

Coherency and Delight:
Dual Canons of Excellence in Informal Narrative

John H. McDowell

Introduction

In recent years the traditional boundaries within the social sciences have become increasingly less binding, much to the good of the disciplines involved. Nothing better reflects this change than the current interest in verbal genres. Here we find formerly strange bed-fellows, such as literary critics, anthropologists, linguists, and folklorists, in open collaboration. The emphasis in folklore studies is shifting from materials, collected and processed, to the settings present in each culture responsible for the production of these materials (see Bauman and Paredes, 1971). Linguists and anthropologists are becoming interested in linguistic performance, with special reference to speech varieties and styles (see Hymes, 1973). The convergence of these two trends is suggested in the following remark made by the folklorist, Dan Ben-Amos (1969:283). "The ethnic system of genres constitutes a grammar of folklore, a cultural affirmation of the communication rules which govern the expression of complex messages within the cultural context." The ultimate achievement of this cross-disciplinary collaboration might be a grammar of verbal performance, establishing a consistent pattern of relationship between verbal performance and cultural context.

Milman Parry stands as an early prophet of the current approach to verbal genres. The breakthrough occurred when Parry, a trained classicist, strayed from his texts and sought solutions to textual problems in the cultural ambience in which the texts were generated. Albert B. Lord records the following from Parry's field notes (Lord, 1970:12): "I came to see, dimly at first, that a true understanding of the Homeric poems could come only with an understanding of the nature of oral poetry." In working with the Yugoslav epic, Parry and Lord became essentially anthropological field workers.

The basic tenet of the work of Parry and Lord, and indeed of much contemporary work, is that the performance situation exerts considerable influence over the verbal performance. Thus the formulaic character of epic poetry and perhaps also of the spontaneous sermon (Rosenberg, 1970), and the callal (McDowell, 1972), and other genres as well, derives from the demands made on the performer by the setting in which he performs.

In the following pages, I will apply this perspective to what is sometimes considered a minor genre, informal narrative produced in the course of small-group interaction. I hope to demonstrate that many of the qualities of speech produced in small-group settings result directly or indirectly from the ingredients of the social situation.

Setting

I will report on narratives produced by a single speaker in the course of apparently routine small-group interaction. The interaction took place in a room on the edge of a jovial birthday party. The participants were young adults, all friends of varying degrees of intimacy, and numbered from six to eight. The conversation was lively and discursive, consisting mainly in the relation of personal anecdotes and narratives, and subsequent commentaries.

Allowing for some margin of interpretation, the interaction can be broken into four rather distinct episodes. First, there were what might be called chaotic episodes, composed of simultaneous laughter, screaming, shouting, and talking. These were recurrent, brief, and virtually unintelligible. They were triggered most frequently by the arrival of additional people from the party in progress outside of the room.

Episodes of chaos gave way to either competing narratives, or single narratives, depending on factors such as a speaker's motivation to hold the floor, and the formation of special interest cliques within the group. Competing narratives were sometimes maintained over large stretches of time. While these episodes seemed to unfold in much the same way as single-narrative episodes, it would be of interest to know to what extent the simultaneous narratives influenced one another.

Single narratives, claiming the attention of all present, did emerge at times. These will be dealt with at length below. The fourth episode involved sustained interruption from the outside. In these episodes extraneous topics such as the availability of ice-cream, and the location of blankets, were handled briefly amid a general exchange of jokes between the people in the room and their intruders. In some instances, outside interruption would occasion a return to a chaotic episode. Ultimately, in most instances, the temporarily defloored speakers continued their narratives.

The narratives with which I will concern myself were all products of single-narrative episodes. One of the participants showed particular enthusiasm to communicate, and in the course of the evening completed four lengthy personal narratives. Competition for the floor was intense during most of the evening. Completion of narratives called for the production of a steady stream of spontaneous speech. Even a momentary pause could mean the loss of the floor.

In sum, the features of the setting impinging on verbal performance were these: (1) casual interaction, calling for informal speech style, (2) limited amount of time in which to formulate utterances, and (3) intense competition for the floor, calling for steady production of utterances. Under these conditions, completion of a single narrative required both skill and determination.

Method

The entire verbal interaction was recorded on a tape recorder placed inconspicuously in one corner of the room. While most or all of the participants noticed the recorder, its presence did not seem to alter their behavior. On the contrary, the recorder seemed to fade below anyone's awareness shortly after the interaction began. The chief narrator later confided that she totally forgot about the recorder, to her own considerable surprise. I remained for the most part inconspicuous. I spoke occasionally and was sociable, but mostly left the talking to the other participants.

The tapes were subsequently transcribed into standard prose paragraphs. Notice was taken of paralinguistic effects such as stress, intonation, and the like only when these were especially foregrounded. The transcriptions were then examined for evidence of a contextual influence.

Discussion

I have already indicated that narratives were subject to interruption if they lagged. The more enthusiastic narrators sought to avoid this unpleasant turn of events. Under the performance conditions specified above, the audience

apparently held the narrators accountable on two scores: Narratives had to be both coherent and entertaining. A narrative which floundered in momentary incoherence, or one which although coherent failed to stimulate audience interest, was most likely doomed to premature termination. In some cases, the narrator would sense his or her own ineptness, and voluntarily yield the floor. In others, a lagging narrative would be supplanted by a rival narrative begun in an opportune moment. This sometimes occasioned fairly extensive episodes of competing narratives.

These two canons of narrative excellence, coherency and delight, are somewhat separable in terms of their impact on verbal performance. For this reason, I will treat them separately here. First I will take up the canon of coherency, and the linguistic aspects of the performance.

Coherence

The basic syntactic unit in the narratives under consideration is the phrase or clause rather than the sentence. I will first deal with a few infra-phrase features, and then turn to the complicated matter of the integration of phrases into larger units.

While phrase formation remains largely adequate, the phrases produced show significant adaptation to the performance setting and its demands on the narrator. Most notably, they are peppered with ubiquitous filler words. The following turn up regularly in the narratives: and um, well, you know, kind of, I mean, but um. The basic function shared perhaps by each of these is that of stalling for time while the next utterance is formulated. In the context of competitive narrating, even momentary gaps must be bridged with some sort of verbal production. The filler words in the following excerpt seem designed primarily for purposes of stalling:

- (1) he handed me 30 hours of work right off the bat, and um, you know, well I also have a bit of seniority.

However, additional functions apparently attach to specific fillers. Consider the meta-communicative function of you know in these two excerpts:

- (2) and it went like we, you know, he'd said

- (3) and somebody says, you know, asks

In each of these cases the filler words signal a break in normal sequence, indicating that the utterance in progress has been retracked for purposes of increased clarity.

The filler you know takes on other functions as well. In some cases it serves as a phatic device, by which the narrator checks on "the physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication" (Jakobson, in Sebeok 1960: 353), as in the following:

- (4) but nobody believed him, you know!

This filler can also serve to mark off an especially pithy word or notion in the narrative, as in the following instance;

(5) it was, you know, a prostitute

No doubt a variety of functions other than those discussed here attach to the filler you know. These functions appear to be differentiated partly by the discourse context, and partly by intonation and other paralinguistic markings. The phatic use of you know often involves momentary eye contact between narrator and audience as well.

A similar analysis could be performed on each of the fillers occurring in personal narratives. For present purposes, however, suffice it to say that stalling is only one in a complex of functions served by filler words in the narratives under consideration.

Crystal and Davy, in their treatment of the language of conversation, suggest that it might be better to speak of clause-complexes rather than sentences (1969:110). As I have already indicated, the matter of the integration of phrases into larger units in personal narrative is problematic. Well-formed sentences are apparently formulated under conditions of relative tranquility. In personal narratives produced under competitive circumstances, the formulation of grammatically complete sentences remains a somewhat unattainable ideal.

The immediate constituents, the noun phrase and the verb phrase, and in turn their constituents, are generally well-formed. They are rarely, however, integrated into acceptable sentences. Normal syntactic relations are skewed through three aberrant processes: (1) incorrect ordering of phrases (2) mis-matching of phrases (3) omission of implied phrases.

The following illustrates incorrect ordering:

(6) I got a nickle raise I found out

The other two processes can be observed in the following excerpt:

(7) I couldn't, you know, remember exactly under what circumstances, so I was kind of felt like a fool

The prepositional phrase "under what circumstances" implies a complement something like "I had met you" which is omitted. Mis-matching occurs when "felt like a fool" is incorrectly paired with "I was kind of."

The speaker, called upon to formulate new utterances rapidly, responds by forming coherent phrases which await either development as sentences in themselves, or integration into an ongoing syntactic structure. However, it would be incorrect to assert that the narrators are indifferent to syntactic linkage. Within the limits of the performance situation, the attempt is made to bring out syntactic relationships. This is evident, for example, in the deliberate interruption of normal sequence, as in the following:

(8) John is, like I say, John lets me go caving.

This sort of meta-linguistic device, as well as the presence of syntactic markers such as relative pronouns and the like, indicate that the speaker is indeed concerned with syntax. He simply finds the pace too demanding to allow for the complete specification of syntactic relationships. And, as we shall see, he is continually plagued with fragments left behind in the process of sentence retracking.

In any case, the narrator must provide sufficient syntactic clues to conform to the canon of coherency. One possible explanation of the audience's tolerance of ill-formed sentences is that the communication of personal narratives is a reciprocal affair. The narrator encodes his anecdote to the best of his ability, under the circumstances. The audience then actively decodes the narrators utterances, in a creative manner aimed at reconstructing the probable syntactic shell the narrator had in mind. Assuming that the audience contributes in this way, the narrator enjoys a greater latitude of syntactic license, without which sustained spontaneous speech might be impossible.

Let us consider in some detail how the audience might go about this process of creative decoding. In difficult instances, the retracking of sentences creates the impression of two or more intersecting sentences. The general case is shown below:

(9)

	S_1		S_2
	P_1	P_2	P_3
		P_4	

The surface representation may obscure this rule somewhat by failing to contain one or more of the phrases involved in the reconstruction. We have already noted that the omission of an implied phrase is one of the processes operating to skew normal syntax.

Consider the following examples, and their probable reconstructions.

(10) the one on the drag doesn't have, the one on San Jacinto's real small
 p_1 --the one on the drag doesn't have
 p_2 --(omitted)
 S_2 --the one on San Jacinto's real small

	S_1		S_2
	P_1	(P_2)	

The reconstruction assumes that we are dealing with two separate sentences, a fact partly obscured by the omission of an implicit phrase.

(11) and they didn't go any further you know, and we couldn't, they went, but nobody was small to go
 S_1 --and they didn't go any further
 p_1 --and we couldn't
 p_2 --(omitted)
 p_3 --they went
 p_4 --but nobody was small to go

	S_1		S_2		S_3
	P_1	(P_2)	P_3		P_4

This example provides a clue to the grammatical model operative in the production of this kind of speech. The syntax appears to be at odds with the semantic structure. Thus, semantically affinite phrases are isolated syntactically, p_3 from S_1 , and p_4 from p_1 . Moreover, the phrases fail to comprise an acceptable unit of grammar in the order in which they appear. The progress of the narrative is deflected through a series of retrappings. Sentences are

recycled in an attempt to supply in retrospect semantic and syntactic coherency. In the above example, the narrator retracks the sentence in order to clarify a semantic detail: the passages did indeed continue, contrary to S_1 , but to no avail, since nobody could fit through them (p4).

Recycling of sentences occurs either as gaps or uncertainties develop on the semantic plane, or as the absence of syntactic structure threatens to obscure interpretation of the narrative. The utterances formulated in the narratives represent a compromise between two somewhat independent ideals, semantic and syntactic coherency. The narrator must be essentially opportunistic, and mend occasionally here, occasionally there, in order to satisfy the canon of coherency.

Sentences are difficult to decipher partly because sentence boundaries are not marked by the sort of juncture associated with more formal language. The larger units of discourse are spliced together by means of co-ordinating conjunctions in many cases. Consider the following excerpt:

- (12) I got bummed-out when I was about 13 because I went down with my parents in a VW bus, with my six brothers and sisters, and we drove all the way down there, and my parents didn't know any Spanish and we went around hotels getting ripped-off, and I watched my parents getting ripped-off, you know, and I knew they were getting ripped-off, but I couldn't find out, you know, what to do about it, and ah, it pissed me off so bad...

Among school teachers these are known as run-on sentences, and are to be avoided. However, it is clear that the narrator is not concerned with the boundaries of discrete sentences, but rather with the flow of the narrative. In the context of these personal narratives, the notion of the sentence is somewhat tenuous. It is primarily visible, perhaps, in the decoding equipment brought to bear on the utterances by the audience. Nonetheless, if the formulation of elegant sentences is beyond the capacities of most speakers in this context, the provision of marginal syntactic information is required in order to allow the audience to successfully interpret the speaker's clause-complexes.

Delight

I have indicated that mere coherency, a remarkable achievement in itself no doubt, is insufficient to guarantee the completion of a personal narrative under competitive circumstances. Narratives are also held up to the canon of entertainment or delight. Beyond maintaining coherency, narratives are required to inspire some degree of audience interest. A narrative that is considered pointless, inane, or poorly related, is likely to perish in the telling. Narrators are subject to a sort of folk aesthetic. While the canons of this aesthetic may be ill-defined, the effect of violating them is palpable enough.

The folk aesthetic governing personal narratives related in small-group interaction operates on various levels. A certain appropriateness of topic is essential in most cases. This quality might be determined by the discourse context, by shared knowledge within the group, or by other factors impinging on topic selection. Of equal or greater weight is the manner or style of narration. The delivery must be as smooth as possible. Humor or wit is usually a successful palliative. Some sense of structure or organization should emerge in the course of the narration. In some cases, tasteful theatrical effects might be added. In short, the framework in which the folk aesthetic

operates is quite comprehensive. Within this framework, the narrative must strike an acceptable mixing and balance of effects.

Rather than dealing with the canon of delight in a piecemeal fashion (as was done with the canon of coherency), I will select a single lengthy excerpt and treat it in some depth. Only in this way will it be possible to capture certain large-scale effects, such as overall structure.

The following is one of several single narratives completed by the most avid participant. The topic, for those who would otherwise be left in the dark, is caving and related speleological adventure. I have retained in the transcription the only important audience contribution.

We were taking a shortcut, and uh, finding our way through this, it used to be a stream, an underground spring, and so its, you know, pretty weird. And uh, I had a canteen around my head, and uh, I was crawling through this little-bitty crawlway and I got my canteen stuck; wedged. And Roy was right behind me and I couldn't back up, I couldn't go forward, and my arms were in front of me--
 5 So you couldn't just--
 Yeah, you decrease your shoulder width by two inches by putting your arms in front of you. And uh, so you usually crawl that way, you know? And uh, I couldn't reach back to get the canteen, and it was like, shit, "Oh no, you know somebody sure could get claustrophobia being in a place like this. I sure could get claustrophobia. You know, it sure doesn't feel very good like this. I sure wish I could get unstuck. Ah hem. I sure don't like this." You know all these
 10 little thoughts run through your mind about "I really think I could get claustrophobia if I stayed here much longer," and uh, then, you know, you finally say "OK, we're getting out," and uh, I wriggled a hand back down and undid my belt and just went forward and Roy just pushed the canteen after me 'cause there was no way I could just
 15 reach back and get it...
 20

There are no doubt several ways to approach the aesthetic quality of this rich material. What follows represents only one of these, but one I find to be especially productive.

Let us focus on the paradigm of sender realizations in the narrative. The following chart presents this sequence:

<u>line</u>	<u>sender</u>	<u>line</u>	<u>sender</u>
1-2	we	14	(cough)
3-6	I	14	I
7-9	you	14	you
10	I	15	I
11	somebody	16	you
12	I	17	we
13	(reflexive)	17-20	I
13	I		

It should not be surprising to find such a variety of pronouns filling in the sender slot. The paradigm of pronouns, as we shall see, is artfully exploited for specific rhetorical effects in this narrative, and indeed commonly in much verbal behavior.

The narrative opens in the first person, shifting from plural to singular as the focus narrows. The interruption in line 7 occasions the you of expertise. The sender implied in the you of lines 11-13 is the group of informed cavers, including the narrator of course. The effect is to condone the heroine's behavior at this point as standard operating procedure. The narrative resumes in the 1st person singular.

The ensuing section constitutes the heart of the narrative, and presents or recreates the struggle between panic and composure as claustrophobia beckons. The narrative voice here is the general you, to which the narrative returns in line 14 and line 16. This generalized you is dramatically effective: because it is inclusive, it facilitates audience identification with the plight of the heroine.

The reported self-address (lines 11-14 involves pairs of formulas in opposition to one another. The heroine first verbally exorcizes panic, by utilizing an abstract sender term, to little avail, because of the concrete sender term immediately asserts itself:

- (1) (a) somebody sure could get claustrophobia
(b) I sure could get claustrophobia
- (2) (a) it sure doesn't feel very good
(b) I sure wish
- (3) (a) ah hem (?)
(b) I sure don't like this

A progression from one pair to the next is visible. The first member of each pair symbolically extricates the actual heroine from the predicament by verbally minimizing her susceptibility to panic. However, from 1a to 3a the verbal magic weakens. Thus the neutral somebody is less compromising than the reflexive. The ominous cough, it could be argued, is weaker still. In a similar fashion, the assertive concrete sender term is couched in increasingly more apprehensive utterances. The verb goes from conditional to indicative. Finally, 3b is nothing but a whining protest, as panic appears to be gaining the upper hand.

Embedded in this section of narrative case in the voice of the general you is a recapitulation of the reported self-address (lines 15-16). With the best of taste, the recapitulation is only partial.

The narrative proceeds to the moment of resolution, marked by the appearance of a single hortatory we. This we in line 17 signals the reintegration of the heroine's personality. The somebody and the I of the paired formulas are combined into a single self capable of action. Panic is vanquished, and the heroine extricates herself physically from the cave.

According to this analysis, the narrative breaks into sections as follows:

- (1) preparatory we (1-2)
- (2) focal I (3-10)
 - (2a) you of expertise (7-9)
- (3) general you (10-17)
 - (3a) self-address (11-14, 15-16)
- (4) focal I (17-20)

The narrative voice in each section correlates with the dramatic moment at that stage of the story. The preparatory we and focal I correspond to the sections that set the scene, and deal with physical rather than psychological complications. The you of expertise tends to vindicate the heroine's behavior, and suggests that her predicament results from causes other than her own negligence.

The alternation of abstract and concrete sender terms in the reported self-address brings the drama to a climax, by recreating the alleged conflict between composure and panic within the heroine's mind. The reported self-address is placed within the framework of the general you, which tends to heighten dramatic impact since it reaches out to include those present as possible victims of the same process.

The unique appearance of the hortatory we coincides with the victory of the forces of composure. Finally, the narrative returns to the focal I in describing the heroine's physical extraction from the cave. Each shift in narrative voice, it appears, reflects a shift in dramatic moment.

The narrative thus evinces the following structure:

preparatory we
 focal I
 general you
 (opposition)
 general you
 focal I

Only a return to the narrative we is lacking for this structure to be perfectly pallandromic. The radical element in the design, the hortatory we, requires some explanation. It stands apart from the pattern as an element of caprice, a deus ex machina, which enters into the event and provides for its resolution. It is both structurally and thematically anomalous.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that this narrative is very subtly structured for dramatic effect. The overall patterning of narrative voice, as well as the intense portrait of the advent and vanquishing of claustrophobia, enable this narrative to satisfy the canon of delight. As performed, it made a fascinating story.

Conclusion

We have taken up two canons of narrative excellence, coherency and delight, and examined some of their effects on a corpus of personal narratives. These canons, we have seen, derive from the competitive nature of the interaction. Narrators were closely monitored, and momentary lapses often entailed loss of the floor. The necessity to produce extended spontaneous discourse, and do it well, has palpable impact on the character of speech produced under these conditions. Demands of coherency entail the formulation of utterances quite unlike standard speech or written prose. Two important features were discussed: the presence and function of hesitation phenomena, and the eclipse of the sentence.

The imperative to entertain, on the other hand, gave rise to the artful presentation of complex and subtle structures, with considerable attention to details of dramatic interest.

As a means of drawing together several of the observations made in the body of this paper, I present the following chart depicting the organizing principles of narratives produced in the course of informal small-group interaction.

<u>stage</u>	<u>demands</u>	<u>resources</u>
seizing the floor	project one's own words; silence those of Others	timing; modulation of supra-segmentals; enticing come-on
holding the floor	continuous speech; coherence; delight	well-formed phrases; sentence retracking; filler words; suspension of normal juncture; modulation of supra-segmentals; sensitivity to rhetorical structuring; appropriate topic selection
yielding the floor	signal end of narrative, or readiness to be interrupted	thematic recapitulation; structural completion; failure to maintain coherence; other manifestations of narrative lethargy (e.g. allowing pauses to develop, voice monotony, and the like).

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