

A Preliminary Survey of the Grammar of 'Folklore':
An Introduction to Hominology

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This paper is a preliminary study in several senses. First, it covers a large topic in a very short space; hence it is a kind of programmatic sketch. Second, I have not documented some of the points raised, and in other cases I have done so only in a brief manner. Third, my way of responding to the problems mentioned in the paper is in a state of continuing development. I am happy to say that there are other students of the phenomena that have been known as folklore who are working along similar lines. No doubt many such persons are further along in thinking through these issues. Because of these factors, I feel that readers of this piece should approach it as food for reflection, not as finished research.

I believe that the most important conceptual problem in the discipline that is now known as folkloristics is a problem that revolves around the concept 'folklore' itself. The nature of this problem should become apparent after I work through a preliminary account of the grammar of 'folklore.' The kind of grammar I will be dealing with here is what some writers have called "logical grammar," the study of which involves an attempt to discern the pattern of usage a word has in some language community, thereby hopefully coming to know its meaning and role in that language. Among philosophers, Peirce was one of the first to employ this kind of technique;¹ Collingwood, Austin, and Wittgenstein are more recent practitioners.²

By way of clearing away one unfruitful approach for gaining an understanding of the meaning of 'folklore,' it is important to note that the origin of the term is not necessarily relevant to its use and meaning in our present day natural language community. I have sometimes been told by colleagues that 'folklore' means whatever William John Thoms intended for it to mean, since it was a neologism that he coined. In 1846 it could have meant what Thoms intended it to mean, *if* he actually did have a clearly characterized meaning for it in mind (an issue that is debatable). But, the meaning it has now in natural language is not necessarily the meaning Thoms assigned, if any. To reason in that fashion would be to commit a form of the genetic fallacy. That 'folklore' can be seen to have its origin with Thoms does not necessarily show that it means the same now as it did then. A tree has its origin in a seed, but it is surely something more than the seed after it has grown for awhile.

Another proposal for discovering the meaning of 'folklore' might be made at this point, namely that if one wanted to know the meaning of this term, one should consult a dictionary. However, dictionaries often do not give the meaning of a word; or if they do, it is often poorly and incompletely explained. In my dictionary,³ the entry for 'folklore' states: "1. the traditional beliefs, legends, sayings, customs, etc. of a people. 2. the scientific study of these." This characterization, one easily sees, includes virtually anything, and therefore is not a scientifically useful account of the meaning of the term. Moreover, dictionaries often conflict with one another, or conflicting definitions are given even within one dictionary, as exemplified in the entry for 'folklore' in the Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend. Therefore, dictionaries can only serve as a rough guide to the meaning of words.

To gain a better understanding of important concepts, we must explore their living employment in the appropriate language community.

To begin to survey the pattern of use of 'folklore' I have found no better contemporary example than a passage from a recent Reader's Digest article entitled "Why Some Women Respond Sexually and Others Don't."⁴ In discussing recent research by a psychologist named Fisher, the author stated that Fisher had found that women with various physiological difficulties were not necessarily unhappy in their sex lives. Then the author states (p. 73, emphasis added), "Another bit of folklore is that a woman cannot achieve sexual satisfaction until she has had a child." Here we see a very common use of 'folklore,' namely a use in which an expert, typically a scientist of some sort (or perhaps a self-appointed expert), wants to identify a certain practice, activity, or belief as being a mistake. The reason that it is said to be a mistake lies in the expert's supposedly more complete knowledge. This use of 'folklore' is particularly popular in the medical profession. I shall identify this general use as being the mistake sense of the word. The force of this usage appears to be about the same as "x is a mistake, given that so-and-so is known." The mistake sense is not limited to cases in which research identifies the phenomenon in question as a mistake. There is also an ethnocentric side to the mistake sense. Adherents of one belief system, or behavior system, see the belief or behavior of persons in another belief or behavior system as being mistakes, taking their own system as containing the truth, and others who differ being seen as "mistaken." In the case of someone like a physician, the motive for describing a practice or belief as 'folklore' is hopefully a benevolent concern for the patient's welfare and not simply an ethnocentric concern. Other instances of use of the mistake sense, for example in political contexts, will have various motivations--personal or political power, or the prevention of inquiry, to name a few.

Another way in which 'folklore' is used might be termed the unusual sense. What is called "regional folklore" is a good case in point. Here someone, perhaps a traveler or a writer of guidebooks for travelers, will often mark off certain aspects of a behavior system in some chosen geographic area in order to call them to the attention of nonresidents of that area. Here the motive is to indicate to the traveller, or other interested parties, that a certain "local" phenomenon is likely to be worth his attention since it is thought to be "distinctive of the region." Many of the state guides prepared by the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration during the depression of the 1930's contain examples of the unusual sense. In addition to the regional facet, the unusual sense also has another side, in that sometimes a person will mark off as being interesting certain aspects of a behavioral system thought to be limited to a particular collection of people which are conceived of as being an "ethnic" unit: Jews, Negroes, Polynesians, or Okies, for example.

Common to both the mistake sense and the unusual sense is the presupposition that "folklore" is something that belongs to someone else, or belongs to some behavior system other than that of the speaker. Many researchers have noticed this factor. It appears in "field research" in the guise of advice which tells the student not to ask potential "informants" for their "superstitions" or "legends," but instead to inquire after cures and planting techniques or old stories. The reason for this advice lies in past experience which shows that if one asks for "superstitions," one is usually either told about other persons or is told nothing at all; whereas if one wants to learn the "informant's" practices, neutral language is required. Of course, when the "collector" writes up what his "informants" told him about cures and old stories, the "collector" often categorizes such cures or old stories as being Superstitions and Legends.

Concerning the foregoing, some noteworthy qualities can be discerned. In both the senses I have mentioned, 'folklore' is not a proper name for a specific practice or practices. Instead it indicates a speaker's attitude toward whatever aspect of some behavior system the speaker wishes to bring under that attitude. So, an important aspect of the grammar of 'folklore' is that it is a relational word, not a proper name. It is relational in that it relates a speaker's attitude to some phenomenon which is chosen by the speaker. For the interest sense, a speaker selects a particular complex from within a behavioral system, then expresses his interest by saying that this complex is "Ozark folklore," or "Negro folklore." For the mistake sense, the speaker selects a complex, then expresses his attitude that it is a mistake or error by saying something like "the prophylactic power of asafetida is a myth," or "dialectical materialism is Marxist folklore." It would be easy to show, I think, that other words which are often closely associated with 'folklore' typically will exhibit much the same grammar. Here I have in mind concepts such as 'myth,' 'legend,' 'magic,' 'folkway,' 'folkmusic,' 'folk art,' or 'superstition.'

Now this result does, it seems to me, raise a serious conceptual problem for a discipline which claims that it wishes to study folklore, for it seems that there is no folklore. Since it lies within the province of any speaker to select the human phenomenon or phenomena toward which he wishes to express his interest or disapproval, it appears that almost anything could be selected. In other words, since 'folklore' is a relational word, and since it is the speaker's prerogative to select the phenomena to be related to his attitude of disapproval or interest by means of 'folklore,' it follows that no one determinate set of phenomena are folklore, a result which is contrary to what is actually presupposed by many folklorists. And, from the same premises, it appears to follow that there is no common feature among all phenomena which have been selected as "folklore" by speakers. And if that is the case, there cannot be a discipline to study a determinate set of phenomena called folklore, since what speakers select as folklore varies with different speakers and their attitudes, from time to time, and from one situation to another.

This being the case, there seems to be no good reason for having a discipline that names itself 'folklore.' Not only is there no folklore for it to study, but to take the term 'folklore' as a discipline's name puts practitioners of that discipline in a very uncomfortable position. This odd position can be seen in that "folklore" is the only academic discipline with which I am acquainted that uses a common term of abuse as its name. It is likely that many of us who have worked within the discipline have felt this discomfort at one time or another in our lives.

By all this I do not mean to suggest that the discipline that has called itself "folklore" or "folkloristics" is not a significant or distinguished discipline, and that it has not been studying real and important phenomena. However, since there is no folklore, there is no discipline of folklore or folkloristics. Thus, it would seem that the most important, the most pressing, conceptual problem in folkloristics is to find out how to stop studying folklore, thus ceasing to be as folkloristicians. I suggest that an appropriate way to solve this problem is to realize that we are, or will become, hominologists. And what is hominology? It would be folklore studies or folkloristics shorn of deleterious terms such as 'folklore' itself. Once one removes these troublesome concepts, one sees that scholars who have called themselves folklorists have been studying something very important, something which has been largely neglected by other disciplines; namely, universal human behavioral patterns and interactional processes.

When I speak of the behavioral patterns of humans or of man, I mean the human species. That is, I am referring to the species Homo Sapiens, the only living species in the genus Homo, of the family Hominidae, of the order Primate, of the class Mammalia, of the Phylum Chordata, of the kingdom of Animals. In other words, I wish to speak about a kind of animal organism which exhibits behavior patterns just as do other species of organisms. In doing so, I wish to reject any form of superorganicism, which was historically a way of avoiding discussing the human organism while focusing attention upon some kind of posited ghostly organism. Superorganicism is a kind of dualism, being mind-body dualism written largely--one could call it culture-species dualism, culture being like a large Cartesian mind-entity. There are two general criteria for a useful scientific hypothesis: it must be consistent, and it must be confirmable in principle. At the least, the superorganic thesis violates the first criterion, because it in effect states that "there is an existing entity which exhibits none of the attributes existing entities exhibit." Existing things can be kicked, weighed, thrown, cut in half, and the like. The entity of entities posited by superorganicism do not behave in that way, on the theory's own account. Hence it is inconsistent. Since there is no superorganism for one to investigate, we land back with the human organism as the locus of study.

Now Homo Sapiens, wherever it occurs (that is, universally) exhibits certain types of behavioral patterns and interactional processes, and it is these phenomena which "folklorists" have been studying. The assertion that there are species-wide behavioral patterns and processes is one which some biologists might dispute, but they, along with anthropologists and other social scientists, often tacitly accept superorganicism which would lead them away from coming to appreciate such an assertion. At least one reason that this is the case lies in the focus upon content of behavior which superorganicism encourages--in "folklore" study this has emerged as the emphasis upon "texts." In anthropology, this has surfaced as ethnography which can be seen as providing a "text" of a whole "culture." And since content is different in various cultures, universals are easily overlooked. On the other hand, denying superorganicism as a way of explaining content and focusing instead upon processes and patterns of human behavior, a number of universals come immediately to our attention. And "folklorists," the scholars one could call classical hominologists, have in some sense always been aware of these universals.

Perhaps the best example known to classical hominologists is story-telling. We have known that Homo Sapiens universally tells stories. The content of the organism's story-telling behavior varies from place to place and from one time to another. But the process or pattern has a good deal that is universal to any instance of its occurrence. There is no need to repeat these factors here, because Georges has admirably sketched many of them in his paper on storytelling events. Another example of a human universal known to classical hominologists is believing and the possession of belief systems. Some scholars do not appreciate my reference to belief systems, so perhaps I could better describe the phenomenon as being networks of belief, or belief relationships. Whatever the name might be, the point is that members of Homo Sapiens have beliefs and that these beliefs are organized in a certain general way. Again, this matter has earlier been filled out in some detail: namely, in my dissertation, An Essay on the Nature of World Views. A third process of universal human practice has recently been adequately sketched. I have in mind the process of curing or healing, which Jones reviewed for the recent Folk Medicine conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, in a paper entitled "Doing What, With

Which, and to Whom?: The Relationship of Case History Accounts to Curing." A fourth example of a universal human process is singing. Lomax, in his 1962 paper on "Song Structure and Social Structure," and in other works, has begun to outline some features involved in viewing singing as a universal human process.. Of course, the discipline known as "folklore" has always been in a good position to notice such species-wide behavioral patterns and processes because usually classical hominologists have practiced some kind of comparative method, as opposed to a contrastive method as found in other disciplines. Such a comparative approach would be bound to eventually encourage the conscious analysis of human universals. Thus, we see that "folkloristics," or classical hominology, is the beginning of a type of human ethology, which is what a full-fledged hominology would be.

Would the establishment of a science of human ethology as the substitute for or further development of what is now known as folkloristics be an attempt to reduce the noble activities of man to what can be accounted for in biological terms? It will be said that I am recommending that storytelling, for example, be accounted for solely in terms of viscera. My reply is that I do not wish to reduce anything to anything else. I wish each phenomenon to have its place in an appropriate and hopefully correct general scheme. Yet I am rejecting species chauvinism. That is to say, I admit that species other than man behave, and I adopt a principle of continuity in nature such that man would be seen as different not in kind, but in degree, in relation to other species. And so I accept that man behaves. And an analysis of man behaving, instead of an analysis of a superorganic pseudo-entity, brings to light universal patterns and processes in such behavior. How can that be understood as reducing singing to being nothing more than the vibrations of viscera? Surely the organism all human beings share will eventually be very important in understanding better man's universal behavior patterns. It isn't the sole factor for understanding such behavior, yet it is one of a series of necessary factors. As William James put it, there is more involved in a violin concerto than some horse hairs draggin across some cat-gut. But the something more is not superorganic, and there would be no violin concerto without the guts and hairs, and the guts and hairs have some influence upon the final nature of the concerto. To appreciate the latter, in your imagination replace the gut with spaghetti and the hair with cotton twine. Probably, the "something more" which is not superorganic is to be found within a study of the logic of communication. As Peirce pointed out almost a century ago, there is a grand-scale human universal, which he called semiosis, which can be understood as the process of communication at the level of complexity with which our species practices it.

Now I am sure that numerous objections will arise at this point, so I will attempt to enumerate some of the ones of which I am aware, then offer a response to them. For one, it will be said that I am taking the natural language senses of 'folklore' that I noted as if they were normative for all possible uses. That is, an objector might well say that a scientist can take a word which has a particular meaning in a natural language, then stipulate a new meaning for it within the scientific community. I agree that this can sometimes be done, and that it is often done with significant scientific benefit. Increased scientific benefit would surely seem to be the motive for thus giving a common word a new stipulated meaning. But in the case of 'folklore,' there are circumstances which are counterindicative for such a stipulative tactic. First of all, there is in our language community a presupposition that, unless there is some indication to the contrary, a communicative act is normal. Therefore, when a "folklorist" speaks, for example, to a congressman, the

congressman quite appropriately follows the "presupposition of normality" principle and thinks that the "folklorist" must study either errors or quaint things. That is, because of the widespread and normal pattern of interpreting 'folklore' in either the mistake or the interest sense, the goal of increased scientific benefit as a result of scholarly redefinition of 'folklore' is thwarted. There are also obvious similar difficulties involved in using 'folklore' and allied concepts in communicating with "informants."

Aside from the above problems which would be difficulties in any version of the stipulative redefinition approach, there is another objectionable feature in many instances of redefinition, namely that they are often only disguised versions of the abusive natural language use. John Greenway's characterization of a "folk culture" as being "an unsophisticated, homogeneous group"⁵ is a good example here since presumably "folklore" is what occurs in a "folk culture." That would mean that "folklore" is unsophisticated activity of some sort. It should be clear by now that there is no such group as "folk" or "a folk" or "the folk." 'Folk' simply means "human being(s)." Richard Dorson also seems to provide some examples of this matter. He speaks of the "folklore of folklore" in commenting upon what he takes to be a mistaken assumption about the discipline he calls folklore--"the idea that folklore is dying out is in itself a kind of folklore."⁶ This tendency comes out in other places in Dorson's work: for instance, he characterizes legends as being stories "which never happened told for true,"⁷ a clear enough way of saying that legends are mistaken stories. In this same vein, Jan Brunvand praises Frazer's characterization of "magical beliefs" as being based upon mistaken reasoning.⁸ Numerous other examples could be provided from the work of several other scholars. Perhaps such a reappearance of the natural language abusive use of 'folklore' in some redefinitions indicates a deep-seated conviction among some scholars that they are, in the last analysis, studying phenomena which are unsophisticated, uneducated, mistaken, or at least quaint. Needless to say, such a positivistic or scientific bias is highly dubious.

Aside from the scholarly redefinition gambit for preserving 'folklore' as an academic term, there is another approach that is beginning to be heard. Persons taking that view would be likely to object to my remarks in one way or another. This is the view that 'folklore' is identified as such by the people who engage in singing, storytelling, and other kinds of activities that "folklorists" have often studied. Dan Ben-Amos, in a recent article in the Journal of American Folklore⁹ suggests something like this as a way of providing "folklorists" with a determinate subject matter. On this view, 'folklore' names that set of interactional processes which people in a particular culture categorize as being "folklore." This approach, which I shall call autodelineation, unlike the redefinition gambit, laudibly attempts to discover a real determinate category within a particular behavior system in which some parts of the system are characterized from within the system as belonging to particular categories. This would be great if it would work; however, unfortunately it does not, at least not to date. To see why it fails, consider its presentation in an earlier article by Ben-Amos.¹⁰

The conception a society has of its own folkloristic communication is embodied in its cognitive system. Implicit in the terms which define and symbolize folklore, or its sub-categories, are the cultural selective perception of communicative attributes and the principles underlying their taxonomy. (p. 309)

The cultural cognition of folkloristic reality is expressed by the descriptive terms which designate it as a distinct communicative category and qualify it as different genres and events.
(p. 309)

Thus, the Limba people of Sierra Leone designate the culturally inherited verbal arts as mboro, a word which connotes matters concerning ancient times. . . . This term is all-inclusive and refers to such forms of expression which are analogous to myth, legends, and Marchen, proverbs, metaphors and riddles in other cultures.
(p. 310)

The difficulty here lies in the fact that the characterization of certain communicative processes by a native people does not include the term 'folklore' or anything like it as it is really and naturally employed in our language community. Of course, various peoples may delineate certain of their behaviors as being verbal art, and likewise various peoples may so categorize other kinds of human behavior processes which may be similar to those "folklorists" have studied. But they do not call them 'folklore.' Ben-Amos has done that. It is the Limba who describe their verbal arts as mboro, but it is Ben-Amos who identifies mboro with the abusive term, 'folklore.' If the Limba of Sierra Leone were to understand how the relational word 'folklore' is normally interpreted in our society (that is, its grammar as I have sketched it earlier), and if the Limba knew that one of our scholars had said that the mboro equals folklore, I expect that they would become upset with that situation, just as an informant gets upset if we ask him to tell us a few of his superstitions. So autodelineation has not worked, since at a crucial point the argument has been given a misdirecting shove.

These two main lines of objection to my earlier comments, then, do not seem to overcome the claim I made above. Therefore, as I see it, since there is no determinate class of phenomena which is named by 'folklore,' let us then permit that term (and related terms) to quietly fade away in our scientific lexicon. Not too much will change if we do that, since we will continue to study singing, storytelling, artistic creativity, and many other things that we are already investigating. We will, however, lose the inherent and unhappy biases involved in identifying various universal human activities as being folklore. But, my fellow hominologists, is that not something we can well afford to lose?

Notes

1. See Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," Popular Science Monthly 12 (1877): 1-15.
2. Representative works here are: R. G. Collingwood, An Essay on Metaphysics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940); J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (New York: Macmillan, 3rd ed., 1968).
3. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, College Edition, 1960).

4. Norman Lobsenz, "Why Some Women Respond Sexually and Others Don't," Reader's Digest 102 (February 1973): 70-74.
5. John Greenway, Literature Among the Primitives (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964), p. xii.
6. Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 278.
7. Dorson, American Folklore, p. 249.
8. Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1968), p. 191.
9. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971): 3-15.
10. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Componential Model of Folklore Communication," Proceedings of the VIIIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences 1968 (Tokyo: The Science Council of Japan, 1969), pp. 309-311.

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_____, "To discern the spurious science behind the bastard art." Paper read before the California Folklore Society, 1973.

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