Orality, transcription and construction of data

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Transcriptions of oral traditional material constitute an inherent part in the history of ethnographical research. The contradiction included in this assignment is a point of departure for the following discussion: to which degree do we (folklorists and ethnographers) affect and reconstruct oral narratives by transcribing / studying our data. After a short introduction to some representative initial European stages in the transcription of orality, that have been significant for the methodological and archived heritage they created, I shall treat the points of transformation, adaptation and archiving in this very specific procedure of (re)constructing oral material data going beyond textualization itself.

The existing technological possibilities affect considerably the methods of collecting material on the field and accordingly the results. Collectors in the nineteenth century were writing down their informants' narrations, some of them later treating their notes by filling the so-thought gaps and by adapting them to their own knowledge or to the taste of the public and the aesthetics of their time. Those treatments concern especially folktales and reflect early stages in the European literary history, introduced during the Italian renaissance by Boccace (1313-1375) and his *Decameron*.[1]

Brothers Grimm and their folktales' collections, established transcribing and typological rules that remained valid for more than one century, until Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928. The first volume of Grimms' collection consisted exclusively of folktales collected inside the borders of their district (Hanau), especially in their own city (Kassel) by asking people they knew (friends, servants and nurses) and also some peasants in the country. Their narrators succeeded in remembering the narratives just for the specific occasion of collection. They recomposed the transcribed narrations, either because they considered them vulgar in some way, or by constructing their own variant combining two and three versions. However Nicole Belmont notes that their morphological interventions did not alter the narrative structure, as they were able to distinguish those points they had the right to intervene without affecting the fundamental ones that should remain untouched (Belmont, 1986: 39-40 ê·Ê 44-45). Those interventions also concerned specific issues that could shock the pedagogical manners of the middle-class; that is the target recipients of the Grimms' collection.

French collectors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as J.F. Bladé, F. Arnaudin, P. Perbosc, P. Luzel, P. Sébillot, were also taking down the narrations in shorthand on the field. With regards to some of them, we can neither exclude the possibility of their interventions in the texts, nor consider their transcriptions as "genuine" since they were made during a privileged tête-à-tête between the informant and the collector – so privileged that the existence of J.F. Bladé's main informant ("vieux Cazeaux", a fussy Gascon peasant) was never attested for sure (Salles Loustau 1985: 193).

The history of Greek transcriptions has a similar type of mystery, though less known on an international level. Some of the best known published folktale collections were transcribed under imprecise circumstances, whereas for the rest of narrative genres detailed information is missing. One of the first Greek collections – published by the Austrian Consul in Greece, Georg von Hahn in 1864 – was made under unspecific circumstances. Von Hahn was mainly interested in the typological connection of folktales with Greek mythology; he was consequently collecting stories mainly for their content by using native transcribers who did the work for him (Pio 1879: IV-V). The exact transcribing conditions faced by von Hahn were lost, as he never had the time to reveal them (Pio 1879: VII). Similarly, the *45 stories from the Dodecanese* published by R. Dawkins in 1950, come from an hypothetical context, as the main collector of those stories in the beginning of the twentieth century was an enlightened amateur in Archaeology, named Iakovos Zarraftis from the island of Cos, who has not left any information on his informants. R. Dawkins had tried to restore the context of the *Stories*, either by stating his own remarks or by arriving at logical conclusions according to A. Adamandiou[2] (1875-1937) and M. Michaelidis–Nouaros'[3] (1879-1954) testimonies (Dawkins 1950: 1-17). On the contrary A. Adamandiou transcribed his material either by attending evening gatherings especially organized out of season by his pupils in order to help him in his task, or under the dictation of his narrator (again during a privileged tête-à-tête). In a quite similar way Michaelidis–Nouaros restored the story-telling ambiance of his childhood, in order to transcribe meticulously the folktales conserved in his memory (Michaelidis – Nouaros 1932: 266-267). Even more particular is the case of Marianna Kambouroglou's[4] (1819-1890) published collection (1883) as she personally transcribed the narrations she was holding in her mind since her childhood; in fact she was dictating them to herself in order to publish.

The transcribing methods for oral narratives were "enriched" with the involvement of the Greek Ministry of Education in mid nineteenth century, encouraging teachers in collecting folkloristic material. Besides their own amateur collections, this lead to specific transcriptions made by the pupils themselves (remembering too, but in the abstract way children do, and self-dictating / collecting the transcribed tales). To summarise about existing Greek transcriptions, especially the unpublished ones, they vary from punctual long texts coming from collectors such as D. Loukopoulos or M. Lioudaki, to the shortened and clumsy texts coming from primary school pupils (1936-1939). The introduction of new technologies in fieldwork research permitted, quite recently of course, precise transcriptions of oral narratives, by preserving them on audio-visual media.

In the same time collecting oral data using anthropological methods, such as participant observation, revealed that the question of fidelity to the original was complex and also dependent on the circumstances and the occasion for the narration transcribed, on the narrator's spontaneity etc. Thus the term "authenticity", in folklore or other cultural theories, in order to describe texts relying more in formal standards and process of production (Mills 2000: 2) resolves to a certain degree the problem of description itself by putting precise limits.

After a wider consideration and beyond these limits these questions essentially concern the transformation of the orality into written text and are quite common in the theory of folklore: to which degree can the narration transcribed be considered as traditional and produce further analysis? To which degree can the oral narratives be transcribed into written reference without considerable alteration? What remains and what perishes in passing from one form to the other? How common factors of human behavior, such as social gathering and communication, can affect the vocalization of narratives, well before and regardless of any transcription? How are silences and pauses registered, and what do they mean? How textualization affects narratives and to what degree does it dictate it? How faithful to any original can a text remain after being classified? Is it still a narrative or just a fossil? The questions of the kind, drawing upon each other, can infinitely spin around the initial paradox of ethnology itself: the transcription and (written) study of cultures without writing in the nineteenth century (cf Belmont 1997: 5).

The societies that have been considered as 'primitive' transmitted information with speech and conserved it by means of memory. It is obvious that the connection between orality and literacy has a prominent role in the passage from one kind of narration to the other. Narration constitutes anyhow an important way of human expression and characterizes most acts, from art to science, since human experience is textualized to be transmitted (Ong 1997: 200). Since the rules dominating oral speech
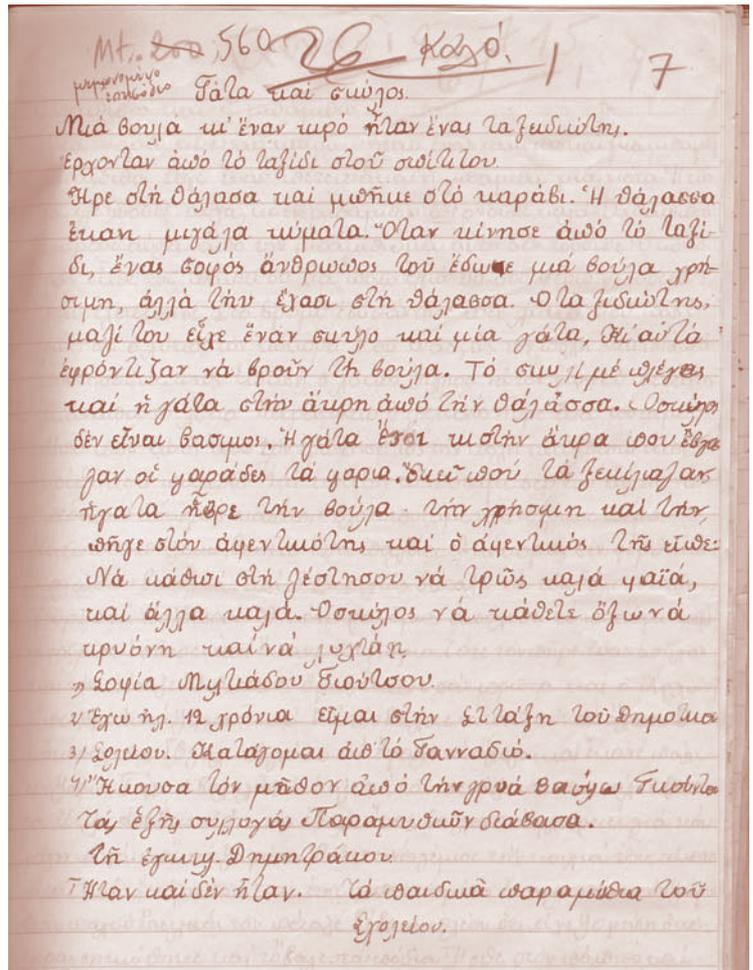
"Extract from manuscript coming from the Pupils' Collection (LA 1261 SM 91, p. 7) kept in the Hellenic Folklore Research Center's Archives.

are considerably different from the ones dictating written speech, we can presume that transcription in illiterate societies that produced many narratives is in fact a kind of adaptation of the products of an oral culture into the needs and ways of a literate culture. The obvious aims of this adaptation are conservation (beyond the limits of geographical borders and human time) and the study of the oral culture by the literate one.

It is interesting to repeat how this adaptation has been and is still effected. A published or archived collection is the product of a fieldwork research; since the object is narrations (conserved by the mechanisms of collective memory and pronounced by the individuals who bear it) we can consider as fieldwork any memory research, whether it is individual or collective, which finally becomes the specific field of narration.

The narration is extracted from the narrator's memory, where it is first textualized, to finally pass from a "mental" text to a written text – especially in the beginning his special expressive means were rarely depicted. Transcriptions of spontaneous narrations in real conditions - concerning contemporary fieldwork research or isolated archived variants - are rather rare. Normally narratives transcribed were previously "ordered" and produced during an interview, or

following a questionnaire or answering to the collector's demand. However "ordering" includes the condition of personal choice, both for the collector and the narrator alike, who accepts being recorded – a consent revealing a lot about his relationship with the ethnographer himself. When the choice concerns the story told itself, we remain more or less under the conditions of traditional storytelling: the narrator has a repertoire well known to his audience that asks for or encourages narration according to a general mood (the same happens with stories produced by chatting). In those cases the audience is the collector himself. However, his own previous choices have already affected the narration recorded, well before he planned which information to seek for[5]. And of course, he has chosen willing informants to give it – those called "good" informants, who are not necessarily the best storytellers in real conditions, but individuals who like being revealed and can express themselves under precise conditions.

Recording narratives presupposes confidence and communication between both parts, as the relationship between informant and collector is a privileged one and happens in the course of a tête-à-tête. The ethnographer's intrusion into a real storytelling context presumes his acceptance by all participants; otherwise the spontaneous conditions are disturbed. We can assume that those storytelling conditions effectively constitute a performance. Records or transcriptions in a tête-à-tête are usually shorter and closer to typological standards.

For the genres besides folktale, such as legends, anecdotes or life stories the storytelling conditions diverge considerably, at least as far as we know from contemporary research, by making each narrative part of a general collective discussion: the narrators succeed and complete each other with their own narration / experience which is much shorter than a fairytale. In these cases the terms repertoire and performance are restricted to their everyday use and meaning, whereas the storyteller is more a speaker than a narrator (cf Degh 1995: 79-89). The general context is in fact the frame of a discussion and the factors of confidence and communication are even more imperative.

During private entertainment between the narrator and the ethnographer, most of the real conditions we have just mentioned are suppressed: the open discussion is not only restricted to tête-à-tête but also and mainly it is affected by the intervention of the transcription means, either pen/notepad, tape recorder or camera. Transcribed (= written) text dictates oral, in order to help the transcriber in his work or just because it gains a fixed form and the narrator knows it. The storyteller addresses the ethnographer himself and stresses the points he estimates more interesting for him. As for the other genres we can presume that even the intention of recording alters them considerably, because the relaxing conditions of chatting are eliminated to the point that the ethnographer is listening less and conducting his informant more according to his own research needs.

We can assume that transcribing oral narratives equilibrates in between two distinct symbolic systems, i.e. language and culture (Geertz 1973: 5-6, 21-29). At the same time transcribing goes well beyond textualizing oral narratives as it forms a procedure beginning at the very moment that the ethnographer expresses his interest towards a certain direction and ending with the publication of his written text. Transcription itself is a very tiny point in this procedure – but together with the written study it inspires it is the most visible one. More importantly, archived transcriptions contribute decisively in the infrastructure for scholarly research.

The existing transcribing and recording techniques certainly offer great possibilities in maintaining a lot from the original oral narration. However and regardless of them, from the moment that the oral narration is transformed into an archived text, all the elements related to the narrator's physical existence (such as the timbre and the tones of his voice, his appearance, or even his expressive means and talents) are lost. Other elements are lost too: the air (lights, smells, temperature, etc), the audience's mood, and the very special time preceding narration. The only thing remaining in fact is its textualized content, with some information on the context. Fairytale transcriptions are luckiest, as their discourse is so poetic itself that it can resist the narrator's physical absence. I am not at all sure that this is also the case for the other genres of oral narratives (cf. Belmont, 1997: 219).

In order to become exploitable and researchable, the transcribed oral text further undergoes the archivist's / researcher's treatment: recognizing and classifying the transcribed material are necessary stages in this procedure. In fact, even the most evident classifications, such as "variant", presuppose a silent agreement with the existence of stereotypes and standardized reproduction procedures. Moreover we consider that a narration is part of the oral tradition if it is met in at least two variants. Classifying gets involved everywhere during this stage of treatment, as some of the most common research criteria indicate (place, genre, tale type etc) according to pre-existing theoretical treatment.

However classifying constitutes an obvious need since it makes possible the management of large data: even a bad classification system (which often means a system resulting from a past and contested theoretical model) is preferable to not classified material. On the other hand organizing transcribed material is always a treatment, and consequently an alteration, since it is perfectly known that collective imagery's products do not obey strict borders.[6] The introduction of new technologies in archiving permits apparently more neutral data analyses, such as the keywords. In my opinion we stay in front of latent classifications, since we still chose one synonym among many, the terms must be compatible with a wider contemporary system of theoretical analysis and research, etc.

Transcribing oral narratives is in fact a procedure producing texts reminding of (or even summarizing somehow) the oral "originals", while at the same time it saves them from being forgotten in the process of socio-cultural changes. Under the precise perspective of

creating ethnographical data, we could even consider them as partial "sketches" of oral narratives created in between orality and written speech and giving new – and permanently fixed – versions of oral texts.

Endnotes

[1] The main literary adaptations of oral folktales in the European culture can be summarized by the following flashpoints: Straparola's *Pleasant Nights* (Italy – 16th century), Rabelais' *Gargantua* (France – 16th century), Basile's *Pentamerone* (Italy – 17th century) [cf Belmont 1986: 40-41].

[2] Eminent Greek scholar in Byzantine studies with a remarkable contribution in folklore research, including the first approach of storytelling in Greece.

[3] Greek tutorial and historian, who also left considerable works in folklore.

[4] Athenian bourgeois lady and intellectual of the time with a considerable contribution in folklore studies.

[5] «The ethnographer approaches his informants with a baggage of intellectual preconceptions given by his anthropological knowledge, of cultural preconceptions given by his sociohistorical background, and of psychological predispositions derived from his lifehistory. » (Tullio Maranhão 1986: 299, in Vasenkari & Pekkala 1999: (6).

[6] A typical example of such an archival misleading is the corpus of the Greek oikotype *514C: the classified folktale also incorporates a lullaby, rumors, anecdotes, songs, plus an entire communication system of representations (see Papachristophorou 2002: 201-224, 267-268, 319-331, 333-337). Vasenkari Maria & Pekkala Armi : 2000. « Dialogic Methodology », in Honko.

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