

Learning to Listen: Oral History as Poetry

Dennis Tedlock

Guide to Delivery:

A line change indicates a short pause, about 1/2 to 1 second;
a double space between lines, marked by . , indicates a long
pause, about 2 seconds;

CAPITALS are loud;

small type is soft;

split-level lines indicate a chant-like delivery, with each
level at a separate pitch;

long dashes indicate lengthened vowels, short ones at the
ends of lines an interrupted delivery;

repeated consonants are lengthened;

other instructions are in *(parenthecized italics)*.

Prepared for the session "Answers Without Questions: An Evaluation and Critique of Oral History" at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, 1973. To appear in *Envelopes of Sound*. Edited by Ronald J. Grele. New York: Precedent, 1975. Printed with the permission of the publisher.

POETRY is oral HISTORY
and oral HISTORY
is POETRY.

.

FIRST of all, historical information
and the IDEAS of history just spoken of by Mr. Grele
are found not only in
the relatively casual
conversational narratives of the interview situation
but also in forms of oral discourse which are traditionally classified
as POETRY—
songs and chants, for example.

SECOND
conversational narratives THEMSELVES
traditionally classified as PROSE
turn out, when listened to CLOSELY
to have poetical qualities of their OWN.

.

Here are two texts from the Zuni Indians of New Mexico
which demonstrate the FIRST point.

On the surface both of these examples
would appear to contain nothing of historical value.
The first example is the text of a song first performed by
masked kachina dancers just this past summer.

It goes like this:

"Rejoice! holy bundles, sacred bundles, because of your wise thoughts
there in the east your Moon Mother spoke, gave her word
when we sent over there with the dragonfly, entered upon her road.
Rejoice! you will be granted many blessings, flowing silt,"
the two stars are saying this to all the sacred bundles here.¹

.

At one level this text is typical of Zuni rain songs.

The songs mention silt

because in desert country one of the main signs of
good recent rains is the presence of
fresh silt deposits all over the landscape.

The sacred bundles mentioned are the very powerful fetishes in the
keeping of Zuni priests.

On another level the song is an ALLEGORY:
the sacred bundles
are HOUSTON CONTROL
the dragonfly is a ROCKETSHIP
the silt is the alluvial deposits recently hypothesized for the moon's surface
and the two stars, who were reporting the silt to the sacred bundles
are the ASTRONAUTS.

.

At another level the song is saying that the Zunis have ALWAYS had a
way to the Moon Mother
through the
sacred bundles and the priestly prayers that go with them
and that the idea of
travelling to the moon is not
really something entirely NEW to them.
It's simply that the Zuni priests are capable of making SPIRITUAL
journeys to the moon
rather than MECHANICAL ones.
The song is an attempt by them to come to terms
with an historical event
and at the same time reassert
tradition.

I would suggest that oral historians working in the larger American society
might find similarly important clues
to the meaning events have for people
in contemporary song texts.

.

Now this next example comes from the Zuni story of
the creation.

It belongs to a genre that
we, looking on from the outside
would unquestionably label as myth
partly simply because the events described in it seem implausible to us.
Some of the lines, as you will hear
are in chant form.

The Zuni priests have just asked the Ahayuuta
the twin war gods
to look for the middle of the earth:

"Very well indeed.

I'm GOING," the twins said.

They came this way until they CAME TO ZUNI.

When they came here to the present village, they summoned the
water-strider.

WHEN THEY SUMMONED HIM

he entered upon their roads.

There they spoke to him: "NOW

this very day

we have summoned you here.

You

must bend over here.

YOU MUST STRETCH OUT YOUR ARMS AND LEGS.

BY THE POSITION

OF YOUR HEART

The Middle Place will then become known."

That's what they said. "Indeed.

Is this your reason for summoning me?"

"Yes, this is why we have summoned you.

Now then, stretch yourself OUT.

By the position of your heart

IT WILL BE KNOWN

WHERE THE MIDDLE PLACE IS," that's what

the Ahayuuta told him.

"Very well."

Bending over toward the east

he stretched out, stretched out all his legs.

When they were ALL OUT FLAT

WHEN THE ARMS

LEGS

stretched

A——LL AROUND TO THE OCEANS

his heart

rested

at the site named the MIDDLE PLACE.

.

They stood there:

"Very well, here is the middle

here is the middle of the EARTH."2

The water-strider is that insect (*hold out hand with fingers spread but bent downwards*) that floats on the surface of ponds.

On the face of it this passage would seem to be describing a water-strider SO gigantic

that its legs

can span an entire continent.

This is far into the realm of what we ourselves would call imaginary or mythic

but it is in fact a description of an actual experience.

Whenever the Zuni priests have something important to divine they go into retreat to seek a vision.

In this case they are guided in that vision by the Ahayuuta

and one of them impersonates a water-strider by stretching out his arms

(stretch arms out horizontally to the sides)

in the four directions, two at a time.

When the priest does this he IS the water-strider and his arms DO reach all the way to the oceans:

that is his experience.³

It is simply that the narrator does not specify which events are visionary ones.

Now the point that texts like this rain song

and this section of a creation story

can refer to historical events

or ideas of history is not new to

Professor Vansina and other oral historians

who have worked in nonliterate societies.⁴

But what I would suggest HERE is that

oral historians working in literate societies should also pay attention to such texts.

People do not reveal their ideas of history only when they are conversing with an interviewer.

It's hard to imagine an oral history of the youth of the sixties, for example without some reference to their songs

and to the wild stories that went around then.

Clearly

highly metaphorical or poetical speech events

can be

a source of history.

This brings me to my other major point which is that the relatively casual

conversational narratives

which are the more ORDINARY business of the oral historian

are THEMSELVES highly poetical

and cannot be properly understood from prose transcripts.

the MEANING of SPOKEN narrative

is not only carried by the sheer words as transcribed by alphabetic writing but by the placement of SILENCES

by TONES of VOICE

by whispers and SHOUTS.

In ancient Greece

written narratives

were still composed with oral delivery in mind.

Herodotus

for example

gave public recitations of his Histories

among other places at the Olympic Games.⁵

Right up through the Middle Ages written narratives

still retained their oral form, they were full of repetitions

formulaic phrases, the things that characterize oral performance.⁶

The punctuation and spacing that were used then came

much closer to representing actual

features of oral delivery than does the punctuation we use today⁷

and the manuscripts were accompanied by a tradition

of oral performance

carried on by professionals

who knew how to make the words SOUND right.

And not only professional performers but

other literate individuals

always read aloud

even in private.

The only recorded exception in all the time before the Renaissance was St. Jerome.

His ability to read silently greatly disturbed St. Augustine

who had never seen anyone else do it

but even St. Jerome moved his lips,⁸ at least.

It was not until the Renaissance that there began to develop the kind of prose narrative we know today⁹

the kind that is
read silently and has lost many of its oral features.
Today's prose is no longer in the care of professional performers who
know
how to turn it back into the oral
nor is it accompanied by performance notations
and so it is an EXTREMELY poor medium for the transcription of tape-
recorded discourse
EVEN the most ordinary conversation.

.

We must question whether HUNDREDS of REELS of oral history TAPE
ought to be converted into THOUSANDS of PAGES of PROSE typescript
after which the tapes are all too often ERASED.
To use a VISUAL analogy, such a procedure is as absurd
as preferring to
make pencil sketches from photographs of historical events
and then destroy the photographs.
Nobody, whether in a
literate society or not SPEAKS in PROSE
unless he is
unless perhaps he is
reading aloud
from WRITTEN prose
and in the flattest possible voice.¹⁰
The WORST thing about written prose is that there is no SILENCE in it.

.

.

Even in an extended well-rehearsed discourse
the speaker of any language spends forty to fifty percent of his time
being silent.¹¹
The punctuation we use today is not an accurate guide to these silences
though it is true that
people reading aloud usually stop at each period.
But in oral discourse a person may go right on from one sentence to
another without pausing, or else he may pause in a place
where there would ordinarily be no punctuation in writing.
Here is an example of pausing from a Zuni narrative:

“You’ll get to the dance in plenty of time,” that’s what her children told her. “Then that’s the way it will be,” she said, and she left. It was getting SO hot.¹²

In the second of those two lines there were two complete sentences and a part of a third sentence, all delivered without a pause. In this next passage there are eight different pauses and no fewer than five of them occur where there would be no punctuation in a written version:

They brought him back, and when they
tried to unmask him
the mask
was stuck
to his face.
He was changing over.

When they unmasked the young man, some of his
flesh peeled off.¹³

Sometimes pauses
reveal great hesitation and doubt on the part of the speaker
as in this passage:

Well
there were about
a hundred and hundred annnnn
hundred and six Zunis
signed up for it.¹⁴

But frequent pauses like these
don’t always indicate hesitation, sometimes

pauses
are used

to create suspense
or to set off a series of elements that are in parallel construction
as in this next passage.

This passage
also illustrates the use of tone of voice.
The speaker is telling of a time when
B.I.A. officers
had to capture Zuni children in order to get them in school:

And I didn't see the POLICEMAN that came around.
Finally he came up behind me—
(low and gravelly) he caught me and dragged me down to the school.

Then in the NOONTIME
I came home
as a BLUEbird:
had a blue shirt on
corduroy pants on
corduroy cap on:
a new boy.¹⁵

Besides pausing prose also fails to convey the way in which speakers may
range all the way from a whisper
up to a shout.

We have italics and exclamation points of course
but we have been taught and taught and taught that any but the most
sparing use of such devices
is unbecoming to written composition.

And we have no device at all that is suitable for
marking an especially quiet voice.

Here is a passage in which a speaker alternates between a normal speaking
voice and a near whisper.

Beyond the first line he repeats everything he says twice
in terms of alphabetic writing that is

but when we restore the changes in amplitude to this passage we discover that in fact he never says the same thing twice in the same way:

.
At that moment his mother
embraced, embraced him.
His uncle got angry, his uncle got angry.
He beat
his kinswoman
he beat his kinswoman.¹⁶

.
In this next passage
the speaker alternates between
a normal voice and something approaching a shout.
In the realm of tone of voice
he makes use in a couple of places of a sharpening or
tensing of the voice
and in one line he uses
a gentle or kind tone, although as you will hear in context this turns out
to be ironic.
He is talking about the head of the Zuni Tribal Government:

.
Look, HOW MANY TRIPS HAS THE GOVERNOR MADE TO
WASHINGTON?
He's got a GOOD
NAME
(*sharply*) on ACCOUNT OF
these B.I.A. guys like John Gray
and John Taylor
(*kindly*) he's got a good RECORD, he's made a good EFFORT
in WASHINGTON
but what about his people?
HIS PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING.
WHEN HE SITS IN HIS OFFICE LIKE WE ARE IN HERE
we don't know what's going on over there
right on the other side of the creek in the (*sharply*) Zuni village.¹⁷

.
In this next example a speaker makes use of stress
hard stress on individual words rather than making entire lines loud.

He also makes use in a couple of lines here of a staccato delivery where the stresses on words are evenly spaced to give a constant beat:

.
That was the HARDEST job because
up there in Kansas
the weather is too HOT
even around
nine o'clock, ten, twelve o'clock
bo——y that's hot.
(staccato) The héat cómes úp to yóur FACE
and the héat cómes ón yóur BACK—
(throaty) gosh!
And you're pressing on
on the hot ground with your BARE HAND
your KNEES—
we almost gave up on it.¹⁸

.
Now in this next case, patterns of amplitude, including a marked falling off of the voice in many lines combine with pausing with tone of voice and a general softness of articulation to give the entire episode a strong sustained emotional flavor. The passage concerns a time in the 1880's when the U.S. Army was sent to Zuni to prevent the execution of a man accused of witchcraft. They brought cannons with them and camped on the opposite side of the river from the village facing it. It was the winter solstice, a time when the medicine societies were in retreat to say prayers and meditate:

.
(with a sad tone throughout)
Because a person's life
was being threatened