

Investigating how oral narratives are culturally reproduced and accurately maintained

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Abstract

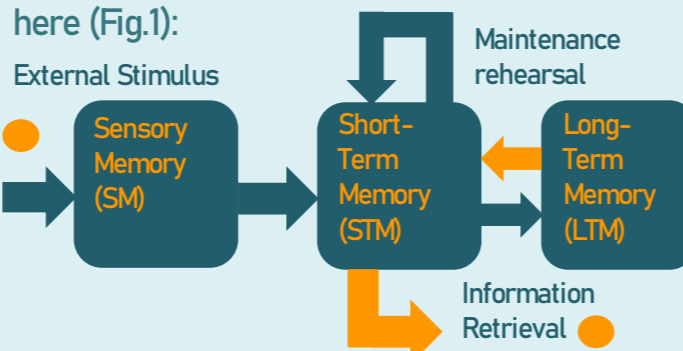
This project set out to develop an understanding of oral history as an action rather than a result, an ongoing process of encoding social identity through narrative transmission. Indigenous oral histories has historically been dismissed as mythology or viewed reductively as a misunderstanding of explicable events; however, increasingly the information transmitted is considered to both valuable to support historic and geological events (Nunn, 2013) and can be admitted as legal evidence (Borrows, 2001). Focusing on a macro-scale analysis of oral narrative transmission methods, the purpose of this investigation is to assess the mechanics behind how oral narratives are culturally reproduced and communicated accurately without written forms. From this project, it is evident that narrative transmission has evolved dialectically with accuracy ensured by the maintenance of key narrative points. Additionally, this investigation indicates that oral history should be considered not as a stable entity but as a dynamic and evolving form, with internal and external factors critical to recall stability.

Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyse narratives for common themes; this was completed in stages, with a literature review directing the research focus. As expanded below, the project initially collected and collated current stores of oral narratives around the Pacific; this was completed methodically by covering geographic regions and groups. The narratives were sourced from current collections of stories from ethnographic accounts and text compilations. Examples included here demonstrate common features identified within narrative transmission consistently across the groups examined; the type of narrative considered recorded natural events. To assess the method of accuracy maintenance, transmission was analysed in two forms: the internal effects of narrative content and the external mechanics of ensuring accuracy. Applying theory from cognitive psychology, areas within the Choose-to Receive, Encode-and-Retrieve, and Choose-to-transmit phases were examined to identify the frequency a practice occurred at. The most frequent practices were further examined.

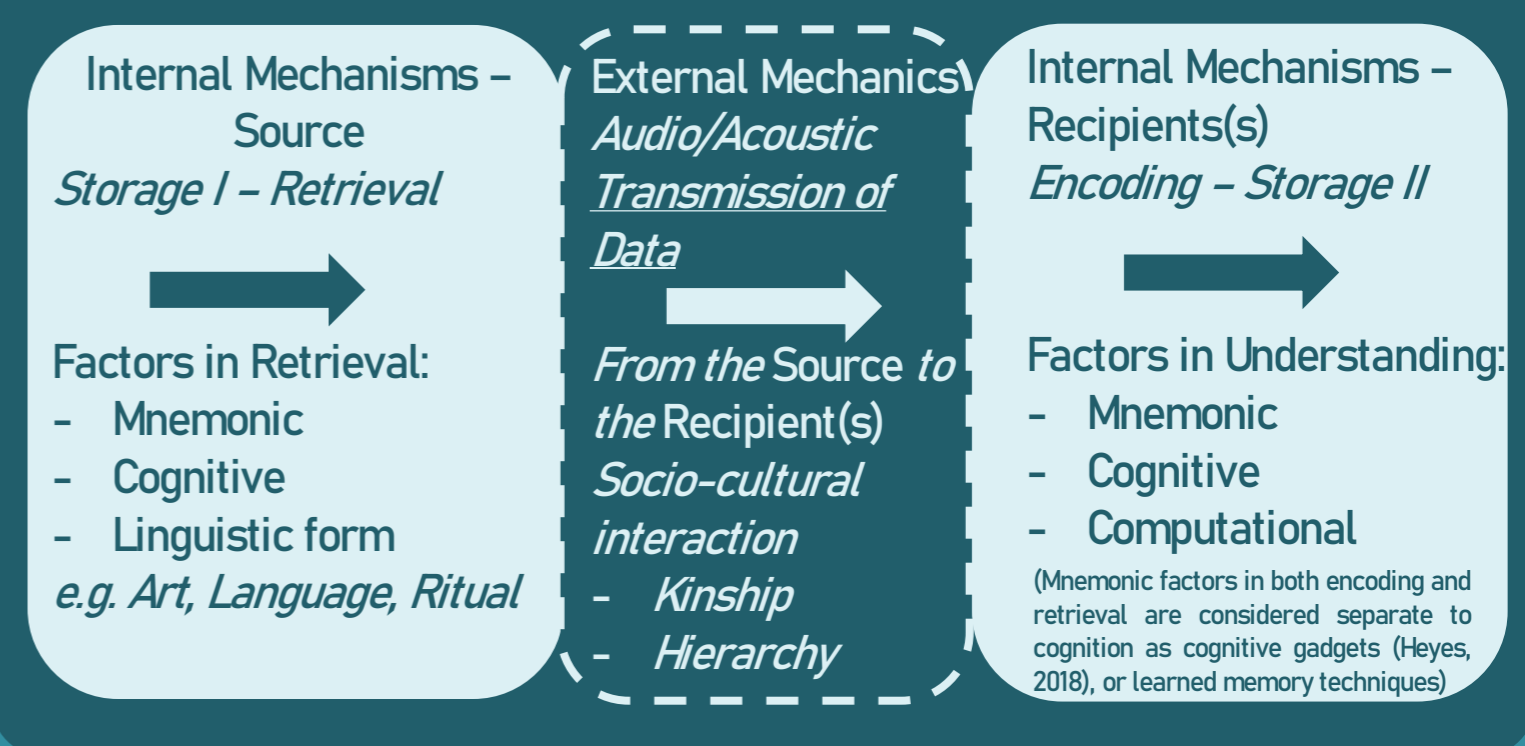
Background:

The memory-recall section considered in this investigation concerned language processing in the brain; based on current understandings the cognitive comprehension processes of encoding and recall were considered in conjunction with social structures. A multi-store model is illustrated here (Fig.1):



The investigation likewise mainstream models of recall to suggest how the narrative communication is effective. This adhered to the most widely accepted models of memory encoding; however, this investigation also recognises the continuing debates over which models best fit observed patterns.

Fig. 2 – Adapted Model of Memory Encoding & Retrieval



Transmission

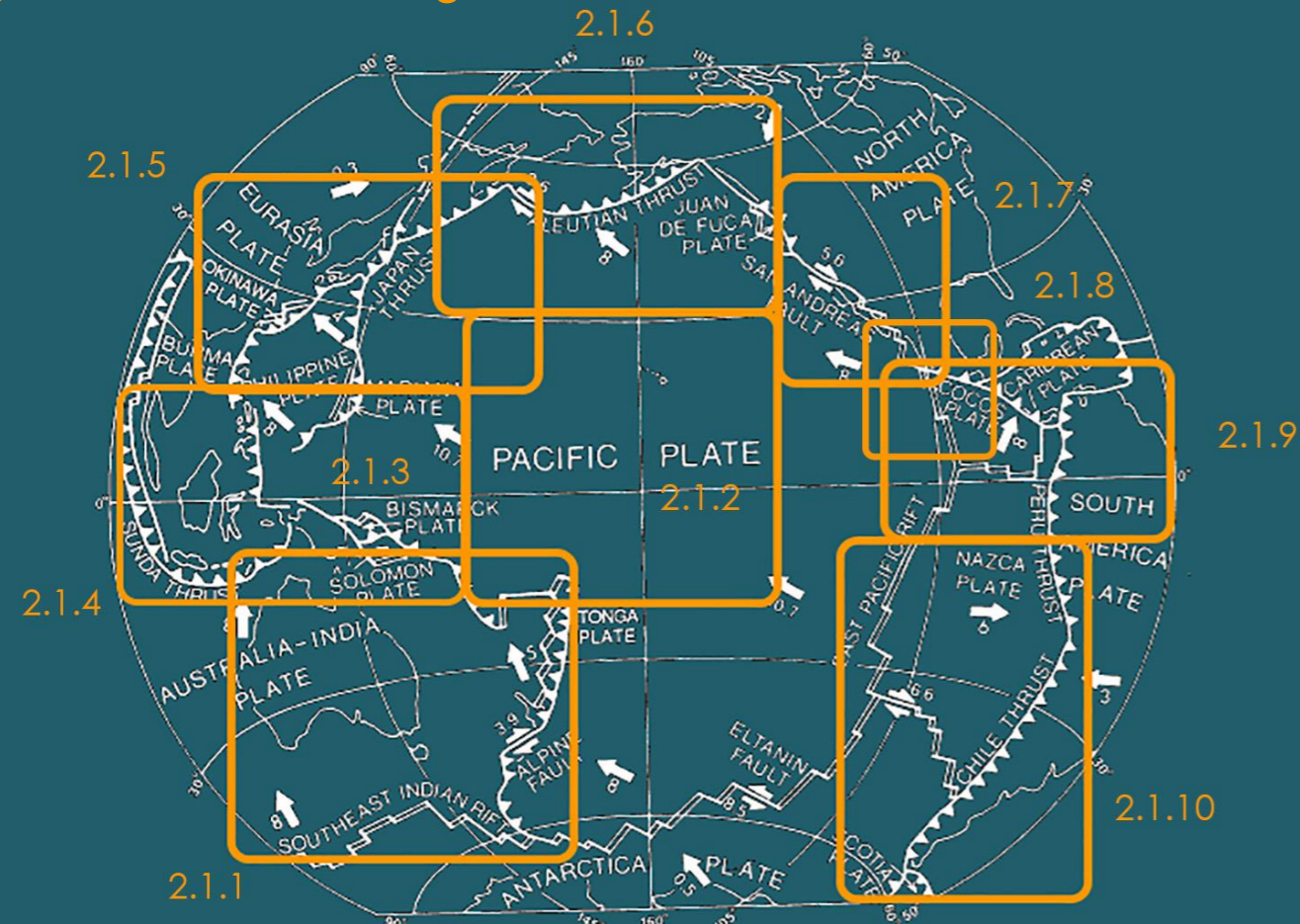
Internal Mechanisms

Critically, each of the narratives succeeded in building a mental image of the event, and indeed focused on constructing an experience grounded in localised connotations and understandings. More widely, the evolution of oral narratives into mythologies appears to reside within a culture understanding natural events within their own terms, but also as a method of ensuring narrative transmission through the production of a memorable story. Research into the difference between experiencing pain first-hand or second-hand through retold events strongly suggests that the event is processed in the same way, i.e. processed through the cortical and subcortical brain areas are involved in perception and processing; likewise the emotional experience of pain as brought on by stories has been indicated to be similar to physical pain (Sturgeon & Zautra, 2016). The importance of dramatic stories to oral transmission here is further supported when compared to transmission by literary means (McIver & Carroll, 2004); many of the narratives rely upon a similar form to poetry or lyrical speech. Additionally, in agreement with relevance theory the importance of verbal working memory in the process of recall was repeatedly demonstrated by the supplementary contextual information of a narrative changing while core information was maintained (Wilson & Sperber, 2002). As demonstrated in (Fig.5), Barrett & Nyhof's investigation into Non-natural concept retention supports the theory that using counter-intuitive concepts ensures narrative survival in memory.

External Mechanisms

Previous research has suggested that the type of narrative affects the recall and transmission rate, leading certain narratives to become more prevalent; this was explored here both through the structure of the narratives themselves, as well as external factors including both visual culture (aside from writing), and social structures (Fig.4). Regardless of environmental factors the presence of petroglyphs, wood carvings, and similar memory aids was found to be prevalent; notably in Polynesian mythology both characters and carvings were repeatedly reproduced in tandem. Using ethnography, in storytelling rituals physical images were referred to both as an illustration of the journey (Rodriguez, 2009), as well as a memory aid for the elder tasked with retelling the narrative; these techniques have continued to express community and resistance, alongside their original practices. Consistently, the accuracy of transmission was also ensured through social structures the narrative is reproduced by. In Alaskan tradition, the hierarchal arrangement appears pedagogical (focused on teaching); the use of visual, auditory, and gestural structure keeps attention, while aiding recall and narrative momentum (Sugiyama, 2017).

Fig. 3 – Narrative designations around the Circum-Pacific Belt



- 2.1.1 Australia & New Zealand
 - 2.1.2 Pacific Islands
 - 2.1.3 Indonesia & Papua New Guinea
 - 2.1.4 Philippines & South China Sea
 - 2.1.5 Japan, Korean Peninsula
 - 2.1.6 North America I (Arctic): Aleutian Islands, Alaska, & Yukon
 - 2.1.7 North America II (Continental)
 - 2.1.8 Middle/Latin America
 - 2.1.9 South America I
 - 2.1.10 South America II
- (Map from Halbouty, 1990)

Conclusion & Applications

The findings indicate a wide range of recall methods, both internal and external to the individual, are used in conjunction with each other ensure the accurate transmission of narratives over generations; although entailing only an overview of practices, the investigation also reinforce the view that stories are integral to helping us remember and fuse learning with experience. Overwhelmingly, this project highlighted the need to discuss oral tradition as a living and dynamic practice. However, alongside the main investigation a common pattern of misunderstanding and ignorance was identified repeatedly that reduces the effectiveness of narrative information and its inclusion into addressing preventative measures. While several contemporary forms of narrative transmission were identified recalling geological events e.g. Kataribe following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake (Pritchard, 2012), these continue to be viewed as purely cultural understandings; Cruikshank's work on local oral tradition surrounding Glaciers (Cruikshank, 2005) illustrates a vastly different understanding of natural fragility that counters Western understandings of nature, and informs contemporary struggles in climate discussion.

Database

To identify key narrative techniques, a database was built of collected stories from around the Circum-Pacific Belt, more commonly referred to as the 'Pacific Ring of Fire'. Narratives were incorporated from secondary sources, including compilations, ethnographic accounts, and transcribed audio records. These were subsequently catalogued according to location, with the movement of people and by extension narratives also recorded. While similarities and common practices were identified, the study would further be improved by expanding the catalogue. Additionally, modern and contemporary narratives were also considered; however, these were structurally different, often recording events exactly. This raised questions on the evolution of a story, from an account to an interpretation of events. During the course of the investigation the database approach was developed to instead focus on case studies, providing more insight into practices that ensured accuracy.

Fig. 4 – Structured Narrative Distribution, Alaska Native (Grouped)

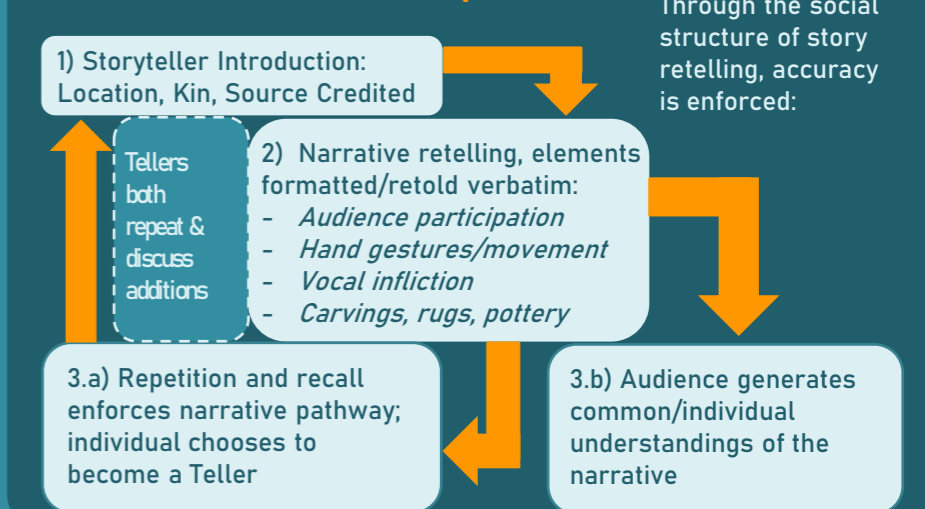
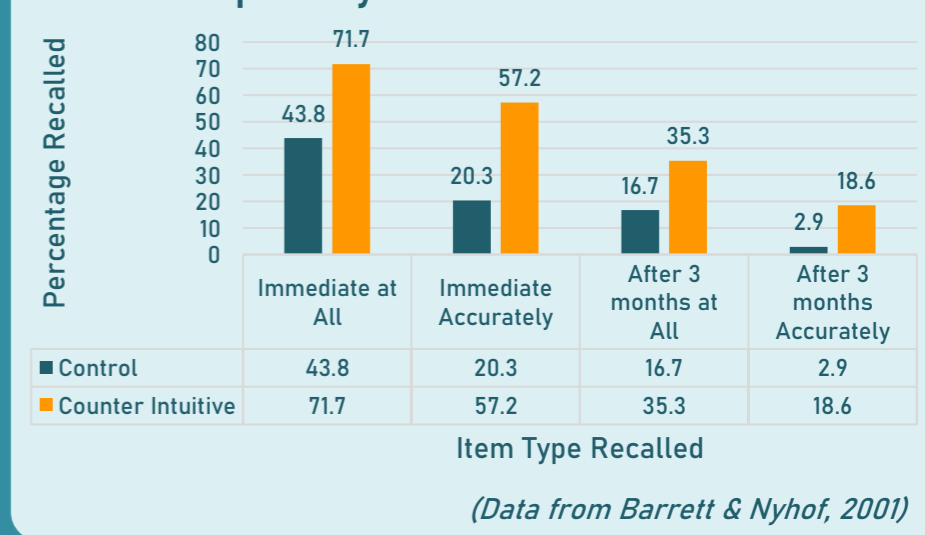


Fig. 5 – Counter-Intuitive events recalled more frequently than the Control:



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