

**THE KERNEL STORY:
A NEW CONVERSATIONAL GENRE?**

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In a recent study of storytelling in women's rap groups, Susan Kalcik isolates a type of narrative which she calls the **kernel story**. Kalcik defines the kernel story as one in which the narrator tells the most important part of the story, namely its kernel, first instead of leading up to it (1975). In this paper I shall present a personal experience story which seems to fit this definition. Particular attention will be paid to the kernel of this story, its role in forming an aesthetically pleasing narrative, and its function in a conversational context. On the basis of these observations I shall briefly discuss the validity of calling the kernel story a separate genre.

The narrative in question was performed during an informal gathering of graduate students at the home of a faculty member in March 1983. We spent almost an hour chatting as we waited for everyone to arrive before dinner was served. I had brought my tape recorder in hopes of recording a riddling session. My attempts to induce riddling from the group were only partially successful, but I was able to record a lengthy period of general conversation enriched with narrative performances. The following story was told by the senior faculty member who was our hostess.

"I THOUGHT I WAS DRUNK, 'CAUSE I GOT THE MEASLES."

(What was your first teaching experience?)

Mine?

(Yeah. Nothing extraordinary happened?)

5 (They all came to class every day, //showed up for the exams on time...)

My knees were...shaking. (Laughter) I couldn't stand properly. And you won't believe that I thought I was drunk, 'cause I got the measles.

(Laughter)

10 (Measles?)

(Oh, no//)

(//Your first teaching?)

Yeah, my first teaching experience, we celebrated,
down town. We had a, college, I was working in a
15 library. And I was uh, invited as instructor. My
first seminar, instructor. And, we celebrated round
town. One colleague of mine, with a big bottle of,
wine, and we drank. And I, afterwards I had a class
at three o'clock. It was already, from twelve to one
20 I was at the party, partying, and drinking, and I
thought that I got drunk.

And I was shaking, and I was hot, and I said "My
God what has happened to you. (Laughter) Are you
drunk or what." I was absolutely, well, desperate.
25 And I heard my voice in the corner of the room, you
know how it feels like. I was really dizzy. And
it didn't go away. And I was talking, and I was
hot and cold. I didn't know what happened to me.

When I got home - they didn't notice, I think they
30 might have noticed something, but they didn't know
I was drunk. When I got home and I told my brother,
"My God I'm scared (...) Really had a lot of, drinks
and simply I don't sober up I still feel, and I'm
shivering and I'm cold and hot, and, it's, really
35 terrible but nobody noticed anything." So he looked
at me - he's a doctor - and...took my hand, and he
said, "My God you're hot." And I had quite a horrible
(...) awful feeling. And I got the measles.

(Loud laughter)

40 (At least you're immune.)

(Well at least you don't have to prove (that you
are immune.)

In calling this story a conversational form
of folklore, I mean that it arises in the course
of a conversation. The session as a whole includ-
ed a high proportion of verbal art - riddles,
jokes, puzzles, proverbs, and stories - inter-
persed with periods of relatively unmarked "ordi-
nary" speech. Nevertheless, the mechanisms which
are characteristic of conversation continued
to operate, not only during the periods of plain
talk, but also within the sequences of folklore

One important conversational mechanism is turn-taking: "(1) at least, and no more than, one party speaks at a time in a single conversation, and (2) speaker change recurs" (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 293). Just as the participants in a conversation take turns in the roles of speaker and listener, so in the performance setting described here they took turns in the roles of performer and audience. No-one "hogged" the floor by telling two or more stories in a row, and once a performer had gained control of the floor the others present all remained silent and listened.

Another feature of conversation is the way in which participants speak on the same topic. New topics are fitted into the flow of talk so that they appear to "occur naturally" (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 301). As with the sequence of topics of talk, so with the sequence of narrative topics. New stories are introduced by being tied to the preceding ones in some way. In the rap group sessions which Kalcik observed, "New points of discussion and new topics were usually preceded by some attempt to tie them into the discussion" (1975: 6). In the present case, the story about the measles was told in the midst of a series of accounts of teaching experiences told by assistant instructors in the group. In fact, one person commented on the number of "A.I. atrocity stories" that were being told, thus giving an explicit label to what everyone present tacitly agreed was the current topic.

Since the turn-taking mechanism of conversation extends its jurisdiction to cover the performance of narratives in conversational settings, the would-be storyteller faces two problems. First, how is he to gain control of the floor, or in other words, get a turn? Second, how is he to keep it for the extended length of time needed to tell a story? No participant in a conversation has a predetermined right to perform. Nor is the sequence of turns pre-arranged in a group as large as the one under consideration here. Everyone must actively seek to gain the floor and to keep it, even in the politest company. Thus the performer of conversational narratives must deal with these problems in addition to

the usual task of delighting the audience with artistry.

Let us see how our storyteller has handled these aesthetic and rhetorical problems. To start with, the task of gaining a turn is made easier because the floor is practically offered to her: "What was your first teaching experience? Nothing extraordinary happened?" At this point, however, another person tries to take the stage with a witty reply: "They all came to class every day, showed up for the exams on time..." But the storyteller counters with lines 6-8, which succeed in gaining everyone's attention. These lines do a lot of work in a short space. They indicate that the story to follow is worth listening to, summarize the point of the story, and provide what prove to be its basic structural elements.

The first words of the narrator tell us the answer to the question, "Nothing extraordinary happened?" (line 3). They indicate that the events in the story were scary ("My knees were shaking"), in fact extremely scary ("I couldn't stand properly"). Furthermore, we are told that the experience was incredible ("you won't believe that"). Thus, by telling us that the story is worth telling (Labov 1972: 370-75), the narrator arouses the interest of the audience.

The words "I thought I was drunk, 'cause I got the measles" form the kernel of this story. They summarize the plot, and indicate the point of the story. In a few words, the storyteller has established what it is that made the experience unusual and hence tellable. The kernel sets up a conflict between appearance ("I thought I was drunk") and reality (I got the measles.")

This contradiction informs the theme and structure of the rest of the narrative. Most of the account is devoted to a description of the causes and effects of the supposed drunkenness; but because the narrator has already let slip that it was really the measles, a sense of dramatic irony pervades this description. The irony is maintained until almost the end of the story, when the protagonist discovers that she really has the measles (line 38).

For the moment, however, the audience knows nothing of the story itself. Nevertheless, the

kernel is so intriguing that they are willing to listen to the rest. There are no further attempts to take over the floor. Instead the incredulous question "Your first teaching?" is an added invitation for the storyteller to go on.

It is the essential incongruity of this kernel, I suspect, that makes it so effective in "hooking" the audience. There is something enigmatic about the way drunkenness and sickness may cause similar sensations. This enigmatic quality lies at the heart of another folklore genre, namely the joke. Narrative jokes set up expectations about the outcome which are reversed by the punchline, which offers an alternative and previously unsuspected interpretation (Douglas 1968).

Our measles story also resembles a practical joke. The victim of a practical joke believes that a certain state of affairs is in operation, while the pranksters know that he is interpreting events incorrectly. The joke ends when the victim realizes his mistake and recognizes that he has been deceived (Tallman 1974: 259). Practical jokes thus have a structure that is similar to that of narrative jokes; in fact practical jokes are often turned into narratives (Tallman 1974: 261).

In pointing out the similarity between this personal experience story and jokes, I am not claiming that it should be classified as a joke. It has been suggested that many urban legends, including some which are by no means funny, are also based on an incongruous conflict between appearances and reality¹. Since so many genres of folklore share this quality of incongruity, implying that modern audiences find this quality attractive, a story kernel which possesses the same quality is likely to succeed in getting an audience's attention.

Once the storyteller has gained a willing audience, she has to keep their attention while impressing them with verbal artistry. Success in the latter task goes a long way towards accomplishing the former. The story kernel is useful in solving these problems as well, as the following analysis of the measles story will show.

The narrative can be divided into three parts, or "chapters." Chapter One (lines 13-21) might be titled "The Party." It describes the setting of the story and the events which set the experience in motion. The first in this train of events was the fact that the protagonist had got her first teaching position ("My first seminar, instructor.") Thus our attention is drawn to the fact that the experience occurred at a critical time, a time when appearances would be important. As the narrator told me, in your first teaching job you are nervous and anxious to make a good impression.

The next event which took place was the celebration (lines 16-21). In this section the narrator develops the theme of drunkenness which had been introduced in the kernel. Several words relating to this theme are repeated: "we celebrated," "a big bottle of wine," "we drank," "I was at the party, partying, and drinking," "I thought that I got drunk." Each of these words is emphasized by an increase in volume and intonation.

The words "and I thought that I got drunk" act as a transition from the first part of the narrative to the second. It summarizes the consequences of the partying described earlier, and announces the subject of the next section of the story. Furthermore, it repeats the first half of the kernel almost exactly ("I thought I was drunk." This repetition reminds us of the theme of the story, but also reminds us that this drunkenness is not real by recalling the second half of the kernel ("I got the measles."))

The stage is now set for Chapter Two, "The Symptoms." Unlike the preceding section of the story, this part features lively variation in paralinguistic features. The words "And I was shaking, and I was hot," are spoken louder and more slowly than the previously, but "My God what has happened to you. Are you drunk or what" is quieter and more rapid. After this the volume pitch and speed all continue to be varied. This paralinguistic variety marks this passage as an important one in the story.

In lines 22 to 24, the narrator breaks into direct speech. This reported self-address is

a¹ example of embedded evaluation, where the evaluative comment is attributed to the protagonist at the time of action (Labov 1972:371). The exclamation "My God" shows that these events are felt to be important and emphasizes the sense of bewilderment felt by the protagonist. This speech (lines 22-24) also plays a structural role in that it repeats the drunkenness theme once more.

This section is set off not only by a distinctive use of paralinguistic features, but also by repetition of theme and distinctive syntax. It is made up of eleven short sentences which contrast with the long rambling constructions that predominate earlier in the story. Eight of these short sentences are in the first person, and describe the sensations which the protagonist is having ("I was," "I heard," "I felt"), or what she was thinking ("I thought," "I didn't know"). In addition, the short, choppy sentences are indicative of the protagonist's anxiety.

In the third section (lines 29-38), a new series of events is initiated which will lead to the discovery of the truth ("I got the measles"). First, there is a brief parenthetical recapitulation of the second section. This time, however, the events are seen from the point of view of the other people present, rather than in the first person ("they didn't notice...they didn't know I was drunk"). Lines 32-35 repeat the entire account in miniature. At this point the protagonist is still convinced that she is drunk, and is glad that no one has noticed the scandalous event.

Finally the brother investigates the matter. His comment is given in direct speech (line 37), but it sounds quite different from the utterances that had been attributed to the protagonist. The narrator alters her delivery to imitate the speech of another character, and his different emotional state. In the speech of the protagonist variation in volume and pitch was used to indicate her fear and confusion; but the brother's speech is delivered in a level, "unemotional" tone of voice.

The resolution is presented quickly and simply in words which recall the opening lines: "And I got the measles" (line 38). With the brother's intervention, the previous events are explained,

honor is saved, and the conflict between appearances and reality, which has underlain the entire narrative, is finally resolved.

The words "I thought I was drunk, 'cause I got the measles," fit Kalcik's definition of the story kernel in both form and function. She describes the kernel as "a brief reference to the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story" (1975: 7). The previous analysis demonstrates how the opening words encapsulate the point of the story in a nutshell. We have also seen how our storyteller used her first words to hook the audience; according to Kalcik, this function can be ascribed to story kernels in general.

Given that the narrative presented here does begin with a kernel, can we classify it as a **kernel story** as opposed to some other type of personal experience narrative? The kernel in this example is very important both rhetorically—in gaining and holding the attention of an audience—and aesthetically—in forming a well-structured narrative; but is it important enough to be used as the basis of classification?

If a kernel story is one which begins with the offering of a kernel, and this is the major distinguishing characteristic of this class of narrative, we would expect the kernel itself to be different from the openings in other kinds of personal narratives. This is not the case. Kalcik's kernel is indistinguishable from what Labov labelled the **abstract**; namely one or two clauses, found at the beginning of some stories, which summarized the point of the story (1972: 363).

The only difference between Kalcik's kernel and Labov's abstract is in function. Labov feels that the abstract is not intended to catch audiences; the narrators which he recorded did not wait for the reaction to their abstracts, but launched into their narratives immediately (1972:364). For the women in Kalcik's study, the kernel was sometimes more important than the full story. The story itself would only be told if the audience had not heard it before, if they were willing to listen to it, and if no one else won a competition for the floor (1975: 9).

These differences in function are not the result of any formal or structural differences in abstracts as opposed to kernels. The way in which a would-be narrator uses an abstract or kernel depends upon her personality and the nature of the situation. Some people are more hesitant about telling stories, and need explicit audience approval before going ahead. The men from whom Labov collected stories had been asked directly to tell about a personal experience, and so they did not wait for audience approval after delivering the abstract of their story, because they had already received the approval in advance.

It is interesting that many of the storytellers interviewed by Labov, as well as the storyteller who is the subject of this paper, started their narratives with a preface even though such a preface was not strictly necessary to gain audience attention. I think the reason for this apparent redundancy is that the preface to a story can serve an aesthetic function as well as a rhetorical one. We have seen, in the example presented here, that the kernel unified the narrative by supplying its major themes which are then repeated throughout the account. Furthermore, it added a flavor of dramatic irony as the audience waits for the revelation of the truth which they know must come eventually. Perhaps the aesthetic function of the abstract will be found to be as important as its rhetorical function in the performances of other storytellers as well.

NOTE

1. Daniel R. Barnes, "Suprise Packages: Some Relations Between Urban Legends and Practical Jokes." Paper delivered at the American Folklore Society Meeting, San Diego, October 1984.