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The Shape of Time in Folk/Vernacular Narrative

Or, really, Some Considerations and Complications on the Way to Constructing (Possibly) a Computational Model of Narrative.

Those of you familiar with my work in computational folkloristics will be surprised with how I begin, and disappointed with how I end. So, fair warning.

Those of you here because I used the phrase “folk narrative” in the title of my paper are going to be disappointed because I don’t talk all that much about narrative.

Both of these disappointments are a product that I am really at a far earlier stage in this project than I imagined, a fact brought to life by finally setting aside (not enough) time to write this paper.

All that noted, I’ll begin with the following observation from the larger project:

We live in an age of data. Everywhere we turn we are, we are told, counted and measured in ways that mostly escapes our ability to comprehend. Every telephone call we make is logged somewhere. If we are driving, every turn we take is logged somewhere. If we are on-line, every link we follow is logged, and every page we scroll is noted. Much of this is, we are told, is for our benefit. Analysis of call logs allows carriers to understand traffic patterns, to use current facilities to their fullest, and to make better plans for future facilities based on actual needs of actual customers. Analysis of traffic patterns allows applications in our cars to offer us better routes, and, we assume, that such information accumulated as a history must surely contribute to better planning for civil engineering. Analysis of search engine and website usage gives us better results: results that are not only ranked in our likely preference but also of a higher quality. And, too, we get advertisements that are tailored to our interests.

It is this latter dimension, of being measured in order to be sold, that makes us, at least some of us, uncomfortable. It feels like we are no longer in control of ourselves, of our fates.

Surveillance in the service of our having a choice in our future is one thing. Surveillance in the service of others choosing our future is another matter altogether.

And so it seems almost inevitable that with the rise of data, and the power it promises, or threatens, to have over our lives, that there would be a perceived need for something to balance that power, to limit it in some fashion. Over and against the granularity, the sandpile of bits of data that our lives would seem to be reduced to when run through the necessary grindstone of

computer algorithms, we find ourselves wishing for something that understands us, or at least we understand, as a whole, as something that cannot be taken apart and understood as a sum of its parts.

In this, in what seems like the opening act of the data drama that will shape our lives, and our futures, in ways that we cannot yet anticipate—and yet so many individuals and companies our banking, quite literally, on our anticipation—we seem to have stumbled upon, or fallen back upon (however you prefer to imagine it), the strength of stories.

Stories, yeah! To the parapet folklorists, because we know stories!

Or do we?

Part of what I am going to argue today is that we don't.

Or, to put that another way, folklorists need to cease once and for all using the word story for every damned text we encounter. A lot of them aren't stories, and those that are are not necessarily as narrative as we would like to think. So, if this paper is anything, it is an exercise in personal hubris, my own failings as an analyst, blamed on disciplinary hubris.

With that noted...

At the very outset of his multi-volume *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur states that “what is ultimately at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function as well as in that of the truth claim of every narrative work is the temporal character of human experience” (3). Steeped in both Hegelian dialect as well as Heideggerian hermeneutics, Ricoeur’s process is to gather, slowly but steadfastly, all those facets of narrative from which he can draw upon to address what he regards as the necessary question which philosophy must ask and which also must be answered: *what should I do?* As a folklorist, I am not interested in such ethical questions, but, rather ethnographic questions like: *what do people think they should do and how do they know it?* To do that, I am going to address neither the dialectical nor the hermeneutical dimensions of Ricoeur’s work, but rather a fundamental assertion he makes in the sentences that follow those above, where he notes that:

The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. Or, as will often be repeated in the course of this study: time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. (3, emphasis added)

Ricoeur is not alone in assuming that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative”; his is simply one of the larger and better-known

treatments of narrative that finds itself on literary texts and, thus, in the process, misses how time is actually alternately imagined, or contained (if you prefer) in discourse. Folklorists are, by and large, no better, no worse in this regard, despite there being a reasonably compelling tradition of inspecting the contents of texts more closely to understand the relationship between them and time.

Time and Folk Narrative

In “The Structure of Narrated Time in the Folktale,” Bill Nicolaisen noted that folklorists tend to think of the relationship between various genres and time in rather broad terms.¹ Such generalizations are themselves not necessarily wrong nor without use. Noting that myths are, in terms William Bascom memorialized, about the time before time or that folktales are about time outside of time provokes our imaginations and the imaginations of the various audiences with which we engage. But when our thinking stops at the provocation, we ignore the very real differences in the way discourse structures time, and thus lose the opportunity to consider how time may or may not be managed differently in different genres, perhaps giving us a better sense not only of the genres themselves but also of how humans imagine time. (And this latter point is especially important when we consider Ricouer’s conflation of time and narrative.) Nicolaisen’s observation is part of his larger turn towards narrative studies in order to understand more precisely how people imagine the places in which they live. As he looked more closely at folktales in particular, with his careful eye for linguistic detail, he realized that “within the outer frame of timelessness, we have an inner frame of sequentially structured time that relies on the day as its basic unit of reference” (417).

Without being familiar with contemporary work in narratology, Nicolaisen constructed a framework for distinguishing between the discourse of a folktale, the actual words used, and the story that the discourse conveys, the events depicted. Focused on matters of time, he noted that there axes at play are narrated time and narration time. Perhaps just as

¹ Later in the essay, Nicolaisen himself articulated his own version of this idea of folk narratives negotiating two, or more, time streams: “Narrative time, or more precisely folk-narrative time, is consequently, once it has been appropriately and understandably signaled, ‘other’ time, time outside the chronological frame work which we usually impose on the past to make it accessible and recallable; it is not in this sense true timelessness, non-time or time standing still, but an attractively convenient suspension of historical time” (418).

importantly, he observed that rarely are the two times congruous, except when it comes to speech: a match between narrated time and narration time is “most likely to occur in the rendering of dialogue embedded in the story since the storyteller probably takes about as much time narrating it as the characters involved would have taken speaking it” (419–420). In almost all other cases, we will encounter a kind of *narrative compression*, in which “the time taken to narrate actions [is] much shorter than the actions narrated” (420).² While certain literary texts may play upon this convention, the convention in oral discourse is fairly well established, and it is a rare text that breaks with our understanding that “the total amount of narration time required to tell a story ... is bound to be almost always disproportionately shorter than the total time recounted in a story” (420).

With the inclusion of *recounted time* Nicolaisen introduced a third dimension of time that must be managed in discourse: “the total time encompassed by a story, and this recounted time consists of both narrated and non-narrated portions [and] is therefore the sum total of narrated and non-narrated time” (421). To illustrate the relationship, Nicolaisen compares narrated time to recounted time in the first ten texts of Stith Thompson’s *One Hundred Favorite Folk Tales*. (See Figure 1.) His summation of John the Bear (AT 301), the third tale in Thompson, reveals his scheme: “In contrast to a total recounted time of about 16 years, only portions of 19 days are narrated with greatly varying density and detail” (422). That is, the narrated time is the time of those events that are actively, or actually, described in the discourse of the narration. Recounted time includes elapsed time, or compressed time. In some cases this time is specified, but in many cases it is not. Consider for example the unspecified time between two events in Grimms 149, “The Rooster Beam”:

There was once a magician who was standing in the midst of a great crowd of people performing his wonders. He had a rooster brought in, which lifted a heavy beam and carried it as if it were as light as a feather. But a girl was present who had just found a four-leaf clover, and had thus become so wise that she could see through every deception, and she saw that the beam was nothing but a straw. So she called out, "You people, do you not see that it is a straw that the rooster is carrying, and not a beam?" The magic vanished immediately, and the people saw what it was, and drove the sorcerer away in shame and disgrace. He, however, full of inward anger, said, "I will avenge myself." Some time later the girl's wedding day arrived. She was all decked out, and went in a great procession across a field to the place where the church was. Suddenly they came to a swollen brook, and there was neither a bridge

² Nicolaisen seems to have developed his ideas solely based on the work of Günther Müller, who appears to have focused on the idea of narrative tempo (Müller 1968). While Nicolaisen references Propp elsewhere, he does not explicitly do so in this essay.

nor a walkway to cross it. So the bride nimbly lifted up her clothes, and was about to wade through it. She had just stepped into the water when a man near her, and it was the magician, called out mockingly "Aha! What kind of eyes do you have that think they see water?" Then her eyes were opened, and she saw that she was standing with her clothes lifted up in the middle of a field that was blue with flax blossoms. Then all the people saw it too, and they chased her away with ridicule and laughter.

The narrative proceeds through the conjunction of two events separated by an indeterminate, and thus also unimportant to the point of the story, amount of time. All we know is that the wizard has awaited his opportunity to get even. It begins with the kind of frame we expect of folk tales, "there was once", and having dropped us into that particular temporality, proceeds, as Nicolaisen concluded, in ordinary time. The event concludes with the wizard's vow, and then with a simple "some time later" we are once again in ordinary time.

But the indeterminacy of time is not necessarily a defining feature of folktales, and it might serve us better to think of it as exaggeration of a more normal discursive move that tellers make in order to move to the focus of a narrative. Across a wide range of oral historical accounts, mostly in the form of anecdotes, but also in a form discussed later, it is quite common for there to be an initial *orientation* that then leads to a narrative sequence. The following anecdote is from the Midwest and tells about a particular incident in the life of the teller:

And Joe Natalie was a true old world Italian
And he talked Italian
English, you know, but broken English
And a lot of the kids would go over there and steal an apple or a banana or something, you know, when
he wasn't looking
And I never did think to steal. If I stole something and my grandparents found out, I mean, my butt
was ... gone
They'd beat me until I couldn't sit down
So anyway, I was over there looking at bananas and this man came up and grabbed me by the arm
And he said he said you're the kid who stole the apple
I said I what?
He said you stole an apple. I said I never stole no such thing. He said no last Saturday
I said I have never stole anything in my life
I said if you go ask that man that works over there I usually come up and buy an apple or an orange or
something—you'd get a banana for like three cents, an orange for two cents or something

From the opening introduction of a particular historical individual up until the moment the

narrator repeats the fact that punishment would certainly follow any wrong-doing on his part, there is no particular series of clauses that are held together by the kind of *temporal juncture* which Labov and Waletzky define as crucial to a narrative sequence. The phrase “so anyway” acts, and indeed sounds like, “so one day” which is a familiar phrase to anyone who has done fieldwork as a segue into a story. (“So anyway” is familiar as well, but that’s for another time.)

In their pioneering work attending to the strings of clauses that make up any text, Labov and Waletzky distinguish between those clauses that establish the situation, or the current state, as the *orientation*, and, by and large, they are typically *free clauses*, clauses that are free to move earlier or later in a sequence of clauses without changing the meaning of the overall sequence. For those familiar with discourse analysis, this is very different from narrative clauses which, by definition within the scope of the kind of simple, mono-episodic personal experience narrative texts which Labov and Waletzky examined, are received as having a one-to-one correspondence with the events they represent. That is, if Action 1 was followed by Action 2 in the representation, then the clauses representing each action occur in the same order in the narration, Clause 1 and Clause 2. While this schema rules out more complicated forms of narration, it covers a surprising range of texts very well.

What the schema leaves out, however, is a rather wide range of materials that are largely under-attended by folklorists, anthropologists, and linguists: those forms of vernacular discourse which seem, from the discourse analysis perspective, to be made up entirely of orientation with no complication. Take for example this attempt to locate an individual mentioned in passing:

You remember Golden's Market? Let's say this is the block this is Second Street, this Rogers, this Maple. Well, Golden Market was on this corner and EJ's bakery was in there, and halfway ... there's a pharmacy in there now, called Value Plus or I don't know now. But right in there was where that little old lady, in her house, had this little clothing store.

There is literally no narrative in the text. It is all locative, and, if we are honest, a surprising amount of vernacular discourse, even talk about the past, is not, as Ricouer insists, in narrative but in forms better described as locative, expository, or even simply descriptive. (My sense is that place name researchers are very familiar with this.)

In another text that demonstrates how much of talk about the past can be dominated by

other modes of discourse, a speaker is in the middle of discussing the many kinds of jobs he has held over the years and is drawn to expand on a particular one:

He was in the excavating business,
so he called me to come up and showed me the job.
And we dug house basements.
And that was when they were remodeling a lot filling stations,
making them super service and that sort of thing,
so I said, yeah, I'll take it.
So I worked there about two years and a half.
And then we came back to Bloomington.

I would argue that this is rather typical of the many hours of speaking about the past I have recorded in Indiana and in Louisiana. There is narrative, but it is often seemingly limited to sticking together bits of exposition. In the text above, the narrative is really a function of a kind of constructed dialogue: “he called … so I said yeah” which is a fairly widespread narrative trope. If we return to Nicolaisen’s notion of recounted time versus narrative time, we will find that the recounted time is a bit fuzzy, probably something on the order of a little over the time specified in the story itself, which is, according to the second to last clause, two and a half years.

But how are we to understand the narrated time within this text? If we take the dialogue as our narrative kernel or, as Labov and Waletzky would describe it as *the* narrative N, then how do the other clauses affect our understanding of N? One of the things that becomes quite clear is that those portions of the text that are narrative in nature are, as Nicolaisen observed, within the scope of a day. In the case of the constructed dialogue, the duration is mere seconds. These sharp clear actions are counterposed by long periods of habitual action, which perhaps mimics how the teller himself felt about that period in his life. It’s not entirely clear if recounted time is dimension worth discussing: it would appear that the story specifies that time and leaves it at that. (The same goes for the period of time involved, which would appear to be a kind of general, personal past: that is, “some years ago.”)

One response to these texts might be that they aren’t very good stories to begin with, which seems an odd evaluative perspective for a discipline that attempts to the social science fringe of the humanities. And yet, I would argue, accounts of personal experience are just full of exactly this kind of discourse. In *Listening for a Life*, Patricia Sawin provides

the following account from Bessie Eldreth of her final encounter with a possible revenant. For a long time, she told Sawin, after her husband died there were lights that would flash in her bedroom:

And, uh, it was
For a long time it would kindly
It'd dash me, you know.
But I got till I, when I'd turn off the light I'd close my eyes real tight.
But now, honestly, that light would go down in under the cover with me.
It did.
That light'd
When I'd turn that cover down and after the light was turned off,
That light'd go down under that cover as pretty as I ever saw a light in my life.
And, uh, I had a quilt on my bed that I thought might be the cause of it,
That ... that was on his bed when
Before he died.
And I rolled that quilt up and sent it to the dump.
Because I felt like that made that's the reason.
But I still saw the light.
It didn't make
It didn't change a thing.
But the light ... for a long time, well for two of three years or longer ... probably than that, light
would flash up.
But I've not seen it now in a good while. (126-127)

If there is a narrative kernel in this text, it is in the two clauses: "I had a quilt on my bed that I thought might be the cause of it ... And I rolled that quilt up and sent it to the dump."

Another example of an encounter with the supernatural, a memorate, this time from my own fieldwork:

One day me and my daddy
My daddy was sick
His stomach kept hurting him, hurting him
Every night he would lay in the bed cramped up so bad
Said there was a big old knot in his stomach
He said he just couldn't take it
We had to sit on his legs to stretch him out
Stretch his arms out so that cramp would leave his stomach
So mama said one day ...

We had an old seventy-one Ford pickup truck
With a purple hood
So one day mama said —
My daddy's name was Taise —
She said Taise we going to bring you to the treater
I was kind of small
So they brought me with them
And the only thing I can remember, man, is my daddy going in the house with this old lady
And I was still in the truck
Because they wouldn't let me go in the house
So when he come outside
He throwed up snakes
Out of his stomach
Out of his mouth
I mean six seven eight nine ten
Throwed them up
And when we left from there,
Daddy was fine
Never caught a cramp again.

More than previous examples, the structure of this text is quite clear, with an extensive orientation focused on an ongoing state and then a complication that stutters to begin with two instances of “one day” a bit of constructed dialogue and a digression to remind the audience that the narrator was a child during the time of the narrative. With all that work done, the text transitions into a clear sequence of narrative clauses which actually begin with “And the only thing I remember....”

Discussion

With little to no time left, I want to point out that, first, clearly Ricoeur was wrong and Nicolaisen was right, but both worked over thirty years ago and we haven’t caught up to the argument they never had. One of the things the emergence of performance studies promised, was a closer look at the texts themselves as manifestations of their context and as manifestations of the intersection between culture and personality. Work by Sawin, by Capps and Ochs, by Shuman, and by Cashman have taken us a certain way down the path but I would argue that it’s time, no pun intended, to roll up our sleeves and “get all linguistic” on texts.

With this small collection of examples, we can first address the fact that while narrative is not the only way that humans account for their temporality. Indeed, even within those texts where it might be considered the structuring modality, it is not necessarily the dominant modality in terms of proportions.

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Nicolaisen 1982

“While drawing attention to the total extent of recounted and narrated time and to the proportional relationship between them, Table I does not specify what is perhaps even more important, i.e. the points in recounted time at which significant days are narrated, and the degree of generosity or miserliness bestowed by the storyteller on the narration of such days. Both the intentional selection and the relative amplitude of structurally meaningful days are, however, in the long run more likely than any other aspect of narrated time to throw light on the organisation of folk-narrative art. It is also reasonable to expect the tension between recounted time and narrated time to be of greater narrative significance to

the creation or recreation of a felicitous tale, through the act of oral storytelling in the folk-cultural register, than the tension between narration time and narrated time which Muller considers to be of primary importance in the telling (reading) of sophisticated written narratives.¹³ Naturally, the peculiar distribution of those portions of narration time which represent narrated time over the whole of the narrative performance is nevertheless an important factor in the foregrounding actualization of any story, even in an oral-aural setting.” [424]

For a wider intellectual history of “narrative time” see Ricoeur’s 1980 essay of the same name in *Critical Inquiry*.

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