

And what if they say nothing....?

English version of:

Et quand ils n'en disent rien

(Cahiers de musiques traditionnelles, vol.12, pp.175-185 (1998))

Udo Will

Flinders University
Adelaide, South Australia

Abstract

Since the unfortunate introduction of K. Pike's emic-etic distinction into the ethno sciences, there has been a tendency of intradisciplinary imperialism whereby the emic strategy deliberately denies the validity of alternative research options. There is the insistence of many ethno scientists that inquiries into the field of human culture is only definable in emic terms, and that means, only with reference to the way people talk about it - in neglect or misinterpretation of K. Pike's original elaborations (he even outlined operations for the identification of nonverbal emic units). Emic commitments have become blatant, insistent and parochial and there is an air of scholasticism or of arm chair detachment about much of the formal analysis of the new ethnography including ethnomusicology.

Not denying the scientific credentials ethnolinguistics has brought to certain domains of the ethno sciences, I am going to discuss two critical aspects: Ethnosemanticists do not seem to be able to cope with the contingency that in human cultural repertoires there may actually be more domains which derive their salient semantic order from ambiguity and variation than there are domains whose orderliness reflects uniformity and consensus. Secondly, due to their fixation on verbal behavior, they are unable to see the importance of other, non-verbal behavior and its structural manifestations.

Evidence of both logical and empirical nature from many different quarters of humanities (human sciences) indicate that emic rules of behavior, especially verbal behavior, are a poor guide to significant etic regularities in many a socio-cultural subsystems.

Introduction

In autumn 1994 the late Catherine Ellis, well known Australian ethnomusicologist and colleague of mine since the early 90s, went back to Central Australia to discuss several issues with some elder Pitjantjara singers. We had just completed the first phase of our common research project on pitch structures in Aboriginal music. Singing in Aboriginal Music has been described to proceed not in discrete pitch steps but in continuous singing of undulating, descending melodic line sections. To our own surprise, however, our new analytical approach had enabled us to identify sets of constantly recurring frequencies in several songs, which we considered as the main or characteristic frequencies of these songs. Catherine was curious to find out how the original performers of these songs would respond to our findings. So she took a set of re-synthesized main frequencies from one song with her and replayed them to the singer who had performed the song some ten years ago. Due to the non-existence of specific Pitjantjara terms for pitches and notes, it took her a while to explain how this set of sounds were related to the song; and when finally asked whether he agrees that these are the main notes of that particular song, responded: 'that song .., eh .., listen, it goes like this' and then he sung the complete song again.

The objectivist view

In many a current trends in ethno-musicology the above encounter will be seen as a clear indication of failure for our complete project. Obviously, our study had no significance for the singer. Instead of developing sophisticated methods for musical analysis whose results the performers cannot relate to, we should rather sit down, talk and listen to the musicians and develop our categories for understanding their music from what they tell us. If we really want to know what is going on in their music and to understand what they are doing we would have to know what they think about it, meaning, what they say about it.

Such views are very much under the spell of the Whorfian hypothesis that language determines conceptual systems and are additionally tainted by the unfortunate introduction of the emic-etic distinction into ethnomusicology. However, as I am going to show, it is an untenable position to claim that the most important and decisive source of meaning are the verbal expressions of those who make the music. This information may be very useful and may offer invaluable hints for interpretations but is in no way the only available source nor necessarily a very reliable one. The above views will have to be challenged in the following two of their basic features.

□

First, it assumes that there is a clearly defined, one to one point mapping between words and the aspects of the external reality they refer to. Second, it implicitly assumes that there are talkable concepts (terms and notions) for all relevant aspects of the external reality, meaning that these aspects find their expression in language categories.

This position has been given various names by different writers and I will refer to it as the objectivist position, in accord with Lakoff (1987). It assumes, because of the singular and well-defined correspondence between symbols (words) and things as defined by categories of classical logic, that logical relations between things in the world exist objectively: categories of language correspond to categories of the world. Hence the symbol system is supposed to represent reality, and mental representations must either be true or false in as far as they mirror reality correctly or incorrectly. (Classical categories are those in which membership is defined in terms of singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions). According to objectivist beliefs, it is this correspondence to things in the world that gives meaning to linguistic expressions. Symbols are made meaningful, i.e. given a semantic significance, in a unique fashion through the assumed correspondence with entities and categories in the world. Meaning is based on this correct or incorrect definition of truth and thought itself is a manipulation of symbols.

Verbal categories, mental concepts and external reality

One of the biggest challenges to the above objectivist view of mental representations comes from philosophical and psychological works on how we actually categorize things. The most striking conclusion arising from a variety of analyses and studies is that people do not generally categorize things or events in terms of classical categories. The work of Eleanor Rosch (1977) and her coworkers, for example, shows the existence of categorizations according to family resemblance, centrality, and prototypicality. (In family resemblance categories members are related to each other without all members having necessarily any properties in common. In centrality categories the membership properties level off, some members being better representatives of the category than others. In prototypical categories not all members have equal status, some being prototypical members for the category.) If e.g. family resemblance works as a categorization criterion, it is not surprising that there is often no definite hierarchical relationship between superordinate and subordinate categories. Another important result of these studies is that categories are heterogeneous in origin: The actual properties humans use to determine category membership are interactional and they depend on different biological, cultural and environmental variables.

Lance Rips (1975) has shown that neither similarity nor typicality fully account for the degree of category membership and that the reasoning involved in placing membership is often non deductive. In addition, particular categories are not even represented by invariant concepts, as demonstrated by Lawrence Barsalou (1983). There is great variability in the concepts representing a category; different individuals do not represent a category in the same way, and the same individual changes his or her view of category membership in different contexts. Furthermore, as Mark Johnson has pointed out, metaphor and metonymy are major modes of thought. (Metaphor is the referral of the properties of one thing to those of another in a different domain. Metonymy allows a part or an aspect of a thing to stand for the whole thing). Finally, it should not go unmentioned that the objectivist model can also not deal with the fact that certain symbols do not match categories in the world. These are, for instance, categories of the

mind and of language that reflect mental concepts instead of categories in the world out there.

All this spells trouble for mental representation, which, in order to function, requires an accurate unambiguous link to the external world. Often meaning cannot be established this way. Objects in the world are not labeled with dimensions or codes and the way they are partitioned differs from person to person and from time to time. Indeed, the fixed semantics of mental representation cannot account for the occurrence of novelty in the world, and well-defined codes cannot exhaust the meaning of linguistic expressions.

These insights are extremely relevant for ethnomusicologists who are implicitly or explicitly dealing with the relationship between language categories, mental categories and the out-side world (i.e. music) in their everyday practice. As a case in point, the unintelligibility of many of the Central Australian song texts to many performers was already a source of continuing interest and concern for T.G.H. Strehlow, and formed a starting point also for some of Catherine Ellis own investigations. Her basic idea was that if the meaning of songs is not (fully) derivable from the song texts, then it might be musical structures that were aiding performers when they gave glosses for texts they themselves did not understand. She has formulated the following procedural outline for this research (Ellis, 1997): it is first necessary to know what the performers and composers believe that music symbolizes, then to search for non-random occurrences of particular structures which may indicate exactly what is being used as a symbol. After this is understood, it may be possible to find extra-musical information which correlates with these structures, and finally, once these features are clarified, to address questions of creativity in performance, and to understand how performers can maintain the symbols unchanged while creating something that is characteristic of the individual performer, the group and the ancestral spirit.

□

When Ellis was working with T.G.H. Strehlow in the early 60s she came across that complex web of meaning and symbolism within song texts in Central Australia, which makes it extremely difficult to disentangle individual meanings, or to understand how performers arrive at the explanation they offer for each song item. Reading Strehlow's several accounts of one actual performance of the Northern Aranda Ilbalintja Song, and the actual presentation of the texts, the degree of symbolic overlap became very clear, with specific verses being used in various different positions in the performance to signify different parts of the whole. While searching for the structural metrical information that could assist in understanding this complex situation, C. Ellis constantly came up against an intriguing problem (Ellis, 1997). She assembled the data according to the short and long syllabic patterns given by Strehlow, and assigned to the pattern for each text line as many different domains of meaning as seemed appropriate from the context of the song. It was clear that one metric structure was favored above all others for any one particular meaning, but not for a sufficiently high percentage of the verses for this to be a useful indication. For instance, the opening verse describes the ancestor (referred to in this song) awakening in the depths of a vine-clad soak. This verse could be thought of as referring primarily to the soak, and/or to the vegetation and/or to the

ancestor himself and his actions: Ellis found 21 examples that specifically referred to the soak. Of these, eleven started with a long syllable, five contained two or more adjacent long syllables, two used multiple adjacent short syllables, two used three adjacent short syllables, and one used one short syllable. While this suggests that starting with a long syllable is significant in relation to information about the soak, it by no means proves a case, because almost as many examples do not start with a long syllable as do start with one. On the other hand, all examples that begin with a long syllable have a direct reference to the soak. Ellis presents several more cases like this in her 1997 paper, and they all indicate that there is a one-way mapping from the metric structure of the text, which in turn is generated from the sung performance, to a given domain of meaning, but not the reverse: the semantic domains of words and metrical patterns are not identical. This is a clear example of metonymic reasoning: a metrical pattern stands for the musical representation of the soak, the concept of the musical representation of the soak, however, is superordinate and more complex.

Another example of the extremely complex relation between verbal concepts and musical reality concerns the Pitjantjara concept of *mayu*. Pitjantjara performers claim that each song line is marked by the flavor or essence (*mayu* in Pitjantjara) of the particular ancestor referred to in that song. Strehlow (1955) suggested it might be the specific combination of the invariable rhythm of a text with the tonal pattern traditionally associated with it that creates this essence. Ellis originally thought that it might be the melodic contour that identifies a particular ancestral being. However, Ellis and Barwick (1987), doing extensive analysis of melodic contours, showed that elongation and/or contraction of melodic contours occur with different lengths of text phrases, and that the precise constitution of the melodic contour depends on a number of factors, including text type, the duration of the rhythmic pattern, and whether the song is accompanied or unaccompanied. A different suggestion was recently made by the present author. In an analysis of ten different performances from Central Australia, he found that six performances had a set of recurring frequency intervals in common and all six performances made reference to the same ancestral being. None of the three studies has so far succeeded in unanimously demonstrating the relation between the *mayu* concept and musical structures; it may well be that they each contribute to enlightening only partial aspects of this concept.

Mental concepts without corresponding verbal categories

So far I have dealt mainly with the first feature of the objectivist view mentioned above, the assumed one-to-one mapping between speech categories and the external reality. Now I am turning to the second, the assumption that all significant aspects of the external reality have corresponding speech categories. From Eleanor Rosch (1973) came one of the first attacks on this assumption, and thereby challenging Whorfs hypothesis that language determines ones conceptual system. In a remarkable set of experiments, she set out to show that primary color categories were psychologically real for speakers of Dani, a New Guinea language, even though they were not named. Subsequent studies identified many more concepts that did not have corresponding language categories and most of them seem to concern functional embodiments. This means the idea that certain concepts

are not merely understood intellectually; rather, they are used automatically unconsciously without noticeable effort. Noticeably, most concepts used in this way have a different, and more important, psychological status than those that are only thought about consciously. This was, by the way, already one of Whorf's big issues: the nature of use matters. He had recognized that grammaticized concepts were used unconsciously and automatically (and he viewed differences in such concepts as differences in modes of thought).

Pitch categories in oral cultures will be an example of functionally embodied categories (perceptual as well as conceptual, as has been indicated by recent studies (Will and Ellis, 1996; Will, 1997) on frequency production in Australian Aboriginal song performances). There are hardly any explicit language categories for isolated aspects of melodies in Aboriginal Australia, and there are no explicit terms for pitch intervals. But the consistency of reproduction of certain intervals in different performances of the same song and the production of different intervals in different songs can indicate whether specific pitch intervals are constituent features characterizing particular songs or not.

Despite the lack of verbal categories for pitch and pitch shifts in Central Australia, C. Ellis has recently demonstrated the importance of very small changes of pitch for indicating, to the performers that is, various features of a performance (Ellis, 1994). The songs analyzed were from a secret womens performance recorded by a group of women researchers in the north of South Australia in 1968. The total shift in pitch of the tonic throughout about three hours of this performance is from 244 Hz to 262 Hz, which in western terms is an interval of about a semitone between middle C and the B immediately below. Within this range a couple of subdivisions were identified: all preparatory singing uses a tonic of 244 to 252 Hz; the first small song to use 256 Hz occurs at exactly the point where the singers explain that this song tells us to go away and get painted (this is not a reference to the text of this small song). This remark by the performer, although not referring to the pitch shift, is a clear indication of the significance of this point of the performance. The frequency of 256 Hz and its neighbor, 255 Hz, function throughout the performance as markers of starts or ends of sections, and include all informal dances done by the unpainted women in the singing group. The extended singing during the body painting of the dancers is symmetrically based around the central frequency of 256 Hz, and shows specific placement of the tonic for significant texts. As well, all songs in the preparatory stages use a tonic lower than the central, musically and functionally defined frequency of 256 Hz, while all songs from the final stages of the painting to the end of the performance are above it. The overall direction of shift of the tonic is a rise, which is quite different from our expectation of a fall in pitch as singers tire towards the end of the performance. A comparison of various different performances of this one ceremony has shown that there was a strong tendency for the frequency of the tonic to remain within the same range in any one geographic locality and for different regional performances to differ in the way already described by Strehlow for Aranda mens performances.

This incredible disposition of the pitch of the tonic within an extended womens performance shows a level of accuracy of performing inconceivably difficult from a

Western perspective. Given that the songs are unaccompanied by any instrument which can assist in maintaining constant pitch, the skill of the performers and their signaling of the content of the performance through very small shifts in the frequency of the tonic are remarkable. The systematic shifts in pitch suggest that not only is geographic locality conceptualized and signaled by the pitch of any performance, but also that specific textual themes are located within specific frequency ranges and that specific frequencies signal particular ceremonial functions at particular times during performance preparation as well as the performance itself.

Besides a set of structures, which performers may refer to more or less explicitly / verbally, there are other sets of hierarchical elements that can be observed analytically, but about which there is no available verbal information that would indicate that performers have a conscious awareness of such structures. However because they use them structurally in significant ways, they must somehow know about them.

An example for yet another type of conceptualization can be found in a recently article by Richard Moyle (1995). He was looking for a bio-physiological timing device to explain the amazing constancy of tempo even over extended performance periods in Aboriginal music. He makes a good case for relating the uneven double-beat figure, found widely in Central Australian accompaniment, to the human heartbeat sound which, in turn, could provide the 'timing device'. If Moyle's argumentation can be further substantiated, this may turn out to be a clear case of **conceptual embodiment**: properties of certain categories (here: a type of rhythmic pattern) are consequences of the nature of human biological capacities and of the experience of functioning in a physical and social environment. This type of concepts has also played an essential role in the late John Blacking's biology of music making (Blacking, 1992).

□

Untalkables

In a sense, as alluded to by the title of this paper, I have been writing here about untalkables. These, however, differ in some substantial way from the untalkables of music of **Mantle Hood**. In his 1993 paper he explains his notion of untalkables with reference to the example of "Hawaiianess". His central question is, what is it that makes people, be they Hawaiians or non-Hawaiians, consider certain types of music as typical Hawaiian? How can we understand this "Hawaiianess" that can be evoked even by the briefest musical example and that will not need the slightest musical analysis for its generation? He then suggests that "Hawaiianess" must be understood in terms relating to its emotional content: Certain distinguishable practices can be identified as a unique cluster of performance idioms essential to "Hawaiianess". The casual listener may too quickly identify these as representing the untalkable "Hawaiianess". ' ..But I am convinced that it is the presence of extra-musical associations for performer and listener that constitute the foundation of the untalkable "Hawaiianess" ' (Hood, 1993, p. 141). It is not quite clear whether the unique cluster of performance idioms is part of his notion of

the untalkables or not, definitely it is not a focal aspect. Quintessential, however, seem to be the extra-musical associations for performers and listeners, and it is here where his notion differs from that presented in the present paper. The latter are untalkables because they are cognitive concepts for which there exist no corresponding linguistic categories. As cognitive concepts they find their expression in the interaction of their bearers with the environment. With reference to music this means that these concepts structure productive and interactive behavior during performances, and it is through this structuring of performance behavior that concepts become manifest in the music itself. Whereas Hood's untalkables, created by extra-musical associations, seem to exist only in the mind of performers and listeners, ours find a structural expression in the music.

Presumably, the way we think has a lot to do with the way we act. Analyzing the external manifestations of mental concepts allows us to determine what exactly this connection is. Surely, not just any concept will necessarily affect actions. As there are mental concepts about mental concepts it is possible that people say what they think they think. But this can hardly be the main domain of work for a musicologist. Knowing what people say or think, may help us to understand why people act the way they act, it can, however, only be a first and at times indicative step towards understanding what they do when they act. Noting en passant: often, when we say that we do have to know what people say about their music in order to really understand it, this provides an easy relief from the difficult task of having to analyze the music itself. It is not that I am neglecting the importance and significance of knowing the language categories of the people one is studying. I am much more emphasizing the fact that an abundance of research data indicates that there is a multitude of mental concepts for which there are no corresponding verbal categories and often these concepts are the most significant ones with respect to coping with the environment.

In no way can we conclude that, because some people have no verbal categories for certain aspects of their behavior, these aspects of their behavior are not significant for them. Hence, when ethnomusicologists analyze and understand these aspects they are indeed dealing with relevant issues.

□

References

- Barsalou, L. 1983: Ad-hoc categories. *Memory and Cognition* 11, pp.211-227.
- Blacking, J. 1992: The Biology of music-making. In: H. Myers (ed.) *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*. New York, pp.301-314.
- Ellis, C.J. 1994: The Two Women series from Central Australia. In P. Cooke (ed.): *Proceedings of the ESEM Conference 1994*, Oxford.
- Ellis, C.J. 1997: Understanding the Profound Structural Knowledge of Central Australian Performers from the Perspective of T.G.H. Strehlow. In *Strehlow Research Center, Occasional Papers* 1, 1997, pp. 57-78.
- Ellis, C.J. and Barwick, L.M. 1987: Musical syntax and the problem of meaning in a Central Australian songline. *Musicology Australia*, vol.15, pp. 41-57.
- Hood, M. 1993: The untalkables of music. *Annuario degli Archivi di Etnomusicologie dell'Accademia Nazionale di S. Cecilia*, I, pp.137-142.
-
- Johnson, M. 1987: *The body and the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago London.
- Lakoff, G. 1987: *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago London.
- Moyle, R. 1995: Singing from the heart. In L. Barwick, A. Marett and G. Tunstall (eds.) *The Essence of Singing and the Substance of Song. Recent Responses to the Aboriginal Performing Arts and other Essays in Honour of Catherine Ellis*. □269 pages, Oceania Monograph 46, University of Sydney.
- Rips, J.L. 1975: Inductive judgments about Natural Categories. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 14, pp. 665-81
- Rosch, E, (Eleanor Heider) 1973: Natural categories. *Cognitive Psychology*, 4, pp.328-350
- Rosch, E. 1977: Human Categorization. In N. Warren (ed.): *Studies in Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Academic Press, London.
- Strehlow, T.G.H. 1955: Australian Aboriginal Songs. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 7, pp.37-40.
- Strehlow, T.G.H. 1968: *Aranda Traditions*. Johnson Reprints, New York

Strehlow, T.G.H. 1971: *Songs of Central Australia*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

Will, U. and Ellis, C.J. 1996: A re-analysed Australian Western Desert Song.
Ethnomusicology, Vol.40/2.pp. 187-222.

Will, U. 1997: Two types of octave relationships in Central Australian Aboriginal Music.
Musicology Australia, Vol. XX, pp. 4-15.