

PERFORMANCE AND DISCOURSE:
Transcribing Latin American Languages and Cultures

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NATIVE LATIN AMERICAN CULTURES THROUGH THEIR DISCOURSE. Edited by Ellen B. Basso. (Bloomington: Folklore Institute, Indiana University, 1990. Pp. 176. \$29.95 cloth, \$12.00 paper.)

"IN LOVE AND WAR: HUMMINGBIRD LORE" AND OTHER SELECTED PAPERS FROM LAILA/ALILA'S 1988 SYMPOSIUM. Edited by Mary H. Preuss. (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1989. Pp. 110. \$25.00 paper.)

LAIL SPEAKS! SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE VII INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON LATIN AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES. Edited by Mary H. Preuss. (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1990. Pp. 152. \$32.00 paper.)

VERBAL ART IN SAN BLAS: KUNA CULTURE THROUGH ITS DISCOURSE. By Joel Sherzer. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. 281. \$39.50 cloth.)

NATIVE SOUTH AMERICAN DISCOURSE. Edited by Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban. (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986. Pp. 347. \$49.95 cloth.)

A DISCOURSE-CENTERED APPROACH TO CULTURE: NATIVE SOUTH AMERICAN MYTHS AND RITUALS. By Greg Urban. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. Pp. 215. \$35.00 cloth.)

A constellation of factors has conspired to create exciting and productive dialogues within the several broad disciplines that investigate native Latin American discourse: anthropology, linguistics, and literary studies. This new body of work recognizes the importance of factors that were previously either ignored or taken for granted by paying attention to the neglected voice of indigenous authors, the unseen roles of transcription and translation, and the transparent screen of discourse.

Decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing is now providing an unprecedented historical base for Mesoamerican literature because what the Maya recorded prior to contact can now be read. Analyzing the content and style of the hieroglyphic texts permits clarification of the elements that are truly indigenous and enhances scholarly understanding of colonial and modern texts by comparison. Moreover, speakers of indigenous languages throughout the Americas are now publishing texts in

their own languages. Although only some of the work under consideration here treats indigenous literature directly (for example, the contributions by Richard Layton, Gregory Fields, Carmen Aguilera, and David Drucker to *LAIL Speaks!*), all of them have emerged in an atmosphere of increased appreciation of indigenous authorship and growing concern about preserving and documenting endangered and disappearing languages. These concerns are particularly acute in South America, where change is proceeding rapidly and the languages and cultures are rich yet rather poorly known. One way the concern for the indigenous voice is being demonstrated is by recognizing the multivocality of colonial documents in indigenous languages and Spanish, along with attention to separating the voices and thus opening this discourse to new understanding of how the colonized situated themselves within the rhetorical, social, and political spheres of colonization (see the essay by Susan Paulson in the Basso collection and those by María Esther Choque and Norma Helsper in "*In Love and War: Hummingbird Lore*"). Another aspect of attention to authorship comes through conveying the voice of the individual in performance.

The group of books and articles under review here is remarkable in scope and depth. The two volumes edited by Mary Preuss, "*In Love and War: Hummingbird Lore*" and *Other Selected Papers from LAILA/ALILA'S 1988 Symposium* and *LAIL Speaks! Selected Papers from the VII International Symposium on Latin American Indian Literatures*, are particularly wide-ranging in geography, theoretical approaches employed, and issues and genres investigated. These two volumes publish papers presented at the annual international meetings of the Latin American Indian Literatures Association/Asociación de Literaturas Indígenas Latinoamericanas, a forum on the languages and literatures throughout Latin America. The other four volumes showcase the discourse approach to language and culture. As defined in Ellen Basso's introduction to *Native Latin American Cultures through Their Discourse*, "discourse-focused methods are concerned with discovering how the languages of real life operate, and the methods exist in recognition of the fact that it is through the speech-centered processes of human activity that people create meaning" (p. 4). The volume edited by Basso as well as that edited by Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, *Native South American Discourse*, concentrate on South American Languages, although the Basso collection includes an essay on the Mexicanos by Jane Hill. Urban's *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture: Native South American Myths and Rituals* discusses a number of South American languages. In contrast, Joel Sherzer's *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse* provides a detailed profile of an individual language, that of the Kuna in Panama. In this review essay, I will explore the ways in which discussions of diverse genres in a variety of Latin American indigenous languages have dealt with the emergence of the approach to language

and culture that centers on discourse and with the issues of performance as well as transcription and translation.

The Discourse-Centered Approach

Most prominent among new theoretical directions is the discourse-centered approach eloquently developed in the works under review in Joel Sherzer's *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse*, Greg Urban's *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture: Native South American Myths and Rituals*, and Sherzer and Urban's *Native South American Discourse*. Strongly grounded in the ethnography of speaking tradition, this perspective views discourse as "the richest point of intersection of the relationship among language, culture, society, and individual expression" (Sherzer, *Verbal Art*, p. 6). If discourse is treated simply as a vehicle of culture, it remains transparent. With the analytical spotlight focused directly on it, however, discourse becomes an object of study in itself rather than simply a means of interpreting either language or culture.

What takes place at this nexus of language and culture? Myth and ritual are enacted, cultural memory is conveyed, and discourse is situated in community life and history. As Urban explains in *A Discourse-Centered Approach*, "The actual situating is done subjectively, but it is based upon a vast range of historical experience with other instances, which are also part of the public circulation of discourse in the ongoing life of the community" (p. 9). The public nature of discourse continually calls speakers and analysts to accountability, despite the necessarily subjective nature of talk. For example, when Kuna chief Muristo Pérez delivered verbal counsel (or *unaet*) to new chief Takkin Hakkin on 27 April 1971, he used a set of metaphors that conveyed Kuna tradition but also addressed the circumstances of the time and place of the interaction as well as the participants (see Sherzer's *Verbal Art in San Blas*). To cite an example from Urban's *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture*, Shokleng ritual wailing embodies culture through the vocal control involved and stylistically expresses the liminality (the threshold nature of boundaries that is so often addressed in ritual) of separation, death, ritual occasions, and the daily cycle.

Issues of ideology also emerge at the discourse nexus of language and culture. Urban points out that ideological issues articulated especially through language include those of authority and continuity. He shows that in southern Brazilian Shokleng myths, authority is expressed through incorporating quoted commands. Urban also points out the use of macroparallelism, or parallelism of discourse units made up of "many clauses that taken together represent a historical episode" (p. 83). Macroparallelism thus constitutes a metadiscursive representation of continuity achieved through discourse commenting on discourse. In the example just mentioned, the metaphors used by the Kuna chief center on images

of the central pole supporting the house just as the chief supports the village. The metaphor refers to the tradition of seeking a strong, long-lasting tree to make the pole. Equating the central house pole with the chief thus joins authority with continuity, an association that is strikingly similar to the association of authority and continuity in Shokleng myths. As Urban elaborates in *A Discourse-Centered Approach*, "A focus on discourse thus repositions language, making it appear to be the product of individual metadiscursive reflections whose comparability across speakers is opened for investigation. Primary emphasis, however, is placed on exploring community discourse histories and public circulation" (p. 12). Thus form and content are both understood to be firmly grounded in the cultural context of use.

This interpretation necessitates a close understanding of that cultural context and hence must be based on detailed ethnographic observation. Taking a discourse perspective allows the analyst to locate language in the community studied as the voice of particular individuals. Sherzer's *Verbal Art in San Blas* builds on a deep long-term knowledge of one speech community. Urban's *A Discourse-Centered Approach* ranges more widely over South America, taking an area approach as well as analyzing particular languages. Hence, much of the power of these scholarly interpretations derives from their secure ethnographic grounding.

The most recent work in discourse has clearly been built on a strong foundation of previous work informed by various disciplines: ethnography of speaking, ethnopoetics, and performance studies have all had a strong influence on the recent work. In regard to the Amazon region, the structural approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss has been seminal in its utility and historical precedence (see the essays by Enrique Margery Peña, Mary Preuss, and Hugo Carrasco Muñoz in *"In Love and War: Hummingbird Lore"* and those by Franklin Loveland and Peter Roe in *LAIL Speaks!*). Urban in particular has employed structural analysis in combination with the discourse-oriented approach to great advantage in his *Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture* and also in *Native South American Discourse*, the work coedited with Sherzer.

Performance as a Focus for Analysis

The cultural role of the performer and the nature of the performance take on distinctive importance in the discourse-centered perspective. In this way, the ritual dialogues of South America are now being understood as performances that characterize the region and also provide insight into the cultures where they are found. In *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture: Native South American Myths and Rituals*, Urban analyzes what he calls "the South American dialogic complex" by examining formal ceremonial dialogue in five languages in which it has been well

documented. He explains, "One speaker utters a stretch of speech—a syllable, word, line or sentence—that constitutes his turn. The initial turn and response taken as a unit can be called a 'cycle'" (p. 127). While the rhythm of the cycle may vary across languages, the cycles are consistently iconic of (or directly represent) solidarity through the "regularization of response" that is "a positive acknowledgement of the other" (p. 135).

Persons engaging in dialogues are also individual performers, and that role is recognized by researchers in the emphasis on individuality and creativity as well as in the perception of the individual as the locus of the production of discourse in cultural context. Accordingly, Sherzer's monograph showcases the performances of the Kuna men who are "public performers of verbal art" at the gathering house, where they are "on stage" (p. 3). Janet Wall Hendricks (in the Basso collection) focuses on the performance of one man, Tukup', a virtuoso speaker of Shuar in south-eastern Ecuador. In all of these treatments, individual creativity is perceived within cultural traditions and as being influenced by the time and situation of performance.

The careful attention being paid to music is enhancing understanding of genres and forging a connection with an expressive domain previously studied only by ethnomusicologists. Among the works discussed here, see the contributions of Laura Graham and Anthony Seeger in the Sherzer and Urban collection, and that of Jonathan Hill in the Basso collection. Understanding local definitions and uses of genres has led to the realization that familiar Western distinctions between speech and song are no more relevant to South American oral traditions than the conventional Western distinction between prose and poetry is for North American oral traditions. Seeger's analysis of the genres of *ngére* (song), *kapérni* (speech), and *iarén* (telling) among the Suyá in Mato Grosso in Brazil according to the relative priority of text, melody, time, and timbre shows that only close ethnographic observation can reveal the pertinent factors. Identification of native terms and judgments are part of this process of observation. The daunting challenges of transcribing the songs and accompaniment of musical instruments has been approached, although perhaps not altogether solved.

Arguably, the uniqueness of language situations in South America with regard to dialogue and music have provided some of the impetus for these studies. But the findings of the studies clearly have theoretical importance as well as significant application for analyzing other language communities.

Transcription and Translation

It is increasingly recognized that the way texts are translated and presented is not neutral but rather a form of analysis and evaluation of

the material. This issue is one of enduring concern, and discussions of the topic have matured notably, as evidenced in the works being reviewed here. The process and outcome of translation itself has been analyzed by a number of investigators. The ethnopoetic approach has contributed to recognizing the poetic and performance qualities of verbal art. In the past, discussion of presentation of discourse has carried a somewhat strident and nearly prescriptive tone. The recent work on Latin American discourse, in contrast, manifests an appropriately flexible use of presentational formats to reveal various aspects of a wide range of discourse types. A number of translators have adapted elements of ethnopoetic presentational format to the particular transcription and translation challenges presented by the texts they are working with, whether the texts were tape-recorded by the investigator, were transcribed by other analysts for whom no recordings are available (Maurizio Gnerre in the Sherzer and Urban collection) or are colonial documents (Paulson in the Basso collection).

A recent trend toward including entire texts (some of them lengthy) in the indigenous language as well as in translation is exceedingly welcome, especially given the past tendency for editors to omit the indigenous language material at final publication as too esoteric. Perhaps this increased focus is due in part to recognition of the endangered status of many Latin American languages and the value of documenting them as thoroughly as possible. Certainly, presenting and valuing native voices is important for understanding the languages and cultures in question. In providing extensive text material, such publication also makes data publicly available for comparative and other kinds of analyses.

An exciting innovation in the Sherzer and Urban collection, *Native South American Discourse*, is the inclusion of a tape recording of the texts analyzed. This feature would greatly benefit the study of Latin American languages if it became more common. The tape enhances understanding and appreciation of the interpretations presented and also permits ongoing analysis of the material by other scholars more directly and completely. Beyond the scholarly benefits, the impressionistic power of the South American stories, chants, and songs is tremendous.

Transcriptional features that portray vocal qualities are pertinent to transcription of tape-recorded discourse. But the indication of narrative in poetic lines is also applicable to texts recorded only in writing, thus opening up this aspect of ethnopoetic transcription to colonial and historical texts, those transcribed directly from spoken language, and transcriptions for which recordings are not available. Attention to units of lines, stanzas, episodes, and other components has led analysts to greater awareness of the complex construction of Native American verbal art in general, much of which is achieved through employing grammatical elements.

The Advantages of a Discourse-Centered Approach

The topics of performance and transcription discussed above relate to the discourse-centered approach much more directly than as subject matter and transcription technique. The discourse-centered approach is open to the view of performance discussed above and also congruent with it. Individual creative expression is articulated via the cultural and linguistic resources of the speech community and is subject to the interpretation and evaluation of that community. The question of presentation of texts is also central to the discourse-centered approach, where texts are not only vehicles of language and culture but also their intersection.

Additionally, analysis of phenomena of metadiscourse (discourse about discourse) cannot be carried out without paying scrupulous attention to what gets transcribed. Thus, for example, the powerful meta-discursive function of weeping in Mexicano could not be conveyed through a transcription that ignored the phonological modifications that speakers of Mexicano use to such great effect to construct discourse and to portray themselves as “good people” (see the essay by Jane Hill in the Basso collection). The attention to music in the context of the discourse-centered approach combines both these concerns in that the musical element offers particular transcriptional and presentational challenges. And although it may be natural to Western cultural orientation to think of music as performance, the nature of the performance and its relation to culture must be determined in context. Great potential also exists for applying discourse perspectives to other cultural realms. For example, Peter Roe in *LAIL Speaks! Selected Papers from the VII International Symposium on Latin American Indian Literatures* investigates the feathered corporeal art of the Shipibo, Waiwai, and Cashinahua of the Amazon Basin as an integration of verbal and artifactual text in the process of corporalizing myth. As Roe explains, “data derived from the *verbal* art of myths are coupled with a detailed examination of a genre of *graphic* art, the kinds of feathers, their placement on objects, and the mythic and cosmological significance of those objects in the corporal adornments” (p. 105). These data thus locate myths on the body.

Conclusion

The range of languages covered in these six volumes is impressive: more than forty languages and cultures are represented in detail in the works reviewed here. Several comparative studies range even more widely, at times including South American languages, a frontier that has opened up only recently to investigation. It is fortunate that this opening has coincided with the theoretical and analytical development of discourse-based approaches. Having accumulated material and considered it carefully, Urban has begun to provide a discourse typology for South Ameri-

can languages. What we learn about languages and cultures necessarily is filtered through whatever theoretical approaches the investigators favor. Discourse-centered approaches offer a particularly broad view, slighting neither language nor culture and allowing a perception of their unique intersections as enacted by individuals.