

The Process of Creating Improvised *Bertsos*

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Improvised verse is, above all, and as its name indicates, an act of improvisation.

“To improvise” is a verb that often has negative connotations in present-day society. Used in the negative sense, it is the last recourse of those who are unable to plan or build on what might have been planned; it is last-minute, “everyone for themselves” desperation, the result of which is always imperfect and ephemeral. The positive perception of “improvisation,” on the other hand, is common in the sporting context, when an athlete has been capable of improvising a move here or a strike there, or a manager has been able to solve a problem on the spot, undoubtedly due to his great capacity and genius for “improvisation.”

As far as *bertsolari*s are concerned, the act of improvisation has nothing to do with either of these attitudes. The *bertsolari* does not improvise for lack of ability to plan, nor because (s)he is necessarily an extremely talented person. For the *bertsolari*, improvisation is a way of expressing his or her ideas and feelings; it is a form of cultural expression that goes way back in time and is part of the cultural heritage in which the *bertsolari* has been immersed from childhood. For *bertsolari*s, improvisation is a pre-established framework of entertainment wherein their relationship with themselves and their surroundings can be resolved dialectically.

The [improvised bertso](#)¹ has something magical about it and, although it is in no way magic, this is what the public expects, waiting in expectation for the white rabbit to appear out of the hat, knowing full well that the top hat does not have a false bottom, unless it is the linguistic and dialectic skill of the *bertsolari*. Improvising *bertsos* is neither trickery nor necessarily the fruit of an extraordinary genius.

It may seem paradoxical, but improvisation for the *bertsolari*s is very much a thought-out act. They have continuously lived out and practiced analogous situations to those they may have to face, at any given moment, on the stage of their extemporaneous art. They have learned to work the oral and mental skills of this art according to the rules of improvised *bertsolaritza* (the melody, rhyme, meter, and so on) in such a way that what may seem to the outsider to be restrictions are, in fact, aids that enable them to improvise more freely. They have become used to soaking up everything that may, at some later time, come in handy at the moment of improvisation.

It is a labor of management and logistics. The idea is to keep the store well stocked and

¹ For photographs associated with this article, click on link.

then to put everything in order so that, at the right moment, the most complete and attractive presentation of the product can be given. It is known that pure improvisation does not exist; nobody improvises anything starting from scratch. So where does the beauty of improvised *bertsolaritza* lie? It comes from the fact that it is one of the few cultural expressions wherein the moment of artistic creation and its exposition to the audience are one and the same. The *bertsolari* improvises and, as (s)he does, the audience listens.

When the interspersing of certain English words into everyday conversation became fashionable, the term “performance” caught our attention quite powerfully. We thought at first that this must be something very unusual or innovative . . . until we realized that it was no less and certainly no more than what we, as improvising *bertsolaris*, had been doing for years and years.

Formal Aspects

To construct an improvised *bertso* a number of formal aspects must be considered. A *bertso* consists of sung, rhymed, and measured discourse. Thus, independent of the content of such discourse, the tune, rhyme, and meter are inseparable elements of improvised *bertso* singing. We can say that a person who can sing and construct a *bertso* with the chosen meter and rhyme has the minimum skills required of an improvising *bertsolari*. But this is just the technical aspect of the profession. The true quality of the *bertso* depends on the dialectic, rhetorical, and poetic values of the constructed verse.

The Melodies

Unlike other improvisers (Cubans, Mexicans, Majorcans, Colombians, and so on) the improvising *bertsolari* always performs without musical accompaniment; but the *bertsolari*'s discourse is always sung.

The melodies used are generally traditional airs; the majority are anonymous and have survived through the centuries. Other tunes are modern ones composed by Basque or foreign songwriters whose compositions coincide with the meter normally used for improvisation, or airs composed by musicians at the request of the *bertsolaris* themselves. Thus, there are three sources that the *bertsolari* uses as a supply store of melodies:

- traditional melodies
- modern melodies coincidental in meter
- expressly commissioned melodies

As for the number of existing melodies, we can say that Juanito Dorronsoro, the main researcher on the subject, has managed to collect an impressive total of 2,775 tunes, although the truth is that the actual number of melodies used in public performances is far lower, with *bertsolaris* from each period tending to use the favorite melodies of the time.

In a discourse without any musical accompaniment, the voice of the *bertsolari* is essential

for communicating the content of the discourse. Up until the mid-twentieth century, it was necessary for *bertsolaris* to have both a potent and graceful voice, so that they could be heard in any open-air space. With the advent of the microphone, however, this requisite became a secondary consideration.

Nowadays, more than having a powerful or perfectly modulated voice, *bertsolaris* have to be able to sing in a way that is in harmony with the subject matter of the moment. The success or failure of the communicative act depends greatly on the *bertsolari*'s choice of a suitable melody, more than on the quality of his or her voice.

From among the 2,775 melodies mentioned above, some are more suitable for transmitting the feelings associated with an epic poem; others are more suitable for narration; others are pertinent to drama; and others are more suitable to the purely descriptive. An appropriate choice of melody is an important factor in the success of the *bertsolari*'s art.

Meter

Bertsolaris compose their *bertsos* in accordance with a definite meter or meters. Each verse contains a pre-established number of *puntus* and these, in turn, consist of a particular number of syllables. We are not going to enter into the interesting oral improvisation debate about whether or not *bertsolaris* share the same concept of what is a syllable. As Luis Michelena (1960:64) observed, "leaving aside the oldest singing, with its irregular meter, later verse-making, as in the case of the clerical canto of the Middle Ages, was normally based on the number of syllables and rhymes."

Although there are studies that question the syllabic character of Basque verse, most subscribe to Michelena's thesis, which is confirmed by *bertsolaris* themselves. It is certainly true that the *bertsolari* never spends time counting syllables while improvising. It would be hard work and, moreover, a waste of time. The *bertsolari* knows perfectly well to which meter the chosen melody belongs. If (s)he sings without forcing the melody, it is clear that the artist is complying with the syllabic rules. If, on the other hand, the tune is forced by either cutting it short or prolonging it, it is clear that the singer is not complying with the rules of meter for the verse in question.

The question of meter is one the greatest challenges facing the improviser. Though issues of quality are slightly less important in terms of melody and rhyme, there are no acceptable or allowable variations regarding the meter. It is either correct or incorrect, with no gray area in between. Moreover, it is meter that is the most difficult element facing the *bertsolari* when preparing for a performance. While rhyme, melodies, lexicon, and even the content of distinct subject matters may be stored, ready to be retrieved later at the appropriate moment, the *bertsolari* always has to accommodate the meter. And, although constant use and practice brings self-confidence, the act of improvisation always brings certain metrical slip-ups that mar any composition, no matter how ingenious. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the most commonly used meters in *bertsolaritza*.

(1) *ZORTZIKO HANDIA*

----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A

The *Zortziko Handia* is a composition of four *puntuak*² in which the odd lines have ten syllables and the even ones have eight; it is these even lines, moreover, that have to rhyme with each other. The coincidence in the use of the eighth syllable by improvisers from other cultures is striking. Those from Alpujarra (Granada), like those from the Canary Islands, Cuba, and so on, improvise in *décimas* that, as we know, consist of ten verses of eight syllables each.

(2) *HAMARREKO HANDIA*

The *Hamarreko Handia* have the same structure but with an added *puntu* and, as such, have a fifth couplet, with all the difficulty that this entails. This meter is, perhaps, a paradigm more appropriate for elaborate discourses than the previous one, given the greater space for the text.

-----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A

(3) *ZORTZIKO TXIKIA*

In the *Zortziko Txikia*, the structure of four *puntus* comprising eight lines is kept, as is the rule of rhyming, at the end of the even lines, but the number of syllables in each verse is modified. Given the fewer syllables and the more compact discourse, this type of meter and its corresponding melodies are more given to humorous, purely dialectic situations, rather than epic

² Usually defined, except in the continental Basque Country, as a couplet or pair of lines.

or dramatic discourses; however, this last tendency is by no means an immutable rule.

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----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A

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(4) *HAMARREKO TXIKIA*

This form is identical to the previous meter with the addition of an extra rhyming *puntu*.

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----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A

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Other Paradigms

In addition to the four forms noted above, there are four other paradigms. They are generally shorter or longer than the examples given here but nevertheless coincide in regard to the number of syllables in a *puntu* and the fact that the even-numbered lines rhyme.

Thus we have the *koplak*, originating from medieval romantic ballads and used for centuries for creating popular sung ballads of many kinds. The *koplak* structure is as follows:

KOPLA HANDIA

```

-----10
----- 8 A
----- 10
----- 8 A

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Or alternatively:

KOPLA TXIKIA

-----7
 ----- 6 A
 -----7
 ----- 6 A

These are, then, just half of a *Zortziko Handia* and half of a *Zortziko Txikia*, respectively.

There are also many more recent meters, often created by the *bertsolaris* themselves in a championship; these are generally more complicated. The greater the number of *puntus*, the greater the number of rhyming words, and thus the greater the danger of falling without a safety net. Yet, on the other hand, the greater the success if the *bertso* is truly well performed. And not only that—the longer form is a response to a modern tendency wherein the improviser needs sufficient textual terrain in order to demonstrate his or her originality, the complexity of the argument, the proximity to the proposed theme. Nowadays, with context being less all-important than before, it is to a great extent the text that bears the burden of communicative success. And this is why the trend is toward longer texts.

Here are some examples of recently created meters:

ZAZPI PUNTUKOA

-----10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A

NAUFRAGOARENA

-----10 A
 -----10 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A (repeat)
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A

----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A (repeat)

BEDERATZI PUNTUKOA

- -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - ----- 5 A
 - -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - ----- 5 A

In addition to these, we could cite other paradigms, but those at hand suffice to illustrate some general principles:

- The *puntu* is almost always of the same group (A) and always has consonance. The difficulty lies, therefore, in finding the right number of words that rhyme together, without repetition. If the rhyming word or foot is repeated, it is said that the *bertsolari* has committed *poto*, the technical error most penalized by both the public and the jury.

- The meter may vary but the oral segments must always be similar: ten syllables, or eight or seven, or six or five. This means that the improviser has to fit his or her thoughts into segments of ten syllables, eight, seven, six, and so on, and not into any others, either greater or smaller.

- The greater the number of *puntus*, normally, the longer the text. The desire to take risks in championships has encouraged the proliferation of *bertsolaris* who venture forth with long and difficult *bertsos*. The risk is not always worthwhile. The sails of the text have to be trimmed to the discourse and the discourse to the idea created from the proposed topic. An improviser who has no idea what to sing is always anxious to complete the chosen long paradigm that (s)he has started. Even if they manage, technically, to complete the verse, the equilibrium of the constructed text is far from the ideal and, as a result, the

communicative performance suffers.

The only paradigms in which *bertsolaris* are obliged to combine different kinds of rhymes are those that involve a particular melody. They are, therefore, rare exceptions in improvisation.

In summary, in regard to meter, we can say that approximately 90 percent of the art normally produced in *bertsolaritza* limits itself to those paradigms outlined earlier in this article: the *Zortziko Handia*, *Zortziko Txikia*, *Hamarreko Handia*, and *Hamarreko Txikia*. The *kopla* are usually used for singing informally, as well as in championships and festivals. In reference to the rules for the use of meter, the use of caesura must be highlighted. In the segments of ten syllables, the line has to be constructed, as a rule, in a 5 + 5 syllable combination, and in no other. This involves an additional difficulty: it is not enough simply to fit an idea into a meter of 10/8 syllables—the *bertsolari* must fit it to one of (5 + 5)/8. And, as on many other occasions, for the experienced improviser this limitation provides a kind of advantage. Deep in the artist's mind, (s)he is used to thinking in this meter, and what does not fit with it, apart from being technically damaging, is an obstacle in the thought processes to the extent that a failed caesura can bring the whole structure of the *bertso* tumbling down.

Rhyme

For many, rhyme is the formal essence of a *bertso*. Without rhyme there is no *bertso*. The rhyme, as we have seen, is always of the same family or group and its level of consonance is greatly valued. We can appreciate that, for example, *burua* (head) rhymes with *ordua* (hour or time). But this consonance is relative, limited as it is to the last two syllable-vowels of each word, and is thus regarded as a poor rhyme. *Elizan* (in the church) and *gerizan* (sheltered) make up a better quality of rhyme: both the suffix (-an) and the preceding fricative (z-) rhyme, as does the vowel preceding this fricative (-i-) and even the vowel forming the first syllable in each word (-e-). So, from the classical point of view of distinguishing rich from poor rhymes based on their consonance, we would have to say:

Burua / *ordua* is a poor rhyme;

Elizan / *gerizan*, on the other hand, is a quality rhyme.

Nevertheless, the level or quality of consonance is not the only factor when considering rhyme. Rhyme is perhaps an aspect that goes beyond mere formality for the improviser when (s)he is constructing a *bertso*. It may seem that both meter and rhyme are technical difficulties, formal laws to be abided by that restrict the *bertsolari*, and indeed they are. But this does not mean that the improviser could construct better texts, with improved content, greater reasoning, and so on if (s)he did not have such constraints. Moreover, due to force of habit and mental training, what is a restriction for a non-improviser is an advantage for the improviser. The improviser creates using these rules. And the *bertsolari* feels more comfortable when constructing her or his discourse corseted by the rules of the game than in a vacuum created by a total lack of norms.

So, in one sense, the *bertsolari* never says what (s)he wants to say, but rather what is

permitted by the meter and the rhyming words that (s)he has stored and can, at the opportune moment, retrieve. There are no *bertsolaris* who say exactly what they want to say at the same time as rhyming and using a set meter, although some do come very close to doing so.

From this viewpoint, rhymes are not considered good or bad only in regard to their consonance. Upon commencing the construction of the *bertso*, the improviser tries to choose the most appropriate final rhyming word (*azken puntua*) with which they plan to conclude the discourse. This is because the artist has to find, within that mental store, others of the same rhyming family and have, on the tip of his or her tongue, a sufficient reserve of suitable responses to the theme that has been proposed.

Moreover, the rhymes, apart from being formally “good” or “bad,” are elements that are closely connected with the discourse itself. The *bertsolari* fits the content of what (s)he is going to say around the available rhyming words. Thus, the work of storing, ordering, and retrieving of such elements from the memory is of importance.

Bertsolaris may have a certain number of words from this or that group in their heads. For example, they have 20 terms that end in “-ina.” But if they store them in a disorderly fashion, they cannot use them in the most effective way for one type of discourse or another. For example: *sorgina* (witch), *egina* (done), *ahalegina* (attempt), *grina* (passion), *ezina* (impossibility), *panpina* (doll), *zina* (oath), *osina* (nettle), *kriskitina* (crackle), *okina* (baker), *jakina* (evident), *bina* (two for one), *zezina* (a dried meat), *erregina* (queen), *mina* (pain), *arina* (light), *dotrina* (doctrine), *irina* (flour), *latina* (Latin), and *pinpirina* (coquette).

In principle, there appear to be more than enough rhyming words available for any meter, given that, as we have seen, mostly only four or five rhyming words are used, the use of a form with nine rhyming words being extremely rare. And it is true that, with this number (20) of rhyming suffixes, nearly everything can be said. But the quality of the composition is of course greater when the rhyming words used are appropriate to the theme that is being sung. So, an efficiently ordered group of *puntus* will result in a more exact and effective discourse. The aforementioned *totum revolutus* requires ordering.

All *bertsolaris* carry out this mental ordering in their own personal way, either consciously or unconsciously. Each *bertsolari* has her or his ordered place for each rhyming word, although with time this may change, either because some have been forgotten or because those rhyming words that are most used in one particular period are not used in another. A form of ordering, not the only nor necessarily the best one, may consist of several factors:

- Frequency of use
- Polyvalent nature of certain word-rhymes
- Division into grammatical categories
- Greater or lesser degree of consonance
- Words borrowed from other languages

If we take into account all the aforementioned factors, the mental ordering of the rhyming words in each group may be seen in the form of a daisy in which we store the most commonly used words and those of greatest polyvalence at the central core, and then arrange the rest of the words on different petals according to their semantic or grammatical value, origin, and so on.

An example of mental ordering with the group of words ending in “-ina” could be as follows:

| | |
|-----------|------------|
| 1 | 5 |
| GRINA | ZINA |
| AHALEGINA | OSINA |
| EGINA | ZEZINA |
| EZINA | |
| ATSEGINA | 6 |
| | LIFTINA |
| 2 | PUENTINA |
| PANPINA | PIERZINA |
| ERREGINA | |
| SORGINA | 7 |
| KRABELINA | MINA |
| PINPIRINA | SAMINA |
| | SUMINA |
| 3 | 8 |
| ARINA | KRISKITINA |
| DUINA | IRINA |
| FINA | OKINA |
| 4 | |
| DOTRINA | |
| LATINA | |
| JAKINA | |

In this way, the improviser knows that the most used and polyvalent rhyming words are those in group 1; group 2 has a series of substantives that can easily be associated with adjectives; group 3 contains only adjectives; group 4 has words of the same semantic field; group 5 contains words that share great consonance; and petal 6 contains words borrowed from Spanish or English, and so forth.

What the *bertsolari* does is to alternatively combine words from one petal with those from another. S/he may start by rhyming *mina* from petal 7, then continue with *puentina* from petal 6, then use *jakina* from petal 4 and finally, take up *atsegina* and *egina* from petal 1.

The ordering of the rhyming words offers a methodological and practical advantage. It is methodological because, by combining words from different grammatical categories, the oral structures needed to exhaust them will be different and will give the constructed text more life. This, in turn, ensures variety and avoids monotonous discourse. The method is practical because it makes it easier to avoid repeating a rhyming word. Remember that this is one of the technical faults (*poto*), one that is most harshly penalized by both the audience in general and by the juries, in particular, in contests. *Poto* is simply the repetition of a rhyming word in the same *bertso* (in the same discursive unit). Given that in *bertsolaritza* all the rhymes are of the same family (A),

the skill of the *bertsolari* consists of looking for many words from this group without repeating any of them. *Poto* can occur due to carelessness or to reflexes that are not fast enough to hit upon, in a split-second, the appropriate rhyming word from that mental store that every *bertsolari* carries around with him or her. The ordering explained above minimizes the risk of carelessness and helps those pre-fixed rhymes spring to the surface of the improviser's mind at the appropriate moment.³

Thus melody, meter, and rhyme constitute the formal aspect of the *bertso*. The person who sings, rhymes, and constructs the *puntus* around the chosen meter is constructing a *bertso*. As in football, there is a big difference between being able to kick a ball and being a footballer. In the *bertsolari*'s case, technical skill is no more than this: technical skill. It is the transmitted content that is the primary factor in connecting with the audience. And when this subject matter is being constructed, each *bertsolari* creates a world unto him or herself. It is true that with a larger cultural and linguistic corpus, it should be easier for the artist to find suitable subject matter for the proposed theme. But the analysis of content takes us into a difficult research field. What all *bertsolari*s do have in common is a strategy to get their message across to the public. Our aim, in the following pages, is to explain this strategy.

Principal Strategy in the Construction of the Improvised *Bertso*

The sung *bertso* lasts for approximately 20 seconds (*kopla*) or one minute (*bederatzi puntukoa*), although these times always vary somewhat, depending on the *bertsolari*. Thus, for both the transmitter and the audience, these are small doses of discourse in time. Both parties identify the *bertso* as the unit of discourse. In other words, in each *bertso* of approximately 40 seconds, the transmitter has to be able to create a text that is self-sufficient and that manages to touch the heart and soul of the audience with its grace, depth, brilliant dialectic deduction, and so on.

The main way in which the *bertsolari* carries out his or her art is through the mode of improvised oral confrontation—in other words, a verbal duel with a fellow artist. One defends his or her role or person with his or her own arguments and tries to rebut those of the opponent. In strict turn, they exchange a set of three, four, six, or ten *bertsos* in order to make a more plausible argument than their opponent. Each *bertso*, nevertheless, stands on its own as a complete discursive unit.

When the *bertsolari* sings alone on any given theme, the same sort of thing happens. If the artist sings three *bertsos*, for example, it is important to maintain the common thread of the discourse in such a way that one *bertso* does not contradict the content of the previous one. Even so, it is the individual *bertso* that has to be perceived by both creator and listener as the principal discursive unit.

³ We should point out that if the repeated rhyming word is polysemous and takes on different meanings in each of its uses, it is not considered *poto*.

General Strategy: The Sting in the Tail

The essence of the problem lies in how the artist can manage, in 40 seconds, to attract the attention of the listener and focus it on the *bertso*. To this end, the *bertsolari* has a basic strategy that is used in a systematic way: think up the end first. This may seem a platitude, but it is not. How many times have we witnessed various kinds of discourses that failed to connect with the audience because the transmitted content was not organized in a suitable form? The *bertsolari*, on hearing a proposed theme, turns on his or her mental machinery. This is carried out within parameters that are very close to those of classical rhetoric, as other articles in this collection attempt to show. The *bertsolari*s think about what they are going to say and intuitively plan the order in which they are going to say it, keeping the most potent and elaborate verbal strategy for the end. The artist starts to sing and, as (s)he goes along, tries to express the subject matter in a poetic, dramatic, or epic way, or in whatever form is most appropriate to the situation. All of this is supported by memory to ensure that the oral punch line at the end (thought up at the beginning) has not been forgotten and to ensure that the content is transmitted with the greatest possible impact on the audience.

This fundamental strategy—keeping what was thought up at the beginning for the final discourse—gives the artist two advantages:

- *Methodological*: if the *bertsolari* knows from the start where and how the *bertso* is going to end, the path to be followed to get there is that much clearer.

- *Communicative*: a well-rounded discourse is synonymous with success in any performance. It is better to start lamely and finish off reasonably well than the other way around. Moreover, the audience perceives the *bertso* in an inverse manner to that in which the *bertsolari* conceives it: the artist knows how the *bertso* is going to end but the audience starts to hear it, logically, only from the beginning. They are waiting, expectantly and anxiously, for the end. It is not magic, but they feel as if it were. The coincidence of the attention of the transmitter and the recipient should be avoided. The *bertsolari*'s mind, upon opening his or her mouth, is focused on the final lines of the *bertso* while the audience is concentrating on the first words uttered by the artist. This is why they are so joyfully surprised when the *bertsolari* constructs a text that rises in crescendo to the potent finishing touch—the sharp punch line that the *bertsolari* thought up before uttering a single word.

Methodologically, the *bertsolari*, before starting to sing in those few seconds that elapse between the theme being proposed and the recital of the discourse, thinks out an ideational and verbal plan, chooses a melody, and fits the plan to the chosen meter and melody. Or, alternatively, the artist chooses a melody of a specific paradigm because (s)he has fitted the plan to a concrete number of syllables. This is always the first step. The *bertsolari* has already constructed the plan for the end of the *bertso* and has fitted it around a specific number of syllables.

Practical Example 1:⁴ “*The Dilemma of Designer Drugs*”

Let us take the case of the following topic: “A good friend of yours has offered you some pills that will guarantee you a better performance on many fronts. You are hesitant about taking the” This was proposed to Aitor Mendiluze at a festival in Elgoibar in 1997. His task was to construct three *bertsos* by himself. We will now look at the process of this creation for the first *bertso*.

On hearing the proposed theme, Aitor looked for an argument that reflected his own opinion about designer drugs. The first argument to enter his head was the following: *hobetuko naiz, baina neu izan gabe* (“I would be better, but I would not be me”). He then mentally fit this idea and sentence around a meter of 10/8 syllables.

Hobetuko naiz, baina orduan 10
ni izan gabe, ordea!!! 8 A.
 (I would be better, but I would not be me).

It should be taken into account that, on fitting this argument to this number and arrangement of syllables, Aitor had other possibilities open to him to say the same thing, but in a different way. For example:

Hobetuko naiz baina tamalez 10
neu izateai utzita. 8 A

or

Hobetuko naiz baina orduan 10
ni neroni izan gabe. 8 A

He had many alternatives to choose from linguistically, but Aitor chose what he did for its impact and because he knew that a group of words ending in “-ea” has a sufficient and suitable lexicon to enable the construction of a discourse that will take him and his *bertsos* to the successful conclusion that he had decided upon from the start. If he had had a different idea, he would have had to change the formulation and adopt one of the other alternative *bertso* lines.

So Aitor has found his thesis-argument. He has formulated it around a specific metrical formula and fashioned the phrase in such a way that the final *puntu* gives him room to maneuver with enough rhyming words, and he has chosen the melody that he is going to use on the basis of the meter to which the final *puntu* and the type of subject matter to be transmitted are molded.

Some 15 or 20 seconds have passed since the theme was proposed. The audience waits in anticipation, not knowing what is going on inside Aitor’s head during these seconds. Aitor starts to sing . . . he knows where and how he has to go. He knows that he has to look for rhyming words in his mental store. He knows what path he has to follow until he reaches the final line that

⁴ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

he thought up at the start.

Half a second before starting to sing and in a moment of inspired lucidity, Aitor remembered the word *hobea* (“better”). It will serve him well in keeping up the common thread of the argument in the final sentence. And he starts to sing, “*Ene laguna . . .*” (“My friend . . .”). From this moment on, all his discourse, until reaching the previously worked-out conclusion, will be pure improvisation.

Ene laguna- - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - *-hobea* 8 A
hobetuko naiz baina orduan 10
ni izan gabe ordea!!! 8 A

The part of the discourse that Aitor constructed before starting to sing is more less that which appears in words above. The part constructed as he actually sings is represented by discontinuous lines.

Aitor knows what he is going to sing at the end. But to arrive at that point he has to travel the road and construct the greater part of the discourse in such a way that the final *puntu* makes sense and achieves the maximum effect. He starts to search through his storage-retrieval system or “daisy” of rhyming words and he finds the word *noblea* (“honest”). It works for him. He starts to sing:

Ene laguna uste zintudan,
jatorra eta noblea...
 (My friend, I believed you / to be faithful and honest . . .)

The audience waits in expectation. Aitor has opted to talk directly to this imaginary friend of his, who has suggested taking the tablets. What will he decide to do? In which direction is he going? Aitor knows. The audience does not. At most they can make a guess.

The next rhyming word that Aitor draws from his storehouse is *gordea* (“kept hidden”). It is not bad; it comes in handy for constructing the discourse.

Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea . . .
zuk ere alde ilun, triste bat
nonbait bazendun gordea.

(Apparently you, too, / have a hidden, sad side.)

He has found a way to express in the *bertso* the contradictory situation in which he has been placed, constructing the *bertso* with the chosen meter and rhyme. He has a bosom buddy he thought to be faithful and honest, but this friend has a dark side. And he is telling him just that! The expectation of the audience is growing all the time: yes, he has explained the contradiction to his friend. But what now? What decision will Aitor make?

The next rhyming word retrieved from the store is *dotorea* (“nice”). Given that the word carries with it a great dose of value-judgment, this is exactly what the artist begins to transmit: “*Egin didazun eskeintza ez da uste bezain dotorea*” (“what you’re offering me is not as nice as it might appear”).

*Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea
zuk ere alde ilun, triste bat
nonbait zenukan gordea
egin didazun eskeintza ez da
uste bezain dotorea . . .*

The artist has set out the initial contradiction—he has made a value-judgment. The next stage is to reinforce this by example. And so he trawls until he finds the rhyming word, *umorea* (“mood”) and then *doblea* (“double”). For the logic of his discourse, they suit him very well. He sings, “*Emango dit umorea*” (“It will improve my mood”) and then, “*ta abildade doblea*” (“and double my skills”).

Thus, he manages to arrive at the point he had initially thought up for the conclusion. He is doing fine. Up to now, the content expressed is the following:

I thought you were an honest and faithful friend.
But even you have a hidden, dark side.
Your offer is not as nice as it might appear.
It will put me in a better mood.
And I will increase my skills two-fold . . .

Aitor has constructed a coherent and interesting discourse. Nobody knows how it is going to end up, except Aitor. His memory is honed to retain the idea that he initially thought up. And, despite the fact that much mental energy has been expended during improvisation (recalling and retrieving the best rhyming words, placing them in suitable meter, trying not to commit any linguistic error, and so on), he still remembers the oral segment thought up 40 seconds earlier:

*Hobetuko naiz baina orduan
neu izan gabe, ordea!!!*

He knows that if he can manage to get to this point, success in connecting with the audience with this *bertso* is assured. He also remembers that he has reserved the rhyming word *hobea* (“better”) for hooking onto the final point of the argument. Only the last *puntu* is left to construct. It is this *hobea* that will provide him with the opportunity. He sings:

Hartu ezkerro izan naiteke
Naizena baino hobea . . .
 (Once taken, I would be / better than I am)

The discourse has come to an end. Aitor has told his erstwhile loyal friend that he thought him loyal, but that he has a dark, hidden side. The offer is not as great as it might seem. It will put him in a different state of mind and double his skills, and if he takes the drug he will be better than he really is. What the audience has heard up to now is the following:

Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea
zuk ere alde ilun triste bat
nonbait zeneukan gordea
egin didazun eskeintza ez da
uste bezain dotorea . . .
Emango dit umorea
ta abildade doblea . . .
Hartu ezkerro izan naiteke
naizena baino hobea . . .
 ----- 10 A
 ----- 8 A

The audience knows only that part of the discourse that its creator did not know upon starting to sing is the part of the discourse that the creator had previously anticipated (and that the privileged reader also knows). When Aitor concludes with “*hobetuko naiz, baina orduan ni izan gabe, ordea,*” the act of connecting with the audience reaches its climax.

A Number of Exceptions

Thinking up the end and starting at the beginning is, therefore, the most common formula that the improviser calls upon when faced with the construction of a *bertso*. The improvising *bertsolari* looks for the final argument and, adhering to a plan very close to that of classical rhetoric, continues along the road to the end. But it does not always have to be like that. There are exceptions to this way of doing things and we have defined them as being due to either a) internal conditions, or b) external conditions.

A) Internal Conditions

The first exception to the general strategy refers to the improviser being unable to find any idea or argument in a reasonable period of time. The artist has to improvise alone or in improvised oral confrontation with another *bertsolari* on a theme proposed by the theme-prompter. Seconds pass and the improviser just cannot find a reasonable idea, due to lack of skill, concentration, or whatever. Time is running out, the public is impatient. The *bertsolari* is incapable of finding new ideas or even of repeating old, already used ones. Time ticks on. Although there is no rule about the number of seconds allowed before answering, the improviser knows (s)he has to start. The *bertsolari* does not have an end, but still has to start! This is a case where the usual strategy does not operate. It is a kind of a leap in the dark, starting without having a clear idea where one is going.

This is a situation in which all of us, as improvisers, have found ourselves on more than one occasion. The audience does not know that the improviser has started without a concrete idea about how the *bertso* is going to end and must now construct a sufficiently well composed one to cover up this serious fault. It is very difficult to finish with flying colors under these conditions. Trying to build without a blueprint always is. Here the improvisation is, without a shadow of doubt, “pure.” Not because the improviser preferred this situation, but because (s)he has failed—due perhaps to lack of skill—to think up a final line before starting the *bertso*.

Another exception is when memory fails. The improviser has found the end and has begun to sing in accordance with the rhyme of this final line. The artist knows this and is relatively comfortable. Then, in a split-second, (s)he realizes that (s)he does not remember what had only a few seconds before been constructed for the final line. The *bertsolari* tries to recall it, but it is not that easy when you are concentrating on the construction of a *bertso*. If the forgotten line is not recovered very soon, the artist will be obliged to improvise the end as well, and that would be a shame. The initial seconds creating a good end-argument will be wasted and a last-minute improvisation now will have to be employed, and it will not be at all easy to achieve one of the same quality as the first. This is an example of the failure of the usual strategy.

We have outlined two cases of atypical *bertso* construction. The usual equilibrium between the “thought-up part” and the “improvised part” is in both cases broken for different reasons. But the rupture is always in favor of the “improvised” part. In both cases, due to conditions of an internal nature—pertaining to the *bertsolaris* themselves—there is more improvisation than in the *bertsos* constructed following the usual strategy.

The opposite case can also apply. The *bertsolari* constructs the *bertso* thinking holistically and hardly improvising the delivery at all. This can occur in several situations: greeting ceremonies, presentations, *bertsos* of praise, and so forth. In general terms, we can say it occurs in those cases where there is sufficient time to “think up”

everything.

It could be the case of a young *bertsolari* who, due to a lack of self-confidence, “thinks up” the whole *bertso* before starting to sing. Or even a professional in an event (mass, a meeting, a tribute, and so on) in which there is more than enough time to construct one or more entire *bertsos* before appearing before the public.

Here, the “thought-up part” is infinitely greater than the “improvised part,” and this is how it is perceived by the audience. Logically, the quality of the *bertso* should be that much greater. But, as paradoxical as it may seem, the risks are also that much greater. The *bertsolari* who, instead of improvising a *bertso* as (s)he goes along, constructs it in his or her mind’s eye and then reproduces it in sung form, is taking big risks. During the moment of the performance, the mental effort is limited to remembering what has been thought up and the slightest slip-up may bring the entire *bertso* crashing down. This is because the improviser is not concentrating on resolving the small problems that crop up all the time. As a general rule, and as advice usually given, it is said that the best *bertso* is one that is made up as one goes along, improvising it as it is being sung.

B) External Conditions

One of the most traditional formulations is that of *puntuari erantzun* (“imposed start-up”). It is, from the perspective of the construction of the *bertso*, a form completely different from any other. The public may not perceive it as such, but the improviser does. In this form, the theme-prompter starts a *bertso* and the *bertsolari* has to finish it. So, both the proposed theme and the rhyme to be used are set by someone other than the *bertsolari* and, to make matters worse, the response has to be immediate and pertinent to the theme, both in its form and in its rhyming. The *bertsolari* does not have sufficient time to think about the final *puntu* as well as to start answering the question or suggestion thrown at him or her, as well as to attempt to finish in the most coherent manner possible! In this format, there are no valid strategies. Improvisation here is the purest of any branch of *bertsolaritza*.

Another very common format are the “running rhymes” (*puntuka*), where a *bertso* is constructed between two or more *bertsolari* in such a way that each alternatively sings a *puntu*. Given that the discursive unity is constructed between two or more people and that one never knows what the other is going to say, again there can be no single, valid strategy. It is reflexes and the artist’s capacity for pure improvisation that count here.

Thus, due either to failure at the key moment or because of the demands of a different “format,” we may again find ourselves with *bertsos* not constructed according to the usual strategy. Moreover, to show more clearly what that strategy entails, we have referred only to *bertsos* sung by *bertsolaris* alone. However, in oral performance by *bertsolaris*, as in other analogous phenomena in oral improvisation, it is the improvised oral confrontation that is the most genuine and most frequently performed.

The Soul of *Bertsolaritza*—Improvised Oral Confrontation

In improvised oral confrontations, one *bertsolari* faces another and they weave a performance of a greater or lesser number of *bertsos* between them. It might be that the improvisers have no theme-prompter as such, so the two have to generate the discourse, taking into account the circumstances of the place where they are performing, the day, the audience, the characteristics of each *bertsolari*, and so on. Or it is possible that a theme-prompter imposes a role for each, in which case each will have to find the optimal arguments to defend his or her characterization while at the same time attacking the opponent.

In the improvised oral confrontation format, the aforementioned principal strategy does not vary at all: the improviser thinks up his or her argument, keeps it in mind for the end, and starts singing from the beginning. Thus the construction of the *bertso* is developed in a manner identical to that when the *bertsolari* sings alone.

In improvised oral confrontation, skillful management of the time available for improvisation plays a primary role. When singing solo, the improviser thinks up the conclusion in the smallest number of seconds possible and then starts to sing. Once a *bertso* is sung, (s)he immediately does the same again; in other words, (s)he thinks up the end and starts to sing. And so on, successively. The argumentative thread of the discourse is moreover uniquely that of the solo *bertsolari*, obliging the artist to be that much more coherent in what is going to be sung. Improvised oral confrontation, however, involves two people and, accordingly, both improvisers sing alternatively. We therefore have two variables that up to now have not been considered:

- The arguments of the rival
- The available time for thinking, while the rival sings his/her *bertso*

Thus the improviser has to respond to what the rival has said. This is quite obvious. An improviser who does not respond to a well-constructed argument of a rival is not properly defending his or her role. However, it is not enough just to defend oneself: at the same time, one has to go on the attack. There is a sufficient amount of time to prepare for thinking up the response when it is the rival's turn to sing a *bertso*.

I have used the term “thinking up,” and this is the reality. Wasting precious seconds not thinking at all is not a good strategy, but neither is it a good strategy to devise an argument while listening to and assimilating the rival's *bertso*, and then pertinently respond with what may have been prepared seconds before, regardless of the content of the rival's *bertso*! In many cases, a “halfway” formula is adopted—in other words, responding to the opponent while at the same time adding the argument thought up while the rival sings.

General Strategic Possibilities in Improvised Oral Confrontation

The format for improvised oral confrontation of defending, attacking, devising an argument, and responding to the rival's attack at the same time is not an easy one. One can say that there are three ways of approaching the problem:

- A. Devise an argument while the rival sings and performs, regardless of what (s)he might say;
- B. wait and listen until the whole of the rival's *bertso*-discourse is over and then, in a very short time, respond to it; and
- C. devise an argument while the rival sings, listen to the argument, and opt for mixing what was devised with a response to the rival.

The major drawback of Formula A is that the thread of the improvised oral confrontation may be lost. If one says only what one wants to say, without reference to the rival's line of argument, the discourse can break up. In *bertsolaritza*, improvised oral confrontation is, deep down, an act of cooperation, though it may seem the opposite. It is difficult to perform a great work of oral art if the other *bertsolari* performs badly. This formula has the advantage in that at least each *bertsolari* presents his or her arguments with clarity.

Formula B has the disadvantage of leaving little time to prepare the response. Moreover, when the rival's argument turns out to be weak or faulty and thus not susceptible to an answer, one is obliged to depend on his or her own argument with the added difficulty of having to do so spontaneously. And if one limits oneself just to responding to the rival's *bertso*, he or she does not contribute much original thinking to the improvised oral confrontation. The verbal battle always takes place in the opponent's field.

In any case, one can always fall back on thinking up an argument before hearing out the rival's *bertso* but then discard it completely in order to respond more pertinently to that *bertso*, even though this procedure may mean some loss in terms of quality. One well-known *bertsolari* complained about the way another artist—known for his unusual form of argumentation—performed in improvised oral confrontation. The latter would wander from the point or look for any *sui generis* argument, pertinent or not. The former concluded, "To sing three *bertsos* with him, one has to think of six!" By this, he meant the three thought up while the other *bertsolari* was singing and the other three *bertsos*—the sung ones—improvised while listening to the rival's arguments. However, this is the formula that facilitates a greater level of improvised oral confrontation. When two improvisers become entangled in a dialectic involving a brilliant response to a well-constructed argument, improvised oral confrontation is at its qualitative best.

Formula C is perhaps the most commonly used. The lines are not thought up in anticipation, as such, nor does the *bertsolari* wait until the rival's *bertso* is finished. Instead, both strategies are combined. While the rival sings, some form of argument is thought up and then, depending on what the rival has performed, the reply involves what was previously thought up in combination with some form of mini-response at the beginning of the *bertso*. For the audience at large, C is the formula that is most similar to B, but for the expert or the performer, it is nothing more than a cleverly disguised form of A.

Which formula is best? That is difficult to answer. The purest, without a doubt, is B. But it has a drawback in that rarely do two improvisers get to perform an improvised oral confrontation using this schema (assuming that the performer who starts always does so with the A formula, as (s)he does not initially have to respond to anyone). A schema of the type A-B-B-B-B-B would be ideal, but difficult to respond to with only one *bertso* and this, in turn, is more

difficult to follow with an argued reply.

Although there is no single valid strategy for all occasions, we would venture to recommend one. In an improvised oral confrontation that has to be sung with, for example, four *bertsos* for each performer, it would not be a bad thing if one *bertso* were type A, another C, and a couple were type B. In this way one can be assured that one's own argument will be heard with A; with B one is able to respond to the rival's arguments; and C allows one to do a little of both. However, it could perfectly well be two A's and two B's, or one A and three B's, and so on. As has been stated above, there is of course no one, single strategy.

The most difficult thing about taking part in improvised oral confrontation is the decision regarding the best moment to use A or B. Imagine that a brilliant idea has occurred to us while our rival is singing. But our rival's idea has also been brilliant. This obliges us to respond with another idea and discard the first. A brilliant *bertso* ends up being discarded and it is possible that there will never be another occasion to use it. When we have a brilliant idea and our rival does not oblige us to respond in a different manner, then we may introduce A. But the decision has to be made in a split second. The improviser does not always opt for the best solution.

Dealing with improvised oral confrontation, I have gone into much technical detail. In reality, the improviser does not work along the lines of A, B, or C or with any theoretical "script." (S)he acts according to instinct and to the dialectical skills available and lexicons recallable at the time. Moreover, this species of dissection of the act of improvised oral confrontation applies more to those improvised oral confrontations with a set theme (championships, festivals, and so on) than to those without a proposed topic.

*Practical Example 2:*⁵ "*The Debate about Wind Farms*"

The theme imposed on Lujanbio and Peñagarikano during an improvised oral confrontation was the following: Lujanbio is a hill walker who has traversed the surrounding hills for many years. In the knowledge that a wind farm is to be shortly installed on Mount Elgea, she takes to the hills for one last time before the change. She walks up and starts chatting to Peñagarikano while they are eating their packed lunches—until she realizes that he is no other than the chief engineer of the wind farm project! Lujanbio starts to sing:

*Ez nuen uste, a ze sorpresa
holakoa zinenikan!
diru mordo bat ta proiektu bat
ei dezu zure patrikan;
Bizi guztian mendirik mendi
gabiltzanak hain pozikan,
ez degu ulertzen, ta ez degu nahi
burdinezko zuhaitzikan.*

(I don't believe this is happening! This is too much! / You with a wad of banknotes and a

⁵ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

blueprint / in your pocket; / Those of us who have happily / walked these hills all our
lives / Don't understand and don't want / trees made of iron!)

Lujanbio constructs an A-type *bertso*. She has to, since she has started the improvised oral confrontation and is not replying to anyone. She does so in an evocative manner, pertinently comparing the wind towers to “trees of iron.”

It is Peñagarikano “the engineer’s” turn:

*Aizu neskato, postura hortan
hizketan ez zaitez hasi;
honek pagoa eta haritza
ezin bait ditu berezi.
Eolikoak jarriko dira,
inork ezin galerazi...
edertasunik ez du galduko
ta gauza asko irabazi.*

(Hey, lassie! / Don't give us that patter / (She can't tell / a beech from an oak). / Nobody
is going to stop / the installation of wind farms / Natural beauty won't be lost / and there
is much to be gained).

Peñagarikano opts for a type-C *bertso*. He answers Lujanbio's argument in his first two *puntus* and he does so in a *sui generis* manner: by means of hyperbolic demeaning of this lover of nature (“She can't tell a beech from an oak”). Then he reveals, in the final *puntu* of the *bertso*, what he had thought up while his opponent was singing (“Natural beauty won't be lost / and there is much is to be gained”).

Lujanbio replies with the following:

*Itxuraz gure mendi kaskotan
mila errota egoteak
utziko ditu gutxi batzuren
patrikak ondo beteak.
Gogoan daukat ze amets zitun
La Manchako arloteak . . .
amets gutxi ta interes asko
oraingo Don Quijoteak!!!*

(With our mountains covered / with thousands of towers / The pockets of a few / will be
filled with a lot / It reminds me of many dreams / of that poor Man from La Mancha /
Today's Don Quixotes / have few dreams and many interests.)

Lujanbio again sings a type A *bertso*. With the idea she had in mind, it was not worth considering another type. She knows that her new idea is unsuitable for answering her opponent

point by point. She has the idea of comparing the wind towers and their builders with Don Quixote and his windmills. Antonomasia plays an important role here. When she talks of the poor man of La Mancha, we all know who is being referred to, and we all know the main attribute of Cervantes' character: that of the altruistic dreamer.

The linking of so many ideas is not easy, but Lujanbio does it in a brilliant manner, using contrast at various moments in the *bertso*:

A few (people) / a lot (of money) /
 Don Quixote: many dreams / . . . Today's Quixotes (the engineers):
 many interests / few dreams.

Peñagarikano responds:

*Ekolojista omen zara zu
 eta guztiz nabarmena
 inolaz ere ez duzu onartzen
 eoliko ta antena.
 Ni Quijotekin parekatu nahi
 horrek ematen dit pena . . .
 ni Quijote bat izan ninteke
 baina Panzaik ez duena.*

(It seems you are / quite the ecologist / You won't ever accept
 / wind towers / Your trying to compare me with Don Quixote /
 hurts me somewhat / I could be a Quixote / but without a Panza.)

Peñagarikano makes a type B *bertso*, answering Lujanbio's parting shot with his own final *puntu*. That verbal blow from his opponent was such that he was left with no other choice. And he does so with what is a very common ruse in oral improvised oral confrontation: mixing the character-role with the person of the *bertsolari*.

Peñagarikano is known for his extreme thinness and is stereotyped as such by the public. He uses this reality to the full to turn Lujanbio's argument around; in normal situations this kind of reversal is unbeatable. The engineer represented by Peñagarikano fits perfectly into his own persona. And the polysemy of the word (Don Quixote's servant, on the one hand, but also a term meaning beer-belly) comes in handy to proclaim the integrity of his work. He is not an engineer who has grown fat at the expense of Mother Nature. Lujanbio:

*Don Quijotea zarela esan det
 itxuraz Panzarik gabe,
 Panza beharrik ez daukazu zuk,
 ederki beteta zaude!
 Holako gizon interesdunik
 maiz izan det parez pare*

*dirua atera nahi liokeena,
baita haizeari ere!*

(I said you were Don Quixote / by the look of things without a Panza / Neither do you need one / you're full enough as it is / I've known plenty of cute ones / with interests like yourself / Able to extract money / even from the air itself!)

Lujanbio constructs a Type C *bertso*. She answers her opponent in the first two *puntus*. Then she adds a new idea to show, in a hyperbolic way, the engineer's love of money ("able to extract money, even from the air itself").

A new idea has been introduced and one that is brilliant and difficult to counter. Peñagarikano sings:

*Txakurrarekin ibiltzen zara
sarri hona eta hara
ta txakurrari eman diozu
hemen kristoren pasada;
Ta diozunez hondatu leike
mendi hontako patxada
Aizu! papel hoi jaso lurretik
hain garbizale bazara.*

(With this dog here and there / you're all over the place / And the poor animal / is tired / You say the tranquility of these hills / will be upset / Hey! Pick that litter up from the ground / if you're such a lover of nature).

Peñagarikano's *bertso* is type A. Lujanbio's argument is so difficult to counter that he has had to look for an escape route. He invents the figure of the dog subjected to the whim of his owner, and he invents the litter on the floor in order to test the hill-walker's true love of nature. Lujanbio:

*Bere morala ukitu det ta
harrotu egin da berriz,
proiektuaren defentsan ozen
hitzezin du mila aldiz.
Orain papera jaso dezadan
harrosko egiten dit hitz
asko esan gabe jasoko zuen
bilette bat baldin balitz!*

(I've touched a raw nerve / and he's gone all haughty again / He hasn't stopped talking / in favor of his project / He now haughtily tells me / to pick up that paper / He would have picked it up himself without saying anything to me / if it had been a banknote.)

This is a Type B *bertso*. Lujanbio does not limit herself to answering the new theme introduced by her opponent, but disarms his argument by reaffirming the view she has held from the beginning, that the engineer is tight-fisted. It is a strategy of using the force of the opponent's argument in order to—by a half-turn more of the screw—emerge victorious from the improvised oral confrontation. Peñagarikano sings:

*Zuk diozunez lasaitasuna
laister izango da murriz
ta ez omen da hemen izango
ez pago eta ez haritz;
Ta orain berriz hain lotsagabe
zergatik egin dezu hitz?
berak lurrera ez zun botako
biletea izan balitz!*

(According to you / soon tranquility will be lost / Nothing will be the same / no beech no oak / And now, once again, so brazenly / you go on, Why? / You would never have thrown the paper on the ground / had it been a banknote!)

The last *bertso* of the improvised oral confrontation is also type B. Peñagarikano withstands the onslaught from Lujanbio and sets the improvised oral confrontation in the terrain of the bank note, but only to claim that it was the mountaineer who dropped the paper because, if it had been money, she would never have done so. To reinforce the fact that he has withstood the attack, Peñagarikano uses the same group of *puntus* and some of the rhyming words from Lujanbio's *bertso*. The schema of the improvised oral confrontation, referring to the *bertso* paradigm, is A-C- A- B- C- A- B- B. The skill of both improvisers in their roles is, perhaps, significant. At first sight, Lujanbio plays a more pleasant character, the mountaineer having a thousand reasons to oppose the installation of the wind farm on the mountain. Peñagarikano, the engineer, does not have it so easy; it is difficult, in his situation (on the mountain and eating a snack beside the hill-walker) to find good reasons to justify the project. And the improvised oral confrontation meets the expectations raised. Lujanbio finds brilliant arguments to oppose the wind farm. Peñagarikano finds sufficient excuses to withstand the weight of those arguments.

Not in all improvised oral confrontations is it important to defeat one's opponent on the basis of the quality of one's own arguments. In *bertsolaritza*, there are often improvised oral confrontations of a collaborative kind where the most important thing is to create an attractive and coherent discourse between two *bertsolaris*, without one having to outdo the other.

Improvised Oral Confrontations without an Imposed Theme

In improvised oral confrontations without an imposed theme, the two improvisers mount the stage to weave together a performance on a theme not imposed from the outside. The extempore artists themselves have to “look for” different topics of improvised oral confrontation according to the place, the day, the reason for the event, the characteristics of the audience, and

so on. It is in this modality that the work of cooperation in an improvised oral confrontation can best be appreciated. After stepping down from the stage, one will not hear a *bertsolari* commenting that (s)he has performed well. Whether they sung badly or well, whether they managed to transmit the message or not, everything is done as a team. Either both do well or neither does.

For a good performance it is important for both *bertsolaris* to pre-arrange a route to follow for the next hour that the performance lasts. They talk with each other and decide on a schema. For example: we will start talking about the town, then we can talk about the Saint's day, and then we can introduce the current municipal problems affecting the listeners, and so on. Then, changing the melody, we will go on to the political situation, then have a go at each other, and finally, changing the air again, I will set you up about your approaching wedding day.

This is obviously a schema that can vary from place to place and from *bertsolari* to *bertsolari*. The more experienced the *bertsolari*, with the greater number of engagements and performances, the less time they may have to construct a minimum schema. At times, they may go up on stage without an idea in their head as to how to start. Only their skills and experience give them the wherewithal to be able to make it up as they go along.

Normally the division of functions between *bertsolaris* is primary. One of them will take the responsibility for putting up arguments for the improvised oral confrontation: looking for themes, opening up new ideas, changing the melody. The other tries to follow the "script," sticking to the theme, arguments, and melody, trying to respond accordingly and to the best of his or her ability, always remembering that the most arduous work falls on his or her companion.

Experience plays a key role here. Maybe there are no themes, but there are always motives for singing. It is a question of keeping one's eyes peeled and ears well tuned. Knowing what theme to bring up, when the public is enjoying this or that theme, when a theme has spent itself and when to move on, and when to partner with a companion so that the joint effort will be that much better are all very important, far more than merely knowing how to construct a *bertso*.

In collaborative improvised oral confrontations, the discursive value of each *bertso* loses importance. It is the overall performance itself, in its totality, that is important. That is why it is possible for a *bertsolari* to "sacrifice" the quality of a *bertso* in order to keep focused on the near future, in order to achieve the best end result.

References

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