

**Verbal art in oral cultures:
what questions to ask, and what the answers tell us.**

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Most linguistic fieldwork pays relatively little attention to verbal art (which is as a consequence often omitted entirely from language descriptions), where ‘verbal art’ is a cover term for ways of speaking which (i) are valued, (ii) require skill in composition and performance, and (iii) are subject to superadded rules beyond those found in ordinary language, and may include songs, poems, narratives, and other speech genres. Attending to verbal art is not just a matter of recording texts, but – like other kinds of linguistic fieldwork – a matter of seeking out and investigating specific characteristics of the text, or of the user’s explicit knowledge of the genre and its rules. This talk illustrates some of the things which the fieldworker might look for, focusing on oral literatures. (This talk supplements and updates Ruth Finnegan’s (1992) Routledge handbook designed specifically for fieldworkers: *Oral traditions and the verbal arts. A guide to research practices.*)

I will look at verse as a distinct kind of text: divided into lines, but where lineation can be cued in various different ways. I consider rhythm in verse, and raise the question of whether ‘rhythm’ can be more specifically analysed as ‘metre’ in a tradition. I look at the relation between performance rhythms, and also musical setting, and the text of a song, and ask whether these can be treated separately. I look at parallelism (very widespread in many oral literatures), and show how it is manifested, and why it is interesting. I describe various kinds of sound patterning, including types of rhyme. I look briefly at oral narratives, and explain the Hymesian approach, based on the counting of narrative components. I consider aspects of the semantics and interpretation of verbal art, and ask why specific forms should have special epistemic effects. I conclude by explaining why linguists should be interested in oral literature.