, like gestures and facial expressions.

Whether positive or negative, any patterns established young in life normally become a major part of who we are when we grow up. These natural ways of learning through observing, testing, and repeating things are describing how oral preference communicators learn. This learning process also includes memorization using natural communication art forms like drama, song, poetry, riddles, chanting, thematic questions, and storytelling. Another factor is that we naturally accept things and learn from people we trust. Normally there is no classroom to learn things in, just natural life settings, including work, socializing, and events (like births, weddings, and funerals).

These oral ways of learning have been observed in context of contrasting the way literates learn versus illiterates, thus the term 'oral' was coined in reflecting the illiterates. The deaf learn the same way, but sadly enough the term 'oral' does not reflect this. It is obvious that these oral ways are the natural ways that humans learn.

Literate materials facilitate only learning by using literate methods. However, even when literate methods become a part of our lives, we still will use many oral ways. If learning certain oral ways are not a normal part of our life anymore, we are in danger of losing proficiency in these ways.

Once they are overshadowed by literate methods of learning, we may not even regard our oral ways anymore as valuable for learning and communicating. Some people may regard oral ways of learning and communication as inferior or archaic, but regardless what view we hold, today every baby still starts life as an oral preference learner and many remain so fully for their entire lifespan.