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## Views of orality and the translation of the Bible

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This article presents an overview of constructions of orality that played an important role in the theory and practice of modern Bible translation. Three distinct perspectives can be distinguished. First we have the constructions of orality as articulated by Buber and Rosenzweig in the Interbellum period, a view of orality embedded in ideologies and patterns of thinking of nineteenth-century Germany. The second perspective focuses on universalist and dichotomous constructions of orality, informed by mid-twentieth-century linguistics, anthropology and philology that strictly separated, isolated and contrasted oral and written communication. The third perspective has roots in developments in late twentieth-century biblical scholarship and linguistics. It rejects the universal dichotomies of the preceding period as pseudo-universal and empirically false and emphasizes two things, the interconnectedness of oral and written dimensions and the local nature of oral–written interfaces in different linguistic, cultural and historical conditions.

**Keywords:** orality; Bible translation; oral–written interfaces; translation history; oral versus literate cultures

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of theories and ideologies of orality that play an important role in the theory and practice of modern Bible translation (twentieth and twenty-first century). Translators of the Bible, including those who are not inclined to theoretical reflection on their translation practices, often use the term “oral” to explain what they are doing. They may call the Bible a product of an “oral culture” and discern “oral styles” in biblical texts. They may view some audiences, or even cultures as a whole, as “predominantly oral”, or see the Hebrew and Greek texts of the biblical corpus as “oral literature” written down. They may even try to capture the “orality of the Bible” in their translations. The term “oral” has an innocent and technical ring to it. But notions of orality functioned as a vehicle for a wide range of ideologies, theologies and philosophies in the history of Bible translation. This implies that the terms “oral” and “orality” mean different things to different scholars and this led some scholars to avoid the terms altogether (Rodríguez 2014, 6–7). However, as with so many other scholarly terms, this multiplicity of meaning is less problematic once the contexts in which scholars use these terms are taken into consideration. This article aims to give an overview of the perspectives, views and contexts that have informed the usage and meanings of the terms “oral” and “orality” in the history of Bible translation. Many of these views of orality were (and are) surprisingly immune to later insights and evidence from

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biblical scholarship and linguistics. This explains why Bible translations of the twenty-first century can be shown to reflect constructions of orality of the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Three main perspectives on orality and Bible translation may be distinguished that can be chronologically ordered. The first perspective is early twentieth century (Neo-)Romantic constructions of orality as articulated by Buber and Rosenzweig (*Gesprochenheit* or “spokenness” of the Bible and its translation). These views of *Gesprochenheit* were embedded in wider nineteenth-century ideologies and patterns of thinking (de Vries 2012, 2014): for example, primacy of diachrony, expressive and nationalistic theories of language centred around *Sprachegeist*, emphasis on roots as translational units and on root meanings.

The second perspective focused on universalist dichotomous constructions of orality (e.g. Ong 1982), informed by mid-twentieth-century linguistics, anthropology and philology. The second perspective strictly separated, isolated and contrasted oral and written communication (de Vries 2003). These dichotomies ascribed a range of linguistic, cognitive and cultural properties to orality and literacy. Orality was associated with a strong tendency towards paratactic, concrete, context-bound, formulaic, repetitive and mnemonic discourse; literacy with a tendency towards complex forms of embedded syntax, abstraction and logic, with non-redundant, non-mnemonic forms of discourse, not tied to the immediate context.

The third, most recent, perspective has roots in developments in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century biblical scholarship, ancient studies and linguistics. It rejects the universal dichotomies of the preceding period as pseudo-universal and empirically false. And it emphasizes two things: the interconnectedness of oral and written dimensions (oral–written interfaces) and the local nature of oral–written interfaces in different linguistic, cultural and historical conditions (e.g. Carr 2005; de Vries 2012).

Of course, this overview deals with just three major perspectives on orality in the field of Bible translation and does not pretend to cover the whole literature and research on orality and Bible translation.

### **The first perspective: *Gesprochenheit***

Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), both born and raised in Jewish families, collaborated on their German translation of the Hebrew Bible, *Die Schrift* (Buber and Rosenzweig 1997).<sup>1</sup> After the death of Rosenzweig in 1929, Buber went on to complete his last version between 1954 and 1962. The idea of the *Gesprochenheit* or “spokenness” of the Hebrew Bible is the central theme of both their theorizing about Bible translation and their translation practices in *Die Schrift*. Buber, born in Austria, studied philosophy between 1897 and 1909, in Leipzig and other places in Germany. It was in those years that he came in contact with the philosophies of nineteenth-century Germany (Schmidt 1995; Askani 1997). Rosenzweig studied philosophy in Freiburg and wrote a dissertation on Hegel in 1908. Buber and Rosenzweig did not only absorb German philosophies of the nineteenth century in their younger years, but they kept interacting with contemporary German philosophy: for example, with Interbellum philosophers, especially Heidegger (Gordon 2003).

Four influences are important to understand Buber and Rosenzweig (de Vries 2014): first, Romantic views of translation; second, generally accepted linguistic ideologies of nineteenth-century Germany; third, the philosophical climate of the German Interbellum period; and fourth, the Jewish heritage of Buber and Rosenzweig.

Van der Louw (2006, 14) discusses links between the German Romantic ideas on language and translation of people like Schleiermacher and Herder on the one hand and those of Buber and Rosenzweig on the other. There are continuities in the notion of translation as deeply and directly felt experience of the individual otherness of the original writer and of the individual otherness of his or her language, its unique *Sprachgeist* [language-spirit]. In line with early nineteenth-century Romantic translators, Buber and Rosenzweig have an expressive and psychological rather than a representational theory of language. At the collective level language is viewed as an horizon of understanding of a *Volk*, inseparable from the world view of its speakers. At the level of the individual writer language is seen as inseparable from the inner world of the writer that it expresses. The term *Sprachgeist* plays a key role in the way Buber and Rosenzweig think about language, culture and translation (Reichert 1996). To capture the *fremdes Sprachgeist* [foreign language-spirit] of Hebrew grammar and the individual otherness of the foreign biblical writers they forced the German language *zu einer fremden Ähnlichkeit*<sup>2</sup> [towards a foreign likeness], combining neologistic German, invented on the spot (e.g. *königen, darnahen* and *Nahung*), with archaic and rare German words. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Buber and Rosenzweig and the early nineteenth-century Romantic turn in translation, see de Vries (2014).

The second influence of nineteenth-century Germany on Buber and Rosenzweig are general ideas on language and linguistic ideologies of that period, especially the primacy of diachrony and unity assumptions. Language was approached from a diachronic perspective in nineteenth-century Germany. Comparative linguistics reconstructed *Ur* languages from which modern languages had descended. Lexical semantics was about *Ur* meanings of words as revealed by etymologies and not about synchronic contextual meanings in various contexts of usage. This diachronic take on language dominates the translation theory and practice of Buber and Rosenzweig (de Vries 2014). Rosenzweig talks about the etymological *Tiefsinn der Worte* [the deep meaning of words]. He employs the metaphor of a mineshaft into which we have to descend to find the *Ur* meanings of recurrent Hebrew roots, using German terms as the *Wurzelschicht der Worte* [the shaft of the root of words] (van der Louw 2006, 4). An example of this etymologizing translation practice would be how Buber and Rosenzweig in the Psalms render the Piel forms of  $\text{פָּלַח}$ , “to deliver; to rescue”, with *entschnüren* and *losschnüren*, “to unlace, to untie (of ropes)”, based on a (contested) etymology (Botterweck and Ringgren 1980, 437): for example, in Psalm 6:5 and Psalm 60:7.

Buber and Rosenzweig understood the heritage of Schleiermacher, Hegel and Herder in terms of their own times, the period between the two world wars in Germany. The chaos, horrors and trauma of the lost First World War and its aftermath had shaken many absolute truths and certainties of the nineteenth century. Heidegger captured the spirit of the Interbellum that left little room for absolute truths beyond time and place. Philosophy could no longer find any foundation other than the temporal existence in the historical here-and-now of the individual, the

*Dasein*, an existential ontology that broke with nineteenth-century absolute metaphysical foundations of philosophy in an anti-idealistic and relativistic climate (Gordon 2003). Van der Louw (2006, 5) and Gordon (2003) describe the links between Buber, Rosenzweig and Heidegger: for example, in the emphasis on the existential function of language, but also a shared focus on roots and etymology. Gordon (2003, 266) discusses the translation decisions of Rosenzweig that he sees as reflections of the philosophical climate of the German Interbellum such as an existential ontology and anti-idealism.

Buber and Rosenzweig stood in Jewish theological traditions, and they combined the heritage of nineteenth-century Germany with theological thoughts about the unity [*Einheit*] of the Hebrew Scriptures, a rabbinic hermeneutic that connected Hebrew roots, words and phrases in very different parts of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible was a unity, one Book (*Die Schrift*, Scripture, in the singular). They saw this unity as a result of an *Einheitsbewusstsein*, “awareness of unity” (Buber 1964, 1113), or *bibelstiftende Bewusstsein*, “Bible creating awareness” (ibid. 1186), that worked in Scripture itself before it was canonized (Schraevesande, 2009, 262–263). One divine Voice spoke in all the Hebrew Scriptures. The problem was how to connect disillusioned and sceptical modern Germans to this Voice in their concrete individual existence here and now, in their *Dasein*. Buber firmly believed that the ears of modern Germans, Jews or Christians, formed the connection to the Voice: when Scripture was called out and read aloud to them, God would enter the existence, the temporality of individuals, through their ears (van der Louw 2006, 4).

This notion of *Gesprochenheit* or oral-aural spoken *Urwort* dimension of Buber and Rosenzweig must be seen against the background of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideological and philosophical climate sketched in the previous paragraphs. “Buber and Rosenzweig based their approach on the Romantic nineteenth century notion that the Bible was essentially oral literature written down” (Fox 1995, x). The Voice breathes and speaks in this fundamentally oral Hebrew Bible. Buber and Rosenzweig divided the Hebrew text in cola or breath units, units that could be spoken in one *Atemzug* or one breath. These cola were breath units and meaning units at the same time (Buber 1964, 1176–1177). Colometric structuring distinguishes all translations in the tradition of Buber and Rosenzweig; the cola are small units of text and at first sight colometric formatting seems to fragment the translation. But thanks to the *Einheitsbewusstsein* [awareness of unity] that worked in Scripture, intertextual webs of audible linkages were formed between these breath units, by repetition of keywords and of roots, across the whole canon (ibid., 1177). These *Leitworte* [leading words] form audible clues: the listener hears the repetitions, reflects on their links and by doing so starts to experience unity and connections, threads of meaning that bind the cola together throughout the canon, in an audible unity of Scripture, a unity based on the one Voice. The listener is drawn into an inner-Scriptural dialogic encounter of *Leitworte*, spoken to by the Voice in his or her existence, then-and-there (de Vries 2012, 91–92).

The *Leitwort* approach of Buber and Rosenzweig is much more than a literary notion because it combines repetition as a literary device with the theological aspects of the unity of Scripture, and of the unity of canon and rabbinic reading traditions. But philosophical themes of the Interbellum also resonate in the *Leitwort* approach (the *Leitworte* speak existentially to the listeners), as well as Romantic themes of direct experience (the *Leitworte* speak directly to the listener who thus experiences the

Voice) and general nineteenth-century etymological views of word meaning. It comes as no surprise then that the *Leitworte* became the cornerstone of the Buber-Rosenzweig tradition in Bible translation, in theory and in translation practices that tried to capture the “orality of the Bible”. Consider the translation of the Hebrew consonant root קרב in Leviticus 1:2. Buber and Rosenzweig created new German words (*Nahung* = near-ing; *darnahen* = to near there) to reflect the deep meaning (*Tiefsinn*) of the repeated root קרב “near” and translated: “Ein Mensch, wenn er von euch IHM eine Nahung darnah<sup>3</sup>” (de Vries, 2014). Recent Bible translations in the tradition of Buber and Rosenzweig reflect these views of the orality of the Bible in their translation practices, to varying degrees. For example, Fox (1995) also translates at root level in this passage of Leviticus 1:2, to make the repetition of the root קרב audible in the English version: “When (one) among you brings near a near-offering for YHWH”.

The popular Dutch translation by Oussoren (2004), called the Naarden Bible, pays tribute to Buber’s perspective on orality in its preface and applies the *Leitwort* strategy consistently in the translation of both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, also at root and stem level. The same is true of the French Bible translation by Chouraqui (1974).

The difference between moderate followers of Buber and Rosenzweig such as Everett Fox in the USA and more hardcore practitioners of these views such as Oussoren in The Netherlands and Chouraqui in France is that moderate followers tend to use the *Leitwort* translation strategy within smaller, literary units of the biblical texts, and then only when there is clear evidence for writer-intended conscious use of root or word repetition. But more hardcore followers emphasize the audible unity of the whole Bible and accordingly apply *Leitwort* strategies across books, at the level of the Bible as a whole, and with a much higher frequency. Colometric division of the text (Buber’s *Atemzug* or breath unit) and audible allusions in Hebrew names are found in all post-war Bible translations that practice Buber’s perspective on orality. For example, Everett Fox translates the name ya’aqov, “Jacob”, in Genesis 25:26 as “Heelholder”, to capture the sound similarity in Hebrew between ‘aqev, “heel”, and the name ya’aqov.

### The second perspective: Universalist dichotomies

The first perspective on orality and Bible translation, with *Gesprochenheit* as central notion, had its ideological roots in Europe, especially in nineteenth-century Germany and had most of its impact in the world of Bible translation rather than in other fields of translation.<sup>4</sup> The second perspective on orality has its roots in three academic disciplines (linguistics, anthropology and classical philology) in Europe and America. It lacks the strong connections with theology and philosophy of Buber’s construction of orality and for a while the second perspective seemed to express an academic consensus on the nature of orality. The well-written and influential book *Orality and Literacy* by Ong (1982) summarized this consensus just before it would be shattered by new findings in linguistics, biblical scholarship and anthropology. Precisely because of its less obvious connections with theology and ideology and its strong links to academic disciplines such as linguistics, the second perspective had a far wider impact than the first. In fact, many of the present uses of terms such as “oral culture”, “oral style” and “oral syntax” in translation studies,



cultural studies, biblical scholarship and other fields of the humanities are still informed by the second perspective.

Two elements are central to that mid-twentieth-century consensus on the nature of orality. First, an almost impenetrable barrier was erected between oral communication and written communication, in the words of Carr (2005, 6): “Past studies of the oral and the written have been plagued by a frequent tendency to juxtapose orality and memory with written textuality.” Orality and literacy were understood as two separate, contrasting worlds. This dichotomous thinking, the “Great Divide” of orality and literacy, was so strong that counterexamples did not break the paradigm; rather, this led to the recognition of “mixed” forms that were placed on an “oral–written continuum” that maintained the basic opposition between the oral and the written.

The second element was an essentialist and universalist dichotomy that ascribed a universal set of contrastive properties to orality and literacy. Oral syntax was supposed to be simple, mostly paratactic, coordinative and basically juxtaposing chunks of information, without much syntactic integration. Written syntax was highly integrated, with embedding and recursion and complex syntax. Oral discourse was concrete, context-bound, formulaic and repetitive, involving the listener, synthetic rather than analytic. Written discourse was abstract, distanced, analytic, non-redundant, non-formulaic, lacking mnemonic devices needed in oral cultures to memorize oral long-duration texts. Oral cultures were pre-logic whereas writing had introduced logic and abstract reasoning.

Where did all these properties ascribed to orality and literacy of the second perspective come from?<sup>5</sup>

Syntactic attributes came from the linguistic debate about oral and written discourse in English (de Vries 2003, 397). Linguists like Chafe linked oral communication with parataxis, a lack of syntactic integration and reliance on context to infer semantic relations, in contrast with the high degree of explicit syntactic integration in written styles. Chafe and Danielewicz (1987, 103) attributed this difference in the degree of syntactic integration to processing constraints: “In other words, there is a strong tendency for casual speakers to produce simple sequences of coordinated clauses, avoiding the more elaborate interclausal relations found in writing. Elaborate syntax evidently requires more processing effort than speakers ordinarily devote to it”. Although Chafe based his argument on informal, casual speech (without claiming to generalize over all oral genres, let alone over languages other than English), parataxis became associated with orality in general (de Vries 2003, 399).

Cognitive attributes ascribed to orality and literacy in the second perspective originated in anthropology (de Vries 2003, 398): for example, cognitive dichotomies of pre-logical versus logical cultures (Lévy-Bruhl 1926), or cultures with thought processes tied to the concrete versus those that can abstract from concrete circumstances (Lévi-Strauss 1966). In the work of Goody (1977) and Olson (1994), such old cognitive dichotomies resurface as cognitive properties of oral and literate societies. Olson (*ibid.*) emphasizes that written language is “decontextualized” when compared to speech. Speakers expect their listeners to infer information by combining utterance and context. Writers do not share an immediate context of utterance with their readers and accordingly cannot rely on contextual implications to the degree that speakers can. Olson (*ibid.*) connects this explicitness and



autonomy of writing with the emergence of analytical and critical thinking, a cognitive development that was less likely to take place in the contextualized, more implicit communication of primary oral cultures. The second element in Olson's view is the written text as a fixed object which the reader can compare to other texts, interpret, summarize and so on. Such operations on written texts as fixed objects would supposedly stimulate the distinction between text and interpretation, and create a different metalanguage consciousness, leading to grammars, lexicons and, ultimately, to the development of logic (de Vries 2003, 398).

Stylistic and literary attributes of orality and literacy of the second perspective originated in the philological debate on the oral nature and origin of texts from antiquity, as we find in the work of Parry (1928) and Lord (1960) on Homer (de Vries 2003, 399). Parry noticed the frequent use of epithets, formulas, standard themes and other formulaic elements in the metrical epics of Homer and attributed that formulaic nature to the orality of such texts. Performing artists produced their oral texts by drawing from a store of fixed formulas, standard themes and epithets that helped them, together with rhythm, metre and assonance, as mnemonic devices to memorize those traditions and perform them orally from memory.

Ong (1982) brought the notion of additive parataxis from the linguistic debate, the context-bound concreteness from the anthropological debate, and the formulaic, repetitive, mnemonic elements from the philological debate together in an accessible, coherent, but highly dichotomous picture of orality that influenced many Bible translators, especially in missionary and evangelizing contexts. After the Second World War hundreds of missionary Bible translators from Europe and the USA became active in minority languages in remote corners of the world, and they found themselves very often in what they considered to be oral contexts, with oral languages and oral cultures. Their views of orality were shaped by the "Great Divide" of the oral and written dimensions of the second perspective and they interpreted what they saw through that lens. When I was a translation consultant in Indonesian West Papua in the 1980s and 1990s, I met Bible translators who tried to "oralize" their translations, to adjust the translation to what they saw as the oral mode of communication of their audiences (de Vries 2008). In practice, this often meant frequent use of topic markers, the use of extra-clausal thematic phrases that were not syntactically integrated in the following clause, forms of repetition and recapitulation (e.g. tail-head linkages) and very long clause chains, strings of syntactically very simple clauses.

The problem with that strategy was that the "oralized" translations became more difficult to read, and to read aloud to listening audiences (de Vries 2008, 308). Renck (1990, 96–97) gives interesting data from the Yagaria area of Papua New Guinea. The New Testament has been translated into two dialects of Yagaria, in the Move dialect and the Kami-Kulukua dialect. Renck (*ibid.*) gives Mark 15:21 in both translations. The Kami-Kulukua version uses cohesive markers (and recapitulative tail-head linkage) as in oral Yagaria narrative genres: it has 17 cohesive markers in three sentences which are connected by tail-head linkage. The Move version does not use those devices in this fragment. Renck (*ibid.*) writes that the Kami-Kulukua version is harder to read than the Move version because of the high frequency of cohesive markers and other "oral" features. Notice that these were efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to adjust written translations to oral environments of interior New Guinea, not to produce audio versions.

When “oralizing” strategies did not really improve the effective communication of the Gospel through these written missionary translations, a logical next step within a dichotomous paradigm was to conclude that written Bible translations could not work in predominantly oral environments, and this explains the impact of so called “storying” approaches in the missionary communication of the Gospel. The content of the Bible is translated into a chronologically ordered series of oral stories that are recorded and played to audiences. Kalkman (2010) described the strong and explicit links between the second perspective, especially as popularized by Ong (1982), and the Chronological Bible Storying approach in missiology and Bible translation as proposed by Brown (2004) and Franklin (2008). A key assumption in these missiological approaches is that communication in oral cultures privileges narratives. Abstract notions in non-narrative types of discourse – for example, many passages in the Letter to the Romans – should be transformed into concrete and non-analytic narratives.

Obviously, these audio versions of Bible stories work better than written translations in getting basic biblical stories across in environments with low levels of literacy. They are relatively effective because they continue a long and effective tradition in the history of Christian missions: missionaries who transformed what they perceived as the central content of the Bible into stories that they told to listening audiences. These missionaries did not consider their oral Bible stories as something that could replace a written translation of the Bible, as a sacred text with authority in the community of the young Church. The same is true of young Churches themselves: audio cassettes or DVDs with Bible stories are not perceived as sacred base texts that speak with authority to their communities.

### **The third perspective: Local oral–written interfaces**

Independent developments in linguistics, anthropology, ancient studies and biblical scholarship towards the end of the last century and in the first decade of this century led to the breakdown of the paradigm of the second perspective. But these developments also stimulated the emergence of new approaches to the relationships between oral and written forms of communication: for example, in biblical or ancient media criticism (Carr 2005; Rodriquez 2014), linguistics (Biber 1988; Besnier 1995), and anthropology (Scribner and Cole 1981; Foley 1997).<sup>6</sup>

Computers and statistical “big data” research changed linguistics and stylistics in the last two decades of the previous century. One of the great breakthroughs was the work of Douglas Biber (1988), who studied 20 properties associated with oral and written language in a digital corpus of texts (both oral and written). He found no absolute differences between written and oral texts. Whether a given text – for example, a shopping list, a sermon or a love song – scored high for a certain property could not be predicted on the basis of whether that discourse was oral or written. Biber’s work dealt a blow to the whole idea of a style continuum with “typically oral” and “typically written” extremes. That notion was replaced by genre-determined configurations of stylistic characteristics. This does not make the medium (oral or writing) irrelevant but rather underscores that it is only one feature of a genre. Whether a genre of texts is oral or written is far less important for its stylistic and linguistics properties than the combined impact of other aspects of its genre. A shopping list is a written genre but it has most of the properties ascribed to

orality: it is paratactic in syntax, concrete, context-bound. The properties associated with orality and literacy turned out to be not predictably distributed over the oral and written genres represented in the corpus (de Vries 2003, 398). Biber's work on English was replicated and confirmed for non-western languages by Besnier (1995), working with a corpus from the Polynesian language of Nukalaelae. Stylistically, personal letters form one cluster with conversations on Nukalaelae whereas written sermons cluster with political speeches and radio broadcasts. The genre of personal letters is determined by the cultural context of Nukalaelae in which kinship and exchange relations are crucial.

I have earlier discussed data from primary oral languages of interior New Guinea in communities where writing was completely unknown (de Vries 2003). These data did not show the properties that the second perspective would predict: for example, relative lack of syntactic integration or prominence of formulaic-repetitive styles in long-duration texts. There are well-documented oral languages in New Guinea that have subordination as the most frequent, unmarked way of clause combining: for example, Yimas of Papua New Guinea. According to Foley (1991, 497), Yimas is a language that "contrasts with many other Papuan languages in making less extensive use of clause chaining .... The most common type of clause linkage in Yimas involves nominalization, both finite and non-finite."

Empirical studies on primary oral languages – that is, languages spoken by people who did not have literacy practices in any form or any (contact) language – showed rich oral traditions and various genres of oral literature but these long-duration texts did not show verbatim or semi-verbatim performance of these oral texts; rather, non-verbatim memorization and performance, with the important exception of ancestral (spirit) names and ancestral genealogies, were found (de Vries 2012, 94–95). Crucially, the mnemonic "poetic prose" style attributed to orality did not have a special prominence in the oral literatures of primary oral communities (de Vries 2003; van Enk and de Vries 1997) and this makes sense when communities have no written reference point for their long-duration texts, in cultural conditions where the intentions, the content, of the texts is the focus of the tradition and not the wording (de Vries 2012, 83).

The mnemonic formulaic-repetitive style associated in the Lord-Parry tradition with oral literatures turned out to be not typical of primary oral societies but rather were found in societies that have a non-print technology of (re)producing written texts, with scribal traditions and with a hybrid oral–written interface in which semi-verbatim memorization of written long-duration texts is the key feature: for example, in ancient biblical worlds or in the ancient civilizations of Asia (de Vries 2012, 73). In these conditions written texts are designed for easy memorization and oral recitation, and that is why they have the mnemonic "poetic prose" style. The written texts function very much like a score for a musician who performs a piece of classical music: as a written background reference for a piece that primarily exists in the memory of the performer (Carr 2005).

The anthropological debate on universal cognitive dichotomies of oral and literate cultures also lost its relevance (de Vries 2003, 398). Relativistic theoretical developments left little room for universal, ahistorical dichotomies of oral cultures versus literate cultures. Empirical research in cognitive linguistics and anthropology on the cognitive effects of the introduction of writing did not find universal effects but a variety of local cognitive effects. Indeed, the effects of writing turned out to

differ in crucial ways in literate cultures, and this supported the idea of different local literacies (see, for example, Scribner and Cole 1981). As for the relationship between logic and writing, highly abstract logic and codification of rules for logical reasoning emerged in oral religious contexts to establish rules for doctrinal discussions: for example, in the Buddhist schools of Tibet (Foley 1997, 419).

Perhaps the most radical shift away from the second perspective occurred in the fields of classics and biblical scholarship. Two elements were fundamental in that paradigm shift: the emphasis on the interdependence and interaction of oral and written forms of communication and the emphasis on the local nature of that interaction. These two elements come together in the notion of local oral–written interfaces to which we now turn.

### ***Local oral–written interfaces in antiquity***

To present the new insights into orality and literacy in the field of ancient studies I will summarize findings by David Carr (2005) in his book *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, a brilliant application of the new orality-literacy paradigm on biblical literatures that shows how local oral–written interfaces in ancient worlds help explain the origin, transmission, nature and performance of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> For Carr (ibid.) the key element in the transmission of long-duration texts in antiquity was the transmission *from mind to mind* in a process of indoctrination/education/enculturation of an elite minority of literati (6). The traditional texts were “written on the tablet of the heart” (127) and the goal was to plant the values and ideals of the ancient texts in those hearts along with the words. “Thus, the minds stood at the centre of the often discussed oral-written interface” (6).

Written copies of texts were not designed for instant reading off a page, certainly not for silent reading,<sup>8</sup> but rather “stood as a permanent reference point for an ongoing process of largely oral recitation” (Carr 2005, 4) based on memorization. This explains many striking aspects of ancient manuscripts: for example, the absence of word and/or sentence separation, leaving out vowels or sometimes giving only the first word of a verse in full, with just the first letter of each succeeding word of that verse and other forms of ancient “stenographics” (5). We can only understand these characteristics of manuscripts in the context of a specific type of local oral–written interface. Only when people were already very familiar with a text, on the basis of memorization, could they read it: reading was a kind of recognition. The written copy of long-duration texts, if at all present at the performance scene, functioned as “a musical score does for a musician who already knows the piece” (4). This analogy with a musical score is helpful to grasp the relationship between the written and oral dimension: they are interconnected aspects of the performative condition, linked via memorization practices.

Manuscripts that in their visual form assume this type of oral-written hybrid also occur in traditional cultures in other parts of the world (de Vries 2012, 73). The Makassarese of Sulawesi, Indonesia, wrote their long-duration texts on leaves of the Lontar palm. These Lontar manuscripts not only have no word spaces, but each syllable is represented by just the first consonant-vowel, deleting any consonant(s) that close the syllable (Evans 2010, 132). Cumming writes that “only by knowing the subject of a sentence can it be read. According to some Makassarese, the written

script only ‘becomes Makassarese when it is spoken aloud’ ” (2002, xii). The skills to perform texts in societies with these hybrid oral–written interfaces is limited to an elite minority who have the long-duration texts written on the tablets of their hearts during a prolonged period of training.

The central memorization aspect of ancient oral–written interfaces is the key to other important features of ancient long-duration texts. For example, the link with music: music, singing and chanting formed mnemonic aids to the memorization of these orally performed *written* traditions (Carr 2005, 94–96). Stylistic features such as inclusio, chiasmus, chain words, and other repetitive structures like parallelism, interpreted under the second perspective as oral residues in written texts of earlier purely oral traditions, may be reinterpreted as *writing* strategies designed to facilitate the memorization of the written text, to inscribe it more easily on the tablet of the heart, and to facilitate the oral performance of written texts by the mouth and lips in recitation. Carr writes in relation to Greek oral–written interfaces: “poetic and formulaic elements often pointed to by the oral-traditional school might be characteristics of *written* Greek epic that evolved to support its *oral* transmission within early Greek society” (ibid., 105). The frequent use of acrostics in ancient long-duration texts is a good example of a writing strategy aimed at memorizing and reciting the sequence of passages (73, 125).

### ***Local oral–written interfaces and printed Bibles of early modern Europe***

Technological and material changes stand at the heart of changing dynamics in local–written interfaces, and the materiality of the carriers of (translated) texts crucially shapes forms and functions of translations (Littau 2011).<sup>9</sup> The invention of print dramatically changed local–written interfaces in early modern Europe, and nowhere does this become more visible than in the Bible translations of early modern Europe.

The invention of printing by Gutenberg in 1440 led to a whole new oral–written interface. By 1500, printing presses were all over Europe, and millions of volumes had been distributed. Written texts entered the lives of countless individuals who read those books individually, in the privacy of their homes. Compared to the very small numbers of people who could read and write in ancient scribal cultures, early modern times saw a sharp increase of literacy rates, although nowhere near the literacy rates in modern, advanced societies. Mass production of Bibles led to individual reading of the Scriptures from a private copy. Memorization of long-duration texts became rare, and the primary mode of existence of long-duration texts was no longer in the minds of an educated, literate elite. Early modern mass-produced Bible translations of Europe show an explosion of visual paratextual elements in the text, compared to the Bible translations of antiquity: word spacing, indentation, pericopes with titles, chapters, verses, cross references to other texts in Scriptures, annotations and explanations. These paratextual features were designed to help individual readers to pick up the written text and start to read it, just read it off the page, without the aid of the memorized text stored in the brain, without assuming previous familiarity with the text prior to reading it, as in antiquity (de Vries 2012, 79). The pages of early modern Bible translations such as the Dutch *Statenvertaling* (1637) show an amazing system of paratextual links. Verses of Scripture are linked to other verses in different books and to theological reflections

in the marginal notes. We have no direct proof of the effectiveness of these paratextual helps but we know they were in high demand. The *nota marginalia* of the Dutch *Statenvertaling*, its central paratextual feature, were translated into English to satisfy the demand among Protestants to be able to read and understand the Bible without the help and mediation of clergy or Church.

### Concluding remarks

Notions of orality have played an intriguing role in the history of modern Bible translation, at all levels, from the way the biblical sources were understood as “essentially” oral to “oralizing” translation strategies and perceptions of audiences as “oral” in grammar, culture, style and cognition. To bring some order in the rich intellectual history of orality I distinguished three perspectives on orality and Bible translation, chronologically ordered from the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The distinction of three perspectives on orality and Bible translation, although hopefully useful in an overview article like this, does not begin to do justice to many translators and works on orality and translation that do not fit this mould.

The first perspective on orality, of Buber and Rosenzweig, attracted translators and biblical scholars interested in the “oral” otherness of the Hebrew Scriptures. But the otherness of the Hebrew Bible, or any other text, is never a self-evident notion. To be identified and captured in translation, otherness needs to be theorized, constructed; this construction of otherness takes place in domestic terms and frameworks, and this is the irony of foreignizing translations (de Vries, 2014). Buber and Rosenzweig constructed the “oral” otherness of the Hebrew Scriptures in the terms, notions and ideologies of philosophies and ideologies that they had absorbed when educated as philosophers in Germany. Contemporary critics of Buber and Rosenzweig had a much sharper eye for this German layer of domestic inscription than later critics, after the Second World War, who tended to stress the Jewishness of Buber and Rosenzweig, and the Hebraicity of their translation, but ignored their roots in German philosophies and ideologies of language, culture and translation. An example of a contemporary critic sensitive to that German ideological side of Buber and Rosenzweig was Kracauer ([1926] 1963, 180), who used the term *völkische Romantik*, an expression translated by Maranhão as “racial Romanticism”, to characterize the work of Buber and Rosenzweig (Maranhão 2003, 77; van der Louw 2006, 15).

This first perspective on orality had much less appeal for most missionary Bible translators who left Europe and the USA in great numbers after the Second World War to work in remote corners of the world, often with an evangelical American or European background. They were driven by a Protestant message-and-meaning perspicuity hermeneutics. The Bible was seen as a clear message from God in Hebrew and Greek that He wanted to be communicated as clearly as possible to all humans, to each in his or her own tongue. The exoticizing emphasis on Hebrew orality as part of a wider focus on Hebrew otherness and alterity of the first perspective did not fit their missionary, communicative *skopos*.

This does not mean that they did not notice or appreciate these Hebrew features. But rendering these features with the translation strategies of the Buber-Rosenzweig tradition (root concordance, colometric divisions, rare and highly infrequent words, difficult neologisms) did not have a high priority, given the missionary purpose.



Missionary translators did sometimes try to render the literary features focused on in the first perspective such as keyword repetition, sound effects or inclusio, by employing literary strategies of host communities with similar literary effects. Wendland (2011) is an example of such an approach that he calls literary functional equivalence.

Whereas the first perspective, of Buber and Rosenzweig, highlighted the orality of biblical source texts as an aspect of their otherness, the second perspective highlighted the orality of “target” cultures, as a form of otherness that Bible translations should take into account in order to successfully communicate with such “oral” audiences. Unfortunately, in portraying the orality of minority communities in the developing world as “paratactic” (that is, without complex syntax), “concrete and context-bound”, “formulaic-repetitive”, the second perspective had very little basis in empirical study of such communities, and came dangerously close to academic recycling of old stereotypes of “primitive” peoples as lacking abstract and logical thinking, with “oral” languages that supposedly lacked complex syntax and with simple, repetitive, coordinative forms of discourse (de Vries 2003).

Findings from anthropological linguistics, cognitive anthropology and especially the fields of ancient studies and biblical scholarship gave way, towards the turn of the millennium, to a third perspective on orality and literacy practices as historically situated, driven by local technologies and material conditions, local social practices of speaking and writing that can best be understood from the point of view of their interaction and points of contact. Key to this new approach is the historical situatedness of the interaction of orality and literacy practices. This means that we cannot generalize over the local oral–written interfaces in which the Hebrew sacred texts, the Septuagint or the writings of the New Testament functioned. Performance conditions, material culture, writing technology, the place of oral traditions; they all differed crucially in these three traditions. To give an example of a local–written interface, this article focused on the Hebrew Bible, following Carr (2005), who describes the place of scrolls, literacy, oral performance and memorization in ancient Israel in the comparative contexts of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. We lack such a comprehensive study of the Septuagint and the New Testament from the perspective of biblical media criticism. Further research of the Septuagint and the New Testament writings is needed to better understand the way in which oral and written dimensions interacted in the origin, performance and transmission of these traditions.

## Notes

1. This section relies heavily on de Vries (2012, 87–93; 2014).
2. To use a characteristic phrase of Schleiermacher (1838, 277), quoted by Venuti (2008, 85), who also gives the translation by Lefevere (1977), “bent towards a foreign likeness”.
3. This sentence exemplifies the very peculiar form of German that Buber and Rosenzweig used, often ungrammatical and with neologisms – very difficult to translate into English. A rather literal rendering would be: “A person, when he from among you brings-near to HIM a near-ing”.
4. This section relies heavily on de Vries (2003).
5. I rely on Foley (1997, 417–434) for the origin of the properties ascribed to orality in the second perspective.
6. This section relies heavily on de Vries (2012).
7. This section is based on de Vries (2012, 71–79).



8. This does not mean silent reading was unknown; it was known but not the default way to perform a text. See Carr (2005, 4) for the emergence of silent reading and more visually oriented reader-friendly teaching texts for use in early education in the Hellenistic period when literacy became more widespread.
9. This section is based on de Vries (2012, 79–82).

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