"Looting killed" the audience: African-language writing, performance, publishing and the audience

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Abstract

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*This article examines the role played by African-language writing, performance and publishing, including critical practice, in the demise of the indigenous audience in African-language literary practice. Using implicit materialism the argument is premised on the developments wrought by the era of Modernism that has lead to a **univocal** writing of world history, and the era of Postmodernism that has ushered in the era of a **multivocal** writing of world history. The transition from oral literature to written literature will also be used to advance the argument about the subsequent exclusion of the indigenous African- language audience from literary practice. This exclusion is considered to have a direct bearing on the under-development of African societies. Finally, possible solutions will be sought by revisiting some of the causes that characterize the African language problem as a medium of communication and research.*

1. Introduction

Language is central to the life of a people, both as carrier and transmitter of the culture of any linguistic community. Essentially, language is a basic tool that particular communities develop to relate to their respective environments, to develop culture and to tell stories in order to make

sense of their world. Hence Ngugi's (1981:15) remark that

> [a] specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

However, one of the key questions still facing (written) African literary scholarship today is the relationship between the writer and language on the one hand, and between the text and the audience on the other. Unlike literatures in other languages, such relationships cannot be taken for granted in African literatures. In African literature the relationship between language and literature, and between language and audience, is not a simple symbiosis as one might assume. Amuta (1989:107-8) makes the following observation in this regard:

> A conspicuous aspect of discourse on African literature in its written expression to date has had to do with the relationship between the writer and literature on the one hand and the audience on the other. [In literature] the writer is usually presented as synonymous with literature, the phenomenon and social institution. [However, in African literature we] know of course that the writer as a socially conditioned producer of artifacts does speak through his words but is by no means synonymous with them. His relationship with the society he inhabits is similarly not identical with the relationship between his work and its audience.

The negative effect that the language-audience problem has had on African literature has nevertheless either been undermined or left in limbo for a considerable period. This observation therefore suggests that the subject, African-language writing, performance and publishing, requires a holistic approach if the problem of audience in African literature is to be successfully addressed. Furthermore, the underlying causes of the language problem that poses challenges and obstacles in postcolonial Africa need to be understood in their proper context if workable solutions were to be found. For instance, Margulis and Nowakoski (1999) observe that

> [l]anguage is often a central question in postcolonial studies. During colonization, colonizers usually imposed their language onto the peoples they colonized, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues. In some cases colonizers systematically prohibited native languages.

This colonial legacy has had a ripple effect that made attempts to respond to the question of language both prescriptive and proscriptive;

close-ended and open-ended in this article. It does not only deal with those writers who are unwittingly trapped within that legacy and with those opposing it. The basis for these different views is mainly ideological. This also has a lot to do with self-identity and the indigenous African writer and audience. In fact, the problem of the identity of the indigenous African writer-audience demonstrates a dialectical relationship between orature and literature, not with respect to language only, but with respect to culture as well (cf. Ngugi, 1986:15).

2. A dialectical relationship between orature and written literature

Firstly, the issue of orature and written literature specifies an identifiable audience – an audience which is defined by language and culture as focal points in this article. Such points of identification also determine what related products have to be delivered to the audience by the writer, performer and publisher in a suitable language. In relation to this view Ngugi (1986:16) asserts that

> [l]anguage as communication and as culture are […] products of each other. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. Language is thus inseparable from us as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

From this inherent link between language communities and their world, the issue of African-language writing, performance, publishing and audience, is also assumed to include a live audience in a performance situation, and a reading audience in a writing situation.

Secondly, this issue is also limited by the specification *African-language* writing/performance, which lends prominence to the specificity of language. Furthermore, the notions of *writing* and *publishing* pre-suppose a certain level of literacy, which the notions of *performer* and *audience* do not imply. Explaining the implications of literacy Oxenham (1980:19) asserts that "writing should be regarded as a very special kind of technology, able to transform its user and his society". Ong (1982:72) extends this observation further by arguing that literacy does not only introduce a new consciousness but that "the new consciousness, which was reinforced by literacy raised a desire for individual achievement as opposed to collective achievement, personal pursuits as opposed to communal desire". Elaborating on this change of consciousness that was

wrought by the transition from orature to literature, Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993:29) argue that

> [t]he written medium turned the communalism of oral performance into the individualism of the lone writer. This implied that the liberties of the bard had been amputated as it were, and replaced by an imprisonment by and uncomfortable reliance on the written word.

Evidently, the change of consciousness brought about by the transition from orature to literature has had other implications for the (traditional) audience of African literature. One of the implications of this phenomenon is the division of the audience along the lines of literacy and illiteracy. This phenomenon also diminished the significance of the poet, bard or storyteller as legitimate spokesperson of his community, which the traditional artist enjoyed in orature. In an attempt to paint a clearer picture of the social consequences of the argument Abrahams (1986: 105-6) makes the following enlightening observation:

> The ethos of traditional society was enshrined in oral, religious, and literary tradition through which the community transmitted from generation to generation its customs, values and norms. The poet and the storyteller stood at the center of the tradition, as the community's chroniclers, entertainers, and collective conscience. Their contribution was considered of the greatest significance. *The oral creative act was a communal act rather than the product of a particular genius* (my emphasis).

The fact that the oral creative act referred to above enabled traditional artists to enjoy legitimacy among members of the communities they served can primarily be attributed to a communal language, which writer and writing do not enjoy. As Abrahams observes, writing remains a product of a lone artist and/or class that serves only a section of the community. What all this means is that the readers of written texts (the "audience") and the audience of a performan*ce* cannot be conceived as a homogeneous entity. The audience manifests as dichotomous relation-ships between the literate and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the civilized and the uncivilized, etc. It is within this framework that I will attempt to identify the challenges and obstacles that face African-language writing, performance, publishing and the audience.

Related to these arguments is the notion of "looting", which has resulted in what I would term the demise of the African-language literature audience. This notion stems from the observation that for a considerable time some writers and scholars have never considered the African-language audience as an important factor in the equation of pedagogical and literary practice. This has happened in spite of the fact that literary

practitioners have consciously used the language and culture of the African audience as raw materials to fashion their artistic products. Although a corpus of literary works has been published in African languages, research and critical works have apeared predominantly in languages that are alien to the indigenous African audience.

Evidence of this practice are the mini-dissertations, dissertations and theses that line university libraries as well as the publication record of the *South African Journal of African Languages* (cf. Selepe, 1999)[1]. Reasons advanced for this practice were that it was done for the benefit of the so-called international audience, which in the South African situation is perceived English to a large extent. On the contrary, the importance of language for its users lies not in its universality but in its particularity (cf. Ngugi, 1986).

Within this broad understanding of the relationship between *writing, performance, publishing* and the *audience* in African-language literature the argument of this article will develop. For the purpose of probing this relationship one cannot avoid referring to the role played by African literary scholars, which is characterized by facilitation, mediation, intervention, criticism, etc. Such a consideration is important because

> [l]iterature and theory and criticism are not only contemplative, not mere superstructure, but also active; they share commitments to human life in history. In short, they share the world (Arac, 1986:ix).

Evidently, to Africans the definition of their world is primarily the one that they could relate to linguistically. Consequently, in order to advance this argument, I will also approach the issue at hand by implicitly referring to the impact of the eras of Modernism and Post-modernism. Firstly, I will consider the issue of literary development with its attendant changes in terms of modes of production. I will then proceed to probe the related paradigm shifts in so far as they have a bearing on the audience of African literature in indigenous languages.

3. Literary development

At the present stage in literary history it is generally accepted that all literatures evolved from oral forms into written forms as human beings continuously created stories as means of making sense of their world.

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1   Chapter 7 of Selepe's thesis, "Towards an African Theory of Literary Production: Perspectives on the Sesotho Novel" (1999), paints a very clear picture of this situation.

This evolution happened as a result of changes in social development and, in particular, changes in modes of production (cf. Hall, 1971 and Lukacs, 1978). However, what is crucial at this point is the fact that oral forms did not vanish with the emergence of written forms but remained living traditions that continued to flourish (cf. Ngugi, 1986). That is why a number of literary scholars argue that oral forms actually laid important foundations for the development of written forms. For instance, literary scholars such as Lukacs (1978), Julien (1992), Msimang (1983), Sirayi (1989), Swanepoel (1987), Finnegan (1970) and Selepe (1999) argue in favour of the view of inseparability and continuity as opposed to that of a watertight division between the two traditions in literary development. To argue otherwise, has often tended to shift central issues of literary development from the centre to the periphery and *vice versa*.

Without belabouring the question of what is central and peripheral, I have decided, instead, to address broad issues of literary development. I hope that this exposition will in the end address some of the teething questions emanating from the assumptions made with regard to literary development. From observed data it could be argued that the factor that could best account for literary development is the change in modes of production, which are responsible for shaping the consciousness of society (cf. Eagleton, 1978; Amuta, 1989 and Macherey, 1984).

3.1 Modes of production as a factor in literary development

Hall (1971) and Lucaks (1978) argue that oral forms evolved among feudal communities, in a situation where the world was a given, where everything developed according to a fixed pattern: reward for virtue and punishment for vice, for instance. This was a naïve world, so to say. However, the advent of the eras of the Industrial Revolution – with its capitalist mode of production, Realism, Renaissance and Enlightenment, changed this naive worldview to one of realism. Realism in particular introduced a view among people that the world could be challenged and changed. The emergence of industries and the working class changed the art of printing and literature, in line with capitalism, into consumable market commodities (cf. Eagleton, 1978).

The other related dimension of this development is that publishing pre-supposes certain levels of literacy and material affluence. In other words, conditions for the emergence of an affluent and literate community that could read and write or publish also evolved simultaneously. Unlike the oral tradition where the whole society had spontaneous access to the arts, this development also meant that only a section of the potential audience could benefit from this phenomenon. The other section of society, the illiterate and the poor, remained excluded in spite of shared

language and cultural origin. As a result literary art no longer served as a unifying factor but as a dividing factor in African social existence (cf. Selepe, 1997 & 1999). From this development the voice of the affluent class became synonymous with the voice of society. In the process the voice of the lower stratum of society was either overtly ignored or covertly silenced. As evidence will show, Modernism also became an important factor to the extent that the lower section of society was ultimately disregarded as the primary audience for both creative works and related research output. It is against the backdrop of this development that the need arises to interrogate the question of African-language literature and its audience seriously.

Related to the issues of literacy, writing and publishing is the rise of Western Modernism, which according to Featherstone (1995:72) yielded "technologically useful knowledge with which to tame nature, but it would also lead to parallel social technology designed to improve social life and usher in 'the good society'". However, this development was based on a serious miscalculation which considered it as a given to assume that

> [t]he Western nations which had first developed and applied this knowledge were well ahead in the process of social development and could confidently maintain their lead as people in other parts of the world eagerly sought, or if need be were instructed, to follow and reap the benefits of modernization (Featherstone, 1995:72).

It is as a result of this development that Western culture emerged as a standard for other cultures in the rest of the world. In other words, Modernism became synonymous with the value systems of the Western world. The international audience also became synonymous with the Western audience. All nationalities and nation-states henceforth had to speak with Western voices both to the West and to themselves. Consequently, the voices of the West became the voice of the world. In the same manner languages of the West became the carriers of world knowledge in international, educational, technological, scientific and commercial spheres. That meant the total "rejection of all previous bodies of knowledge" from other parts of the world (Featherstone, 1995:72). It is against this background that Featherstone argues that

> Modernity was held [by the Westerners] to entail a relentless detraditionalism [of other nationalities] in which collective orientations would give way to individualism, religious beliefs to secularization and the accumulated sediment of mores and everyday practices would surrender to progressive rationalization and the quest for 'the new' [West] (Featherstone, 1995:72).

However, since the late seventies there have been indications that "the confident belief in an ordered social life, coupled with ever-extending progress, has been seen to have reached its limits and the reversal has set in" for the mighty West (Featherstone, 1995:73). In illustrating the assertion about this major change he observes that

> [p]ostmodern theorists have emphasized fragmentation against unity, disorder against order, particularism against universalism, syncretism against holism, popular culture against high culture and localism against globalism (Featherstone, 1995:73-74).

It is probably from such a realization that scholars such a Ngugi (1993) called for the "moving of the center", Chinweizu (1980) for "the decolonization of African literature", Graff (1989) for "the de-institutionalization of literary theory", Featherstone (1995) for "the globalization of local cultures" and Rogers (1996) for "multiculturalism". It is from these perspectives that the challenges and obstacles that face African-language writing/performance in relation to its audience will be sought and identified. This leads us to the second issue, the question of a paradigm shift.

3.2 A paradigm shift

One of the logical steps that could be taken towards addressing the question at hand would firstly be to acknowledge that there has been a major paradigm shift in world affairs. The Western world has outlived the leading role that it assumed during the era of modernity, and can now sit back and watch other nations leading the world into the postmodern era via new "non-Western modernities". Oriental cultures are beginning to make their mark on the world scene with East Asia emerging as a powerful economic block. On the African continent dictators and military juntas are giving way to democratically elected governments. There is also a call for an African Renaissance and an African Century that would steer Africa towards taking her rightful place as a distinct member of the global community. Some of the recent initiatives that demonstrate Africa's intent are the 40th anniversary conference on "A United States of Africa"**2** that was held on 30 May-2 June 2000 in Pretoria. These initiatives were motivated by *inter alia* the 1991 OAU Abuja Treaty calling for the establishing of an African Economic Union by 2025 and the 1999 Sirte Declaration calling for the establishment of an African Union. Two other important conferences that focused on the value of African

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2   The African Union has already been formed in July 2001, in Lusaka, Zambia, to replace the OAU.

languages for the development of the continent were held in 2000. The conference entitled "Against all odds: African languages and literatures in the 21st century", which passed the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures, was held in Asmara, Eritrea, on 11-17 January 2000. Another conference, "The 1st International Conference on African Languages" was held at Maseno University, Kenya on 10-12 May 2000.

The foregoing argument illustrates that it can no longer be doubted that the sun has ultimately set in the British Empire, leaving some bemused and dismayed, asking whether it has really happened. The Swiss watch has given way to the Oriental digital watch. Japan, which has made remarkable recovery after 1945 is now part of the G8 economic group, and together with other East Asian countries she has become a leader in electronic technology. According to Featherstone (1995:88), the rise of Japan can be attributed to the fact that

> [i]ts economic success seemed to present it as outmodernizing the West, […] because the Japanese began to articulate theories of world history that disputed the placing of Japan on the Western-formulated continuum of premodern, modern and postmodern societies.

This development seems to have been neither anticipated nor captured by most Westerners, and as a result they seem also to have lost track of the implications thereof. This scenario seems to be even worse to those that followed Western modernity blindly. While Featherstone (1995:83-4) tries to make the new reality more comprehensible to Westerners, the same cannot be said of their loyal supporters in Africa. For instance, Featherstone asserts that

> [f]rom this perspective postmodernism can be related to the various ways in which Western intellectuals have detected symptoms of this shift in the global balance of power, although of course some of them may have read the shift as an internal process taking place within (Western) modernity. The end of modernity, then, would be better referred to as the end of Western modernity. […] If this is accepted, then the notion of a single *univocal* world history, so long dominant within the West, may have to give way to the acknowledgement of *multivocal* world histories.

For instance, Clause 1 of the Asmara Declaration states that "African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility, and the challenge of speaking for the continent." Such an eventuality will definitely create a problem of divided loyalty among African intellectuals that worship the West to committing another fatal mistake of national suicide, if left

unchecked. This would lead to a further ideological polarization of Africa and the question whether the West alone should still lead the world into the new era. Japan moved on without meeting this pre-condition and so Africa could also move on. However, the question that African-language scholars need to address is how and where to go from here. This is also a challenge that faces the African-language writing or performance, in an era where the West is no longer considered to be the sole voice or audience of the world.

4.   Challenges facing African-language writing/performance

At a basic level the relationship between the African-language writer/ performer and his/her audience is primarily that of language. By choosing a particular language as a medium, the African-language writer/performer is also choosing an audience. This is the audience that the African-language writer/performer seeks to address, and which should also respond to the author in the same language. This interaction between the audience and the writer/performer's message leads to the level of critical discourse, which establishes dialogue between the two. It is, however, at the level of critical discourse that most problems in African language literatures occur.

This tendency continues unabatedly in spite of persuasive arguments by Bishop (1971), Egudu (1978), Chinweizu (1980), Ashcroft (1995), Ngugi (1986 & 1993) and Mazrui (1997) who have demonstrated that the "international audience" is, in fact, synonymous with the "Western audience". According to Featherstone (1995:94) this mindset has also diminished the sense of identity, belonging and space among many (African) nationalities. It is probably for this reason that some African scholars do not seem to have strong ties to their immediate socio-cultural environment. Instead, they have their eyes fixed on distant horizons. However, an interesting feature in African literary practice is that the illusionary "international audience" has actually not emerged to complement or replace the local audience. This seems to be proof enough that it was in fact a cardinal mistake to ignore the local audience in favour of the former. As a result a new definition of the international audience is required.

According to Featherstone (1995) the answer to this question should be sought in the globalization of local cultures (and languages). According to Selepe (1999) these should collectively constitute a cocktail of global cultures and languages, and subsequently, the newly defined international audience. The implications of these developments for the African-language writer/performer and critic are that they must begin to accept that the African-language audiences are also a significant part of

the international audience. Therefore, by addressing them in their own languages they will still be addressing the international audience. After all, it is basically language that makes Africans distinct nations among other world nations, nations with a distinct history and destiny. Consequently, Africans can no longer afford the luxury of wilfully denying the world that they could contribute to it by emulating "the other" (cf. Featherstone, 1995).

The other area that poses a challenge to the African-language writer/performer and his/her relationship with his/her audience stems from the provisions of the present South African Constitution, which recognizes eleven official languages as well as cultural and religious equality. Over and above these provisions there is a stipulation in the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) Act, that protects language rights and encourages an aggressive development of the previously disadvantaged languages for education and other aspects of social life. These undertakings are reiterated in Articles 4, 5 and 6 of the Asmara Declaration, which state the following:

- All African children have the inalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.

- Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages.

- The effective and rapid development of science and technology in Africa depends on the use of African languages, and modern technology must be used for the development of African languages.

Taking such initiatives into account could assist the African scholar in making a meaningful contribution to the reconstruction of Africa in general, and of South Africa in particular. These expectations also place another demand on the African-language writer/performer and scholar to re-evaluate his/her relationship with the audience. To listen to responses to creative works produced, and to disseminate scientific information would in turn benefit the local audience. It is with a similar realization that Lillis (1975:24) argues that:

> Before shutting himself off in his laboratory, the African scientist must pause to think what he may do to remain an integrated member of the society that gave him the passport to the realms of the initiated. From his haven of light, which those on the outside fear may blind them, can he shine a few rays to guide them in their struggle from the morass of superstition and prejudice?

This means that, as a gesture of gratitude and loyalty to his people, it is also the duty of the African literary scholar to administer a therapeutic antidote that would heal the traumatized African mind. After all, it is the same mind that provides the African literary scholar with the raw materials of language, culture and worldview that are used to produce both creative and critical texts.

Considering that people *inter alia* produce creative works in an attempt to give meaning to their world, it seems to be one of the best ways of saving Africa and ensuring sustained development to consider the use of African languages as a vehicle for social development (cf. King'ei, 1999:1). For similar reasons Anyidoho (1992:46) argues that "[…] For us to clearly understand the role of language in developmental strategy […] we must examine our literary heritage for significant pointers and lessons". The significant pointers and lessons that could be derived from African literary heritage could only benefit related communities if African-language writers, performers as well as scholars regard their audience as important stakeholders in literary production.

5.   Obstacles facing the African-language writer/performer

One of the greatest obstacles facing African language writing, performance and audience remains that of a culture that has evolved since African languages and literatures became part of pedagogical practice. The culture that evolved in African literary practice is the one that consistently sought to divide the head from the flock and has lead to utter disregard of the African audience by intellectuals. Intellectuals have consequently become unaccountable to their local audience, unlike the traditional bards or storytellers in the past. Maphalala (1999:11) describes one cause of this trend as follows:

> African intellectuals are unable to do this because the education/ socialization they received from primary school to university has always been based on a European worldview and not on an African worldview and cultural values. Thus it is not an exaggeration to argue that most African intellectuals are alienated from their people at grassroots level. This alienation becomes chronic when it comes to linguistic, religious and cultural matters.

Several other people have in the past expressed similar concerns about African intelligentsia. Now, the question is: If this is a position with regard to African-language literatures, then why have such concerns never been debated at an academic level? One may also ask whether or not such questions have been deliberately overlooked, or have simply escaped the vigilant mind of the African-language literary practitioner.

In attempting to answer this question I wish to argue that the cause of the language problem in Africa could be traced to the colonial legacy. When colonizers initially occupied Africa they targeted the land, which was the basic wealth and means of production, and ultimately controlled it as they pleased. By controlling the land the colonizers also took control of the mind of Africa's inhabitants. This meant that Africans could no longer relate to the land as they used to do in the past. What they remained with were their small dwellings and some livestock that grazed on the colonized land at the discretion of European farmers. In this process African languages, cultures, value-systems, etc., became confined to their dwellings. Henceforth, whenever they left their dwellings they had to speak to and behave only in a manner that would be approved of by the European landlord.

I therefore wish to argue that if language relates people to their environment and culture evolves when people interact with the same environment, then it is understandable why African languages were restricted. That is why even in creative writing, "stories of the hunted glorified the hunter because the lions did not have their own historians*"* (an old African proverb). But now the lions have their own historians but their stories still glorify the hunter and the pattern has not changed. The following observation could shed some light on the real nature of the problem.

In the eighties when journalists asked Prof. Es' kia Mphahlele why, in spite of his Pan Africanist stance, there were no African students in his African literature class, he replied that:

> *For me it is a living in the same way that millions of other blacks work for whites to earn a living.* […] Teaching at Wits is the best I can do. I am doing research most of the time and so I have the basis for a lot of extra-mural activity. […] In this way I can do a lot to teach young blacks outside the formal schooling situation (quoted by Barnett, 1983:260). (Emphasis added.)

This means that the problem of African-language writing, performance and the audience reflects more of an economic and political nature than just cultural or pedagogical. This problem is furthermore linked to the issues of social development in which literature should play a critical role, if we concede that literature reflects the worldview of a community and that its accurate interpretation could contribute to addressing related problems.

6. Conclusion

The nature of the problem that faces African-language writing, performance and the audience induces a reluctance to provide what might be perceived to be prescriptive answers to the issues raised in this paper. I therefore wish to conclude by highlighting a critical link between literature and society, which in a way determines social development or the lack of it. Newton (1999:197) makes the following observation about the critical importance of literature in social development:

> What needs to be developed is an environment in which national language literatures not only survive but blossom and bear fruit, constantly interpreting and transforming the cultural heritages from which they have grown. They need to continue to inform and express the lives and the relations of the people in the communities of their readers and writers. In particular, […] the creation of national languages literatures in order to make possible the programs of functional literacy that are so needed and sought after […] today.

It stands to reason, therefore, that if African-language practitioners hope to salvage anything from the present morass, they have to dig deep into their ancestral past to regain common ground with the local audiences they have lost in pursuit of the elusive international audience. Consequently, it becomes logical to recommend that the use of the raw materials of the African people and their processing should primarily be informed by local conditions if globalization should be of any consequence to social development. It is only when African literary products have locally demonstrated a high level of demand and have satisfied related needs that the international market could be explored for possible expansion, and not the other way round.

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Key concepts:

audience
literature
African-language literary practice
African languages: writing, performance, publishing
indigenous audience
oral literature; transition to written literature

Kernbegrippe:

Afrikatale; literêre praktyk
Afrikatale: opvoerings in
Afrikatale; skryf in, publiseer van
inheemse gehoor
mondelinge literatuur; oorgang tot geskrewe literatuur