

Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation
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Week-03

Lecture-12

Lecture 12 : Documenting Oral Literature, Part 1

Hello! This is the 12th lecture of the course, Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation. Today, I will talk about documenting oral literature. So to begin with, we will know what is 'oral literature'. So, can literature be oral? Because we have seen the word 'literature' actually means something written, written document. But now we will see whether literature can also be oral or not. Importance of oral literature: why am I talking about documenting this? What is the importance of doing so? And the features of oral literature.

There are certain commonalities between oral literature of all the speech communities. So little bit we will talk about that. So, folklore is defined as a community's beliefs, customs and stories passed through the generation by word of mouth. So basically folklore, oral literature, oral tradition, they all have a common connotation which basically means the stories, proverbs, riddles, all these which are passed from one generation to other and not in a written form, but by telling stories through word from one mouth to another and like that, generation after generation the words are passed on.

So, we know that there are feelings which are very common to humans. So, we feel happy, sad, we suffer, we have pain, we have the feelings of love, humor, longing. So all these feelings at different points of time take different shapes, artistic shapes, in the form of folktales or folklores and these are actually part of the speech communities. These feelings are actually transformed into various forms. So, they can be songs, they can be chants, poems, proverbs, sayings.

So, there can be some knowledge, there can be some wisdom which is actually hidden in various proverbs or sayings. So, we see that the knowledge from one generation to other, the common history, the common origin story, all these are passed from one generation to other just through oral tradition. So, there is no need of written document. So, that is what

is actually oral tradition or oral literature. These can be creation myths, tales of origin.

So we see that in various communities, they believe they have originated from some particular space. That can be they have originated from a cave or they have migrated from a different place. So, there can be certain stories or there can be stories of wars between two tribes or two clans. So, there can be various such types of stories. So those stories, it is very difficult to find written documents of those, but they know they have heard it from their forefathers and it keeps on going like that.

There can be epic tales, historical narratives of some incidents which can be true, may not be, but we are not going into that. We are only collecting the narratives the oral literature. Folk tales. There can be different types of songs, like different types, depending on whether it is performed during a ritual like marriage or any puja ceremonies or there can be songs related to different types of professions like fishing songs or agriculture-related songs There can be different types of songs related to seasons. So there can be rain songs, there can be songs which are sung when there is no rain.

So people are singing to get some rain, may be in the form of a prayer or there can be songs when people are sitting together, they are having bonfire during winter and singing songs. So, there can be songs which are related to particular season, particular occupation, particular ritual and of course, there can be songs of celebration, of victory or history or various types of lullabies; there can be different kinds of songs. So it is only about songs. So if we go similarly, we can also see different variations of folk tales, different variations of historical narratives. Some of which can be myth-based, some of which can be factual.

And then there can be some mixed of both, there can be stories related to supernatural powers. So there can be different types of stories as well. So we can find actually variations in oral literature or oral tradition. There can be riddles, jokes, language of rituals, chants, there can be some mantras which they believe have healing power. There can be some words or some ways of cursing people or abusing people which can have both negative and positive connotation.

So depending on that, oral tradition or oral literature can be vast and of different kinds. So when we are talking about documenting oral literature, we are actually trying to target all of these. So some people, still we see believe that languages which are not written are not languages, but it is not true. When we study linguistics, we know that every language is a language. It is not needed that every language should have a script or every language has to be represented in a written form, but everything, every way in which we can

communicate, that is a language.

It can be oral language, there are sign languages. So there can be different types of languages. So it is not mandatory for a language to have a written script or to have a written form. So there can be various languages which are just spoken. Similarly, when we are talking about literature, there are lots of texts which are not documented in a written form, but they are being discussed, they are being used in the community for entertainment, for passing the knowledge from one generation to another or in their day-to-day discourse.

So, all these are actually part of literature and we cannot say that written literature is superior to all these. So, when we are studying literature or when we are studying folklore, we know that they are in on the same platform. We are not talking about this one is good, that one is bad or this is superior, that is not; everything is actually part of the literature. So, we know that it was earlier believed that only written literature is literature, but nowadays we have actually accepted and we are aware that oral literature is also literature and it is very important to talk about them and to save them from getting endangered. So, how did it all start? We know that the growth of literature by N.

K. Chadwick, you can go through this, he talked.. I will quote him. He says "In civilized countries, we are inclined to associate literature with writing" and here you know, 'civilized' is said to be civilized in a way that people claim that they are civilized when they have a written literature, but it is not so. Civilization has nothing to do it, "but such an association is accidental".

"Millions of people throughout Asia, Africa and even Europe, who practice the art of literature have no knowledge of letters". That means they cannot write. They might not have a script for their language. "Writing is unessential to either the composition or the preservation of literature". So it is not necessary that we need to have a written form to create literature.

So I can just create a poem and I do not need to write it, I can tell it to someone and that person can pass it to someone else. So there is no need of a written form. And also, for preservation also, it is not needed. Of course, when we are talking about documentation, we need to document it, but we can see in the communities, these stories are preserved only in the oral form. So the children might have heard from their grandparents and then the children pass on to their children and so on.

It lives maybe with little bit of changes. With time it evolves, but still it is there. The theme, the basic structure, it lies with the community when they are practicing their

language, when they are practicing their literature. So, we see that Paul Sebillot, a French folklorist's influential collection and discussion of local stories songs and proverbs actually brought importance to oral literature, because he was emphasizing on the urgency of collecting this rich oral literature before they disappeared, because he realized that it was going to disappear and that is why, it needs to be saved; because it not only talks about collection of sentences or collection of words. In folklore, what we find is that, we find world view, we find the moral of the community.

We know what are their moral way, what are their intellectual setup; we know about their knowledge system, we know about the geography and the ecology of the surrounding language. So, lots of information are actually embedded in the folklores and that is why, you can see that in 1880s he was talking about saving or preserving the folklores. So, it is very important. So, what are the importance of oral literature? If we talk, we know that most of the time the oral literature that we find whether in the form of stories or songs or proverbs, they are uncontaminated form. So 'uncontaminated' term has been taken from Himmelman.

So, why uncontaminated? That means that we do not see much of the mixing up of languages. Why so? Because these are older tales or older stories and they pass on in a similar way in many of the cases and there we do not find the changes as we find in our day-to-day speech. In our day-to-day speech we use lots of code-mixing or code-switching. So you can think about your own language. When you speak your own language, may be you code-mix with lots of English words or English phrases, English sentences, but when you are singing a song in your own language, if it is a older song, older folk song, then there is no chance of doing code-mixing in that.

So that is why, it has been said to be uncontaminated; not only about code-mixing, but also about mixing up of the language or changing of the language, which we find in our day-to-day discourse, is very limited in the folklores. Folklores are multidimensional. What do we mean by that? When we are studying folklore or when we are looking at a performance, it has various dimensions. As I mentioned, there is a relation with the geography, a relation with the ecology and at the same time, it also tells about the social setup. So lots of information, lots of extra things are actually added in the folklores; when to use it, when to sing it, who does it, who does not do it.

So, lots of extra information, meta-linguistic information are all hidden in the folk or oral literature. So, we can know about that. And as I said, it also presents the world view and the ecology around it. In many of the folklores, proverbs, riddles, songs, what we find is that it talks about something which is related to the geography or ecology and also related to their world view. So, this is an example from Mahasui language, which actually means

"If grass was not bent when green, how will you bend it when it turns dry".

So it is a proverb and I think you can understand what is the meaning of it, what is the metaphor here. So this is important for their geography as well, because grasses have to be bent and then kept, otherwise it cannot be done if there is snowfall and all, because Mahasu is spoken in Himachal Pradesh where we find lots of snowfall. Secondly, metaphorically this proverb can be also used for children. So if on time, they are not treated well or if they are not handled with care, maybe after sometime it is not possible. So there can be multidimensional meaning as well for one proverb; that also can be, we can see that.

So oral literary text have been turned to use in schools in the revival of languages. That also we know. And oral literature, when they have been used as a pedagogical material, we see that these are very entertaining for the children. So if someone is taught language through like grammatical rules and they are given a set of words and they are asked to learn it, it can be boring at times. But when they are taught their own language through this oral tradition, then it becomes more engaging and entertaining.

So they are basically listening to stories and through those stories, they are learning this syntactic structure of the language, they are learning words of their language. So that way also, pedagogical materials have been created through oral literature and nowadays, we see that there are lots of focus in doing that. So people across the globe are actually paying attention towards that. Moreover what we see is that, oral literature are evidence of ways and means of human survival and sustenance. Because it talks about geography and ecology, it also talks about how humans survive that, how in harsh climates people are actually surviving, what are their tricks of living in that geography, which is often reflected through the folklore.

Evidence of collective memory and what do I mean by collective memory? When the community believe in something, they have that belief or they have that common memory that our tribe or our community, they actually descended down from a hill or they came from a particular forest. So there can be certain memories, which are not part of their cognition, but it is a story which they have heard from their grandparents and that passes on. So they know about their community, they know from where they have originated, what were the difficulties that the communities faced, maybe there were battles and they had to migrate or there were certain harsh climate and also, there can be certain things which they remember only because they have heard about it. So now as humankind, we have some collective memories. We have like, you can say, we know about World War I, World War II, our next few generations, who have not seen COVID-19 will know about it.

All these are part of our common memory as human beings, as part of this earth. Similarly, being part of a particular geographical area, being part of a particular community, people carry those common memories. Evidence of sharing among the communities. So through these oral literature, they share the literature right, and when they perform also there is interaction, that binding is very very strong and that is actually reflected in the oral literature and practiced through the oral literature. Evidence of archaic structures of language which may not be used at the present times.

As I said that, these oral literatures are very old in most of the cases and that is why they carry archaic structures which you cannot find when you are collecting like sentences or narrations at present times because the language has changed and so these structures have become frozen. You cannot find them in their day-to-day discourse, but you can collect those from the folklores. Evidence of communicative pattern outreaching the wide variety of listeners. So how actually they communicate, how a performer communicates with the audience and how the audience actually interacts with the performer. So all those you can collect, which is collected only through oral literature, the performances and all.

You cannot collect it just through translation method or any other method that I discussed. Evidence of archaic linguistic structures. So those structures which are archaic and not only structures actually, both matter and manner. So there can be things which are talked about like a river, a waterfall which might have dried out right now. So no one is talking about it, but in older songs you can know that there was a waterfall, which has dried out now or you can see that with time, geography changes.

With modern times, there are lots of changes in a village, but when you go to these older songs, you can actually know about the historical things like which might not be present at today's time. So features of oral literature, we see generally, some of these features are mostly present in most of the oral literature that we see. So again, some of them can be there in some songs or some oral literature, while others might not be there, depends on the community. So generally, what do we see? We see that oral literature is performance-based. So when we are talking about songs or we are talking about folklores, there are generally performances.

And that is why there is audience, there are performance and it is not done in a very formal manner, it is done in a very casual manner, so maybe all of them are sitting together in the village and someone stands and starts performing, then the other one joins. So, it is done in very informal manner, but generally there are performances. Participatory in nature, as I mentioned. So if someone is performing, then the other one might join voluntarily and the third person might just clap and ask something, so that can

be done. So without boundaries of prose, poetry, narration, theatre, gesture, all integrate in one.

So there is no boundaries. Sometimes what you will see that certain people, they are actually reciting a song or a poetry, but in between they are also dancing and then there can be some riddles and those are asked to the audience, audience replies and then again the performer starts dancing. So, everything is mixed up. There is no clear-cut boundary at times, that can be a thing. It is not like always it will be there, but in some performances one might find that.

It may be restricted to certain parts of the society. So there can be things like some songs, which can only be sung by women or some chants, which can only be recited by the males. So there can be certain type of restrictions. So we saw a dance in Koda community, which were performed only by the young boys. So they will take sticks and they will dance together.

So only boys below 14 will generally perform this dance. So there can be certain type of things and of course, I think looking at the dance, I felt that of course, people more than that, if 40+ might not be able to perform those type of dance. So there can be certain reasons behind it. So you can see that these can be the things. Outcome of collective memory and hence there is no single author or copyright.

So nowadays, we talk a lot about copyright things and all. But in folklore, we do not talk about copyrights, we do not even know who are the actual authors of it. So when we are talking about oral literature, if you want to find the authors it might be difficult. Though in certain folklores or folk songs, we see that author is already mentioned in the tale, in the narration they name the author or they talk about the author; it can be a thing, but we generally do not find author. Ever flowing like a river, but very holistic in nature. Why it has been said to be ever flowing? That means, if today you are able to collect oral literature of a community that means, it has been passed from one generation to other and that is why it is still surviving.

That means, it is flowing. So there is a flow. So if it stops, there is no flow, then of course, it will not survive. And holistic in nature because it has lots of information and overall, it gives you an impression about the community, you know about the community it is very holistic in nature. The language of oral tradition in various genre may not be the same as that of speech or conversation, thus some specific archaic structures may be represented. So what we see is that, this we also see in the language we speak, the way we are speaking is not the way we actually create poetry or create songs. So there can be changes in the syntactic structure, there can be changes in the word choices.

So that can be a thing and of course, sometimes it can be archaic. So these are some of the features of oral literature which we find. So what we can see is that oral tradition or oral literature or folklore are the names commonly used for oral practices a community involves in, which can be beyond the interpersonal communication. So day-to-day communication that is there, we talked about how we can collect words or sentences, how day-to-day discourse we document, but when we talk about oral literature, we are actually documenting those structures, which can be archaic at times, which are more uncontaminated, as I mentioned, so there is less code-mixing or code-switching type of things or borrowing. Those are the structures which are often used, but they are difficult to document as well because you cannot translate a proverb and ask someone or you cannot guess what can be the proverbs or sayings in a particular community.

Within interpersonal communication also, we can see some oral tradition like proverbs. So sometimes, we can see parents telling proverbs, some type of proverbs to their children or some type of riddles or sayings to teach them something. So there can be different types of proverbs used in interpersonal communication as well. But generally, we also find oral tradition beyond the day-to-day discourse. So we find it when they are performing something, when there are certain seasons and people also do it for entertainment.

It is not like it is a duty to pass on the knowledge and that is why it has to be done. It is just for entertainment. So people are fishing and they are singing a song, they are harvesting and they are singing a song. So there can be things like that. And nowadays, what we can find is that sometimes we can find these oral literature, we can find oral songs, we can find folk songs, folklores, but you might not even find the exact meanings of each and every word.

You might get the theme. So what I have experienced is that, when we are working in the endangered languages, speakers they might remember some of the songs or some of the tales in that same archaic structure that they have heard from their grandparents. So they might remember that, but when you ask about each and every word they might not be able to tell that. So for some of the words of course, they will be able to tell the meanings, but for some other words, they might have forgotten the meanings of the words, but of course, in those cases as well we should keep on documenting the oral literature. Oral literature is a means of entertainment and also a way of passing knowledge about the geography, about the ecology, about various other means which are available there from one generation to the other. So these are some of the references which you can go through and I hope you enjoyed today's class. Thank you!