

## INTRODUCTION

### CONVERSATIONAL GENRES OF FOLKLORE

John H. McDowell

Folklore studies have long been bedeviled by a motley crew of verbal genres that generally fall into the interstices of our classification schemes, genres such as the nickname, proverb and proverbial expression, wordplay, riddle, catch, joke, taunt, greeting and leave-taking, charm, memorate, and personal experience story. While each of these traditional expressive forms can be associated with other, more established genres (for example, many jokes, along with the memorate and personal experience story clearly belong to the supercategory of narrative) and some of them, for example the proverb, can stand alone, there has nonetheless been a tendency to perceive a broad affinity linking these genres into a discrete category of traditional verbal expression. Terms like "the minor genres," "proverbs and allied forms," or "gnomic forms" have been applied to them, but without much conviction or clarity.

The term "conversational genres" was introduced into the folkloristic vocabulary by Roger Abrahams in his article, "A Rhetoric of Everyday Life: Traditional Conversational Genres," published in the Southern Folklore Quarterly in 1968. In proposing this term, Abrahams mentions the "back-and-forth movement of converse" present in "a number of interpersonal types of verbal expressions" (1968b: 51). This attempt to formulate the logic for the perceived affinity among these forms embodies the orientation of the emerging folkloristic paradigm of the day, the contextual approach. A specific social context, conversation, is identified as the natural habitat of all these expressive forms; their affinity resides in the conversational ethos that pervades them all. The formulation "conversational genres" directs our attention to performance contexts, and to the uses of these verbal expressions in real-world social settings.

Construing these expressive forms as "conversational" has proven to be highly suggestive, yet it is important to determine in precisely

what sense they are in fact conversational. There are perhaps two different senses in which these forms are conversational, and at least one sense in which they are not. The conversational genres of folklore are not strictly conversational in the sense of lying within the domain of ordinary, unmarked speech, for they bear the mark of their provenience from a realm of special artifice clearly stamped upon them. These folklore forms may be thought of as conversational in two different ways: one, they may serve as the substance of a conversation, as proverbs and personal experience stories often do; or two, they may incorporate prominent conversational mechanisms, for example, the sharing of turns at talk, into their extra-conversational performance frameworks, in the manner of the riddle or catch.

The conversational genres of folklore establish an interface between two broad categories of discourse, which we might label ordinary speech and poetic speech. Ordinary speech (a somewhat problematic concept) exhibits a casual seemingly spontaneous and natural style of discourse. Poetic speech, by way of contrast, is full of artifice, constituted, according to Roman Jakobson (1966), by parallel structures. The conversational genres of folklore possess certain qualities, for example poetic textures, and repeatability as pre-coined items, that stand at variance with the unrehearsed aura of ordinary conversation. It is for this reason that these forms are so often charged with special functions in conversational settings.

In essence, conversation is a social encounter between two or among several individuals, involving the exchange of words in a fluid, comparatively spontaneous vein. Participants tend to act as co-equals, with the turn at talk shifting rapidly to allow all interested parties to speak their piece. conversational talk is often treated as something ephemeral, even though on reflection it is apparent that very important preparatory work may be accomplished in conversation. It is among the freest forms of talk, both in content and in style. conversations may range widely across the entire panorama of

human experience, fictive and factual, even delving, under appropriate circumstances, into areas of social taboo. The discourse style is highly eclectic, for within its prevailing mood of spontaneity and informality there is room for momentary flourishes of any and all available speaking styles (Havranek 1964).

There are, of course, a great many conversational styles. Contemporary North American English recognizes at least the following varieties: discussion, debate, argument, shop talk, rapping, jawing, joking around, chattering, shooting the breeze, chewing the fat, and gossiping. Within a broad conversational ethos, each of these specific types pursues its own ends through its own means. Our discussion suggests that the conversational ethos, a spirit pervading the diverse inventory of ways of conversing, would consist in the following attributes:

- (1) an aura of spontaneity: speech that persists as too meticulous endangers the spirit of conversation.
- (2) a casual discourse style, marked by hesitation, elision, retracking, ungrammaticality, vernacular speech, and sometimes obscenity.
- (3) an egalitarian sharing of roles: any hoarding of the turn at talk endangers the spirit of conversation.
- (4) an open agenda, with relatively free movement from one topic to another.

The conversational genres of folklore are available for insertion into this fluid and unpretentious speech format. They tend to be fairly compact items, only moderately disruptive of the discourse in progress. If they are protracted, like the personal experience story or memorate, then they gravitate towards the conversational ethos in their style of delivery. They sprinkle conversational discourse with occasional segments of more formalized speech. The conversational genres of folklore stand apart from their discourse matrices on the basis of the following features:

- (1) a more highly patterned aural texture (for example the alliteration, rhyme, and meter of the proverb).
- (2) a parallelistic phraseology, with pal-

pable structuring of morphological and syntactic elements (for example, the polite formulas in many traditional greetings).

(3) a figurative mode of reference, wherein things and people are referred to by other than their normal appellations (such as the often hilarious comparisons made in nicknames).

The presence of the conversational genres of folklore produces a transition from esthetically indifferent speech to esthetically coloured speech, in the terminology of Jan Mukarovsky (1964). In this formulation, features of the linguistic code that remain latent in reference-oriented speech come to the forefront in poetic language. Thus the fact that two distinct lexemes share a common or similar phonetic identity is inconsequential (or even inimical) to routine, reference-oriented speech, but may become a constitutive device of aesthetically-oriented speech. Yet the aesthetic impulse must be held in check in the conversational format, lest the tone of discourse seriously challenge the casual ethos of which we have already spoken.

The conversational genres, then, occupy a middle ground between speech that is aesthetically indifferent, and speech that is saturated with poetic effect. They occur within the conversational matrix, yet in some sense are not entirely or merely conversational. What then are they doing in these conversational settings? At the very least, they are toying with the linguistic code, pointing out its wrinkles, demonstrating how it can be rearranged for purposes of play or art (McDowell 1979). In some cases, they are diverting the conversation away from its serious purpose, and engaging its participants in a reprieve of frivolity. This is especially evident when joking, riddling, or aimless wordplay take over, as a conversation modulates from serious business to playful intrigue. These moments of frivolity are not by any means trivial, for major social and cognitive functions may be ascribed to seemingly frivolous speech (Stewart 1978).

But the functions of the conversational genres of folklore are not limited to the production of entertaining interludes. Two additional,

more dignified roles can be assigned. One of these is to serve as a kind of folk commentary on conversation itself. Riddles and catches, for example, replicate conversational scenarios but in the embrace of a gaming model. In these encounters, conversation is stripped of its niceties and reduced to a bare-bones account. Riddles focus on the question-answer paradigm in conversations, while routines like the knock-knock jokes produce facsimiles of other scenarios, for example the exchange of words used to initiate a visit. These forms explore, through these playful models, the real uses of authority and persuasion in serious conversational settings, developing miniature meta-conversations reflective of the aggressive nuances frequently present in real-world social intercourse.

Finally, some of the conversational genres of folklore may be employed to accomplish certain ritualistic gestures vital to the conversational enterprise. Erving Goffman describes the ritual danger lurking in conversation in the following terms:

Once the exchange of words has brought individuals into a jointly sustained and ratified focus of attention, once that is, a fire has been built, any visible thing (just as any spoken referent) can be burnt in it (1981: 37).

Conversation, with its propensity to create a touch of *communitas*, wherein ideally all participants exercise rights of self-expression, requires unstinting attention to the maintenance of personal integrity. The conversational genres of folklore, in particular the greeting and leave-taking, and the proverb and proverbial expression, can be yoked into the achievement of these ritual goals. They provide a tried and tested means of entering into and departing from a conversation, and also for accomplishing transitions from one theme to another within the heart of a conversation.

Poetic license generally correlates to the expression of higher truths, and ultimately this too is the mission of the conversational genres of folklore. Speakers rely on these traditional resources to challenge received cultural codes,

or to formulate canonic truth (i.e. truth possessing a degree of consensus in the community). The higher levels of formalization present in these genres correlate to their broader range of efficacy. These speech segments are unusually evocative, arresting, or persuasive. In their ludic and ritualistic applications, they constitute an invaluable resource in the expressive repertoire of their speech communities.