

## *Investigating how oral narratives are culturally reproduced and accurately maintained.*

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### Abstract

The focus of this study is the use of spoken word to record events; in particular on the methods used to maintain the accuracy of oral histories over multiple generations. Oral histories now have legal application in Canada and important status in New Zealand as recognised sources of evidence (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, 1997), acknowledging their accuracy; despite this, there remains very little research or understanding around oral histories, partly due to past dismissal condemning them to the realm of mythology. However, even ‘true’ myth has long been recognised as having a role in science, particularly with legends that combine semi-historical sources with elements of the supernatural (Piccardi, 2007). During a 2016 study on Indo-European folktales, Dr. Tehrani identified the combination of real and supernatural narrative elements as a possible reason for the persistence of fairy-tale narratives across several millennium (Tehrani, 2016); alongside *why* narratives persist, this research project primarily will focus on *how* histories endure. The purpose of this investigation is to research how accuracy is maintained, and the possible application of this knowledge to both the anthropological understanding of oral history and uses within modern and digital narratives.

**Keywords:** *oral history, narrative, accuracy, linguistic, mechanics, mnemonic, cultural reproduction*

## 1.0 Initial Research Proposal

The research focus is on cultural reproduction; this project therefore intends to investigate how narratives are communicated through ethnographic accounts of social influences (who reproduces the history? Does another individual check the accuracy?), and by combining anthropology with research in neuroscience (memory recall) and literature/linguistics (verbal techniques used to recall extensive prose). The aim of the project is not to record how different people communicate, to pursue Sapir-Whorfian linguistic relativity or universalism, but exclusively to investigate mechanics; the variety of methods used to reproduce oral history and their application. By understanding the transmission of narrative communication, the project is intended to reduce a current niche in research literature, and to encourage further research in this area.

## 2.0 Method

**2.1 (Stage 1, Week 1-2)** - Compiling a database on relevant oral histories to study the process of transmission through. The process will select case studies that have traditionally transmitted data through oral history, specifically focusing on oral histories that record seismic events; by concentrating on narratives recording geological events, the origin of the narrative (geological dating, external primary sources) may be accurately determined. The combination of these factors will likely lead to a focus on the Circum-Pacific Belt.

**2.2 (Stage 2, Week 2-4)** - Investigation into the methods employed to maintain the transmission of oral histories accurately, using primarily qualitative ethnographic accounts alongside empirical data; these may be categorised into:

- a) External mechanics, e.g. kinship, relational, hierarchical, and ritual factors
- b) Internal mechanisms, e.g. mnemonic, cognitive, and computational factors

**2.3 (Stage 3, Week 4-5)** - Hypothesis and testing; identify the key techniques from the investigation and recreating them in a simulated environment. The internal mechanics will likely be the focus of extended research, focusing on computation, cognition and linguistics.

**2.4\* (Stage 3.1)** - Tbc possible collaboration with the Durham University Neuroimaging Centre (DUNIC), to examine the effect of different oral narrative presentations and techniques on neural recall activity in comparison with written accounts. \*subject to research completed, approval, and the external influence of Covid-19 on all research practised. This may take place at another point in the year.

**2.5 (Stage 4 – Week 5-6)** – Project write-up and compilation of Portfolio (**3.1**)

### 3.0 Project output (Summer 1)

**3.1** Portfolio, consisting of:

- An extended essay covering the initial research
- A compendium of groups and the methods used in accurate transmission (Stage 1)
- Research into internal and external mechanics, focussing on an interdisciplinary approach
- An essay debating the extent of the influence of these methods
- An analysis of application

**3.2** Publishing the research completed both on the Laidlaw Scholars Network, and (with discussion) externally.

**3.3 \*\*** (Alongside the purely academic project, my intention is to document the research via a public media page/blog, giving an insight into undergraduate studies and the process behind the project).

### 4.0 Research objectives

- To investigate the mechanics behind how oral narratives are culturally reproduced and communicated accurately without written forms.
- To examine the possible application of the research findings to digital communication and to the analysis and probability of seismic activity
- To promote interdisciplinary research in cognition through combining Linguistics, Social-Cultural Anthropology, Computation and Neuroscience/Psychology.

### 5.0 Oral Narratives as a System of Social Reproduction

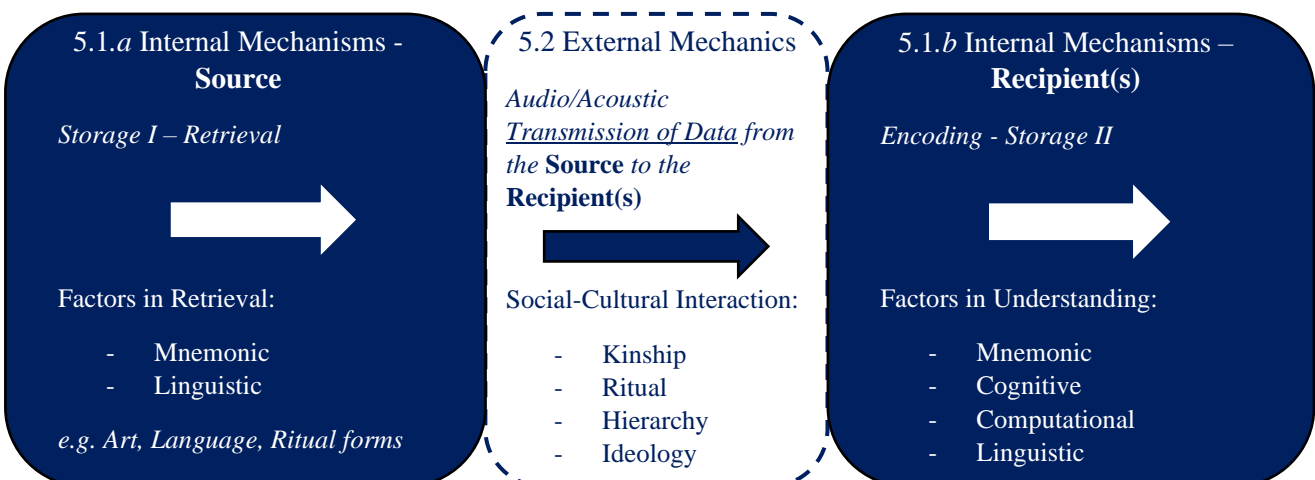


Fig.1 The research focuses on the oral transmission of cultural data between individuals and over generations. A key focus will be the Internal and External mechanics of communication, in relation to mnemonic techniques

## 6.0 Timeline

### 6.1 Summer 1 (tbc 2020):

- (Week 1-2) Research oral accounts of event (*Durham, Collections and Archives, UK Legal Deposit Libraries*). Search ethnographic accounts for instances of oral history in relation to verifiable seismic events. The Polynesian language group (*Tahitian, Samoan, Tongan, Māori, Hawaiian etc.*) is an example of this. Existing only in romanized orthography due to their unwritten nature, these groups contain rich oral narratives relating to seismic activity.
- (Week 3-4) Conduct research on techniques used to accurately communicate extensive narratives
- (Week 5-6) Identify several methods used to accurately transmit information. Identify the most influential and propose area for further study, possibly in relation to *Summer 2*. Complete project write-up and Portfolio.

### 6.2 Summer 2: (tbc 2021)

- *Tbc* Collaborate with a (Laidlaw-affiliated) university outside of the UK and establish a relationship between the institutions, possibly in the form of a student exchange. In-field application of the initial research project with outputs to be specified.

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