

The Shape of Communities Along the Communication Continuum: Considerations for BT and SE Strategies

Introduction

In recent years, Bible Translation (BT) has experienced a type of movement in the field of Orality. This movement is evidenced by a host of literature, new software, the first-ever Oral Bible Translation (OBT) Conference, and the establishment of new positions and departments within BT organizations. One result of this movement has been the development of new strategies.

While there are many important factors involved in strategy development, which are beyond the scope of this article, this article intends to describe and give occasion for the consideration, discussion, and further study of a single factor, which I will call the *Shape* of a community.

The Communication Continuum

Years of work among a variety of socio-linguistic contexts has pushed us beyond a binary view of communities as either “oral” or “literate”. This outdated view classified whole language groups or communities as one or the other.

Oral	Literate
Yetfa	Korean
Mahri	French
Kimki	English

As our understanding of communication has matured, so has our ability to describe those engaged in it. References to the “great divide” between oral and literate communities have given way to the concept of a continuum.ⁱ Orality and literacy are not viewed as different modes of communication, but rather designate points on a continuum of representing and communicating information.



While scholars in this field often refer to this continuum, Holly Hearon points out that “there is a vast, complex region between the two extremes where most cultures exist”.ⁱⁱ This is an important observation which deserves further description. Hearon’s statement only mentions “cultures” or language communities as existing between the two extremes. However, we recognize that, within each language community, it is individuals who communicate at different points on the continuum.

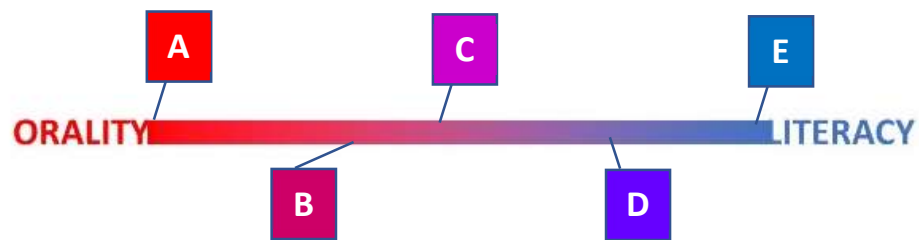
James B. Slack has described various points along this continuum that can help us identify where those individuals function.ⁱⁱⁱ

For example,

- Person A is “**illiterate**”. He/she cannot read or write. He has never “seen” a word.

- Person B is “**functional illiterate**”. His/her reading and writing skills are inadequate "to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level".^{iv}
- Person C is “**semi-literate**.”. He/she functions in a gray transitional area between oral communication and literacy.
- Person D is “**literate**”. He/she understands and handles information such as ideas, precepts, concepts, and principles by literate means
- Person E is “**highly literate**”. He/she is a thoroughly print-culture individual.

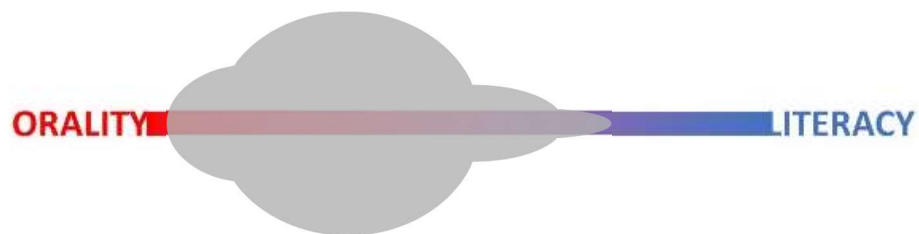
While these particular labels may be less than ideal in that they only describe one’s level of literacy and do not necessarily reflect a preference of communication, they are still helpful in allowing us to depict positions along this continuum.



A Community’s Shape

Today, almost all language communities have members at multiple places along this continuum, and this reality forms what I call the *Shape* of a community. A community’s total number of members who represent and communicate information at these various points along the communication continuum determines that language community’s unique *Shape*.

For example, the Yetfa community in Papua, Indonesia has a total population of roughly 1000 speakers. Approximately 250 are illiterate, 550 are functionally illiterate, 175 are semi-literate, 25 are literate, and 0 are highly literate.¹ Therefore, the *Shape* of Yetfa community would look something like the following:



This depiction of a language community is certainly more representative than previous binary categorization, and it provides a profile of Hearon’s assertion for a given language community. In other

¹ These numbers are only approximations based on our experience of working with the Yetfa community over the previous 10 years.

words, the above figure shows where in the “vast, complex region between the two extremes” the Yetfa community exists.

Shape Shifting

The figure above provides us a snapshot of the *Shape* of the Yetfa community’s current communication situation. However, it is critical that we remember that a community’s *Shape* on this continuum is not static but is very much in motion.

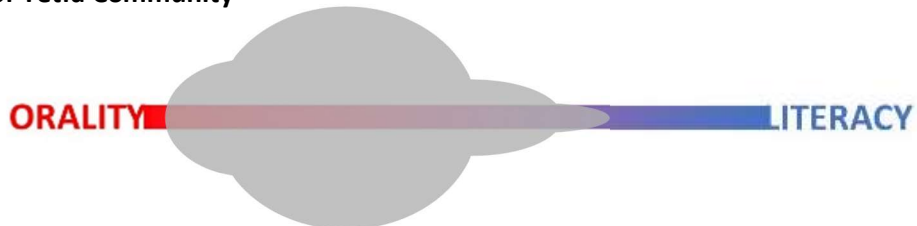
For example, the following shows how the Yetfa community has shifted along this continuum over the past 29 years. When the Yetfa were originally identified as a unique language group in 1991, 100% of the community were illiterate – total oral communicators. There was no orthography, and no Yetfa speakers were literate in a second language.

1991 Shape of Yetfa Community



Over the last 29 years, however, there has been a significant shift towards literacy leading to the current *Shape* of the community on the communication continuum.

2020 Shape of Yetfa Community



Given the conditions that resulted in such a shift and the ongoing developments occurring among the Yetfa, it is not unreasonable to think that 10 years in the future the *Shape* of Yetfa community will look more like the following than the above depiction.

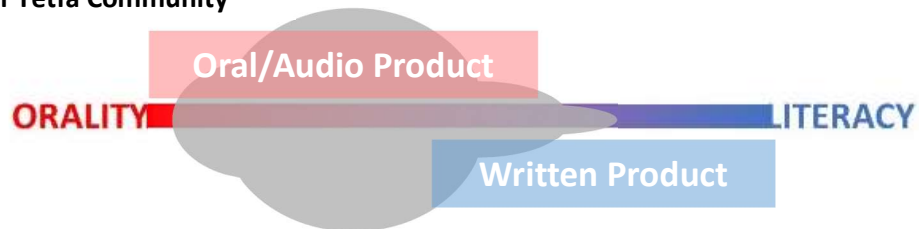
2030 Projected Shape of Yetfa Community



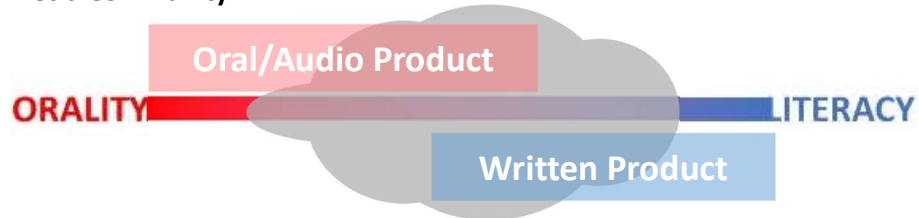
Implications for BT and SE Strategy Development

Assuming that an oral/audio product is most appropriate for those on the oral side of the continuum and a written product for those on the literate side, we can see how depicting and predicting the *Shape* of the Yetfa community could help determine a strategy for BT and Scripture Engagement (SE).

2020 Shape of Yetfa Community



2030 Shape of Yetfa Community



In the case of the Yetfa translation project, this consideration led to the decision to use an OBT strategy that includes a plan to further adapt the final product into a written text. The oral translation process and primary product (an audio recording) takes into consideration the current *Shape* of the community. The addition of a secondary written component has the smaller yet influential minority of the current *Shape*, as well as the projected trajectory of the entire community, in mind. There are also a number of products and SE activities being developed that blend oral and literate aspects, such as creating Talking Books using the Bloom software.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, there are many very important factors to be considered in the development of BT/SE strategies. As BT organizations continue to develop strategies in line with the orality movement, attention to the *Shape* of a language community emphasizes developing strategies that (1) are unique to a given community and (2) anticipate the projected future needs of the community. Having moved beyond a binary view of language communities as either oral or literate, we must be careful not to develop binary strategies for giving them access to God's Word.

Further discussion on this topic might include (1) reasonable and reliable methods for determining and predicting the *Shape* of a community, (2) implications of demographics within the *Shape*, and (3) strategies for communities where the bulk of their *Shape* is in the semi-literate zone.

ⁱ Ruth Finnegan, *Orality and Literacy* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1988) 175.

ⁱⁱ Online Introduction to *Orality and Literacy*. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0224.xml>

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted by Fanning, Don, "Chronological Bible Storying/Teaching" (2009). Themes of Theology that Impacts Missions. Paper 6. http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_theo/6

^{iv} Schlechty, Phillip C. "[Shaking Up the Schoolhouse: How to Support and Sustain Educational Innovation](#)" (Pdf). Catdir.loc.gov