

## Language, the Singer and the Song

### The Sociolinguistics of Folk Performance

The relationship between language and music has much in common – rhythm, structure, sound, metaphor. Exploring the phenomena of song and performance, this book presents a sociolinguistic model for analysing them. Based on ethnomusicologist John Blacking’s contention that any song performed communally is a ‘folk song’ regardless of its generic origins, it argues that folk song to a far greater extent than other song genres displays ‘communal’ or ‘inclusive’ types of performance. The defining feature of folk song as a multimodal instantiation of music and language is its participatory nature, making it ideal for sociolinguistic analysis. In this sense, a folk song is the product of specific types of developing social interaction whose major purpose is the construction of a temporally and locally based community. Through repeated instantiations this can lead to disparate communities of practice, which, over time, develop socio-cultural registers and a communal stance towards aspects of meaningful events in everyday lives that become typical of a discourse community. Additional resources for this publication are available at [www.cambridge.org/watts](http://www.cambridge.org/watts)

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## *The Sociolinguistics of Folk Performance*

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## Contents

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<i>List of Images</i>	page x
<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Essentials of Folk Performance	1
The Structure of the Book	3
A Reference Performance	4
The Website	7
Conventions	8
A Functional Definition of Folk Song	9
Bonding People Together through Song	11
‘All Music is Folk Music’	15
<b>Prologue</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>1 Language and Music</b>	<b>19</b>
Language and Music as Communication Systems	19
Languaging and Musicking	19
Missing Links	21
‘Hmmmm’ and Human Language	22
Mithen’s Hypothesis	23
What Happened to ‘Hmmmm’?	25
Ontogenetic Evidence for the Priority of ‘Hmmmm’	26
Song <sub>1</sub> and Song <sub>2</sub> : Distinguishing Hominins from Other Species	29
Bird Song and Hominid Song	29
Hominid Song as an Exaptive Ability or an Adaptive Faculty: Song <sub>1</sub> ?	31
The Emergence of Song <sub>2</sub>	32
A Footnote on the Development of Instrumental Music	33
Containing Ritual	33
Symbolic Containers	34
The Symbolic Container of Ritual as the Source of Music	35
The Sociolinguistics of Song Performance	37

vi	Contents	
	<b>Part I: Creating Community and Identity through Song</b>	<b>41</b>
2	‘Breaking through’ into Performance	43
	Singing, Linguaging and Performing	43
	Hymes’ Notion of Breaking through into Performance	44
	The Chip Shop: Keying-in and Keying-out	45
	Performance in the Social Sciences since the 1950s	48
	Linguaging in the Performance Mode and Conceptualising Performance in the Social Sciences	48
	Performance as Ritualised Social Drama	51
	Defining ‘Performance’	53
	Constructing and Using the Container	54
	Constructing the Container in Emergent Social Practice	55
	Relational and Representational Singing Performances and the Performance Continuum	57
	Representational Performances	60
	The Performance Continuum and Hybrid Performance Types	61
	Classifying Performance Contexts	62
3	The Communitality of Folk Song: Co-performance and Co-production	68
	Singing to Create a Community	68
	The Eel’s Foot	69
	The Princess Charlotte	72
	The Monkseaton Arms	75
	Community Concepts in Sociolinguistics	77
	The Community of Practice	78
	The Discourse Community	81
	Co-performance and the Co-production of a ‘Folk’	82
	Shanties and Rowing Songs	83
	Marching Songs	85
	Community in Song	86
	Song Choices	86
	Characteristics of Communal Songs	88
	From <i>Rubber Soul</i> to <i>Rubber Folk</i>	90
4	Answering Back: Rebels with and without a Cause	91
	A Social Conundrum	91
	Finding a Voice	92
	The Voice of Folk Song	93
	Answering Back	94
	Folk Song and Modernity	96
	Folk Song and Protest	98
	The Nature of Protest in Song: Musical Aspects	98
	Strategies for ‘Answering Back’ in Song	100
	Answering Back in English-speaking Folk Worlds	102
	Answering Back in Scotland and Ireland: A Historical Sketch	103
	Answering Back in the USA: A Historical Sketch	106
	Concluding Issues	109

Contents	vii
<b>Part II: Variation in Language and Folk Song</b>	<b>113</b>
5 ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’’: Language Change and Song Change	115
The Longevity of Songs	115
The Actuation Process in Language Change and the Transmission Process in Song Change	116
Three Hypothetical Principles for Tracing the History of Folk Songs	119
A Song Schema	121
Songs as Narratives	122
Songs as Blueprints	123
Variable Song Schemata, but One Song	126
Two Minimally Different Song Schemata and Two Songs	132
The Song Schema of ‘Geordie’	132
‘Geordie’ in Child’s <i>The English and Scottish Popular Ballads</i>	135
Two Seventeenth-Century ‘Geordie’ Broad­sides	136
Songs with No Apparent Song Schema	139
‘The Four Loom Weaver’	141
Creating New Songs from Old Material	144
6 Ideologies, Authenticities and Traditions	148
Tradition and Authenticity	148
Tradition and ‘Traditional’ Songs	149
‘The Tradition’	151
The Discourse on Folk Song in Britain: The First Folk Song Revival	152
Discourses and Discourse Archives	153
History and Nostalgia	153
The Discursive Expropriation of Folk Songs	156
Searching for Authenticity: The Second Folk Song Revival	157
Bonding the ‘Nation’	158
Redefining the ‘Folk’	159
The Authenticity Trope in Sociolinguistics and Music Performance	162
Authenticity as the Process of Searching for the ‘Lost Other’	163
‘The Good Ship Authenticity’ and the Second Folk Revival	165
Adapting a Song to Different Performance Contexts: Authenticating the Singer	168
7 ‘Insects Caught in Amber’: Preserving Songs in Print, Transcript and Recording	173
Folk Song as a Process or a Product?	173
Preservation in Performance and the Perpetuation of Songs	174
Standardisation	175
Further Ideologies	177
Types of Amber	179
Preservation in Print	179
Preservation in Notation	182
Preservation in Recordings	187
Perpetuation and Transmission	191

<b>Part III: Folk Song Performance and Linguistics</b>	<b>197</b>
8 Voices in the Folk Song	199
Voices in Performance	199
Frith's Voices	200
Voice and Voicing	201
Performance Voices	203
Exemplifying Performance Voices	205
Voices and Music in Narrative Songs	206
Exemplifying Fictional Voices: Two Songs about a Tailor	206
Voicing and Ventriloquising	211
Looking for Voices in the Ballad	212
Voice Complexity in Ballads	214
Voicing and Ventriloquising in Ballads	216
The Role of the First-person Narrator in Implied Narratives	217
Presenting a Representative 'I'	218
Imagining a 'You'	220
Song Voices	223
9 The Song: Text and Entextualisation in Performance	226
In Search of the Text	226
Written Texts vs Performance Blueprints	228
Text and Entextualisation Revisited	228
A 'Flexible Schematic' for Performance	230
The 'Flexible Schematic'	230
The 'Components'	231
The Language of Folk Song	235
Formulaic Lexis and Phrases	236
Formulaic Lines, Stanzas and Episodes	237
Formulae for Structuring Narratives	238
The 'Song Elements': Functions of Language and Form for Entextualisation	241
Song Schemata	242
Formulaic Song Motifs (FSMs)	244
Stanza and Verse	246
10 Going Out There and Doing Your Thing	249
Performances in Relational and Representational Frames	249
Performance Types	249
A Focus on Representational Performance	250
'Billy Grey': A Case Study	251
Norman Blake's Song and First Recording	252
Adopters and Adapters	254
Lyrics and Pronunciation	257
The North American Instantiations	257
The Old World Adaptations	259
Preliminary Conclusions	262
From Perpetuation to Performance	263
Two Types of Language 'Standardisation'	263
Dealing with Differences	265



Contents	ix
Style and Stylistation	267
Style as a Sociolinguistic Dimension	269
Phonological Constraints	272
Rounding Off: The Impact of and on Performance	274
<b>11 Enregisterment through Song: The Performer's Credibility</b>	<b>276</b>
Enregistering Social Practices and Beliefs through Song	276
Registers and Enregisterment	277
Voices, Indexicality, Styles and Enregisterment	278
Enregisterment, De-enregisterment and Re-enregisterment	278
Features of Enregisterment	279
Enregisterment in America	280
De- and Re-enregisterment in British and 'New Folk' Versions	281
Shifts in Enregisterment and 'Answering Back'	282
Enregistering 'Folk Talk' in Performance: Enregisterment <sub>1</sub>	283
Characterological Figures and Distinctive Features	283
Enregisterment <sub>1</sub> in Maddy Prior's Performance 'Back to the Tradition'	286
Enregistering Geordie through Song: Enregisterment <sub>2</sub>	292
Songs from Bell's <i>Rhymes of Northern Bards</i> (1812)	292
Nineteenth-century Enregisterment of Geordie in Song	298
De-enregistering and Re-enregistering Geordie: 'Byker Hill'	302
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>12 Whither Folk Song, whither Sociolinguistics?</b>	<b>311</b>
Tying the Ends Together	311
Performance in Languaging	313
Folk Song as Song that Bonds Communities	316
New Approaches in Sociolinguistic Research	320
In Defence of Appropriation and Authenticity: The Resilience of Folk Song	322
And So to Conclude	327
<i>Appendix: Overview of Musical Concepts</i>	328
Modes and Scales	328
Basic Chords and Keys	329
Harmonies/Chords for the Modal Scales	331
<i>References</i>	332
<i>Index</i>	347

## Images

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Intro.1	The entrance to Cecil Sharp House, photo by courtesy of Alexandra Burton, Assistant Librarian (Maternity Cover), The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society	<i>page 6</i>
Intro.2	Kennedy Hall in Cecil Sharp House, photo by courtesy of Alexandra Burton, Assistant Librarian (Maternity Cover), The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society	7
3.1	The Eel's Foot pub in the early twentieth century	69
3.2	The snug at the Eel's Foot, where weekly singers' nights were held in the 1930s	70
5.1	The Pepys broadsheet for 'The Life and Death of George of Oxford'	137
5.2	The broadsheet for 'George Stoole' from the British Library	138
5.3	The Bebbington broadsheet of 'Jone o' Grinfield'	143
11.1	Great floor singers	285

## Figures

---

Intro.1	Musical notation	<i>page</i> 6
1.1	The evolution of music and language as communication systems, adapted from Mithen with permission from Orion, (2006: 267)	27
1.2	The symbolic container of ritual as the oval of performance	36
2.1	The breakthrough into performance	48
2.2	Creation of an impromptu/relational performance frame for a ritual performance	58
2.3	Preparations for and clearing up of a representational/arranged frame for ritual performance	59
2.4	Performance spaces and the location of performance types within them	65
2.5	Distance (spatial and social) from performers in performance types	67
5.1	The transmission process	117
5.2	Linguistic variability in the stanza containing the narrative complication in eleven of the twelve versions	131
6.1	Performance selections for different performance contexts	171
8.1	The 'typical' structure of a folk performance	204
9.1	'Components' of a flexible song schematic	231
9.2	Ranges of folk song tunes	233
9.3	F.S.M.s and song schema steps 1 and 2 in the first stanza of two ballads	245
9.4	F.A.M.'s arrangement of Bronson's version 9 of 'The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter'	247
10.1	Referee design in relation to different performance contexts	270
12.1	Mind map of sociolinguistics and folk song from the perspective of performance	312
12.2	The historical and ritual depth of songs within folk performance	319
Appendix 1	Musical modes	329
Appendix 2	The blues scale with the 'blue note'	329
Appendix 3	Chords for the modal scales	331

## Tables

---

2.1	A selection of hybrid performance types in the folk music world	<i>page</i> 63
3.1	Characteristics of sessions at the Eel's Foot	71
3.2	Characteristics of sessions at the Princess Charlotte	74
3.3	Characteristics of sessions at the Monkseaton Arms	76
5.1a	Narrative elements and contents in the 'Sailor's Life' complex	129
5.1b	Organisation of narrative elements and contents into stanzas of the twelve variants of the 'Sailor's Life' complex	130
6.1	Textual variants of 'The Cruel Mother'	170
7.1	Dick Gaughan's and the Fureys' version of 'The Snows They Melt the Soonest'	194
11.1	Folk performance and keying-in/out	291
Appendix 1	Major and related minor keys	330

## Preface

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### R.J.W.

The idea of writing *Language, the Singer and the Song* reaches back at least as far as the final year of my career as full professor of Modern English Linguistics at the Institute for English Languages and Literatures at the University of Bern before my retirement in the summer of 2008. I knew I was going to miss the students and the wonderful times, academic and social, that both staff and students had enjoyed during my twenty-four years at Bern. So what was I going to do with the years of retirement ahead of me?

I had a number of ideas up my sleeve, of course, and in point of fact, two writing projects have already come to fruition. Both of these provided input into what I had been dreaming of writing for years, a fusion of my great active love of the folk song of the English-speaking world with my passion for pulling down hegemonically constructed assumptions about the English language. The first (*Language Myths and the History of English*) was a deconstruction of the potent myths surrounding the history of English from a discursive, sociolinguistic perspective. The second (*Letter Writing and Language Change*) was an editorial collaboration with Anita Auer and Daniel Schreier in investigating the historical need to readjust the focus of historical study by a sociolinguistic analysis of letter writing ‘from below’, i.e. socially ‘below’, from those who rarely get a look in when it comes to reconstructing how people used and use language socially. How much do we perform when we use language? And how do we shift our identities and our social relationships when we perform consciously for others and with others? That was it! It just had to be an investigation into the performing of songs from a sociolinguistic perspective. But I could hardly do this on my own.

### F.A.M.

In hindsight, meeting Richard Watts in 1974 at what was then the biggest folk festival in Switzerland at Lenzburg was nothing short of fateful. I was seventeen, a wide-eyed, wildly enthusiastic folkie, and he was a prominent figure on

the Swiss folk scene. He has never let me forget how I, obviously star-struck, opened up what was to be the first of our many exchanges about the passion we shared, folk song and folk music. We ended up working together, on the stages of Swiss folk clubs and at venues that promoted acoustic music, but I also became first his student, then his assistant and finally his colleague at Bern University. It took some persuasion on his part to get me on board this project, as I was not at all sure what I could contribute to it, but, as it turned out, the different areas of linguistics we had explored over the years complemented each other well. In short, I am deeply grateful that he kept up the pressure and that I became part of this study, a culmination of a lifelong love for this kind of music in a scholarly exploration that draws richly on the practice of performing these songs in a variety of settings. Writing this book together with Richard was probably the most pleasurable foray into academic research I have ever been involved in.

### **As a Duet**

At this point we would like to thank the people who helped us in the exploration of the topic and of the songs. Looking back, after the mention of the 1974 Lenzburg Folk Festival, we realise that what we do and think today, including this book project, is built on contacts, friendships and experiences with people, in academia and the folk music world, made over the long course of the years.

Many of those to whom we dedicate our thanks will not even be aware that we have written this book, and we have lost contact with many of them. Some of them, alas, are no longer with us. But without them, the book would have been impossible. Andy Irvine, who at the time was playing with Planxty, and R.J.W. were trying a few musical things out under a wall in the gardens of Lenzburg Castle on that 'fateful' day in 1974 when F.A.M. joined us. Andy's singing and playing has been a source of inspiration to us ever since. R.J.W.'s folk 'mentor' at Leicester University, Roy Bailey, was instrumental in triggering his commitment to folk music, and it was Roy and Leon Rosselson who were the guests at the first festival. We would like to thank them for their support and enthusiasm.

The members of the High Level Ranters during the 1970s, Colin Ross (and his wife Ray Fisher, now, sadly, no longer with us), Ali Anderson, Tom Gilfellon and Johnny Handle, were regular visitors to Switzerland. What Roy began in terms of commitment, Johnny completed for R.J.W. with an unforgettable guest evening at the Leicester University Folk Song Club early in 1962. It was Johnny who sparked off R.J.W.'s love of the Northumbrian smallpipes and who gave him his first lessons in playing his own set. And it was Colin who made him a new chanter to give him a greater musical range. Tom invited Seamus Ennis to Switzerland for a tour after R.J.W. had first met

Seamus at his caravan home of ‘Easter Snow’ at Naul north of Dublin in 1971, and Tom also arranged for a cittern to be made for R.J.W. Both cittern and pipes are now in the capable hands of F.A.M. It was Ali who came to Switzerland for a breathtaking set of concerts with the English concertina and the smallpipes in the early 1970s. A heartfelt vote of thanks to all of you, in particular, bless his soul, to Seamus, who died in 1983.

As far as present musicians and friends go, a big thank you to the doyenne of folk song, Maddy Prior, for hosting such fascinating, inspirational workshops at Stones Barn – in particular the 2014 workshop on Child Ballads – which fundamentally rekindled F.A.M.’s interest, for being so generous with her time and her insights in allowing him to interview her at length, but also for having given so much great singing to the entire community. Without her work our musical tastes might have gone in a very different direction forty-five years ago. Thanks also to her daughter Rose Kemp and Rose’s father Rick for their insights into song-writing and performing when F.A.M. met them at the Stones Barn workshops, as well as for acting as sounding boards for some of our ideas.

No expression of thanks would be complete without mentioning Martin Carthy, guest at one of the Lenzburg festivals in the early 1970s and co-presenter at the Child Ballad workshop, but, most importantly, a wonderful person. He has been an inspiration since F.A.M.’s teenage years and R.J.W.’s late twenties, in making us realise how as performers, without having to follow the ‘tradition’ slavishly, we can be true to the spirit of a song and keep the music alive. F.A.M. also owes a debt of gratitude to ‘The Barn Stoners’, alumni of the Stones Barn workshops; in particular, Suze, Ella-Joy Hunton and Kevin Wilkins, sadly missed, for songs and friendship; Siobhan and Chris Nelson for great music, great songs and discussions about how we stylise our singing; to Peter Little for his company and his ability to galvanise an audience with his voice and his repertoire; and Lynn Goulborn for organising song gatherings and forays to clubs that have proved so useful for our understanding of current folk practices.

Will Kaufman has been a great help to us with his perceptive work on the American folk scene, in particular his way of bringing the music of Woody Guthrie to life. Thanks are also due to Norman Blake for his generosity in letting us use his song ‘Billy Grey’ and to Scott O’Malley for establishing contacts with Norman and answering so many of our questions. Eric Bogle was very generous in allowing us to present and discuss ‘No Man’s Land’ just as long as we used his first printed version of the song. We hope the interpretation of the genesis of the song is along the right lines. Thanks to Alexandra Burton, a librarian in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House, who was kind enough to send us her own photographs of the entrance to Cecil Sharp House and Kennedy Hall, the venue of the Maddy Prior performance.

On the academic side of the fence, it is not often that one encounters colleagues who are also ‘into’ folk music, but one such, for whom we have an abiding affection, is Paul Simpson of Queen’s University, Belfast. Thank you, Paul, for supporting us and thank you for an absolutely unforgettable Poetics and Linguistics Association meeting at the Åbo Akademi in Finland many many years ago, which we turned into a succession of three folk gigs reaching far into the small hours of the morning. Back in Bern, this work could not have been undertaken without the support and encouragement of F.A.M.’s old colleagues Simon Hicks, Dewi Williams and Margaret Mace-Tessler, and his new colleagues, Dave Britain and Crispin Thurlow, who all gave him the feeling that this work mattered. Thanks also go to Britta Sweers for conversations about folk music and folk singing that left F.A.M. buzzing with enthusiasm.

F.A.M. thanks the University of Bern for giving him a sabbatical in the spring term of 2015 to concentrate fully on this undertaking. And of course his thanks go to all those students whose feedback in related seminars and discussions helped set him straight on more than one occasion. We thank all those at Cambridge University Press for even being interested in this project, and in particular Helen Barton for showing the professional patience to get us to redo it and broaden its scope in the wake of justified criticism from the reviewers. With a vote of deep thanks and love for putting up with us over the period of writing, we now give two short a cappella performances for our families.

### **F.A.M. a cappella**

As far as family is concerned, I am deeply grateful to this day to my mother Irène, whose love of music was the wellspring of musical enthusiasm in my childhood and in my family. She would have loved to see this book, a testimony to all the ‘old’ songs she had been so fond of all her life. Thanks also to my sister Suzanne, my partner in singing, talented multi-instrumentalist, arranger and vocalist performer, the other harmony voice in the polyphonic singing of our youth, and to my Dad and my brother Peter, lusty singers both. But the most profound gratitude is due to my wife and best friend Caroline Morrissey for her encouragement and her patience, especially when songs, in the interest of research, of course, were played over and over again. She was always there to support our work, and just as importantly during gigs, she was always that friendly face in the crowd that takes so much pressure off a performer.

I am also grateful to my daughters Corrina, Astrid and Frances for being such avid singers and musicians and making us realise how much the practice of singing in the family is to be valued. And lastly thanks to my son Andri, apparently a classic chip-off-the-old-block, who insisted – against his teachers’ advice – in his college finals on tackling the power of sung protest as his



independent study project. Many ideas were tossed back and forth in our discussions, helping to shape his work and some of my concepts.

### **R.J.W. a cappella**

When discussing new ideas with my wife, Anne-Marie, I immediately detect her registering the ominous fact that I might be thinking of writing another book, and imagining all the hours spent behind the computer, reading up new material and getting more than a little frustrated. She is, of course, absolutely right in thinking, ‘Oh no! Here we go again!’ But this time she has been not only thoroughly cooperative; I think she has also secretly enjoyed seeing me do what I always wanted to do.

We have had lots of discussions about this book, from which I have profited immensely. My heart goes out to her for setting me right most of the time and, in particular, for being so patient with me. She also likes having Franz round at our place and lets us get on with our discussions. It’s probably a case of ‘Well, if I can’t set him right, Franz will.’ My daughter-in-law trained to be an opera singer, so it was great fun to explain to her (and my not particularly musical son) what the book was all about. We do not see one another all that often now as they live abroad. But my son, when he was a boy, thoroughly enjoyed coming to the Lenzburg festivals and having folk musicians staying at our flat through the 1970s. We also had a dachshund called Lotti, who insisted on barking right in the middle of Planxty’s rendering of the Donegal reel ‘The Dogs among the Bushes’ at Lenzburg. Imagine the keying-out comments from the band! Our granddaughter, Jenny, has also shown a keen interest in England and its music. My love goes out to them all and my thanks for being so understanding about my passion. It goes without saying that none of those mentioned in this preface bears any responsibility for the errors of judgment and interpretation that readers might find in the book.

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