

How many oral archives are in your home?

Piloting a new Tuscan census in the Gra.fo Reloaded project

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the pilot phase of a new census of Tuscan oral archives promoted by the Gra.fo Reloaded project. Building on a long research tradition, the Gra.fo Reloaded census strives to take a step forward by a) updating the contents of previous similar endeavors; b) promoting contemporary initiatives to strengthen the oral archive research community; c) adapting well-established pre-testing procedures of National census agencies to its specific context. 13 individuals of diverse disciplinary backgrounds were asked to fill in the census form while thinking aloud; then, they completed an Italian reduced version of the Questionnaire of User Interface Satisfaction (QUIS). The results make a solid argument for running similar procedures in census construction processes and being aware of the features of our survey tools.

KEYWORDS

Gra.fo Reloaded; oral archives; census; cognitive interview; QUIS.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inaugurating the first electronic issue of *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, Canadian archivist Wilma MacDonald provocingly asked her readers “what happens to the oral history you create?”, while encouraging them to store their oral documents in suitable repositories for the sake of accessibility and long-term preservation [1]. Far from being a mere outburst of archival idealism, MacDonald’s call stemmed from her first-hand experience as an oral-archive survey conductor: comparing data from two National censuses launched in 1984 and 1994, she witnessed a steady increase in the production of tape-recorded documents [2]. This situation, in turn, urged to make both institutions and researchers aware of the importance of their materials, in order to reduce the risk of irreparable losses. Indeed, the digital revolution makes the increased rate of oral document production of the past decades appear as small talk. In this new milieu, the advantages of digital orality cannot be fully achieved if the broadened availability of tools for high-quality recording outpaces our capability of knowing, archiving, and safeguarding oral documents while making them easily available ([3] and, *mutatis mutandis*, [4]).

As for any other form of intangible cultural heritage, a first step on the pathway to the preservation of orality is acquiring knowledge of the existing materials, and, therefore, conducting and updating surveys, which is instrumental to the planning of long-term actions (e.g., [5]). However, this is not per se a small feat, since archive surveys are time-expensive activities for both the conductors and the respondents, who are not always in the right conditions to answer with quality information, if not to answer at all ([2]; [6]) – not to mention that the current digital “data flood” [7] most certainly implies tightened update intervals. A possible solution to this conundrum is the projecting of censuses which are not just periodic representations of the status quo, but systematically linked to permanent structures conceived for the spontaneous participation of the target population in any time and space. This is, for example, the approach advanced by a work-in-progress by the Italian Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi [8], which will host the census form on a long-lasting website designed for regular participative updating. In the same spirit – albeit more local in scope, another oral archive survey is currently under way: the Tuscan Gra.fo Reloaded census. After a brief introduction to the general project structure (§2), this paper will focus on the census planning, from the selection of the sources and the loci of constitution of a stable community of Tuscan oral archivists (§3), the formal guidelines (§4), up to the results of a pre-test phase (§5). Lastly, overall conclusions will be drawn (§6).

2. GRA.FO RELOADED

Gra.fo Reloaded is a project financed by Regione Toscana (2022-2024) and coordinated by Siena University, in collaboration with Fondazione Sistema Toscana, Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Toscana, Ecomuseo della Montagna Pistoiese, Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale “Antonio Zampolli” (Pisa National Research Council) and CLARIN-IT. Three main research lines are envisioned: firstly, as the name itself implies, Gra.fo Reloaded aims to establish a pipeline for the revivification of a previous Tuscan project on oral archives, Grammo-foni. Le soffitte della voce (Gra.fo; Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa and University of Siena, 2007-2013 [9]). During the course of its activities, Gra.fo surveyed, digitized, described, and made available to the public around 30 oral archives (3000 hours of recordings). However, its web access portal is no longer maintained and currently closed. For this reason, Gra.fo Reloaded plans to study the feasibility of transferring the original data on a much newer (and hopefully durable) infrastructure, Archivio

Vi.Vo. ([10]; see below, §3). In this process, Gra.fo Reloaded also relies on a previously uninvolved partner (Fondazione Sistema Toscana) in order to further amplify the reach of its activities and improve their sustainability over time. The second project objective consists in the new Tuscan census, which will be discussed in detail below. Thirdly, Gra.fo reloaded focuses on the re-use of oral archival materials for the sake of participative territory promotion. The Gra.fo documents recorded on the Apennine range in the Province of Pistoia will be analyzed and adapted to an augmented-reality geolocated audio tour (e.g., [11]) revolving around the areas covered by the local ecomuseum, thus realizing a long-planned extension of the original enterprise [12]. Citizens of the Pistoiese range will be consulted for both the itinerary sketching process and the gathering and production of additional oral documents. These three seemingly disconnected activities are, in actual fact, deeply intertwined. For example, the feasibility inquiry for the Gra.fo – Archivio Vi.Vo. transfer is being conducted using materials from the Pistoiese range as a case-study, thus also serving the third objective of the project. Moreover, the census is connected to the Archivio Vi.Vo. platform, alongside other contemporary initiatives on oral archives in Italy, as it will be shown in the next paragraph.

3. A TUSCAN COOKBOOK FOR AN ORAL ARCHIVE CENSUS: THE INGREDIENTS

As [10] recently stressed, the research tradition on oral archives in Tuscany is rather sound, counting the works of Giovanni Contini at the Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Toscana (who later co-authored [13]), seminal publications on specific topics [14] and, of course, dedicated censuses, among which [15] was the first uncovering 124 Regional oral archives between late 1999 and early 2004. The aforementioned original Gra.fo survey was a partial update and extension of [15]: indeed, this first Tuscan census focused on oral history and anthropology, while leaving aside archives pertinent to linguistics subdisciplines. To these aims, in addition to [15], Gra.fo surveyed other Italian oral archive censuses (namely [16, 17]) and then added to the mix of its form design other linguistics-related elements. In order to take a step further, the Gra.fo Reloaded census construction procedure repeated this pipeline, also adapting elements from [18] and [19], the latter of which, despite not being a census *sensu stricto*, helped formulating sections related to digital documentation (e.g., file formats), which was mostly left out previous similar efforts. Moreover, references to technology and the internet were also added from scratch: for example, an extensive archive content topic list was directly imported from Gra.fo while adding more contemporary keywords (e.g., “videogames”, “social networks”). This ensured not only an overall better topic coverage, but also some level of compliance with emerging speech research protocols (such as gamified ones; e.g. [20]). We also strived to achieve a good balance between standardization and accessibility of the deployed terminology. For example, we substituted the four-level carrier physical condition grading scale from [18] with the one from [21] (alongside an adaptation of the respective semantic tags), which, being dedicated to collectors, might be more acknowledged by the general public.

As we briefly mentioned above (§1), the Gra.fo Reloaded census makes explicit reference to other contemporary Italian projects on oral archives for the sake of community building. Firstly, the census describes to the respondent the software developed through the Archivio Vi.Vo. project (Regione Toscana 2019-2021; University of Siena, Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Toscana, Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale “Antonio Zampolli” - Pisa National Research Council - and CLARIN-IT, Ecomuseo del Casentino): an easy-to-use online platform with an integrated workflow guiding the archivist from the creation of a long-term preservation digital copy to the finalization of the individual sound documents contained by the carrier through interfaces dedicated to audio restoration and content description – all being compliant to international standards [10]. Secondly, the respondent is informed of [22], a *Vademecum* on oral document creation, description, preservation, and valorization jointly written by a heterogeneous group composed by members of the CLARIN-IT consortium, National institutions, and scientific associations. With respect to both these tools, the respondent can declare his/her interest in dedicated sections and be kept up-to-date of related initiatives via future mailing lists. Through an ideal consistent reach of [8] and our census, the Tuscan research community will be soon acquainted with several bootstrap tools related to the investigation of oral sources (an accessible text for learning fundamental concepts on disparate aspects of the workflow; a participative perpetual census of the gathered materials; an open-access, intuitive software for oral material processing and storage), potentially triggering a snowball effect of lasting awareness (see also the “crowdsourcing” idea of the original Gra.fo project [23]). Of course, the close contact with Archivio Vi.Vo. and the *Vademecum* left other structural marks on the Gra.fo Reloaded census. While a peculiar attention paid to restoration, digitization, legal issues, and related archival documents stem from the former, the latter, through the consequently constituted Tavolo permanente per le fonti orali¹, allowed us to fruitfully discuss with [8] during the respective development phases.

¹ bit.ly/3kAVnjg.

To sum up, this first phase of source selection, revision, and integration left us with the following census macro-sections: physical carriers; digital documents; other archive features (archival order, description, long-term preservation); document contents; other related documents; legal issues; publications; previous knowledge of pertinent topics; declarations of interest; personal data (of all the involved subjects)². Now that all these census ingredients were placed on the worktable, we had to look for a viable strategy for combining them and assessing their goodness. To this aim, we searched for foreign recipes.

4. THE RECIPE

Literature on survey design is abundant. Here we will briefly cover two main areas of our interest, namely the modes of data collection and the rationale behind question structuring. In the mid Nineties, survey scientists began to explore the potential of the world wide web and its sampling problems [24]: given the limited diffusion of the internet, the subset of the population reachable through it presented biased features. The late adoption of web-based procedures in Italian oral archive surveys goes well beyond the sake of statistical finesse. Among the sources mentioned in §3, [18] was the first to evaluate a multimode data collection strategy involving the web, the complete adoption of emails being hindered by their limited diffusion among local institutions. When compared to European standards, Italy has a history of subpar internet access, especially in families consisting of 65+ years old people and residing in places far from major urban areas [25; 26]. An Italian oral archive census cannot forgo these two demographic subsets: recall that the biggest archive discovered in Tuscany by [15] is possessed by a religious community in the countryside of Grosseto. The decision of previous endeavors to rely on phone calls and paperworks was not a matter of achieving a representative sample: it was a matter of achieving a successful census. Despite this peculiar context, oral archive survey conductors fully transitioned to web-based approaches in more recent times [19; 8]. [19] relied on Google Forms, an online survey tool which caught the eye of the scientific community since its first versions because of its free availability, intuitiveness, and functionalities – in particular, its skip logic and data plotting features [27]. More recently, [28] also highlighted the low cognitive workload required to use the tool and the familiarity that a good number of internet users has with it – these properties being probably interrelated from the viewpoint of text legibility [29]. These qualities convinced us to plan a sequential multimode strategy consisting of a first, time non-expensive, campaign distributing a Google Forms implementation of the census via email followed by an ad hominem follow-up (via phone or in person) to reduce non-response rate. In order to keep an eye on potential mode effects on responses, the conductor will keep track of the circumstances of questionnaire completion [30].

With respect to the other topic of interest, previous research highlight that question design choices are hardly universally right or wrong, suggesting that knowledge of the specific trade-offs is essential in tailoring an effective survey. A good exemplification of this point is the line of inquiry on check-all-that-apply (CATA) versus forced-choice (FC) question format. It is generally assumed that the latter leads to more attentive answers and higher endorsement rates of the individual options [31]. However, the sheer advantages of FCs are probably too small in comparison to the higher CATA perceived usability [32]. Moreover, as our census form is rather extensive, time completion times are also a concern [33], leading us to prefer CATAs for questions with long lists of options (such as the content topic selection commented above), while eventually trying to gather more precise information in follow-ups. Even though an extensive discussion on all the design features of the census is out of the scope of this paper, we will list here a series of elements with pertinent bibliographical references. We tried to write our questions with a concise style [34], but with frequent parenthetical clarifications (definitions, formatting requirements, etc.) positioned after the question [35]; in compliance with the implementation of Google Forms skip logic, the number of questions per census page was kept moderated [36], and a progress indicator was provided for transparency (but see [37]). Lastly, given the absence of consensus on the issue, we followed the general tendency of placing demographic questions on the involved subjects after the other sections ([38] for a recent short review). At the end of this assembling phase, we ended up with a preliminary Google form composed of 47 content pages and 98 total questions (mean 2.08 questions per page). This total estimate might be seen as intimidating; however, the implementation of Forms skip logic progressively reduces the completion burden alongside with the decrease of surveyed archive complexity, leaving the minimal cases with approximately half of the total questions to fill in. In any case, before the launch of the survey, we needed to answer a fundamental question: how does this new census recipe taste?

5. USABILITY TESTING

In order to take a first look at how potential users would interact with our new census, we run a usability test inspired by the guidelines of two National agencies with a tradition of formalizing and expounding their procedures to the scientific

² A GDPR-compliant consent form was prepared with the guidance of the University of Siena legal office and placed at the very beginning of the final version of the census form (see below, §5).

community: Statistics New Zealand (e.g., [39]) and, in particular, the United States Census Bureau (e.g., [40]). A two-step protocol was envisioned, consisting of a qualitative cognitive interview (for accuracy) followed by a quantitative questionnaire on user satisfaction.

Participants and settings. While a final quota of participants was not decided a priori, we opted to stop testing after 13 individual runs, since the number of new information and suggestions emerging from the procedure had evidently become stagnant. The recruited participants were acquaintances of the first author, did not have any prior archival knowledge, and had very diverse education levels (from high school diploma to university professor) and involvement with oral documents (music researchers and enthusiasts, linguists, psychologists, etc.). The participants were interviewed in private homes or online via video calls.

Materials. The preliminary version of the census extensively discussed in §§3-4 was the object of the inquiry. In order to have a quantitative assessment of user satisfaction, we adopted a multi-purpose tool, the Questionnaire of User Interface Satisfaction (QUIS) [41], in a 11 (specific) + 3 (overall reactions) items version reduced by the United States Census Bureau [42]. The reduced QUIS was translated into Italian (through content adaptation) and implemented in another Google form, with a 5-point Likert scale (with various semantic tags, following the general rationale of higher scores equal desirable properties) associated to each one of the questions.

Procedure and analysis. The experimenter sent the link with the Google census form to the participant and, if the test was conducted online, asked him/her to share the screen. Participants were requested to fill in the census as any other user of the future campaign while thinking aloud. In order to accustom them to this practice, we asked them to answer the training question “how many windows are in your home?” [43]; then, once the participant had warmed up, the experimenter took note of their interactions with the census form and their pertinent comments while trying to keep his active verbal interventions limited to explicit requests. In case participants declared that they did not possess any oral documents, the test was run using the following vignette: “imagine that you have a very unique collection of recordings of your favorite musician’s live performances and rehearsals”. After the completion of the form, the experimenter sent a second Google link with the QUIS to the participant asking him/her to provide an answer to each question. Each individual session lasted from around 30 mins. to 1 hour. Given the very limited number of responses, the analysis of the QUIS was conducted using the integrated descriptive statistics tool of Google Forms.

Results: Cognitive interviews. 44 distinct points of discussion emerged from the 13 interviews, with a mean of 6/7 comments per interview (and, thus, a noticeable overlap). A very common observation pertained to an off-putting formatting derived from a hasty question copy-paste from a development textual document. The other points can be roughly divided in two macro-categories: 31 requests for clarification features (mostly about archiving terminology, but also a small number of procedural opacities) and 12 suggestions for question/option revisions (mostly missing options – potential document contents, specific subdisciplines, etc.³).

Results: QUIS. The means of the responses to the individual questions were overall acceptable: intuitiveness (4.3), organization of the information (4.1), terminological coherence (4), information arrangement on screen (4.3), adequate presence of sectoral terminology (4.2), character readability (5), ease of learning to operate the census (4.8), appropriateness to inexperienced users (3.9), perceived census completion speed (4.3), operation predictability (4.8), ease of performing response operations (4.7); overall impression (terrible-wonderful, 4; frustrating-satisfying, 4; difficult-easy, 4.6). An open-ended final suggestion box was rarely filled in and will not be commented here. Note that the only mean score below 4 pertains to the needs of non-specialists, which confirms the importance of the many requests for clarification retrieved during the cognitive interviews.

Census re-building. The two authors jointly evaluated the contents of the 44 points of discussions and critically examined the best integration strategy for each of them. Then, for the sake of traceability, the test census Google form was copied in another URL and consequently modified. The final census has 49 pages (preceded by a consent form) and 100 questions (mean 2.04 questions per page). As the reader might notice, we strived to implement content revisions in the pre-existing structure without adding too many new elements: in fact, the QUIS responses indicated that the original census length was deemed acceptable. The final census is available at <https://forms.gle/kwRJebacsdp3eXC08>.

6. SUMMARY AND CURRENT WORK PROGRESS

Given the dramatic increase in data production, conducting oral archive surveys risks becoming a researcher’s Sisyphus boulder. In this paper, we highlighted that a contemporary Italian census trend tries to mitigate this condition by connecting users to resources apt for self-learning, awareness developing, and autonomous intervention. In an attempt to make the knowledge gained through years of Tuscan oral archive tradition percolate into a new research community, the Gra.fo

³ Curiously, there was also an explicit conversion request of a FC question to CATA, supporting [32].

Reloaded census does its part. This new form is not only dedicated to non-archivists, but also structured in cooperation with them. Usability testing underlined the importance of the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle in survey design, which is indeed not only limited to mere question length [34]. Even though technology offers easy solutions (such as skip logic features) to reduce the disruptive effects of burdensome numbers of survey items, terminological and procedural clarity must be a primary concern for conductors. In this regard, our pretest phase highlights the advantages of relying on an external perspective to efficiently spot residual issues. At the present time, the census has been sent to over 350 addresses, including research associations, Municipality offices, ecomuseums, Ph.D. program coordinators, and individual researchers. Related information was also disseminated through newsletters and during events devoted to oral sources. Gra.fo Reloaded and its census caught the eye of the press and was covered by the daily newspaper La Repubblica [44]. In the meanwhile, we are beginning to narrow down our focus in order to plan the subsequent “ad hominem” strategy of data collection.

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