Dell Hymes, "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth"

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At the 1974 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Portland, Oregon, outgoing AFS president Dell H. Hymes (1927–2009) delivered his presidential address titled "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth." Published one year later in the *Journal of American Folklore,* flagship journal of US folklore studies, the address has since become an oft-cited piece both for its reflections on disciplinary history and futures, and for its conceptual contribution to debates on context, performance, and traditionalization. Hymes, his training and career as a folklorist "intertwined with anthropology and linguistics" (Hymes 1975: 345) much like the discipline itself, sets out to discuss the "state of the art" of folklore studies. He does so not by way of disciplinary introspection but by relating his perspectives of folklore studies' main potentials to anthropology and linguistics. This endeavor of bringing into dialogue three disciplines with common origins yet divergent trajectories is a guiding thread in Hymes' scholarly and professional work as he, after his presidency of the American Folklore Society (1973–74), also presided over the Linguistic Society of America (1982), the American Anthropological Association (1983), and the American Association of Applied Linguistics (1986–87). The relation between language and culture, and respectively between ethnography and linguistics, is a consistent focus in his writings, including his central contributions to the so-called performative turn in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s.

Hymes is credited with having had considerable influence in shaping linguistic anthropology as a distinct sub-discipline of US anthropology, with establishing the

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ethnography of speaking as a model for the analysis of speech events in context, and with developing ethnopoetics as a view of "languages not in the sense of stable, closed and internally homogeneous units characterizing parts of mankind …, but as ordered complexes of genres, styles, registers and forms of use" (Blommaert 2006: 259). These efforts are bridging disciplinary boundaries with ease and still today, Hymes' œuvre is a fixed reference in sociolinguistics, (linguistic) anthropology, and folklore studies. Few of his writings have been translated into German, a collection of essays edited by Florian Coulmas and translated by Fritz Schütze and Florian Coulmas (Hymes 1979) being a notable exception that has been well received mostly in interactional sociolinguistics. Somewhat surprisingly and despite shared perspectives, his works have only been scarcely cited in German-speaking *Volkskunde* and European Ethnology. Regina Bendix has to be credited for introducing Hymes to a larger disciplinary audience in writing (e.g., Bendix 2003; 2004) and teaching, including a course on the ethnography of communication in Göttingen in 2005 which I had the pleasure of attending as a graduate student.

Hymes' essay starts with an attempt to describe what constitutes folklore studies as a discipline and folklorists as a group of scholars. Best read as a portrayal of and reverence to his contemporary colleagues, Hymes posits that professional identities and personal self-conceptions of folklore scholars are not haphazardly related but reflective of a deep dedication to the matter of study. In his view, "the folklorist commonly embodies a personal synthesis of social and aesthetic values" (Hymes 1975: 346); as distinctive features of his fellow scholars he lists the "concern with the aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture; concern with traditions and traditional life of one's own society; enjoyment of, and caring for, what one studies; often, craftsman-like participation in the tradition studied; concern for accuracy and objectivity, insight and explanation, that manages by and large not to contort what one studies with procrustean methodology, or to conceal it behind a mask of theoretics" (345). From this survey of concerns emanates a stance that still today resonates with representatives of the discipline, and which has its origins in scholarly debates of the time. Against the positivist strands of linguistics which sought to isolate universal structures, Hymes stresses performance and creativity; against a theorizing and distancing view of the groups one studies, Hymes stresses involvement and participation while being wary of conflating reflection with affection. This, crucially, includes aesthetic experience beyond 'Culture with a capital C' and the "recognition that beauty, form, and meaningful expression may arise wherever people have a chance, even half a chance, to share what they enjoy or must endure" (346). As an example from his studies in Oregon, Hymes recollects "the satisfaction in the voice of Mrs. Blanche Tohet of Warm Springs, Oregon, when, having finished fixing eels to dry one evening, she stood back, looking at them strung on a long line, and said, 'There, in't [*sic*] that beautiful?'" (ibid.). One might find in this assertion the transfer of Kenneth Pike's emic/etic distinction to aesthetic experience, similarly situated between linguistics and anthropology and

related to Alan Dundes's earlier efforts to establish the category of emic units in folktales.

This is the pivotal point in Hymes' presidential address that establishes "community definitions" (350) as a guiding concept for disciplinary approaches and their potential over other disciplines. It is discussed in more detail after the appreciative general introduction as Hymes moves to discuss disciplinary politics and the place of folklore studies among other disciplines—a debate all too familiar for German European Ethnologists. He argues that a lacking general understanding of the discipline's scope leaves folklore studies being "perceived as the study of things neglected by others, the leavings of other sciences" (346). To change this perception and the role of folklore studies in relation to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, Hymes argues that "folklore must advance a general conception of itself" (347), including "theory and methodology proper to [the fundamental] aspect of reality" it attends to. Drawing on the disciplinary development of linguistics in the US in the twentieth century and its relation to anthropology and folklore studies, Hymes advances such a conception. He argues that regarding communication in a wide sense as "human symbolic competence" (349), folklore studies are in a unique position to bridge the gap between the study of language decoupled from its everyday performance and anthropological approaches in which linguistic aspects are marginalized (and which shy away from studying one's own society). "Folklore's concern with the aesthetic and expressive, with craftsman-like participation, with accurate maintenance of form" (350) is, according to Hymes, the ideal basis to ethnographically relate language to values and identity and, subsequently, to pinpoint the distinctness of folklore studies as a discipline.

Five key notions of folklore studies are constitutive for his understanding: *genre* as salient forms of everyday interaction not limited to myth, tale, or proverb but stretching to "any recurring activity" with "structured expectation" (351); *performance* as a specific quality of interaction and "potentiality of conduct", i.e., not simply as interaction but as "a quality that opens up the heart of the satisfactions one finds in folklore research" (353); *tradition* as a process of grounding activities in social life (rather than time), including the efforts of a group to "'traditionalize' aspects of its experience" (ibid.); *situation* as a counterpart to tradition and a "name for the other forces in social life" (355); and lastly *creativity* as communal and individual re-creation and interpretation. These five notions, Hymes argues, are bound to community (or emic) definitions: what constitutes a genre, whether a genre is 'truly' performed (352) or 'just enacted,' which aspects of social life are traditionalized and which are counted as situational, and how genre and performance, and respectively tradition and situation, are "pervaded by forms of creativity" (356)—these questions require the ethnographic endeavors of folklore studies to be answered.

Hymes' address culminates with an example of his ethnopoetic approach, a transcription of a Chinook myth (360–367). "The Sun's Myth," recorded by Franz Boas in 1891, was narrated by Charles Cultee in Kathlamet, the language Hymes

extensively dealt with in his PhD dissertation *The Language of Kathlamet Chinook* (Indiana University, 1955) based on publications and recordings by Boas. Hymes uses this example both to illustrate his previous discussion of folklore studies' key notions and, more importantly, to put in context the myth as an instance of the texts the discipline deals with and their grounding in social life. The myth of the Sun is about the "mutuality between the people and the powers of the world around them" (358), about a particular relation to nature, and about decay caused by hybris and not abiding to social norms. In presenting the myth to his audience in Portland, Hymes pays deference to the Kathlamet Chinook who lived in his home state Oregon before their "destruction … in the middle of the nineteenth century, from 1830 on, particularly by disease" (ibid.). The "synthesis of social and aesthetic values" (346) which Hymes alludes to as qualities of his fellow folklorists is best reflected in this presentation.

For me, the paper served as one of a few first readings on US folklore studies and its history, alongside works by Dundes, Bauman, Briggs, Noyes, and—for the German speaking context inevitably—Bendix and her concise introduction to the discipline (Bendix 1995). Hymes' paper, while well received after its publication, is an unconventional reading for an introduction to folklore studies in terms of genre and situation—a presidential address at an annual conference. From my limited experience with such works, they tend to age less well than "Folklore's Nature," either because they are too specifically bound to locale, time, and conference theme, or because they engage in disciplinary (and, more broadly, scholarly) politics for its own sake. Hymes does both: he situates his arguments at a vantage point of folklore studies and advances his conceptions of the discipline based on his transdisciplinary standing and strong leaning towards the performative turn (without going much into detail of respective debates). Yet, the enduring appeal of his performance might be explained by what Hymes terms *participants* in his SPEAKING model, i.e., the speaker and the multiple present and future audiences, directly or implicitly addressed. In the years after its publication, the paper's open and inclusive conception enabled it to be taken up not only by fierce proponents of Hymes' proposition but also more generally by those interested in advancing the discipline in relation to but distinct from related fields of study. And further, its attempt to outline the characteristics of a discipline entailed in synthesizing fashion many axiomatic propositions to later debates. From my subjective perspective, the integrative role of language in Hymes' view of folklore studies had much appeal vis-à-vis developments in German *Volkskunde* in which it remains at the sidelines of the discipline. Likewise, Hymes' brief discussion of traditionalization brings together crucial pillars of subsequent discussions on cultural heritage and property. And the list of ways in which the paper offers connections to other substantial topics can be continued: it includes a prime example of the ethnopoetic approach, ties performance to the potentiality of conduct, makes the case for disciplinary politics as well as for transdisciplinary collaboration. Re-reading the paper in 2021, it enables its potential audiences to peek into a breadth of different debates in 1974

while foreshadowing many subsequent developments and illustrating their contingencies.

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