

Oral Tradition in Linguistics

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Historical linguists and Indo-Europeanists are not known for their attention to Oral Tradition. Nevertheless, oral tradition—with lowercase letters—plays a critical role in linguistic scholarship, one so basic, indeed, that it is rarely acknowledged as such. In order to understand how this is so, let us examine the two words “oral” and “tradition.”

“Oral” means “pertaining to the mouth” or, when it comes to language, “communicated by mouth/through speech”; the sense in which scholars like John Miles Foley generally use it is an extension of the latter definition, namely “performed by mouth/through speech,” where “performed” refers to a special kind of communication. What is important to understand is that every linguist is an oralist: language exists in the first place for the purpose of communication, and the most basic form of this communication is through a medium other than writing, which for everything other than sign language is via the mouth. And every historical linguist is an oralist, too, for the additional reason that it is possible to look at language across time only because parents naturally speak in their own most familiar tongue with their children, generation after generation. As for “tradition,” this refers to “that which is passed down,” and so it is obvious that every historical linguist is a traditionalist as well as an oralist: the study of linguistic change depends on the fact that communication proceeds naturally from one generation to the next, over and over again. In short, then, even a historical linguist who is not interested in, say, the oral nature of Homeric epic is fundamentally indebted to oral tradition.

Some of the most interesting recent work in Indo-European studies looks at not just “normal” language, which is the usual object of most linguistic research, but also forms of speech, like poetry, that are delivered in an exceptional context. For at least 150 years, scholars have noted the existence of cognate poetic phrases in two or more Indo-European traditions, with pride of place usually going to a passing comment by Adalbert Kuhn in 1853 on “imperishable fame” in the Greek *Iliad* and the Sanskrit *Rigveda*, both major works of traditional oral poetry. However, proper appreciation

of the artful employment of language and of larger poetic structures (not just words and phrases, but type-scenes and themes) has been slower in coming. In the past couple of decades, the most influential figure in the field has been Calvert Watkins, whose 1995 book is already a classic. The next meeting of the Indogermanische Gesellschaft, the leading international professional society of Indo-Europeanists, will be taking place in Paris in October 2003, and the theme is “Indogermanische Dichtersprache”: happily, the study of historical poetics, and with it, o/Oral t/Tradition, is on the rise.

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