Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation

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Lecture-13

Lecture 13 : Documenting Oral Literature, Part 2

Welcome to the 13th lecture of the course, Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation. Today I will continue talking about Documenting Oral Literature. So in the last class, I talked about what is oral literature, what are the basic features of it and all about that. So, I will continue today with the features of oral literature, but I will talk little more about it today. I will also talk about how we can document oral literature and what are the challenges in doing that, what are the challenges that we face when we are about to document oral literature. And for that, we should also be aware of fake lore.

What is fake lore? I am also going to talk about that. So in my last lecture, I mentioned that oral literature or performances are generally performance-based, that is it is not text-based. It is more about performance and when we are saying performance, that does not mean that it is all about dancing and singing. It can be just saying a thing, it can be a proverb, it can be a riddle.

So it can just be a sentence, but then how are we delivering that? So there can be some voice modulation, there can be some expressions related to it, it cannot be just said in the same way. So, there can be like 10 proverbs and all those 10 might need little change in the voice modulation or how we are actually delivering it. So it has been seen that scholars focus, nowadays, more on the performance, how is it actually being delivered, not on the text, of course, on the content as well, but how it is actually delivered because that adds to the content of the literature. So, it is not only about what is the story. When we are collecting a folklore, you should not only focus on the story part, it should be also how it is delivered, how they tell a story.

Where are they actually using laughter, where are they using different types of voice modulations, what are the ways of actually delivering it. There can be different types of sentences used, there can be some questions to the audience. So all of them, all of these

are actually part of the performance. It is not only about a stating a story in a simple manner, it is not about that. Oral literature actually involves lots of performance.

So the story's life and reality actually depends on the manipulation of voice, gestures can be there, facial expressions, dramatic characterization and at times, also audience involvement, how audience is interacting to the performer. So I have seen a performance in Purulia by a Kurmali speaker. So this is an aged person who is sitting with his grandchildren and then he is narrating a funny story, but then in between there are pauses, where the children are supposed to ask "then what happened? Then what happened?", something like that. And the children in chorus, they are asking that because the children have heard this story; they know that that is their part. So almost every day, they listen to some of the stories and they know how to take part in that and they also enjoy doing that.

So it becomes a two-way thing; it is not only about the performer performing and the audience just sitting and enjoying it, both are active participants in the whole activity. So the performance is for both, the narrator as well as the audience, both are actively participating. The audience, they have to laugh at certain points, ask questions or say something. So those are needed for the narrator to keep on narrating the story. So, all these are actually needed to be documented.

We cannot only focus on the text of the story, we cannot focus on just the story baseline, no we cannot do that. We have to talk about the overall thing, how this old man is narrating, how the children are listening, where he is pausing and how these children are reacting to those pauses. So everything is part of the performance. So as I mentioned, it is very much participatory in nature. It is not one-way thing, it is not like some performers are performing on the stage, others are just sitting there; it is not like that.

It is involved; the audience are involved with the participants, both the performer and the audience needs to interact. For example, audience needs to ask at certain points or laugh at certain points or say something exclamatory like "oh this happened!", something like that, which helps the narrator to keep on narrating the story. And then as I said there can be no boundaries to it. If someone is narrating a story, it can be a thing that the story is there, in between comes a poetry, in between again comes a riddle and then there is a song. So, everything can be mixed up.

It is not like you have taken a ticket for a dance performance, you go to the hall, watch the dance performance and then come back. In between you can also check your mobile and might take a short nap, so it is not like that. It is like you have to be totally involved and it can be anything, the performance can be full of dance, song, everything. It is not only actually a performance as such, it is a group activity kind of thing. So that is there

and   it   can   be   at   times,   restricted.

So when I said that this person is telling a story and the children are basically listening to it, so in this case, it was not restricted for the adults, but mostly it is enjoyed by the children. In certain cases, we have seen that certain songs are sung only by women. So in certain communities of Bihar, they sing marriage songs. So when they sing, only the women can sing it; male members they do not get involved in the activity. Similarly we have seen that, again in certain communities of Bihar, where we see that when the groom comes with the family to marry the girl, then the females of the girl's family, they can curse   a   lot   to   the   groom.

They can say bad words to the groom, to the groom's father, to the boy, his father, his mother, his relatives and these can be bad words, tabooed words, every type of words. But generally, these are only said by the females of the community, male members they do not get involved in that. So why? It is restricted to the male members, only female can do it. There can be such type of examples which we find. For example in Toto, we have seen that there are certain songs which are only sung by the women of the community, who   have   actually   received   the   song   in   their   dreams.

They believe that in their dreams they have got the song and then they sing it, then they might teach it to someone whom they feel is suitable for the song, not to just anyone. So it is restricted to certain people. So there can be different types of restrictions. There can be also restrictions depending on the season or a part of the day, like some songs can only be sung during the morning time or some songs can be sung during only night time. And the   rules   are   known   by   the   community,   they   do   not   actually   disobey.

They follow the rules. So there can be certain type of restrictions. Again, like marriage songs will be sung during the marriage only. The marriage songs are not sung during some other ritual; may be during a birth ceremony, a marriage song will not be sung. So there are certain rules and regulations and restrictions, which are actually followed by the community   members.

Part of collective memory and hence there is no single author. So what we see is that, in most of the cases, songs or tales or whatever we are talking about, folklores are, as I said, it keeps on going from one generation to other. If the population is staying in one village or two, three villages, this folklore will travel also in all these villages. So when the folklore, as you know it, is oral, it passes from one to other person or one clan to other clan, there are lots of variations added to it. So people when they are narrating, they also add   their   little   part   to   it,   Because   it   is   not   restricted.

No one knows who is actual author of it. So there can be various versions of the same folklore, there can be various versions of the same song, same folk tale and it is there generally. Of course, there are certain rules which are followed. There is some baseline of a story, but then there can be other smaller incidents which are added to the story by the narrator. So, it can actually change from one person to another.

It is also said that no two performances are same. So, when someone is performing or singing a song in folk tale, might be the performance can be different from his or her earlier performances. So, that can also be a thing. It can change with the same person, it can change from person to person, people can add their own little bit to the narration. So those can happen because it is not very strict.

So, Albert Lord's "The Singer of Tales" is a very famous one because it is based on field research on South Slavic oral heroic songs. So while analyzing these songs, what he realized is that these lengthy songs are of course, very long and repetitive, and these lengthy oral poems were created not through prior composition or by repeating memorized text. What does that mean? That means, that these are just not like something memorized which is being repeated, it is not like I have heard something from my parents and I am repeating it. It is also while repeating it, I am adding my little creativity into the story, I am adding little stories, subplots to the main plot. So things like that often happen.

So that is what he realized that tales are generally not a single story, there can be versions to it and it is not generally composed by the single author. Because they are oral in nature, so there is no written document and that is why, people add their own creativity, they can add their own subplots to the narration. So someone who is actually telling the story, might forget about one part and add his or her own part or might just for fun add some part, so there are lots of improvisations while narrating it. So these are there. But again as I mentioned, there can be subplots, there can be little bit added to it, but the basic plot remains same and that is the formula of the expression.

So if a song is being sung, there is a particular tune to it, the performer will actually stick to the tune. He or she might add one or two lines by his own, but then the tune will remain same, the basic expression will remain same. For folktales also, the basic plot, the basic way of expression, those things remain same, but there can be minor changes, new addition to it, those things can also be there. So, in Lord's oral formulaic analysis, it came to be called as 'oral theory', what he saw is that, it has hugely influenced across a wide range of disciplines. And it also talks about how a composition always follows the rules, it is both formulaic and based on composition during performances.

As I mentioned, when one is performing, one can actually add to it, but again, he or she will stick to the basic formula, which actually Lord talks about. So now coming to documenting oral literature, how can we do that? By now, I am sure you have understood that collecting oral literature is a little bit challenging task, because it is not only about collecting sentences or words or names of objects, it is not only collecting about the stories or the songs, it is also about collecting the whole performance. And as I mentioned, performance is not only by the performer, both by the audience and the performer plus, there are extra dimensions to it like when is it performed, why is it performed, what is the season, what time of the day, what are the equipments those are needed. So there can be multiple dimensions to it. So video and audio recordings are needed of course, for oral literature and also keeping notes.

So all of them can together help in documenting oral literature. So it is about multimedia recording; not only recording of video, along with that notes are also very important; you need to take notes of things. Collect various versions of it: if you are working on folklore or you are working on oral tradition, it is always good to collect as many versions as you can get. So just now I mentioned how with time it can change, so the basic plot will remain same, but there can be new changes into it. So, you can always collect all the versions and then see how and why there are so many versions.

So, that can depend on the clan, that can depend on the geography, culture, ecology, why? Maybe they are based on the geography. A particular speech community stays in say five different villages and depending on their geography, they are bringing little changes in the song; that can be a thing. So, lots of those type of things can be there; why there are variations? It is very interesting to study. What is the basic formula? So there can be variations, but then the skeleton of the literature remains same. So what is it? Matter and manner, how it is being delivered and what is the matter, the main theme, those things generally remain same and one needs to focus on that.

Because the matter will tell a lot about the world view, about the geography, about the surroundings and all. And of course, the history of the community and manner will also tell how it is delivered, how the particular narration is delivered in a particular manner. So, all these needs to be documented. The degree to which new creative additions can be made to the text. So, it is not like everything can be changed.

So, 90 percent of the text will remain same, 10 percent can be added or may be 60 percent remain same, other part is being added. So, how it can be done? So there has to be certain unsaid custom. So there can be some convention actually which is there. So this is a questionnaire which one can follow while collecting or documenting folklores. Of course, you need to know the name, gender, age and these are some of the common

parts which you also collect while collecting other type of linguistic data, but along with that you also need to know language of the oral tradition.

Performance, where is it being performed? Some performances can be done only inside the house, some can be done in public places. So where is it done? What constitutes the stage? Are these performances done under a tree or on top of a hill or in a social gathering, where are they performed? So when I am talking about rituals, those might be done in a place where they worship God or naming a children, the songs sung might be done in a sacred place, where there are other religious rituals being done, for other type of songs those can be done.. harvesting songs may be sung on the field. So, where is it actually performed? When is it performed? What are the seasonal aspects of it, if any? So, what are the do's and don'ts of the performances? Who can do it? Who cannot do it? What are those? Functional aspect, why is it done? So sometimes, it is said that some songs can heal a person.

Some songs can make someone happy. So those type of functional aspects, what is the function of the performance or is it just for entertainment? Sometimes people, there are customs where parents, they might actually curse their children because they will think that that way their children will not fall sick. So, why? What is the function that is believed? Is any other activity associated with the performance? Any other activity can be there like for occupations, if the song is a fishing song or harvesting song, so what is the activity which is related to the performance? Does it carry any other power like I said, sacred or healing power? So, what is it considered to be? Instrument required, for certain type of performances, they will require certain instruments. So I mentioned that young boys in Koda community, they were dancing. So they require stick for this particular type of dance, all of them carried a stick. So, what are the equipments? In certain songs, they need certain instrumental equipments, some instruments are required, in certain songs some leaves or something are required.

So, what are the requirements for the performance? What are the restrictions? Who can perform, who cannot, who can listen to it, who cannot. So for some type of songs in certain communities, women cannot hear the song. So there can be various types of restrictions. And then when we are collecting, we should also focus on both the new and the old forms. Why it is important? Because the older one of course, can give us the archaic forms and it can give us the difference between the old and the new, in both matter and manner.

In most of the communities, we see where still the new songs are being created, the theme of the songs vary a lot from the older songs. In some communities, we have seen the older songs talk or describe the nature, while the new songs they talk more about

struggles of modern life. So, there can be differences in both the matter and the manner, how they are performed and what is the theme of the song. So that way, it is also good to see how the language is changing, how the world view is changing with time. So for that, both the new and the old forms should be documented for any language.

Now, what are the challenges of doing that? There are actually lots of challenges like how to do justice to the performative element. So, if you are presenting it in a writing mode, so, of course, we can video record it, we can audio record it and we can keep notes, but when you are trying to translate it, or if you are trying to write something out of it and then how can you do justice to the performance? It becomes little difficult, little difficult to translate the performance in a written text, translate the voice modulation and all those things in a written text. Also, you have to record the whole social convention. So there is not only the things which are happening in the performance, but also beyond that; when is it sung? So there can be a particular time, particular day, the whole social convention, the interaction with the audience, it is a huge thing; it is not only a particular thing.

Same for any type of oral literature actually. So, it becomes challenging how can you do that. Moreover, it always changes. So it is never same; if it is practiced in the community then that means, it will change with time. So, how to document that change? There are also moral and political questions related to that. And when we are talking about these challenges, we also know that when we are collecting proverbs or sayings or riddles, how can you actually collect it? You cannot go it through any methods like translation or any other method, because you do not know.

But if you are there and naturally, it is being used in a discourse, you can document it, otherwise it becomes a challenging task to document the proverbs, sayings. For folk songs or folk tales, you might ask the person to perform, but for sayings and proverbs, it really becomes a difficult task. For performances also, like songs and dance or stories, at times the community members may not agree to perform it for you. Why? Because that is not the season when they perform it or it is not the time when they perform it.

So they cannot perform it. It will be very natural for them not to do it. So that can be a thing and in opposite to that, we can see in some places, people can actually create something. So if you are forcing someone that give me a folk tale in your language or give me a folk song in your language, this person can create something artificial and then deliver it to you. There can be various reasons for doing it: for remuneration, for political agenda, may be they are trying to spread some agenda through it, some propaganda through it; there can be different types of interest in doing that. But these are inauthentic material, even sometimes they are described as 'fakelore', because they are not folklore.

They are fake, like fake you find lots of thing nowadays. So this is also fake, which we should not entertain and we should actually verify whether it is original or not. We generally understand, we can understand when we are collecting from more than one informant. We are going to different people, we are asking about it, we are validating our data. So we know it and we should actually cross check it.

We should not get trapped in these type of activities. So oral literature is mostly performative. When one aims to document oral literature, one needs to use multimodal techniques for the process and that not only requires audio and video recording, but also taking notes of various aspects which cannot be recorded through this medium, like why is it being performed in that particular time and all those things, what are the restrictions which are there? So when one aims to document oral literature, one needs to use multimodal techniques along with the notes. It is also important to mark the social convention for the use of the particular folklore, like proverb is also used in a certain context. So people just do not use proverb all of a sudden; there has to be a context to it.

Again, there has to be certain restrictions. Some proverbs can be said to the younger people, but not to the senior people or older people. So there can be certain restrictions to that. So what are those? When are they delivered? One also needs to check about the authenticity of the folklore which are collected. It is always better to collect from the most natural occurrence than the staged ones. So if one wants to collect say folklore related to marriage, one can visit the community when someone is getting married and try to document it, if they get permission.

Similarly, if there are seasons in which particular performances are done, then on those seasons they can visit the field and collect data or document the whole scenario. So it is always good to document from the natural setup than creating artificial setup, because in the artificial setup, the performance might not be so real. The performers, they might not feel like performing because it is not natural; they also know it. So it is always better to document in the natural setup than on the staged context. For certain type of oral literature, it is only possible to collect or document when it is in natural discourse.

So documenting folklores is a challenging task, yet it is worth doing, why? Because it carries indigenous knowledge system and the world view. So we know about the community's history, geography, ecology, world view, all of these through their folklores, through various songs, stories, riddles, because all of these are actually based on the geography and ecology of that area. And again as I mentioned, also lots of knowledge related to the geography is passed on from one generation to other through these proverbs and folk literature. We know about the moral and ethical values of the community

through folklore. There are various types of proverbs or riddle which actually showcase their morals and ethical values.

Oral tradition can be entertaining way of reviving or learning a language. So when we are talking about documenting oral literature, we can actually use these documented material for reviving a language, or for teaching the language to the younger ones. And in many cases we have seen, this has already been practiced, where oral literature is used not only to teach the language, but also to teach about the geography of the area. So that is a very entertaining way of teaching about the area and of course, about the language through oral literature. So that is why oral literature, though it might be little difficult to collect, but it is worth doing it and it can get lost very easily with the exposure of the dominant language.

So it is very important to document it and use it also for future generation. I hope you enjoyed this class. Thank you.