Poetic Structures of an Ethnographic Narrative

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This presentation analyzes narrative sections of health-related interview transcripts. My purpose here is to highlight the poetic structures they substantiate: this includes blocking text into verses, stanzas, and refrains, and using thematic parallelism. Although a familiar literary resource, poetics has only recently been applied to casual discourse. The present analysis will document the occurrence of poetic styles in impromptu interview speech and hypothesize the social functions of such styles: significantly, that these poetic structures are textual markers which have a social function much like other stylized verbal forms.

1. Introduction

This paper is a study of poetic structures in one genre of natural speech, and of how these structures function stylistically, communicatively, and socially. I will present natural text data from a special social situation, the interview, and discuss how various poetic forms in these oral texts work alongside the linguistic forms.

These data come from hundreds of semi-structured interviews recorded in English by medical ethnographers at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) at the University of California, San

Texas Linguistic Forum 44(2): 373-387
Proceedings from the Ninth Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin
April 20-22, 2001

Francisco. The interviews are recorded in a conversational setting in an ongoing study of seven populations in the San Francisco Bay Area who are at high risk for HIV transmission.

2. Background and Methodology

The following texts were recorded in 1997 and 1998 at CAPS. Each consists of an interview conducted with an HIV-positive CAPS interviewer and an HIV-positive informant who was recruited by CAPS to talk about his or her risk behaviors and experiences living with HIV. Each complete interview lasts about one hour. Questions deal with the subject's risk behaviors: drug use habits and sexual practices. The session is always limited to these two people, primarily to ensure completely anonymous disclosures related to HIV, but also to enable the dialogic pair to establish rapport *because of* their shared HIV status and offer honest remarks. Subjects have given their prior consent to allow researchers access to the tape recordings.

Here, I focus on three interviews. The first is with a 38-year-old Latin American male who grew up in Mendocino County, Northern California, where there were "hardly any Hispanics." Likewise, in his Bay Area adulthood, the subject has "always associated with Anglos more or less." The second is a 35-year-old Asian/Filipino male who was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. He also describes himself as highly assimilated to mainstream culture. The third participant is an African American male, 43 years of age, who moved to the Bay Area over twenty years ago. All three are native speakers of American English, with native access to the cultural schema necessary to engage in the interview genre. Therefore, the following theoretical discussion will provide valid background for the analysis to follow.

The social status of CAPS' informants is low, due both to U.S. society's fears about HIV and to its prior marginalization of various populations at high risk for HIV: sex workers, men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, and ethnic minorities. These speakers' marginalized status, acknowledged in each interview, very much reminded me of the social status of Native American groups whose myths and stories have been re-analyzed as poetry in papers beginning with Hymes (1977). Previously, speech communities with no written elaborations of their code had been classified as having no literary linguistic styles: literature was equated only with writing. This mistake is

paralleled in how the dominant society relates to HIV-positive populations, where even academic and medical institutions in the U.S. have claimed a lack of sophistication, or even deviance, in the social adaptations of marginal groups, and therefore not accepted those adaptations as stable or functional (Walters, 1998). Such claims result from ignorance of the adaptations in question. In this paper, I provide linguistic counter-examples to such hostile and erroneous assertions, via the poetic resources of this population.

I use Gumperz's (1982:xii) prosodic conventions for transcription, which roughly correspond to standard literary English punctuation rules and mark prosodic boundaries (see Appendix A). Utterances have not been simplified with respect to reformulations, tag questions, nor hesitation markers, as these morphemes delineate higher-order structures and thus will guide this analysis.

The entire transcript has then been segmented via a poetic analysis adapted from Hymes (1977) which makes use of lines and stanzas. Its criteria are syntax and content. Linguistic relations depend on context, not on any relationship that is external to the text. The lowest-order element is the line. Each line, with its clause or predication, is related to the sentence and the speech act (Sherzer and Woodbury, 1987). Each progression of the plot calls for a new stanza, for which boldface type is added where relevant. Thus the oral text is represented as non-metrical verse. This is poetry: discourse organized into lines (Hymes, 1977), so that the aesthetic content within a given linguistic form is at least as important as the cognitive content (Bright, 1984).

For this analysis, the essential arrangement of these forms is poetic parallelism, which is the repetition of lower-level linguistic material within a higher-level structure. Jakobson (1960: 358), Gumperz (1982: 107), and Hymes (1977: 22, 46; 1981) each discuss parallelizing discourse devices: Jakobson in terms of the equivalence logic of direct (or inverted) parallel structuring, Gumperz in terms of topical continuity among repeated key terms, and Hymes in terms of the logic of narrative action and cohesive properties. Here, intonation has a minimalized expressive function; texts all show much more "poetry" in the syntax than in the prosody (Bright, 1984). For this reason, I will leave such suprasegmental features for another investi-

gation and limit the data to morphological, syntactic, and discursive features.[1]

Further, I propose a functionalist explanation of these stylistic features. Halliday (1967), in his functional approach to grammar, proposes that language simultaneously represents reality, enacts social relations, and establishes identities; that is, language is situated in a social context. Bakhtin (Holquist (ed.), 1981), Gumperz (1982), and Brown and Levinson (1987) are among those who also use socially situated models of phenomena and identity. Clearly, in producing text, any poetic structures thus built will serve to elicit these intertextual situations. Gumperz makes use of Halliday's grammar in his theory of how interlocutors make interpretations (1982). Brown and Levinson introduce a theory of interlocutors' expectations that makes them observable through discourse analysis, providing a method for interpreting data from speakers to whom I have no direct access. Although this idea of situated meaning is not assumed to be a psychological reality, it is a useful psychological model because it describes meaning as an active cognitive assembly process. Thus discourse comprehension will include the top-down guidance of cultural models and also bottom-up, local processes of action and reflection. Thus, by incorporating socially situated concepts, sociolinguists can gain tentative answers to their investigations into sense-making.

In this investigation, the interview speech event will be analyzed as a type of confession: a conversation in which the speaker is assumed to be motivated toward describing some past behaviors and in "subjectifying them" (Foucault, 1981: 61). Confession is defined first by topic and then by the role of interviewer as confessor; he is not only the interview manager, but also the authority who attends to the confession. Confession is a genre (or, for Goffman, 1981, a script) of speech event reproducible by the greater speech community (in Foucault's analysis, also from 1981, we are a modern autobiographical culture), such that carrying it out has some redemptive value for the speaker: a confession changes him/her; s/he has clear affective

[1] A caveat: given Woodbury's discussion of written representations of oral poetry (p. 177), there can be no single correct interpretation of these texts. In that spirit, I offer the subsequent analysis as one meaningful aspect of the originals. Formal distinctions between poetry and prose are not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

motivation. And the scientific status now granted to the ethnographic narrative is, according to Foucault, historically related to that granted to another confessional form, the formal interview, in the nineteenth century (Fairclough, 1992: 54). By foregrounding the confessional aspect of the interview, the explanatory function of the narrative is emphasized.

The poetry encountered here is a versatile matrix of these creative, social, and linguistic constraints. My analysis shows that the speakers exploit the structural and thematic elements of discourse to create lyric poetry (with songlike structures and personal subjects) within the narratives. My claim is that this poetry is a linguistic resource with stylistic, communicative, and affective functions.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

3.1. Confessional Narrative as Lyric Poetry

The data are left as complete answers in order to provide the necessary context for an "emic" analysis (Pike, 1945; Gumperz, 1982). In an "emic" approach, functional relationships among linguistic elements depend on the context of the utterances, not on any linear sequencing or fixed relationships among the elements which are external to the text. Here, the end of the subject's utterance provides the natural boundary for my analysis: the point at which the interviewer asks the next question. In the following analysis, the global features of the interview genre will relate in a demonstrable fashion to the more locally-controlled poetic structures.

Below, the first excerpt comes from the Latin American's transcript. It is an example of the lyric organization I described above, having ten stanzas and a peroration, which is a recapitulating passage utilized as a final refrain or coda to bring the piece to its end. For him, each stanza usually begins with a summary statement of the new topic. This pattern reappears throughout his interview.[2] The entire piece is a self-evaluation, responding to the assessment question in line 216.

[2] Although a reverse-structured passage occurs in lines 6149.1440 through 1470. Short, emphatic, introductory lines begin the second stanza and are elaborated later in the piece, which includes a specific reference to "this disease." A conciliatory stanza can focus meaning by way of contrast. See 6077.283 to 315.

(1) Interview 1

216. Interviewer: What are some of the biggest changes in your life since you've been HIV positive?

Stanza 1

217. Subject: [1.8] Well, **I'm afraid of looking for a serious mate again**, you know?
218. I mean, how do you go about [ha ha] . . .
219. I mean, you do you find one, you know, now that you're, you know . . .
220. I mean, how do you even plan a- . . . ahead, you know,

Stanza 2

221. like even a **family**?
222. And that's really what concerns me, is a family.
223. Having a family, you know.

Stanza 3

224. and uh [1.2] and um . . . and just . . . just being scared of, you know, of it getting worse.
225. You know, just . . .

Stanza 4

226. and **not having a cure for it**, you know?
227. Will they find one?
228. Yeah, they probably will.
229. They're making a lot of progress with it,
230. but uh . . . it's still in the back of your mind, you know.

Stanza 5

231. And then, **having friends that have died**,
232 and knowing people in the streets.
233. You've seen people in the streets, you've seen like, like five years ago,
234. and maybe they were then, you know,
235. but now you see them,
236. and they are like, God, you can't even recognize them, you know?
237. They're just so bad off they . . . and you know why.

Stanza 6

238. **Now that I'm HIV**, you know, I know what is go . . .
239. even though they don't tell you that they are,
240. but can see it in their skin, you know, the rashes and you know,

241. and just . . . you know, I can tell, you know,
242. and . . . and the the biggest . . . I guess, changes would, yeah, it's just that.

Stanza 7

243. ***It's just my future,*** you know?
244. *It's just uh . . . just my future . . .*
245. ***it's . . . just*** *I'm not sure*, you know, that . . . I don't know,
246. *it's just* . . . it makes you, you know . . .

Stanza 8

247. well, well then again, you know, it's like well **I'm trying to come off the drugs** too, you know.
248. I literally, you know, I'm just trying to get off of them . . . completely.
249. I mean I'm more aware now of my, of my actions.
250. I'm not *sedated* all the time, you know.
251. I'm not on that *sedation* trip, you know.
252. I'm not trying to get *sedated* all the time.

Stanza 9

253. I'm trying to . . . well, I kinda'd like to see my mother again, you know,
254. when I'm in a better state of mind.
255. She knows that I've used drugs.
256. She knows da da da, you know,

Stanza 10

257. and . . . so I'm trying to you know,
258. **I want to get myself to a level where**
259. **I can go back and see my family and feel good about it.**
260. And let her know that, you know, that I'm you know,
261. I'm trying to do the right thing, you know,
262. despite the fact that I've wasted ten years of my life
263. and, you know, and made her suffer over it.

Peroration

264. And uh [1.1] but most of all **it's for me**, you know.
265. **I want to do this,**
266. but . . . it's the **family** thing.
267. It's **finding a mate.**
268. Uh, **if I can't get cured.**
269. **If there is no cure**, you know, soon or whatever.
270. Or just **giving up on myself again**.
271. That is the biggest thing, you know, uh [0.5] you know,

272. like I say, I've been . . . I go . . . I fluctuate with mood changes, you know
273. and uh . . . that's . . . the biggest thing.
274. It's just not knowing if I'm going to be able to **have a family** you know,
275. or, you know, yeah.

Compare the peroration (lines 264 to 275) to the topics marked in the body of the story. Observe how the speaker's topics are reiterated by the peroration: stanza 1 by line 267, stanza 9 by line 266, stanza 3 by line 268, stanza 4 by line 269. Then he skips stanzas 5 and 6 but continues: stanza 7 by line 264, stanza 8 by lines 265 and 272, and stanza 10 by line 274. In "giving up on myself again" (line 270), he would suffer personal loss, given the desires of lines 257 through 263, where he had listed his motivations for restoring control over his actions. Then the topic of line 274 in the peroration goes back to having a family of his own. This is closely related to his opening comments about finding a mate again, bringing the narrative around full circle, to starting a family.[3]

Example (2) comes from the narratives of the 35-year-old Asian-Filipino American male. It employs the stanza pattern too.

(2) Interview 2

59. INTERVIEWER: And uh [1.5] what did you do then?

Stanza 1

60. SUBJECT: I . . . I kept using.
61. My behavior . . . at that time I was . . . I was still dealing,

[3] The expression "the family thing" in line 266 did cause some initial confusion but I believe it is a reference to his family of origin, since here he nominalizes the act of preparing to see his mother again, from stanza 9, so that his mother is the referent for "family," and not the offspring he hopes to one day produce.

Also notice how uniquely the missing stanzas 5 and 6 (lines 231 to 242), which speak of HIV, reappear. In the peroration, they are telescoped down into the hypothetical construction "if I can't get cured/if there is no cure." Compared to the changes he has more control over, such as finding a mate or doing right by his mother, a cure is a remote possibility, so that line 268 is an independent clause and not subordinate to line 267. Also, this telescoped construction in the peroration avoids nominal references, and their specific implications, for the interlocutor and his HIV-positive friends. I investigate the structuring of sensitive topics in a 1997 paper.

62. and I was strung out real bad,
63. and **my behavior never changed.**
64. INTERVIEWER: Mm hmm.
65. And uh . . . I just . . . I was so hooked at that time, it . . . it didn't matter.

Stanza 2

66. I didn't do anything at all,
67. but to just continue my behavior
68. and my drug uses
69. and all my activity that went along with everything else.
70. And **that went on for, like uh . . . about three and a half years.**

Stanza 3

71. [1.5] Ninety-two is when I started to . . . like . . . well, you know,
72. when **I started like takin' care of myself**
73. or bein' more aware of my situation.

Chorus 1

74. And I started doin' things,
75. **little things that I started.**

Stanza 4

76. Um . . . going to see the doctor.
77. Thought . . . uh . . . checkin' my T-cell count.
78. Uh . . . back then, viral loads was . . . didn't even exist,
79. but . . . **I was more self-conscious and uh . . . about my health.**

Chorus 2

80. **I started lit- . . . little things.**
81. Um . . . um . . . behavior changes.

Stanza 5

82. And uh . . . I don't know, and then uh . . . let's see . . . uh . . . ninety-two [1.2]
83. in ninety five . . . no, ninety four, I just got all in with it.
84. **I just started takin' everything.**
85. I started the cocktail

Stanza 6

86. and . . . um [1.0] I took . . . **I'm takin' care of everything in my health.**
87. As far as HIV's concerned.
88. I fin . . . find out everything I can about it.

89. Everything about my health status.
90. What the alternatives are.
91. What the medications are.
92. I'm more into it now.

Stanza 7

93. **Plus I got off the denial trip.**
94. Um . . . I worked on that for a long time.
95. And now uh . . . I don't have no problems with my family.
96. And . . . mostly everybody that I know knows of me . . . that I'm HIV positive.
97. But uh . . . that's where I'm at with it now.

Notice that, instead of placing the summarizing material at the start of each stanza, the subject places it at the end. Also, all stanzas contain an evaluation of the actions he recounts: lines 65, 66/67, 72, 79, 83, 92, and 97. Notice how the stanzas are grouped. Stanzas 1 and 2 are devoted to the progressive sense of time, as demonstrated by the past progressive aspect of their verbs; by the verbs of continuation "kept," "continue," "went on;" and by and adverbs "still" and "never." Then the next three stanzas use themes of starting and changing to reflect his situation. For instance, the simple past aspectual "started" comes up twice each in stanzas 3 and 5; then the adverb "more" twice contrasts his state of mind at the then-present time with the then-anterior time; and the progressive aspect is used for five new, attentive activities, begun at that time, which continue today: "takin' care of myself," "bein' more aware of my situation," "goin' to see the doctor," "checkin' my T-cell count," and "takin' everything." He uses the term "self-conscious" and says, "I just got all in with it." Finally, Stanzas 6 and 7 emphasize his break with the past in using present tense verbs and using the adverb "now" (lines 91, 94, and 96).

Instead of using the peroration feature exploited by the first speaker, this speaker places a refrain-like chorus between sets of stanzas, such as in lines 74-75 and 80-81. These choruses separate the three sets of macro-structural themes and thus emphasize the "changes" theme of Stanzas 3, 4, and 5, which is copied by the "little things that I started" choruses. He places the first chorus between the first and second "started" stanzas, then the second chorus between the second and third. By way of the stanza/chorus interplay, he creates a focused, emotional theme about starting the personal changes that

result in "I'm takin' care of everything in my health" in the present, line 86.

This interplay resembles in its cultural function a poetic style researched by Hymes (1981:19). In his data, Tonkawa informants employ a stylized grammar with "going along"/"walking along"/"arriving" verb phrases, and Hymes suggests this extra attention to aspect instantiates an underlying "rhetorical form" that is part of a cultural style with a complex function, "at once aesthetic, moral, and informational." We see that the speakers under the present analysis also achieve a poet's aesthetic in an improvised text. The interplay between stanzas and emphatic structures, either peroration, as in (1), or chorus, as in (2), provide proof of this. But here, not only are the contents stylized; they are also autobiographically informative and evaluative. The evaluative material offered by the two informants provides clues to another function of the narratives: a moral one. From the confession theory discussed in the introduction, it is clear that all of Foucault's confessional components are present: sensitive topics, an interviewer to act as confessor, and the speaker's willingness to self-evaluate. This evidence also shows that these improvised texts fit Hymes' three-part description of a socially recognized rhetorical form: predictable content, style, and meaning.

3.2. Syntactic and Thematic Parallelisms

A single stanza may also show a cohesive pattern, amounting to a short poem, *within* a longer lyric narrative like those just discussed. Below, these isolated stanzas employ their own intrinsic patterns of emphasis and meter.

(3) Interview 3

a. 80. I was just going to keep going [ha ha] in and out [of there] you know, so **I gotta stop.**
   81. I mean *what do I want to do?*
   82. *Do I want to keep going,* you know?
   83. *Do I want to keep doing this.*
   84. *Is this what I want,* you know?
   85. Of course *it's not what I want*,

b. 1446. because I can't offer any- . . .
   1447. **there's nothin' I have to offer.**

1448. *I've lost my life.*
1449. *I've lost my life.*
1450. *I've lost my belongings.*
1451. *I've lost my persona.*
1452. *I've lost my self esteem.*

c. 430. INTERVIEWER: Okay. So what did you do?
431. What kind of sex did you have?
432. Tell me what you did.

433. SUBJECT: Well, I fucked him,
434. he sucked my dick,
435. we did this three or four times t*hat night*.

436. *About 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning* we take a shower,
437. he dropped me off in my car and
438. I went home.

Above, (3) contains two examples of syntactic parallelisms, a. and b., from the Latin American informant. Parallel structure is highlighted by italics, and a new topic is shown in the familiar boldface. Structurally, Example (3)a. uses the same components ("I do want to do X" or "This is/is not what I want") five times. This thematizes, or emphasizes, the semantic content of these components. In asking and answering repeated rhetorical questions in which he positions himself as trying to make less harmful decisions, he builds on his situated identity as a responsible person and evaluates his past actions in terms of his current desires.

Likewise in (3)b., repetition builds *focus* and *emotion*. Notice how the simple and classic narrative device of loss and restoration is only halfway represented as "I've lost X." This leads the audience to infer that restoration, the missing half, will be crucial to his fulfillment. The speaker's frustration and forsakeness are clear because of the clarity of his poetic argument. Structurally, he uses syntactic parallelisms precisely to construct meaning. After a reformulation, he gives an evaluation in line 1447. Then he iterates the losses he's suffered, employing the same clause five times, including a reduplication, to underscore his feeling of loss.[4]

[4] Two further examples are stanzas 7 and 8 (lines 243 to 252) in Example (1) above, in which it is the repetitive device that builds focus and emotion while more common meaning-building devices like content words are sparse.

In (3)c., the third speaker, the African American male, uses a distinctive morphological pattern to name the cast and scene in his brief, ready answer. He repeats the same three nominative pronouns from lines 433, 434, and 435 in lines 436 to 438. However, he places them in symmetrically parallel positions: he goes from "I-he-we" in the first half to "we-he-I" in the second. Likewise, he makes the time of his two scenes symmetrical. The time of the first scene ("that night") he mentions last, but resets the second scene immediately; it happens "about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning," making a quick, logical study of the events for the listener.[5]

4. Interpretation and Conclusion

As discussed in the literature review, the parallelisms employed by a speaker allow a listener to process the content of a text more efficiently by highlighting its salient features through repetition. All three lyric data have demonstrated the speakers' control of structure and content at each level of the language. By making these tapes available, CAPS plays a crucial role in the discovery of the poetic structural organization of these autobiographic narratives. This study provides significant evidence of an elaborated poetic form within conversational, improvised narratives. I have described the interplay of these poetic structures and processes and also suggested some of their functions within the society that produces them. The formal interactions of these poetic structures are communicatively significant (Woodbury, 1985: 177), because such interaction presupposes a single communicative function shared by separate structures. This is demonstrated in the summarizing and parallelizing resources utilized by the various speakers, which supports the hypothesis of a functional grammar of poetry. Specifically, these poetic narratives build meaning on an informational dimension with autobiographic content, on an aesthetic dimension with lyric styles, and on a functional dimension with confessional purpose. Thus I have established a cultural rhetorical form, according to Hymes' criteria.

There are many possible future analyses of this data. These texts contain other poetic patterns of organization. It would be possible to work out categories of poetic devices by looking at more data of this

[5] For another example, refer to lines 6149.673-677 in corpus.

type. Such naturally occurring behavioral data could also contain evidence of emergent discourse that Woodbury and others have posited. However, not enough data has been analyzed to locate any of the structural interactions predicted by Woodbury (1987). Next, one could examine the relationship between conversation and poetry in narration, or between context and themes of evaluation or consequence. Finally, in the 'confession' analysis, it would appear that this discourse function varies with topic, speaker, and other locally-controlled phenomena. However, in acting out the confesser role, our participants may be inclined to make the narrative adhere to some underlying, global rhetorical form that remains unexamined.

In summary, I have been fortunate enough to have separate analyses come to similar conclusions. I sifted through different methodologies looking for complementary approaches, and I hope I have been successful in demonstrating how "finished"-sounding lyrics have been inserted into spontaneous narratives in order to augment their communicative, aesthetic, and affective content.

Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

,	minor, nonfinal phrase boundary marker
.	major, final phrase boundary marker
?	falling, then rising tone
<u>word</u>	secondary stress
...	speech pause
(0.5)	long speech pause, with seconds elapsed
(ha ha)	laughter
(word)	unintelligible word, with best guess
=word=	overlapping speech
xxx-	truncated word (self-correction)
word	emphasis added to show thematic structure
word	topic marker

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