

LANGUAGE AND POETRY AS COMPOSITION-IN-PERFORMANCE

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For classicist Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas, it is beyond doubt that arts scholars contribute to research on humankind; or more specifically the human mind. Not without reason are their disciplines termed the ‘humanities’ in the English language. Together with Mihailo Antović, whose background is in English linguistics, Pagán Cánovas has been investigating the linguistic structures of ‘oral poetry’ since October 2012 as part of a FRIAS Tandem Fellowship in Linguistics and Literary Studies. Their focus is on poems that are not only presented orally, but that in large part are first composed whilst they are being performed. For an epic the length of Homer’s *Iliad* to be created in such settings is not the norm – but is possible. The building blocks that help the poet to simultaneously compose, present, think and above all entertain in this way are recurring formulaic phrases, thematic structures and plot patterns that structure the performance and facilitate free composition within them. Harvard classicist Milman Parry conducted pioneering work in the field of oral poetry when he began to record the performances of local poet-singers in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia in

1934. Today, the Parry-Lord theory concerning the oral origin of epic poetry traditions is widely accepted and, thanks to an extensive digitalisation project, many of Parry’s recordings are available to modern research.

Antović and Pagán Cánovas have now observed a parallel between the structures of oral poetry traditions and everyday linguistic processes as they are described, for example, by construction grammar: each is based on an elementary set of linguistic structures that are used to form larger linguistic units. Studying the poet’s oral presentation or *composition-in-performance*, to name the central working hypothesis of the tandem project, is like putting linguistic construction processes under the microscope. In these extreme conditions, the poet provides evidence of a skill that allows the researchers to draw conclusions about general linguistic competence. In order to confirm these hypotheses, the two academics have embarked on a project entitled *Cognitive Oral Poetics*. On the one hand, the aim of the project is to describe the linguistic structures of oral poetry in different cultures and

traditions using the tools of modern grammatical theory based on cognitive psychology. The focus of interest from the perspectives of language and cultural history are therefore not only the traditional texts themselves, but also the cognitive processes that occur during composition and performance. On the other hand, Antović and Pagán Cánovas hope that their work will allow insights to be gained into the formation of theories on cognitive linguistics and psychology.

Admittedly, achieving this aim will be no mean feat. First, the researchers must identify the formulaic linguistic structures that characterise oral poetry, record them in a comparative corpus and then describe them. This will entail very specific problems, such as those of classification and taxonomy: where does what can and should be considered formulaic begin and end? What similarities and differences are there between vernacular language and the ancient Greek of Homer? What would be an appropriate transliteration of the richly modulating performances set to music of those poet-singers recorded in Parry’s corpus? Language research looking at ‘classical’ texts, corpus-based analysis and modern linguistic theory are all intertwined here.

Antović and Pagán Cánovas are able to benefit from the fact that they are an experienced, multilingual team. They developed the ideas for the FRIAS Tandem Fellowship during parallel research stays at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Antović, whose home university is in the Serbian

city of Niš, conducted research as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the university’s Department of Cognitive Science into the role of visual and spatial categories for conceptualising music, while the Spaniard Pagán Cánovas explored the narrative integration of fundamental emotions such as love, fear and hate into ancient and modern Greek, English and Spanish poetry as part of a Marie Curie International Outgoing Fellowship. This comparative and intermediate groundwork aided the analysis of oral poetry in no small way.

On the whole, it is clear that the project of *Cognitive Oral Poetics* is not compatible with a narrow interpretation of traditional research fields. This is one reason why the conference on “Oral Poetics and Cognitive Science” organised by the two researchers at FRIAS was also international and interdisciplinary. The conference brought together linguists, scholars of language and literature, psychologists and cognitive scientists with the aim of feeding the respective skills in each discipline into the overarching research project. The two FRIAS-based researchers have hit upon a great deal of interest amongst the experts, which has clearly delighted Antović and Pagán Cánovas: “We have been able to attract several of the top international researchers to attend our conference.”

The fact that their *Cognitive Oral Poetics* project enters unknown territory does not daunt the two researchers; their intellectual curiosity is too great for that. And the pair agree that they have found the ideal environment to conduct the project

at FRIAS in Freiburg. This was clear to them from the moment they were accepted for the tandem fellowship. When cautiously enquiring as to what might have tipped the funding balance in favour of their project, the response from Freiburg was: “We’re curious.” (tk)



Mihailo Antović and
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