■

ETHNOPOETICS

Dennis Tedlock

Study of the verbal arts in a worldwide range of languages and
cultures. Primary attention is given to the vocal-auditory chan-
nel of communication in which speaking, chanting, or singing
voices give shape to proverbs, riddles, curses, laments, praises,
prayers, prophecies, public announcements, and narratives (*see*
FOLKTALE; PROVERB; RIDDLE).

 The aim is not only to analyze and interpret oral perfor-
mances but also to make them directly accessible through tran-
scriptions and translations that display their qualities as works
of art.

History

Ethnopoetics originated in the United States among poets such
as David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Gary Snyder, all of
whom had training in anthropology or linguistics; Nathaniel
Tarn, whose poetic career was preceded by an anthropological
career under the name E. Michael Mendelson; and anthropol-
ogists and linguists with experience in writing poetry, includ-
ing Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, and Dennis Tedlock. The
term *ethnopoetics* was first used in print in 1968 by Rothenberg

to name his editorial department in the poetry magazine *Stony Brook.* In 1970 he joined Tedlock in founding *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics,* a magazine featuring transcripts, translations, and tearout disc recordings of performances by indigenous verbal artists from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

Philosophy and Methodology

Practitioners of ethnopoetics treat the relationship between PERFORMANCE and text as a field for experimentation. Texts that were taken down in the era of handwritten dictation and published as prose are reformatted and retranslated in order to reveal their poetic features as defined by such formal devices as initial particles, native pattern numbers, syntactic structures, and parallelism (*see* ORAL HISTORY). In the case of a sound recording, transcripts and translations serve not only as listening guides but also as scores for new performances. The richest single GENRE is storytelling, in which speakers depart from third-person narrative in order to take the parts of the characters. In the process they provide dramatized examples of everything from an ordinary conversation to a shamanic power SONG, while at the same time simulating voices that differentiate characters according to social position, personality, and emotional state.

An ethnopoetic score follows the original timing of a recorded performance, dividing the words into lines according to the alternation of sounds and silences. This makes it possible to distinguish rapid passages (with little pausing) from slow ones (with much), and it becomes apparent that pauses often create suspense by cutting across verse or sentence structures rather than coinciding with them. In the following passage translated from Zuni (an indigenous language of New Mexico), three sentences are broken into eight tension-filled lines. The pauses between lines average three-quarters of a second, with two dots indicating a two-second pause. The story concerns a

dancer who became possessed by his MASK and tried to run away:

> They brought him back, and when they
> tried to unmask him
> the mask
> was stuck
> to his face.
> He was changing over.
> . .
> When they tried to unmask the young man, some of his
> flesh peeled off.

In contrast with surprising events like this one, actions carried out according to a plan may be described with a series of one-sentence lines. In the following example, translated from Haya (a language of Tanzania), a woman is preparing for a journey into the wilderness:

> She grinds a little millet for herself.
> She makes it into porridge.
> She finishes it.
> She wraps it.
> She finishes wrapping—
> she goes and forges for herself nine arrowheads.
> She ties them up.

Just as the Zuni passage had one line (the sixth) whose completeness momentarily relieved tension, so this passage has one line (the fifth) that introduces a tense moment into an otherwise orderly account. Instead of ending this line with a falling intonation, indicating a complete sentence, the narrator leaves it hanging with a rise (indicated by a dash) just before telling us that the woman knows not only how to prepare food but also how to make weapons.

Scoring also requires attention to changes of amplitude. In this next excerpt a Zuni narrator emphasizes the climactic third line not by loudness but by a decrease in amplitude, thus preserving the delicacy of the moment of birth:

> She sat down
> by a juniper tree and strained her muscles:
> (*softly*) the little baby came out.

Other ways of giving emphasis are illustrated by a dialogue from a Yucatec Maya story in which a bereaved man consults with his guardian spirit. In the first and third lines a loud voice (shown in capitals) dramatizes the man's predicament and the forthrightness of the guardian's response; in the last two lines a slow, precise enunciation (in italics) and a focusing of loudness on isolated words give the guardian's further remarks a didactic force:

> "What shall I do, small friend? My wife was CARRIED AWAY.
> My eyes are sad since it happened."
> "WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO SEE HER?"
> "I'd like to go see so I could find where she is."
> "Good, fine. *You'll have to go see*
> BUT there is a WAY to see. You are going to SEE, friend."

Conventional transcripts make oral performances seem more repetitious than literary compositions, but ethnopoetic scores reveal that repeated words may be differentiated by changes in voicing. In the Zuni excerpt below, three identically worded phrases contrast not only because one of them is loud, but also because they are divided into three descending pitch levels by a chantlike rendition:

> And ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HAD COME
> KILLED THE DEER
> killed the deer
> killed the deer.

Some dimensions of performance, including tones of voice, sound effects, and gestures, require parenthetical descriptive notes like the ones in dramatic scripts (*see* GESTURE). Whatever a score may encompass, the notion of a definitive text has no place in ethnopoetics. Just as any translation from one language to another suggests alternative translations, so any pas-

sage from sound to visible marks suggests others. Linguistics avoids this problem by narrowing its attention to the normative side of performance, recognizing only such features as can be accounted for by general rules. Ethnopoetics remains open to the creative side of performance, valuing features that may be rare or even unique to a particular artist or occasion.

■ *See also* ORAL POETRY.

Bibliography

Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics (New York) nos. 1–5 (old series), 1970–1973, and (Boston) Vols. 1–4 (new series), 1975–1980.

David Antin, *Talking at the Boundaries*, New York, 1976.

Charles L. Briggs and Julián J. Vigil, eds., *The Lost Gold Mine of Juan Mondragón: A Legend from New Mexico Performed by Melaquías Romero*, Tucson, 1990.

Nora M. Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives*, Seattle, 1987.

Elizabeth C. Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print*, Bloomington, Ind., 1984.

Allan F. Burns, *An Epoch of Miracles: Oral Literature of the Yucatec Maya*, Austin, Tex., 1983.

Dell Hymes, *"In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*, Philadelphia, 1981.

Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, New York, 1972.

Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*, 2d ed., rev. and expanded, Berkeley, Calif., 1985.

Peter Seitel, *See So That We May See: Performances and Interpretations of Traditional Tales from Tanzania*, Bloomington, Ind., 1980.

Joel Sherzer and Anthony C. Woodbury, eds., *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric*, Cambridge, 1987.

Dennis Tedlock, *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians*, New York, 1972, reprint Lincoln, Neb., 1978.

Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*, Philadelphia, 1983.

Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church*, Austin, Tex., 1988.