

Differences In Legends And Gossip

By Bob Cairns

If a juicy tidbit passed by several gossips can be distorted beyond recognition, why is it that legends, handed down over the ages, stand the test of time?

"Legends and gossip are passed along in very different ways. That's why there's such a contrast of their credibility," said Dr. James W. Kalat, an associate professor of psychology at N. C. State University.

Kalat has recently completed research which supports his premise concerning gossip and legend.

"Gossip is just one person's hearsay account of something passed along to another. A legend is a structured story told by a number of tellers," Kalat said.

When hearing a legend from a variety of sources, the listener naturally picks and chooses the material, he said.

"He tends to select the parts of the tale that make the most sense," Kalat said. "Because of this sensible selection, as the legend is passed along it becomes more regular and eventually is a simple story that can be passed without further distortion."

According to Kalat, gossip makes the rounds in an entirely different way.

"One person hears a story, passes it along to the next, who in turn tells it to another person," he said. "The story goes one-to-one-to-one, so there's no stabilizing effect brought on by the other renditions like that found in the passing of a legend."

If a change in the story is made by the second teller, then that addition can become a permanent part of the story.

Kalat set up a story chain which simulated the gossip and legend passing processes to test the two methods of tale telling. More than 150 NCSU students participated in the project.

To simulate legends Kalat chose three written stories of different levels of complexity and length.

"Each student listened to a story told by three different people who had just had the tale told to them," he said.

For instance, the 11th, 10th, and ninth persons in the chain of story tellers passed the tale to the 12th person.

After listening, the person tended to repeat a version of the story which sounded like a sensible combination of the three.

"Like legend, as the story was repeated it became simpler and sometimes shorter," Kalat said.

The psychologist's simulation of gossip worked quite differently.

"In this case the 11th person to listen to a rumor or piece of gossip would hear the story told three times, but it was always told by the 10th person in the sequence," he said.

This one storyteller was the listener's only source.

Mistakes made by a previous teller in the chain (18 tellers in all) were deleted only by chance so the story became distorted quite early, he said.

"Distorted additions snowballed, and like gossip the story became less accurate as it was passed along," Kalat said. "It took about five or 10 people before the story was distorted almost beyond recognition. Even by the third telling there were gross distortions."

We can be sure that any rumor or gossip we hear has an excellent chance of being untrue, he said.

The fact that the passing of legend has a certain built-in sensibility makes an interesting statement about some of the world's oldest stories.

According to Kalat, legends from Ancient times, including much Biblical material, was passed by word of mouth for centuries before anyone wrote it down.

"Some people have assumed that people in ancient times must have had better memories than we do today, but we don't need that assumption," he said. "As long as we hear something from several sources before repeating it, we can pass on information with only a moderate amount of distortion."

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