

## Ethnomethodology's Mission

In workplace studies, as discussed in the previous section, the specific features of ethnomethodology—its interest and methods—can perhaps be seen most clearly. These include the requirements to attend to details, to immerse oneself into the local relevancies, and to acquire enough of the competencies to understand what is going on from the perspective of the workers while putting external conceptions and evaluations at a distance. Ethnomethodology in its current shape is not limited, however, to the study of specialized work settings. Similar requirements can, for instance, be formulated for the study of observable practices of severely handicapped persons, as David Goode's work makes clear. And although the study of less exceptional situations may make immersion and acquiring local competencies less spectacular, attending to details to understand "competencies in use" remains essential.

When the idea of ethnomethodology was being developed by Garfinkel, its topic—the seen but unnoticed features of ordinary action—was so hard to get in focus that he used very specific procedures, the so-called breaching experiments, to make them "visible." Although he continued to use some of these purposeful disturbances of ordinary situations as a pedagogy, they are no longer necessary as a general study policy today. Closely observing some utterly routine doings, such as greeting and (for pilots) arranging take-off, can provide a basis for understanding what goes wrong in exceptional situations, such as in "cold" encounters and airplane accidents, respectively. To maintain situations, whatever their kind, as in some way "orderly," work must be done systematically and routinely but adapted to local circumstances. Explicating that work is the task that ethnomethodology has set for itself.

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**See also** Conversation Analysis; Membership Categorization Device Analysis (MCDA); Phenomenology; Videorecording

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## ETHNOPOETICS

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Dennis Tedlock defines ethnopoetics as the study of verbal arts in all languages and cultures, focusing in particular on the oral communication of proverbs, laments, prayers, praises, prophecies, curses, and riddles shaped by the spoken, chanted, or singing voice. Such studies aim at translating, transcribing, interpreting, and analyzing oral performances to make them cross-culturally accessible as works of art, hoping in the process to free all poetries from the constricting traditions of Western literature and thereby helping to transcend the artificial boundaries of language and culture that modern thinking harbors in separating itself from what it sees as the "others" of the world.

This effort was launched as a special genre of inquiry when Tedlock teamed up with Jerome Rothenberg to create the radical magazine *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* in 1970. Although similar work had been done piecemeal for several years, the magazine concentrated on ethnopoetics as a unifying theme. It was strongly committed to exploring new techniques of translating the poetries of tribal societies, especially the work of Indigenous verbal artists from Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* is no longer published, but its goals and methodological experimentalism have continued to characterize the field since it began.

### Narrative Verse

One important early development in this field was the recognition of narrative verse patterning—the idea

that Native American oral performances were organized by poetic line phrasings rather than by the sentence/paragraph forms imposed on them by Western transcribers. Pointing out that ethnopoetics is, above all else, committed to understanding the ways in which narrators choose and group words, Dell Hymes asserted in the process that the stories of Native American oral discourse are a form of poetry to be said and heard in lines—an idea he first had in 1960 while working on some of his Northwest Coast materials. Tedlock concluded much the same thing in his influential study of Zuni oral performances in 1972. He and Hymes disagree in part on how to identify the lines themselves, what is actually lost through dictated texts (e.g., not necessarily all paralinguistic features), and what might be saved through phonetically transcribed texts or, perhaps best of all, sound recordings of actual performances. Focusing on the body of the presentation itself (what is said *and* how it “sounds”), Tedlock puts a great deal of emphasis on the timings of sounds and silences in performances. Hymes says that identifying pauses as line breaks is not available for all narratives. He seeks poetic line identification primarily by identifying recurrent particle patterns in narrative structures. Nonetheless, both of them find empowering knowledge in treating oral narratives as dramatic poetry, thereby marking many translations as distortions of the originals forced by the dictation process, defeating the idea that form and content are independent, erasing presumptions of fixed boundaries between poetry and prose, and applauding new techniques of recording together with a sense of oral art as performance “events.” With this innovative thinking at hand, knowledge of Native American oral traditions has been greatly enhanced by the work of both scholars.

### Dialogics

It is important to remember the dialogic character of all such communications and to keep in mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s wisdom that language never moves through uncluttered space. Discourse is heteroglossic and mutually constructive in all utterances—in all contexts of development, reception, and discovery—and context is practically everything for determining meaning. Translation (with its attendant nuanced, cultural, aesthetic, intellectual, and mechanical problems) escapes none of this as an activity. In fact, it helps to bring the role of the observer to the fore more readily than in most other domains of ethnographic

research. Ethnopoets want their work to be faithful to the grammatical and semantic patterns, styles, figurative speech and imagery, acoustics, rhythms, and associated paralinguistic (including pausing and intonations) of original performances. But they must also see themselves as part of the cross-cultural equation. They know that they are an audience of a different kind. They are imposers and interpreters potentially loaded with distorting subjectivities, favoritisms, biases, inclinations, and cultural presuppositions about the nature of the world and their place in it. Moreover, because performance narratives are bound to be multivocal and polyvalent at one level or another, they are always subject to context-sensitive interpretations that cannot always be determined for the original performers in the case of *representations* or *rereadings*. The very action of *revisiting* and *reimagining* such circumstances creates original material and, thus, another potential source of distortion in the effort to render authenticity.

Getting to some authentic emulation or understanding of traditional oral performances of any kind, but particularly those considered to be “not our own,” forces the issue of meanings in fundamental ways and makes the effort truly an “artful science.” It raises the questions of what is lost from, or created and added to, discourse whenever it is moved from one person or culture to the next by anyone, not just by specialists. It is hard to overestimate the value of that kind of information for linguists, anthropologists, and the applied social sciences, particularly as they engage the rapidly expanding world of global commerce and postcolonial international relations.

### Literacy

These “slow motion explosions” of expanding urban frontiers (as Gary Snyder likes to call them) not only call to mind the more or less synchronic changes inherent in the translation process—what to study and how to study it among our living contemporaries—but also serve as reminders that cultures and their associated behaviors have deep roots. Literacy itself, the invention and spread of writing and reading across the planet, has been largely overlooked in the study of oral art. Projecting that most modern of mentalities—reading as an avenue to interpretation—as a facile metaphor on all that we wish to understand (e.g., “reading” oral performances) can be an obstacle in the study of both oral and written traditions. There is a big difference between reading writing and speaking

thinking, especially if the spoken word occurs in the absence of any tradition for writing in preliterate or strictly oral cultures—all of which have been smothered by colonial conquests to some degree since 1492. Times have changed, and our sensibilities have changed along with them. The rise of alphabetic literacy and its dissemination through writing and printing technology have had a profound effect on what Donald Lowe calls the “hierarchy of the senses” and, thus, on the way in which we register and store information as humans. That raises the issue of just how much information about a people’s past oral traditions—preliterate cultural content and contexts—is contained in modern knowledge. The whole problem is bound up with enticing mysteries on how oral performances have changed in the long run, how resolving these puzzles at some satisfactory level might set new standards for estimating authenticity in performance studies, and what having that information might tell us about linguistic and cultural change in general.

### Ethnopoetics and Humanism

The great demand of anthropological poetics (and its derivative ethnopoetics as defined here) is that we render these experiences as clearly and accurately as possible through our sense of being-in-place and the guidance of histories—our own and those of others—that appear to contextualize the material best. Such analyses can teach us things that are not available in any other way. Among many other possibilities, they can show us mystery and beauty and the need for being in them as we pass through the landscapes of our lives. Combined with what can be learned from rigorous methods, history, archaeology, and personal experiences, we can bolster our sense of ancient aesthetic and poetic creations by studying the legends, tales, myths, and meanings as they exist today in oral performances. In the quest to understand the rich and abiding nature of oral cultures, however, the bottom line must be more than a study of language and storytelling. It must be a critical exercise in the larger and more inclusive realm of an anthropology of experience, the anthropology of being human, the anthropology of shared humanity. Poetry and related performance arts, after all, are about all of us. They always have been.

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*See also* Cross-Cultural Research; Discourse Analysis; Ethnography; Heteroglossia; Narrative Texts; Oral History; Storytelling

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## ETHNOSTATISTICS

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Ethnostatistics and quantification rhetoric are broad fields of study that deploy different sorts of qualitative methods to study the use of statistical, graphical, and numerical constructions in various settings. Ethnostatistical work has taken as its topic how the practices