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Improvisation

Improvisation is an element of all performance genres that are not prescriptively notated, and is found in the performance genres of a wide range of cultures. Verbal genres that require improvisation include ritual, negotiation, gossip, greeting rituals, and conversation. Improvisation can be as basic as a performer's elaboration or variation of an existing framework—a song, ritual prayer, or traditional story. At the other extreme, in some forms of improvisation, the performers start without any advance framework and create the entire work on stage. Thus, improvisation is not an absolute, but a relative term, and is always in a dialectic with the pre-existing structures of verbal performance that, in large part, define a genre. A focus on improvisation is consistent with many recent trends in linguistic anthropology: the ethnography of speaking, the focus on verbal art and creativity, the emphasis on context rather than text.

This focus on performance is a late-20th-century development. In the first part of the 20th century, ethnographic and folklore research focused on identifying "the text" of performance, in an attempt to identify and transcribe the invariant aspects of the performance text. These texts were often analyzed using tools and techniques originally developed to study written performance texts. However, unlike the study of performance texts—scores, scripts, and liturgies—the analysis of improvisational performance requires a fundamentally interactional semiotics, one that incorporates context, audience effects, performer creativity, and the balance of tradition and creativity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some linguistic anthropologists and folklorists began a line of research called the *ethnography of speaking*. These researchers viewed folklore as a living, practiced tradition and thus explored the improvisational creativity of the performer, emphasizing that performance is a creative and emergent process. These researchers considered the dynamic interplay between the social, conventional, and ready-made in social life and the individual, creative, and emergent qualities of human existence.

Although many genres of verbal performance are extremely structured, linguistic anthropologists have documented variations even in the most formalized rituals. Thus all performances contain at least some degree of improvisation; a central concern of researchers is to document the relative contributions of tradition and individual agency in each performance and each genre. Terms such as *ritualization, routinization,* or *formalization* are used to describe the processes whereby verbal performances take on more structure. Conversely, even the most improvised performances involve structure and pre-determined materials. Research has focused on two types of structures within a genre: (1) short segments of formulaic speech and (2) scripted routines and overall performance templates. The former type, involving selection from paradigmatic sets of ready-mades, is quite common worldwide; examples include the parallel couplets of the island of Roti and the canonical Slavic epic poetry. The latter type—improvisation on a routine or within an overall template—is found in everyday conversational routines such as the *greeting rituals* studied by conversation analysts and in performance genres including storytelling, bridewealth negotiation, and marriage rituals.

Thus a fundamental empirical issue is the relative degree of improvisation and ritualization in a performance genre. Various analytic schemas have been proposed to allow researchers to characterize different genres of verbal interaction within a single framework. These analyses suggest that different types of verbal interaction, from ritual performance to ordinary conversation, must be characterized along a set of semiotic dimensions, rather than a single dimension from "ritualized" to "improvisational." The following are some of the dimensions along which different genres of performance can be contrasted:

Ossification. Ritualized genres are often in a dead language or use archaic speech forms, whereas improvised genres use contemporary registers.

Involvement of audience. More improvised genres tend to be more receptive to audience participation and interaction with the performers.

Resistance of genre to change. More improvised genres are more receptive to innovation.

Permanence of genre change. Although improvised genres are more receptive to change, those changes are more likely to be short-lived.

Cultural valuation. The more ritualized genres of a culture tend to be more culturally valued than the same culture's improvised genres.

Indexicality and metapragmatics. More improvised genres tend to require a more sophisticated use of indexicality, with speakers incorporating references to the specifics of the performance event. Likewise, they tend to require of the performer a more sophisticated use of metapragmatic techniques—the reflexive use of language to creatively regulate, or frame, the performance.

Breadth of genre definition. In a more improvised genre, a greater variety of performances will be considered to be tokens of the same event type (culturally defined). In a relatively ritualized genre, a much more narrow range of possible performances is considered to be an instance of the event type; a variation is simply viewed as an incorrect performance (often then losing its ritual effectiveness).

There are many promising areas for future research on these topics. Research is needed on how genres vary on these dimensions; to what degree the dimensions are interrelated; their cultural context, to develop a framework that can characterize the shifts in social purpose which covary with these dimensions; and the folk theories of performance within cultures, to determine how concepts of "improvisation" and "creativity" vary across culture and across genre.

(See also *genre, music, orality, oratory, performativity, prayer, theater*)

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