

Methods for Approaching Oral Traditions

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Lecture 4

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Plan for today's lecture

1. Why use multiple approaches?
2. Historical survey
3. Focus on three “idiom-based” approaches
4. Performance theory
5. Ethnopoetics
6. Immanent art
7. Summary of selected approaches

I. Why multiple approaches?

- A. All approaches are necessarily and fundamentally interpretations
 - they offer *perspectives*, not “ultimate truth”
 - story of the literary criticism course
- B. All approaches should serve the materials (oral traditions)
 - rather than exist for their own sake
 - problems connected with limitations of any single approach
- C. What we have to gain through multiple approaches
 - avoiding exclusive dependence on one lens (or one perspective)
 - the ideal: a collection of lenses, or a tool-kit
 - ++ using the best available tool for the interpretive job
 - understanding OTs from a variety of perspectives

II. Historical survey

(based on Zumwalt 1998)

18th & 19th centuries

- Romantic nationalism (Herder): *Volksgeist*
- Cultural evolutionary theory (Tylor, Lang): social stages
- Solar mythology (Müller): mythopoeic nature

20th century

- Historic-geographic method (Aarne, Thompson): tale-types
- Age-area hypothesis (Boas): reconstructing culture
- Epic laws (Orik): law of repetition, e.g., as universal
- Myth-ritual approach (Raglan): generic pattern for hero-biography
- Morphological approach (Propp): functions constitute folktales
- Oral-formulaic theory (Parry, Lord): building blocks for performance
- Structural approach (Lévi-Strauss): binary oppositions
- Symbolic-interpretive (Geertz): cultural meaning from inside
- Structural-interpretive (Feld): combination of two approaches
- Psychoanalysis (Dundes): Freudian analysis

- Ethnopoetics (Tedlock, Hymes): each OT on its own terms
- Performance theory (Bauman, Sherzer): keys to an event
- Feminism (Hollis, Mills, Pershing, et al.): power & gender
- Authenticity (Bendix, Handler, Linnekin): critique of assumptions

III. We will focus today on three “idiom-based” approaches

1. **Performance theory** (from anthropology & folklore)
2. **Ethnopoetics** (from anthropology & sociolinguistics)
3. **Immanent art** (from linguistics, folklore, and literature)
4. What these three approaches share
 - a. Focus on word-power; or “word”-power
 - b. OT is a specialized code, a set of signals
 - c. Codes enable communication between performer & audience
 - d. Codes are structured conventionally and idiosyncratically
 - according to language, genre, area, individual
 - e. Codes are idiomatic
 - they cue participation of a certain kind
 - f. OT is thus an emergent experience, not a museum piece
 - extended to oral-derived texts as well

[Of course, this is not to deny or disparage other approaches!]

IV. Performance theory

Q: What difference does performance make?


A: Performance is part of the meaning.

A. Quote from Richard Bauman’s classic *Verbal Art as Performance* (1977: 9):

“Performance represents a transformation of the basic referential . . . uses of language. In other words, in a performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally would convey.’ This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.”

1. transformation of referentiality
 - a. words, actions, sounds, etc. take on new meanings
 - b. meanings that are activated by the performance situation
2. some special sense
 - a. not the unmarked, everyday sense
 - b. but marked for this particular activity
3. an interpretive frame
 - a. sets the rules for *expression* (on the performer’s part)
 - b. and for *reception* (on the audience’s part)
 - c. analogy to theater lighting, for example
4. of course, these ideas apply to everything we do
 - a. broad-spectrum, unmarked activities versus
 - b. narrow-spectrum, marked activities (easier to recognize as performance)

B. Keys to performance


1. they are cues for expression and reception
2. they indicate the *special sense*
3. they prescribe the *interpretive frame*
4. Bauman's examples of keys – just a sample, as he insists!
 - special codes (linguistic archaisms, dialect forms)
 - figurative language
 - parallelism
 - special paralinguistic features (silence, loudness)
 - special formulas
 - appeal to tradition
 - disclaimer of performance
5. A few keys from epic “breakthroughs into performance”
 - Ej!* – the interjection that begins performance in South Slavic epic
 - the prologue or *pripjev* is a similar signal
 - Hwæt!* – serves the same purpose for the Old English *Beowulf*
 - also used to start telling heroic saints' lives, etc.
 - Andra moi ennepe, Mousa, polutropon...* in Homer's *Odyssey*
 - Man me in-say, o Muse, many-turning...
 - the *Iliad* also calls upon the Muse
6. A few keys from non-epic (performative cues)
 - Serbian charms: whispering, *sotto voce* delivery
 - Basque *bertsolaritza*: one of the 1800+ melodies
 - slam poetry: the “sacrifice poet” 
 - Homeric Hymns: “and now I turn to another song” formula
 - the grave-goods at a Serbian lament performance
7. Multiple levels of keying in the same performance
 - musical introduction on the *gusle* – performance event
 - *Ej!* as explained above
 - the recurrent meter and melody reinforce the event
 - a generic prologue (can be used in any song-performance)
 - Oh, my gusle, maplewood gusle,
 - Speak now and ever,
 - Speak softly, loudly –
 - This gusle is mine but it's played for all of you.
 - I will sing a song of truth,
 - Which I heard from my father
 - In one thousand nine hundred
 - And twelve by count,
 - A song about a certain hero.
 - (from Halil Bajgorić, *Halil Rescues Bojičić Alija*)
 - the specific narrative then begins
 - ++ but suspended in a web of “words”
 - ** formulaic diction, typical scenes, story-patterns
8. Keys work both ways
 - a. the performer sends signals
 - b. the audience receives and interprets them, and then reacts
 - c. the keys enable a specialized, economical communication

V. Ethnopoetics

Q: Does oral tradition need to be read differently?

A: Diverse oral traditions need to be read diversely.

A. The meaning of “ethnopoetics”

- poetics of the *ethnos*, or group
- by definition, not a universalist approach
- each oral tradition must be read on its own terms 

B. Roots in Native American studies had a heavy influence

- N. A. verbal art poorly studied and represented in early eras
- judgments as basic as poetry vs. prose
- meaningful units & structures obscured
- often misunderstood because of colonialism
- overcoming this bias led to codified, well developed approach

C. The “Three Rs” of ethnopoetics

1. **Reading** (analyzing on the tradition’s own terms)
2. **Representing** (making editions that faithfully reflect poetics)
3. **Reperforming** (the next reader’s reception of the performance)

D. *Performative ethnopoetics* (Dennis Tedlock; Zuni poetry)

1. restoring the vocal qualities to oral poetry
2. features include
 - ++ loudness and softness
 - ++ rising and falling intonation
 - ++ marking poetic lines (breath-groups)
 - ++ understanding the role of silence (pauses)
3. Every feature of every performance is treated individually
 - ++ treats only those features realized vocally in performance
4. Thus his editions are performance transcripts
 - ++ which may or may not relate to other performances

Example from “Coyote and Junco”, a Zuni tale (Tedlock 1999: 71-72):

- CAPITAL LETTERS indicate increased volume
- new lines involve at least a half-second pause beforehand
- asterisks (*) call for at least a two-second pause
- raised or lowered type indicates an intonation shift up or down
- a series of dashes (-----) signals a prolonged word
- *italicized phrases* give nonverbal stage directions

“ONE!” he says.

“The fourth time I, uh, speak and you don’t sing for me, I’ll bite you,” he tells her.

*

“Second time, TWO!” he says.

“Quick! Sing your song,” he says.

When she doesn’t sing, “THREE!” he says, “I’ll SPEAK for the LAST TIME,” he says.

*

Coyote says, “QUICK! SING IT,” to her.

She doesn’t sing.

Coyote bites Junco clear through.

He bites Junco, CRUNCH! He bites the round-rock Junco.

Right here (*points to molars*) these here

all his teeth come out, the whole row of teeth comes out.

(*in a tight voice*) “This is exactly what I wanted to do to you.” “Ay! Ay!” he says.

When the prairie wolf returned to his children, by the time he got there his children were dead.


Because of the one who lived this long ago, coyotes have no teeth here (*points to molars*), that’s A-----LL THE WORD was short.

E. *Structural ethnopoetics* (Dell Hymes; Northwest Coast poetry)

1. restoring the structural qualities to oral poetry
2. features include a grid of poetic units
 - ++ verses
 - ++ lines, pattern numbers
 - ++ stanzas
 - ++ scenes
 - ++ acts
3. Features are discovered according to their recurrence in performances
 - ++ understood as traditional units; applicable to many poems
4. Thus his editions are structural reinterpretations
 - ++ they relate to all other performances
 - ++ they turn prose into poetry (on its own terms)
 - ++ they illuminate narrative, characterization, even assignment of speeches to the correct character
 - ++ see Hymes 1981 for numerous large-scale examples

VI. **Immanent Art**

Q: What difference does repetition make?

A: “Words” aren’t repeated by rote; they recur because they’re idiomatic. 

A. Roots in Oral-Formulaic Theory (Milman Parry and Albert Lord; Foley 1988)

1. philology & comparative anthropology
 - linguists: Ellendt, Düntzer, Witte
 - fieldworkers: Radlov (Kirghiz), Murko (South Slavic)
2. Parry superseded current debate on Homer
 - Analysts vs. Unitarians
3. Parry’s research was first restricted to Homeric *texts*
 - *traditional*: noun-epithet formulas (1928)
 - *oral*: formulaic systems & specialized language (1932)
4. Later: fieldwork in the Former Yugoslavia (1933-35)
 - 1500+ oral epics recorded
 - exclusive attention to longer, more elaborate Moslem epic
 - fortunate “fit” between Homer & South Slavic oral epic
5. Lord’s comparative extensions
 - 1953-54, etc.: *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* series
 - 1960: *The Singer of Tales*
 - ++ AG, SC, OE, OF, BG
 - ++ eventually 100+ oral traditions (Foley 1985+)
 - ++ merged with other approaches in mid-1990s

6. Everything based on one subgenre of one epic tradition: Moslem epic
 -- all oral traditions assumed to operate identically

B. Advantages and disadvantages of Oral-Formulaic Theory

1. *Positive aspects*

- drew attention to oral roots of ancient & medieval works
- offered a structural dynamics for oral tradition
- combined philology and anthropology
- promoted comparison worldwide

2. *Negative aspects*

- insisted on a single model for all oral traditions
- concentrated on the product instead of the process
 - ++ derived originally from texts
- sacrificed art to a mechanical explanation (*metri causa*)
 - ++ arguments over “formulaic density”
 - ++ units understood as *literal* aids to *composition in performance* (getting the job done)
 - ** “swift-footed Achilles” = merely “Achilles”
 - ** Feast scene simply details a feast
 - ** story-pattern of Return only a template

C. What the Immanent Art theory proposes

1. **that “oral tradition works like language, only more so”**

- process over product
 - ++ a system, not a warehouse of items
- marked language with additional coding
 - ++ idiomatic implication, not literal meaning
- fluency in that specialized language is essential
 - ++ for both performer and audience

2. **that the core dynamic of oral tradition is *pars pro toto***

- *the part stands for the whole*
- metonymic relationship between sign & signified
- traditional referentiality: meaning is immanent
- example 1: *vjerna ljuba* (“true love”) > Return heroine
- example 2: “X jumped to his/her light feet” = “X is responding heroically and honorably to an unexpected or threatening turn of events that demands his immediate attention” (Foley 1991: 86)
- to ignore or fail to understand the signals is to “misread” the work

D. Basic features of the Immanent Art approach

1. *Register*

- the specialized language of the oral tradition
 - ++ marked variety of language intended for narrow usage
 - ++ different for each different tradition, genre, etc.
 - ++ often contains multiple dialects, archaisms, meter, music
- = Hymes’ “way of speaking” (plus idiomatic meaning)
- = 19th c. German linguists’ *Kunstsprache* (plus idiomatic meaning)
- Homeric language as an example
 - ++ “artificial language”

2. *Performance arena*

- the virtual place where the oral tradition is performed & received
- not a single physically or temporally defined place
- entering the performance arena means
 - ++ using the appropriate interpretive frame
 - ++ speaking and hearing the appropriate register
 - ++ understanding the OT on its own terms
 - ++ **“reading” the tradition, not only a single performance**
 - ** “just like language, only more so”

3. *Communicative economy*

- the economical expression that results from
 - ++ the appropriate register and
 - ++ the appropriate performance arena
- effective performance, effective reception
- fluency supports both ends of the process
 - ++ and *lack of fluency hinders communication*
 - ++ the famous accusation: “Homer nodding”

E. Example applications

1. Smallest “words”: phrases

- AG: *chlôron deos* (“green fear”)
- OE: *helm Scyldinga* (“protector of the Scyldings”)
- SC: *nerodjena majka* (lit., “not-birthing mother”)

2. Medium-level “words”: typical scenes

- AG: Feast implies mediation of a problem
 - Od.* 1: forecasts Telemachos’ journey of self-discovery
 - Il.* 24: forecasts Hektor’s funeral in Troy (H. incl. at meal)
- OE: “Exile” pattern in the saint’s life poem, *Andreas*
- SC: Prince Marko’s disarming before death
 - ** beheads his horse (and companion) Šarac
 - ** breaks his sword
 - ** smashes his war-lance
 - ** throws his mace into the sea

3. Largest “word”: story-pattern

Example: The *Odyssey* as a Return epic

1. Follows a widespread & ancient pattern:

- Absence-Devastation-Return-Vengeance-Wedding

2. Indo-European provenience & beyond

- hundreds of examples in South Slavic alone

3. Agamemnon’s ghost describes the two-part morphology (24.192-202):

"O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices,
surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue.
How good was proved the heart that is in blameless Penelope,
Ikarios' daughter, and how well she remembered Odysseus,
her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never
die away, but the immortals will make for the people
of earth a **pleasing song for prudent Penelope**.

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Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil

deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and **a song of loathing will be hers** among men, to make evil the reputation of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous." 200

The Return pattern always

1. assumes a backstory about a foreign war and captivity
2. follows a specific but non-chronological order
3. relates prior events via an inserted flashback
4. features a woman (the hero's mate) who remains noncommittal
5. climaxes in a reunion or its opposite
6. deals with situation-specific details in a post-climax coda

On this basis three rereadings are necessary:

1. The order of the *Odyssey* is idiomatic as it stands
 - doesn't start "in the middle"; it begins where it should begin
 - any other order would be unidiomatic
2. Penelope stubbornly delays final recognition of Odysseus because that is the role of the Return Song heroine
 - earlier recognition would be unidiomatic
3. The end of the *Odyssey* and its *telos* (climax) are two different points
 - reunion in Book 23; situation-specific details in the rest of 23-24

VII. Summary

A. Similarities/correspondences among the three approaches

- all three focus on "word"-power
- all three highlight a special register
- all three understand OT as a language (only more so)
- all three see performance as emergent and rule-governed

B. Homemade "proverbs" to underline the approach through language & idiom

1. Oral tradition works like language, only more so.
2. Performance is the enabling event; tradition is the context for that event.
3. The art of oral tradition emerges *through* rather than *in spite of* its special language.
4. The best companion for "reading" oral tradition is an unpublished dictionary.
5. *Artis causa*, not *metri causa*.
6. Composition and reception are two sides of the same coin.
7. True diversity demands diversity in frame of reference (use multiple approaches).
8. Without a tradition there is no language; without a speaker there is only silence.

Resources

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