Communicating Effectively in Folkloristics: The Dialectic of "Style"*

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Based upon the relative frequency of the occurrence of the term 'style' in the written and spoken messages generated by folklorists, one may infer that it is an important word in their lexicon. In spite of its apparent significance, however, the term 'style' is not often defined or explicitly characterized by those who encode it, thus making it necessary for the decoder to determine, as best he can from the context of its use, what concepts the encoder is referring to, and what rule of use he is following as he writes or speaks of "style."

At this point, one may suggest that consulting a dictionary or some other source that renders a "definition" of the term 'style' may be helpful in determining the "meaning" of the word. For example, one may read Meyer Schapiro's essay entitled "Style" wherein he states that "by style is meant the constant form--and sometimes the constant elements, qualities, and expression--in the art of an individual or group. The term is also applied to the whole activity of an individual or society, as in speaking of a 'life-style' or the 'style' of a civilization."[1] If this brief characterization of the meaning of the term ('style') seems general and indeterminate, one has only to read the remainder of Schapiro's discussion to realize that the label 'style' can be and has been attached to practically every conceivable aspect of human behavior, encompassing a brief span of months or a number of centuries, in terms of one individual or a multitude of individuals, and utilizing many different kinds of criteria. Obviously, then, any general definition or characterization of what 'style' means will not advance one's understanding of "style" as it is encoded by a particular person on a specified occasion.

Such an understanding can come about in only one of two ways, i.e., (1) through an explication by the person who is composing the message in which the term 'style' is manifested (thus minimizing the need for inference by the decoder) or, failing this, (2) only through the process of inference by the individual who is decoding the message. I am asserting in this essay that, within the framework of folkloristics, the first process of understanding is by far more desirable than the second, based upon the a priori assumption that interacting is one of the most important goals of folklorists when they are communicating among themselves. The term 'interacting' is used here to label the process which consists of reciprocal role-taking, of anticipating, predicting, and behaving in accordance with the mutual needs and objectives of self and other. The following quotation from David Berlo will serve to clarify the distinction between interacting and communicating:

> All communication is not interactional, or at least does not emphasize this level of interdependence...much of our social behavior involves attempts to find substitutes for interaction, to find less energy-consuming bases for communication. We can communicate without interacting to any appreciable extent; however, to the extent that we are in an interactional situation, our effectiveness, our ability to affect and be affected by others increases. As interaction develops, expectations become perfectly interdependent. The concepts

> of source encoder and receiver decoder as separate entities become meaningless, and the concept of process becomes clear.[2]

In other words, when two or more individuals are interacting, they are enhancing their chances of mutual understanding; they are, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's words, "playing the same language game."[3] In Murray Leaf's terminology, they are plugged into the same "message source."[4] Thomas Kuhn might say that they are "sharing a paradigm."[5] The important concept here is that two or more individuals who are attempting to communicate can understand one another only to the extent that they share a system of meaning (and action) and are simultaneously referring to that system, and that interacting is the ideal process for achieving such understanding.

Unfortunately, ideals are rarely objectified. The study of folklore has attracted scholars from a very diverse range of academic pursuits. Consequently, the learning experiences of folklorists, taken collectively, are far from homogeneous, because they reflect the various paradigms operating in the discipline in which any particular folklorist received his training. To assume that all, or even many, folklorists will be referring to the same message source during the process of communicating (especially via the static, written medium) does not appear to be intellectually defensible. That this is the case becomes readily apparent when one looks at the use of the term 'style' by folklorists and scholars in related disciplines, since its use varies according to the paradigm to which any particular scholar is apparently referring.

In order to initiate an understanding of how and why the term 'style' is attached to a variety of concepts, it will be useful here to take a closer look at Kuhn's concept of a paradigm, which, in his words, can be a "substitute for a variety of familiar notions" (p. 11). By choosing the term 'paradigm,' Kuhn means to "suggest that some accepted examples of actual scientific practice --examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together --provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research" (p. 10). Furthermore, Kuhn states that "men whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice" (p. 11). Briefly stated, then, a paradigm is a general picture of some key phenomena embedded in an "exemplar," or significant example of scientific practice.

For scholars whose exemplars consist of concrete manifestations of human behavior, that is, artifacts or "items" of human manufacture, the term 'style' is often employed in a taxonomic or typological sense. The typological understanding of the term 'style' is also characteristic of some scholars whose exemplars focus upon outputs of human behavior which, while not concrete as they are generated, can be rendered substantive through various translational techniques, such as descriptive notation of musical performance or written transcription of verbal performance. If we conceive of this understanding of the term 'style' as occupying a polar position in a range of various possible understandings, we might place at the opposite pole the understanding of the term 'style' shared by scholars whose exemplars emphasize the behavioral aspects of human beings making choices in the process of creating expressive manifestations. Thus, this dialectic of "style" ("style" includes the term 'style' and its associated concepts and rules of use) can be conceived to be part of a larger dialectic operating among the various paradigms relevant to folkloristic inquiry, i.e., the dialectic

between a comparative orientation, on the one hand, and a synchronic, culturally- or individually-specific orientation, on the other.

In the next portion of this essay, I will be examining the logic of the use of "style" within the framework of the larger dialectic with two main objectives, i.e., (1) to demonstrate how folklorists may increase their mutual understanding of the various concepts and rules of use associated with the term 'style,' and (2) to explicate some specific suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of the communicating process among folklorists.

Perhaps the best way to begin this examination is by attempting to answer the following question: Why have some comparatively-oriented paradigms been characterized by exemplars which focus upon the substantive outputs of human behavior? That concretions provide the primary data base for some exemplars is partially understandable by perceiving that many comparatively-oriented paradigms have as their objective the illumination of some aspect of human behavior in the past. Thus, for example, archaeologists, historians (of art, architecture, music, literature, etc.), and many folklorists utilize the data that has survived from the age which they are examining. During the early nineteenth century, museum collections of artifacts provided the data base from which an archaeological paradigm was generated. By 1836, Christian Jurgensen Thomsen had classified and arranged the collection of prehistoric artifacts in the National Museum of Denmark according to their similarities of manufacture. On the basis of the patterns he perceived in his arrangement, Thomsen established the idea of three prehistoric ages of stone, bronze, and iron. Similar classificatory methods, based upon consistencies in formal characteristics, typify the exemplars of other comparatively-oriented paradigms. These classifications have characteristically provided a means for determining the origin, age, and distribution of artifacts for which these questions were previously unanswered. Thus, such methods are also embedded in exemplars of paradigms concerned with historical reconstruction or geographical distribution.

Historically, then, scholars referring to comparatively-oriented paradigms have emphasized the apparent consistencies in outputs of human behavior through time and space. In their studies, comparative scholars have generally concentrated upon the means by which human beings express themselves rather than upon what human beings express; that is, such scholars have been concerned with the forms or structures of concrete manifestations rather than the content of these manifestations. The logic of focusing upon similarities rather than differences can be deduced from the very act of comparing objects from different historical or geographical horizons and, since forms of expression appear to be less variable than contents of expression, the logic of formal or typological analysis is also apparent. In an article entitled "The Concept of Style in Non-Western Art," Adrian Gerbrands summarizes the logic of "style" as understood in one of the comparatively oriented paradigms, by stating that "In cultural anthropology style is usually understood to be a constant combination of forms by means of which one is able to establish the origin of objects made and used by man and also, to a certain degree, the relative age of such objects....To repeat, style is a constant or fixed form, or a fixed combination of form elements."[7]

The categories generated by formal (i.e., typological) analyses, such as those described above, are often termed 'types' rather than 'styles.' For example, Henry Glassie, in Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United

States,[8] outlines the concept of defining a "type" in the following manner:

> The typology and cross-cultural classification of material culture must be based on form only; that is, in the establishment of a chair type, the construction of the chair and the use to which it is put are not considerations. Any object's form can be separated into primary characteristics (those used to define the type into which the example fits), and secondary characteristics (other attributes of the form which, though they may be culturally significant, are not of use in the definition of the type). The primary characteristics of a usual American folk house type, for example, would be height and floor plan; stylish trim and appendages, such as porches and additions, would be secondary characteristics.

Obviously, Glassie is employing the same concepts and rule of use for the term 'type' that Gerbrands is using for the term 'style.'

Directing attention, now, to the other end of the dialectic, one can perceive an understanding of "style" which differs from the typological by, in a sense, subsuming it. The expressive understanding of "style" adds to the concept of formal patterns the concepts of content and context (or, for those who find the concept of "context" too static, the "process of creativity" in all of its aspects, such as choice, innovation, use, function, taste, and aesthetics). For scholars referring to an exemplar of a paradigm which is synchronically oriented and geographically or culturally specific, differences as well as similarities are significant in the understanding of "style." Such scholars are concerned with manifestations of human behavior, not as concrete objects in themselves which can be related to other, similar objects, but as expressive indicators of important social processes, such as learning, interacting, and communicating. Glassie summarizes the concerns of this orientation when he asserts that, for those who wish to go beyond "the historic-geographic connections of types,...it will be necessary to know not only what an object is and what its history and distribution are, but also what its role in the culture of the producer and user is, and what mental intricacies surround, support, and are reflected in its existence" (p. 16). Thus, for Glassie, typological studies provide the springboard for asking the important questions regarding the connections between the objective appearance of an object and the human behavior which generated it.

However, within the framework of the expressive understanding of "style," there is another dialectic operating for, while some scholars such as Glassie work toward understanding individual and community behavior by beginning with the structure of the object, other scholars initiate their invetigations by focusing their attention upon the individual as he is generating an expressive manifestation and upon the community as they are responding to the individual and his product. It is interesting, in fact, Glassie moves from the typological understanding of "style" (i.e., "type") toward an expressive understanding of "style," while Michael Owen Jones, in his article "'They Made Them for the Lasting Part': A 'Folk' Typology of Traditional Furniture Makers," moves from an expressive understanding of "style" toward a typological understanding of "style," regarding individual producers rather than their creations.

In order to complete the discussion of this aspect of the dialectic of "style," I will focus upon how Jones uses his expressive understanding of "style" to delineate his typology of individual creators. For Jones, there are four major concepts associated with the term 'style,' as is evident in his discussion that follows:

> Within the total traditional sic of folk utilitarian art conceived of as process and event in a system operative in a physical and a social environment, one can delineate broadly four factors that determine individual style. There is the technological factor involving tools, raw materials, and techniques of construction; the psychological factor including the physical dexterity and mental skills of the artist, and his values and aspirations; the cultural factor comprising the stylistic tradition of the group; and, closely related to the cultural factor, there is finally the sociological factor consisting of the values and standards of taste of the consumer public whether within or outside the local community, and the social roles and statuses of producer and consumer with the economic and social relationships between these individuals.[9]

In order to relate the technological, psychological, cultural, and sociological concepts associated with the expressive style of an individual to the broader community setting in which individual craftsmen are evaluated in terms of each other, Jones seeks to elicit the critical commentary of community members. The typology which Jones describes, then, is not based upon a formal analysis of individual creators, but is the result of his abstraction of the qualities by which members of the community apparently categorize local craftsmen. Jones defines the typological criteria as "occupational specialism, motivation, and relative emphasis on either the technical or the aesthetic aspects of the craft" (p. 61). Obviously, in this case, Jones's understanding of "typology" differs from that of Glassie or Gerbrands.

It should be evident by now that what I have been describing as the dialectic of "style" is not simply the result of the "misunderstanding" of "misuse" of terms by handful of scholars. This is precisely the point. There is no one paradigm or message source to which one can refer as the universal or final arbiter of terminology. As Wittgenstein has so aptly indicated, to understand what an individual means by some word, one must know what language game he is playing; that is, one must perceive what concepts are being encoded via that word and what contexts are conceived to be "the same" for eliciting that word (i.e., what is the rule of its use). Thus, if one is aware of this form of relativity, one should not be surprised, or even very irritated, to find that when Gerbrands encodes the term 'style' he means something different than does Jones when he encodes the term 'style,' for one understands that difference concepts and dif ferent rules of use are associated with the same term. In the same manner, one finds Glassie and Gerbrands encoding different terms (i.e., 'type' and 'style' respectively) when referring to the same concepts and employing the same rule of use.

The relativism which I am asserting here to be objectively valid is not the unreflective kind of relativism by which any action is as justified as any other. This important aspect of Wittgenstein's investigations is described briefly and well by Peter Winch, in The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy.

> The notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of making a mistake. If it is possible to say of someone that he is following a rule that means that one can ask whether he is doing what he does correctly or not. Otherwise there is

> no foothold in his behaviour in which the notion of a rule can take a grip; there is then no sense in describing his behaviour in that way, since everything he does is as good as anything else he might do, whereas the point of the concept of a rule is that it should enable us to evaluate what is being done."[10]

Thus, it seems reasonable for one to begin by examining his own terminological system. Is one following a rule as he is encoding some term while in the process of transmitting a message? If so, is one's use of the rule consistent? Are concepts that are being associated with various terms conceived clearly and unambiguously? Is the logic of the term referable to a particular paradigm message source, or language game, and, if so, is this system shared widely by potential decoders? Conceptual effectiveness will be enhanced by asking, intentionally and consistently, these and similar questions. Being aware of the conceptual problems associated with terminology, one may examine and evaluate the logic of use apparent in the messages generated by others. I am asserting strongly that this is where communicating effectively begins, and where the process of interacting becomes attainable.

NOTES

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1. Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in Anthropology Today, ed. Sol Tax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 278.

2. David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1960), p. 131.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 3rd. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

4. Murray Leaf, Information and Behavior in a Sikh Village: Social Organization Reconsidered (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 6-11.

5. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

6. Glyn Daniel, The Idea of Prehistory (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 32-33.

7. Adrian Gerbrands, "The Concept of Style in Non-Western Art," in Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art ed. Daniel Biebuyck (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) pp. 58-61.

8. Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), p. 8.

9. Michael Owen Jones, "'They Made Them for the Lasting Part': A 'Folk' Typology of Traditional Furniture Makers," Southern Folklore Quarterly 35 (1971): 44-61. See p. 44.

10. Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 32.