

The human voice and the texture of experience¹

by Anne Karpf

Abstract: This article explores the representation of the voice in texts about oral history over the years, arguing that too often it has been seen as a mechanism for retrieving otherwise inaccessible testimony rather than as a rich medium in its own right. Such a stance, however, is being modified, it suggests, as new digital technologies develop the potential to breach the chasm between the oral and the written.

Key words: voice, oral history, orality, transcription, digitisation

The explosion of oral history in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to represent a new way of doing history. It took the historian out of the library and archive, and into the community, the workplace and the home. It opened up new spheres of inquiry into hitherto neglected realms of experience. And, by recording aspects of human life that had fallen outside the purview of classical historians, it also made visible structural social relations and challenged them. However, this article argues, in their tendency to treat the human voice as an invaluable new source rather than as a resource in itself, oral historians have failed to fully exploit the richness of their medium. While it has become a cliché of oral history that it ‘gives voice to the voiceless’, the rush to transcribe oral recordings that has been such a significant feature of oral history practice over the past half-century has often simultaneously silenced these voices. We may, though, be entering an era in which the voice re-sounds.

Muffled from history

There was an unmistakable air of excitement about the writings of historians of the 1960s and 1970s, describing the new seams of life that oral recording was now enabling people to access: it

was as if they had alighted on an entire, previously hidden, subterranean channel, along with a fresh way of preserving the mulch and silt of human experience. This ‘evidence from the underside’² and ‘history from below’³ ‘put people into print, especially people who would normally be denied this opportunity’⁴, including ‘those who find writing difficult or impossible.’⁵ Implicit in this characterisation is an opposition between written and oral forms. The historian, whose medium of scholarship and method of dissemination is presumed to be the written text, could now gain admittance to the lived actuality of those without the cultural power to commit their own experience into the written form – its ultimate destination.

In this approach the oral dimension of oral history was constituted as a kind of raw material that the historian alchemically transformed. It provided a link to the oral tradition, to nineteenth century folklore, for example,⁶ or praise poetry;⁷ cultural forms whose orality was not just their means of transmission but their very *raison d’être*, the quintessential ‘performative utterance’.⁸ But frequently the orality of modern oral history was regarded as incidental: it was a means of capturing the experience of ‘those classes and

groups in society which, although part of a literate society and often literate themselves, did not leave much documentary evidence of their own creation.⁹ Thus oral history was seen as particularly suited to recovering the lives of certain disadvantaged social groups. At the same time, it was also considered as having a role to play in recording the history of elites, in that it offered a way of compensating for the lack of written sources, or at least supplementing them. Allan Nevins, often seen as the grandfather of modern oral history, saw the oral recordings he made at Columbia University from 1948, for example, as filling 'a noticeable gap in the level of personal documentation generated by prominent people who no longer wrote letters or kept diaries on the scale of their nineteenth century counterparts.'¹⁰ Oral sources, therefore, supposedly made up for an insufficiency of written ones, 'information about whole areas of our past which is unavailable from written or printed sources',¹¹ when subjects lacked the skills, time or inclination to author these themselves.

Revealingly, the definition of oral history in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* was 'tape-recorded historical information drawn from the speaker's personal knowledge; the use or interpretation of this as an academic subject.'¹² In this formulation the voice itself has been almost entirely erased: it exists only in its recorded form. The technology of recording overrides the original instrument – the voice was thus reduced to a retrieval mechanism. Indeed, from a technologically deterministic perspective such as this, oral history was often depicted as being somehow 'produced' by the invention of new recording technologies, especially the lightweight, cheap and very portable cassette recorder. However, this characterisation also arose, perhaps, because ultimately it was the historian who possessed the ability to confer historicity on evidence or testimony; it was the historian's gaze that endowed raw material gathered through the conduit of the voice with the status of historical record, a status only fully arriving through its metamorphosis into the written form. Such life stories are sometimes represented as extricated by the historian: 'seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects.'¹³

The voice: in transit

Not infrequently the 'oral' in historical discourse has turned out to refer merely to the means through which historians acquired their material, acting as little more than a staging post *en route* to its transcription and transformation into a written text. Of course oral historians have long acknowledged the unique qualities of spoken testimony. Paul Thompson, for example, described the way that 'The use of the human voice, fresh, personal, particular, always brings the past into the present with extraordinary

immediacy... They breathe life into history.'¹⁴ Yet, curiously, in his pioneering championing of oral history, an entire chapter on memory and the self noted the similarities between oral history and psychoanalysis, yet never referred to the fact that both rely on the voice as their primary medium of communication. Indeed, the continuing lack of reference to voice, along with intonation, pitch and paralanguage, in indexes of books of or about oral history is striking. Historians cast around for ways of animating and enlivening the voices of the past, and yet oral historians, custodians of real, living voices, have often been at pains to embalm them in print, to remove the oral from oral history.

Yet the alacrity with which the oral has been transposed into the written is not some peccadillo peculiar to oral historians. If they could not bear to linger on its orality for long, if they have felt a need to flatten and deaden their material so that it more resembled that found on parchment or in a chronicle, this is because to a great extent the written form today has a greater legitimating power than the spoken, with the oral commonly consigned to the merely illustrative, in the form of 'clips'. In this the oral historian has been simply following contemporary cultural priorities and prejudices. By transfiguring the vocal into the written the oral historian has re-enacted the apparent displacement of oral societies by literate ones and, Derrida's belief in 'phonocentrism' notwithstanding,¹⁵ the superior value now attached to written forms. Whether inadvertently or inevitably, oral historians have reproduced the modern hierarchy of the senses that prevails in Western cultures, and which is governed by what Coleridge called 'the despotism of the eye'.¹⁶

I have argued elsewhere that Western cultures lack a collective sense of the importance of the voice, along with almost any shared language in which to talk about it: sound is often placed below sight in importance, with the result that adults – in contrast to small children – are barely voice-aware.¹⁷ We persist instead with the idea that the arrival of the printed word marginalised the voice, making it less important than the image and the written word, as if it belonged to an earlier, more primitive stage of human development and evolution, and now rested at the periphery of human interaction, rather than at its heart. Indeed, in the excited debates about the role of language, speech and conversation, the embodied voice is often no more than an afterthought.¹⁸ So if oral historians have tended to ascribe a higher value to oral accounts once they have been transcribed, they are reflecting, as well as reinforcing, dominant cultural beliefs.

Yet the process of transcription purges testimony of some of its most powerful features. Two major oral historians recognised this some decades ago when they problematised the act of

transcription. In 1971, in this journal, Raphael Samuel contended that:

The spoken word can very easily be mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page... People do not usually speak in paragraphs... Continuity, and the effort to impose it even when it violates the twist and turns of speech, is another insidious influence.¹⁹

His solution was not to eschew transcription altogether, but for transcribers to become more sensitive to the cadences of speech and attempt to communicate these, rather than imposing 'conventions and constrictions of written prose.'²⁰

Alessandro Portelli, in an article reprinted in 1981 in *History Workshop*, similarly argued that 'Expecting the transcript to replace the tape... is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations.'²¹ Portelli drew attention to the connotations of tone, volume, velocity, rhythm and intonation in popular speech. The very addition of punctuation by the transcriber, he suggested, by introducing pauses appropriate to grammatical convention, confined speech 'within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow.'²²

It certainly is not the case that in the years since, historiographers of oral history have failed to recognise the distinctive qualities of spoken discourse. On the contrary, what is significant is how often they have needed to remind their fellow practitioners of it, as though this understanding were hard to sustain and needed to be repeatedly rediscovered. For instance, in 1979, anthropologist Charles Joyner suggested that 'Too many oral historians are content to interview and transcribe, making little effort to comprehend more than the literal referential meaning of the words.'²³ Yet in 2011, Shelley Trower, in a book sensitive to the differences between oral and written texts, called for future work that focuses in more detail on 'the sonorous textures of the voice', something that her book, however, would not be doing. 'Considering that voice is essential to oral history', she declared, 'we might do well to think more not only about what it says but what it is and how it says it.'²⁴ Other commentators, when talking about voice, slip almost unnoticed into using 'voice' in a metaphorical sense, or elide voice with narrative, or the authorial or political voice.²⁵

The sound of difference

The properties of the embodied voice, it seems, are hard to keep in mind, even though they bring to testimony the texture of experience. In 'Belonging: voices of London's refugees', part of the Refugees Communities History Project lodged in the Museum of London, for example,

Mercedes Rojas talked about her Chilean husband who 'disappeared'. The transcript reads somewhat generically, as if she were describing an experience that might have taken place under any number of Latin American dictatorships. Rojas, speaking in a language that was not her mother tongue, also used the word 'infringing' where she probably meant 'inflicting': transcripts inevitably draw attention to such slip-pages because we expect them to conform to the norms of writing and not speech, and notice when they do not.

The recording, however, adds an overwhelming sense of individual experience. What in transcript form had been somewhat flat, though still powerful, is transformed through the voice into a still continuing human tragedy, and a very particular and personal one; coloured by Rojas's soft voice, accent and slow pace, it becomes an anguished, highly embodied attempt to make sense of senseless acts. As you listen, you also become aware of a certain ambiguity: that the torture she refers to is that which was inflicted upon her husband but is also, in some sense, that which has been inflicted upon her. I read this transcript several times but it was only when I heard the recording of Rojas that I understood properly that her voice was expressing this double agony.

By contrast, I have had personal experience of the perils of ignoring the voice. In January 1998, the *Guardian* newspaper sent me to interview Benjamin Wilkomirski, author of an already acclaimed supposed Holocaust memoir *Fragments*,²⁷ which was later exposed as a fake. I was moved by both book and author, despite some fleeting concerns which are hard to recover now, so tempting is it to place oneself retrospectively in the doubters camp. The most striking of these was Wilkomirski's lachrymosity. I grew up in a community of Holocaust survivors and hardly ever saw one cry: most of them had learnt to armour themselves against tears during the Holocaust and those I knew well were at the steely end of the emotional spectrum. Although I am not an oral historian, I was then already a seasoned interviewer and Wilkomirski's tears flickered somewhere on my gauge of discrepancy. However, for a variety of reasons that I discuss elsewhere,²⁸ I never pursued this. Had I attended to his voice, and the knowledge I had of the voices of other Holocaust survivors, I may not have been so easily duped.

Lost in transcription

Certainly, since Samuel and Portelli's essays and even earlier, oral historians have recognised what the voice brings to testimony and what is changed through the process of transcription. As Thompson put it, recordings convey 'social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour, or presence, as well as the texture of dialect.'²⁹

Even a simple word like ‘Yes’, argued Lummis, ‘can be stated instantly and decisively in response to a query or in a hesitant drawl, as if to signify that it is only marginally more accurate than “No”’.³⁰

However, attempts to reassert the value of orality bring a real danger of false polarisation, of pitting recordings against transcripts in a kind of either-or-ism. This is unhelpful for a number of reasons. Transcription remains, for historians and other scholars, the chief method of accessing oral history. It would be absurd to argue that it should be jettisoned on account of its imperfections or, conversely, to resurrect the old trope that recordings are less reliable or valid sources than written ones. The latter argument rests on a positivist view of written documents, endowing them with an incontestable, almost inhuman facticity, even though written discourse is self-evidently as socially and individually constructed as oral remembrance. However, equally damaging is to idealise the human voice as somehow purer than written discourse, in some sense an unmediated instrument.

McLuhan was guilty of this when he dismissed print, comparing it unfavourably with orality: ‘The eye has none of the delicacy of the ear.’³¹ Such binary analysis not only romanticises oral cultures and hearing itself, but also fails to recognise the capacity of ear and eye to work together and their potential for integration. As Portelli argued:

Our awe of writing has distorted our perception of language and communication to the point where we no longer understand either orality or the nature of writing itself... As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive... the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up cancelling out specific qualities, turning these sources either into mere supports for traditional written sources, or into an illusory cure for all ills.³²

The logistics of vocal analysis

Yet no matter the degree of unanimity that has been achieved between those who favour transcription and those who believe in the pre-eminence of the recorded voice, analysing the vocal aspects of oral history still poses considerable challenges. If, as I have argued, Western cultures no longer have a shared language in which to talk about the voice, how then are we to make manifest the nonverbal elements of recorded testimony and remembrance? Despite fifty years of attempts to establish a common language on aspects of prosody, researchers in the field of linguistics cannot even agree on terminology: 107 different terms have been used to identify register alone.³³ There is, as yet, no common system of notation for the human voice, although tran-

scription methods that aim to translate not just words but also the paralinguistic elements, such as the tone and volume of voice, continue to be developed.³⁴

Oral historians have often returned to the question of whether they should desist from tidying up speech, including hesitations and repetitions, and avoid correcting grammar,³⁵ or whether the oral subject should be invited to review a draft transcript, allowing them to jointly author, as it were, the transcript. Some believe that such a process of ‘correction’ ‘weakens the authenticity of oral evidence’;³⁶ others argue that participants should be allowed to reflect on and amend their first version of their account in this way. In one case history educationalist Jane Mace, although she defends the practice, allows that a final transcript arrived at in this way ‘took away some of the rhythm and buoyancy’ of the spoken version.³⁷ Such irresolvable debates remind us that transcription is always an interpretative act and authenticity potentially a contested notion; and if the subject of an oral history is, through their account, making meaning, so too of course is the oral historian.

Yet while oral historians have reflected sensitively on the necessarily negotiated relationship of interviewer and interviewee, insufficient attention has been devoted, perhaps, to the influence on the interview of the voice of the interviewer. It is a truism to claim that no single person ever describes the same experience in exactly the same way each time they speak about it, but one factor which helps shape the speaker’s narrative is surely the voice of the person eliciting it. Speech accommodation theorists have demonstrated the ways in which we modify our voices to fit in with that of the person with whom we are talking, whether in tempo, pitch, volume, accent or even pause pattern.³⁸ Social class, ethnicity, gender and culture all are mediated through speech. If there is a large difference in the speech patterns of interviewer and interviewee, how might this change the style and even content of the account?

There is also a subjectivity and a politics of listening. Norkunas asks:

What can be heard? The listener negotiates what she can hear, must hear, hopes to know and cannot bear to know... Empathetic listeners are ever sensitive to the nuances of trauma in the life story: long silences, detachment, a change in voice or body language.³⁹

All successive interviews are different, argues Norkunas, because all listeners are different.

However, if the full import of this is recognised, the problems are only exacerbated. It is one thing to suggest that a transcript should indicate clearly any point at which ‘the interview passes into sarcasm or irony, because a record in cold type does not disclose the sarcasm evident

only in an inflection of voice.⁴⁰ It is quite another, of surely dubious ethicality, to subject the voice of a participant in an oral history interview to some sort of psycho-linguistic analysis, for which few oral historians would in any case feel qualified. Feminist oral historians have argued that they should be listening not just to their subjects' statements but also their meta-statements: 'We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn't. We need to interpret their pauses and, when it happens, their unwillingness or inability to respond.'⁴¹ Rhonda Williams applied this kind of analysis to her interviews with two black American activists, remarking that one of them 'did not tell her story nonchalantly, but with fire, a pensive, a commanding tone, and a serious pace that bared her disgust and anger at the circumstances that she found herself in... The way she spoke shaped the intensity of the words, and therefore – like her laughter – added another layer of knowing to the oral history.'⁴² This kind of deep listening is reminiscent of Freud's advice that the analyst turn their 'own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient'.⁴³ One of his first students called his 1949 book about his experience as an analyst *Listening with the Third Ear*. In it he contended that 'he who listens with a third ear hears also what is expressed almost noiselessly, what is said *pianissimo*'.⁴⁴ However, unless this is done with the utmost respect and as a gesture of mind, it may feel like an intrusive undertaking, for both interviewer and interviewee.

Indeed, perhaps one reason for the race to transcribe has been because transcription propels the oral historian into an area of greater safety. We know how to deal with written text, how to theorise it, analyse it, shape it. The oral and aural is much more indeterminate and elusive, and ultimately more frightening. How do we grasp and hold onto this slippery thing, 'the voice', without privileging the words or accent through which it is conducted? How can we know with any certainty those fleeting, ephemeral qualities we think we hear in it? As soon as we try to describe them,

voices seem to evanesce. Made out of breath, they are insubstantial. Unlike visual images, the voice exists only in time and cannot be frozen⁴⁵ as it starts it also dies away.⁴⁶ You cannot access the words in an entire spoken sentence simultaneously, for instance, only sequentially. The voice seem to require of the historian the kind of instinctual response which belongs more usually in interpersonal relationships than in traditional scholarship.

Today, however, radical new technologies are providing alternative solutions, allowing oral historians to retain the irreducibility of the human voice while also facilitating the dissemination of their material. In place of wrestling with the problematics of transcription, digital media enable audio to become as readily available as written text. Michael Frisch has argued that the digitisation of sound will challenge the dominance of transcription, and is returning oral history to its aural roots. New digital tools, such as sophisticated indexes and catalogues, will permit the preservation and sharing of oral interviews in their original form. 'All can be expressed as digital information that can be organised, searched and integrated with equal facility... One can move from point to point, anywhere in the data, without having to scroll or play forward or backward through the documentation in a linear way, as with tapes.'⁴⁷ In this incarnation oral history both retains aurality and overcomes its disadvantages, acquiring the pliability of text, as the differences between the written and the oral themselves begin to evanesce. Everything becomes data.

This coincides with what might be called a sonic boom, a new interest in audio, especially as it relates to place. The soundscape, the sound walk, the sound map, the audio installation, the audio tour: all these are, in their way, aspects of a renewed interest in and popularisation of oral history and indeed of sound itself. Through them, presently in some small measure, the voice is returned to public spaces and becomes not only a cultural resource that can be shared but also a challenge to the fetishism of the written.

NOTES

1. This article originated as a presentation, 'Hearing voice in oral history', to the Oral History Society annual conference at the University of Strathclyde in July 2009.

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5. Humphries, 1984, p. 4.

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7. Ruth Finnegan, 'A note on oral tradition and historical evidence', in David K Dunaway and Willa K Baum, *Oral History*, Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1984.

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