Summary of Walter Ong’s “Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought”

Father Ong was a Jesuit Scholar that lived from 1913-2003 and studied linguistics. He wrote on subjects like orality, literacy, and technology. This article addressed how writing restructures thought and brings with it a new sophistication to communication.

Ong wrote about speech being a natural ability, and one that was universal to all humans. However, writing was a learned skill. Certain cultures didn’t understand that any language could be written, and their native tongue could be written as well. Ong drills into this perspective by expressing the normality in current times is literacy and the abnormality, illiteracy. This echoed thoughts from the previous story on the Tiv culture, and their principles regarding orality vs. literacy.

Ong continues to describe differences in literacy by context. While writing advances the organization of thought, it also has constraints when communicating messages. Speech delivers emotion, cadence, and urgency, while writing is restrained to the grammar and context of the other words it is written with. Text lacks the nonverbal aspects of language and is separated from the present tense that speech happens in.

Ong expresses orality as a more holistic method of communication that brings people together. This dialectic relationship within communication presents itself in Ong’s writing. He says that humanity needs “both proximity and distance” in our communication. This helps us think deeply, yet pull peers into the full understanding of the message.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Ong, W. J. (1986). Writing is a technology that restructures thought. In G. Bauman (Ed.), The written word: literacy in transition (pp. 23-50). Oxford: Clarendon Press. Retrieved from https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/f08/ong\_article.pdf