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[See table of contents](#)

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A-Literacy and Digital Orality: A Figure/Ground Relation for Our Digital Dilemma

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The meaning of any "figure," whether it is a technology, an institution, a communication event, a text, or a body of ideas, cannot be determined if that figure is considered in isolation from the ground or environment in which it operates. The ground provides the context from which the full meaning or significance of a figure emerges.

Robert K. Logan, 2016, p. 372

The electri-fried planet sends a jolt through our nerves. We are livid with input and output.

B.W. Powe, "Noise of Time"

Through the unknown, we'll find the *new*.

Charles Baudelaire and Robert Lowell, "The Voyage", 1963

Due to dominance, electronic media bears transformative potentialities. "Literacy and the book", Elena Lamberti (2012) writes, "are literate *figures* which must adjust to a clear sensorial and environmental change, to a different *ground*" (p.61). Eric and Marshall McLuhan (1988) note: "the west now bathes in the emotions of post-literacy" (p.4). McLuhan and McLuhan deem post-literacy to be a condition enveloping our experience. A condition brought about through technological advancements jolting, shaping and altering our environment, our sensibilities and our nervous systems. According to B.W Powe (1987), a former student of McLuhan and prominent McLuhan Scholar (yet a self-proclaimed poet first, then scholar), post-literacy is "the condition of semi-literacy, where most people can read and write to some extent, but where a literate sensibility no longer occupies a central position in culture, society, and politics."

(p.15). "Post-literacy occurs", according to Powe (1987), "when the ability to comprehend the word decays" (p.15). Occupying a dominant position, occupying our ground: electric light and digital technology. Print technology is no longer ground. Print media no longer facilitates information and knowledge. Therefore, our literary ages' prior established ideological, historical, and socio-political notions no longer hold dominant positions. The power of these notions is in decay. Post-literacy is a condition limiting understanding to the figures of association that are readily available instead of the vast accumulation of literary, historical, and critical precedents. Granted, reading and writing are still a vital part of education and our culture: printed literary texts no longer ground our society's content or consumptive patterns – literacy and literary culture become figures (figures of content) instead of ground.

However, the prefix 'post' does imply that our culture has moved on from literacy and reading. "[Qualifying] the verb," the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) defines the prefix "post-" as "referring to time or order... with the sense 'afterwards, after, subsequently'". In a recent email correspondence between Powe and myself, he revealed, "Now I would use the term a-literacy". Noting, with Blake-like vision and his own (one-of-a-kind) delicate prowess:

Some writers unfold from a single point and source, fine-tuning what they say over periods. Some move by stops starts sudden shifts illuminations abrupt breakdown-breakouts. I'm of the latter. I abandon positions. When they don't serve... I'm still exploring.

We have reached a frontier when contemplating our current state. Powe's definition, and post-literacy as a demarcating term, implies that literacy was stable, available to all, and collective -- this begs a bevy of questions. When were we all literate? What quantity of literacy makes a

collective literate? Did we "move on" from literacy? Additionally, is the ability to comprehend the word decaying, or is the English language transforming along with our environment and senses? Or is the ability to comprehend words and concepts decaying while language transforms? A-literacy allows recognition of our transformations without heavy-handed assumptions and potential misreadings bound to the term post-literacy.

"Electric speed", McLuhan ([1964] 2017) writes, "mingles... the nonliterate with the semiliterate and the postliterate" (p. 29), yet such mingling implies a different condition of literacy – a condition of a-literacy. In the words of Michael Gorman (2003), a-literate people are people who "read what they must and write, if at all, using debased forms such as 'text messaging'" (p. 41). A-literate people can read and write well enough. However, these individuals avoid reading and writing as much as possible and do not use typical media (books, newspapers, pens, and typewriters). Reading and writing are now a matter of if/when necessary. "This is due to the rise", Daniel Keller (2014) argues,

of a culture of acceleration, a gathering of social, educational, economic, and technological forces that reinforce values of speed, efficiency, and change. Literacies are bound up in and tied to these forces, so as these forces influence cultural changes, literacies change with them. (p. 7).

Our central nervous system is jolted into hyper-speed, accelerated, and forced to keep up. Reading and writing, a relatively slow and meticulous process, is severely affected and altered. "We live in a culture", Keller (2014) writes, "that urges and thrives on speed and efficiency" (p.69). Goals in our a-literate condition are communicative and informative, bound to notions of results and productivity – not nuance and acuity. We aim to achieve goals as fast as possible (Keller,

2014, p.8). Whether the goal is to communicate or consume a message, brevity is of utmost priority – often prioritized over understanding and comprehension. This means that, for instance, standard language models and structures are not always of use. Furthermore, such communication is often mediated digitally via text messaging and digital platforms; thus, we must consider the role each medium has in enacting such changes. Shifting from post-literacy to a-literacy signals and outlines our electronic, and now digital, metamorphosis aptly.

Various contemporary scholars are also exploring Digital Orality to elucidate communication changes and our environmental metamorphosis. Digital orality is an alteration, a modification, an extension of Walter J. Ong's conceptualizations of orality. "I would suggest", Ong (1971) theorizes:

that we speak of the orality of preliterate [people] as primary orality and of the orality of our electronic technologized culture as secondary orality. Secondary orality is founded on - though it departs from - the individualized introversion of the age of writing, print, and rationalism which intervened between it and primary orality and which remains as part of us. (p. 285).

Ong's paradoxical paradigmatic thwarting of visual primacy for oral primacy, regarding writing and reading, is the basis of Digital Orality's conceptualization. "The electronic transformation of verbal expression", Ong ([1982] 2002) later writes,

has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality... This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering

of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment and even its use of formulas (p.133-134).

Electronic media not only changes communication styles, patterns and outlets but also fosters alterations of our sensory organization and consciousness. Electronic media also retrieves communal sense and distorts time and place by allowing communication to occur across borders of space and time. However, the qualifiers Ong employs ("primary" and secondary") imply a sense of multiplicity and order. "Primary orality" implies there are multiple oralities. "Secondary orality" implies a sense of order. Granted, according to Ong's conceptualizations, "secondary orality" occurs historically after "primary orality"; the term "secondary orality" implies a sense of linearity. "Secondary Orality implies there is a "first" type of orality which came first (a first type that may or may not have anything to do with "primary orality"), and there is no need for more historicity, more linear confusion in this coup. "History", through secondary orality, as Ong (1971) himself notes, "is deposited permanently, but not inalterably, as personality structure" (p. 285). Digital Orality, however, does no such thing. Digital Orality is not historically localizable but, instead, is technologically oriented. Digital Orality simultaneously acknowledges our newly digital environment, the devices and apparatuses of use, and these devices' orality.

Robert K. Logan (2016) delineates, "Digital orality is the orality of emails, blog posts, listservs, text messaging, which are mediated paradoxically by written text transmitted by the Internet" (p. 123). Digital orality's mediation is paradoxical for four main reasons. One, emails and text messages create messages from physical keyboards and keyboard software, not pens and pencils – meaning, for the record, I am currently typing, not writing. Two, "written text transmitted

by the Internet" (p.123) is computer code transmitted into letters and words; therefore, to refer to the letters and words formed on a screen as "written text" is paradoxical. Here, Logan hints at the often-disregarded paradox of our Digital Orality: that which is transmitted and mediated by the internet is mediated and transmitted via computer code and algorithms. Three and most notable is the paradox of Digital Orality's orality. Meaning Ong's (1971) claim of the computer being "essentially a visual device" (p. 296) must be reconsidered, not solely because computers make noise or because we often read words off computer screens (especially now), but because "electric technology has meant" in the words of McLuhan(1967), "a considerable drop in the visual component...and a corresponding increase in the activity of [our] other senses." (p.125). Our sensory ratios are altered. Tactility increases along with orality, and tactility registers closer to orality than visuality. Computer screens, like television screens, to repurpose an insight of McLuhan's (1967), involves "images [that] are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point." (p. 125). Electronic screens are more tactile than visual; tactility is immersive like sound, whereas visuality is not immersive. Visuality provides recognition. Through tactility, absorption occurs. Fourth and finally, as any well-versed McLuhan scholar should be aware, media mediation is merely an extension of ourselves and our bodily operations. That is, our mediation, and by extension, orality, is a contradiction: a function of external media internalized, and therefore, not only does Digital Orality change our environment but also our consciousness – where does digital media end and our consciousness begin?

Granted, Digital Orality is a corollary, an advancement, occurring amidst digital culture's proliferation and a-literate conditioning; yet, "Digital orality", Robert K. Logan (2016) succinctly notes, "is in fact a superposition of both literacy and orality" (p. 123). According to the *Oxford*

English Dictionary (2023), superposition is a scientific term: "The action of causing two or more sets of physical phenomena (e.g. waves, colours, or motions) to coincide, or coexist in the same place; the fact or an instance of such coexistence." Regarding literacy and orality: a proliferation of digital technologies and a lack of print-based media consumption [a rise in experiences mediated by (and through) electronic light (on algorithmically controlled digital media) and a significant decrease of experiences occurring in acoustic space] are the phenomena coinciding that enact our ground of Digital Orality. There is further mediation than experiences mediated by a printed page or television screen— indeed, this is a new frontier for humanity. Literacy and orality existing in a superposition problematize our relations with current notions of literacy, orality, and orality's relation to literacy. Only a fraction of Digital Orality is experienced amidst digital technology. The effects reverberate through all our experiences and actions, regardless of medium. This probe proceeds by outlining a-literacy and digital orality in a figure/ground relationship -- diagnosing current conditions.

According to Gorman (2003), "the masses [are] rendered soporific by infotainment and mindless diversions" (p. 117). Amidst a-literate conditioning, goals are not narratological or critical. Communicatory and informative media, in the words of McLuhan ([1964] 2017), are "the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry." (p. 89-90). Series of serialized illusions, reflections and gimmickry, creating a sense of societal somnambulism: narcissistic consumptions and productions are of utmost priority. We solely desire to consume and reproduce ideas of ourselves in the form of human-interest stories, gossip, and so on – voiding criticism and reading in depth. To an extent, refracting one of McLuhan's ([1964] 2017) well-established notions, a-literacy, puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as

servomechanisms. (p. 68). A-literacy enables narcissistic consumption patterns and furthers numbness to content that does not reproduce images of ourselves. We serve the medium's tenants. It enables our dismissive responses and our desires for speed and efficiency. The medium even "responds" dismissively to that which does not tickle narcissistic desires and structures. Content is not easily or quickly spread if a post does not use a particular hashtag. Or if a thought is too long, it cannot be on *X* – formally known as *Twitter*. Our a-literate conditioning conditions society to be fickle about what is worthy of reading (worthy of consuming our time) and what is worthy of approaching critically; it is not that we are collectively "past" reading – we often simply choose every option but reading before having to read, especially if we are referring to reading physical books.

The difference between a-literacy and post-literacy is fourfold. Firstly, as mentioned prior, 'post-literacy' temporally binds environments. The term post-literacy suggests sequential containment; even though McLuhan does not subscribe to notions of containment, the phrase still implies containment. McLuhan (1970) probes: "ENVIRONMENT IS PROCESS, NOT CONTAINER". Offering a process of intangible continuum negates signposting and demarcations of then and now, ultimately resulting in countless attempts to localize, locate, and place. Meaning: futile attempts at linearity need not apply here. Secondly, the term a-literacy recognizes media's pervasive hold on users. A-literacy registers a user's choice to read and write or not to read and write, which medium is of use, if reading and writing occur, and the extent of what is read. Speed and time enter the fray. According to Keller (2012), "speed has become a defining feature of contemporary literacy" (p. 69). Our inputs and outputs enter the equation of what is deemed necessary, possible, and available based on time constraints, efficiency desires, and enabled desires for brevity—a craving for brevity resulting from our overwhelming and overstimulating

habits and habitat. Often, users decide to scan content. Users scan for pertinence and importance or to gather a sense of a message without reading its entirety. The totality of a message is not deemed necessary or worthy of the time required – intonations, narrative, and style are disregarded for the information provided amongst time constraints. The need to read and write is secondary – output is prioritized and of utmost importance.

These days, each user's choice to read and/or write is even more complicated, as is their role in the process; Artificial Intelligence (AI) software can now edit and generate everything from fiction to emails to essays. A user does not need to read an email to respond. A *GrammarlyGO* browser extension, for example, will synthesize content and respond on behalf of each user. Users decide on style and whether to respond affirmatively, decline, clarify, and so on. *GrammarlyGO* is a new addition to *Grammarly* – a downloadable software and browser extension allowing users' writing to be checked for grammar mistakes and promptly corrected. *Grammarly* also provides suggestions that can be adjusted based on the "goals" of each user. Formality, Audience, Intent and Domain can all be adjusted based on the user's intentions for whatever is written. Domain includes: academic, business, general, email, casual or creative. Intent includes: inform, describe, convince, or tell a story. Audience includes: general, knowledgeable, or expert. Formality includes: informal, neutral, and formal. These four categories tailor the potential suggestions *Grammarly* provides. Each user's writing is then scored based on correctness, clarity, engagement, delivery, and style guide. No longer is a user required to think through what was written or know the differences between writing styles and formalities. *Grammarly* will provide conclusions and opinions for each user. *Grammarly* provides an assessment of tone. *Grammarly* will “detect” if a work reads formally or informally, cooperatively, humorously, and/or informatively. No longer is a user required to judge or assess what is being written. It is an

option. Literacy is still necessary to an extent. However, literary sensibilities are unnecessary. The software is the arbiter of sense and sensibility. All that is required of each user is content.

Using *GrammarlyGO*, the users' role is diminished even further. *GrammarlyGO* can generate and regenerate a collection of text for each user. This software and browser extension will make changes based on the user's choice of "voice". Under "my voice," each user specifies their profession and desired tone, language, and level of formality. *GrammarlyGO* then regenerates what is written based on the user's desired "voice". But whose "voice" is it, *GrammarlyGO*'s or the users? *GrammarlyGO* will also generate text for the user. Users provide a topic, a prompt, and *GrammarlyGO* generates text. The tone and formality are at the user's discretion, and that is about it. Tones include personable, confident, witty, direct, engaging, and empathetic. Users can have an email generated with a click. *GrammarlyGO* voids the user's authorial function, literally. The medium is (actually) the author. Thirdly, a-literacy positions literacy and literary sensibilities to be a figure. Amongst electronic circuitry, a literary sensibility is an option: content from the preceding environment. Software, such as *GrammarlyGo*, raises the question of authorship and exemplifies literary sensibilities' optionability – or, to use "actual" words, tenability and necessity. A-literacy challenges the need for users to read and write, whereas post-literacy suggests reading and writing are unnecessary; a-literacy recognizes the medium's newfound role in the reading and writing process.

The literary sensibility now exists entangled: a function (of use) amongst figures that bear no semblance to literariness. Grammatical errors are relative when conditioned amidst a-literacy – these errors can be fixed automatically or disregarded. Sometimes, errors are intentional -- for effect. Slang, abbreviations, and acronyms, especially when debased media such as text

messaging, email, and chat communities (like *Discord*), are now common and proliferating profusely. Fourth and finally, a-literacy recognizes our awareness and knowledge of media processes and our choice not to read through the content of our potential knowledge. That is, our understanding of (our literacy of) our environmental conditioning and programming. We choose when to be literate. A medium can now read and respond for each user or, at the bare minimum, condition each response and void our media literacy. Our knowledge of, for example, laugh tracks during sitcoms or specific posts appearing on social media feeds because of prior searches, prior likes, prior word choices or our constant surveillance and data-mining does not matter. Despite our knowledge of the laugh track being a synthetic reproduction, we may still laugh along. Regarding what is algorithmically presented to each user, we may still feel an innate connection even though we know there is no personal connection. Awareness and literacy of such conditionings do not necessarily enter our thought processes when watching, reading, writing, and consuming. Many users do not recognize or apply literacy. A sense of somnambulism is induced. Societal somnambulism renders our choices to read, to write or to think. A matter of power and media influence. "This power, reinforced and repeated by electronic media," Powe ("Noise of Time") comments, "could inflame souls, trigger automatic acts, incite screams of pain, numb us by the sheer number of things we have to absorb". A matter of mass hypnosis, not determinism. It is a matter of brains on the verge of frying like overheated computers. Or worse, a matter of battered chicken and battered fish frying simultaneously in a deep fryer, submerged in oil that needs to be changed – how is your cholesterol? That is, media, as well as production and consumption patterns and necessities, overwhelm each user into embracing processes of a-literacy and producing content of an a-literate variety. Our media environment is overstimulating. A semantic shift from post-literacy to a-literacy is pivotal for McLuhan scholars' assessment of our ever-changing electronic conditions and procedures, for understanding communication amongst digital electronic circuitry, and for considering what

currently constitutes language and communication – in our now ever-expanding digital dilemma. To repurpose a quote from Jean Baudrillard (2010):

there is here the principle of a genuine event, of those singular events that challenge globalization (hegemony) at a stroke -- seizing that power at the high point of its *mise en scene*, 'the better to wring its neck', as Rimbaud (who accomplishes this terrorist act in the field of poetry) would have said. At a single stroke, all the signs are reversed...not through some decision or calculation, nor even by objective chance...the event, for its part, wasn't free not to occur...We may view the scenario in the following way...a metaphysical scandal erupts -- something that no longer plays the game, that no longer conforms to the principle of Sufficient Reason. (p. 79-80)

Here, Baudrillard refers to a scandal occurring during the 2006 FIFA World Cup of Soccer. He is referring to Zinedine Zidane headbutting Italian defender Marco Materazzi during extra time in the World Cup final. An action challenging Baruch Spinoza's initializing concept of reason, a concept later furthered by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who coined the term "Sufficient Reason". Spinoza, and by extension, Leibniz, believes "everything must have a reason, cause, or ground," the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* summarizes, "a sufficient reason would be a proof that is both a demonstration – a set of premises and a conclusion such that the former necessitate the latter – and a causal explanation – a statement of the causal antecedents of some truth or event". Zidane's headbutt was a viral moment challenging Sufficient Reason. An act jeopardizing his team's winning potential. An act outside the rules and etiquette of the sport. An act outside

of the usual actions that occur outside the rules of soccer -- this was not a trip, kick, shove, or aggressive slide tackle. He headbutted another player in the chest. Regardless of the rumours considering Materazzi's potential comments, the audience never heard what could have been said between the two, and no corroboration of sources and journalists agree upon what could have possibly incited Zidane's action. There is no viable explanation, premise, or necessity to explain his action. Granted, comparing Zidane's headbutt (event) to advents in electronic and now digital technologies creates a false parallel. However, I demonstrate the disregard for sufficient reason in our digital dilemma by using Baudrillard's synthesis, which references an event that bears no ground to my topic and, yet, is all too typical of our current habitat. Repurposing Baudrillard's quip enhances our understanding of the powerful reversals occurring as digital culture and orality embeds further. "Indeed, the verbalization of sound in the electronic media environment reinstates an even more powerful version of the oral-aural condition based on the communication event," Paolo Granata (2021), synthesizing Ong's conceptualizations of orality, writes, "the word-event... the new orality of the electronic media and their reliance on the aural sphere revive the ritual dimension of communication, that which is experienced collectively through interaction, sharing and exchange." (p.91).

Orality, reading and writing, Ong ([1982] 2002), referencing Saussure, notes are: "complementary" – writing is not the "basic form of language"; oral speech "underpins" all verbal communication, including that which is textually written. (para.1). Not only did oral speech exist before writing, but speech and verbalization "underpin" what is read – cognition is a register of orality, not the written word. A register of speech, adhering to a code of carefully designed symbols. "What the reader is seeing on this page", Ong ([1982] 2002) assures:

are not real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words in actual or imagined sound. It is impossible for script to be more than marks on a surface unless it is used by a conscious human being as a cue to sounded words, real or imagined, directly or indirectly. (p. 74).

Reading is a process of a code of marks designated to be symbols cueing sounds that, when assembled in specific ways by an individual educated in the code of marks assigned to be particular symbols, become “words”. “Oral formulaic thought and expression”, Ong concludes, “ride deep in the consciousness and the unconsciousness, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand.” (p.26). Meaning: the act of writing contains aspects of orality. Reading is also an oral act; Ong ([1982] 2002) surmises, that “reading a text oralizes it” (p.172). Therefore, yes, to use the words of William Burroughs (1986), “words are still the principal instrument of control” (p. 143). Seeping into our unconscious, words emit and execute control. Here, Burroughs distinguishes the limitations of each user's use of each word and the limitations of words while still recognizing the word's principality in control over the users' use and the primacy of orality. Keyword: instrument. Not tool. Not notes on a score or music sheet; Burroughs references the medium that produces each sound, not the language being read or the visuality of the written word. “Writing”, however, Ong ([1982] 2002) notes, “is an even more deeply interiorized technology than instrumental musical performance is.” (p. 82). Instruments are technological extensions of our mouths and hands. Writing and speech, especially speech, make instruments of our mouths and hands. Writing emerges from orality and “is permanently and ineluctably grounded” through orality (Ong [1982] 2002, p.76). In other words: words are figures, and language is ground.

"Thought", however, Ong ([1982] 2002) explains, "is nested in speech, not in texts, all of which have their meanings through reference of the visible through the world of sound" (p. 74). Meaning: linguistic signs are a figure to the sounds of each letter arranged. Sound is our ground. Orality precedes the written word and is the mediator of literacy. Regarding our current digital dilemma, the paradox of orality is only furthered. Not all thought is nested in speech. "Digital orality is written", Logan (2016) notes, "with the semantics and syntax characteristic of digital culture" (p. 124). That is, while words are still an instrument of control for users, our digital culture is not strictly bound to linguistic cadences and structures, nor is our digital culture bound to words -- the principality of signifier/signified relations is questionable. By extension, our systems of control may be being rearranged. Our thoughts, functioning through words and languages, are adopting new methods of signifying, new codes and symbols that move beyond Saussure's "view that writing simply represents spoken language in visible form" (Ong [1982] 2002, p. 17) and beyond "the 'secondary orality'...sustained by telephone, radio television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (Ong, [1982] 2002, p.11). "Written words", Ong continues, "are residue" (p.11). Yet, regardless of the remnants of written words, words are now being mediated through digital algorithmic registers sustained via computers and smartphones. Our thought patterns and, by extension, our orality are under intense transformation. Digital Orality is metamorphosizing our thought processes and structures of thought.

Powe (1987) asks, "[w]hat happens to thinking, resistance, and dissent when the ground becomes wordless, electric and musical? (p. 15). In other words, what happens to thinking now that our ground has reached a flip point? In a probe, Andrey Mir and Logan (2023) deem Digital Orality enhances access, obsolesces detachment, retrieves immersion and flips into addiction.

Now that our ground is immersive, even more tactile, even more auditory, and even more narcotizing, where do we go? Over thirty years after *The Solitary Outlaw's* publication, this question, this provocation, is even more relevant today. And the answer is a series of reversals. Thinking, resistance and dissent reverse from the Principle of Sufficient Reason. A principle created when a print-based society was our ground cannot hold in our Digitally Oral ground. Amidst our electronic and now digital interfacing, thinking is fragmented, resistance is randomized, and dissent occurs in the form of terror. "Terror", McLuhan (1967) deems, "is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time". By using this Baudrillard quote, I enact simultaneity and void Sufficient Reason. I terrorize Sufficient Reason to enhance our understanding of the reversal occurring through digital algorithmic media. We are terrorized by information, blasted and bombarded by lights and sounds and information. Critical thinking is exhausting, and nuance can be a nuisance. In our current conditioning, Sufficient Reason flips into a semblance of randomized simultaneity.

I use the word "semblance" because there is no objective chance or actual randomness – we are directed algorithmically through our affect. There is merely the outward appearance and sensation of chance and randomness. *Grammarly* and *GrammarlyGO*, for example, are algorithmically directing content: terrorizing our understanding of authorial functioning and terrorizing our capacity to sufficiently reason, let alone think—AI reasons and thinks and directs feelings for each user. Therefore, although I am elucidating my point via an example without contextual relevance, a semblance of communicable understanding is still somehow recognizable. "It is in relation", Granata (2021) succulently surmises, "that communication occurs." (p. 91). There is no direct correlation or connection between *Grammarly* and Zidane's

headbutt – I impose a relation, a register of resonance. A resonance registers¹ cognitively and is embodied through ‘vibrations’ and affective reverberations. Resonance²: as resonance is defined linguistically³, like sound and music⁴, thus also as resonance is defined regarding Physics⁵, like electrical engineering⁶ and Mechanical Engineering⁷ and, by extension, even like Biochemistry⁸ -- I use the word resonance through all these definitions simultaneously and interstitially. Resonance registers (is achieved), partly because sufficient reason is not required when making a metaphorical analogy, partly because of my a-literate and digital oral conditioning, and partly because “our new sensitivity to the media has brought with it a growing sense of the word as word, which is to say of the word as sound.” (Ong 1971, p.18). To repurpose Ong (1971) for our current environment, he continues, “our understanding of the word as sound is often more felt than articulated, or more implied than explained. (p.18)

¹ *Grove Music Online* (2001) defines a register as: “A part of the Range of an instrument, singing voice or composition.”

² The *World Encyclopedia* (2014) defines resonance as: “Increase in the amplitude of vibration of a mechanical or acoustic system when forced to vibrate by an external source. It occurs when the frequency of the applied force is equal to the natural vibrational frequency of the system. Large vibrations can cause damage to the system.”

³ The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* (2014) defines resonance as: “The physical effect in which a vibrating body, e.g. the body of air within the vocal tract, selectively reinforces or prolongs a sound produced by the vibration of another, e.g. of the vocal cords. Thus resonants are speech sounds, or one kind of speech sound, in which the vocal tract above the larynx acts solely as a resonating chamber.”

⁴ The *Oxford Dictionary of Music* (2013) defines resonance as: “Sympathetic vibration of bodies capable of producing sounds as soon as a pitch similar to that of the body or one of its overtones is heard.”

⁵ A *Dictionary of Physics* (2019) defines resonance as “An oscillation of a system at its natural frequency of vibration, as determined by the physical parameters of the system. It has the characteristic that large amplitude vibrations will ultimately result from low-power driving of the system. Resonance can occur in atoms and molecules, mechanical systems, and electrical circuits.”

⁶ A *Dictionary of Electronics and Electrical Engineering* (2018) defines resonance as: “A condition existing when an oscillatory circuit responds with maximum amplitude to a periodic driving force so that a relatively small amplitude of the driving force produces a large amplitude of oscillation. Resonance is achieved when the frequency of the driving force coincides with the natural undamped frequency of the oscillatory system.”

⁷ A *Dictionary of Mechanical Engineering* (2019) defines resonance as: “In a mechanical, acoustic, or electrical system, the circumstance when a forcing frequency coincides with one of the system’s natural frequencies, leading to a peak in the amplitude (theoretically infinite without damping) of oscillation. A resonant frequency (critical frequency, resonance frequency) is any frequency at which resonance occurs.”

⁸ The *Oxford Dictionary of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology* (2008) defines resonance as: “In a mechanical, acoustic, or electrical system, the circumstance when a forcing frequency coincides with one of the system’s natural frequencies, leading to a peak in the amplitude (theoretically infinite without damping) of oscillation. A resonant frequency (critical frequency, resonance frequency) is any frequency at which resonance occurs.”

"It is the ability", Granata (2021) notes, "to create or simulate a relational environment of inherence, contact, and proximity that leads the oral communication forms to promote new thought models." (p. 91-92). Though I do acknowledge that you, my dear reader, you may not be a-literate, you may be literate and unable to explain what is happening here. Hence, my use of the pronoun "we" throughout this probe is not a valorization of the universal "we" so often promulgated but a separation of those conditioned and born through a-literate conditionings and those who are not. Regardless of your conditioning or positioning, however, the point remains: digital media constitutes a critical reversal of power dynamics. "Electronic media", Elena Lamberti (2012) writes, "retrieve both the alphabet and the printed word and include them in the newly convergent *post-secondary orality*: this is, in fact, our new evolving ground" (p. 64). Literacy is a figure retrieved in an oral ground. However, our digital interfacing challenges our hegemonic structures and our senses even further than initial initializations of electronic media, and while electric light and digital interfacing constitute events, events causing drastic changes, there is no set of premises or necessitation of such changes in power dynamics, especially when regarding our digital interfacing and our emerging ground of Digital Orality.

Cecelia Cutler et. al.(2022) define Digital Orality to be:

any form of communication that exists on a digital platform (spoken, written, or multimodal)...digitally mediated, typed communication that bears traces and features of spoken, interpersonal, and/or face-to-face conversation...Digital writers may also attempt to replicate the informal, prosodic, and embodied aspects of face-to-face, spoken interaction...In sum, by digital orality, we mean a unique style of writing that is used in digital spaces and which mimics oral,

face-to-face communication across a range of linguistic and extralinguistic dimensions (p. 11-12).

Cutler et al., however, limit Digital Orality to "digitally mediated" content. Yes, this style of writing and communicating is predominantly "used in digital spaces", yet our digital environment's effect on our existence is unignorable. The impact of Digital Orality does not exist in a vacuum of prior technological advances. It is not merely a new communication style but a new frontier. The "traces and features of spoken, interpersonal, and/or face-to-face conversation" do not serve as precedents – this comparison bears little to no fruit or vegetables. McLuhan (2003) proclaims, "EACH NEW TECHNOLOGY IS A REPROGRAMMING OF SENSORY LIFE." (p.162-163). Referring to "digital writers" and "any form of communication that exists on a digital platform"(Cutler p.11) as the only space to not only witness and perceive digital orality but also the only space where productions of digital orality occur fails to recognize drastic changes happening to our sensibilities while these modes and media become our ground, fails to acknowledge our need for speed. Furthermore, such containment, such spatial poetics, fail to recognize and open dialogue for considering the effects of Digital Orality to be our environmental ground—a ground changing our societal literacy, enabling a-literacy, and changing the content of our being. "Environments are not just containers", McLuhan (2003) insists, "but are processes that change the content totally." (p. 304-305).

In other words, Digital Orality, Oren Soffer (2012) correctly concludes: "challenge[s] the existence and survival of rigid, binary linguistic structures: the intentional deviation from standard writing forms can be seen as an erosion of the relationship between signifier and signified." (p. 1106). Signifiers and signified become figures bound to a-literate conditioning. No longer the ground of communication, signifier relations and literacy become malleable. Digital Orality,

Soffer (2012) continues, "ostensibly reflects the melting processes of linguistic structures, resembling the changes to other social structures in the late modern era." (p. 1106). Becoming a structure structured at the whim of our electronic environment, at the control of our technological advancements, a figure of our ever more increasingly digital interfacing. Signifier and signified are no longer bound to Sufficient Reason, let alone Saussurian concepts. When "ZZZZZZ" means sleeping or snoring, there is no Saussurian connection but an oral connection that vaguely mimics the sound of snoring but does not have any connection to the act of sleeping or the signifiers "sleep" or "snore". Saussurian signification is further voided through digital platforms if slang and short forms are of use.

For example, "nun" and "ab" connote words bound to linguistic understanding but not Saussurian semiotics. According to *UrbanDictionary*, "ab" is short for "about," and "nun" is slang for "none". A user who uses these -- let us call these configurations of letters "words". A user who uses these "words" understands spelling and is aware proper spelling exists -- whether their spelling skills are good or not is irrelevant. However, the user is not using what their education has taught about literacy. We have exchanged Saussurian semiotics and, by extension, our sense of literacy for a new structure of linguistic utterances. Each user uses a sense of literacy adopted from their interactions with digital communication that enables and is in sync with our a-literate conditioning. Upon reading, each reader is expected to think and hear "about," not "ab". Upon reading the word "nun", each reader is expected to think and hear "none," as in nothing, not "nun," -- like what Hamlet scornfully recommends Ophelia become (Shakespeare, 1599/2008,3.1.121). Sufficient Reason annexes from communication practices for a new set of linguistic utterances and a new grammar, bearing ground to digital communication and seeping

into our content and sensory programming. Digital Orality is more than a style or form of communication bound to Digital platforms – it is our environmental ground.

"Digital orality", Logan (2016) notes, is "...the unspoken form of orality." (p. 123). Digital Orality is the "unspoken form of orality" not because of Soffer's (2010) conclusions in "'Silent Orality': Toward a Conceptualization of the Digital Oral Features in CMC and SMS Texts". Soffer (2010) concludes: "Digital orality [is] manifested silently and mainly through interpersonal digital communication...Digital texts are not intended to be voiced: They are read silently." (p.400). User intention is irrelevant here. Once again, to repeat Ong ([1982] 2002), one more time: "reading a text oralizes it" (p.172). Whether read aloud or silently, when reading, orality ensues – internally and/or externally. External verbalization is not necessary for verbalization to occur. Digital Orality is "unspoken", however, because it produces content, signs and signifiers unbound to Saussurian signifier/signified relations without the requirement of verbalization.

Emoticons, or emojis, exemplify this point thoroughly. Emojis are unbound to Saussure's concept of signifier/signified. These are signs, in the form of images, producing thoughts and reactions unnested in speech and yet still a register of orality -- functioning in a register between. Sadness, embarrassment, happiness, tears, and laughter are not necessarily expressed or verbalized and yet internalized. This register between speech, affect, and orality is not exclusive to emojis connoting reactions. For example, as a response to "What are you in the mood to eat tonight?" a user could send a hamburger or sushi emoji, and the receiver may not necessarily register the word being signified by an emoji when seeing said emoji. You may think variations of yum, or yuck, or yes or no, or you may shake or nod your head. Or your eyes might light up at the sight of a hamburger, or your stomach may growl if your appetite is that famished. Still, you may not necessarily verbalize the word signifying the connoted image; you may find yourself voiding the

signifier (in this case, sushi or a hamburger), internally registering a resonance and responding without verbalizing said emoji. The fire emoji is an example of a sign voiding the signifier and sufficient reason while inducing a register of resonance; upon seeing the image, readers do not register the word “fire” or “blaze” -- truncating the verbal signification of the actual emoji. Signification is left unspoken, without thought. Ironically enough, the fire emoji is often used to express anything but an actual fire. Usually, the fire emoji represents a positive reaction – thus voiding sufficient reason. Digital Orality is unspoken because it bears the potential to void signifiers and, instead, trigger sensations and responses between the faculties of our sensorium and beyond rigid signifier significations and often sufficient reason.

When using *GrammarlyGO*, emojis are prevalent throughout, unbound to Saussurian signification and unspoken; for example, beside each tone detected is an emoji. To the left of the word formal is the image of a fully buttoned men’s dress shirt; to the left of the word informative is a yellow head wearing glasses; to the left of the word cooperative is a yellow star. Each of these emojis consumed by each user resonates without verbal signification, and since these are complex images, connections between the word and its paired image register a particular notion. This ideological statement goes beyond a simple emoji signifying reactions and emotions (like laughter and tears). Informative being paired with the image of a head wearing glasses reverberates a connection between the stereotype of intelligence, of a “nerd”, to the trait of being informative. Using a yellow star simultaneously aligns cooperation, universal harmony, and stardom. Invocations of the male gender signifying formality are brought to bear with a men’s dress shirt. This image reinforces teleological notions of a man’s hierarchical position in the workplace. The spoken signifier is paired with an image, an image that is not verbalized and, in the example of a male dress shirt, is a reproduction, a reproduction enhancing, enabling, and

elevating problematic gendered hetero-normative standards of what is formal and worthy of, or constitutes as formality as well as the place of a “male” and “male” signification when considering notions of formality. These unspoken registers of signification and communication, thus, also inform registers of static ideological logic. Here, what is unspoken informs what is spoken. While using *GrammarlyGO* and assessing your tone, assessing how, for example, “formal” your writing sounds, the need to read the word “formal” is voided – the emoji provides an unspoken register of signification. Users can simply scan the results, what GrammarlyGO deems your tone to be, without verbally registering or thinking through what you see. What is usually spoken, usually oral, exists alongside an image bearing a signification deemed similar; thus, the unspoken image informs the spoken signifier and registers each verbal signifier between any necessity for verbalization. Resonance can occur from a quick scan -- without verbalization, unspoken. Users register, express, and/or feel the significance of whatever emoji is used along with each word; however, the emoji of use sets a precedent – emojis trigger connoted sensations. Signification is recognized, and signification resonates, but verbalization of the word itself does not necessarily occur; neither is all that is being signified by the emoji of use.

A similar resonance occurs when applying slang, abbreviations, and acronyms common to our a-literate conditioning. “Lol”, according to *UrbanDictionary*, is short for “laugh out loud”. “Lol” signifies laughter but is registered internally. Readers may chuckle or laugh (via thought or out loud), repeat the acronym, repeat each word each letter represents, repeat the abbreviation as if it is a word, or register the acronym and not internally express laughter. These are unspoken resonances – when a signifier is registered, and yet no verbalization ensues. Two other examples of unspoken resonances are “dw” (meaning “don’t worry”) and “idk” (meaning I don’t know) – both defined in *UrbanDictionary*, which, for readers unfamiliar, is a website started in 1999 cataloguing slang and abbreviations. These short forms and abbreviations of common

utterances become ritualistic when perpetually proliferated. Presented as slang, these “words” are a register of a shared “internet vernacular.” We have exchanged Saussurian signification for an “internet vernacular”. A reader is likely to repeat the short form, repeat its signification, or register its meaning and significance affectively without repeating anything. A sense of ease may resonate through a reader when seeing “dw” or a sense of frustration (if the reader believes worry is appropriate). However, there may be no internal repetition of “dw”. The sentiment registered functions as a response. A sense of disregard or nonchalance may resonate with a reader when seeing “idk.” A reader may even shrug their shoulders, imitating the sentiment. For example, a response to the text “What should I eat when I get home?” might be “idk, warm up the leftover pasta”. Yet, a reader may not even internally repeat “idk” as a reader would do with each other word in a message – “idk” can simply be passed over and disregarded. Another example is the abbreviation “smh”, which, according to *UrbanDictionary*, means “shaking my head”. Readers may repeat each letter’s meaning, repeat each letter, disregard the abbreviation, and/or act upon the gesture being connoted; however, no matter how the abbreviation is expressed, an unspoken resonance registers – a sense of disappointment and/or disbelief reverberates. Abbreviations can be scanned as opposed to being read. Scanning becomes a ritualistic reaction. Abbreviations exist between our sensorium’s faculties, thought, speech and affect. These unspoken registers of resonance are occurring now that our ground is Digital Orality. These are examples of how “the unspoken form of orality”(Logan, p.123) materializes immaterially and reverberates through a-literate conditioning. Resonance thwarts response – regardless of verbalization. Our experience of Digital Orality is mediated through technology but then experienced internally through thoughts and/or affective resonances. Our current ground, Digital Orality, suffuses our encounters, altering our ways of being – engendering more and more

unspoken resonances as responses simultaneously producing and enacting a-literate conditioning.

By framing a-literacy in a figure/ground relation with Digital Orality, I hope to have further illuminated how a-literacy and digital orality affect physiology as well as psychogenic life in order to lay the necessary foundations for opening a dialogue for academic content, furthering considerations of Digital Orality and a-literacy regarding not only physiological and psychogenic effects/affects, more generally, but also regarding intersectional content, to use a term coined by Donna Haraway (1988), “situating” this phenomenon through embodied perspectives⁹. Speech-to-text software, known as Automated Speech Recognition (ASR), for example, found in smartphones, computers, and applications, allows users to speak and have a message transcribed into an email, text, document or for assistance to operate a device hands-free. ASR enables a-literate conditioning and provides more options for those who choose not to write. ASR is a function perpetuating Digital Orality’s furthering. Yet, Allison Koenecke et al. (2020), in a study called *Racial Disparities in Automates Speech Recognition*, found word error rates for ASR systems to be nearly double for Black users and “the likely cause of this shortcoming is insufficient audio data from black speakers when training the models.” Black users do not see this conversion from computer code to words and may easily be persuaded or dissuaded. Persuaded to believe in a sense of inferiority or dissuaded from using such software. The process is invisible – often, as is the othering process. ASR software inputs each word as code and then transcribes the code into spoken words for each user's use. ASR is a function perpetuating Digital Orality’s furthering while also perpetuating racial disparities because of a lack of consideration for marginalized people when programming.

⁹ “I am arguing for”, Haraway (1988) sternly states, “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.” (p. 589)

Digital Orality, as previously stated, is a condition of light moving through each user, and each message's transmission is through code, then translated into words or signs; however, this code must still be imputed by human hands who may or may not account for particular people. Traditional linguistic signs and sufficient reason are now of the preceding environment – jettisoned by computer code, formulae, data, efficiency, speed, and suggestions but still imbued with bias. It is not that users do not evoke words and imagined signs when consuming digital media but that each user reads or scans words transmitted from computer code into images, characters, and words -- often at a rapid pace. Our communication is no longer necessarily bound to Saussure's designations of signifier/signified either. Emojis are actual images, and some internet vernacular (such as lol) bear no resemblance to a signified word and have no signified presence. Remember, "The environment always manages somehow to be invisible. Only the content, the preceding environment, is noticeable." (McLuhan, 1970).

Even while I type this text, *Microsoft Word* transcribes and generates. Currently, I am using *Microsoft Word*, with the option for "Text Predictions" on; when I type words such as transcribing or predictions, *Microsoft Word* offers to complete those words for me – after three or four letters, after "trans" and after "pred" *Word* already "knows" what's next. And yes, I am livid at the sight of these potential inputs suggesting my output—livid at the sight of the preceding environment. Digital Orality is a significant contributor to our a-literate conditioning furthering even further. Digital Orality allows users to choose if reading and writing are necessary while allowing users to void signifier/signified relations and the principle of Sufficient Reason; finally, Digital Orality enhances "unspoken" resonances of understanding – orality enters into registers between thought, speech, and sensation. A new code of affective resonances emerges -- tactile and

immersive. Through Digital Orality, we will ground and assess our cognitive habitat. Computer code, formulae, data, metadata, and algorithms are now our environment -- invisible to each user.

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