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Oratory

As an analytical term for linguistic anthropologists, *oratory* harbors rich associations with classical rhetoric. For Aristotle, oratory referred primarily to the art, rather than the act, of effective public speaking: the skills, competencies, and tactics of persuasive talkers rather than the actual events, practices, and performances that frame and define such displays of verbal ability. As in much of linguistic anthropology, the analytical tension between the art and the act creates opportunities for research and reflection.

Some of the classical connotations of oratory give reason for caution when applying it comparatively. In its focus on effective speech, oratory implies a contrast between instrumental, practical action, and more literary, poetic, and entertaining discourse. Yet studies of public discourse in Polynesia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Native America reveal a very complex relation between stylistic form and expected outcomes. In some communities, a performance of highly structured, elaborate speech may be linked with not only secular results for social action, but sacred, aesthetic, and emotional effects that are not as easily observable. In some speech communities, such as the Wolof of Senegal, a griot's song might function as an effective and persuasive vehicle of public communication. As argued by Marshall Sahlins, culture and "practical reason" are deeply intertwined.

Local beliefs about language and its structures—or "language ideology"—also contribute to the meaning of oratory and its effectiveness. In some communities such as Weyewa of Indonesia or Merina of Madagascar, the more highly structured the speech code, the greater the general confidence people have in its effectiveness; among other groups, such as the seventeenth-century Quakers described by Richard Bauman or, indeed, late-twentieth-century Americans, elaborate formal code structuring in public verbal displays may be regarded as the antithesis of effective speech. The extent to which discourse is effective is associated with its simplicity. Some

politicians are thought to be "great communicators" to the extent that they can express complex ideas simply with a minimum of artifice.

For anthropologists, oratory exhibits a problematic relation to the concept of "public." This notion also raises important questions (and analytical opportunities) when thinking about oratory comparatively. In general terms, oratory both constitutes and is constituted by, an ideal of performance in relation to a larger community. In classical antiquity, however, oratory implied a performance in a non-domestic, collective space directed to an audience of non-kin. This definition effectively rules out the existence of oratory in small scale, kin-oriented communities such as "tribal" societies.

Oratory has generally been regarded as a predominantly male activity. Women are occasionally orators, but they are often portrayed as unusual, or as acting in a "deputy" capacity for a male. Important questions arise, however, as to whether there are women's forms of oratory that have been overlooked (perhaps because most anthropologists have been male). Furthermore, does oratory help constitute males as political creatures and reciprocally, women as domestic ones? Among the Weyewa in eastern Indonesia, both men and women perform in public speaking events, but their contributions are construed as complementary rather than competitive.

Oratory is a linguistically self-conscious form of speaking, rich in devices that frame and re-frame its use and contexts of interpretation. Many formal devices—including rhythm, pitch, pauses, even musical conventions—play a key role in the effectiveness of oratory. Some scholars, such as Maurice Bloch, have argued that the rules governing the structure of the verbal code so dominate the performance frame that other features of the performance—role definition, situational focus, and rules of alternation among styles—are guided by the features of the code structure. Others, such as Judith Irvine, have argued that the formal structure of roles, situational focus, style switching rules and code structure are all more or less independent features of oratory that can vary in their importance depending on the cultural context.

There is often no way to know in advance which features of oratory will be important in a given performance, because orators and audiences often use the context of performance to define the oratorical features that are relevant for the interpretation. Malagasy orators, for example, often deny they are even "truly" orating, pointing variously to features of the participants, setting, and code use to suggest that the performance is not yet quite authentic. As these features are addressed in turn, the performance takes shape as a process of contextualization.

The methodological and linguistic obstacles to studying oratory in depth can be daunting. Although the comparative analysis of politics, for example, often depends on data derived from public performances involving oratory, few anthropologists carefully study acts of oratory in context. This is partly because the language used in these events is often distinct from the everyday language and poses additional linguistic burdens and challenges on the visiting anthropologist. However, as volumes such as Donald Brenneis and Fred Myers's *Dangerous Words* and Bloch's *Political Language and Traditional Oratory* have shown, careful study of oratory repays the linguistic investments

because it not only reveals important insights about the nature of discourse, but also about politics.

Relatively little is known about how oratory changes, raising important questions for future research. While it seems clear that changes in oratory are linked to the sociopolitical circumstances that define the contexts of its use, the nature of those links are subtle and complex. Changing conceptions of the nature of the "public sphere" in many developing countries, for example, are accompanied by dynamic new patterns of oratory. In most cases, however, the relationship between sociopolitical structures and sociolinguistic practice is not simple, direct, or one-way. In Indonesia in 1998, for example, student demands for increased democratization were dramatically accompanied by the use of the relatively novel practice of *interupsi*, "interruptions" of the oratory of the political establishment. This shocking violation of Indonesian norms of verbal conduct highlighted the need for new patterns of political participation in ways that more standard political practices had not. These sociopolitical changes, in turn, then may give rise to further sociolinguistic shifts in sentence length, clause structure, and vocabulary, which in turn further affect changes in the political sphere.

Another important issue is the impact that mass media (television, radio, Internet) have had on the contexts and definition of oratory as public speaking. For example, it seems clear that oratory on television cannot be interpreted in the same terms as its more face-to-face relative. There is evidence to suggest that television-mediated oratory results in simplification, compartmentalization and even trivialization, isolating sources of meaning from audiences. On the other hand, in some cases, new cultures of spectatorship have emerged that themselves require oratorical response. As processes of globalization continue to transform both the concept of "the public" and "communication" in the next millennium, oratory poses intellectual and methodological challenges to linguistic anthropology. How the field responds to that challenge will speak eloquently about the shape of the discipline itself.

(See also *codes, gender, genre, ideology, media, music, orality, poetry, power, prayer, style*)

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