



Interlingvistikaj Kajeroj

Interview | Intervista | Intervjuo

8 febbraio 2011

Written in the wind

Francesca Phillips & *el Silbo* of La Gomera

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1 Introduction

A few months ago, I had two great chances on a single day: I found out and learned about Silbo, a whistled language 'spoken' in a Canary Island, and met Francesca Phillips, film maker and photographer, who's recently written and directed a documentary about it. This article will try to recreate that day - on a small scale and unfortunately silently. In the following pages you will find a report of the event, as well as an interview with the director.

2 The Film

*Written in the wind*¹

There we are in *La Gomera*, a tiny Canary Island. So small a place and yet so powerful: craggy mountains and ravines on the land, covered with ancient rain forests (the very last at this latitude!), thick fog dancing around the highest peaks, opposite the Ocean. Everywhere you hear the sound of Nature: waves, seagulls, the wind blowing through the valleys... Among these sounds, we start hearing the whistling of men: it's Silbo, and the men are talking, from hill to hill.

Right from the first minutes of the video, Francesca has taken us in the midst of the wilderness of this island, already captivated by that special charm ancient legends have. The documentary goes on: people from the Island are interviewed, both the old and the young, the shepherd, the music teacher, the school teacher of Silbo. There are also scenes where we're shown how people now use Silbo: two teenagers arranging a date and two kids meeting up to go to school, a *Silbo* class there, men working in the fields. And possibly the most fascinating of all, the old Death Whistle when at twilight, from hill to other hill, the villages would pass the word on and the community would think and remember their dead.

At the end of the video, we've collected a lot of information about Silbo, some technical details about the language, its historical and today's use, but most of all, we've got to know something about the spirit of the people from la Gomera.

3 The Interview

A Milanese miniature Tour

On 26th and 27th October, *Written in the Wind* was presented at two very different venues: the State University of Milan and *Mc2* contemporary art gallery in the traditionally young and arty district of Milan, the *Navigli*...

How come? The idea, like most, came unexpected when Claudio Composti – gallerist – was first shown the video. After that, Claudio and Massimo Rizzardini, lecturer at the University of Milan, set to organising the two dates as hybrid events: projection of the documentary followed by a panel and debate, open to the public. This was set according to a concept of dialogue between the arts and humanities that's guided some of this gallery work and its collaborations with academics like Rizzardini in the past.

The panellists on the first day were Davide Bigalli, History of Philosophy Professor at the University of Milan and Gabriele Iannaccaro, Linguistics Professor at *Bicocca* University of Milan.

On the second, Federico Gobbo, linguist, Esperantist, I.T. expert and lecturer at the University of Insubria, and Francesca Gualandri, musicologist.

But of course, guest of honour was the director of the video, **Francesca Phillips**. This interview is a result of our conversations, on that day and afterwards.

- *Let's start from the subject of your film, which is really today's topic. Here in Italy, a language like Silbo isn't commonly known about. Many who saw your*

¹For a trailer of the film <http://www.francescaphillips.com/written-in-the-wind-video.php>

documentary were wondering how you decided to make a film about it. Have languages always held your interest? Did you work on languages before?

Well, not so much in the past. I've become interested in languages in the past year, especially in how language and culture are tied together. The history and the identity of a people can be entangled with their language like in the case of *Silbo*. In the case of Pirahã, which is spoken by around 300 people in Amazonia, there are fascinating implications on culture and grammar. Pirahã is raising debate among scholars on whether it is subject to a phenomenon known as recursion, notably Daniel Everett arguing against and Noam Chomsky in favour of this hypothesis. Or languages may embody an ideal, like in the case of Esperanto one that's largely utopian, and *Silbo*, too, at this stage of its history.

However, like many projects the idea of making this film came about over lunch with a friend. *Silbo* had recently had some news coverage in England and elsewhere as the Gomerans were at that time waiting to hear if their proposal to have *Silbo* accepted as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by Unesco was to be successful.

Silbo: Getting technical

- ***I would like to move on to the language itself and its characteristics. Let's start from scratch: what do we mean when we say 'whistled languages'?***

Before I start, let me say I am not of course a linguist, neither a specialist on the characteristics of whistling. I'll try to explain a little of what I've learnt in La Gomera, in the making of the film.

So, whistled languages are languages that can, in addition to being spoken and written, also be whistled. In other words, rather than substitute languages they are adjuncts, an extra means of communication. Anything that can be said can be whistled in any language, once the technique is mastered. In fact when we were in La Gomera some people who knew English started whistling it!

- ***That's amazing! How can a whistle carry so much information?***

Well, it's not just *a* whistle! Whistled languages have technical differences according to whether they are based on tonal or non-tonal languages. But in the case of non-tonal languages, like Gomeran Spanish, vowels and consonants are represented by relative pitch ranges and continuous or interrupted sounds. Whistlers can convey virtually any message. Of course, there are 'side effects'. Firstly, range: the number of sounds that can be produced may vary according to a whistler's skill, but after many years of discussions and research among linguists now it's generally accepted that *Silbo* has four vowels and four consonants. Secondly, distance: the whistle can be heard clearly at least two kilometres away, some argue as far as ten under the right conditions. These two factors cause some simplification. Different words end up sounding very similar, like *nada* (nothing) and *lana* (wool) or *ballena* (whale) and *gallina* (chicken). The context in which whistled languages are spoken becomes then crucial to understanding. If we are up in the mountains, the most common landscape in La Gomera, I am obviously not going to whistle: *it's time to go and feed the whale*. So the context we are speaking in tells us what we mean.

- ***Very similarly to what happens when shouting...or in the tube at rush hour! I'm***

starting to understand the way whistle works. But let's go back a little. You mentioned the possibility of whistle to adapt to any language. How many whistled language exist, and where?

Oh, there are a surprisingly large number! Around 70 in fact, throughout the world. There is Antia, on the island of Evia in Greece; Kuskoy in Turkey; the language of Yupik in Alaska, discovered only in 2005; Sirion in Bolivia, Mura Pirahã in Brazil, several languages in Mexico; Chin, Chepang and Akha in Burma, Nepal and Thailand respectively. French is whistled in some areas of Western Africa and by small groups in North Africa. The whistle of the village of Aas, in the Franch Pyrénées, was lost when the last whistler died 11 years ago. These among many others. But only 12 of these have been described and studied, and only *El Silbo* is, for the moment, upheld and protected.

- *And why do such whistle languages develop?*

The reasons for their development are the most varied. Sometimes they show that influence of culture on language we mentioned earlier. For example, in many societies whistling is traditionally reserved for men only. Whereas Kikapoo Indian tribe in Mexico use it primarily for courtship! Kikapoo's is an interesting case: the language developed originally as a way for young men and women to communicate without their parents understanding, but has now become a ritual to get together and whistle to each other messages. Breaking the whole secrecy altogether!

For some groups whistling is one of several different means of communication - like humming, yelling, singing - each one having its own unique cultural function. This happens among the Amazonian tribe Pirahã. But the most common explanation is possibly that of geographical conditions, which forced people to communicate over long distances.

- *Let's focus on Silbo, shall we? and here, too, let's start from the beginning. How much do we know about the origin of Silbo?*

Unfortunately, very little. The origins of the population itself remain unclear: they're collectively known as Guanches, and they might have been descendants of North African Berber tribes. Anyway, the invading Spanish in the 15th century found a stone age culture living on livestock, grain and fruit gathering... and whistling! *Silbo* was found on Gran Canaria, Tenerife, El Hierro and La Gomera, but it survived only on La Gomera, where it was adapted to Spanish. Why, it is also not known, but some suggest that practical explanation I was mentioning before: the rugged topography of the island and the isolation of its inhabitants probably created a need for it.

- *And what happened in more recent times? I'm thinking of the 20th century and its technological revolutions...*

Yes, you'd think such technology must have frustrated all use for *Silbo*. And indeed telephones have partly reduced the need for it. But it was mainly cultural implications that caused people to drop it off. It was thought the language of peasants, so well-off or 'modern' families wouldn't allow their children to whistle. By the 1960s *Silbo* had begun to die out.

- ***But in 1999, the death of the last whistler in Aas motivated Gomerans to do something about it.***

That's right. At that time only the old would whistle, so the government created a law that all school children between 6 and 14 must have at least a 20 minute whistling class every week. Now it's firmly built into the school curriculum, the old and the young whistle. The consequence of those years when it was abandoned reflect in a generation gap: in the film a school girl tells us about how her father is asking her to teach him how to whistle... that is not at all uncommon! What's more beautiful is how what once was shame has now turned to pride.

- ***In your film we can see some whistling classes... there seem to be different approaches.***

You see, one of the aspects that makes *Silbo* unique is that it's the only whistled language to have its own phonetic transcription. This enables the technique to be taught in two different ways. On the island there are two main teachers of *Silbo* and they are well representative of the two didactic options. One is by imitation only, and that is the case of the first teacher we see on the film. He simply demonstrates how the finger must be placed in the mouth, resting it against a curled back tongue. His pupils copy him and learn in a very natural manner. The other teacher in La Gomera makes use of the phonetic transcription, teaching the sounds that constitute vowels and consonants in a blackboard style environment, written and described just as any other ordinary school subject. It's still early to say which one is the best method.

- ***Yes, it's only been 11 years and probably research must be done in the methodology of teaching whistle. Although as a student of foreign languages myself, I dare saying that a mix of the two methods may prove the best solution.***

We'll see. But you're not wrong in driving a comparison between learning *Silbo* and learning a second language. A psychology professor at the University of La Laguna in Tenerife has published a paper showing that *Silbo* is processed by the brain in a way that is similar to its understanding of a spoken language.

- ***Has there been more research?***

I know about research in the field of linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive science. And the Alaska Whale Foundation have been researching for several years the correlation between *Silbo* and the whistle communication system of bottlenose dolphins.

- ***After showing the film, both days, you could sense a question hovering over the audience, that is how is a language like Silbo useful?***

There are more levels of this answer. Historically, we can say it was born out of need: the distances, the relative isolation, shepherding and the work in the fields. But even at the time the use of the whistled language transcended simple survival. It was used to spread all kind of information around the island, vital things like the approaching of ships, or simply 'the news'. In this sense *Silbo* created an extraordinary bond among inhabitants and a strong sense of the community. Perhaps an example will help clarifying this point. One of the old traditions is that of Death Whistle. Each group used to have a speaker, somebody who lived high enough to

be heard by everyone in the village and further away . They were called 'links', laes, and they linked one community to the other through whistling. At the end of the day, when people had finished work and were going back home, the links would start whistling. And if someone had died that day, they'd whistle their name. So from hill to hill, the whole island would know and remember the person. At present, I think it's still useful, both practically and culturally. In Canary islands, people on occasion find themselves without sufficient network coverage and the ability to whistle can save a life. Only last year a hiker up in the mountains of La Gomera fell and broke his leg. His friend whistled down into the ravine that they urgently needed a doctor and a couple of hours later one indeed arrived from a distant village. In day to day life, there might not be a desperate need for it, but people who can whistle will find a use for it at all times. For example, one day in La Gomera we were having a meeting at the school. Suddenly through the window we heard a whistle: a friend had seen the people inside, he was saying hello and talking of having dinner later. In my film I've tried to include sequences to show easy, day to day use of *Silbo* like this one. But whistling is also fun and more importantly, in a more and more homogenised world, it creates a strong sense of identity and community for the younger generation.

- ***It would seem that this very generation is going to play a crucial role...***

Well, of course. The hope in La Gomera is that ex-students of *Silbo* can be encouraged to turn to it as a career in teaching and there is talk of a school being set up specifically to train them for this purpose. The two main teachers on the Island are well into retirement age and unless the younger generation are persuaded, the language may find itself back to where it was.

- ***I'd like to ask you a couple of questions on the film itself. Your career's been that of a photographer and a film maker; also recent work shows alternation between the two, for example the one on the Trappists. But which one is your favourite and why do you choose one or the other?***

It's true, I've worked with both. Although my first choice was actually film; then for a number of reasons I started working as a stage photographer in theatre, taking photographs of stage productions. What I liked most about it were the lights, you can get fantastic light effects in theatre photography. In this sense my work on the life in a monastery is very theatrical. At the moment, I can't say I prefer either technique: they're different and they convey different effects, so the choice goes down to the subject. Depending on what I'm working on and what I want to say, I'll choose the method. For example, I'm currently working on a project on a man and his life. Such a subject could be extremely boring, whereas through film you can show you can show details like the movement of his hands, the flow of things, which in turn gives the idea of a life experience.

- ***I'd love to know more about the making of the film. How did the shooting start? I was impressed by the style of the documentary: though it's based on interviews, it conveys much more than wordy information. How did you do that? And, finally, what was the most difficult aspect of filming, and the most rewarding?***

As I said before, I thought about doing a documentary on *Silbo* by chance, over lunch after it had some news coverage. To begin with I'd thought of focussing the

film on the teaching methods of Silbo, then on hearing the tale of the Death Whistle, I made my decision. It's rather difficult to explain what drove me towards the subject. It was a matter of instinct and fascination.

I don't think that the style, as you called it, is such an original feature in my film, in fact it's quite common to film that way, combining interviews with re-enactment with landscape and so on. Though I have to admit I had a dilemma when it came to the interviews: I believe the audience needs to see the face of the people talking, but I didn't want to simply film talking heads. More generally, you have to find a balance between the visual and the information, which means that continuous picture can't keep running naturally, you have to choose where, when and how to put a picture in a frame. It's part of making a film.

As for the most difficult thing, well, certainly the language: the whole translating from whistle to Spanish, to English. The filming itself is a quite difficult and tiring process: because of all the equipment you need to take with you and because of the effort to put into team work. Being the director you may have a strong idea of what you want the scene to be like but you have to make sure that everybody sees what you are seeing and understands what you are thinking on a particular scene: which in our case, with all the translations, made me really nervous! Going back to the previous questions, photography is in comparison a much freer experience. The most rewarding moment of making a film is a feeling of things coming together. The different people on your team and sometimes sheer luck, something you hadn't planned for, are making conditions perfect and the result is exactly what you wanted. In the film there's a moment where the sun comes through the clouds: that's an example of pure luck.

- *This language is at once public and very, very private. In fact, it's very much a part of the community, a native communication code. Have you ever felt Gomeran people unwilling, if not opposed, to be filmed by your camera as if they were revealing a secret?*

Well, my husband is from the Canary Islands and this has helped immensely. You see, although Canary Islands are a part of Spain, they have been influenced mostly by South American and partly by North African culture. Also the local Spanish is really quite different from Spanish. So my husband made a difference not only as an interpreter, but also and especially in the way we were welcomed. We were not outsiders, so to say. My film is not the first one ever made on Silbo. Most travel programmes usually include a brief account of Silbo, as a local curiosity there's also a very technical French documentary about Silbo. But with us Gomeran people were so friendly and welcoming and they were so relaxed in front of the camera; some confessed things that are very personal and similarly the atmosphere was intimate. I don't think we would have never got anything like this without being 'part of the family'.

- *What about now? What's your relationship like? Have you been back to visit?*

Yes, of course. We went back shortly after completing the documentary to give the participants a copy of the film and we've been there other times, too. In fact, we're probably going to go at the end of November as well. Some of them are just great friends of ours, you know. Most of the people have been and are always very friendly with us, especially the Canarian older generation, they would never let you go home without some gifts, or some produce of their land.

- *How did Gomeran people welcome your film? On a wider scale, has it reflected on tourism, research programs? Has it influenced the scientific community and institutions?*

Gomerans, I believe, were quite happy with the result. As for the tourism, I don't think a documentary like mine would make a difference in that industry. It helps raising awareness of Silbo, therefore may raise an interest and then research, although I don't know about any in direct connection with my documentary.

- *Your opinion about our Milanese Tour. How was presenting the video in Italy?*

I loved it! The contrast between the two locations was great, one more academic, the other more relaxed but both were a wonderful experience: academics of different fields and creative getting together and discussing work from they're different perspectives. It was vibrant and stimulating, that's how it used to be.

- *Some of us were wondering why your documentary has not been distributed in Italy? Are there commercial reasons or otherwise?*

Honestly, I don't know. It's a pity, because so much has happened in Italy, from the very first time I presented a clip at a pitch forum, when I was still looking for funding, to the presentation in Milan last October. Anyway, the distributions is out of my hands, the property of the film is entirely of Al Jazeera and they are the ones to refer to for these matters.

- *Your documentary shows us a language as well as the history, present life and the whole of folk tradition of a community. In today's global village, do you think we'll witness more re-discoveries of this kind?*

Yes, of course. There is a surprisingly large number of languages around the world and we will certainly see other discoveries. But the global village is also the biggest threat to local languages: it is said that a language dies every two weeks.

- *Documentary like yours seem then invaluable in the discovery and protection of socio-linguistic communities, don't you think? Not only for anyone who may watch it, people like me, who will learn about another culture, but also and possibly more for the communities themselves...*

Definitely. Awareness is the first step to interest. Besides, visually showing something makes people relate to the subject much more than a talk, therefore video documentaries can help a lot.

It is also true that to save a language the community itself must be aware of what precious heritage their language is and make an effort to revitalise it. For example, in La Gomera people realised this in 1999, following the news of the death of the whistled language of As in France. That was their catalyst. After that, the people and the authorities started being concerned, the government was eventually convinced and *Silbo* was introduced as a school subject.

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