



# Two Ways of Knowing: Looking at the Case of Irish Language Education through the lens of Orality and Literacy

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## Context & Objectives

As human beings we learn and acquire knowledge through two fundamentally distinct modes: orality and literacy. **Orality** describes cultures whose primary communicative substrate is the spoken word, where knowledge is generated, preserved and circulated through speech, memory and storytelling. **Literacy**, by contrast, denotes cultures organised around written text, in which knowledge is recorded and transmitted through reading and writing. Ireland occupies a unique position within this orality/literacy framework. While Irish cultural life cannot be reduced to a single mode, the default mode of Irish communication remains fundamentally oral. This is evident in the Irish language tradition, which despite possessing a rich manuscript tradition traceable to early Christian monasticism, has always been anchored in the spoken word. However today the Irish language exists in a condition of profound vulnerability. Despite being enshrined in **Article 8** of the Irish Constitution as the nation's first official language, Irish remains the second language in practice in Ireland.

The **UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger** in 2010 and 2021 classifies the Irish language as "definitely endangered" (Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger - UNESCO Digital Library, 2010). This endangerment cannot be adequately explained through structural or demographic variables alone. This endangerment is deeply entangled with public attitudes toward the language, with institutional approaches to its transmission and with a broader unresolved cultural tension between oral and literate modes of understanding. This research examines orality and literacy not as opposing forces but as frameworks within Irish language education specifically, and within educational theory and practice broadly.

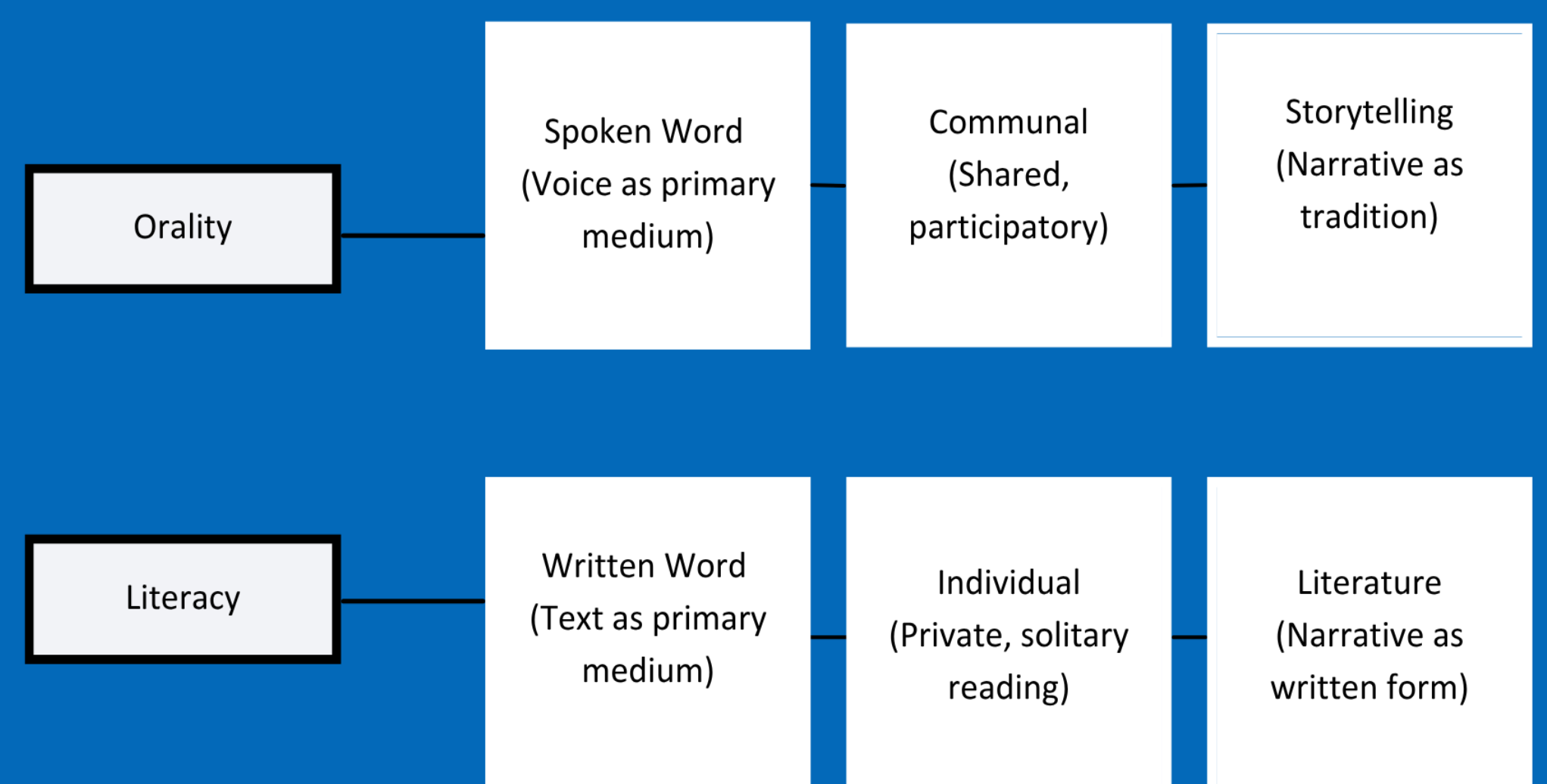


Image from the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

## Key Outcomes & Impact

- Highlight "secondary orality" as a theoretically grounded bridging concept between traditional oral inheritance and contemporary educational practice.
- "Secondary orality" a term coined by Walter Ong (1982) describes the revival of spoken communication through electronic media such as radio, television and podcasts.
- Unlike primary orality, which exists independently of writing, secondary orality emerges within literate culture, making it a particularly relevant framework for contemporary Irish language education.
- This research aims to bridge the gap between constitutional status and lived linguistic reality in the Irish language context.

## Orality Vs. Literacy



## Reflections

My thinking about orality and literacy did not begin in the Irish language classroom. It began when lecturing a media writing course, students who were vivid and compelling speakers in conversation became less fluent when asked to convert their thoughts to paper. Something had been lost between speech and writing, and prior to research on orality vs literacy, I did not have the language to name what that was. In the Irish language context, there is a tendency to view language through the lens of literacy. Writing makes it possible to preserve language, study it and encode culture in written form as literature. Literacy in language education places emphasis on learning, vocabulary, rules of grammar and syntax. Orality places emphasis on the practical, pragmatics of everyday use, conversational use and the fact that language is used for a real purpose. We first learn to speak before learning to read and write. Language education often reverses this. Language begins in the mouth, not on the page. The classroom must welcome both approaches.



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