

The Creation of Basque Oral Poetry by Four American *Bertsolaris*

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In this article I analyze Basque oral poetry, or *bertsolaritza*, by four poets who live in the United States. We start with a remarkable fact: all four *bertsolaris* come from the Spanish region of Navarre. They include Jesus “Jess” Goñi, born in Oronoz in 1947; Martin Goikoetxea, born in Gorriti in 1948; Jesus “Jess” Arriada, born in Arizkun in 1935; and Johnny Kurutxet, born in San Francisco in 1946 but raised in Esterenzubi and resident there until the age of 20. The overall situation in the USA has been well described by the researcher Joxe Mallea in several publications (2003, 2005). Within that context this paper specifically examines the production of the American *bertsolaris*.¹ The corpus I will use for this analysis consists of a selection of 237 *bertsos* composed by these four oral poets and recorded and transcribed in the USA.



Jesus “Jess” Goñi, Martin Goikoetxea, Jesus “Jess” Arriada, and Johnny Kurutxet. Photo: Xenpelar Document Center, used by permission.

¹ I focus here on spontaneous oral improvisation. In fact, written *bertsolaritza* is very common and widespread in North America; however, this area requires and deserves special analyses and methodologies. The *bertsos* are a very special topic for Basques in North America, a phenomenon closely related to the survival of the Basque community. Joxe Mallea formulates the connection as follows (2003:274): “Since nowadays very few Basques come to the United States, what will happen to *bertso*-singing after you quit?”



Martin Goikoetxea (on left) and Jesus Goñi performing in Boise, Idaho.
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Jesus Goñi (left), Johnny Kurutzet (middle), and Martin Goikoetxea (right).
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Of course, *bertsolaritza* is a communicative act. The text produced by a *bertsolari* while performing is a dimension of this speech-act, perhaps the most important one. Other aspects (such as kinesics, melodies, and so on) are not considered here. Even so, textual analysis will let us approach this performative act, revealing the main compositional strategies used to create *bertsos*. These strategies reflect each *bertsolari*'s background and artistic repertoire. Moreover, in some cases the text is all that remains from some performances.

Before beginning our examination, we may briefly recall the general situation of the *bertsolaris* in the USA. Joxe Mallea provides a wonderful view of the context: "The poets living in the United States are isolated from the whole *bertsolari* movement, not to mention the heart of the Basque-speaking population, making it extremely difficult for them to keep their inventive edge sharp" (2003:50). One of our goals will be to determine whether this isolation has any discernible influence in the *bertsos* performed by these four poets.

In order to offer a deeper and more pluralistic point of view, this analysis will follow a set of steps closely related to some aspects and elements of *bertsolaritza*. First of all, it takes into account the rhyme, the last sentence, and the verse. I will also talk about the importance of rhetoric, which has often been identified as the most promising framework for understanding *bertsolaritza*. In many quarters rhetoric is understood as a part of pragmatics, or speech analysis; as Dominique Maingueneau explains: "La rhétorique, l'étude de la force persuasive du discours, s'inscrit pleinement dans le domaine que balise à présent la pragmatique" (1990:1).

One conventional theory divides rhetoric into three genres: legal, deliberative, and epideictic. According to this categorization, the epideictic genre could also include persuasion, but only in a special way; it does not seek any special reaction, but rather wants to influence the values and beliefs of the receiver. Persuasion is also visible in dialectics; in this case, it is not intended to reach an agreement, but tries to change the receiver's mind in a certain way. We all know that one of the objectives of *bertsolaris*, maybe the most important one, is to thrill and excite. Thus, it seems that *bertsolaritza* belongs to the epideictic genre, as Joxerra Garzia explains:

We can state, thus, that it is rhetoric and more specifically its epideictic genre, which is the natural framework for a full understanding of the phenomenon of improvised *bertsolaritza* We can, therefore, refine our definition of improvised *bertsolaritza* offered at the beginning of this section, stating that *bertsolaritza* is a rhetorical genre of an epideictic, oral, sung and improvised nature (Garzia et al. 2001:181).

In concert with this perspective, I will try to characterize the values and emotions the *bertsolaris* have transmitted in their productions; for that purpose, it is necessary to know what kind of personality, cultural identity, and speech the Basque oral poets prefer.

Formal Aspects on American *Bertsolaritza*

It is interesting to examine the formal aspects of spontaneous *bertsolaritza* in America. Though they do not constitute the essence of *bertsolaritza*, and while they cannot provide the

central clue to understanding this phenomenon, they can help us to comprehend the reasons for the strength and sharpness of this unusual poetry.

Rhyme

Even if some authors employ the word *errima* (“rhyme”) in Basque, I would rather use another term: *hoskidetza* (“sound similarity”). This term seems to be more appropriate in the case of *bertsolaritza* because rhyme serves a memorial function in this oral poetry, even if its function is chiefly aesthetic in literature. Once the first rhyming line is heard, the audience recognizes the word or group of words that form the rhyme. As a result, they can try to predict the words that will appear at the end of the lines to follow. This dynamic creates a “play” atmosphere in oral performance and strengthens the relationship between the *bertsolari* and his audience. Actually, it is quite common for the audience to guess the rhyme.

I will focus here on the sound-similarity of the rhyming lines, but will also include some comments about the length of the rhyme as part of my analysis. As for categories of rhyme, Pello Esnal (1994:1242) has argued that the length of the rhyme cannot be determined solely by the similar syllables. If the rhyming lines include the word root, he contends, the rhyme must be considered long (in case it lasts throughout the *bertso*). If rhymes are based on suffixes only (with no rhyming root), they should be considered short.²

I will start with the oral production of the *bertsolaris* in the USA. Joxe Mallea portrays the first championship of *bertsolaris* that took place in that country in this way: “The first-ever formal *Bertsolari Txapelketa* (Improvisational Poetry Contest) in the United States took place on April 23, 1988, and it was part of the first NABO *Euskal Kantari Eguna* (NABO Basque Singing Day) as well. The event resulted from the cooperation of several individuals and organizations, chiefly NABO and *Mendiko Euskaldun Cluba* (the Basque Club of Gardnerville)” (2003:60).

First of all, here are some *bertsos* performed in that contest (Mallea 2003:61-62):

Jesus “Jess” Arriada

Arratsalde on orai deneri

hauxe erran nahi dutena

zer gauza ederra hainbertze haurride

hementxe ikusten direna

San Franciscotik nator ni ere

kunplitzera hitz emana

lehendabiziko hauxe eskatzen dut

denei besarkada bana.

Good afternoon now to all;

this is what I want to say:

² For this analysis I have followed Esnal’s criteria: although I do not wish to disregard other theories, his morphological criteria support more constructive analysis of *bertsos*. At any rate, I will not be placing major emphasis on length when talking about rhyme. For one thing, I know that long rhyme is a new concept that has only recently appeared; for another, I would rather concentrate on the semantic field of the rhyme.

what a wonderful thing, it is right to see so many brethren here.
 I too come from San Francisco
 to fulfill the promised word.
 This is the first thing I ask of you:
 an embrace from each and every one of you.

Johnny Kurutxet

*Arras triste partitu naiz goiz huntan
 han urrunen etxetik
 eta orai bihotza daukat nik
 arrunt aleger'harturik
 honbertze lagun eta
 adiskide kausiturik
 guzieri musu bana dausuet
 bihotzaren erditik.*

I was feeling very sad when I left this morning
 from my faraway home,
 but now my heart is
 totally overtaken by happiness
 after having met
 so many companions and friends.
 To all of you I give a kiss
 from the bottom of my heart.

Jesus "Jess" Goñi

*Euskal Herriko partetik ginan
 Amerikarat etorri
 hemengo anaiari nahi genduzke
 euskeraz'e erakutsi
 gaurko egun eder hau dana guk
 zor diogu Gardnerville'ri
 arratsalde on anai-arrebak
 ta danori ongi-etorri.*

From the lands of the Basque Country
 we came to America;
 to our brethren here we would like
 to teach the Basque language.
 This beautiful day that we enjoy,
 we owe it entirely to Gardnerville.
 Good afternoon, brothers and sisters,
 and welcome to everybody.

Jesus Arriada has rhymed only a single syllable over the four rhyming lines of his greeting verse. It is true that some of the rhyming lines are closer (for instance, the first and the second, *dutena* and *direna*), where the penultimate syllable's vowel is included in the rhyme. On the other hand, Johnny Kurutxet has rhymed only half a syllable by using the ablative and the partitive cases; there is no substantive or verb. In the case of Jesus Goñi, the greeting verse has a peculiar rhyme. The only thing that seems to be the same in all the rhyming lines is the final *-i*; the consonants linked to it are not identical. Moreover, there is a kind of morphophonemic correspondence called *poto* between the first and fourth rhyming lines: *etorri* ("to come") and *ongi-etorri* ("welcome").

Let us analyze some additional examples, two *bertsos* performed by Johnny Kurutxet (Mallea 2003:63):

*Denek badakigu
hain segur engoitik
urtean badela
sasoin ederrik
neguaren ahazten
naski ari gaitu indanik
bide bat erroietan
ez dago elurrik.*

We all know
[especially] from now on
that in the year
there are beautiful seasons.
We are already
forgetting winter;
there is not a single road in the mountains
covered with snow.

*Ikusten dugu denean
zerbait badagola
negu beltza pasaturik
ostatzen ari arbola
urteak joaiten ari
diragun bezala
hobiago ginezke geroz
hobeki izanen gira.*

We realize that everything
plays a part [in life];
the dark winter has passed,

the trees have begun to bloom with leaves,
 [and] the years continue to roll
 as they do for us;
 we might be better off later,
 we will be better indeed.

The first *bertso* repeats the rhyme in *-ik* and once again covers only half a syllable. In the second *bertso*, the *bertsolari* improves the rhyme and reaches a syllable and a half in *-ola*. It could be also taken as a two-syllable structure, since the first consonant is weak, even if the pronunciation is different.

In traditional *bertsolaritza* one of the most commonly used rhymes is in *-ia*. As illustration, here is a *bertso* performed by Johnny Kurutxet in the 1988 championship in Gardnerville (Mallea 2003:68):

Enaizela badakizue
ni hanbat eskolatia
eta arras gogor zaut hortan
politikan sartzia
gure herri euskal maitian
eskuara da pizten hasia
agian horrekila segitu-
ko du bakia.

You know that I am not
 very well educated;
 for that reason it is very difficult
 for me to embroil myself in politics
 in our beloved Basque Country.
 The Basque language has begun to revive
 and after that, perhaps,
 peace will follow.

In this case, the rhyme consists of a syllable and one-half: the last syllable is *-a* and the penultimate uses the *-i* vowel. Once again, this is a very common rhyme for the *bertsolaris*, thanks to phonetic variations from spoken language that multiply the rhyme choice. In fact, standard Basque would not allow words like *bakia* or *sartzia*, for which the correct pronunciation would be *bakea* or *sartzea*. Criteria for allowable phonetic variation have changed through the history of *bertsolaritza*. Some *bertsolaris* have no problem using nonstandard pronunciations, while others feel they must respect the formal quality of *bertsolaritza* and forgo this kind of alternation.

The following *bertso* by Martin Goikoetxea is an excellent example of a type previously mentioned (Mallea 2003:64):

*Negu beltza're kezkatzen a'i du
hain baita beldurgarria
guzia joanik ondorenia
badator udaberria
artzaiak ere maitatzen dute
mendi gaineko punta berdia
artaldeantzako nahiko jana ta
txori kantuna bestia.*

The dark winter wants to keep us in suspense;
it is so frightening.
But in the end it goes away
and spring follows.
The shepherds, too, love
the green shoots on the mountain
that provide plentiful food for the sheep,
beside the bonus, the songs of the birds.

According to the first two rhyming lines, it seems that the rhyme is going to be rich and multisyllabic, but the overall sequence does not turn out that way. The first two rhyming lines have two syllables in common (-*rria*), but the last two lines are diminished.

Categorical Rhyme

The experts on *bertsolaritza* and the judges in improvisational poetry contests tend not to like *bertsos* that depend on rhyming words of the same grammatical category. On the other hand, the audience does not require such a formal level of structure in order to enjoy a performance. In general, the audience is always looking for good *bertsos*, but taking into account some particular aspects of a performance: the ability to perform fluently, the capacity to mention a funny, moving, or serious idea, and other elements. Sometimes nonverbal communication becomes important because it helps reveal the character of a *bertsolari* and thus contributes to the success of the performance.

At any rate, a *bertso* that does not vary the grammatical category of its rhymes will not be taken as a good *bertso*, even though *bertsolaris* often improvise that way. Here is an example of such invariance (Mallea 2003:67):

*Azkenekuan orai etzekoz
mintzatzen nuzu hasiko
gaiso emazia hementxe balitz
hura naike mintzatuko
aspaldi hontan mintzo zaut beti
noiz ote nauen ikusiko
gazte ta eder arrosa bezala*

goiz on batian jeikiko.

Finally, I will begin to talk
 about the people who live at my place.
 My dear wife, if only she were present here
 I would talk to her.
 Recently she has been asking
 when she will get to see me,
 young and beautiful like a rose,
 rise [again] one fine morning.

The rhyme presented in this *bertso* derives from the future marker *-ko* at the end of each of the four involved lines.

In the next *bertso*, although the same grammatical suffix is used throughout, the rhyme is richer because it starts with the penultimate syllable. Thus, the lines harmonize in *-s/ziko* rather than merely in *-ko* (Mallea 2003:66-67).

Jesus “Jess” Arriada

Gisa berian orain ni ere
mintzatzen naizu hasiko
nola dakigun negu gaixto hau
alde bat egun utziko
juan den gisan berri onikan
guk ezpaitugu guk ikusiko
agian primadera eder batian
denak girade biziko.

In the same manner, I too
 shall begin speaking to you
 by saying that we are aware that cruel winter
 will leave us alone today.
 As it recedes it is not likely
 that we shall see any good news.
 Perhaps we shall all live
 to enjoy a wonderful springtime.

The same effect is produced by iterative use of the imperfect tense, ending in *-t(z)en*, a common inflection because of the frequency with which poets employ this tense in their performances. Here is a typical instance from Jesus “Jess” Arriada (Mallea 2003:67):

Egia erran udaberrian
esperantza dut nik hartzen

*hainbesteraio kanpo ederrak
nola baitzaizkun kanbiatzen
egia esan bihotzetikan
hauxe dut ba esperatzen
zahartu girenok pixka bat agian
hasiko gera berritzen.*

I will confess that in spring
my hopes are renewed,
seeing the beautiful outdoors
change to such a degree before our very eyes.
I will tell you what I think in my heart;
this is what I hope for—
that those of us who have grown old
will perhaps begin to rejuvenate.

At most, there will be two grammatical categories constituting the rhyme. For instance, in the following example, again from Arriada, we can find the partitive and ablative cases mixed in the rhyme *-ik* (Mallea 2003:64):

*Ez daike izan urtean
sasoina ederragor**ik** (partitive)
nola kanpo ta arbola
lora ederrez bete**rik** (partitive)
Jinko jaunak emana dauku
grazia zeru**tik** (ablative)
estima dezagun hori
orok bihotze**tik**. (ablative)*

There is no season in the year
that is more beautiful,
[as we see] the fields and the trees
filled with beautiful flowers.
The good lord God has given us
that grace from heaven.
Let us appreciate it,
all of us from our hearts.

In describing modes of rhyme, we cannot forget the *poto*. There is no *bertsolari* that has never sung a *poto*, and it is also present in the USA. Both of the following excerpts come from Arriada (Mallea 2003:70, 74):

*Eskualdunak leku guzietan elkarri ikusi nahiak
hartako beraz deitzen gerade danak elkarren anaiak
zenbait handikan hunera jin ginan bizia hobeki nahiak
baina halare ez gaitu ahantziko sekula Euskal Herriak.*

The Basques everywhere love to visit with each other;
that is the reason why all of us call one another brothers.
Some of us came here from there in search of a better life;
nevertheless, the Basque Country will never forget us.

*Ni Amerikara jinta hementxe baigira
franko esker asko lanian ederki ai gera
nazione hau maite dut hortan mintzo gira
baina benturaz egun batez berriro Euskal Herrira.*

I came to America and I live here,
thank God with plenty of work; we are doing just fine.
I love this country [and] that is what we are talking about,
but perhaps someday I might go back to the Basque Country.

Perhaps the *poto* is more permissible in the USA because American *bertsolaris* do not meet so often and therefore do not have as many opportunities to improve their techniques and rhymes. Thus departures from best practice are not penalized, at least not as much as they are in the old country.

This syndrome involves not only the *poto*, but also poor or inexact rhymes (Mallea 2003:73):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi
*Gazterik nintzan ni honerat etorri
Amerika zer zan nahi nula ikusi
zazpi asto pakian ziraten ezarri
urik ezbazen atzera joango naiz urruti.*

I came to this country when I was young;
I wanted to see what America was all about.
They gave me a pack of six donkeys;
if it wasn't for the water [the Atlantic Ocean],
I would have gone back long ago.

The only thing that the rhyming words have in common in the previous verse is the *-i* at line-end, which amounts to only half a syllable. The consonants preceding this vowel have nothing in common.

In summary, we can state that the rhyme-sequences of these four *bertsolaris* are often based on the same grammatical categories and do not pay any special attention to the number of

syllables. We might say that this is the predominant style through the twentieth century for “local *bertsolaris*.” Their lack of proximity to people and their liveliness may compensate for the lack of an exact rhyme.

The Last Sentence

In regard to the history of *bertsolaritza*, the strategy of the last sentence has a long tradition. However, theories about this topic are quite recent, having emerged only after the 1980s. In this section we will discuss last-sentence strategy in the USA. We start with a contest from the 1988 championship mentioned above. Martin Goikoetxea and Jesus Goñi were required to sing about a very common topic in America, sheep-herding (Mallea 2003:187-88):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi

*Gure inguru eder honek
bertso gehio merezi ditu
behin Elkora etorritz geroztik
beharko degu kantatu
artzain etorriko euskaldunak
hemen baigira elkartu
gelditzen geran bakarrak
elkarrei lagundu.*

This wonderful ambience
deserves more improvised verses.
After having arrived in Elko,
we must sing poetry.
Those of us Basques who came to herd sheep
have gathered here.
Let the few of us who remain
help each other.

The quality of rhyme and the correctness of the meter aside, it seems that the *bertsolari* wants to specify the topic by using this last sentence. Thus we can say that the nucleus of the message appears at the end of the verse.

The next *bertso*, by Martin Goikoetxea, fails to link the last sentence to the rest of the *bertso*. There is at least no clear union, since the last part does not match the rest of the *bertso* (Mallea 2003:188):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Guri're hemen etorri eta
gertatu gaur agertzia
bertsotan hemen hasi gera-ta
zaila degu atertzia*

*oso gustora tokatu zaigu
guri're hemen biltzia
gure euskerarengatik ere
balio hola ibiltzia.*

It so happened that
all of us arrived here today.
We began to sing improvised verses,
and now it is difficult to stop.
It has been a great pleasure
meeting all of us here today.
On behalf of our Basque language
it is worthwhile doing.

His last sentence is not related to the ideas mentioned by Goñi in the previous verse; it does not even talk about sheep-herding. However, taking into account the context, the audience will be generous with the *bertsolari* and communication will go on.

Let us examine the response performed by Jesus Goñi (Mallea 2003:188):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi
*Aspaldiko artzain zaharrak
daude hemen etorrita
Amerik'honeri gure izenez
tituluak emanta
Euskal Herria utzi genduen
urrutiraino sartuta
baina halare jarraitzen degu
berton euskera eginda.*

Veteran shepherds of old
have gathered here today.
To America our names
We have contributed.
We left the Basque Country,
and we went to a faraway territory.
Nevertheless, we continue
here speaking our language.

Here the *bertsolari* from Oronoz again takes up the topic. He uses the opposition between two concepts, between their homeland and the USA, to create a paradox. The Basque language is of course one of the core attributes of the Basque Country. As a result, Goñi is able to contrast his last sentence to the faraway territory: “here, in the USA, shepherds continue speaking the Basque language,” The *bertsolari* knows that the audience will sense the discrepancy, approve of the

idea, and clap at the end of the performance.

The next *bertso* sung by Martin Goikoetxea follows the same idea (Mallea 2003:188):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Amerikara etorri gaitik
oraindik gu ez gera nahastu
Ameriketan urte franko guk
eginak ditugu ahaztu
baina euskaldunak oraindik
ahaztu gabeko egunik ez du
ingles pixka bat ikasi arren
euskerarik ez zaut akastu.*

Even though we came to America,
we have not intermixed.
We came to America many years ago,
we cannot remember how many,
but the Basques have yet to forget
any one of those days.
Though I learned a little English,
I have not forgotten the Basque language.

In this case, the last sentence takes the form of a negative statement: *Euskerarik ez zaut akastu* (“I have not forgotten the Basque language”). However, the previous sentence is a subordinate concessive that presents the opposition to the main idea.

Opposition is in fact one of the most commonly used strategies in *bertsolaritza*, especially in the last sentence. The following *bertso* from Kurutxet shows its operation clearly (Mallea 2003:208):

Johnny Kurutxet

*Aire tritea kantatuko det
suieta tritea da-ta
gure lagunik onena mundu
huntik aldegin duta
Jean Lekunberry baigorriarra
Euskal Herrian sortua
arima zerura joan da
gorputza hemen utzita.*

I will sing a sad tune,
because the subject is also sad.
Our best friend
has departed from this world:

Jean Lekumberry, native of Baigorri,
 born in the Basque Country.
 His soul has gone to heaven,
 leaving the body here.

The text of this *bertso* does not represent a major contribution, but if we look at the context in which it was performed we will see that the message did not need to be very moving. In fact, this *bertso* was sung in a Basque restaurant in Gardnerville, Nevada on the 13th of August, 1993, for a highly respected man, the proprietor of the restaurant. The opposition between soul and body is used to announce words of consolation for the kind man who has gone to heaven.

However, the figure of opposition is not the only way to formulate a last sentence and finish a *bertso*. Direct statements are often used for the verse closure (Mallea 2003:209):

Jesus "Jess" Arriada
Pena hartu degu, zu Lekumberry,
falta zira zure xokotik
penagarri da zu joaitia
hola eskualdunen artetik
zenbat ordu goxo pas'ditugu
Lekumberry zurean ganik
egunen batez joain gera gu ere
agur eiten dautzugu hemendik.

We grieve for you, Lekumberry.
 We miss [seeing] you in your corner [at the bar].
 It is very sad that you are gone
 this way from among the Basques.
 How many sweet hours have we spent together
 in your place, Lekumberry.
 Someday we too shall go.
 We send you greetings from here.

The last sentence compacts and catalyzes the message, and makes a moving, actually quite prophetic, statement.

In other cases, the last sentence is a colorful idea that ends the *bertso* by trying to make the audience smile (Mallea 2003:210-11):

Jesus "Jess" Arriada
Zer istorio gertatu zaitan
orain erraitia iguala
Gardnevilla etorri bainaiz
baso, zelai, eta malda
baina hunerat etorri eta

*gero istorio hau da
berant xamar ni etxera juanda
emazia mutur zala.*

The incident that has happened to me,
I might as well tell it now
because I have come to Gardnerville [to sing]
after passing forests, fields, and hillsides.
But having arrived here,
this is what happened, namely
when I was kind of late returning home
my wife had an unhappy face.

The dramatic potential of the dialogue is also harnessed in some *bertsos* (Mallea 2003:211):

Jesus “Jess” Arriada
*Bestan lehen gauz emana baita
betidanik tabernari
hainbertze gustoz gau guzian ni
aritzen naiz beti kantari
baian gau hau ez baizaio
gustatu ene emazteari
“beira senarra, zu ezpaitzira
ez txakurra ez txori.”*

The first scenario [requisite] in a fiesta
has always been a tavern-keeper.
All night long I was enjoying myself,
always doing the singing part,
but this particular night
was not to my wife’s liking:
[she says] “look, husband of mine, you are
neither a dog nor a bird.”

Even if the most formal verse requirement, the rhyme, is not so strictly observed in the USA, the last sentence nevertheless seems to be a carefully worked element. *Bertsolaris* know that an extra effort at this last point in the speech will be especially appreciated by the audience. The last sentence can be simply a final comment or can be a categorical and powerful statement that completes the speech. Sometimes a simple opposition in the last sentence, merely the tip of the iceberg, will clarify the speech.

The Verse

It is well known that the *zortziko* is the most common verse in *bertsolaritza*, as illustrated by the corpus we are analyzing. The *zortziko* verse consists of four possible structures or arrangements:

First structure

- a)
 - 1 *puntu*
 - 2 *puntu*
 - 3 *puntu*
- b)
 - 4 *puntu*

The first three *puntus* address a topic that becomes more and more concrete, but does not reach any special concreteness in the third *puntu*. The fourth *puntu* (or last sentence) serves as a conclusion to the first three. It could be a joyful expression, a complaint, or a cry of exclamation.

Second structure

- a)
 - 1 *puntu*
 - 2 *puntu*
- b)
 - 3 *puntu*
 - 4 *puntu*

This pattern has two main parts. The division is clear: the first part includes a metaphor for something that is explicitly expressed in the second part.

Third structure

- a)
 - 1 *puntu*
 - 2 *puntu*
- b)
 - 3 *puntu*: inflection
- c)
 - 4 *puntu*: conclusion

Here the inflection paves the way for the last sentence and marks the difference between the first and the second halves.

Fourth structure

- 1 *puntu*
- 2 *puntu*
- 3 *puntu*
- 4 *puntu*

This pattern can be developed either forward or backward. Its main characteristic is that there is no considerable difference among the *puntus*.

How do the American *bertsolaris* deploy these structures? On available evidence it seems that the third one is the most frequently used. A set of *bertsos* performed in 1995 prove this observation.

For example, although it does not appear to be a good topic for jokes, Goñi laughs at himself while trying to have a laugh with the audience (Mallea 2003:274):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi

*Ameriketan gaude bertsulari zaharrak
eta laister akabo gauden bakarrak
Kurutxet'en semiak dauzke'in beharrak
ezbaitu umerik ez Goñi mutilzaharrak.*

We are here in America, some old poet-improvisers,
and pretty soon it will be the end of us few.
Kurutxet's son certainly has a job cut out for him,
because old bachelor Goñi does not have any children.

This *bertso* clearly belongs to the third structure. In fact, the first two *puntus* form a unit; the second *puntu* completes the idea proposed in the first one. Then the following *puntu* presents a new message related to the first two and introduces the last sentence. The role of the last *puntu* is to justify the mention to Kurutxet's son—a funny justification actually, even as it matches perfectly with the rest of the *bertso*.

A *bertso* performed by Martin Goikoetxea seems to develop the third structure (Mallea 2003:275):

Martin Goikoetxea

*San Franzisko hontan iduri du gaur
degula euskaldun Haritza
pozik egin nezake nik ere
herri hontan bizitza
gaur gaben hola ikusita
ematen dizuet hitza
holako entzulek diran artean
bizi da bertsolaritza.*

What I see here in San Francisco today reminds me

of the Basque oak tree.
 I too would gladly make
 my living in this town.
 After what I saw tonight
 I give you my word:
 as long as there are listeners like you,
 the *bertsolari* trade will endure.

The poet's adherence to the third pattern is evident. Over the first two *puntus* he gives his opinion about San Francisco, especially about the Basque community. The second *puntu* directly says that he would happily make his living in this town. Following the third-*puntu* inflection, the *bertsolari* concludes with a pledge to continue the tradition. It is interesting to note that this last *bertso* was sung during a special event in which *bertsolaritza* was not a known topic; in fact, the Basque Cultural Center in San Francisco had not housed many "*bertso* performances" until that one in 1995. Moreover, it was the first time that four American *bertsolaris* sang together.

The next *bertso* performed by the same singer does not match the third structure. In this event *bertsolaris* were singing without any special topic and the exchange turned to baldness. As the youngest and hairiest, Martin Goikoetxea offered this verse (Mallea 2003:250):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Bi bertso hoiek entzundakoan
 ezin nezake aguinta
 nik ere orain esan nahi nuke
 hemen egi bat galanta
 neronek ere ikusia det
 bi gizona hoiien planta
 nik ilea nahikua det
 bainan talentua falta.*

After hearing those two verses,
 I can hardly contain myself.
 I also would like to state
 here and now the plain truth,
 because I have seen
 the posturing by those two fellows.
 I myself have plenty of hair,
 but lack talent.

The first three *puntus* do not specifically refer to the *bertsos* performed by the other *bertsolaris*. Nevertheless, they fit in perfectly. The first two are generic, "multi-purpose *puntus*," useful for a variety of topics and situations. The strategy of filling out *bertsos* without saying anything special is called *betelana* ("the fill-in task). The third *puntu* also presents some characteristics of *betelana*. Finally, the last sentence is closely related to the topic; what's more, Goikoetxea is able

to laugh at himself and create a nice opposition in the last *puntu*.

This pattern is the most commonly used for *betelana*, even when *bertsolaris* do not build a *bertso* by starting with this strategy in mind. Most *bertsolaris* prefer to pave the way for the last sentence and to employ the third *puntu* as a union unit. The next *bertso* is a good example of this tendency. The topic prompter asked for a description of the situation in the Basque Country at that time (1988), and here is the answer performed by Jess Arriada (Mallea 2003:68):

Jesus “Jess” Arriada

*Euskal Herriatik badu buelta bat
handik atera nintzela
ez dut ukatzen bakantzaz beti
hain gustoz juaiten naizela
garbi erten dut ni ateraz gero
kanbio aundiz badela
ez dut uste hortako Euskal Herriak
bat'e atzera in duela.*

It has been a long while
since I left the Basque Country.
I will not deny that I always
enjoy returning there for a vacation.
Clearly, I will also admit that
since I left great changes have taken place,
but for that matter I do not believe that the Basque Country
is worse off at all.

In the first *puntu* the *bertsolari* laments that he is far away from his homeland, that he left the Basque Country a long time ago, and, as noted in the second *puntu*, always enjoys returning there for a vacation. Thus we learn that he cannot give any details about the situation in the Basque Country. This line of thought is continued in the third *puntu* as Arriada says that he knows that the Basque Country has changed, although the last sentence explains that the *bertsolari* does not believe that the Basque Country is worse off at all. In other words, the third *puntu* paves the way for the fourth one, providing the inflection that leads to the conclusion.

In summary, it is clear that the *bertsolaris* know about the expressive importance of the last sentence when building their verses. For that purpose they use two main strategies: a) the last sentence is opposed to the message of the first three *puntus*; or b) the last sentence concludes the *bertso* but needs the third *puntu* to pave the way and ease the transition. If *bertsolaritza* has any success in the USA, the one major reason is the strategy of the last sentence, which is managed by most *bertsolaris* in a very skillful way.

Rhetoric and Speech in American *Bertsolaritza*

If we want to analyze the expressive behavior of these *bertsolaris* effectively, we must take into account the criteria of quality identified by rhetorical studies of communication. Of course, most of the *bertsolaris* know nothing about the principles of formal rhetoric, so we will not be imputing to these oral performers any explicit or conscious intention. Instead, rhetorical figures and characteristics will be understood as arising naturally from the aesthetics of poetic communication and the verbal skills of the *bertsolaris*.

These are several criteria:

a) The *aptum* asks the transmitter to use the elements in a communication properly. It links the communicative situation, the expression, and the contents. In addition, this criterion includes a moral condition. In fact, since the speech is a rhetorical device, the transmitter has to take into account the ethical obligations created by the society and the individual. In other words, the speech is closely related to individual and social ethics; it is in “debt” to beauty and truth. The main objective is still persuasion, but ethics constitute an important dimension. Some scholars make a distinction between the out-*aptum* and the in-*aptum*. The in-*aptum* is the relationship between the elements of the speech. The out-*aptum* is related to the social aspects of the speech, especially to the characteristics concerning orality and improvisation.

b) *Puritas*, or grammatical correctness, is a precondition of any rhetorical speech; in fact, before the so-called *ars bene dicendi*, *ars recte dicendi* is essential. For theorists like Quintilian, the correct use of the language does not lie only in grammatical rules; exemplary authors must be imitated.

c) *Perspicuitas* refers to the clarity of language and ideology (Spang 2005:106-09). A speech must be clear, and it will be clear if its formulation and its concepts are transparent and understandable. The audience has to be able to decode the message easily, and precisely in the same way the transmitter has coded it. Of course, sometimes the objective of the communication can be an ambiguous message. The transmitter can create a confusing *bertso* on purpose; representing the enigmatic nature of something is a permissible option. In any case, when the intention of the transmitter is not an unclear message, a mistake is called *obscuritas*. In order to clarify a text, redundancy is frequently employed: normally, every message has a lexical, morphological, or syntactical redundancy. Rhetorical figures avoid redundancy, and they also increase expectation.

d) *Ornatus*, or the aesthetic part of the speech, is intended to persuade by means of the beauty of the language. Rhetorical images are not just “decoration”; they amount to different ways to invent the world and to provide information about the transmitter’s point of view. The *ornatus* surprises the audience by pleasure, and the process of persuasion is strengthened. The rhetorical images prolong attention among the audience, and sometimes have a special influence on creativity and affect. But these images must be used in harmony with the contents of the speech; otherwise, they may prove counterproductive. The *ornatus* has always been the most prized virtue among the elements of the speech. Many twenty-first century rhetorical manuals are written about the *ornatus*.

In what follows I will focus on *aptum*, *puritas*, and *perspicuitas* within the performances of these four *bertsolaris* in the USA, and to a lesser extent the *ornatus*.

Aptum

We start with a performance that took place at the previously mentioned 1988 event. Johnny Kurutxet had to impersonate Ronald Reagan while Jesus Arriada had to mimic Mikhail Gorbachev, then president of the Soviet Union. Taking into account the criteria, we can observe that this is not a very suitable context. *Bertsolaris* seldom know much about international affairs, nor have they been trained in diplomacy. A speaker has to know a good deal about his topic; but since the performers' knowledge was not greater than other people's, they had to improvise a speech to fulfill their roles as best they could. And what resulted was a small miracle for the audience. It is strange to see two *bertsolaris* who are so deeply rooted in tradition singing about international topics (Mallea 2003:80):

Jesus "Jess" Arriada
Bihotzetikan galde egitera
noazu orain Reagan jauna
hilabete bat barren oraintxe
heldu zaigula eguna
eta seriozki orain unian
mintzatu behar deguna
inondik ere nahi nukena da
izan orain zure laguna.

With total frankness, Mr. Reagan,
 I am going to ask you a question.
 Within a month now
 our date will arrive,
 and this time it is very serious business
 that we must talk about,
 but what I would like at all costs now
 is to be your friend.

So even if the topic is not suitable for them, *bertsolaris* try to sing about it in a suitable way. In fact, their point of view is linked to human quality, and this mention of human quality is completely unexpected. As a result, it may be said that it is not necessary to be an expert to perform about a complex topic. *Bertsolaris* have to "talk," and what they say matches perfectly with the human aspect.

Let us examine Johnny Kurutxet's answer (Mallea 2003:81):

Johnny Kurutxet
Zuk ene laguna nahi duzu izan?
Nik ez dut besterik pentsatzen;
mundua ere da zaila eta

erraz ari da satisfatzen
gure diferentziak hasi
ditzagun estaltzen
mundu guziko bakia
gure eskuetan da gertatzen.

You want to be my friend?
 I could not agree with you more.
 The world is a difficult place;
 it is being easily satisfied.
 Let us begin to bury
 our differences;
 the peace of the whole world
 happens to be in our hands.

This second *bertso* puts international diplomacy aside and focuses on the necessity of collaboration and friendship between the two presidents, seconding Gorbachev's initial proposal for peaceful coexistence. There is no mention here of the social or political, but rather of values that can be generally agreed upon: "the peace of the whole word," for instance. *Bertsolaris* have transformed the topic to a more suitable context. Moreover, the speech has been enriched with a human point of view, the point of view that is shared by the audience. The *bertsolari* takes the so-called *honestum* attitude; in that way he makes the situation more suitable, as a *vir bonus* must do for the audience. The out-*aptum*, the capacity to take into account the social situation, is a *bertsolari*'s stock-in-trade, and he tries to engage it as best he can.

In the same event Jesus Goñi, the *txapeldun* (winner of the championship, or *txapela*), was asked to perform. The context of the communication is concrete, and the audience knows it. The *bertsolari* has the opportunity to create any kind of speech. These are his first two *bertsos* (Mallea 2003:83-84):

Jesus "Jess" Goñi
Gaur izandu det egun eder hau
nunbaitetik eskeinuta
euskaldun giro zoragarria
Gardnerville'n du bilduta
zuei eskerrak eman behar zaiztet
zuen txaloak nik entzunda
agurtzen det bihotzez
txapela irabazita.

Today, I have had this beautiful day
 offered to me from somewhere.
 [We had] a wonderful Basque atmosphere
 wrapped up into Gardnerville.

I am obligated to thank you
for the applause I heard.
I salute you from my heart
for this beret [that I have won].

*Bigarren bertsua kanta behar det
amerikano gazte deneri
entzun dituzten gure ahotik
buruan zaizten ezarri
hemen ez da asko etortzen
ta bertakuk behar ari
ia Amerikan izaten degun
bertze Euskal Herri.*

I must sing a second verse
to all the young [Basque-]Americans.
The words you have heard from our mouths,
put them into your head.
Few [Basque] people come here anymore;
therefore those of us who live here must get busy.
Let us see if in America we can have
another Basque Country.

In this case, the *bertsolari* from Oronoz also takes into account his audience and tries to tailor his performance appropriately. He is very respectful. Undoubtedly, the *bertsolari* is making an effort to win the *txapela*, but he recognizes that this communicative situation would not have been possible without the audience. Moreover, the Basque community organizes the event and also gives the performers a chance to live in a familiar ethnic and linguistic environment in the USA. The *bertsolari* has not forgotten to show his gratitude, even if it is obvious. The second *bertso* is another step in the continuing speech. Once again, Jesus Goñi shows his sensitivity to the moment. For instance, the third *puntu* is a summary of Basque life in the USA: “Few [Basque] people come here anymore; / therefore those of us who live here must get busy.” In other words, in the last decades not as many Basques have emigrated to the USA and the ones there must make special efforts to maintain their identity. In that sense, he mentions a major ambition, an idea that matches an aspiration implicit in the Basque identity: the dream of building up a Basque Country within the USA.

I have still not mentioned any *bertsos* by Martin Goikoetxea. Let us move to the *Euskal Kantari Eguna* (the Basque Singing Day) in 1991, the first time Martin Goikoetxea was in front of an American audience. Goikoetxea and Jesus Goñi had to sing to the following topic: they are in a small boat in the middle of the ocean; if they stay together in the boat both will die, so one of them must jump into the sea.

If the performance is taken as a rhetorical act, the topic on which it is based has to be analyzed in the same way. Once again, the topic given to the *bertsolari*s does not have a suitable

aptum. *Bertsolaris* are not sailors; they do not know much about the sea. Besides, the situation is extreme, almost strange, and certainly not a daily experience for the audience. On the other hand, the topic is closely related to basic human values, and the *bertsolaris*, aware of that connection, will compose their verses accordingly. Additionally, we should add, topics depicting extraordinary situations are actually quite common. Therefore we can say that the *aptum* is in this case more manageable than some (Mallea 2003:131):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Gai ederrez etorri da hemen
guk egiteko hizketa
itsasoaren erdian biok
ontzi batean gaude-ta
kontseju bat nik eskatzen dizut
arriskuaren neurketa
zu itsasora saltatu zaitez
hemendik uraz beteta
nik saltatzerik ez daukat hemen
igari ez dakit eta.*

We were given a nice topic here
to discuss, which is that
the two of us are in a boat
in the middle of the sea.
I want to present you with an idea,
because I gather that I am in danger.
You should jump into the sea
because the boat is full of water.
It is impossible for me to jump out
because I cannot swim.

In this first part Goikoetxea has added a pertinent nuance to the situation that will strengthen his *bertso*: he is the one who doesn't know how to swim. Of course, he is the one who started the performance, so he has the chance to specify the situation and facts.

Jesus Goñi continues with the theme of shared human quality, but he adds a pertinent nuance – his opponent has two children (Mallea 2003:131):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi

*Gai xeblebre samarra degu
txalupa barrun sartuta
honek aitzaki hartzen du orain
igeri ez dakila-ta
ikusten denaz guk biek ere
bizia maite degu-ta*

*neu saltatzera hortxe nijua,
zu baitzera bi umeen aita.*

This is a rather funny subject,
Since here we are in a boat,
and now this fellow starts excusing himself,
saying that he cannot swim.
Well, as it is clear to see,
we both love life; therefore
I must jump in there right now,
for you are the father of two children.

The *bertso* does not explicitly indicate it, but it is true (and the audience knew) that Goikoetxea was married and had children, while Goñi was single. The one who is not married has shown a special respect for the family, so his speech admirably responds to his companion's. He has answered the first *bertso* in a positive, complementary way—acknowledging Goikoetxea's expressed inability to swim and the unexpressed reality of his two children. Moreover, we have to add the usage of the second person and the proximity of the conversation.

As I have tried to explain through these examples, the topic prompts can become an obstacle for *bertsolaris* because they have not been trained to analyze certain topics in a pertinent way. But the difficulty of the situation is an effective incentive to push the *bertsolaris*' skills. Besides, in extemporaneous performances *bertsolaris* can add pertinent nuances to the topic, so they can either enlarge upon the topic or further specify it.

Puritas

There is no extensive research available about this element's place in *bertsolaritza*; in fact, *bertsolaris* are presumed to fulfill requirements of *puritas* correctly. However, we have to qualify this assumption. If we take into account Quintilian's criteria, grammatical correctness is not enough: speakers must imitate exemplary authors or reflect their style (or at least show a similar effort). Just so, when we are talking about correctness in *bertsolaritza*, we cannot reduce its meaning to mere grammatical correctness; we must also include the effective use of language and the metrical shape of the verses.

In order to illustrate these principles, let us look at some examples. As noted above, Martin Goikoetxea and Jesus Goñi were asked to sing to the following topic in Gardnerville in 1991: they are in a small boat in the middle of the ocean; if they stay together in the boat both will die, so one of them has to jump into the sea. Some decades beforehand, two other *bertsolaris*, Xalbador and Uztapide, were asked to sing to a similar topic. If we compare performances, we can easily see that the *puritas* is more commendable in Xalbador and Uztapide's production: better rhyme, better meter, better expression and clarity (they avoid forced and useless structures). Here are the first two *bertsos* sung by Xalbador and Uztapide (Amuriza 2000:34):

Uztapide

*Lurretik ehun metrora zaigu
aldamio bat ageri,
bitatik batek saltatu behar,
badira mila komeri
ta, Xalbador, zu eroritzeak
pena ematen dit neri,
bitatikan bat erortzekotan
nahiago det nik erori.*

Here we are at 100 meters from the ground
on a scaffolding,
One of us has to jump down,
We've got into a mess.
It would be sorrowful for me, Xalbador,
If you fell down,
So if one of us has to fall
I hope I am the one.

Xalbador

*Kasu hunetan nehoiz munduan
gertatu ote da nehor?
Beheragotik ere guziak
nahiz gintazken erorkor.
Ez, Uztapide, nihaur banoa,
otoi etzaitela eror,
berdin zu hantxet hil eta gero
hila litake Xalbador.*

I wonder if something like this
Has ever happened in this world,
Although from a lower height
We all are also able to fall.
No, Uztapide, I shall go down,
Please, do not fall
Because after you had died
I would drop dead.

There are no metrical mistakes in the *puntus* and the rhyme quality is good. American *bertsolaris* could try to achieve a similar level, but they have not yet managed to do so (despite other creditable achievements). Therefore, from a rhetorical perspective, they do not sufficiently imitate any exemplary author (or his style), no exemplary rhyme or meter.

In order to demonstrate this difference, we can measure the syllables of a *bertso* sung in

Gardnerville (Mallea 2003:132-33):

Martin Goikoetxea

Barkutik saltatzen bazera zu (10)

nik egingo dizut otoitza (9)

bihotza onarekin jarria (10, without respecting the break)

hemen daukagu bakoitza (8)

orain badakit zuk ere ona (10)

daukazula oso bihotza (8, with elision)

barkutik saltatu zaite eta (10, without respecting the break and with elision)

salba nere heriotza. (8)

If you jump off the boat,

I will surely pray for you.

I will do it with a good heart.

Here the two of us have a choice.

Now I know that you too

have a very good heart.

Please, jump off and

save me from death.

This kind of syllabic alteration is very common in American *bertso* production. Some *bertsolaris* (Jesus Goñi occasionally and Johny Kurutxet perhaps more) tend toward this kind of variation from time to time. At any rate, the result is not so obvious or objectionable because the performers adapt the melody to their “unusual” meter as they sing. In other words, they do not normally break any linguistic rules, shortening or lengthening some words or using phonetic alterations to make the rhyme work. Phonetic variations are not understood as mistakes, of course, but it is evident these *bertsolaris* do not employ them coherently because their choice is subordinated to the rhyme. This practice does not obscure comprehension, nor does it darken the communication.

Perspicuitas

These *bertsolaris* do not perform incomprehensible or arcane speeches. This is evident for anyone who knows about the craft, especially in the USA. This is the result of a concrete situation: the *bertsolari*'s speech is received by a Basque audience, a group of receptors who have learned the Basque language by oral transmission (most of them do not know to read or write in their mother tongue); moreover, they do not live in the Basque Country, and they do not know much about the ups and downs of the homeland. Thus, the *bertsolari* has to compose an understandable speech for his audience, at least if he wants to succeed and, actually, that is not very easy in the USA. The *bertsos* are appreciated, but there are not many local fans or experts.

There are topics that require a special knowledge. For instance, in the *Euskal Kantari Eguna* in 1991, the *bertsolaris* were asked to sing about this topic: Kurutxet is an Iraqi soldier,

Goikoetxea is a fish in the sea, Arriada is Saddam Husein, and Goñi is Bush (the father), who at that time was president. The setting was the Gulf War (Mallea 2003:143):

Johnny Kurutxet

*Berriz ere hemen tugu
borrokak jendeen arteko
zorigaitzez gerla hasi da
eta nik segitu beharko
Jainko maite argi indazut
egun huntan denendako
nere amak ni e'nau mundura
eman izan sentitzeke.*

Once again here we go with
quarrels among the people,
and, unfortunately, war has started,
and I must go on to fight.
Dear God, guide me
in everything that I do today.
My mother did not bring me
into this world to suffer.

The soldier's position is clear: he is sad because of the war and he asks God to guide him because his mother did not bear him in order to suffer. The message is obvious, but we don't know if the audience understood his intention; in fact, most of the listeners were Low Navarrese, but there were some Biscayans too. The word *sentitzeke* means "suffer," but it is expressed in the eastern dialect. For someone from the west, such forms are not readily understood. At Basque picnics, they are quite common and the audience has almost accepted them.

The other *bertsolaris* gave good performances. For example, Jess Arriada reflected perfectly Saddam's fundamentalist speech (he puts God in his favor, he threatens the invaders, he trusts his "side"). Jesus Goñi bases his speech on a curious point: he asks Saddam to shave off his moustache. In fact, his speech represents Saddam's dictatorship and arrogance (his mustache represents his culture and regime), and Bush wants to control his opponent. It is closely related to oral psychodynamics and has direct rhetorical consequences (Mallea 2003:144):

Jesus Goñi

...
*amor ematen ezpazera nik
kenduko zaizut bigotiak.*

If you do not give up on your intentions,
I will cut off your moustache.

A lack of good ideas can force a *bertsolari* to create ambiguous speeches (those that are full of words but say nothing), and I think that Martin Goikoetxea's third *bertso* reflects this case. We have to remember that he was the fish. Consider his third *bertso* (Mallea 2003:147):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Hussein honek mundu guzia
hor beti harritutzen du
arrozoi gabe gerra ematera
bestenera mugimendu
behin errean hasi zan hau eta
orain ezin du zuzendu
hobe zenduan Hussein izana
lehenau agindu bazendu.*

This fellow Hussein always
manages to surprise the world.
He starts a war without a motive,
and he moves against other countries.
Long ago he began walking down the path of quarrel
and now he cannot straighten himself out.
Hussein, it would have been better
if you had ruled earlier [in another time].

The first two *bertsos* clearly show that Goikoetxea sings from a fish's point of view; in fact, he says there that the war pollutes sea water and he complains about pollution. But his arguments end and with his third *bertso* he decides to give Saddam a telling-off, thus diminishing his reliability as an artist. He also blames the dictator for his outrageous act: "He starts a war without a motive / and he moves against other countries. / Long ago he began walking down the path of quarrel / and now he cannot straighten himself out. / Hussein, it would have been better / if you had ruled earlier [in another time]." We can presume the main idea of the *bertso*, but there are many ambiguities. The fourth *bertso* sung by Goikoetxea comes back to the dirty water, and he adds at the end the strong and direct statement that he wishes for Saddam's death. However, it seems that he speaks quite inappropriately; in fact, he stipulates correct and moral behavior by saying *kristauki ibiltzea* ("You should have behaved like a good Christian"), intimating that maybe that is not a requirement for a Muslim (Mallea 2003:148):

Martin Goikoetxea

*Arraia galtzen inoiz etzuten
hor zurekin merezia
hobe zenduen
kristauki ibiltzia.
zure kulpaz gu itsaso zikin
huntan utzirik bizia*

*zuk ere merezi zenduke hor
nik bezelaxe hiltzia.*

The fish never deserved
to be treated like this by you.
You should have behaved
like a good Christian.
Because of your fault,
we have lost our life in this dirty sea.
You, too, deserve
to die here like me.

In the same performance, Jesus Goñik feels his role is over and changes his mind in his fourth and last *bertso*; although he was supposed to be George Bush, he finally says that neither Saddam nor Bush will go to heaven (Mallea 2003:149):

Jesus Goñi

*Arrazoia alde bat dezu
Hussein zuk haserratzeko
zure parajin zerorrek nausi
zertara hara juateko
zure oliua agintzalia
mixeriak harritzeko
Bush eta zuk ez dezu izanzen
zeruan ez sartzeko.*

Hussein, in a way you have motives
to be upset [with the USA].
You have the right to be the boss in your own country,
but why did you go over there [to Kuwait]?
Oil rules you
and afflictions are incredible.
I do not think you and Bush
will manage to enter heaven.

In summary, it seems that the *bertsolaris* have no problem maintaining *perspicuitas*, especially because they know now that they have to perform easily understandable *bertsos*. There are only two possible problems: a) if the *bertsolari* uses phrases from other dialects, the audience may not understand his speech; and b) if he changes his point of view when singing in a specific role, he could mislead the audience.

Many formal rules are unconsciously fulfilled. The *bertsolaris* sing in a fictitious communicative situation, but even when this situation is far away from their everyday lives, their approach to human values is well known to the audience. In fact, they know that they will not

fail the audience with such a speech, and they regularly offer the listeners the set of values they seek in a *bertso*. Sometimes some *bertsolaris* include their opponent's ideas only to overcome them with more basic human perspectives. This represents the climax of the performance, in my opinion. Of course, the transcendence of values can take a different shape when the *bertsolaris* are pulling each other's leg, indulging themselves in a comic battle of wits. In such cases there is no difference between their activities and those of the *bertsolaris* in their homeland.

It is evident that because they do not have as many opportunities to sing together, American *bertsolaris* specify new images or different points of view for each role. In these situations, it could also happen that some speeches do not completely match the topic, or include dialectisms not understood by the general public. However, Basques from the USA greatly appreciate their performances and it is obvious that their communications succeed.

Ornatus

This criterion is closely related to the *elocutio* of a speech and does not refer solely to ornamentation (Spang 2005:109). The rhetorical resources and images analyzed from this perspective cannot be considered merely external. These resources are the way to understand and know about the world. The *ornatus* is intended to be a persuasive resource that uses the language's beauty, in other words the language's *delectare*. For that purpose, the speaker, or in this case the *bertsolaris*, uses different rhetorical resources.

However, since we are speaking about an oral genre, let us analyze the main oral tendencies and how they are deployed here. The critic Jon Kortazar (1997:18) identifies several of them: a) formulaic character, b) trinity, and c) "open structure." Every oral genre has these three characteristics, even if they occur at different levels in particular genres. For instance, formulaic character is very common in Basque ballads, Basque tales, and epic songs from various cultures. But in *bertsolaritza* they are called "formulas of the mind," even if more common formulas are also used.

Trinity

Trinity is present in ballads and tales, but less so in *bertsolaritza*, though some examples exemplify oral style (provided by Xenpelar Documentary Center):

*Ikusi zuten hainbat kristau on
odolustu zituztela,
ikusi zuten berdingabeko
bekatua zeukatela,
ikusi zuten mundua kontra
jeikiko zitzaietela
eta orduan zabaldu zuten
gorriak erre zutela.*

They realized they bled to death

so many good Christians
They realized they had committed
 a great sin
They realized everyone in the world
 would turn against them
 so they decided to say
 the communists had burnt the city.

The *bertsolari* Txirrita (1860-1936) improvised this *bertso* that offers a clear example of trinity (provided by the Xenpelar Documentary Center):

*Iru reloju, iruna kate,
 iru mallakin bakoitza,
 buruan berriz iru korona
 petxuan iru orratza;
 iru doblako amoriyua
 tximista bezin zorrotza,
 iru tirotan utzi zizuten
 zuri senarra illotza,
 iru ezpatak zulatzen dute
 señora, zure biotza.*

Three watches, three chains
 each one with a link
 inside, three crowns
 and three needles in her breast;
 a love of three golden coins
 as sharp as a flash of lightning,
 they shoot your husband to death
 with three bullets,
 three swords pierce,
 my lady, your heart.

However, it cannot be said that trinity is rooted in the structure of the *bertsos*, even if instances are frequent.

Open structure

Bertsolaritza also manifests great “openness.” In fact, “open structure” is evident in other genres as well, because the re-creation and transformation of traditional speech-acts happens in the act of transmission, creating many versions of the traditional text. But in *bertsolaritza* the objective is exactly that: each *bertso* has to be “new,” it cannot be a copy. A *bertso* is a new creation that arises from a certain communicative situation. Moreover, it is not invented in order

to be transmitted from generation to generation, though some *bertsos* (even improvised ones) have become traditional; they remain in the audience's memory, or they are transcribed and achieve a certain popularity, so that they are conserved in the community memory.

I would supplement this list with four additional rhetorical tendencies: d) repetition, e) opposition and antithesis, f) parallelism, and g) climax.

Repetition

Repetition, opposition, and parallelism are consequences of the oral style and oral psychodynamics. Climax is the consequence of performative creativity over the trajectory from the beginning to the end; in other words, it is the consequence of the increasing compositional and dramatic (or comic) tension. Nevertheless, it is clear that *bertsolaris* have not learned this technique from written, classical rhetoric. At most, they have had the opportunity to listen to other successful *bertsolaris*. They lack explicit rhetorical intention, working as they do with implicit or aesthetic criteria. We cannot forget that the aesthetic objectives often match with an effective dialectic, especially with these particular *bertsolaris*.

These *bertsolaris* have few formulae, because of their small repertoire of proper images. In other words, their *bertsolaritza* has no "productive storehouse" of images that could be used to create small formulas. Some images that refer to homesickness and Basque culture are quite standardized, of course, but they appear to be linked in certain ways (Mallea 2003:169):

Martin Goikoetxea

. . . *Errango det ba egi guzia*
eta gure arbaso zahar haiek
han egiten zuten bizia
nik beti maitatu izandu det
ni jaio nintzan kabia
Ameriketan indar aundia baina
ez det kanbiatzen nere herria.

I will speak candidly and completely.
 Our forefathers of long ago
 used to make a living in the Old Country.
 I have always loved
 the nest where I was born.
 In America we are powerful,
 but I will not switch my homeland.

This *bertso* has two principal ideas: the standardized metaphor or image, *kabia* (nest), and the opposition at the end of the *bertso*.

The image is well known and does not confer unexpected beauty on the *bertso*; in fact, this image from nature introduces love for his homeland into a natural atmosphere. The word *kabia* ("nest") has a humble and tender connotation, and provides a coherent point of view. But does he

say everything intentionally? Perhaps it is just an aesthetic intuition, not a reflection of conscious style.

Nevertheless, as was mentioned, formulas are not so common in *bertsolaritza*. However, some phrases do recur, and these recurrences constitute a kind of unconscious formula. For instance, Johnny Kurutxet was asked to perform three *bertsos* about springtime. This is a part of the first one (Mallea 2003:63):

Johnny Kurutxet
Denek badakigu
hain segur engoitik
urtean badela
sasoin ederrik

We all know
 [especially] from now on
 that in the year are
 beautiful seasons

And this is the third one:

Ez daike izan urtean
sasoina ederragorik

There is no season in the year
 that is more beautiful

It is obvious that the phrase is repeated, although the second example adds a suffix: *-ago*, which is used in the Basque language to make a comparison.

Some years later, on November 7th, 1992, we find the following in this *bertso* performed by Jess Goñi (Mallea 2003:169):

. . . *Errango det ba egi guzia*
eta gure arbaso zahar haiek
han egiten zuten bizia
nik beti maitatu izandu det
ni jaio nintzan kabia
Ameriketan indar aundia baina
ez det kanbiatzen nere herria.

I will speak candidly and completely.
 Our forefathers of long ago
 used to make a living in the Old Country.
 I have always loved

the nest where I was born.
 In America we are powerful,
 but I will not switch my homeland.

On that occasion, the *bertsolaris* had the challenge of comparing their love for their homeland with their love for the USA. The verb phrase *Jaio nintzan* (“I was born”) forms a subordinate sentence, and complements the word *kabia* (“nest”). On the same day, Goñi sang this *bertso* (Mallea 2003:169):

*Gure herri maitagarria
 askorik ez nahi dezuna
 Amerikara etorri zinan
 lanik egin nahi ez zuna
 baina halare nik maitatzen det
 amak bularra emana
 Amerikako dolar guziak baino
 nahio dut jaio nintzana.*

Our beloved homeland,
 the one you, apparently, don’t love much.
 You came to America
 because you didn’t want to work.
 I, on the other hand, love
 the fact that my mother nursed me.
 The country where I was born is worth
 more than all the dollars in America.

The previous verb now appears nominalized, as a noun, with the article (–*a*). It is a repetition, made by the same *bertsolari* on the same day. These kinds of pet expressions are normal and perhaps necessary for this kind of *bertsolari*.

The following are examples of other pet expressions that recur in our corpus:

Pentsatzen (“thinking”): 7 times
Pentsaketan (“thinking”): 2 times
Pentsatu (“to think”): 11 times

The words are useful for rhyme patterns, but less so for the structure or the relationship between the ideas. Extemporaneous performance is an oral reflection based on a communicative situation. Thus the meaning of these words leads us to the essential act of *bertsolaritza*. The *bertsolari* thinks about everything around him, and “chews over” his thoughts by singing. These words show how the *bertsolari* expresses his conclusions (Mallea 2003:275):

Johnny Kurutxet

Gauza hortaz pentsatzen oraintxe hastia . . .

What a thing to start thinking about right now!

. . . nik ere oraintxe geroari

behar baitut ba pentsatu . . .

. . . for I, too, must look ahead

and think of the future . . .

Zer pentsatu badet gehia nik

hori dena entzun eta . . .

I have to think it through further

after listening to all your stories . . .

Antithesis

Antithesis does not show any special value. But there are similar features in the *bertsos* of other *bertsolaris*. More generally, as Walter Ong reminds us (1990), one of the characteristics or psychodynamics of oral productions is that they contain agonistic nuances. Opposition in this poetic tradition is often expressed by an adversative sentence that uses the conjunction “but.” The main clause presents important ellipses and the audience can easily understand them. Here is an initial statement: *Ameriketan indar aundia* (“In America great strength”) [*Ameriketan indar handia daukagu euskaldunok / Ameriketan indar handia izatera ailegatu gara euskaldunok / Ameriketan bizi-kalitate –material– erosoia izatera iritsi gara euskaldunok* (“Basques have great strength in America, Basques have gotten great strength in America”)]. This statement has the following antithesis: *. . . baina / ez det kanbiatzen nere herria* (“but I won’t exchange my country”). In other words, “I won’t sell my cultural and national identity, I don’t want to cut my roots, I know the country that remains in my heart,” Thus real-world welfare versus the heart creates an antithesis in the last sentence.

In this case, antithesis is expressed by grammatical elements. In other cases it is expressed by juxtaposition; in such instances there are always two semantically opposed elements (Mallea 2003:41):

Jesus “Jess” Goñi

Xalbador maite, kantatu nahi ‘zut

egun ahal badet inola

mundu huntatik joan zinan baina

gelditu zaigu zure odola

zu zinan bertsolari aundia

baita poeta bertzela

*gu gera hemen adar kaxkar batzuek
zu zinan gure arbola.*

Dear Xalbador,
I want to sing to you
today the best way I can.
You left this world but
your blood remains with us.
You were a great *bertsolari*
as well as a poet.
We are just insignificant branches,
you were our tree.

Jesus Goñi not only opposes *gu* (“we”) and *zu* (“you”), but also maintains a very traditional tendency in this *bertso* improvised against Xalbador. The end of the *bertso*, the last sentence, is both a statement in its own right and a significant semantic opposition: *adar kaxkar batzuek* (“some weak branches”) versus *arbola* (“tree”). In other words, on the one hand he mentions unnecessary things, useless elements; on the other hand, he summons a symbolic image, a source of life (especially in Basque culture)—the tree. The cultural connotations are clear. First, there is the tree of Gernika, the symbol of the Basque sovereignty. It is also related to agriculture and traditional lifestyles, as well as the forests often associated with Basque identity. Finally, there is the more categorical antithesis between the “forests” and the “city” (civilization).

The *bertsolari* has many resources for creating a climax at the end of his *bertso*. He can compose a graphic phrase or a funny sentence. The following *bertso* was performed by Jess Goñi, who is a doctor. According to the topic prompter, his assignment is to ask the other *bertsolari* to give up drinking wine (Mallea 2003:100):

*Ofiziua dotorra daukat
eriatzen sendatzeko
eta goizian hemen dator bat
ez dala ongi sentitzeko
medizirik onena, aizu, laguna,
zer dagon gaur zuretako
aza nahikua jan zazu eta
basua ez ukitzeko.*

My occupation is that of a doctor,
in order to heal the sick,
and this morning this one fellow came in
because he did not feel well.
Listen my friend, I will tell you today
what is the best medicine for you.
Eat plenty of cabbage,

and do not touch the bottle.

The last image is surprising. The recommendation to eat plenty of cabbage is extremely graphic: although it is certainly a common food, gourmets do not like it a lot. The situation clearly shows that the *bertsolari* looks for an amusing idea, finds it, and uses it to compose a powerful last sentence.

Climax

In *bertsolaritza*, climax is a strategy that is mainly related to the last sentence. In fact, the improviser is always searching for the climax, but normally aims to create it at the very end of the *bertso*. Here are some *bertsos* performed by Jess Arriada in 1976 for illustration (Mallea 2003:39):

*Lan tipi bati lotzeko orain
baderaukat alegrantzi
hautxo maiteak hartuko al duze
agurian aski pazientzi
Euskal Herria gora dezagun
hau ez degu behar ahantzi
zeren mundu hunek ezpaitu nehon
holako zazpi probintzi.*

I am about to start a little chore,
[and] I do it happily.
My beloved children, I hope you
have enough patience with an old man;
let us hail the Basque Country.
We should not forget it,
because nowhere in this world are there
seven provinces quite like them.

This is a simple *bertso* that leads to the last sentence: *zeren mundu honek ezpaitu nehon / holako zazpi probintzi* (“because nowhere in this world are there / seven provinces quite like them”). The *bertsolari* knows that the audience will agree with him. The performance is unique and composed especially for that moment, so this climax seems forthright and suitable.

The previous seven *bertsos* were offered to the seven provinces of the Basque Country. However, Jess Arriada performed this *bertso* to end the event (Mallea 2003:40):

*Azkenekoa denak agurtuz
despeditutzen naizela
gauza ederrok ikustean negar
jautsiren baitzaut berela*

*anaitasuna edo batasun
hunek jarraiki gaitzala
aita ama batek euskaldun guziak
egin bagintu bezela.*

On the last verse I want to salute
and say farewell to all.
When I see these beautiful things,
tears come to me very quickly.
With brotherhood or unity
we must continue,
as if one Basque father and mother
had given us all birth.

The latter section is again the compositional focus, but here it is not just the last sentence but also the previous *puntu*; the closure is more articulated, more open, thanks to the last comparison—an exhortation to the audience for unity. The speech gains suitable cohesion at the end of the *bertso*, and the poet asks for a certain “cohesion” with the audience at the same moment.

Conclusion

When analyzing the oral production of the *bertsolaris* in the United States, I have imposed some limits; in fact, an integral analysis requires the context and a view of the performances. Analysis of the text in this context could be very useful in order to understand deeply this aesthetic and communicative situation. However, I think that I am well acquainted with the general context because I have been there, I have seen how the *bertsolari* live, and I have interviewed both them and their fans. My general knowledge of the Basque culture has also helped in this regard. And thanks to the information collected by Joxe Mallea (2003, 2005), I have learned a lot about the performances and uncovered very useful information.

In this article I have carried out a formal analysis that emphasized three aspects: the rhyme (or sound similarity), the last sentence, and the verse. We have seen that *bertsolaris* fulfill the rules of rhyme, but do not take into account its grammatical value. Nor do they pay strict attention to metrics. From the first part of the twentieth century (and a large part of the second half), it was a very common *bertsolaris* for poets in the Basque Country use flexible metrics, and the improvisers in the USA still maintain this practice, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It seems that this tendency from the homeland has been frozen in America. As for the last sentence, the praxis of the *bertsolaris* clearly shows that all *bertsos* are built in anticipation of the last idea, primarily because it expresses the core meaning of the *bertso*, and in some cases is crucial for the syntactic structure of the whole *bertso*. Most of the sentences are statements (affirmative or negative) or semantic antitheses (concessive clauses or juxtaposition by adversative conjunctions, for instance). The whole *bertso* is constructed according to the last sentence, even if sometimes the next-to-last *puntu* seems to be a “necessary support” for the

bertso. In that case the last two *puntus* become an indivisible element, expressing and constituting a kind of duality.

From a rhetorical point of view, these four *bertsolaris*' virtues correspond very closely to the virtues of *bertsolaris* in the Basque Country. I have taken into account different criteria in order to analyze the rhetorical value of their speech. According to the so-called *aptum*, we can say that the situations or the topics encountered by the *bertsolaris* are not the most suitable for them, so they present the so-called *vir bonus*. This attitude is welcomed by the audience, but lack of training and preparation are obstacles in the communicative situation. In accordance with the criterion *puritas*, comprehension is not obstructed, but many *bertsos* demonstrate mistakes in the metrical structure, even if the melody helps to sort out the rhythm. Anyway, this shortcoming keeps the *bertsolari* from reaching greater aesthetic levels. Taking into account *perspicuitas*, I must mention that the *bertsolaris* often have problems with certain topics. *Ornatus* is present in the antithesis and climax, the principal resources for these four *bertsolaris*. Repetition and formulas also occur, even if they are few.

In general, these *bertsolaris* maintain some tendencies that have since disappeared from the "European" Basque Country. Because of the impossibility of working on the performances by singing together, they have not completely developed certain skills. But most of the time they carry out successful communications and valuable rhetorical activities, thanks to their talents and intuition. The *bertsolaris* underline the necessity to institute a *bertso-eskola* (a school for *bertsolaris*, a workshop to improve their skills) in the United States, as in the Basque Country; otherwise, they do not see a promising future for this transplanted oral tradition. They say they are prepared to use new technologies for that purpose, for example. Although that initiative is up to Basques who are resident in the United States, their European colleagues should continue to help them with materials and experiences, as they have always done.

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