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Collaborative Anecdotes: an Arapaho Conversational Speech Genre

This paper is based on videotape of naturally-occurring conversation in Arapaho, taken during the last three years. One feature of this conversation is the creative recounting of past humorous anecdotes. These accounts almost always involve a situation where both speakers were involved in the past event. One speaker initiates the recounting, but the other speaker is then expected to participate by suggesting additional details to further the narration, while nevertheless remaining the subsidiary teller. Interestingly, though the anecdote is a true event, the suggested details can constitute embellishments or creative additions to the scene, based on what “could” have happened or would have been especially funny if it had happened. Thus the genre is part anecdotal, part story creation, and fundamentally collaborative. It is also fundamentally focused on humor, with topics typically involving subjects such as misadventures in hunting, “snagging” women, and drunkenness.

This genre raises complex issues in Linguistic Anthropology, Conversation Analysis, and Ethnopoetics. Among the issues to be discussed are: 1) the ways in which uptake of suggestions do or do not occur on the part of the lead teller; 2) the rules and expectations for intervention by the "assistant teller"; 3) the overall narrative structure produced by this process; and 4) the types of affiliation and social positioning which occur through this conversational process, both in terms of the content of the resultant anecdote and in terms of the cooperative process among the speakers.

This paper draws on work in Conversation Analysis and turn taking for issue #1, but with heavy attention placed on use of gesture, gaze and body movement and positioning. It draws on earlier studies of collaborative narration for issues #2-3. However the preceding work is not heavily anthropological in nature and lacks focus on indigenous languages. I will argue that, unlike the cases in most of the preceding literature, the Arapaho case involves a formal narrative practice and genre. Finally, in regards to issue #4, I draw on work by Basso (*Portraits of Whiteman*, 1979) and Bauman (*Story, Performance and Event*, 1986) to focus on the performative, ethnopoetic dimension of the narratives, in particular examining the way in which the “lead narrator” role is linked to social positioning as a language/performance expert, while also examining how the narratives often involve recounting of potentially embarrassing events or descriptions, and thus exhibit strong degrees of interpersonal affiliation and tolerance between the tellers, for an audience of listeners.

Overall, conversation practice has received little attention among Native American languages, and very little video of natural interaction is available. While narrative has received a great deal of attention in Native America, the less formalized, more interactive genre of anecdotal narration described here is a linguistic practice not otherwise well documented, so far as I know. The paper seeks looks at a practice at the crossroads between conversation and ethnopoetics, and adopts a perspective theoretically at crossroads between Conversation Analysis and Performance Studies.