

# Oralising the Written in the Audiobook: Technology-Mediated Transformations of the Narrative Space

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## Abstract

*The major distinctions in our experiencing of the narrative is primarily the binary between the reception of the oral and the chirographic, whereby oral narratives are perceived aurally while written texts are experienced by both visual and tactile senses. The digitization of the written text into the read-along, audio-novel and talking book, the various types of the audiobook has shifted the modal agency of the written narrative into the oral narrative space. While the audiobook narration of the written novels is not a direct correlation of the performance of an oral narrative, the oralising aspects of auralising the written text is examined here for the 'supremacy' of speech over orthography in enhancing the narrative experience for the naratee. The paper brings the theoretical perspectives on listening into a reconfigured discourse with sociological symbolic interactionism by George Mead and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic human development, with emphasis on the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, to tease out the implications of the audiobook. The paper argues that the audiobook fulfils the desire for relational engagement with the narrator of the audio-novel as an aural agency rather than as an imagined entity, as is attainable in the act of reading. It also concludes that the choice of listening to the audio-novel is expression of the desire to return to the uncanny pristine orality afforded by the audiobook narrator. The paper contributes to studies on the electronic cultures in narrative as they create an interface between oral and written cultures.*

**Key Words:** Digital, Audiobook, Oral Narrator, Reading

## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is as old as humanity itself (Foster 1985, Ong, 2002). The urge to tell is the motivation behind sharing experiences through creative narrative structures that inspire imagination and thought, building communities in the process. Narratives exist in short and long forms as well as in oral and written presentations. The audiobook, specifically the audio-novel is treated here as a long narrative that proceeds from the written form in presentation into the oral form in performance. In his theorization of communication, Aristotle emphasizes the supremacy of the speaker in the communication process. He notes that once the poet (artist) discovers the proofs he intends to communicate, he organizes them, clothes them and sends them out, with regard to who his audience is. This is the space of the ethos in his communication triangle that includes pathos, audience-focused and logos, the message. In the reading process, the ethos is gauged through imagination of the reader, while in the speech performance the ethos is easily checked out by confirmations. In the experience of the audio-novel, the writer's proofs are dually packaged in print structure and in the audio narrator's voice before being accessed by the audience. The sounding of the story, mostly done without the agency of the author, is the subject of this paper.

Storytelling is a social process that exploits performances between persons to build communities. It highlights the use of communicative structures and processes in creatively sharing experiences for pleasure and function. We utilize the principles of Symbolic Interactionism to explore the affinity towards listening to the audio-novel, over reading it. George Mead's Symbolic Interactionism present meaning, language and thinking as core principles in determining human behaviour in society. A person's behaviour is a direct response to stimuli perceived from external agencies around them. As such, this study tries to explain storytelling as gaining more traction in an oral performance space than in a solitary reading space because the response of the audience will be directed, to a large extent, by the sound performances of the narrator. This study further argues that storytelling in its primordial setting involves the engagement of voice to share experiences, in what Mead (1934) refers to as vocal gestures. In his espousal of symbolic interactionism, where we make meaning of self and society through communication processes, Mead focuses voiced communication as a community-building tool. He notes that:

where one significantly says something with his own vocal process he is saying it to himself as well as to everybody else within reach of his voice. It is only the vocal gesture that is fitted for this sort of communication, because it is only the vocal gesture to which one responds or tends to respond as another person tends to respond to it (67).

This paper also interrogates the importance of listening as attainable in oral performance and shall thus exploit the act of listening as a core communication process in symbolic interactions. Further, the paper portends that the oral state can be equated to a primordial human communicative state using language that exists before writing. To help in this analysis, we draw from Jacques Lacan's notions of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic as stages of development, now not of the human person, but of the communicative media of oral, written and electronic.

Ong (2002) notes that 'the electronic age is also an age of 'secondary orality', the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depend on writing and print for its existence.' Further, 'smartphones, tablets and computers make texts available in a number of different technological formats and have changed the way we read in the digital age' (Have and Pedersen, 2016). But the explosion in its usage has caused its detachment from the printed original and it is now a medium in its own right (Have and Pedersen, 2019, Bednar, 2010).

The growing popularity of the audiobook is transforming the literary landscape and further blurring the comfortable lines hitherto drawn between oral and written literature. An audiobook is an electronic book format, which is listened to instead of being read in the traditional sense. It is 'an audio recording of a (previously or simultaneously) published written book, performed by a narrator who could be the author, a professional actor or an amateur, or a synthetic voice' (Have and Pedersen, 2016). This shift from conventional reading of texts to listening to them has re-introduced the oral narrator, and translocated access to the narrative from reading to listening. This marks an uncanny return to primary orality as espoused by Ong in his treatment of oral cultures.

The insertion of a vocal narrator in the primarily reading experience transforms the vehicle of narrative transmission from the imaginative engagement with the narrative voice in the written text into an interaction with the recorded sound in the sound text. Access to the narrative shifts from visual-mental image-understanding matrix to that of sound-mental image-understanding. The growing affinity for the audio-novel has been attributed to developments in the postmodern world like coping with a fast-paced multi-tasking, thus listening to a narrative while doing something else, coping with reading disabilities, as well as effective avenues for language acquisition. This

almost renders the development of the audiobook, in this case the audio-novel, an emerging convenience without in-depth underlying motivations. Essentially then, the rise and increased uptake of the audio-novel is not simply an accessory for contemporary lifestyles afforded by technology, but rather an important development that speaks to the sociological and psychological perspectives of listening, by which it subverts the act of reading. With the availability of technological instruments and digital platforms, there seems to be a deeper affinity and preference for listening to the sounding of the text to visually consuming the written text by reading, in the experience of a narration. In today's scrutiny of oral traditions, this highlights the place of the narrator in the performance of the narrative.

The oral artist in the traditional oral narrative performance is more than a vehicular agency for the narrative but can be perceived as part of the message in their community-creating act and art. This is because they build on the narrative in the process of performance and get to own the narrative from production to the employment of body and voice in performance. On the other hand, the oral narrator of the audio-novel is a storyteller who tells a tale that is already fixed by another. He only brings in his prosodic qualities and skills into the narrative. This means that the audience have to visualize event and characters through the presenter's voice performance, hence highlighting the importance of listening in the narrative performance.

### THE TRADITIONAL ORAL NARRATOR AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Jablan & Parks (2022) assert that "Stories are central to or common to humanity. In the stories we tell, we see our cultures reflected. When we intentionally listen to others' stories, we can create communities and cultures where everyone belongs." Tolstoy in his classic text *What is Art?* defines art, where storytelling belongs, as the intercourse between man and man, where one seeks to deliberately infect the other with their thoughts and emotions. In this context, storytelling is essentially a community-building act that bind participants emotionally through thought and emotion sharing. In the performance of the oral narrative, this aspect brings into sharp focus the element of the narrator – the performer – of the narrative. The oral narrator in the traditional oral narrative performance space is a live entity who draws from their repertoire of performance endowments to tell the tale to a critical and appreciative audience, whether in the same space or remotely. The narrator, using body, voice and space communicates emotions and thoughts to an audience with the intention of drawing them into the narrative as a real world through the window of imagination. The presence and the voice of the narrator communicates to the audience, just as much, if not more emphatically, as the story in the narrative. Thus, there is a psychologically enhanced connection between the audience and the narrative mediated by the presence and sound of the performer. The audience, in seeing and listening to the narrator is drawn in with increased immediacy into their world and the fusion of the two worlds – narrator's and naratee's – creating the desired community. Ong (2002) notes the supremacy of sound in oral communication: 'Yet in a deep sense language, articulated sound, is paramount. Not only communication, but thought itself relates in an altogether special way to sound' (41).

Symbolic interactionism holds that humans are core agencies in the creation of society rather than being products of it. In the traditional performance of the oral narrative, the narrator is a key agency who controls the production and delivery of the story for reception by the audience, more often than not, in a face-to-face setting. In this instance, the oral performer creates symbolic language using speech and non-speech cues to communicate. Nevertheless, the performer's voice as a medium also produces communicative cues that are accessed by the audience. These find expression in prosodic features like intonation, rhythm, volume and pronunciation. Conversely,

the audience' attention and response are magnetized in greater measure to the prosodic effects of vocalization by the narrator, even as these are augmented by visually beholding of the performer. Because the unwritten code of oral performances focuses on the message, listening becomes the major activity in the community building process of experience sharing.

Listening, like reading, is a complex cognitive process that occurs in stages: hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding (Jablan and Parks 2022). Listening is the act of attaching meaning to the perceived aural symbols and is distinctly different from hearing as it is a deliberate and active process (Lundsteen 1979, Purdy, 1997, Thomson et al, 2004). It is not a passive act but a mentally engaging process that requires an alertness, mostly occasioned by awareness of the transiency of the oral presentation. Michael (2001) affirms that listening, which he calls 'auditory comprehension', requires greater, not less, mental energy. This accords it a stature similar to, if not higher than, reading.

The symbolic interaction between narrator and naratee through sound creates a real-time community through storytelling. This context enables the naratee to not only assign meaning to the words, but also to allow different naratees to assign different meanings to the words through their perceptions of the sounds via its prosodic qualities at the time. As such, sound and its quality become a major conveyor in the creation of meaning in the narrative process, making listening a distinct meaning making agency from reading.

### **SIMULATION OF THE ORAL NARRATOR BY THE AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING**

The study treats the oral narrator of audiobooks as a fundamental modal agency in the experience of the digital narrative. It examines the presenter of the audiobook as not simply a transformation of the oral narrator in the 'Ongian' primary oral cultures but as an evolutionary institution emerging from written rather than real time contexts. The focus here is the effect of the interface created by the audiobook oral narrator as an agency on the ways of 'reading' and experience of the text, that disrupts the traditional 'solitarian' reading of print texts.

Simulation of the narrator by the narrator's voice breathes life into the narrative voice in the progenitor print text. Foster (1985) perhaps foretells the listening of the novel, emphasizing the modal agency of listening over reading of novels, a literary structure that develops with the advent of orthography and printing. He writes:

It is immensely old – goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps to Paleolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull . . . the novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him (26).

Engagement with the written narrative is primarily through the written word and the audience' imagination of the narrative voice. Reading is a solitary affair that involves perception of the visual text, understanding, creating mental image and imaginative dialogue with the characters to access the story. There is no performance in this context as no other being, save the reader is involved (Elder 2003). Contact with other humans is temporarily suspended as the author, real and implied, are distanced by the visual text in the reading act, a phenomenon that is not found in the aurally accessed text. It can be seen that whereas in the reading of the printed text, the audience negotiates meaning with an absent entity distanced from the narrative by marks on a printed page in the reading exercise, the audience negotiates meaning with a present narrator via the latter's voice, an

implied presence when they listen to the audiobook. This enhances the relational aspect of storytelling by bringing in another presence into the performance space.

This quality assigns a relational aspect with the sound agency and makes listening a more engaging process than reading. Listening provides the hearer with the sense of another human being at the end of the word – so to speak – and hence there develops a sense of mutual identity and the tendency to respond. The connections with narrative afforded by the narrator enable community-building in that there is an evidently visually or aurally perceived fellow human being issuing the invitation. This is the narrator credibility with the audience.

Tyagi (2013) explains listening as ‘the psychological process of receiving, attending to and constructing meaning from and responding to the spoken and/or non-verbal messages. This occurs in a complex five stage process involving hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding. This is applicable to listening to the audio-novel. The listener is engaged mentally upon receiving the speech cues and processes them through to the point of responding. This is enhanced by the fact that they are listening for the story, the ‘what happened?’ and the ‘what next?’ This process is boosted by the prosodic characters of the voice they are listening to, which at once, announce the presence of another, and also establishes emotional praxis for negotiations of meaning, enhancing the community-building nature of the audiobook.

Martin (1996) calls listening an art, which requires the listener’s special willingness to engage the imagination. Further, he notes that the act of narration urges listeners out of self-consciousness into the story. To expand this thought, we would argue that the listener is catapulted out of self-consciousness into the consciousness of another. The sound of the narrator is a vocalized – and therefore personalized – invitation into the space of the narrative. When the listener shuts out other competing voices to focus on the narrator’s voice, then a concrete unity of purpose is created, similar to that obtainable in dialogic spaces.

### **SIMULATION OF ORALITY AND THE UNCANNY IN THE AUDIOBOOK**

Jacques Lacan in his revision of Freudian Oedipal complex aligns our development with pre-entry, entry and post-entry into language. Lacan espouses a Real state that is before entry into language where the subject is complete and whole, but notes that after the rapture of this state by entry into language, the adult spends the rest of their lifetime longing for a return to that whole state, an impossibility though, which then results in the neurosis of man, often requiring solution. The Lacanian Real is also referred to as the ‘original’ state of ‘nature’ that has to be broken up in order for culture to be formed. The destruction portends loss for the subject though it is necessary for evolving into the Imaginary, which now recognizes and acknowledges the Other, and subsequently into the Symbolic, with its ordering of language and sublimation of desire.

In the context of the psychoanalytic context of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, we treat the oral culture as the Real state, whereby humans communicate orally through narrative. This parallelism is made both synchronically, whereby orality and writing and the mediation between the two occur alongside each other, and diachronically as well, where these modes occupy successive hierarchical spaces. Oral communication, which Ong refers to as primary orality, is the ‘original’ mode of human communication using perceived symbolic codes of presentation centred around issuance of sound. Siertsema, cited in Ong (2002) holds that ‘wherever human beings exist they have a language and in every instance a language that exists basically as spoken and heard, in the world of sound’ (38). The oral state which is the first in the communicative hierarchy and which permeates all human societies is a universal state which attains to all humans by virtue of

community and association in a specific linguistic community. As the primordial linguistic communicative mode, it is characterized by a completeness by all subjects who are able to articulate self and environment using the correct codes of representation. Further, it is not polluted by alternative modes of verbal communication and all participants are inherently at rest in oral expression. Orality is therefore treated here as a perfect and complete state of knowledge transfers and sharing.

The advent of writing is likened to the Imaginary state, also known as the mirror image where the written word is a reflection of the spoken word. Typical of a mirrored image, the written word is not a faithful reproduction or representation of the spoken, but a distortion through expansion, exemplification, and elaborations. In the Lacanian context, this is the emergent of 'I', distinct and differentiated from the Other (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004). The print text can arguably be termed as an assertive 'I' in the communication process by its state of permanence that the oral speech in its original form lacks. Further, the written text is associated with the acquisition of additional and elitist capabilities by the reader, that are in conflict with the oral self, even as the latter still demands the supreme position. Written novels, accessed by the solitary process of reading, recognize the existence of the Other – the author and the narrative voice – in the communication process as both media and message. The state of the Imaginary is characterized by an instability that can be illustrated by the ambiguity of the print text. By its 'permanent' and 'fixed' state, it claims stability, but its subjectivity to multiple interpretations lends it a fluidity that negates fixedness. For our purpose, we will also attribute the instability of the print text as enhanced by the absence of a vocal exigency in the communicative process.

The Symbolic state is paralleled to the electronic age that mediates between the oral and print worlds in the communication of the narrative, but which exhibits nostalgic tendencies of a return to the Real, the 'original'. The insertion of a narrator who provides a voice in the audio-novel accentuates the human agency in the communication process. Like Lacan's Symbolic, the audio-novel narrator is a bridge between primary oral narration and reading of the narrative. The presentation of the written narrative by an oral narrator is both an expression of the desire for primary orality and an acclamation of the redundancy of a faithful return to the same: The sublimation of this desire into a mediated orality that does not do away with the written text, but modifies its access by the audience.

The audiobook narrator simulates an absent oral narrator, who, using the prosodic qualities of sound, amend the audience's access to the narrative. This is not a mere re-introduction of the oral narrator into the narrative space, but a transformation of the written text into a quasi-oral narrative. This supports the affinity for listening to the narrative over reading the narrative. The audiobook, through the listening mode of access, is a return to the uncanny familiarity of oral presentations that seem to have both universal and basic human appeal. The act of listening is central to the primarily or purely oral world or culture. It is the linguistic narrative mode that cannot be retrieved after the indelible disruption by writing. Writing, the orthographic representation of the spoken word, is removed from the immediacy of man-to-man communication and therefore occupies a secondary level in meaning-making.

In making a case for narratives, Ripley (2011) calls them 'the foundation of knowledge and knowledge transfer.' This makes the access to the narrative an important element as it would determine its reception and processing. It is imperative to propose that the rise of the audio-novel is a statement of the desire to re-enact the 'original' state of orality, but the disruption of writing

cannot be wished away. Hence, the essentiality of a technologically-mediated space to foster a 'new orality'.

## CONCLUSION

Technological developments augment human needs in diverse areas including community. This study notes that the narrative space is still key in informing human interactions through knowledge sharing and transfer. As such, access to the narrative is an important element of scrutiny in an effort to understand the motivations behind choices of access, conscious or unconscious.

The study also underscores the primacy of orality in accessing the narrative, as well as the importance of the oral narrator as a vital connection to the narrative for the naratee. In the traditional performance of the oral narrative, the co-occupation of the narrative space by the performer and audience increases aspects of community-building and the immediacy of access to the narrative by the audience. This enhances the profile of the narrative in sharing experiences and creating communities. The study further notes that the advent of writing has alienated the agency of the vocal narrator in the experience sharing process. As such, the reading act presents an absence of a specific perceptually tangible narrative agency who is vital in the process of community-building. Instead, reading replaces this agency with the imaginary simulation of the same in the audiences' mind.

The study further opines that the development and increased interest in the audio-novel is an attempt to re-assert the oral narrator into the narrative space to bridge the gap created by the solitary act of reading. The aim is inherently to revitalize the community-building aspect of the narrative performance. Although listening to the audio-novel brings back the oral narrator into the narrative space as the other, a relationally recognizable entity, the narrated text remains novel in structure and does not transform into the shorter oral narrative. This means that the re-assertion of the oral narrator does not turn the written text into an oral text in the traditional sense, but reconfigures it through a secondary orality, where the narrator lends his voice to the author and the narrative voice. This resembles a return to the uncannily familiar primary orality in storytelling. This attribute of the audiobook now presents a one-dimensional third interpreter into the reception of the text in a simulacrum that presents an ecclesiastical return to orality.

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