

## Two cheers for literacy:

### Walter Ong, President Trump and the Literate Mind<sup>1</sup>

## Dois Vivas para a Alfabetização:

### Walter Ong, Presidente Trump e a mente literata

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*Ong's "literate man" is scholarly, not merely literate.*

#### Introduction

It is indeed an honor to be the recipient of the Walter Ong Award for 2021. I once shared the stage with Walter Ong at the University of Chicago and was impressed not only by his erudition but also by his friendliness and his notable enthusiasm for argument. As I recall we all showed our respect by addressing him with the honorific of Father Ong although the status we all granted him had more to do with his scholarship than his faith. It is almost a half-century since he published his most famous work *Orality and literacy* a book that has gone through three editions and a dozen reprinting. For my own book on the topic

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription of the speech given by the author as recipient of the Walter J. Ong Award for Outstanding Career Achievement in the field of Media Ecology, at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association. PUC-Rio, July 8-11, 2021

*The world on paper* published a decade later, the best I can claim is that it remains in print. In this lecture I will try to show how my own work builds on Father Ong's claims that subjectivity and interiority are promoted by writing and literacy.

Walter Ong was one of a small group of scholars that included Jack Goody, Eric Havelock and Marshall McLuhan who established writing as a distinctive communication technology and the uses of writing as a formative influence on minds and societies. Havelock (1991) noted that these theories all appeared on the scene in the 1960s and he attributed the development, in part, to the dominance of newer electric media in particular television and computing. It was McLuhan who captured the shift by claiming that "The medium is the message". Walter Ong honored the distinction by systematically contrasting the social and intellectual demands of oral language with those for written language. I honored the distinction by contrasting oral "utterance" with written "text" in my account of children's learning and development and the consequences of a "literate" education (OLSON, 1977). Each medium in some way alters not only how we do things but, more controversially, how we think about things. After a few decades of living under the mantle of the internet no one any longer denies the revolutionary social impact of communication technology—one has only to mention Google and online commerce. What remains less certain is how technology, in particular that of writing, affects language, minds and consciousness, the aspects of the topic that most interested Walter Ong. While writers such as Merlin Donald (1991) and Andy Clark (2008) have examined the role of writing on memory and knowledge, Ong's concern was primarily with consciousness.

Ong organized his argument by distinguishing "orality" from "literacy" and drew many important contrasts between minds and societies in those terms. Indeed, he regarded the distinction as binary, either-or, in order to highlight the properties under review. Thus, he could contrast written essayist prose with that of oral political speech, but also the bureaucratic structures of a modern society with those of tribal cultures, and the linguistic and mathematical forms of modern science with the traditional folk remedies and story telling. These differences show up dramatically whether in law, government, religion, or the academy as well as everyday life. I regard all of these distinctions made by Ong to be generally valid and later research (BIBER, 2009) justifies many aspects of this work. I will discuss three aspects of Ong's work by reference to my own work in these areas, namely, rationality, linguistic awareness and subjectivity or "interiority" as Ong named it as well as the limitations and biases of categorical distinctions between the oral and the literate.

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v22.ed46.2022.277>

ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 22, Nº 46, p.6-24, jan./abr. 2022

## I. Rationality and the giving of reasons

Ong argued that “literate man” was more logical and rational than “oral man” whose reasoning more bound up with emotion. Literate, school-based societies are correctly described as reason-giving societies. Schools insist not only on giving right answers but also on “giving reasons for your answers”. That injunction, as I recall, was explicitly written at the top of the examination papers I faced in my High School days. Highly literate parents are known to ask more “why” questions than less literate parents and consequently, so do their children. Some may recall “Question Quigley”, Francis McCourt’s troublesome student in his book *Teacher, teacher* who no doubt came from such a home. Consequently, educated adults are far superior in answering test questions, solving logical verbal problems and giving reasons to justify their answers even if international assessments show that the reading comprehension of even High School graduates is often judged to be unsatisfactory (NCES, 2010). Ong suggested that “Such tasks are “beyond the capacity of the oral mind” (p. 54). It would be more correct to say that such tasks are often beyond the resources of an ordinary reader.

But are those who are less familiar and consequently less successful with the reasoning tasks that make up a substantial part of IQ tests less rational than those who succeed on such tasks? Clearly they are on tasks that demand, as Margaret Donaldson (1968) once put it, “paying scrupulous attention to the very words”. Schooling and literacy play an important role in this development. The skills demanded are more like those of a proof reader or a critic than those of an ordinary reader. And schooling and extensive reading plays a role in developing these skills.

But can success on such tests be identified with rationality? This seems an overstatement. Locke (1829/1689) pointed out that “God has not been so sparing as to men, to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational”. He added that ordinary people can reason even if they cannot do syllogisms. So we need some way to grant the importance of literacy for thinking without allowing the highly literate to claim a monopoly on rationality.

My conclusion in regard to rationality is that rationality is a property of being a speaker of a natural language. The more specialized uses of language are entirely a consequence of schooling. But does such specialization justify one’s membership as a “kind of person” namely, a literate person as opposed to an oral person as Ong attempted to show? As

we have been led to ask in more recent “post-modern” times: Who is making the classification and for what purpose?

Categorizing societies as child-like, “illiterate” or “oral” is to create the “otherness” that historian Edward Said (1978) characterized as “Orientalism”. Orientalism is the dismissive and contemptuous depiction of societies widely different from our own by assigning them to a vague and exotic category — “oriental”. By assigning unfamiliar societies to a general category we escape the bother of actually treating them as distinctive, rational and worthy or respect thereby absolving us of the obligation to understand them in their own terms. This argument could be applied to psychologists who do much the same in classifying children as, for example, “slow learners” or as “handicapped” rather than treating each child as possessing a unique identity that must be respected.

Admittedly, the distinction between oral and written may allow us to recognize the importance of the orality manifest in traditional and aboriginal societies, including that that gave rise to the epics of Homer. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and large parts of the Bible are now recognized as products of an oral tradition. An “oral tradition” is a valid form of linguistic competence, worthy of respect and worthy of study in its own right. The orality of traditional societies is to be recognized as a distinctive way of acquiring and storing knowledge for reuse even if it violates some of the conventions of written culture. Contemporary oral societies, as anthropologists such as Momaday (1987), Jousse (1925/2000) and Chamberlin (2016, p. 12) have argued that aboriginal cultures display a combination, or sometimes a rich confusion, of the oral and the written” and deserve respect in their own rights. Claims, once seen as pagan or polytheistic that involved a reverence for nature are now recognized as important for protecting the environment.

Ong has been criticized for his tendency to cast oral, traditional societies in a negative light, as the absence of literacy. Consequently, as Chamberlin noted “Ong’s book became a primer for post-colonial commentary, entrenching ideas that can all too easily become a cover for racist ideologies”. “Illiteracy” these days is often little more than a term of abuse. In Ong’s analysis, literacy is seen simply as progress, the idea that the world is unfolding in a way that is generally “providential”. Consequently, he assumes that a literate tradition is a straightforward advance in human development, a general increase of consciousness, and an elevation of the human spirit.

It must be admitted that this progressive motif is one of the principles of developmental psychology and educational theory. Acquisition of literacy is seen as the foundation of progressive cognitive and social development, a belief that sustains the almost universal commitment to public schooling. A high level of literate competence is the defining feature of a successful education and critics are not slow to bemoan declining standards of school achievement. I share the view that education and literacy are defining features of schooling and that schooling is indeed providential, an increase in consciousness. Education is, as we say, “consciousness raising”; the purpose of education is to teach children the concepts important to living in a modern bureaucratic scientific society.

While it may be appropriate to see literate consciousness as essential to development, it is less appropriate to see social change as progressive social development. Societies, unlike children, are not going anywhere; they exist as somewhat stable, existing states. Even traditional societies are not well described as “developing societies” so much as they are “accommodating” societies, adapting to the societies around them. Anthropologists no longer examine traditional cultures to see what they lack by comparison to literate cultures but rather as societies with institutional arrangements and patterns of beliefs that have sustained them over time. Those societies are not, generally, waiting to be redeemed by literate societies. Societies borrow from one another but, largely on their own terms.

Children, on the other hand, are developing the intellectual resources necessary for participating in the adult society. Taking some responsibility for children’s development and designing programs to advance their “consciousness” through education is a perfectly valid goal, indeed, a social obligation.

Consequently, it is not appropriate to consider non-literate societies as child-like, an assumption I, like many others, made in much of my earlier work on language and literacy. Not only is it patronizing, it is now recognized as inappropriate for modern societies to prescribe or impose programs for the development of adult citizens. Consider Western outrage in response to China’s “re-education” of the Uyghurs of western China, a move widely characterized as cultural genocide. Colonialism, long a model for social development, the so-called “white man’s burden”, is the outcome of treating members of non-literate societies as child-like rather than regarding them as adult members of functioning social systems.

Oral societies, then, like the individuals that compose them, cannot simply be dismissed as the “other” but must be understood in their own terms. I can illustrate this problem by reference to some of my early work on the effects of schooling on cognitive development. I discovered that even adult members of a Bantu speaking tribe in Kenya who had never gone to school were unable to copy a diagonal on a “checker-board” a task that all North American 7 year olds easily master. These traditional adults tended to put the checkers on the rows or columns or a mixture of the two rather than along the diagonal. In fact, such a finding does tell us something about the cognitive effects of literacy and schooling but in fairness to the Logoli tribe I should have gone on to study how they do think about space, how they find directions, how they locate themselves in their environments even if they cannot copy diagonals. I am certain that I would have found that they are just as capable as the Canadian Aboriginals studied by Chamberlin who find their way through unsurveyed territory and read animal tracks in setting and finding their traps. In general, we are obliged to find what people can do rather than design tests to reveal what they cannot. The latter is important only if at the same time one designs training or provides explanations that aids them in their endeavors.

Ong, following the lead of Havelock and Goody, suggested that the invention of the alphabet was a key to universal literacy. Samuel Johnson, author of the English Dictionary asked his biographer Boswell if the Chinese were literate to which Boswell replied that they lacked the alphabet, “So”, concluded Johnson, “they are illiterate”. It has taken a half-century of research to establish that all writing systems, including the alphabet, may be read both as words signs and as phonological signs. That became clear only when theories of reading attempted to include writing systems other than alphabets in their theories. The Chinese writing system has some signs that are irreducible signs for morphemes (words) as well as signs for sounds. Westerners mistakenly took morphemic signs as “pictures” that represented a more primitive form of representation than that of an alphabet. Only when such pictorial signs were recognized a morphemic, did it become clear that letter strings in an alphabet also serve as word signs while individual letters may indicate separate sounds. Hence, the uniqueness of the alphabet can no longer be offered as an explanation of the “superiority” of the West, as Havelock, Goody, and Ong all argued. Writing is significant to the extent that it can represent all that can be said, the very definition of a full writing systems. Of course, that the alphabet is less unique than McLuhan and Ong and Goody had thought, does not diminish the significance of writing and its role in social and cognitive change.

Although it is sometimes appropriate to consider orality and literacy as binary poles it is equally important to examine the great expanse that lies between those poles. This is not a new idea. Ruth Finnegan (1973) was among the first to point out a central fact about writing systems, namely, that they are shaped to represent anything that can be said orally. Consequently, writing never exceeds the lexical and grammatical limits of speech. Even the most complex grammatical forms required for subordination and complementation may be, and are, expressed orally. No unique words or grammar have been shown to be associated exclusively with written language. If a written expression cannot be read out in speech, it is not writing but picturing. Language is the basic cognitive resource with its vocabulary, grammar and diverse uses. Yet, over time the increasing reliance on reading and writing for a number of social functions ranging from science, government and the academy there has evolved a specialized and distinctive form of language that Biber (2009) has isolated and called a written register. The written register is shaped by the constraints in the medium especially its permanence and portability. Writing provides opportunities for revision and for the formation of extended logical and rational argument. I elaborated on the norms for writing in my recent book *The mind on paper: Reading, consciousness and rationality* (2016) and I'll not rehearse the arguments here other than to say that writing invited special forms of awareness of the lexical and grammatical properties of language essential to rationality (ANTON, 2017; FRANCIS, 2020). In my view the governing limitations on cognition are linguistic but supplemented by literary. The famous distinction made by McLuhan between the eye and the ear is a powerful metaphor, but, in my view, only that.

However, there are two more general claims made by Ong that in my view are of special importance and have, in fact, been central to my own psychological research. The first is on consciousness of language, the topic of Olson (2016), the second on the consciousness of mind, the topic of my current work on the mental concept of understanding (Olson, 2022). I discuss them in turn.

## II. Consciousness as consciousness of language

One of Ong's more striking and plausible claims was "More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (p. 77). But we may ask "Consciousness of what?" Consciousness of self?, of mind?, of nature?, of language? All of the above? How so? Much of my own research (OLSON, 2013; 2016) was directed to showing that learning to read and write had an important effect on their consciousness of aspects of language including the very concept of language. I will mention two examples: Phonological awareness is important to reading an alphabet. Thus, children who can read have no difficulty solving a task

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v22.ed46.2022.277>

ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 22, Nº 46, p.6-24, jan./abr. 2022

such as the following: “Say fish but don’t say the “f” sound. What would you get?” Reader’s answer “ish”. This is not a developmental achievement. A French psychologist J. Morais and colleagues (1987) showed that adult fishermen who had never learned to read performed like pre-school children. Those adults who had been exposed to even elementary school could solve such tasks. More recently Norbert Frances (2021) showed that linguistic awareness affected beginning writers’ ability to revise at the phonological, semantic and pragmatic levels of linguistic structure.

Just as phonological awareness depends on acquaintance with an alphabet so too is awareness of words. I can illustrate this by reference to an experiment conducted by Bruce Homer and myself (HOMER & OLSON, 1999) in which we asked pre-reading children to pretend to write simple expressions such as “Three little pigs”. Children tended to produce three scribbles. When asked to write “Two little pigs”, they made two squiggles. For “One little pig”, one scribble. When asked to write “No little pigs” one child waves her pencil in the air and claimed “There are no pigs so I didn’t write anything”. The point is that the child used written marks to represent pigs not *words* for things. Awareness of words depends in part on learning to read and write. In fact, the invention of signs for words was an important step in the invention of writing systems around the world. I concluded that we literates think about our language in terms of the properties of our writing systems. Children learn what a word is as they try to write it, what a sentence is when they try to discover the rules for pronunciation and so on. Literacy fosters awareness but primarily awareness of language. Consequently, linguistic awareness shows up, too, in children’s management of logical tasks and those requiring a distinction between what was said and what was meant.

Ong used the contrast between the oral and the written to highlight distinctive meanings and uses of oral and written language. He showed that there really are important differences between speaking and writing as, for example, between a promise and a written contract. Furthermore, there is an important difference between the temporal connectives such as “and then” favored by speech, and the logical connectives such as “because” and “implies” favored by writing. Mastering these more logical connectives is both an historical and a developmental achievement associated with literacy.

In our own research we showed that beginning readers accepted a true paraphrase as “what they had said”; older children did not. Thus, developmental psychology tends to confirm much of Ong’s account. However, that research also tended to show that the mental agility children were acquiring were those things that were explicitly taught in school including such things as defining terms and providing synonyms

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and antonyms. Children who learn to play “Simon says” learn to attend to grammar. People who learn to write become aware of words and sentences as they learn to insert spaces between words and periods after sentences and so on. Those who read literature learn to distinguish genres of news reports from editorial opinion, lectures from sermons and so on. So, by becoming literate one increases consciousness but, I would add, only of those things picked out, valued, captured by concepts that are valued and taught by the school and society (see ANTON, 2017 and DAVIDSON, 2018 for recent reviews). However, non-readers, too, are aware of many aspects of language, primarily, those relevant to personal beliefs and commitments, and manifest most clearly in rhetorical speech.

### III. Interiority and consciousness of mind

The consciousness that Ong attributed to writing is sometimes described as “interiority”, an internal consciousness of one’s own mind and its mental states. Karl Jaspers (1947) in his theory of the “Axial” age, the period about 8<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, attempted to capture the cultural breakthroughs associated with Socrates, Moses, the Buddha, Confucius and Zoroaster. What these diverse traditions have in common was their challenge to convention and newfound attention to one’s own thought as distinguished from what one believed or taken for granted by members of a social group. All Socrates had to do was ask his pupils to repeat what they had said and then ask what they had meant by it. This was sufficient to encourage doubt about what had long been taken for granted. Assman (2016) argued that this “dawning of modern consciousness” was linked to the invention and use of written records that could be re-read and commented on. This claim remains untested.

Consciousness of minds is of special concern to developmental psychologists who study what is referred to as “mind-reading” or children’s “theory of mind”. When children are 5 or 6 years of age develop a new ability to attribute to others and to recognize in themselves such mental activities as thinking, knowing, remembering, promising and the like. Parents recognize this development when quite suddenly children begin to tell lies, to hold parents to their promises, and to play games with rules such as “hide and seek” and tag.

My current work on language and mind addresses the question of what Ong described as the rise of interiority, the self-conscious awareness of one’s own mind. In my forthcoming book *Making sense: What it means to understand* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) I have attempted to formulate an account of

understanding that would help to explain how we adults go about attributing or “ascribing” understanding to children, language-processing computers, ordinary persons, as well as literate elites such as ourselves.

In my book I examined understanding first in terms of children’s understanding of language and second, the relation between that early understanding and their later their ability to attribute or ascribe understanding to themselves or others what is sometimes described as “metacognition”. What I discovered was something that Bertrand Russell had pointed out in the 1940s, namely, that believing is easier than understanding without believing. Let me unpack this.

Children come to understand what is said to them when they learn their first language. To illustrate: When our daughter Joan was little more than a year old, on a whim I said to her “Joanie, go get your shoes”. Up to that point she had never spoken a word or given any indication of understanding language so my request was clearly unrealistic. Yet she looked at me briefly, then wheeled around and disappeared down the hallway. Moments later she returned, shoes in hand, and a smile on her face that expressed a pride matched only by that felt by her astonished father. She had understood what I said! But it should be noted that she had already learned to participate in the ritual of “being shod” and the roles that each of us played in it. These well-known routines make up the basic beliefs in terms of which language is understood.

But it is not until the late pre-school years or early school years that she learned the word “understand” and used it to ascribe understanding to herself or others somewhat independently of what she herself believed. Thus, there is an apparent gap between Joanie’s understanding of my request and her later ability to attribute or ascribe understanding to herself or to others. This is the gap Russell noted in his comment about understanding without believing. We could say she understands but does not know that she understands. To know that she understands is just another way of saying that she knows how to ascribe understanding to herself. What is involved in ascribing understanding is the central concern of my book.

To understand (without believing), I argued, is to know how to correctly ascribe understanding to oneself and others. We attribute understanding to even young children when that understanding is based on the linguistic evidence available and that understanding is shared intersubjectively with others. However, it is primarily older children and often the more literate and educated children, who are able to correctly ascribe or attribute understanding to themselves and others. Eventually, they come to know and correctly apply the standards for ascribing understanding, that is, for making a justifiable claim about understanding

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v22.ed46.2022.277>

ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 22, Nº 46, p.6-24, jan./abr. 2022

or misunderstanding. They have the skill to appeal to the linguistic evidence that justifies the interpretation. Non-specialists, on the other hand, like younger children, may understand language so long as it comports with their prior beliefs and expectations but not take the second of justifying their understanding by an exhaustive examination of the linguistic or contextual evidence that may contradict their entrenched beliefs. Thus, a gap is created between the understanding of literate elites and members of the more general population. And it is to confuse rationality, a possession of all people, with the expertise of literacy specialists.

For many people and perhaps for all people under some circumstances, what they read or hear makes sense—it comports with possible beliefs— even if the conditions for a validly correct understanding are not met. That is, correctness is often sacrificed to honor prior beliefs and expectations. A familiar television program entitled “Impossible railways” goes on to show that the railway has actually been built. How then can such railways be said to be impossible? Similarly, in Diane Setterfield’s *Once upon a river* a character plausibly exclaims “Just [be]cause a thing is impossible, don’t mean it can’t happen” to which his listener nods agreement. The charm of Setterfield’s story is that the author and her readers recognize an irony presumably unrecognized by the characters themselves. For the characters themselves, what they say and hear “makes sense” even if it violates the meaning of the word “impossible”. Ong would describe this difference as one between the “oral” and the “literate” man. Ong’s literate man knows the definition of “impossible”.

#### **IV. Rhetorical speech and the literary elite**

Just because everything that could be written could indeed be said, does not guarantee that every reader and writer can manage these resources equally well. Mastery of this special written register is not achieved by simply learning to read and write, although that may be the first step. Rather the mastery of the written register involves a special competence that we may identify as a scholarly, elite form of literacy. An elite literacy is at play in academic discourse, governing institutions, law courts, the sciences and literature. These are specialist domains that take years of study and apprenticeship to master. Even if years of schooling provide a basis for entry into scholarly discourse a great deal of reading and writing is necessary for achieving a level of mastery adequate to evaluating scientific and logical arguments, even those involved in oral discourse. The risk, of course, is that literacy provides an opening to the claim that we live in a two-class system: a rational literary elite ruling over an undereducated irrational proletariat. This gives rise to various

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ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 22, Nº 46, p.6-24, jan./abr. 2022

forms of populism, the claim that elites are undemocratic and a vestige of “colonialism” that does not represent the general population and needs to be overthrown. Shades of Trumpism.

Learning to read and write is only a first step in becoming aware of one’s own linguistic resources. Years of schooling are instrumental to learning to make finer distinctions between, for example, an assumption and an inference or between a guess and a hypothesis or a story and a theory or between an answer and valid reasons for an answer. These are all worthy achievements but they should be acknowledged as “scholarly”. But what then are we to make of the opinions and views of those who are less scholarly? As academics, our first suggestion is that we need to raise the literacy levels of the general populace; make everyone a critical reader. Ong’s “literate man” is scholarly, not merely literate.

Political discourse involves two quite different forms. Serious political discourse, civics, is an elite literate form of discourse suited to writing and interpreting constitutions, making laws, bureaucracies and the academy. It is a form of discourse in which wording matters. On the other hand, rhetorical political discourse is an oral or oracular style of political persuasion common to political rallies, slogans and chants. A defining feature of rhetorical speech is that it is speech addressed to committed believers. Political rhetoric, like religious rhetoric, is designed to appeal to the already converted. It is a form of expression of solidarity, of shared hopes, beliefs and desires rather than a report of objective truth, a language of conviction rather than argument, of invitation to action rather than to reflection. A problem arises, however, in that for believers’ political rhetoric is not recognized as polemical, that is, as one-sided; it is taken as expressing an obvious truth.

The hypothesis I wish to offer is that rhetorical language is the medium of the political thought of the non-specialist public (and to some extent for all of us). Slogans, not reasoned arguments, are the currency of much of political thought. Consequently, non-specialists accept a lower standard for understanding, namely, that what they hear makes sense to them even if their understanding is not objectively correct, that is, warranted by reason and evidence. The more “scholarly”, on the other hand, have long been wary of rhetoric, what Francis Bacon called “the idols of the tribe” and have created a language suited equally to believers and non-believers, what we call “objectivity”. That is, the more scholarly ascribe understanding on the basis of linguistic evidence even if it runs counter to what is believed. I can illustrate my claim (no surprise here) by reference to increasingly hostile political debate surrounding former President Donald Trump.

Obviously, polemical speech is not unique to Trump even if it is the most glaring attempt to rouse team spirit rather than to examine truths.

To the alarm of the “scholarly”, Trump and his many followers claim not only to understand such expressions as “the election was stolen”, “fake news” and “wide-spread voter fraud” but to take them as expressions of a manifest truth. That is, to believers, rhetorical speech is an expression of the truth while ignoring the technical meaning of such terms as “steal”, “fake” and “fraud”.

The problem of understanding rhetorical speech became acute when then-president Trump actually put his rhetorical speech shaped for public rallies into written form on Twitter, thus trampling Ong’s fundamental distinction between the oral and the written. Once written down such statements are assumed, both by disbelievers and by the scholarly, to have taken on the form of objective claims and so are rejected as hyperbole, distortions, and outright lies. That is, skilled readers read the expressions on Twitter as they would read any other serious written document of the type that would be acceptable in law, government or the academy. Consequently, critics such as those who write for major newspapers, familiar with the conventions for written documents, provide evidence to prove that Trump’s expressions are false. Trump’s believers, undeterred, continue to take them as truth. So who understands? Believers accept them as true, non-believers reject them as false and the scholarly reject them for failing to meet the norms for academic written documents.

Clearly, these audiences react in dramatically different ways to Trump’s Tweets. Political commentators quickly divided these audiences into two classes of voters, the “educated” and the “less educated”, the latter referring to Trump voters. Although a majority of both groups have a high school education it has been noted that Trump and many of his supporters, are not habitual book readers but rely more on social media, public rallies, daily briefings and face to face interaction. Habitual readers are more familiar with the language of journalism, the law, justice, science and the academy, the language shaped to appeal equally to believers and nonbelievers. Consequently, these readers are more likely to reject those Tweets as false or as mere polemic. Skilled readers are more likely to honor the standards for correct ascription of understanding, namely, limiting their understanding to beliefs that can be upheld by evidence. Political rhetoric clearly does not meet these criteria. Putting political rhetoric into writing, as Trump did on Twitter, makes it open to critical, objective reading and rejection but only by non-believers.

A common response of the educated elite familiar with academic language is to regard Trump and his followers as irrational and to insist that a systematic education is the only solution. Education has the goal of teaching everyone to master the literate norms of objective discourse in which evidence and reason override subjective and personal belief. Modern societies charge the school with the task of bringing everyone up to a certain literate standard. One response to the success of Trump's rhetoric is to say that the school has failed to teach people to read critically. Indeed, efforts are now underway to develop programs that advance student competence with civic and political discourse (LEE, WHITE & DONG, 2021)

But is education the solution to the problem? There was a time when it seemed possible to set and enforce rules for the correct use of language and correct interpretation of texts. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the French Academy attempted to set out standards for the correct use of language and created the *ecoles normales* to teach children to honor those rules. Jonathan Swift recommended similar reforms for the English language. Our schools honor this aspiration to this day although, as noted above, they are not uniformly successful and critics call for higher standards.

But, alas, it may be too late to change the speaking and thinking habits of voting adults. It is impossible to impose academic norms for understanding language on adults who exult in the freedom of speech. In a democracy all citizens, not only the highly literate, have a right to be heard and a right to vote. Consequently, it may be necessary to admit that for many voting adults the language of thought is primarily rhetorical, shaped for believers, and not that of the academy, shaped for skeptics. Perhaps, as Ong suggested, most people remain "oral" and rhetorical rather than literate, analytic and rational. Furthermore, it may be necessary to allow that even for the highly literate, language is to a larger extent than usually acknowledged, rhetorical, and attuned to our embedded beliefs. The question, then, is how to understand polemical language if we are not to simply dismiss it as irrational. What the "educated" have yet to learn is to understand rhetorical language not as irrational but as an expression of more basic, inchoate feelings and beliefs some of which may deserve consideration.

Language ability is only part of the problem. The more basic problem is the weight of prior beliefs and commitments in the understanding of any expression. If what is heard comports with one's basic beliefs it is easily accepted; if it violates or seems to violate those beliefs it is rejected whether or not one heard every word. Recall Bertrand Russell claim that believing is easy; understanding without believing is difficult. The weight of prior beliefs on understanding is well-known in media studies. Loeb (2021) a media consultant

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pointed out that media campaigns fail because “data-driven persuasion is generally limited to leveraging existing biases” and are ineffective in overturning existing beliefs. As every salesman and every teacher knows one must begin with the prior interests and beliefs of the listener. Dismissing opponent’s concerns as irrational will only infuriate and polarize views and reduce any willingness to continue discussion.

Consequently, rhetorical expressions should not always be ignored as irrational but rather as sincere expressions of deeply felt needs and desires. That rhetorical expressions express deep concerns may be seen by recognizing, as equally rhetorical, the expression “Black lives matter”. This, too, is a call to action enforced by posters, chants and protests. To believers, the expression is greeted as a factual claim but rejected by skeptics as a tautology. Rather than denying the importance of sincerely held feelings simply because they are rhetorical, one could get down to a more basic discussion of what one believes and desires. Arguments and evidence perceived as running contrary to those deeper convictions and desires tend to be denied or ignored. Understanding without believing is difficult and if the beliefs are deeply felt, impossible. It may be more useful to encourage people to know and honor what we mean by understanding.

#### **V. Here is where education could play a role in advancing political discourse**

Here is where an additional complexity arises. Although one may have reasons for saying “I understand”, providing the reasons that would justify a claim is both difficult and late to be achieved by children. Giving the reasons to say why one interpretation is better than another is not only cognitively demanding, it is not usually required in ordinary oral discourse. To ask someone for reasons for what they say in an oral context is often seen as challenging the credibility of the speaker. In the traditional societies studied by Malinowski (1923, cited by ONG, 1982) to question a speaker was seen as “agonistic”, that is, oppositional rather than conversational, a threat rather than as an invitation to reasoning. An interruption is often seen as impolite. Consequently, the ability to justify one statements or beliefs is a special competence shaped up primarily in “scholarly” discourse. A whole branch of the psychology of reading called “comprehension monitoring” focuses on just this problem. Students, even High School students are often unable to give reasons for their answers or to justify their convictions.

Now we can return to Trumpian rhetoric. Only literate specialists are skilled in justifying their claims on the basis of reasons and evidence. Rhetorical statements are taken as true by believers and do not, in their view, require justification. The truth of the statement to believers is self-evident. Non-believers, on the

other hand, simply reject them as false or crazy. Discussion is impossible. However, more literate readers have mastered the art of making statements suited equally to believers and non-believers and they are better prepared to justify their interpretations by appeal to evidence and reason. To Trump's followers such evidence is disregarded as aggressive and "agonistic". Reporters noted that when these partisans are asked to defend the claim, for instance, that the election was stolen, tend to claim that "it's obvious" or to offer a panel of just-so stories, but disregard the evidence that shows that the statement is false. Here we may be reminded of Socrates and his students. When Socrates asked his students to repeat what they had said and to explain what they meant by it, like Trump's followers, they resorted to "popular clichés, epithets and the stock of phrases of their tribe" (ANTON, 2017). To think about what they had said, and to provide justifications for saying it was a new and hostile challenge. New to the student, and, indeed, an important step in the development of Western, that is Greek-inspired, Axial Age literate culture.

The kind of understanding that believers bring to rhetorical speech may be described as the "feeling of understanding", the confidence that the speaker is saying something one can go along with, something that answers to prior belief. Correct understanding, on the other hand, is the understanding that can be justified by reason and evidence somewhat independent of what one currently believes. One may feel and be certain that one understands but in fact misunderstands. I am suggesting that rhetorical speech in general relies on the feeling of understanding. Literate specialists demand that understanding meet the conditions not only for correctness but also for justifying that understanding by evidence and reason.

As Havelock, Ong and others have argued, one of the achievements of the Ancient Greeks was the invention of prose, a form of language that could reach beyond the rhetorical and "poetic" speech of so-called "oral societies". The secret of prose, I suggest, is that it is suited equally for believers and non-believers. Prose, so to speak, levels the playing field. Such prose aspires to move beyond private and personal commitments including the "idols of the tribe" to the objectivity aspired to by literacy. But that standard may blind us to the truths hidden in rhetorical speech and where understanding depends less on the wording of an expression than on its alignment with the beliefs and presuppositions of believers. Kahneman (2011) and others showed how a "confirmation bias", the tendency to believe what we want to believe and the "my side" bias, the tendency to believe what upholds the beliefs of our team or tribe or party tends to override valid, logical understanding. Rhetorical speech is designed to play into these biases. The invention of written prose, as Eric Havelock and Walter Ong argued was an important corrective in that it provides a form of



discourse that can be shared equally by believers and sceptics. It provides a forum for adjudicating claims. Even if seen by some as an expression of colonialism, elitist, or “one eyed” it is the only bulwark against tyranny. Understanding without necessarily believing is essential not only to literate thinking but also to accommodating wide differences in matters of belief.

But I leave open the bigger question: How do we, committed as we are to the rules of science and logic, resolve political disputes with those who fail to honor, indeed reject, those rules while relying on deeply held convictions and beliefs expressed by slogans, metaphor, stories, ambiguities and the threat of force?

So only, two cheers for literacy!

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Received on: March 25, 2022.

Approved on: April 10, 2022.

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## Abstract

This text is the transcription of the speech given by the author as recipient of the Walter J. Ong Award for Outstanding Career Achievement in the field of Media Ecology, at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association. PUC-Rio, July 8-11, 2021.

**Keywords:** Orality. Literacy. Education

## Resumo

Este texto é a transcrição da palestra ministrada pelo autor como vencedor do Prêmio Walter J. Ong por carreira extraordinária no campo da Ecologia das Mídias, na 22<sup>a</sup> Convenção Anual da Media Ecology Association. PUC-Rio, 8-11 de Julho de 2021.

**Palavras-chave:** Oralidade. Cultura escrita. Educação.

## Resumen

Este texto es la transcripción de la conferencia ministrada por el autor como vencedor del Prémio Walter J. Ong de carrera extraordinária em el campo de estudios de la ecología de los medios, em la 22<sup>a</sup> Convención Anual de la Media Ecology Association. PUC-Rio, 8-11 Julio, 2021.

**Palabras clave:** Oralidad. Cultura escrita. Educación.

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