

Handout 8: What Makes Oral History Different?

Session: Oral Sources vs. Written Sources

Alessandro Portelli is an Italian scholar and professor emeritus of Anglo-American Literature at the University of Rome La Sapienza. He is most renowned, however, as a leading world scholar on Oral History and has published several books on his oral history research in Italy and the USA. This article, first published in 1979, challenged oral history's critics head-on by arguing that 'what makes oral history different' - orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the 'different credibility' of memory, and the relationship between the narrator and the interviewer - should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, a valuable resource rather than a problem.¹

I. The orality of oral sources

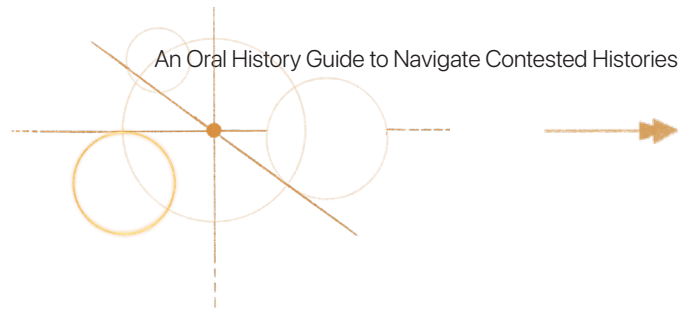
Oral sources are *oral* sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape [today the digital file]; but almost all go on to work on transcripts (the written copy of the oral recording), and it is only transcripts that are published. Occasionally, tapes [digital recordings] are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word. [And] the transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies changes and interpretation.

We hardly need to repeat here that writing represents language almost exclusively by means of segmentary traits (graphemes, syllables, words, and sentences). But the tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing - unless, and then in inadequate and hardly accessible form, as musical notation.' The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber's own words.

In order to make the transcript readable, it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more-or-less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. The exact length and position of the pause has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech. Many narrators switch from one type of rhythm to another within the same interview, as their attitude toward the subjects under discussion changes. Of course, this can only be perceived by listening, not by reading. A similar point can be made concerning the velocity of speech and its changes during the interview. There are no fixed interpretative rules: slowing down may mean greater emphasis as well as greater difficulty, and acceleration may show a wish to glide over certain points, as well as a greater familiarity or ease. Changes are, however, the norm in speech, while regularity is the norm in writing (printing most of all). We flatten the emotional content of speech down to the supposed equanimity- and objectivity of the written document. This is even more true when folk informants [i.e. narrators] are involved: they may be poor in vocabulary but are often richer in range of tone, volume and intonation than middle-class speakers who have learned to imitate in speech the monotone of writing.'

¹ Alessandro Portelli, "[What Makes Oral History Different](#)," [The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History](#) (SUNY Press, 1991).





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II. Oral history as narrative

Oral historical sources are *narrative* sources.

Some narratives contain substantial shifts in the 'velocity' of narration, that is, in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of the narration. An informant [i.e. narrator] may recount in a few words experiences which lasted a long time, or dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, although we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy to distract attention from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator.

Oral sources from non hegemonic [those not in positions of political, financial, military power] classes are linked to the tradition of the folk narrative. In this tradition distinctions between narrative genres are perceived differently than in the written tradition of the educated classes. This is true of the generic distinction between 'factual' and 'artistic' narratives, between 'events' and feeling or imagination. While the perception of an account as 'true' is relevant as much to legend as to personal experience and historical memory, there are no formal oral genres specifically destined to transmit historical information; historical, poetical, and legendary narratives often become inextricably mixed up.' The result is narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal 'truth' may coincide with shared 'imagination'.

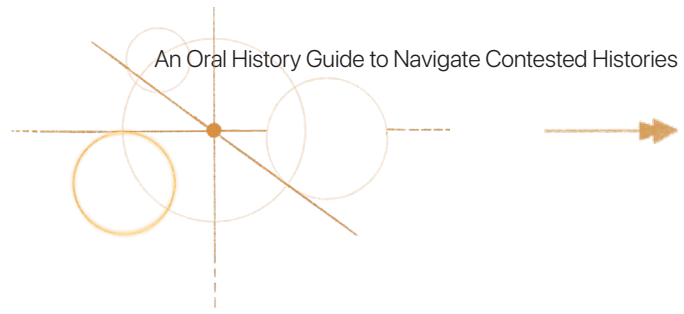
III. Events and meaning

The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their *meaning*. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non hegemonic classes. From this point of view, the only problem posed by oral sources is that of verification.

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's **subjectivity**. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now *think* they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved, but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs. The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationships to their history.

Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'. What informants [narrators] believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened. When workers in Terni [a town in Italy] misplace a crucial event of their history (the killing of Luigi Trastulli) from one date and context to another, this does not cast doubts on the actual chronology, but it does force us to arrange our interpretation of an entire phase of the town's history.





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When an old rank-and-file leader, also in Terni, dreams up a story about how he almost got the Communist Party to reverse its strategy after World War II, we do not revise our reconstructions of political debates within the Left, but learn the extent of the actual cost of certain decisions to those rank-and-file activists who had to bury into their subconscious their needs and desires for revolution. When we discover that similar stories are told in other parts of the country, we recognize the half-formed legendary complex in which the 'senile ramblings' of a disappointed old man reveal much about his party's history that is untold in the lengthy and lucid memoirs of its official leaders."

IV. Objectivity

Oral sources are not objective. This of course applies to every source, though the holiness of writing often leads us to forget it. But the inherent nonobjectivity of oral sources lies in specific intrinsic characteristics, the most important being that they are *artificial, variable, and partial*.

Alex Haley's introduction to *Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes how Malcolm shifted his narrative approach not spontaneously, but because the interviewer's questioning led him away from the exclusively public and official image of himself and of the Nation of Islam which he was trying to project. This illustrates the fact that the documents of oral history are always the result of a **relationship**, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony. Written documents are fixed; they exist whether we are aware of them or not, and do not change once we have found them. Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence.

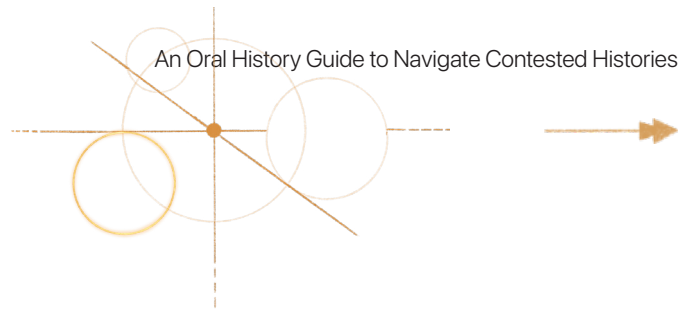
The content of the written source is independent of the researcher's need and hypotheses; it is a stable text, which we can only interpret. The content of oral sources, on the other hand, depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.

It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview in the first place. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants [narrators] tell them what they believe they want to be told and thus reveal who they think the researcher is. On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule. Such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference.

The first requirement, therefore, is that the researcher 'accept' the informant, and give priority to what she or he wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wants to hear, saving any unanswered questions for later or for another interview. Communications always work both ways. The interviewees are always, though perhaps unobtrusively, studying the interviewers who 'study' them.

The final result of the interview is the product of both the narrator and the researcher. When interviews, as is often the case, are arranged for publication omitting entirely the interviewer's voice, a subtle distortion takes place: the text gives the answers without the questions, giving the impression that a given narrator will always





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say the same things, no matter what the circumstances ~ in other words, the impression that a speaking person is as stable and repetitive as a written document. When the researcher's voice is cut out, the narrator's voice is distorted.

Oral testimony, in fact, is never the same twice. This is a characteristic of all oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview. Even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different *times*. As the *two* subjects come to know each other better, the narrator's 'vigilance' may be attenuated.

The fact that interviews with the same person may be continued indefinitely leads us to the question of the inherent incompleteness of oral sources. It is impossible to exhaust the entire memory of a single informant; the data extracted with each interview are always the result of a selection produced by the mutual relationship. Historical research with oral sources therefore always has the unfinished nature of a work in progress.

The unfinishedness of oral sources affects all other sources. Given that no research is complete unless it has exhausted oral as well as written sources, and that oral sources are inexhaustible, the ideal goal of going through 'all' possible sources becomes impossible. Historical work using oral sources is unfinished because of the nature of the sources; historical work excluding oral sources (where available) is incomplete by definition.

