Written language, oral language

There is often a great deal of methodological confusion about these two expressions – confusion which is all the more damaging because it is accompanied by a great deal of confidence. It is generally thought that written language is just a form of spoken, or oral language; but many think that those two forms of language should be well separated : for many academic scholars, a good written language should avoid some oral usages, and others think that a written speech is always some kind of dead corpse of the living spoken language. Neither the written form of language nor the oral one should be set completely apart from the other, because, by its very nature, written language, has to be spoken, and spoken language, by its very nature, can be somehow written. As a consequence, none of them should be considered as superior to the other; but in order to understand that, we need to define these two concepts, what brings them together and what sets them apart, in such a way that we could understand, beyond what opposes them, how they are linked one to the other.

I. Language is one, because it is human

A. The envelope of speech

Let's start by trying to define what "written language" is. Perhaps it would be a good idea to be humble and start by asking what "written speech" is. *Is* the ink-streaked paper on which this speech is written, or the document encoded in the computer's memory, or displayed on a screen, written speech? No; in reality, what is drawn on a sheet of paper or on a screen is not a discourse, nor a speech, just as the apple painted by Magritte is not an apple. That this discourse would be, for example, a novel, safely stored in my library, would change nothing. The novel is not the codex of sheets covered with little black drawings that physically sit there. The novel is what happens to me when I transform it into a series of mental representations, with the help of my eyes, and no doubt also in some way with the help of my ears and mouth, the whole thing obviously being articulated by my brain. In other words, the text, or written discourse, is not just the ink on the paper; it is what happens when a human being reads that text.

Similarly, oral discourse is not the mouth in motion of the speaker; nor is it exactly the vibrations of the air that this mouth provokes. In other words, oral discourse is

everything that happens from the body of one human (brain, mouth, emotions articulated together) to the body of another human (ears, brain, mouth, articulated together). It should be noted here, however, as a reservation, that the singular in "another human" is a simplification that will need to be analysed further on.

In the meantime, we can already see that there is a first essential point in common: both written and oral discourse encompass the body of the person reading or listening to it. In other words, if we go back to Jakobson's schema, "sender → message → receiver", the message is only a message insofar as it is linked to a receiver – even a virtual one; in a way, there is no such thing as a "message in itself". The message in itself exists only as a convenient conceptual breakdown for human beings, because they need to separate the elements of the analysis: it exists in itself only insofar as it is bounded, held, by the receiver, who is in a way the receptacle without which it would not be what it is.

Now this envelope, through which it exists, a living human body, is exactly the same thing in both cases: written speech and oral speech. It will of course be objected, and rightly so, that the main route of entry into the human body is not the same: the eyes in the case of written text; the ears in the case of spoken text. It's true, there is quite a big difference between the two entry points. But it would be better to take a closer look to understand what this difference is.

B. Reading, even silent reading, is oral

Firstly, what happens when we read? Do the eyes directly transform what they see in the book into concepts? No. First of all, it is clear that it is not the eyes but the brain that transforms the image into a concept. But there's another essential point: once the eyes have transformed the drawing into an image accessible to the brain, the brain transforms this image into a word, a signifier. And before it hears what is signified through this signifier, it has associated with that signifier which it would receive through the ear; it has created *the illusion*[1] that the word that comes to it through a drawing, then through its eyes, is exactly the same as the word that generally comes to it through the vibrations of the air, then through its ears. In other words, the brain told itself that this signifier had followed the same path.

1 I'll have to clarify the meaning of this term later.

To understand this better, let's take the example of a word and the way the brain understands it. If, on a certain date, I had a certain representation of the meaning of a certain word, and after a certain experience, a certain reflection, this representation changes, how is it that it changes at the same time and in the same way for the word I hear through my ears and for the word I read through my eyes? In other words, to understand the word I have read, I make it follow the same neural pathway as the word I have heard. And for each of the different words I know, in order to follow the same neural pathway, whether they are read or heard, it is not enough for one to be the image of the other; one has to be the other. Now, we have to realise that it is written speech that is transformed into oral speech within the human body, rather than the other way round, insofar as words are always articulated by means of phonemes, including in languages written by means of what are generally called "ideograms".

In fact, what happens is that in the human body, written speech is transformed into oral speech. As far as the reception of speech is concerned, the difference between the written and the spoken word lies in the way, or rather in the process by which man transforms the written word into a quasi-verbal form. Here we begin to enter into what I would call the art of reading. Just as he has transformed graphic signs into quasi-phonetic signs, just as he has given himself the feeling of hearing the words he has read, he can give himself the feeling of seeing what he sees when he hears a flesh-and-blood human speaking to him: this human, and in particular his face and hands, his silhouette, his finery, the space that is between himself and this other human... and through this space, in a way, the sound vibrations that pass through it, the breath, the wind that carries the flying words from one human body to another. The sound vibrations in fact exist before they enter the listener's ear, and very often, since he very often has his eyes open, he sees the space that contains these sound vibrations, and something in him senses that these vibrations are there in the space that separates him from his interlocutor: this is perhaps what the poet also evokes when he hears the wind speak to him[2] .

C. Written language and breath

We must also bear in mind that this wind of words comes into contact with the listener in yet another way: the wind is the speaker's breath, the listener's breath: the sound vibrations also penetrate with the listener's breath. In other words, the good reader doesn't just let the words he sees written into his body through his eyes; he also lets them in through

[2] My friend Madis Arukask whispered this line from Juhan Viiding in my ear: "*ütlevad tuuled*", "the winds said to me". "*Jaapan on kaugel, / Eesti on kaugemal veel, / ütlevad tuuled.*" [Juhan Viiding (Jüri Üdi)]

his own breath, sometimes accompanied by an imperceptible but real caress along his cheeks. But naturally, the passage of this breath from one human to another is again accompanied by that sense that is essential to the human race: vision, which can also perceive the swelling of the chest or belly, or even, as Rimbaud would say, the quivering of the nostrils. This vision can ensure that the breathing of each of the interlocutors is accompanied by the other[3] .

In this way, communication functions with the help of breath, not only from one to the other, from the other to the first one, even when only the first one is speaking, but also in a synchronisation of the breaths of each person. And this is all the more true because the mirror-imitation accompaniment can take place through everything that can be seen: facial expressions, gestures, particularly those of the hand, any swaying of the body, and particularly of the hands, from left to right, backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards. All this so-called non-verbal communication is in fact part of speech, insofar as it surrounds and envelops it. It is present not only in the body of the speaker, but also in that of the listener.

D. Written language is doubly oral

The reader, when he reads a text, transforms the word, the sentence, the verse drawn into the word, sentence, verse heard in real life; he makes it take the same path as the one it takes in real life, between humans made of flesh and bone. And this path is marked out by all these sensations, by all the representations of these sensations. There are something like neuronal synapses that can be activated on this path of interpretation. The question is to what extent we activate them again when we read.

But another mimetic factor comes into play here, and it's a very powerful one: it's the mimicry of the phonatory apparatus: vocal cords, uvula, tongue, palate, maxillae, the diaphragm that sends air from the lungs. When I hear a phoneme, something inside me reproduces it in some way. This reproduction is more or less sketched out, but it is undoubtedly always somewhat present, even if it is virtual, in at least part of the neuronal networks that connect the brain to the mouth. This reproduction is undoubtedly more present in reading than in hearing *in præsentiā*: the reader needs to hear what he is reading, even if he is reading in silence. In other words, reading, even silent reading, is a phenomenon that passes through the mouth, through the neurons that link the brain to the mouth: it is, strictly speaking, an *oral* phenomenon.

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[3] Since we're talking about air breathed through the nostrils, air coloured by the vibrations of speech, we should probably add the smell of words – which might explain why the smell of a book is so important to anyone who still reads books made of paper.

The difference between “written” language and “oral” language is that what is called oral language is in fact doubly oral – it passes through the mouths of both speakers – and what is called written language is merely oral… provided that it is seen only from the reader's point of view. And even if it only passes through one mouth at the moment of reading, that mouth is still both the producer and the drinker of speech. But in reality, the written language is not just the language that is read: it is the language that has been written, and it is only a language insofar as a human being writes this language; and this act of writing is itself an oral act: what passes through the hand also passes through the phonatory apparatus. The brain does not dictate to the hand, or to both hands if it is a keyboard, without accompanying this dictation to the hand with another kind of dictation, to the phonatory apparatus: when I write, I also pronounce what I write. Even when my writing is “perfectly” silent, when I block out the outline of the articulation of words, and it only takes place by figure in my brain, this process is truly present there, because the image of my body is entirely and truly present there. A sign of this presence are the *lapsūs digitōrum*, the keyboard errors I sometimes make when despite my knowledge of the language, I write one grapheme for another, as long as they are pronounced the same.

In other words, written language is a doubled oral language, in which the writer doubles up as a reader in front of the paper or screen, and the reader doubles up as a writer in front of the same mirror. In each of these acts, the human being, with his or her body, is doubly present.

E. The written non-language

Having said that, it is not impossible to transform written language into written non-language, on the one hand, on the reading side, by pretending to read, escaping the oral reconstruction of a written text; on the other hand, on the writing side, by pretending to write, escaping the oral composition of a written text. Just as it is possible not to hear the person we are listening to, or to listen to the person we are hearing, it is possible to read the words of a text without really hearing them, to pick out a few phrases, a few expressions, a few words, without having the slightest intention of sharing the breath of the person speaking to us. It is also possible not to be able to hear them, not to feel their breath: in this case, we don't read; we observe what is written. Similarly, we may be not listening to someone, but simply watching them speaking.

On the other side of the written language, on the writing side, there are two ways of writing: one is to produce writing; the other is to let the breath pass through the glyphs

placed on the paper or screen, so that the reader can re-enact what happened between the writer and the medium. That's what we mean when we say that a writer has breath.

In short, the fundamental challenge of writing and reading is to ensure that the other is present despite his absence. And this is, of course, even more the fundamental challenge in literature. That's why, in a literary text, we cannot talk of what "is told" to the reader; there's someone: the author, the narrator, the translator, the transcriber who tells him something... and this someone is all of those personas at the same time, but through a single breath, at the origin of which we absolutely must consider a human figure; it's not just a narrative instance, it's a person, embodied in a human body.

So for speech to occur through writing, a double expenditure of energy is necessary, on the part of the writer as well as on the part of the reader, in order each time to reconstitute the breath, the sensory and emotional space, necessary for there to be speech, both *in præsentiā* and *in absentiā*. In short, if it's a question of filling paper with ink, there's no need to tire – and all the more so as *ChatGPT* will now do it for us – but if it's a question of transmitting speech, it's worth tiring twice over – and all the more so as this fatigue has the precious faculty of renewing our human energy.

II. Specific features of written and oral language

What are generally taken to be features of the so-called oral language are in fact much more features of the language of everyday conversation, with speeches and narratives of a certain length being regarded as negligible, especially when they are prepared and worked on in one way or another. We will therefore study separately these two complementary parts of oral language, and the features that predominantly characterise it.

A. Conversational and written language

1. Hesitations, repeats and anacoluths

These phenomena have already been extensively studied by others. But we can no doubt draw the essential conclusions by considering that they are of two kinds: one is imperfection, the tug-of-war of thought and expression in a hurry, the jostling of ideas as they rush by, the disorder of speech whose composition is not planned; the other is the association, in spoken language, and in particular in the language of conversation, with the rich multiplicity of modes of communication that complete the language reduced to words and sentences that can be noted in written language.

The former constitute a kind of noise in communication, and if the speaker does not compensate the listener for this discomfort, the listener is likely to become impatient, just as the reader can become impatient with a text that is faulty, poorly constructed, unclear or that does not move forward. This is undoubtedly the reason, at least in part, behind the adage: "Turn your tongue seven times in your mouth before you speak", or, for example, Plutarch's dictum: "You educate a prince by teaching him to keep quiet before you teach him to talk". In reality, this characteristic of oral language is, above all, impatience to speak and indelicacy – which indelicacy can come from the speaker as well as from his interlocutor who would press him excessively.

It's not impossible that this ability to speak in a jerky, hesitant way comes from cultures where the spoken word has largely lost its sacred character, particularly as a result of the transfer of this sacredness to the written language. Be that as it may, anyone who has taught for at least a few months in France over the last three decades, and has therefore corrected papers written by today's pupils and students, knows full well that language that is jerky, faulty and difficult to follow in its imperfection is not the prerogative of oral language.

On the other hand, there are the turns and breaks that do not disturb the speaker, compensated as they are by other elements belonging to what we call non-verbal communication – "verbal" being understood in reality as "which can be retranscribed directly by writing". I'm thinking in particular of the language of the hands, the first element of all that comes under the heading of gestural *deixis*. I'm probably also thinking of the emotions shared through the face. It's worth noting, however, that modern written language is trying to take advantage of this, with the use of *smileys*. In fact, since written language is by its very nature a trace of oral language, and since oral language by its very nature contains these non-verbal elements, written language, as I was saying, also tries to restore them, or rather to give the reader the means to restore them as much as possible, as soon as it wishes to offer the path of a truly living word.

We should also think of the various interjections and particles characteristic of conversation, as found in large numbers in Plato's dialogues, for example. They certainly belong to a less verbal, less written language, insofar as they imply both an emotional and a deictic relationship between the interlocutors. But why does Plato write them down in his dialogues? Because he made his books a record of what happened *in vīvō*, because he did not want to transform oral language into a 'written language'; he wanted to enable the reader to imagine a real, living dialogue between two living beings. Although his book is not the *verbātim* reflection of a real dialogue that would have taken place as it was between the

interlocutors of his dialogue, but a reconstruction that allows him to express his own philosophy, he strives to give it all the forms of a living oral dialogue. And these traces of "orality" exist concretely in the written form of the dialogue: the oral is in the written word.

2. Complexity of the written sentence

The written sentence tends to be more complex and more elaborate than the spoken sentence, which is made up of smaller units, and tends to make greater use of parataxis (juxtaposition and coordination), whereas the written sentence makes greater use of hypotaxis, i.e. subordination. It's a fact that's fairly easy to spot, and quite understandable.

Now, it seems quite obvious that literature is full of parataxis, starting with the epic: Homer, *La chanson de Roland*, etc. But this is oral literature, some will say. So be it; but can oral literature be written? And so, when language is written, it is not written language? So be it. But Cicero's speeches are full of hypotaxis, of long, solidly constructed periods. So it's no longer oral, since it's an *a posteriori* reconstruction of the speech actually delivered? So be it. But you have to admit that the reasoning poses a few problems. Considering that writing and speaking are two inseparably intertwined things would undoubtedly make it possible to consider them more seriously. Of course, the fact of writing changes something in what we say; but what makes us express ourselves with more or less elaborate periods is above all linked to the capacity to elaborate our thoughts.

Of course, writing is an incomparable tool for helping human beings to develop their thoughts: that's what public education and literacy mean in almost every country in the world. But it would be interesting to appreciate the extent to which this work of elaborating thought is linked to meditative capacity, to the ability to place different elements in one's thought, and to articulate them there: it is in fact, in a way, the ability to construct discourse, to weave λόγος. Now, while the role of writing is undoubtedly important in building this aptitude, I think we need to reconsider the importance of the voice, mouth and ear, of walking, and therefore of the body's disposition in space, in relation to the essential question of memory.

3. Possibility of going backwards

During a conversation, you may be stopped by the person you are talking to, who may ask for clarification or a step backwards; on the other hand, if you've made a mistake or stammered, you can go back, but unlike a speech constructed after various attempts, drafts and plans, or a speech written in a computer's memory and immediately modifiable, you can't totally erase what you've said and didn't mean. In this way, the written word saves time

for the reader, who does not have to endure the threadbare nature of the thought that is being developed.

Maybe. But once again, we need to compare what is comparable: not the language of oral conversation with the language of written discourse, but the language of oral conversation with the language of written conversation, and the language of oral discourse with the language of written discourse. This is what we will do below.

B. In the composition of speeches and texts

1. Inventiō

In a world where writing is available, in order to prepare a speech, an article, a course or a book, we gather material – and this material can largely be in written form. But written documentation is not the only material: the material is essentially what is available to the mind; and what is available to the mind and to thought, what it can manipulate, is what it has represented to itself, what it has taken from the space of *memory*, so that it can articulate these elements, set them against each other, and possibly build new ideas, or even a new, guiding idea, from them. To help the memory, we often note down references, ideas and formulations here and there, and we write something evocative of these different ideas on a sheet of paper, arranging them on the space of a sheet, so as to visualise the relationships between them, using *brainstorming*, for example, or the "mental map", which is in fact the written representation of what we could hold in our mind, our intelligence (in Latin *mēns, mentis*, hence "mental").

Today, the written word plays a very important role in this stage; but as we can see, it is only a kind of extension of memory space, an externalisation into space of what memory must, in some way, already contain, or will have to contain at some point: if a book is part of your documentation, you will have to read it to use it. If you have jotted down the name of an idea or piece of knowledge on your mind map, in order to relate it topologically to others, your mind must hold the content of this idea in its memory in a much more developed or deeper way. Writing is in fact one of the elements that enables you to arrange in space what you are about to manipulate to compose your discourse. It is an artefact in the same way as the method of places and images, described in particular in pseudo-Cicero's *Rhetoric to Herrenius*, sometimes referred to today as the "memory palace" method: the mind locates in places, in the form of images, what it is going to manipulate.

Why, in a culture without writing, would an author not have at his disposal the equivalent of such artefacts? Just as the literate researcher has concrete books before his eyes, written names of ideas – in the most imaginative form possible! – can't the illiterate

wise man place the ideas he is going to manipulate in the palaces of his memory, and place them in the space that surrounds him in concrete terms, possibly with the help of objects that he places there?

In other words, this part of the composition of a discourse belongs to written culture and therefore to written language only insofar as it links thought with space, memory with sight. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Nietzsche said that you can't think sitting down, you have to think walking. In more prosaic terms, anyone who composes a speech from written texts without appropriating them in the meantime is nothing more than a plagiarist in legal terms, and above all, in human terms, a thought avoider. This exists in a world of written culture; but in reality, what exists there is non-culture, non-thinking, written non-language: when written language is not also internalised oral language, memory, it is non-language.

2. *Dispositiō*

When composing the outline of a speech, the relationship between writing, speaking, meditation (both *mēns* and *memoria*) is the same as for *inventiō*. Paper is merely a useful, but not indispensable, appendage to thought. It can even be counterproductive, insofar as there is perhaps a greater temptation to fit ideas into a ready-made plan, so that thought does not articulate the various ideas with each other, but merely lists them under prefabricated general ideas.

Once again, the real opposition here is not between written thought and oral thought, but between living thought and fossilised thought, i.e. non-thought.

3. *Ēlocūtiō*

It is fairly obvious that the work of *ēlocūtiō,* that is, putting speech into words, inextricably intertwines the oral and the written. This is clearly seen when we think about the way in which we prepare a written speech to be delivered orally. If you have prepared your speech in the form of an outline accompanied by schematic notes, you will develop your speech on the basis of these written and drawn notes, with the help of your memory, since you have already thought about what you want to say, and your language skills, which enable you to say what you "want to say", which in this case is obviously inextricably linked to the ability to relate your body to the body of the person or persons you are addressing: phonatory apparatus, hands, face, eyes. Above all, when we prepare these schematic notes, we imagine ourselves producing our speech, and we draw our plan and schematic notes so that the eye can see, as we say, "at a glance", at any moment, where we are. That's why it's so important for the plan to be structured on the sheet of paper, not just to write words on it,

but to add symbols that visualise the movement of thought, that help the brain to move from ideas to words and sentences, from "what you want to say" to "what you say": the ability to improvise the form of what you say. It's easy to see what we're talking about: putting discourse into space, in a way very similar to the method of places and images. But this method can do without writing, strictly speaking, and in particular can be used by an "illiterate" human being living in a society without a formalised writing system.

On the other hand, if you prepare your speech in a more precise way, by imagining in advance what you will do when you deliver it, you can whisper or speak loudly in advance the speech you are going to deliver: you are trying it out. But then we're perhaps already into the next part of rhetoric: the art of memorisation. Nevertheless it's hard to deny that we're also in the art of putting words into words, the *ēlocūtiō.* So what does this have to do with written language? I have in fact claimed to demonstrate that, in the *ēlocūtiō*, written language and oral language are inextricably linked. We can consider that they are linked here in two ways: on the one hand, through *inscription* in memory, but we should talk more about that below; on the other hand, because of the similarity of this process to the one that occurs when one writes one's speech in advance.

Finally, the intertwining of the oral and the written in the *ēlocūtiō* appears clearly in many manifestly mixed practices. For example, would the fact that Virgil dictated his *Aeneid* make it an orally composed text or a text composed in writing? Doesn't the fact that Flaubert tested his sentences *au gueuloir*, in the shouting room, make his style fundamentally oral? Quintilian's injunction, in Book X of his *Institution of the Orator*, to regularly practise *stilus,* i.e. writing with a stylus, on a tablet, and thus the ability to improvise, is also a good indication that learning to write is learning to speak. Didn't Boileau claim to have composed long texts entirely in his head, before delivering them to his friends[4] ?

The question remains as to what link can be established between the composition of sentences in an exclusively oral culture and writing. It seems to me that versification constitutes a very important link between the two. The oral composition of texts in verse form is a way of placing words within a rigid framework, so that their order of detail tends to stabilise, if only in what are known as the formulaic verses or hemistiches of epic poetry. Isn't fitting words into the constrained framework of verse a way of setting them in stone? Isn't the fact that, recitation after recitation, they can be gradually modified similar to drafts, corrected proofs, successive editions of a text, variants found from one copyist to another?

4 See Pierre Clarac's *Boileau*, in the collection *Connaissance des Lettres*, published by Hatier (1964), for example in the dialogue on *Héros de roman* ("La formation du satiriste", pp. 48-61).

4. Memoria

The question of memory is absolutely central. As far as the difference between oral and written language is concerned, the essential point is undoubtedly that, in written language, it is clearly the paper or the hard drive that remembers instead of human beings. In other words, the unwritten language is not the oral language, the language of the mouth, but the language of the brain. It remains to be seen what writing adds or takes away from memorial language, particularly when it comes to composing relatively long speeches.

The art of memory of rhetoric teachers like Quintilian is obviously at the confluence of writing and orality. But let's look at what happens at the two sources of this confluence: the memorisation of speeches composed without writing, and the memorisation of speeches composed with the help of writing.

When you have composed your speech without the aid of writing, what does it mean to memorise it? It's one of two things: either it's the person who composed it that wants to memorise it, or someone else does. It's a matter of repetition, of visualisation in a space that is both increasingly precise and increasingly wide.

This memorisation undoubtedly takes place by visualising the *āctiō* in advance: it is by seeing oneself, hearing oneself, feeling oneself delivering one's speech to the audience to come that one manages to hold it in one's memory, ready to be embodied in one's voice. In a society without writing, speeches are certainly not meant to be forgotten after they have been given once; they are meant to be repeated many times on different occasions, at different times, in different places, to different people, generally with slight variations, with *contamination* that adapts it to each occasion, to the inspiration of the moment. So we can see that in such societies, *memoria*, *āctiō and inventiō* operate simultaneously – this is perhaps a good way of looking at what we call the improvisation of traditional epic singers, provided we see that the whole is regulated by metre and myth, in other words by the Muse.

We must also consider that memorisation, like what happens in a written society, is very often the memorisation of a speech[5] composed by another. If composition and memorisation are achieved by the speaker from performance to performance, by reiteration from one audience to the next, in the journey from one audience to the next, in the nights of wakefulness, sleep and dreams – we must not overlook the fact that dreams are not only, as tradition dictates, the place of inspiration, but also the place of memorisation – from one performance to the next… if the text is inscribed in the memory of a human being by these

[5] It goes without saying, but it gets better when you say it: I'm talking here about "discourse" in the broadest sense of the term, meaning the long word, whatever its nature – political, religious, narrative, philosophical, medical…

reiterations made in person, it is also inscribed by the reiterations heard, seen and felt from the outside, by another: by what is literally called tradition, which means, very precisely, by teaching, from masters to disciples.

On the other hand, when memorisation is associated with writing… it's exactly the same thing; except that memorisation is inevitably associated with forgetting: it's when the written word disappears that memory can really get going. Of course, the visual memory of the layout of speech on paper is useful for memorising: although it is only an ersatz of the method of places and images, it undeniably possesses certain virtues. But it is well known that two gestures are essential for memorising a written text, apart from those mentioned above: the gesture of writing, which makes the written text appear, and the gesture which consists of making the written text disappear, partially or completely. It has to be said, however, that the great virtue of text written on paper – or on a screen – in terms of memorisation is the ease with which the person who has it can make it appear and disappear alternately. In a way, it is through its cancellation that writing can become an aid to memorisation.

5. Āctiō

Let's look first at the other side of the *āctiō*: the part played by those who listen to the speech. We moderns, equipped with reading and writing, often prefer to read a speech rather than listen to it. This gives us the feeling that we can be more active: we can read whenever we want, we can stop whenever we want, go back, skim the whole text, skip passages. We feel that we can appropriate the text much more freely than when it is imposed on us orally.

But what happens when the *āctiō, in* other words the performance of the text, is successful? In a world with writing, it doesn't matter what the *āctiō* is: the written text will always remain; that's what we capitalise on. But in a world without writing, you can only capitalise at the moment of *āctiō*. In other words, in a world where the living voice is the only means of transmission – which living voice, let's not forget, cannot be reduced to what can be recorded using a microphone, or even a camera – the *āctiō* is a moment when *memoria* is at stake, for both the speaker and the listener. It is a moment of teaching and pedagogy; it is a moment when the listener is called upon to move through the space of the vocal text, accompanied by the speaker.

The *āctiō* is in fact *interāctiō*: it is to this extent that the personal reading of the written text and the listening to the spoken text mirror each other; it is a journey through the text, where the speaker and the listener go hand in hand. But in one case, the pilot is the speaker; in the other, the reader. In the first case, the pilot tries to steer where he feels he can

take the hearer or the audience; in the second, the pilot tries to steer where the author would like to take him if he were really there beside him.

Perhaps, if my comments have not been too confusing, if my language has not become entangled in the traps set by the keyboard, the reader will have heard this: if language, when written, does not become doubly oral, it is condemned to being nothing more than paperwork. If writing is only a means of reaching the hearts of other human beings, if it continues to be a living language, a real voice, but a doubled voice, then writing is always a child of language, which is one.

Nicolas Lakshmanan,
the 29 mai 2023

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Table of contents

I. Language is one, because it is human........1
A. The envelope of speech........1
B. Reading, even silent reading, is oral........2
C. Written language and breath........3
D. Written language is doubly oral........4
E. The written non-language........5
II. Specific features of written and oral language........6
A. Conversational and written language........6
1. Hesitations, repeats and anacoluths........6
2. Complexity of the written sentence........8
3. Possibility of going backwards........8
B. In the composition of speeches and texts........9
1. Inventiō........9
2. Dispositiō........10
3. Ēlocūtiō........10
4. Memoria........12
5. Āctiō........13
Bibliography........15