A MODEL FOR TEXTUAL VARIATION IN FOLKSONG *

Tom Burns
Folklore Institute
Indiana University

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a model for textual change in folksong. It is hoped that the model will be useful as a device in at least three ways: first, to bring together the various concepts dealing with textual variation which have been advanced by scholars; second, to clarify the relationships among different types of textual change; and third, to suggest possible types of changes which might otherwise be overlooked. To the degree that textual changes exhibited in folksong are paralleled by changes in oral narratives, the model may also be useful in the study of variation in narrative materials.

II. Previous Scholarship

D. K. Wilgus, in the section of his Anglo-American Folksong Scholar ship Since 1898 devoted to variation in folksong texts, indicates that while the ballad war "stimulated the study of oral transmission, the intensity of the dispute hampered careful study."[1] The fact of the matter is that those scholars concerned with variation tended not to focus on the process of variation itself but to utilize the evidence of variation to advance their causes as degenerationists, diffusionists, or "Emersonians." Interpreting the fact of variation rather than exploring the process or types of variation was what interested these scholars. Thus, while there exist, for example, several superior historical geographical studies of certain individual ballads - studies based on the analysis of a great many variants of a single ballad - there are few studies which either treat in depth the process of change or attempt to systematically identify and order types of textual variation in folksong.

The first work to focus on textual variation as significant in itself was Tristram P. Coffin's The British Traditional Ballad in North America (1950).[2] In the chapter of this book devoted to "A Description of Variation in the Traditional Ballad of America," Coffin defines, discusses and illustrates most of the major types of textual change and suggests the forces which lie behind them. However, Coffin's division of change into textual alteration (minor changes) and story variation (changes affecting the mood or plot of a song) is rather artificial and tends to obscure the basic similarity of the changes at both levels. It should be noted that while Coffin's division of change is artificial from the point of view of the study of process, it is useful to his real purpose in the chapter which is to indicate his criteria for differentiating story variants in the bibliographic survey of ballads which follows.

Most scholars who have considered the general subject of textual variation in Anglo-American folksong in the past fifteen years have added little to what Coffin had to suggest. Malcolm Laws in his chapter

"American Ballad Forms and Variants" in his Native American Balladry[3]
recognizes the various types of textual change and the forces which
lie behind them, but he stresses the basic stability of most songs
and tends to view most change as degenerative.[4] Laws does make one
important contribution to the study of variation by indicating the
significance of the internal nature of the song to the possibility
for change. Laws discusses and illustrates the fact that the more
loosely structured the contents of a song are, the more likely it is
to undergo change.[5]

The most recent work to consider the matter of textual variation is
Anglo-American Folksong Style by Roger Abrahams and George Foss.[6]
Besides more fully illustrating the various types of textual change
in folksong, Abrahams and Foss' contribution to the study of variation
is to indicate the bi-polar direction of change (dramatization vs.
lyrication[7] and localization vs. universalization[8]).

What the study of textual change in folksong seems to lack is a basic
framework within which all of the specific change concepts developed
by various scholars can be seen and understood. In Dundes' terms, it
is for the purpose of liquidating this lack that the model in this paper
is presented.

III. Why Textual Variation?

Before elaborating the model of types of textual change, it is necessary
to consider briefly the principal forces causing change. One of the
problems of previous scholarship on variation has been the confusion
of types of change with the causes of change. For instance, forgetting
is sometimes cited along with localization as a type of change. Other
problems have arisen due to the confusing way in which the causes for
change have been handled. Coffin, for instance, identifies three forces
for variation: the personal factor, trends in folk art, and print.[9]
Such a listing suggests that trends in folk art and print are autonomous
or superorganic forces for change apart from the performer. The fact
of the matter is that trends in folk art (easthetic trends) and print
(one vehicle for transmission) are simply two elements influencing
change at the personal level. If we are to come to an understanding
of why textual change takes place, we must focus on the individual and
reckon with the forces which exist within him and impinge upon him to
bring about change.

Most of those who have considered the matter of textual variation have
pointed out the importance of a performer's mishearing, misunderstanding
or forgetting as forces for change. Some important factors which in
turn influence mishearing, misunderstanding and forgetting are: 1) limi-
ted mental capacity, 2) duration of exposure, 3) the inherent nature
of the song and its parts, and 4) the personality of the performer
(included in this last category are the social and cultural values oper-
ative in the individual). It seems that regardless of an individual's
desire he may not have the ability to comprehend parts or remember the
whole of a song text considering the given degree of his exposure.
Likewise, a song text which is loosely structured or which contains
words or actions foreign to the individual's understanding or whose
tune and text are estranged at points,[10] may affect a performer's ability

to understand or retain certain materials of a song. Personal idio-
syncracies or the working out of social pressures or cultural values
in the individual may well make for the conscious or unconscious rejection
of or attraction to (Coffin's emotional core) specific song text ele-
ments. Like the awareness of other oral versions of a song, the know-
ledge of the text of a song in print is another aspect of the performer's
experience which may affect the song he finally produces.

It should be pointed out that while mishearing, misunderstanding and
forgetting are essentially passive or largely unconscious causes for
textual change in folksong, creation (composition, recreation, recomp-
osition) is for the most part a conscious act on the part of an indi-
vidual.[11] Creation or recreation tends to be a particularly important
cause of textual change in traditions which value originality or im-
provisation. In the highly "creation" conservative Anglo-American
tradition, creation or recreation exists as a force for change more
at the level of the substitution of words and phrases than at the level
of stanza additions or complete reworking of a peice. It seems that in
Anglo-American tradition textual changes resulting from the more ex-
tensive forms of recreation have most often been the product of literary
tradition. Whether conscious or unconscious, textual changes are af-
fected by the individual and it is to this individual's limitations,
idiosyncracies and socio-cultural experience that we must look for the
causes of these changes.

IV. The Model

The following model is built upon the simple assumption that there are
only three basic types of textual change that are possible. In short,
material can be taken away (Subtraction), material can be added (Addi-
tion) and material can be rearranged (Rearrangement). A specific
type of textual alteration may involve any one or combination of these
three basic changes. For example, a common type of textual change
involves the substitution of portions of the text from one song for
portions of another. This type of textual alteration is the product
first of Subtraction and then Addition of material. With three variables
(Addition, Subtraction and Rearrangement) there exist seven possible
ways to characterize textual variation (each variable alone - 3, paired
combinations - 3, and all three variables together - 1). The three
basic change types and their combinations can be represented by the
intersection of three circles as in Figure 1. What will become apparent
shortly is that nearly all concepts developed by Anglo-American folk-
song scholars to deal with the subject of textual variation fall within
the bounds of Addition or Subtraction, or Subtraction and Addition
(Substitution). The implications of this fact will be discussed later.

Before we consider the specific concepts of textual variation that have
been defined by analysts and how these concepts are placed according to
the model, it is necessary to emphasize that by textual variation is
meant change at all levels of song material. Thus, Subtraction as a
basic type of change describes the loss, for whatever reason, of textual
material from a word through phrases, line, lines, stanza, stanzas to
the point where perhaps only a title or tune is retained. Textual
change is not being used here as Coffin employs the term to mean minor
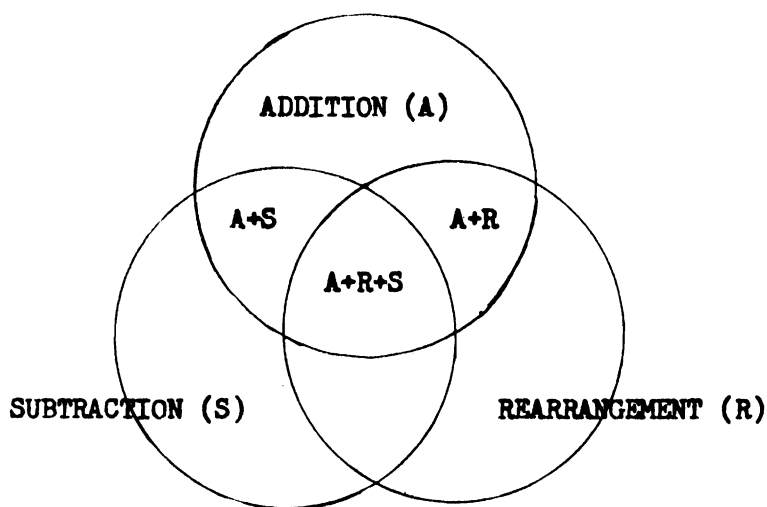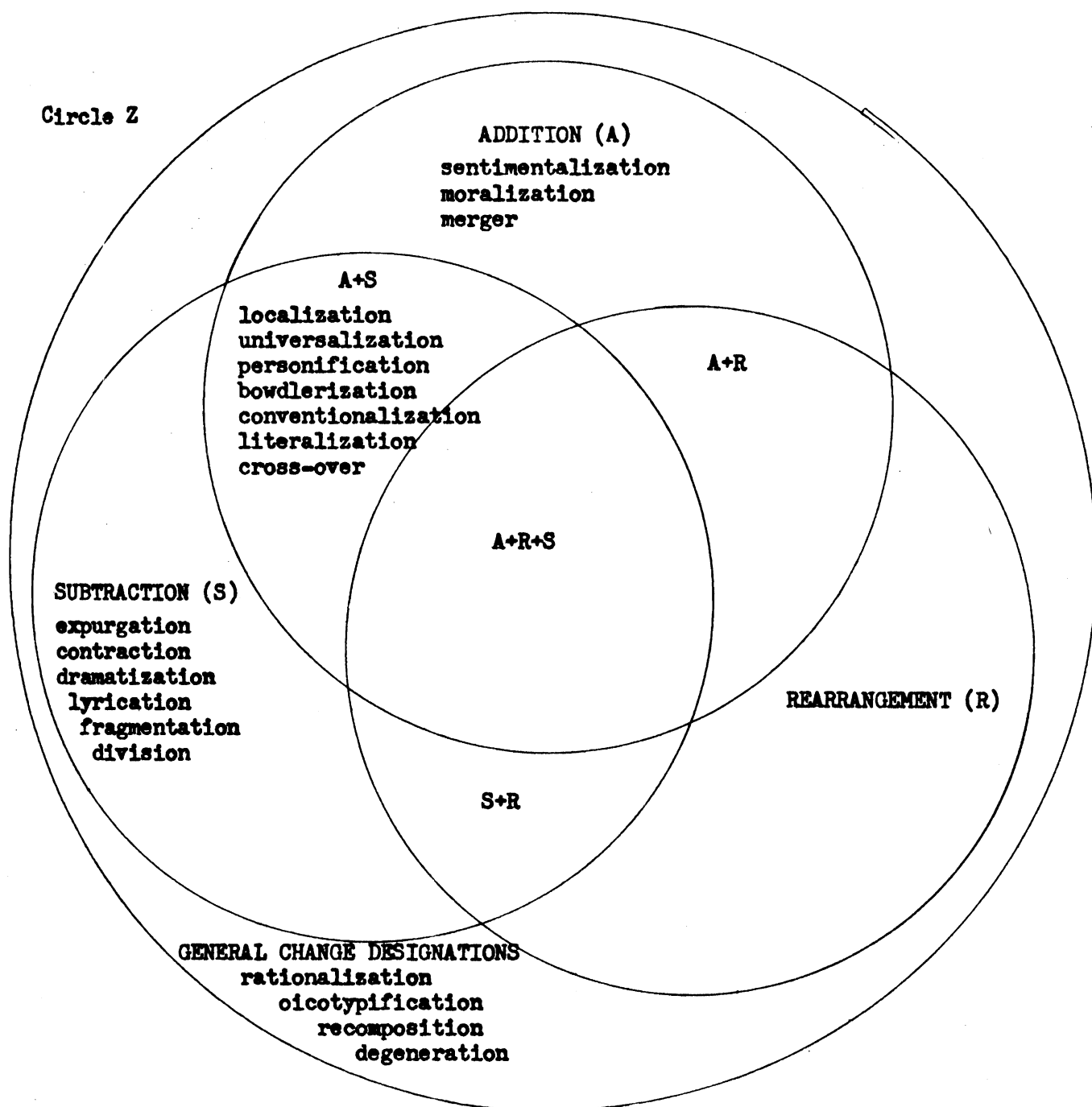changes which do not significantly affect mood or story.

Figure 1

Figure 2

A brief survey of the literature on textual variation in folksong has revealed nineteen different types of change with which Anglo-American folksong scholars have been primarily concerned. All but four of these concepts refer to changes involving Addition or Subtraction or Addition and Subtraction. These types of variation are differentiated from one another by the kind, level and/or degree of song material involved in the change. The four other change designations are of a very general nature and can conceivably encompass any type of possible change. What follows is a brief consideration of each of these specific change concepts under the appropriate model heading, i.e. Addition, Subtraction, Subtraction and Addition (Substitution). The concepts are arranged within these headings according to the level of material to which the change concepts refer from least to most inclusive (i.e., word or phrase to several stanzas).

A. Addition

sentimentalization - a process usually associated with the addition of song material at the stanza level throughout a song text. The added material is generally descrptive in nature and functions to heighten the listener's feelings toward an act, scene or character. That this type of change is largely the product of social or aesthetic pressure is apparent, but exactly why this change is so prevalent in American ballad tradition remains something of a mystery.

moralization - the addition of material, usually a stanza at the conclusion of a song, which states explicitly the lesson supposedly to be learned from the song. This material is often addressed directly to the audience or some portion of it. It is perhaps fair to say that one reason moralization arises as a type of change in folksong is in response to social pressure to make explicit the meaning of a song which is no longer evident for the audience and therefore cannot be taken for granted.

merger - the process whereby two songs become one either through simple compounding or through fusion of their elements. This type of textual change is fairly rare in Anglo-American folksong tradition and is likely to occur only when the songs involved are close in content, mood and theme.

B. Subtraction

expurgation - the deletion by the performer of selected song material, usually bawdy or obscene material, in response to social pressures. This form of subtraction most often takes place at the level of the stanza, particularly a concluding bawdy stanza, but can occur at the level of phrases or lines.

contraction - (compression, concentration) - the most general of the terms for Subtraction, "contraction" can refer to the loss of any type of material at any level. Usually, however, it is implied that materials essential either to plot or mood are retained while peripheral material is shed.

dramatization - refers to a particular direction that compression takes wherein a single or climactic act becomes more and more the focus of

attention due to the shedding of peripheral action and descriptive material. This change process most often occurs at the level of the loss of stanzas. Although this form of change is generally associated with Subtraction, there seems to be no reason that at the same time peripheral action and descriptive detail is lost, the focal action cannot be somewhat elaborated through the addition of dramatic material.

lyrication - change opposite to that of dramatization and involving the progressive loss of all kinds of action elements while detail capable of eliciting a particular mood or emotion is retained. Here, as in dramatization, there seems to be no reason that the loss of action components cannot be accompanied by the addition of appropriate descriptive detail in new stanzas.

fragmentation - refers to an extreme state of contraction wherein the loss of material (either of action or mood) becomes so extensive that what remains of the song text is no longer considered a complete peice.

division - a process which occurs infrequently in Anglo-American tradition and which is characterized by a song splitting into two or more songs. Such a change process is most likely to occur among songs which are episodic, lengthy and loosely structured.

C. Subtraction plus addition (Substitution)

localization - the process whereby details of a folksong, particularly those of person, place and time, are replaced by local counterparts which account for the song's special local relevance. The process of localization is considerably aided when local events attached to local names and places at least loosely parallel the events and characters in a song.

universalization - a process exactly counter to localization. Change in this instance involves the substitution of generalized categories (the three sisters) or common names (John) for specific designations (Emilou, Adelade and Marge; Egbert). Whether the change that is brought about is one of localization or universalization, the result is much the same - to make identification with the contents of a song easier and more intense for an audience.

personification - change which involves the substitution of the first person for the third person point of view in a song. The usual effect of such a change is to place the performer in the role of the song's major character, thereby bringing the performer and his specific performance more to the attention of the audience. Personification represents one of the first intrusive steps by the performer as an interpretive agent into the song.

bowdlerization - the substitution of socially acceptable words, phrases or stanzas for song material considered too coarse to be related, given the social situation of the performance.

conventionalization - a process whereby familiar, almost formulaic words or phrases (cliches) are substituted for forgotten original counterparts.

considered as a factor in variation[12] perhaps because such a change is not prevalent in the Angl-American ballad tradition that has been the focus of most scholarly attention. Rearrangement as a factor in textual change in the Anglo-American folksong tradition is possibly rather slight; but, from what little work has been done with the American Negro song traditions in which improvisation is highly valued, we might assume Rearrangement to be a much more significant factor of textual change in these traditions.

3. It may well be that certain genres of folksong exhibit particular types of textual change and not others. For instance, textual variation in the ballad may be characterized for the most part by changes of Addition, Subtraction and Substitution, as has been indicated for Anglo-American tradition. Textual variation in lyric and descriptive song on the other hand may prove to be primarily the result of changes of Rearrangement or Rearrangement in conjunction with Addition and/or Subtraction. Likewise, different song traditions may be characterized by different types of textual changes. If so, then the reason for these differences should be traceable to different cultural sets which permit or sanction different types of behavior by the performer with regard to his use of song texts. Textual changes may vary with time as well as with genre and culture. Viable, on-going song traditions may exhibit either different types of variation or broader ranges of variation than do waning song traditions. Comparative studies of textual changes, both cross genre and cross cultural, are needed to shed light on these matters. Such studies are predicated, of course, on a renewed interest by folk-song scholars in the area of process.

NOTES

[1] New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1959, p. 277.

[2] Philadelphia, 1950, revised 1963.

[3] Philadelphia, 1957, revised 1964.

[4] Laws, Native American Balladry, pp. 71-77.

[5] Ibid., pp. 77-82.

[6] Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968.

[7] Abrahams and Foss, Anglo-American Folksong Style, p. 24.

[8] Ibid., pp. 29 ff.

[9] Coffin, The British Traditional Ballad in North America, p. 1.

[10] Wilgus, Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship, p. 279.

[11] Abrahams and Foss, Anglo-American Folksong Style, pp. 24-25.

[12] Coffin, The British Traditional Ballad in North America, p. 9. Coffin briefly suggests that shifting of lines, phrases and stanzas within ballads often occurs.