Building an open oral archive: the case of the *Grammo-foni* (Gra.fo) project

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* Grammo-foni. Le soffitte della voce*  
SNS - UNISI  
PAR FAS Regione Toscana Linea di Azione 1.1.a.3. 2011-2013
OUTLINE OF THE TALK

- What is Gra.fo
- Development of Research Agenda (together with AISO – Italian Association of Oral History)
GRA.FO IN NUMBERS

• 2,800 hours of digitized recordings
• 30 oral archives
• 639 open reel tapes
• 1332 compact cassettes
• 950 interviewees
• 143 interviewers
• 11 people involved as staff

€ 317,400 (Regional funding: € 250,400)

At present: one fixed-term position (UNISI funding)
WHY GRA.FO/ 1

The Gra.fo project was born with the aim of:

- Discovering the Tuscan oral archives collected by scholars and private/public collectors;
- Preserving oral materials (and accompanying materials) which would otherwise face deterioration and oblivion;
- Cataloguing and partially transcribing oral materials
- Making digitized audio materials accessible (not only to scientific community)
STEPS

1. CENSUS
2. PRESERVATION
3. ANALYSIS
4. SHARING
STEP 1: CENSUS

Survey of Tuscan oral archives concerning oral history, anthropology, linguistics, ethnography, sociology, folklore studies, etc.

Where are the sound archives of Tuscany stored?
How are they preserved?

Who are their owners?
What kind of accessibility do they have?
STEP 1 phases

- Priority list, according to
  - relevance and age of the materials
  - geographic representativeness
  - state of preservation of the materials

- Contact with sound archives’ owners

- Legal agreements with the owners

- ‘Tell something about your archive’ interview, providing a key for interpreting and cataloguing the archive.
A) Inchiesta svolta da Francesca Baldacci
B) Firma: Francesca Baldacci
C) Data: 14.02.1973
D) Da: Montale
E) Pubblica la copia a Montale e nello stesso ufficio del magistrato e stato di Montale e stato pubblicato il n. 1973 del 14.02.1973
F) La copia e il nastro sono stati inviati alla direzione del Centro
H) è stata trasmessa al revisore il
STEP 2: PRESERVATION

Collection and preservation (i.e., digitisation, restoration) of magnetic and optical audio materials

- Pre-transfer process:
  - Description and photos of physical objects (original carriers)
  - Description of associated materials

- Signal transfer process (A/D conversion 96 KHz - 24 bit)

- Restoring (if necessary)

- Creation of the preservation copy by using AudioGRAFO PreservationPanel (open-source software system)
STEP 3: ANALYSIS
Description of oral documents (cataloguing, transcription)

- AudioGRAFO CataloguingPanel (open-source software system)

- Info about:
  - archive (description, owner, location, etc.)
  - single oral document (abstract, typology, topics, genre, language variety, etc.)
    - interviewee and interviewer
    - related documents (scientific papers, books, accompanying materials, etc.)
STEP 3: ANALYSIS (metadata)

**Typology**
- Controlled (e.g. interviews) / Not controlled (e.g. hidden recording);
- Sung (e.g. lullabies, ottava rima) / Not sung (e.g. interviews, riddles);
- Formalised (e.g. lullabies, riddles) / Not formalised (e.g. interviews) or improvised (e.g. ottava rima).

**Genre**
- About 40 different genres, such as:
  - Answer to linguistic questionnaire
  - Interview
  - Legend
  - Lullaby
  - Narrative song
  - Poem
  - Proverb
  - Read speech
  - Riddle
  - Spontaneous speech
  - Tale
  - ...

**Topic**
- About 130 different topics, such as:
  - Agriculture
  - Biographies
  - Cinema
  - Emigration
  - Environment
  - Fascism
  - Folk traditions
  - Politics
  - Racism
  - Religion
  - Traditional food
  - 1st World War
  - 2nd World War
  - ...

**Language variety**
- About 30 different varieties:
  - Urban varieties (of Arezzo, Florence, Grosseto, Leghorn, Lucca, Massa, Pisa, Pistoia, Prato, Siena);
  - Areas of influence or transition.
STEP 3: ANALYSIS & CATALOGUING

Orthographic transcription  (Giannelli, Di Piazza 1995)
- Balance between fidelity to speech and comprehensibility
- Consistency

IPA Phonetic transcription
DOCUMENTAL UNIT

AUDIO from preservation copy

METADATA + (TRANSCRIPTION) + (ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS)
The documental unit /1

- In order to preserve the authenticity and reliability of the new digital objects, some key issues need to be taken into account:

  i) audio documents preserved in oral archives should be considered as ‘texts’, deserving the same philological attention as written texts

  ii) audio documents may be ‘contextless’, which means that a great deal of effort must be devoted to reconstructing the scenario in which they were recorded.
The documental unit /2

- In the digital domain, different analogue objects (e.g. sides $a$ and $b$ of a compact cassette, or different open-reel tapes) can be joined together, provided they refer to the same communicative event.

- Crucially, the digital domain overcomes the technical limitations of earlier recording devices, but in doing so it makes the identification of the ‘documental unit’ problematic.
The editing of digital audio documents in domains other than art music is a relatively new enterprise, with no strong background of knowledge and experience. One of the most qualified guides* concerning the edition of oral archives states: “Quant à la définition de l’unité documentaire à traiter, c’est au collecteur de l’établir […] Dans le cas d’une enquête ou d’un collectage, l’unité est en fait culturelle” [p. 15].

But precisely the definition of the documental unit may be problematic, as the Gra.fo experience has proved.

The documental unit /4

- Each documental unit is defined according to the following categorization:

  1. *Specific genres* (e.g. oral biographies, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, lullabies, etc.) → the documental unit is the single object elicited by the researcher (i.e. the single life story, the single song, the single proverb, etc.).

  1bis. *Interview with questionnaire* → the unit consists of all the answers given by the same person(s) to the questionnaire in a unitary communicative context.

  2. *Observed event* (e.g. meeting, ‘veglia’) → the documental unit is the recording of the complete event observed.

  3. *Other situational recording*, where the researcher is a mere witness and has no influence on what happens (e.g. public performances, or documents collected with hidden recording modality) → the documental unit is the single event’s recording.
STEP 4: SHARING

creation of an on-line archive on a web portal
http://grafo.sns.it
STEP 4: SHARING

Two browsing procedures:

- geographic search
- content search
Browsing examples

L'esperienza di don G.G. a Suvereto

Gennaio 1987

Il riassunto si riferisce...
LEGAL ASPECTS – ITALIAN LAWS

- According to Italian law, “With regard to the processing of oral sources [of information], all interviewees must provide their express consent, whether orally or not, even based on summary information including at least the interviewer's identity and activity and the purpose(s) of the data collection”. [Code of conduct and professional practice Regarding the processing of personal data For historical purposes, 2001]

- However, most of the documents contained in Gra.Fo were collected before the application of the Code for Personal Data Protection (1996, 2003).
In order to overcome legal problems, 3 levels of accessibility have been implemented:

- **full online access** (no personal data)
- **partial online access** (identifying information deleted)
- **no access** (more than 90% personal data)
TOWARDS THE FUTURE

- The future of Gra.fo
  - Beyond Tuscany (e.g. CDI Italia)
  - The link with textual linguistic sources (e.g. ALT oral archive + ALT-web)

- The VIVAVOCE project (under evaluation)
  Italian Linguists and Oral historians
VIVAVOCE PROJECT

UNISI (as PI), UNITR, UNIVE, SNS + Italian Association of Oral History (AISO)

- PRESERVATION, DISSEMINATION, REUSE of research data related to ORAL ARCHIVES
- While other countries have tried for a long time to assure that such important source of knowledge would be preserved and used, Italy is addressing the problem with a serious delay and must fill the gap immediately.
TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT

Computers:
- Apple Mac Pro 2.8 GHz Quad-Core Intel Xeon
- Apple Mac Book Pro 2.4 GHz Intel Core i5

A/D D/A converters:
- PrismSound ORPHEUS
- APOGEE duet

Magnetophone:
- Revox b77 MK II
- Otari MX5050

Compact Cassette:
- TEAC W-890R
- TASCAM 202 MK V

DAT:
- Sony ZA5ES

Mixer:
- YAMAHA MG 166cx

Audio Monitor:
- Neumann KH 120 A

Incubator:
- Memmert INP400

Camera:
- Canon G15
GRA.FO GROUP

Pier Marco Bertinetto – project coordinator, SNS unit
Silvia Calamai – project coordinator, UniSi unit

Chiara Bertini – technical coordinator
Cristina Bertoncin – cataloguing - transcription
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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY