



## New Guinea Communities without Writing and Views of Primary Orality

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**Abstract.** – Discursive and cognitive practices of primary oral societies have been described to a significant extent in terms of additive parataxis, context-bound concreteness, and formulaic-repetitive style. Such qualifications as a rule did not emerge from empirical study of specific primary oral societies in their historical unicity but seem to result from universalistic projections on these societies, of pictures from various academic debates such as the Homeric debate, the debate of written versus oral style in English, and the anthropological debate on cognitive dichotomies in terms of literate versus illiterate societies. The only feature that can lay some claim to universality is a specific type of metalanguage in primary oral contexts in which the distinction between wording and intention is not made. [*New Guinea, Papuan, orality and literacy, oral societies, metalanguage, folk theories of language*]

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### Introduction

In his influential book "Orality and Literacy," Ong (1982) summarizes in a very lucid fashion the wealth of literature on the nature of primary oral discourse, that is the discourse produced by members of societies in which writing is totally absent. Ong characterizes this discourse as additive-paratactic, formulaic, redundant, and context-bound and primary oral modes of thinking

are pictured as situational rather than abstract, aggregative rather than analytic, conservative or traditionalist, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced.

In this article, I first describe Ong's views as representative of still widespread ideas and assumptions about primary oral discourse and then I sketch the picture of primary orality that emerges from corpora of transcribed oral texts of New Guinea. Most of the characteristics given by Ong cannot be found in those corpora, with the important exception of the intentional and action nature of metalanguage expressions of primary oral cultures. This intentional and action nature has already been noted by Malinowski (1923). Since views of primary orality are crucially informed by three other academic debates, we need to consider those first.<sup>1</sup>

### The Linguistic Debate: Orality and Literacy in English

The first debate is the debate about oral and written styles in English. For Chafe and Danielewicz (1987: 103) processing constraints are the critical factor distinguishing the styles of written and oral texts: "In other words, there is a strong tendency for casual speakers to produce simple sequences of coordinated clauses, avoiding the more elaborate

<sup>1</sup> In representing those debates I follow Foley (1997: 417-434).