Towards a Hoosier Economy of Talk: Poetic Structuring in Indiana Narratives

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Since the general theme of this conference is the economy of Indiana, I decided several months ago to entitle my paper “Towards a Hoosier Economy of Talk”! In doing so, I may have bitten off something slightly different than I want to chew. I am not doing economic linguistics here (though I’m sure there could be such a thing); in fact, a better title might be “Towards a Hoosier Aesthetics of Talk.” To talk about language as a kind of economy is to be metaphorical. To talk about language as an aesthetic phenomenon is not. It is my feeling (and I think the word “feeling” may be the most appropriate one) that the most basic linguistic structuring devices are aesthetic, and that our most basic strategies for interpreting language are aesthetic.

My concern with language and aesthetics is not original with me. The general ideas I will present owe the most to my teacher, A. L. Becker, who argues that particular uses of language (particular sentences, for example) are creative, new, and individual by virtue of their aesthetic value (Becker, 1982). Language as a social phenomenon (shared competence) may be a matter of “logical” convention, but individual language is moral and aesthetic.

More specifically, my work on oral narrative as poetic owes its focus to work on narrative and poetry by anthropologists and literary theorists. A well-known study by literary theorist Samuel Levin (1962) is based on Roman Jakobson’s (1960) enigmatic claim that poetry is characterized by the juxtaposition of paradigmatic classes on syntagmatic structure. Levin attempts to refine Jakobson’s claim into a useable device for distinguishing poetry from prose. The diagnostic of poetry is what Levin calls “coupling.” He isolates two kinds of linguistic equivalence: positional equivalence (the equivalence that holds between two terms in the same grammatical slots) and “natural” (semantic or extralinguistic) equivalence. A poem, he says, places naturally equivalent terms in positional equivalence, thereby reinforcing their natural equivalence.

Using slightly different criteria for poeticness, Dell Hymes (1981) shows that Chinookan narrative, a genre traditionally not considered poetic, in fact is: Chinookan stories are structured in lines and verses, marked, respectively, by internally consistent structure and by external particles. Hymes thereby raises an important ethnographic question: to what extent do the genre categories of a culture really reflect structural differentiation? Just because we call something “prose” does that mean that it is really structurally different from poetry?

Anthropologist Joel Scherzer (1974), who uses an overtly Jakobsonian conception of the poetic function, shows that Cuna curing chants are poetic. Scherzer also shows that, in a Jakobsonian formulation, less exotic genres like simple conversational requests for repetition are poetic, too. The exchange “On the sofa” - “Where?” - “On the couch” places paradigmatically equivalent items in syntagmatically equivalent slots. Scherzer’s, and, indirectly, Levin’s work raises a second, complementary question: Does Jakobsonian (or any other kind) of structural “poeticness” really distinguish ordinary language from poetry? The prototypical examples of ordinary language as poetry are accidental couples of the “I’m a poet but I don’t know it” sort, but perhaps we speak in poetry more often than we think, in everyday talk.

All of the research I have just all too briefly summarized arises from or is an attempt to deal with the age-old, usually tacit assumption that regular, ordinary, everyday language is logical, or practical, or mundane, and that aesthetic language, characterized in its highest and finest incarnation by poetry, is structurally different from and evokes a different response than regular language. It is my intention in this essay to present a corpus of completely spontaneous monologic ordinary talk and to demonstrate that by the criteria for poeticness that have been suggested above this ordinary talk is structured poetically and appreciated aesthetically. I will provide evidence to suggest that these natural stories are characterized by the following features:

(a) juxtaposition of paradigmatic structure on syntagmatic; “coupling,”

(b) line and verse structure, marked with verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as internal ones.

I will then discuss these findings with reference to the following questions:

(a) What are the ramifications of this with respect to the ethnographic technique of looking for native categories of speech events? Culturally, Americans distinguish poetry from ordinary language, but the actual linguistic facts suggest something different.

(b) Why should ordinary talk be poetic? To what extent is the aesthetic form of any linguistic utterance crucial?

The Heartland stories are a collection of sixteen narratives of personal experience collected over the past three years in and around Fort Wayne, Indiana. The Fort Wayne storytellers range in age from twenty to sixty, and their stories are about such things as car wrecks, deer hunting, athletes’ initiation rituals, meeting a future spouse, and finding a pet cat. The only requirement imposed on the collectors was that the stories be about the speakers’ personal pasts.

The structure of each story is internally quite consistent. Some tellers use many subordinate clauses, some use none; some tellers divide clauses sharply with asyndeton, and some begin each clause with an “and” or a “so.” Tellers thus have individual styles. Common to all but the most hesitant, unwilling stories, though, are features strongly reminiscent of the poetic features which Jakob-
what a story is really about an abstract level (Postany, 1947). Compare and
contrast (1972), a eulogy, are included. On the other hand, there is no
evidence to suggest that the abstract level of the story is really about an
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other sociolinguists look at everyday talk from an interactional point of view. They are interested in how a speaker's syntactic choices help, or hinder, the delicate process of negotiating a communicative interaction (of. Gumperz 1982).

What I am suggesting is a third approach. This approach would fuse the ethno poetic concerns of linguistic anthropologists with the syntactic concerns of structural linguists. That is, it would start from the assumption that any kind of language is potentially a thing of beauty, not only to the doting linguist, but also in the ears of everyday hearers. It would look at syntactic choice as it contributes to the poeticness of talk, rather than just as it contributes to content or social interaction. If this approach helps us understand why Hoosiers talk the way they do about cats, cars, and fishing worms, it has already accomplished something. If it helped to free linguists from our excessively logical, pragmatic assumptions about what language is for, that would be even better.

NOTES
1. Work on this project has been partially supported by a Summer Faculty Research Grant from Indiana University - Purdue University at Fort Wayne. I would like to thank the students in Language and Culture, 1981 and 1982, who helped collect this corpus of data.
2. Or, for Aristotle, by tragic drama.
3. Mary Louise Pratt (1977) takes on the opposite project, that of showing how literary language is ordinary, in a fascinating study.
4. The term "paradigmatic" is used here the way Jakobson uses it (1960: 338) to refer to broad Saussurean semantic and associate classes. The more common but less interesting view of paradigmatic classes as classes of items which can fill the same syntagmatic slot (the view of Hjelmslev [1956: 132]) and of most contemporary textbooks (eg. Lyons 1968: 73) completely begs the Jakobsonian question.
5. Cf. Jack Kerouac's On the Road, where locomotion couplings usually involve verbs like "rush," "roar," or "run": "Dean ran like Groucho Marx from group to group, digging everybody. Periodically we rushed out to the car to pick up more people. Damien came." (Kerouac 1955: 126).

REFERENCES