Folklore and the Analysis of Folk Discourse:
Cultural Connotation and Oral Tradition in Communicative Events

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This paper examines the ways in which folklore and discourse analysis may be combined to yield a fuller understanding of the role of traditional knowledge in everyday conversation. It introduces the concept of 'folk discourse' and demonstrates how the technique of expansion (i.e. proceeding beyond what is actually said to discover what is actually meant) provides insight into the functions of folklore in non-performance contexts of social interaction. These points are illustrated with examples drawn from the author's field research in the French-Newfoundland community of L'Anse-à-Canards, Port-au-Port Peninsula.

Introduction

The past twenty years have witnessed an important revolution within the discipline of folklore. Where once folklorists devoted their efforts almost exclusively to a consideration of the text, modern concerns with cultural processes have led researchers to examine the contextual factors which influence the communicative import, both explicit and implicit, of traditional utterances. The isolation of the surface textual, textural, and contextual elements present during the performance of traditional genres has become the primary distinguishing feature of the communication theory of folklore.²
Despite these advances, however, folklore still tends to focus its attention on generic forms and oral modes of expression which fit into fixed categories clearly defined with respect to content, manifest form, and overt meaning. With few exceptions, folklorists have failed to study verbal utterances, occurring naturally in conversation, which make covert, non-traditional reference to overt, traditional forms in order to communicate culturally-significant, unspoken messages within the folk group. Put another way, researchers have not recognized the distinction between 'folklore' and 'folk discourse'.

The drawing of such a distinction is more than a gratuitous attempt to coin yet another neologism. The term 'folklore' has been a source of much contention since it was first proposed by William Thoms in 1846 as a replacement for the then-current 'popular antiquities'. The confusion is particularly acute in light of the communication theory which redefines folklore as a process of communicative interaction, as well as a collection of textual items. Hence, not merely the text of the tale, but also the skills and techniques employed in the telling of the tale, and the social interaction which develops within and because of the narrative context all are considered folklore, albeit quite different aspects of the total phenomenon. This view of
folklore has been greatly influenced by Hymes' (1962; 1964) early research on the sociology of language and has resulted in much investigation in the ethnography of performing folklore (that is, folklore as traditional performance of oral genres in natural contexts). However, the application of these principles remains largely dependent upon the folklorist first recognizing and selecting the oral genre to be so-analyzed. That is, most folklorists would first identify the presence of the verbal form, such as folksong, and then proceed to determine the cultural significance and functions of the genre, as performed in its natural context, as a form of oral communication.

This methodology has been of immense value in achieving an understanding of the function of folklore in its immediate performance context. However, it does not provide the information necessary to determine the role of traditional genres within the broader context of the community's (or folk group's) world view. In short, such an approach does not tell us much about how the enculturated knowledge of a particular body of tradition is manipulated and re-employed in a different form outside the formally-prescribed context of its performance. It gives the misleading impression that folklore is restricted, within a given group's tradition, to its expression in the formalized contexts normally associated
with specific genres.

There are a number of difficulties inherent in this perspective on folklore as performance. It implies that there exists an exclusive one-on-one correlation linking the textual item, the generic form, and the performance context, and that this correlation is restrictive in nature. For example, the folksong tradition of a given group is viewed as comprising the song texts, their formal traits, the normal situations in which they are sung, and their significance (or function). Although it has been recognized that shared knowledge is also a defining feature (e.g. Ben-Amos, 1972), folklorists tend to regard this knowledge as unidimensional in application. In general, few folklorists have considered the ways in which this body of knowledge is manipulated by the folk group in non-performance situations. More specifically, the discipline has tended to neglect the role of traditional knowledge within the course of 'ordinary' conversation.

Consider the following example. The setting is L'Anse-à-Canards, a small fishing community of some 200 inhabitants located on the isolated Port-au-Port Peninsula of Newfoundland. In this community, it is not uncommon for people to gather in the home of one or another of the inhabitants to enjoy each other's company, share a drink, talk business, and so on. In this instance, four fishermen are sitting at the kitchen table discussing the day's
catch, tomorrow's weather, etc. At one point in the conversation, the following exchange occurred:

Speaker A: How about old S?
B: Mademoiselle, voulez-vous danser?
    (All laugh)
C: Yeah, I, I saw him down at the store (i.e. the fish stores)
B: Did he throw his accordion at you?
    (All laugh)
C: No, but on/ only because he didn't have it on him. (All laugh)

As a participant during the exchange, I was not able to understand the full humor of what had been said. It was obviously a joke concerning the non-present 'S' but at the time, no further information was forthcoming which might have explained the remarks and the laughter which accompanied them. It was not until sometime after this conversation that I learned that 'S' was considered to be something of a 'character' because of his clowning at community social gatherings. He would play the accordion at parties, sing the one line of the one song which he knew (i.e. "Mademoiselle, voulez-vous danser?") and then, after playing on a little further, would suddenly fling his accordion across the floor.

This example illustrates the dual level on which
tradition manifests itself. Folklore is not only a
collection of textual items performed in particular,
formal contexts within the sociocultural unit. It is
shared knowledge as well, and it is this cognitive
component—not the texts, not their performance, nor
even the interactive contexts of their performance—
which defines the folk group. In the above example,
the knowledge of a certain aspect of the folksong
tradition of L'Anse-à-Canards is manipulated outside
the performance context and employed to communicate an
encoded message during an informal, verbal exchange. Not
being a member of this folk group and tradition, I was
unable to fully decode the message which was clearly
understood by the four discussants. In his discussion of
linguistic interaction, Hymes considers the defining
element of a speech community to be the "sharing of
rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech"
(Hymes, 1972:54). Likewise, folklore constitutes a
similarly-shared body of knowledge which may be manipulated
in various manners apart from and outside the folkloristic
performance context per se. It is the process by means
of which such implicit communication occurs in natural
conversation which leads me to refer to it as 'folk
discourse', as opposed to the explicit performance of the
genre, which is 'folklore'. The aim of researchers
involved in the analysis of discourse is to determine what is actually meant and communicated, as opposed to what is merely said; that is, to "expand" the text to include both explicit and implicit levels of message transmission.

In their discussion of discourse analysis, Labov and Fanshel (1977) refer to the concept of expansion as an important analytic technique, and in his review of this work, Corsaro (1981) goes so far as to treat expansion as the "crucial phase of analysis because it provides the basis for moving beyond actual speech to the identification of implicit or underlying propositions, and eventually to a description of how interaction is accomplished in discourse". The aim is "to expand the text beyond what is said to what is 'really' meant. Expansion generally involves linking information of varying levels of abstraction". Expansion, then, may be considered the opposite of that which occurs when interactants sharing a common referential framework communicate information in non-explicit, compressed (or reduced) form. Such is the case in the above example, where much is communicated but little is said.³

Folklore has much to contribute to the illumination of folk discourse events. Being trained in the recognition, analysis, and philosophy of traditional modes of expression, folklorists are the specialists with
regards to certain 'levels of abstraction' which discourse analysis attempts to relate to conversational interaction. The remainder of this paper will demonstrate how one specialized area of folklore—folk belief—may both contribute to and profit from the study of discourse.

Folk Belief and Folk Discourse

The term 'folk belief' can convey a wide range of meanings to the folklorist, depending on his theoretical orientation. To the functionalist, it may refer to the positive system of cognitive assumptions which represents the accepted world view of a particular sociocultural group. To the more generically or textually-oriented, a 'folk belief' is the text itself, either as uttered by the informant or as deduced from his behavior. To the more philosophically-minded researcher, 'folk belief' refers to the state of mind or the attitude of the informant vis-à-vis the tenets which his culture teaches him to accept. In short, the term 'folk belief', in folkloristic usage, may refer to cultural world view, to thematic texts (what Alan Dundes refers to as superstitions in his discussion of structural elements\(^4\)), or to the state of an individual's acceptance or rejection of purported truth.

This quality of the multiple denotative power of the term 'belief' was explored by Dégh in her treatment
of the legend genre. As Dégh and Vazsonyi (1975:119) point out in their influential article, "Legend and Belief":

"...it is not necessarily the belief of the narrator or the belief of the legend-transmitter that we have to consider; rather, we must consider...the belief itself which makes its presence felt in any kind of legend."

Here the authors illustrate the relationship between a specific genre—the legend—and an attitude, belief. Similarly, I am concerned with belief as a genre and belief as an attitude, and with how the textual item—or reference to it—may be employed in discourse for reasons quite apart from those normally associated with folk belief expression. As such, folk belief is viewed as tri-dimensional for the purposes of this discussion.

Having established, I hope, a parallel which will clarify some of the ambiguity inherent in the term 'folk belief', I would like to carry the legend-analogy a little further. During the late sixties and early seventies Dégh and other scholars reviewed the relationship between legend performance and participant belief and concluded that the latter is not a necessary prerequisite for the former. That is to say, a legend may be collectively performed without any of those present believing the legend
theme to be true—hence the anti-legend or negative legend. In like fashion, I contend that any item of folk belief—any text, if you like—can continue to be expressed even after the element of positive acceptance has receded from the context of its expression. That is, although positive belief is a possible component in the expression of belief statements, it is by no means a necessary component. In such cases, it is clear that the intended or potential message differs considerably from that communicated in contexts where a positive attitude prevails towards the specific item and that, therefore, the function of the traditional item is difference in each instance. At this point, perhaps, an example would best illustrate this distinction.

Since 1979, I have conducted field research into the belief system of L'Anse-à-Canards. In June, 1982, during an extended field trip to the area, I was present at an informal gathering of some of the younger (under 35) male members of the community. Talk was casual and gradually turned toward traditional verbal tricks and riddles, and the participants began testing each other's knowledge of the 'catch' involved in various tricks. During this contest—for it soon became apparent that the implicit goal was to outdo and, if possible, embarrass one another—one of the participants turned to another and said: "I'll bet you can't take the Jack of
spades in your pocket and walk around the house three times with it". The young man addressed looked puzzled and asked for a repetition of the challenge. The puzzlement turned to suspicion as the 'victim' attempted to divine the 'catch'. For some ten minutes, the precise wording was minutely scrutinized for clues by the addressee who, by now, refused to accept the challenge. At this point, the challenger said, with no small degree of scorn in his voice: "Don't worry, you won't meet the devil!". The others present found this rebuke quite amusing and responded with derisive laughter, much to the obvious discomfiture of the victim who, significantly, vehemently denied that his refusal was based on a fear of some supernatural encounter.

It was not until some time later, when I asked what the statement concerning the devil had to do with the prank, that I was able to fully appreciate the significance of what had transpired and been communicated among the men during this event. I was told that the older people in L'Anse-à-Canards once believed that if one were to walk around the house three times at midnight holding the Jack of spades in one's hand, the devil would appear. I was also told that this was still believed to be true in a nearby community whose residents are considered to be overly-superstitious by the people of L'Anse-à-Canards,
an exoteric view I have often encountered during the course of my fieldwork in L'Anse. By sarcastically 'reassuring' the victim of the catch-prank, the challenger was implicitly identifying him with the residents of this second community and thus, was accusing him of being unnecessarily fearful and naive.

It is clear that a traditional item of belief concerning the supernatural is a prominent component of the context of interaction described. More importantly, the attitude of all participants in the communicative event is quite clearly one of rejection of a belief known to have been accepted in the past within their own tradition. The above example of the expression of the contents of a belief system functions as a means of ridiculing the target of the catch-prank and to express the disapproval of his peers for his refusal to 'play the game' as is normally expected during such bantering among young male members of the community. I might add that, during subsequent interviews conducted in the nearby community, the above-mentioned belief was elicited and was described as true by informants.

This example demonstrates some of the complexity involved in attempting to determine the importance of participant attitude to the context of expression of folk belief. It is not sufficient merely to ascertain whether the participants view the belief as true or false,
although establishing this attitude is obviously fundamental. However, the message communicated by the reference to this belief item is determined in large part by two additional interconnected attitudes. The first is the acceptance of the truth of the basic belief statement by the residents of the second community. The second attitude bearing on the context is that of the residents of L'Anse-à-Canards vis-à-vis this strong adherence to supernatural belief. This attitude, one of condescension and amusement, is the result of the divergent courses each community has followed in its evolution from fundamentally similar cultural antecedents.

Hence, not one but three attitudes, all linked to the specific supernatural belief in question, must be considered:

1) the rejection of the belief by L'Anse-à-Canards residents;

2) the acceptance of the belief by certain residents of the second community; and

3) the exoteric view of this second community held by L'Anse-à-Canards residents.

Moreover, it is the combined influence of all three attitudes, and not the influence of each acting separately, which results in the strength of the rebuke. The difficulty this poses to the outsider is that none of these attitudes,
nor even the belief item itself, are overtly expressed
during the course of the exchange. Indeed, the strength
of the rebuke results directly from the non-verbalized
reference to the body of traditional knowledge shared by
the participants. For them, the one sentence composed
of seven words possessed, in this context, a wealth of
meaning based on its connotative and evocative quality.
It is only through expansion that the significance of
the utterance in discourse can be fully appreciated.

The distinction drawn here between the expression
of a belief and the expression of an attitude of belief
poses certain problems to the researcher. It means that
a communicative event in which a certain belief appears
to be central may not always be an accurate indicator
of the attitude of the participants in the event, nor
that that particular belief is a component of the
community's or group's world view. In the example
cited, I was able to determine the communication value
of the belief expression only after acquiring a full
description of the belief itself, information concerning
the esoteric-exoteric factors at work, and participant
attitudes, and viewing the whole in relationship to
the particular context of communication and to the social
'rules' governing all-male interaction in L'Anse-à-
Canards.
Closing Remarks

Despite the obvious benefits which can be derived from the study of folk discourse, there are equally obvious difficulties, and it is perhaps these very difficulties which account for the dearth of research by folklore in this area. It is apparent that protracted periods of field research within the folk group are essential, both to the collection of sufficient data for analysis and to the establishment of rapport between researcher and informants. The community's acceptance of the researcher is particularly critical if the researcher is to collect free discourse in natural, informal contexts. In addition, if expansion is to be applied to interpret folk discourse, a thorough familiarity with the community's body of folklore, social structures, and group norms is obviously prerequisite. Initially, then, it would appear that the folkloristic analysis of discourse is, because of practical constraints, dependent upon the undertaking of extensive preliminary research in the field. The recording of the data also poses a problem, since one is striving for naturally-occurring discourse, a consideration which renders the interview technique inappropriate.

This paper by no means pretends to provide all,
or even some of the answers to the questions it raises; indeed, it raises perhaps more problems than it solves. These will have to be addressed if the discourse model is to be of use to folklorists. Nor does this discussion mean to imply any inadequacies in the present state of folkloristic theory as applied to the study of oral tradition. Instead, it suggests an area of research which is the logical domain of any discipline concerned with the relationship between traditional, shared knowledge and the oral modes through which it finds expression.
Notes

1. The term 'performance' is used throughout this paper to refer to the folkloristic model, as opposed to the Chomsk yan, linguistic model.

2. For example, see Dundes (1964); Paredes and Bauman (1972); Ben-Amos and Goldstein (1975).

3. Small (1975) notes a similar example of reduction in his discussion of how a full narrative became compressed into a single phrase. The full communicative value of the phrase depended on a knowledge of the complete narrative.


5. See the collection of essays in Hand (1971).
References


