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ORAL COMPOSITION

Oral composition broadly refers to the creation of organized verbal formulations without reliance on writing. Although in essence a familiar process in everyday speech, it has become a quasi-technical and debated term, applied especially to bringing into being relatively sustained examples of entextualized *VERBAL ART*, both ancient and recent. It has thus been of interest to linguists, anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists, historians, and specialists in specific languages and cultures, also linking to work on *ORAL CULTURE*, *PERFORMANCE, STORY*, *LITERACY,* and *MEMORY*.

The central issues have been, first, and most directly, how lengthy oral poems, narratives and other sustained verbal forms can come into being without writing - a puzzle for those steeped in literate traditions that assume the centrality of the written word; and second, how this relates to performance (for performance is arguably how an oral creation exists).

Earlier approaches focused largely on non-literate settings, especially those characterized as "primitive" or "traditional". One model was of spontaneous improvisation by the unself-conscious "child of nature," unfettered (and unhelped) by recognized artistic conventions. Another was of unchanging tradition from the far-distant past, composed not by living creators but stored in the communal tribal memory.

These models were largely superseded by the influential "oral-formulaic" approach (also known as "the oral theory ") which came to the fore in the mid-twentieth century. The concept of "oral composition" acquired a specific meaning and became a key term of analysis and explanation. Its classic statement in Albert Lord's seminal *The Singer of Tales* (1960) used fieldwork in the 1930s Yugoslavia to demonstrate how lengthy oral poems were composed *during* performance: the singers drew on a traditional store of formulaic phrases and themes, which enabled them, without writing or verbatim memorization, to pour forth long epic songs in uninterrupted flow. Variations around such formulaic phrases as, for example, "By Allah, he said, and mounted his white horse" recur throughout the poems, providing a parallel to the "Homeric epithets" like "fleet-footed Achilles" found in early, putatively oral, Greek epics. This "special technique of composition" (Lord 1960: 17) relied not on preplanned, memorized, texts but on composition-*in*-performance. Contrary to literate expectations, there was no fixed correct version: each performance was authentic in its own right, a unique product composed-and-performed on one occasion. Oral-formulaic composing was linked to a traditional, oral, mindset, incompatible with literacy and the literate mind, and once singers became literate, it was posited, they lost the power to compose orally.

The oral-formulaic theory was enormously influential throughout much of the later twentieth century and across a wide span of disciplines, providing as it apparently did an answer to the puzzle of verbal composition without writing. Examples of comparable formulaic expression – and hence, it seemed, of oral composition - were identified throughout the globe, from early Greek epic, Old English texts, or the Bible, to living examples recorded from the field, soon also extending to the full range of poetic genres and to prose-like forms such as sermons or storytelling.

Though still regarded as a classic approach, oral-formulaic theory has been both modified and challenged, especially during the last two decades.

First it has become apparent that not all genres of unwritten verbal art follow the oral-formulaic composition-in-performance mode, nor, as implied by the classic oral-formulaic analysts, is "oral composition" a single identifiable process. Their often somewhat generalized conclusions have not been fully supported by the empirical evidence for oral forms turn out to be created in diverse ways. Some are composed *before*, and separated from, performance. Some do after all involve memorization. One much-quoted case is of the Somali poets who spend hours, sometimes days, composing elaborate genres of oral poetry, later delivered word-for-word either by themselves or by reciters who are able to memorize poems and, without writing, store large and exactly reproducible repertoires in their memory over many years. Elsewhere too prior composition is sometimes a long-drawn out and carefully considered procedure, in some cases involving multiple authors and/or rehearsals before being performed. Certain women's personal songs in mid-twentieth-century Zambia for example were thought out by one woman, elaborated with her friends, worked over for days by an expert composer, then rehearsed and memorized before final performance. In other cases a composer may speak aloud words of rapid inspiration designed for later performance, to be captured by listeners on the spot through memorizing, tape-recording, or writing (further details and discussion in Finnegan 1992, Chapter 3, 2007, Chapters 7, 11). Contrary to the classic oral-formulaic model, oral composing varies in different cultures, genres, and circumstances.

Second, the assumption that literacy and orality are mutually incompatible has been extensively challenged. By now many empirical examples of their interaction in both historical and more recent times have been noted and investigated. At a more theoretical level there are also the current transdisciplinary critiques of the west-centered binary dichotomizing between primitive / civilized, non-western / western, traditional / modern and, alongside these, oral / literate, together with parallel challenges to the arguably ethnocentric and ideological presuppositions of a simple and necessary link between "literacy" and "modernity." In practice, it appears, there are multiple forms of literacy, interacting therefore in multiple ways with oral modes.

Despite challenges to some of its central presuppositions, the legacy of the oral-formulaic school lives on. It rightly unsettled the (literate) concept of fixed correct text, highlighted the significance of performance and audience, and, if in the (arguably) somewhat elusive terminology of "formulae," pointed up the importance for composition of conventionalized verbal formulations in generic settings. Scholars identifying themselves with that tradition have continued their (largely textual) examinations of "oral" and "oral-derived" texts, whilst also reconfiguring their approaches by attention to the specificities of aesthetic and cultural traditions, interacting fruitfully with trends elsewhere to produce sophisticated analyses of the complex interrelations of oral with written composition (Amodio 2005, Foley 2002).

Though there is currently no one dominant approach to complement the earlier "oral theory", the topic of composition without writing (or anyway without central reliance on writing) has continued to attract interdisciplinary interest. The focus is now less on attempting to delineate "oral composition" as a single process or as

pertaining to some special kind of culture or mentality, and more on complexity and plurality.

Oral composition is thus no longer conceptualized as primarily confined to "traditional", historic or non-western settings but as also including such examples as contemporary popular songs or the spoken oratory of modern statesmen and publicists. It has also been noted how readily some long-established oral genres are exploited in new settings, like the South African praise poems now composed for Nelson Mandela, the national football team, or university graduation ceremonies, and circulated not only in live performance but in writing, on radio, CD-ROM, and the web. The relation between oral and literate is now more often envisaged as continuum than opposition – or, better, as a multifaceted spectrum of overlaps, interpenetrations and diversities. The now influential concepts of entextualization and of *DIALOGISM*, here applied in particular by linguistic and literary anthropologists, have also bridged the once-accepted chasm between oral and literate, and illumined the multiple ways in which people construct, assemble and interact with texts (Barber 2007, Silverstein and Urban 1996).

The meaning of "oral" itself has also been enlarged and problematized. Most oral compositions, it is now increasingly noted, are realized not just through words but through a constellation of multimodal resources. The act of performance may include, for example, movement, bodily enactment, visual devices, and the variegated arts of the voice (volume, INTONATION, speed, silence, timbre, atmosphere and much else): A musical element is essential in certain genres, an aspect often neglected in western scholars' propensity to privilege the verbal component. Though *MUSIC* and words are in some cultures and genres taken as distinct, composed by different people, this is not always so, and some scholars argue that language and music form a continuum rather than dichotomy (see Banti and Giannatasio 2004). The substantial recent work on *GESTURE* (McNeill 2000, Kendon 2004) has also elucidated the integral relation between gesturing and speaking. Even if below our explicit consciousness, gesture, it seems, is a planned and patterned activity, a dimension therefore which, like music, must arguably enter into a full understanding of oral composition and performance.

Recent approaches to MEMORY are also relevant. Historians, anthropologists, and psychologists have drawn attention to the frames within which remembering is actively recreated and the diverse social mechanisms for organizing and manipulating memory. Some cultures or genres prioritize word-for-word memorization and organize formal or informal training in this skill; in others different arts are emphasized, including improvisation. Generic conventions themselves provide schemas for organizing and activating memory, offering constraints and opportunities for the creative flow of language not only through larger frames such as *NARRATIVE*, praising or lamenting, but also by memory-enhancing devices like imageries, *RHYTHM*, audience (and chorus) participation, and by sound-pattern repetitions and sequences such as *RHYME*, *ALLITERATION*, parallelism or melody. In some contexts "memory" is seen as itself an aspect of *CREATIVITY*, eroding its apparent opposition to "composition" (see further Rubin 1995, Carruthers 1990).

The upshot is that "oral composition " has somewhat dissolved as a distinctive topic for analysis. It no longer stands out as something self-evidently special or puzzling but as an aspect of processes being studied from other viewpoints and as taking place in many different forms, settings and modalities – from lengthy art

genres to the creativity of everyday conversation; from long preplanned and rehearsed performances to extemporized speeches; from live delivery to multi-media enactments. It is now tied less to theories of the "primitive", "traditional" or, indeed, the "oral" as such, as to on-going issues related to language or creativity more generally, analyzed both comparatively and in cultural specificities.

While in one way this has undermined the idea of "oral composition " as a subject for direct scrutiny in its own right, in another this broader cross-cultural approach and the empirical investigations it has stimulated have enabled a firmer grasp on the complexity of the processes by which, without much or any direct recourse to writing, people can and do produce verbal formulations – both lengthy and short, aesthetically-marked and everyday. Further, all this has helped to challenge traditional models of language as realized pre-eminently either, on the one hand, in stable written texts or, on the other, in relatively unconstrained and perhaps trivial everyday speech. A consideration of oral composing highlights the sustained and creative marshalling of language in situations where writing does not necessarily lie at the core: verbal genres which are by no means outdated or peculiar but have a wide spread in the world both yesterday and today.

-- Ruth Finnegan

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