

Voicing ethnopoetics: A poetics of praxis

Voice as an analytical heuristic has gained momentum after the recent passing of two of its major proponents, Dell Hymes and Jan Blommaert. A number of special issues (Juffermans & Van der Aa 2013; Kroskrity & Webster 2013) have appeared since and have theoretically moved the field of ethnopoetics in new directions. With an array of empirical and methodological contributions in recent years (Moore 2013, 2019; McAllister 2024), ethnopoetics remains a theoretical framework relevant to the analysis of voice.

Ethnopoetics, as theory and method, offers multiple ways for analyzing voice. As one of the pioneers of ethnopoetics research Dell Hymes was concerned with the recovery of voice in reconstructed texts to show how different groups produced knowledge, often deviant from hegemonic norms, via conditions of empowerment (Hymes 1981, 1996). Dennis Tedlock described ethnopoetics as “a decentered poetics” for hearing non-Western voices.

As the field of ethnopoetics has developed over the past fifty years, so have the analytical tools and methods used to assess and the ways in which sociolinguists, folklorists, and anthropologists apply them to their data. Research in ethnopoetics originated in the study of Native American verbal art (Hymes 1982; Tedlock 1983; Webster & Sherzer 2015), with scholarship conducted in many areas of the world with a variety of groups (see Abu-Lughod 1985; Caton 1985; Graham 1995, 2000; Kataoka 2012; Rumsey 2006; Wilce 1998). Moreover, Jan Blommaert (2006) offers applied uses of ethnopoetics as a “useful tool for tracking ‘local’ patterns of meaning-making in narrative” especially for a variety of encounters where cross-cultural narrative performance is the basis for the communicative exchange. Scholars doing ethnopoetic research reveal the cultural logics of communicative interactions through the indexical patterns present.

In this panel, we revisit ethnopoetics as praxis. We bring together linguistic anthropologists and anthropologists of poetics to track and consider the various forms of ethnopoetics scholars use for analyzing voice. In what new ways does ethnopoetics research remain central to issues in linguistic and cultural anthropology? What emerging analytical tools and practices of translation and transcription do scholars use to understand, represent, and recognize marginalized voices “with appropriate fidelity to their artfulness” (Kroskrity & Webster 2013) and voice? What potential for ethnopoetic modes of analyzing voice come into view? How can we voice ethnopoetics as praxis central to current anthropological research?

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