

Ethnopoetics

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Ho-o-o-o!
H'Mother she has moved now
H'Mother she has moved now
Dawn Birth Now
H'Mother she has moved now

Ho-o-o-o!
H'Eagle you move now
H'Eagle you move now
Dawn Birth Now
H'Eagle you move now¹

If the average Western literary scholar were to critique the above poem, he or she might note the repetitiveness, simplistic (perhaps even trite) images, lack of poetic device, and meaningless words. This would represent a fair critique of the poem, if it were written with typical Western assumptions about what constitutes good poetry. But what if the poet's assumptions were different? What if the very context in which this poem was produced dictated entirely different standards than what the above critique assumes? These "what ifs" form the basis of ethnopoetics, an interdisciplinary construct that attempts to correct the Eurocentric and chirographic bias against non-Western, oral traditional ways of speaking and meaning by deriving an interpretive frame from discourse in its own cultural context. Rather than forcing such discourse into Western concepts of poetry, proponents of ethnopoetics analyze texts in their original language and context to discover how individual elements function within a cultural performance of that text. Put simply, ethnopoetics charges that Western- and print-oriented scholars have misinterpreted, and thus misjudged, the poetry of "primitive" cultures by failing to appreciate that aesthetic standards are not universal. Poetry from non-Western cultures has even been labeled "not poetry" because it failed to exhibit what scholars typically expect from poetry.²

The term "ethnopoetics" was coined in the late 1960s by Jerome Rothenberg (1969), who sought better means of translating oral poetries,

especially those of Native American cultures (see Rothenberg and Tedlock 1970).³ Rothenberg, as well as many other researchers, found most translations of Native American oral traditions to be inadequate; they failed to capture the power and beauty of the oral performance on the written page. Often the problem involved the translators' poetic sensibilities—translators turned the Native American poems into Western poetic styles, sometimes with meter, usually with metaphoric references familiar to Western ears, but not necessarily present in the poem in its native language. For instance, the repetitiveness of the above poem is grating to many listeners used to poetry based on Western poetic ideals of originality and variation. Thus, earlier translators of this poem cited by Kenneth Mendoza (1993) altered each repeated line, making it slightly different in wording (and thus meaning) from the others. For the Pawnee ceremony from which these stanzas derive, however, the exact repetition turns out to be a crucial element. The earlier translations therefore end up being mistranslations.⁴ The other problem with confining oral poetry to writing was the starkness of representing what was originally a spoken, chanted, or sung poem on a printed page. Even if the translations were accurate to the original idea of the poem, something was missing.

The Pawnee poem above is also a prime example of the "something missing." The poem, although accurately translated, has been pulled from its context in the oral lifeworld of the Pawnee—voice, gesture, movement, and other ritual elements of the Hako ceremony are missing [Mendoza (1993) does account for these elements]. In other words, ethnopoetics must concern itself not only with the text, the words of the poem, but with the performance of the poem within its situational context. These performance elements are central to understanding not only the role of poetry in the society that created it, but also the aesthetic value of the poem. But the inherent problem is obvious—how does a translator represent such features on the written page?

Anthropologist Dennis Tedlock set out to do just that with the narrative poetry of the Zuni people of New Mexico (1972), and later the Quiché Maya of Guatemala (1983, 1985). The goal was to produce a performable text and translation of an oral narrative, a "libretto." He employed a system akin to musical scoring, a notation system that represented graphically the various sound qualities, such as line breaks for pauses, dots in between lines for pauses of longer duration, capitals for loudness, smaller-than-average type for whispered or softly spoken words. Gestures, facial expressions, and significant audience responses were described in parentheticals and footnotes, which also contained descriptions of the overall storytelling situation. For Tedlock, all oral narrative is poetic, but one cannot hear or see the poetry

when the narratives are presented in unbroken prose paragraphs. He goes so far as to claim that prose does not exist except on the written page, because there is no silence, breath, or pause in prose. Silence, however, is the most important delineation of the poetic measure in oral poetry, and pauses must somehow be marked in any textual representation of such poetry.

One problem with insisting on the poetic notation of oral traditions of Native American groups is that many groups have died or are dying out, and the only representations left of their entire output of verbal art are pieces taken down before the invention of the tape recorder or video. The poets are gone; the sound is gone—all that remains are the written prose renderings of their performances. Tedlock is somewhat skeptical about discovering an oral poetics within ancient texts or within texts dictated to early ethnographers before they had the ability to record sound—oral poetries must be listened to, or be comparable to poetry that can still be listened to (1977, 1983, 1985). But should oral poetry that has been silenced by time be abandoned? Of course not—but the crucial and very difficult question remains: how does one “listen” to oral traditions from cultures that have been preserved only in writing?

By reference to narratives from Chinookan cultures dictated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (before the inventions enabling sound recording), linguist Dell Hymes (1981) answers this question and critiques Tedlock’s insistence on “living discourse” for ethnopoetic analysis. These Chinookan texts, dictated to and preserved by ethnographers such as Franz Boas (e.g. 1894), often represent the only remnants of the tradition. Hymes argues for their inherent worth in an ethnopoetics, despite the seeming loss of paralinguistic features that Tedlock deems so crucial. Hymes claims that this loss is only partial, that the best dictated texts still preserve some of the features in question; careful analysis can uncover some of the principles governing a cultural, oral performance of the text. Because pauses, Tedlock’s general indicator of poetic line, are not available in dictated texts, Hymes turns to other features of narratives to identify the line. For Hymes, the key to the ethnopoetics of any text is not necessarily to determine pause, but to discover the principles behind the organization—in other words, one must consider why pauses are taken at certain intervals, even in tape-recorded texts. What structures are grouped by the pauses?

Hymes employed the term “measured” as opposed to “metered” to describe the defining regularity of oral poetry. “Measure” here simply means that the poetry has a characteristic “grammatico-semantic repetition within its frame as a base” (1981). For the Chinookan oral narratives studied by Hymes, this repetitive feature is the initial particle and the features that co-occur in an identifiable pattern with the initial elements. Poetic “line,” then,

is marked by the presence of these features. Interestingly enough, these initial particles, although present in the original-language, dictated texts, are very often left out of translations, because they have no direct translation into English. They do not make sense semantically in another language. However, if one is to recognize the inherent poetry of the narratives, such “meaningless” features are absolutely necessary. They mark the structure; they are the “reason why” for pauses.

Of course the central idea of ethnopoetic analysis is that every culture has its own poetics, and that it can be described. Initial particles figure in the poetics of many languages, as the Western concept of meter is part of many others. The point is that there are differences; one culture’s poetry has different structural and aesthetic standards than another. Ethnopoetics encourages recognition and appreciation of such differences. Poetry from one culture cannot be judged or interpreted on the basis of another culture’s poetry. It is the job of the ethnopoeticist to discover within the texts the specific standards for that particular culture.

This idea stated by itself may not sound that radical, but the implications are immense. Folklorists, as well as scholars in other disciplines, have taken this basic idea to areas well beyond the translation of Native American poetics. The idea that genres of verbal folklore may actually be poetic and representable in lines has led to diverse studies of such genres in many cultural groups. Elizabeth C. Fine (1984) demonstrates some of the possibilities ethnopoetics presents in solving the ever-present difficulty of representing verbal folklore on the written page. Many analyses dovetail with the application of other theories of oral poetry to areas outside their point of origin. For instance, oral-formulaic theory began with comparative studies of the ancient Homeric and recent South Slavic epic traditions (Lord 1960, or see Foley 1988 for a summary). As scholars discovered formulaic elements in other traditions, they have also noted the crucial element of performance in discerning the poetic nature of the oral genres. Bruce Rosenberg (1988) and Elaine J. Lawless (1988) employ principles from both ethnopoetics and oral-formulaic theory to delineate the poetic nature of American folk sermons (Rosenberg’s research was among African-American ministers, Lawless’s among Pentecostal women preachers).

Ethnopoetic concepts of translation have enhanced numerous studies of cultural groups outside Native American traditions. John William Johnson’s translation of the *West African Epic of Son-Jara* (Johnson and Sisòkò 1992) is greatly enriched by representing various features of performance.⁵ Susan Slyomovics’s study, *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance* (1988), ethnopoetically transcribes and translates a

performance of the Bedouin epic of Bani Hilal. John McDowell (1989, 1994), in his studies of various South American groups, demonstrates the necessity of understanding the performative context to determine the grammar and poetics of oral traditions. These as well as many other ethnopoetic studies, bring to the forefront a crucial part of the oral performance: the performer. One of the complaints ethnopoetics has about traditional folklore scholarship is the assumed “collective” nature of folkloric verbal genres—works with no authorial attribution are assumed to be a product of a collective cultural consciousness, rather than the artistic production of an individual poet. Ethnopoetics recognizes individual artistry, even behind anonymous texts (although, obviously, the specific artist isn’t known), while emphasizing the crucial role tradition plays on the development and performance of the artist.

Shirley Lim (1987) makes the case for applying ethnopoetics to the reading of Asian-American poetry. An interesting feature of this particular study is its focus on written poetry. This application of ethnopoetics, although present from its beginnings, has rarely been picked up in folkloric ethnopoetic studies, but has important implications in discerning connections between folklore and literature. Such an application recognizes that writers, especially those who have connections to groups with strong oral traditional elements, may integrate oral traditional elements into their literary works. Understanding such literary works requires that readers appreciate the cultural elements, whether in content, sound, or structure; otherwise, interpretation of the work is skewed “westward” as much as were earlier translations of the Native American oral poetics. One must place the literary works in their appropriate contexts, which may include heavy influence from oral traditional elements. This goes not only for written poetics, but for prose writings as well. Folkloric analysis has proved helpful in understanding the folkloric content of numerous novels; ethnopoetic analysis could attune a reader to structural and auditory elements that contribute to a richer reading of such works.

Ancient texts that are assumed to be written, but that have clear connections to an oral lifeworld may benefit from ethnopoetic consideration as well. Much of the Bible fits this category. Hymes (1986), on the book of James, and Catherine S. Quick (1995), on the gospels, have discovered that there may be residual poetic qualities within the texts of these New Testament writings, reflecting the fact that such writings were originally meant for oral dissemination. Most works written before the advent of printing and mass literacy would qualify for such consideration. John Miles Foley (1995) draws from oral-formulaic theory, performance studies, and ethnopoetics in a comparative analysis of the oral traditional nature of texts from three cultures (South Slavic, Ancient Greek, and Old English), arguing that traditional oral

expression finds its way into written texts whenever a text must assume existence in an oral lifeworld.

While one rarely finds strong arguments against the basic principles of ethnopoetics, there have been criticisms of it in practice and questions about the extent of its applicability. The mildest criticism is the difficulty of ethnopoetic analysis—it requires a thorough knowledge of the original language and in-depth, even intimate, understanding of the culture, probably more so than a typical ethnographic, observational study. In addition one can read ethnopoetic texts in translation, but one can never perform ethnopoetic analysis of translated texts. The field is thus somewhat limiting. But this limitation is no more than would be expected for any kind of translation project. More insidious is the possibility that a given ethnopoetic analysis could unwittingly confirm stereotyped, even racist, assumptions about the cultures it studies (this concern is briefly expressed in Lim 1987). Researchers, despite their best intentions, enter into cultural situations with expectations, to a certain extent, already formed. Without critical distance from preconceived notions, ethnopoetics faces the possibility of misrepresenting and even patronizing the “primitive” culture, and then promoting false assumptions to the scholarly world at large. The problem is even more acute when dealing with oral-derived poetics from ancient cultures—one has no direct observation to work with, and must rely solely on second, third, and fourth-hand data. Such mistakes may begin a cycle, as future scholars rest their own studies on the questionable, stereotyped conclusions. This issue demonstrates why it is absolutely necessary that the translator be intimately acquainted with the language and culture under study. For an example of such a potential misrepresentation, consider that every Western literary genre includes both excellent and not-so-excellent examples of the form. So do oral traditional verbal genres. Has the researcher understood what that particular culture considers to be good and bad poetry? If not, he or she is in danger of presenting all of the material as equal, whereas within that culture, distinctions are drawn. Ethnopoetics may promote a sense of equality of verbal art forms among different cultures and may recognize that aesthetic standards are not universal. However, this does not mean that there are not standards within the culture under study.⁶

Sherman Paul (1985) notes another issue that has never really been fully addressed in ethnopoetic analysis—that of the seeming neglect of women’s oral traditional poetry. With some exceptions, most major ethnopoetical studies focus on male oral poets. Male genres in many oral traditional societies may be more visible than women’s, but the ability to produce exceptional verbal art is certainly not limited by gender. It is

somewhat ironic that an analytical system devoted to lifting up the verbal art of groups excluded by mainstream aesthetic standards may be undermining itself by promoting a policy of exclusion, thus unwittingly encouraging a different kind of hierarchy of aesthetic value.

Despite these shortcomings, ethnopoetics has made major contributions, not only to folklore, but to anthropology, linguistics, and literary criticism. For folklorists, perhaps the most important contribution is the answer ethnopoetics supplies to the difficult question of representing oral genres on the written page. It is, of course, not a total solution—performance can only be represented in a complete way by witnessing or participating in the performance itself. However, such participation of all interested parties is impossible, for obvious reasons. Therefore, since scholarship, at this point in time, requires written dissemination of ethnographic materials, ethnopoetics is perhaps the best available set of principles by which to provide such dissemination. In addition, folklorists constantly fight the battle of “worthiness” in the academic arena, especially in relation to literature scholars, who often question the aesthetic merit of the verbal genres folklorists study. Ethnopoetics points out the Western and chirographic bias of such questioning, and gives aesthetic value to the oral traditions studied by folklorists. Even more significantly, ethnopoetics deems worthy the verbal output of underrepresented cultural groups, groups that may not produce typical written literature, but who, without question, produce verbal art.

Notes

1 These two stanzas are from Kenneth Mendoza’s translations of a Pawnee Hako ceremony (1993).

2 One might cite the well-known example of Ruth Finnegan’s much-criticized statement (1970) that there are few epics in sub-Saharan Africa. Her assumptions were based on current knowledge of African literature and on strictly Western definitions of epic. Since then, however, scholars of African oral literatures have produced numerous examples of epics from this region, some that had previously been translated and published in prose because of a lack of understanding of the non-Western poetic principles at work in the poems (see Johnson, et al. 1997 for a complete summary of this issue).

3 See also issues of the journal *Alcheringa*, co-founded by Rothenberg and Tedlock, which address various issues concerning ethnopoetics.

4 For instance, Alice Fletcher's 1902 translation of the first stanza of the above-quoted poem (Mendoza 1993:91) is: "The Mother wakens from sleep; / She wakes, for the night is far spent; / The signs of dawn are now seen / In East, whence cometh new life." This translation clearly demonstrates the attempt to interpret the poem according to Western poetic sensibilities. Repetition is virtually eliminated, and concepts clearly not present in the original (e.g. "East" as the metaphorical source of "new life"), but quite familiar to Western ears, are incorporated.

5 Ethnopoetics has been applied to the translation and transcription of other African oral traditions; the anthology *Oral Epics from Africa* (Johnson, et al 1997) provides a representative sampling, as well as a contrast between epics presented in poetry and those presented in prose.

6 See, for example, chapter 5 of Lord 1960, which includes a discussion of how an epic singer's skill level affects the quality of the song performed.

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Suggested Readings

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