

Oral Poetry in the Foreign Language Classroom

Catharine Mason

So much of foreign language study has been based on a strictly semantic approach to language. A mastery of the basic building blocks of language—phonemes, words, phrases, clauses—is indeed dependent upon an understanding of dictionary definitions, grammar rules, and syntactic formulas. It is hardly my intention to argue that these lessons are not essential to foreign language study. Rather, I will seek to show that this semantic-oriented view and practice of language must be accompanied with a more pragmatic approach that includes performance criteria in verbal expression. Much of the theoretical, or rather methodological, groundwork for this approach has been laid down by Dell Hymes, especially in his seminal study of ethnopoetics entitled *In Vain I Tried to Tell You* (1981). Hymes's interpretation of performance competence allows us to better identify forms of expression as well as performers themselves whom a given community will consider competent. His notion of "breakthrough into performance" opens up the study of verbal art as a full-fledged event, as opposed to a series of sounds and phrases that are to be captured on a page that is studied as an end in itself. Finally, his method of verse analysis provides practical guidelines for making oral texts accessible to scholars of all sorts.

In my classroom we begin with an audio or an audio-visual text that has already been analyzed for its verse form and stylistic features. At the outset of an initial observation of the performance, we discuss sound patterns, rhythm, intonations, vocal textures, and any sign of meaning that may be gleaned from the musicality of the text. Unusual pronunciation patterns are explained in the oral reconstruction of the text, and we listen to/watch the performance again. This second listening allows for a certain satisfaction on the part of the students as they reinforce their initial "intuitions" and discover the learned forms (grammatical, phonetic, rhetorical, and others). Lastly, a written transcription of the text is provided and a more thorough stylistic analysis is undertaken. Reading the text

allows us to match up sounds that have been difficult to decipher with semantic references that students may or may not be familiar with.

If all goes well, the students are now in a position to encounter the performance as poetry. After a third and final observation of the performance, they often ask questions about the cultural dimensions of the poet's way of speaking and begin to get a feel for the performance arena as it is reconstructed in class discussion. They are asked to give their opinion on the text, to identify the aesthetic qualities of the performance. Simply put, why do they like it? And they always do!

The study of oral poetry is indeed very gratifying for both teacher and student. The poetic function, as a universal category, is accessible to interlocutors using a foreign language, and a study of this function facilitates immediate comprehension as well as a more profound appreciation of the culture with which the language is connected. The use of videotaped performance is not at all the same as a firsthand experience of such an event, but it provides an intimate and stimulating encounter with an individual who is both master of the language being studied and a creative speaker. The discovery of oral poetic form requires attentive observation that enhances comprehension and crosscultural efforts, two key objectives of foreign language study. Both teacher and student become audience members, and interpretation becomes a collaborative effort as opposed to a one-way form of instruction.

Université de Caen

References

- Bauman and Briggs 1990 Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs. "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19:59-88.
- Foley 1995 John Miles Foley. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hymes 1981 Dell Hymes. *"In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jakobson 1990

Roman Jakobson. *Language in Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tedlock 1983

Dennis Tedlock. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.