Conceptualizing an Inga Reader: From Story Spoken to Story Read

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Abstract

As a folklorist dedicated to embedded, ethnographic research, I have had the pleasure of experiencing and documenting a living tradition of mythic narrative among Inga in Colombia’s Sibundoy Valley. In a long-term dialogue with my compadre Francisco Tandioy Jansasoy, I have struggled to understand these tales of ancestral figures and spirits, to capture the spoken Inga in writing, to translate these words into Spanish and finally into English, and now, to imagine how these stories told in the mellifluous medium of speech can be rendered on the printed page in an intended Inga reader. In this presentation I want to examine each stage of this transformative process with an emphasis on challenges arising and solutions evolving. The final question, a crucial one, is: how much of the original flavor of the mythic narratives and ceremonial speeches can be preserved in the pedagogical materials?
Preface

Come with me to the Sibundoy Valley, a verdant ellipse nestled in a shoulder of the Andes in southwestern Colombia, home to the Inga indigenous community, speakers of the northernmost variety of the great Quechua family of languages. I invite you to re-live with me this moment: we are seated on benches in the cabildo, the house of community self-government, on a drizzly afternoon, in the company of the gobernador, his wife, an officer of the cabildo, and a small group of community members. There is a large barrel of asua, a corn-based beer, in the corner of the room, and we are all partaking liberally of the murky but tasty beverage.

I have arrived to trouble the assembled company with a request for tales from their mythic narrative corpus. They are receptive and gracious, perhaps appreciating my appreciation of their traditions. After the customary salutations over the maize beer—kaiajwa; as li pai—the gobernador, Domingo Muyuy, launches into a story about the augkakuna, the unbaptized ones, heathen savages who populated the region before the ancestors of the Ingas brought civilization to this patch of the earth (McDowell 1994).

“Augkakuna Puriipimanda Parlo,” “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” as I came to call this story, is a gripping account of the Inga triumph over the augka, a spirit-like creature the narrator characterizes as speechless, an eater of human flesh, and a powerful spiritual actor—the Inga term used to describe the augka is kuku, which translates as spirit, or, due to the influence of Catholicism, demon or devil. But we are located in an early phase of cosmic evolution where Catholic protocols carry little weight.

The triumph of the Inga ancestor over the heathen, kuku-like augka is a pivotal one with major cosmological impact. The Inga is at first pursued by the augka, but then the hunter becomes the hunted and the Inga brings down the augka with a poison-tipped arrow from his blowgun. The Inga takes from the fallen augka his feathers and beads, but these are symbolic of something deeper, as he appropriates this spiritual actor’s mind, his knowledge, his “heritage,” meaning his spiritual powers. This appropriation converts the Inga ancestor into a powerful native doctor in his own right, able to shape-shift and take the form of the jaguar, the bear, or the bird, and able to bring the dead back to life through his medications.

“The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” then, tells the story of how the spiritual knowledge of Inga native doctors was incorporated into the fund of human potential. The Inga ancestor who slays the augka is the first Inga native doctor, and this spiritual knowledge has been passed down
through the generations to become perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Inga ethos. Clearly, the story has significant implications for understanding Inga culture, and I will deal with these, but I want to focus our attention on this tale as a performative act.

Let’s visit a few features of “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” as performance. Domingo Muyuy, the gobernador, begins with an opening framing of the performance, "Augkakuna puriimanda-mi parlasa."

Surely I will tell of the heathen’s walk.

This announcement whets the appetite of his wife, who chimes in with, "Sug iawar sutuchispa, sutuchispa puriimanda parlu."

Some dripping blood, dripping, the tale of the walk.

Her comment reproduces, iconically through the repeated word "sutuchispa," dripping, the experience of witnessing blood spill, drop by drop, from an open wound. Here, in this opening gambit, we have distinctive features of spoken narrative modeled for us—the attentive focus on interaction between performers and their audiences, and the use of discourse strategies to engage and involve the listener in the dynamics of the story, above and beyond the needs of conveying referential content. As we pursue the story through its successive narrative clauses, we find that it is acoustically organized by the storyteller to bring to the surface its structures of sentiment, and further, that he marks discrete units in the flow of articulated speech using stress and pitch variation to highlight the drift of the tale and place emphasis on its key components.

In short, “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” as encountered in the cabildo on that June day many years ago, is a work of performance art, a work that unfolds in multiple layers of communicative intent and makes full use of acoustic, semantic, and even visual channels. As such, it is firmly rooted in its performance ecology and will not submit easily to transportation into another realm or medium. The question I want to address here is, how might we activate the insights of the ethnography of speaking, and those of ethnopoetics, to obtain a better purchase on the task at hand when transitioning from the story spoken to the story read? If our goal is to produce a reader that stays true to its source material, can these approaches to the handling of discourse inform and guide our procedures?
Speech Repertoire and Genre

The ethnography of speaking as announced by Dell Hymes (1964, 1974), building on work done in conjunction with the Berkeley sociolinguist John Gumperz, locates human verbalization in its contexts of articulation (see Gumperz and Hymes 1964). To a considerable extent a response to Noam Chomsky’s generative grammar (1957, 1965), this alternative approach to the study of language takes the locus of analysis out of the mind of idealized speaker-listener and situates it in the give-and-take of human sociability. Later iterations of this approach, for example, in the recent work of my IU colleague Richard Bauman (2004), move beyond this richly contextualized vision of speech production and consumption to a constitutive model wherein speech actually generates and reproduces social structures. In this vein, “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” and comparable narrative performances take a primary role in formulating Inga worldview, making palpable specific contours and alignments that are latent within the culture prior to these acts of formulation.

Training these lenses upon our Inga performance of “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” we would want to attend to a set of core parameters, including the setting of the performance, the participants and their relationships to one another, the sequencing of action, the social norms activated, and the discursive genres involved. In short, we are asked to take note of the performance’s immediate social setting and its larger cultural environment. The text, the words and phrases actually spoken, still count as the semiotic embodiment of the story, but they are now to be interpreted in these wider social and cultural contexts.

There will not be space here for a full diagnosis of “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” according to this ambitious program, so let me instead touch upon a few highlights that will prove to be very helpful in conceptualizing the Inga reader. The ethnography of speaking requires that we situate verbal art productions in their social and cultural settings. Clearly, attending to the social setting of mythic narrative performance will assist us in accentuating its performative elements, and I will return to this concern shortly. But first, let’s take up a key piece in the cultural setting, and here I refer to Hymes’ interest in the category of genre. Hymes noted that all speech production tends to fall into detectable and recognized expressive channels or vessels. “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” is not a random item in the Inga speech repertoire. Instead, it is an exemplar of a recurring performance routine that can be referenced in Inga as iaiakunamanda imasa parlaskakuna, “the stories our grandfathers used to tell,” or more simply,
as *antiwa parlu*, “stories from the old times.” This narrative speech genre is understood by Ingas to feature stories about Inga ancestors, and specifically, about cosmological turning points that led from an earlier period of rampant spiritual potency to the less charged but more stable conditions of contemporary civilization. These stories, in short, describe the civilizing process as it is thought to have taken place in Colombia’s Sibundoy Valley.

Hence, in order to deal effectively with “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” we will need to bring forward the mission of this performance genre in Inga culture, and more than that, we will need to locate this particular tale in the broad sweep of Inga mythic narrative. Upon inspection, we will find that antiwa parlu is segmented by the Inga into a number of subcategories – stories about the acquisition of spiritual power (as in “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk”), stories about the forestalling of paradise as animal suitors are turned away from human families, stories about tricky animals and the unwilling victims of their antics, and so forth.

The Inga reader, in my view, will need to deliver a selection of stories across this diversified narrative realm. But once we are alerted to the tendency of spoken verbal performances to cluster into generic forms, we need to search for other Inga genres that ought to find representation in the reader. As it happens, there are other Inga speech genres worthy of representation in the reader. One of these is relatively simple: the sayings of the ancestors. These are proverb-like sayings that encode ancestral wisdom and help people govern and explain daily experiences (McDowell 1989). Another, the *ailastima* or ceremonial speech-making, are ritualized speeches, loaded with formulaic expressions and versified with rhythmic poetic effects, that are performed during formal gatherings in the community and associated, in particular, with transactions in the cabildo (McDowell 1990).

As I discussed in a paper I delivered in STLILLA 2008, these Sibundoy Valley speech genres can be placed in a taxonomy that works from the simpler forms to the more complex ones (McDowell 2011). The proposed Inga reader can take advantage of this tiered quality of the speech repertoire, and bring students, progressively, from the more accessible to the less accessible forms. The short and pithy sayings will be mastered with ease by the fourth-semester Inga student, while the mythic narratives will present more of a challenge. The ceremonial speeches are the most challenging, as they remain partially opaque to even native speakers.
Ethnopoetics and the Making of Text

The ethnography of speaking has much more to contribute to a fruitful conceptualization of the Inga reader, but let me turn now to a related but distinguishable concern: how are we to create the text for the reader, an act that requires moving across linguistic, cultural, and ontological boundaries? Here I will turn to the field of ethnopoetics for assistance. Ethnopoetics, a meeting ground for poets, scholars, and all those devoted to the appreciation of verbal creativity, has much to contribute as we tackle the practical tasks associated with the handling of ethnically-situated speech production. Ethnopoetics developed as a response to the problematic of gaining access to the wonders of ethnically-rooted poetry, in essence, the poetry of oral cultures performed in local or regional dialects and languages. One major focus in ethnopoetics is especially pertinent here: the means for extracting verbal art performances from their original host environments while preserving something of their artistic force.

Recent work in ethnopoetics and related fields provides a conceptual model that accounts for the circulation of verbal products from one setting to another. The concept of *intertextuality* springs from the observation that texts are always versions of other texts, that each verbal act exists in conversation with other verbal acts. Originating in the work of Julia Kristeva (1980), this term, filtered through Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), the inherently public nature of language, has acquired a useful currency in my home discipline, folkloristics, where it helps us to define relationships between and among sets of related performances. I want to locate the challenge of transporting a spoken performance, like “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk,” into a literary medium, the Inga reader, as an effort to mitigate the perception of intertextual gap, that is, the semiotic distance separating texts that stand in a symbiotic relationship to one another.

The specific quest for us, as we envision the Inga reader, is finding ways to make the experience of reading “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” as congruent as possible with the experience of hearing that tale told in its original setting in Colombia’s Sibundoy Valley. An overarching value for our Inga pedagogy project, from its twenty-one *wachus*, or language lessons, to the fourth-semester reader, is that these instructional materials should cleave as close as possible to their sources; we want our Inga pedagogy to present realistic portraits of Inga language and culture, to the extent this can be accomplished in the distanced environment of the classroom and its textbooks.
To achieve the desired mitigation of intertextual gap, I recommend a series of procedures defined by what I have termed *collaborative ethnopoetics*, an approach to the production of verbal art that is radically rooted in a collaborative process linking the scholar to practitioners of the tradition (McDowell 2000). It is my surmise that the best work with verbal performances in ethnic settings comes from a process of close collaboration, even if this collaborative process is not always faithfully described in the resulting ethnopoetics publications. The researcher, whether a member of the community or an outsider who has entered the community, brings to the project a deep interest in this specific facet of culture and some expertise to work with it, while informed members of the speech community possess an invaluable native knowledge that is critical to the success of ethnopoetics work.

With reference to the texts that will populate the Inga reader, we are fortunate to have had access to the skills and knowledge of Francisco Tandiyoy Jansaoy, Inga scholar and activist; the main partners in the collaborative ethnopoetics I will treat here are myself and my compadre Francisco. Our collaboration began in the mid-1970s and now spans four decades; it is responsible for a number of joint publications as well as several single-authored works by each of us. I first met Francisco in Pasto, the capital of the Colombian state of Nariño, after many people informed me that I must get to know Profesor Tandiyoy if I wanted help with the Inga performances I was recording in the field. Indeed, I found Francisco at the old downtown facilities of the Universidad de Nariño, with political graffiti inscribed on its walls, and there initiated a process of intellectual collaboration that continues to the present day.

The procedures that Francisco and I employed, and those that I developed over the years working with the adjacent community in Colombia’s Sibundoy Valley, the Kamsá, entail close collaboration between researcher and native partners at every step of the process. As time is running short, allow me to quickly articulate some provisions in this collaborative agenda:

1. Seek access to naturalistic performance settings. The days of verbal art texts rendered through dictation, where the performing artist would have to pause to allow the writer to catch up, are long gone. But there is still a big difference between a performance in the cabildo, with a native-language audience on hand, and a more artificial one-on-one with just the performer and the researcher. The Hymesian perspective alerts us to the importance of setting in shaping the performance, and this is a variable we need to respect from the outset of the project.
2. Involve capable community members in the transcribing and translating of recorded performances. In the Sibundoy Valley, I would sit with members of my host family—Justo Jacanamijoy, María Juajibioy, and their teenage sons, especially my pal Juan—and methodically work through each phrase of the recording. The technique deployed was that I would play back the recorded performance, phrase by phrase, and have my native helper repeat it to me verbatim. Then, I would write it down, and read it back to my helper, to assure that I had copied the phrase correctly. A similar phrase-by-phrase technique was employed when translating the written text from Kamsá to English, with Spanish mediating between Kamsá and English.

With Francisco’s assistance on the Inga recordings, the transcription process was less collaborative, since, unlike my Kamsá partners, he possessed (and possesses) the ability to write his native language. But the process of translating from Inga to English was essentially the same, a matter of working, in a deliberate manner, through each phrase of the performance.

3. In transcribing, take note of performance features so that they can be encoded into the final text. Most significant here is the chunking of the discourse, as speakers use pauses and other techniques to signal sequential structures (Gumperz 1982). These acoustic articulations will determine line and section breaks in the final text. In addition, speakers attempt to make their performances engaging by vocally highlighting specific moments in the flow of discourse, through modulating pitch and loudness. These and other rhetorical features should be noted so that they can be captured or referenced in the final text.

4. In translating, find the balance between fidelity to the original meaning and congeniality in the target language. Translating, as we know, is an art, and the subject of an immense scholarly literature. What I have sought in my translating practice is a compromise between two desiderata—fidelity and clarity—that are frequently in conflict. Here are a few bullet points that describe this practice:

   • I like to reproduce the verbal bulk of the source utterances, so that the English rendering of an Inga phrase has roughly the same number of syllables, and something like the rhythmic texture, of the corresponding Inga original.
• I try to capture the social register of the Inga source. If it is high-style Inga, as in the ceremonial speeches, this quality should be reflected in the English syntax and diction.

• I seek to preserve in my English translations crucial expressive features of the Inga performance, features such as vowel lengthening and non-lexical exclamations.

Ideally, using these and related techniques, I can produce an English translation with an acoustic profile somewhat like the original, and one that encodes enough of the Inga semantics to occasion a virtual encounter with the source performance. Note the use of the words “somewhat” and “virtual,” signaling my recognition that this move from the story spoken to the story read, even when informed by the best ethnopoetic intentions, is still fraught with a significant degree of auditory and semantic slippage.

Conclusion
By way of conclusion, let me say that these precepts from the ethnography of speaking and its academic cousin, ethnopoetics, are guiding my thinking as I grapple with the project of preparing the fourth-semester Inga reader. The ethnography of speaking alerts us to, among other things, the diversified genres in Inga speech repertoire, and I find it appealing to have this diversity reflected in the contents of the Inga reader. Ethnopoetics offers assistance in thinking about capturing speech in writing, and provides strategies for reducing the perception of intertextual gap between the story spoken and the story read. Taking advantage of these conceptual frameworks, we have the possibility of creating an Inga reader wherein “The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk” will resonate for our students as a viable representation of Inga culture and discourse.
References


Sample Demonstration
“The Tale of the Heathen’s Walk”
As told by Domingo Muyuy

Content-Oriented Transcription, first stanza

I will tell of the heathen’s walk. In order to understand the heathen’s walk, the heathens walk about like that, he is looking for a human being, like that they walk about. The heathens walk about looking for blood, in order to eat a person, and the person will have to flee. The person will just have to be fleeing, this way, this way.

Ethnopoetic Transcription, first stanza

A

Establishing access to the floor, and previewing the narrative:
Chi augkakuna puriimanda parlasa, no,
I will tell of the heathen’s walk, see?

Aja, a…

Yes, ah …

Sug iawar sutuchispa, sutuchispa puriimanda parlu.
Some dripping blood, dripping, the tale of the walk.

(speaken by audience member)

Augkakunapa puriipi, no,
The heathen’s walk, no?

ven, entender, entender,
Come, to understand, to understand, no?

augkakunapa intindingapa.
The heathen’s walk, in order to understand.
Launching the narrative:

Augkakunaka kasami purinkuna,
the heathen’s walk about like that,
runa kristianuta runata kawaspa ka, purinkunami kasa, no.
he is looking for a human, for a person, they walk about like that, no?
Augkakuna purinkunami iawar kawaspa,
The heathens walk about looking for blood,
mikungapa runata, runaka iukami mitikunga.
in order to eat a person, and the person will have to flee.
Runaka iuka kaima, kaima mitikukungallami.
The person will just have to be fleeing, this way, this way.
The 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA) was the second in a biennial series of symposia organized by the Association for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ATLILLA). The Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame hosted STLILLA-2011 in collaboration with partner institutions.

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