

## Folkloristic Narrative Analysis

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Since the days of the Grimm brothers, folklorists have developed methods for analyzing different genres of orally distributed narratives characterized by qualities like unknown origin, collective ownership, and lack of authorized versions. In my presentation today, I will give you some examples of how I use some folkloristic methods of analysis to discuss tape-recorded life history interviews. My ambition here is not to give a complete survey of folkloristic theory and method, but rather to make some moderate suggestions concerning what kind of knowledge a folkloristic approach might generate.

It has often been argued that the Grimm brothers were the first to make an attempt at folkloristic genre analysis, when in 1816, in the preface to their collection of German folk legends they wrote: “Das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage ist historischer”, the fairy tale is more poetic, the folk legend is more historical (1987, Vorrede [1816]).

In Scandinavia as well as in other parts of Europe, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, collectors, just like the Grimm brothers, wanted their collections of folklore to promote ideas of national identity. Folk tales, Märchen, and folk legends were regarded as a cultural heritage that could be used to support nationalistic theories. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national romantic inspiration weakened, possibly as a result of the collectors' close contacts with popular narrators who obviously did not bother in the least about national identity. Instead, they used folklore as a means of commenting on class conflicts and social injustices, as well as playing with sexual fantasies, exploring ethical and moral dilemmas and pondering life's deep existential questions. The collectors' attitude was to treat the folklore they encountered as artifacts from a rapidly disintegrating farming society. Urban academics founded museums to collect and expose clothes, tools, household utensils, and even buildings from this old-fashioned farming society. Advanced archiving programs were launched to collect, catalogue, and preserve traditional folklore, considered to be threatened by the growth of modernity. The archive catalogues always had a topographical index, inviting scholars to start to think in geographical terms. They mapped places of origin and roads of distribution; they identified cultural boundaries and the geographical wanderings of folklore. Ideas about the connections between cultural and political boundaries led to the remapping of Europe through WW 1 (Palmenfelt 2013a; Palmenfelt 2013b).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through influences from social anthropology, sociology and linguistics, folklorists have shifted their focus from text analysis towards studying folklore in the performance situation. The questions are now: who is telling what to whom, when, how, and why? (See e.g. Bauman and Briggs 1990).

With this historical background as my starting point, I will share with you some reflexions made when applying genre analysis, ritual theory, performance perspectives and some other folkloristic approaches on oral life histories. The material I am working with for the time being consists of 132 tape-recorded life history narratives, ranging in length from one to 12 hours. The narrators were all retired citizens of my home town Visby, Sweden. The recordings were made in 1995; the narrators were born between 1902 and 1930, thus representing more or less one and the same generation, while the interviewers were born 1955 to 1970. The outer frame for the collecting was the arranged conversational situation of the ethnological interview, where one informant narrates to a tape-recording interviewer. This artificially constructed arena for conversation leads to some characteristic consequences regarding the form of the narratives thus produced.

First, the narrators do not have to struggle to keep the listener's interest. Thus their narratives do not need to have an extraordinary content; they do not have to be reportable, to use William Labov's term (Labov 2006, 38). Nor do they need to have a perfect dramaturgical composition. In fact, they are often trivial, predictable, and inconsistent. The lack of narrative coherence that Lars-Christer Hydén, Matti Hyvärinen (Hyvärinen 2010) and others have observed in dysfunctional persons' narratives is actually fairly common in my material, too.

Second, as a consequence of the unusual situation of interaction, narrators might experience that they are put in the role of experts, who are expected to report correctly about facts and events. The consequences can be that they either deliberately change their narratives to make them fit in smoothly into the accepted version of local history or that they refrain from mentioning certain episodes that they consider to be incompatible with other known facts. As a folklorist, I am not intending to use the narratives as source material for compiling local history. Rather, I am interested in finding out whether it is possible to detect some cultural patterns that influence the mechanisms of such adaptations. I will return to this issue in a little while.

Third, narrators are influenced by their ideas about how a life history "should" sound. Typically, the life history contains sections about childhood, adolescence, education, family building, professional life, leisure time and hobbies, journeys, illnesses, decisive turning points in life, loss of loved ones, and old age. Some of these "life chapters" seem to have achieved specific genre expectations: both childhoods and marriages are supposed to be either happy or unhappy, but not neutral and unimportant; professional careers seem to be oriented along one scale between careful planning and pure chance and another between success and failure. Accounts about leisure activities and hobbies must express satisfaction, relaxation and preferably signs of contact with the creative and mindful parts of your personality. You are not supposed to admit how dull it was to paint all the windows of the summer house, or how you wrecked your sailing boat because of bad seamanship, or dwell on your lousy results at tennis or chess, if they are not meant as self-ironical anecdotes.

Several of my informants may have experienced a similar situation as the Indian ballad singer Gopala Naika from whom the Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko recorded a very long epos (Honko 1998). At different religious ceremonies, Gopala Naika had performed most of the episodes contained in the epos, but before the arrival of the Finnish collecting team he had never sung the epos in its entirety. I am convinced that most of my informants have narrated at least some of their personal experience narratives before, but I am also convinced that practically none of them before meeting our collectors had put these episodes together into one single chain of events that in some cases may amount to twelve hours of recording. Naturally, these long unrehearsed performances are often unevenly organized; important parts are missing, while meaningless details are overemphasized; they demonstrate illogical jumps between different chronological strata and between diverse subjects; they lack cohesion.

Some narrators may for instance take their starting point in an illness, a religious experience or a close-to-death experience that was to become a crucial turning point which can explain their present situation, while others may begin by accounting for the destiny of their parents. Sometimes childhood episodes are thrown into events of the adult life as a sort of explanation to reactions and choices later in life.

Occasionally, the narrative's movement along a chronological line is substituted by or completed by a movement between geographical places. The American folklorist Katharine Young has suggested a model, where the act of narrating takes place in what she calls the storyrealm, while the narrated events evolve in the taleworld (Young 1987). The narrative maps of my informants seem to consist of several taleworlds that can be defined both chronologically, geographically, and in reference to actions, interests, emotions, or evaluations. When narrators move between these taleworlds, alternative forms of coherence

seem to emerge that are not necessarily chronological or causal, but perhaps associative, argumentative, investigating, negotiating, or reasoning. Narrators may jump directly from a small but cozy childhood apartment, to the chilly school room smelling of burning coal and wet clothes, over the bicycle workshop where they had their first job, to the first own home where the children were born, to football fields, summer cottages, churches, shops, offices, hospital beds or tourist hotels. In the individual life histories, all these places are of course chronologically and geographically situated, but they are also associated with activities, and they are charged with emotions. Sometimes when I listen to narrators switching between such taleworlds, I am reminded of how film directors cut between different staged scenes, each prepared with a well thought-out scenography, lighting, camera angle, and music chosen to put the audience in the right mood. Maybe we could elaborate Lauri Honko's suggested term, "mental text" (Honko 1998, 93-99), to imagine those remembered cognitive realms that are visualized in narrated life histories.

If I try to apply the French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep's ritual theory (Gennep 1960 [1908]) on the artificially constructed conversations, the entire recording situation could be regarded as taking place in some kind of liminal state, located outside the boundaries of normality. The two participating individuals both leave their normal existence to enter a room together with a tape recorder, prepared to spend a considerable amount of time there, while adhering to an unusual set of rules for human interaction.

The speaker is not only assigned the role of expert, as I just noted, but s/he is also given the power to lead the conversation, which is a very unusual situation when only two persons are talking to each other. This offers an opportunity to demonstrate power and self-confidence, which for some narrators appears to be a role they are comfortable with playing. For others the situation emphasizes their shyness and lack of self-esteem.

The interviewers who were all younger than the narrators were supposed to play the role of interested and encouraging audience, but from the perspective of the narrators they also became representatives of a younger generation and of "today's society". Since both parties were aware that the conversations were tape-recorded to be used in scientific analysis, we could also speak about imagined dialogues with future listeners.

Theoretically, the liminal character of the ritual arena could be expected to invite the narrators to try imaginative or even fantastic interpretations when telling about their lived experiences. In practice, this opportunity appears not to be taken advantage of. Perhaps excursions into all too weird imaginary taleworlds were limited on the one hand by possible protests or contradictions by the interviewers, or by future researchers, and on the other hand by the wish to be honest toward their own memories.

The presence of the interviewer and the recording machine may form one barrier against too fantastic interpretations. As I mentioned, the interviewers were between 25 and 40 years old and the narrators were between 65 and 93. All participants in the project were living in Visby at the time of the collecting, but they had been doing so for different periods of time. In some cases, the narrators took the role of omniscient history teachers lecturing about the early 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Visby. In this role they were careful to enumerate the shops of a certain street in the proper order, to provide the correct names of streets and places, and to give the exact accounts of who was related to whom. At other times they took the role of agitators, arguing for or against a certain political decision by giving more or less convincing examples from their own experience. Several of them made themselves spokesmen of what they considered to be the "traditional Swedish way of life", criticizing what they judged to be examples of decadence and moral disorder.

When we agree that somebody's narrative can be keyed as a narrated memory we also accept a cultural agreement that the narrator has comparatively large freedom concerning how to narrate this memory, while the listener has a comparatively limited right to question the

accuracy of the narrated memory in question. We all know that memories can be very personal and we have all experienced how other persons may remember the same event very differently from ourselves. Memories are private property. We also know that the human ability to remember can be a very unreliable talent. We tend to forget what we once remembered and we may come to remember what had once been forgotten. When we have retold a memory several times, after some time it might be the narrative we remember rather than the original experience. And when, in narrating a series of events, we suddenly find that some link is missing, it is possible that we hastily make up a suitable episode to fill out the threatening gap. Later, it may be the hurriedly constructed substitution that we remember as the “true memory” of the event.

In a certain sense, all narratives, even autobiographical ones, are fictitious, since they are verbally constructed representations of events. The narrative form inevitably creates a distance between the narrating I and the narrated I (or the narrated Is in the plural, as the American folklorist Donald Braid has demonstrated (Braid 1996), which may at times be uncomfortable to handle for the narrator. The epical form specializes in recounting action and changes. As long as the narrated I of the story is also the acting protagonist who performs actions that the narrating I can sympathize with, there is normally no problem, but when the narrated I becomes the target of other persons’ actions or performs actions that the narrating I repudiates, the narrator faces a dilemma. In my material, I have several examples of narrators telling about stupid things they have said or done and their solution is to explain it with youth, naivety, and lack of knowledge. Sometimes they are even rebuked by parents already in the story. Narrators cope with the experience of being out of control both intra-, extra-, and meta-narratively. Intranarratively, the narrated I at a later moment may be rehabilitated, or take revenge, or accept the role as a victim. Extranarratively, in the recording situation the narrator may give his/her present interpretation of what happened in the narrative. Metanarratively, some narrators commented on how difficult some things are to tell about and that the other participants in their story may have different narratives to tell.

At a social level above the interpersonal one, narrators have to make sure that their individual life histories do not deviate too much from the collectively accepted version of local history. Everybody’s life is unique, but it takes place alongside other people’s lives in shared settings. This double and possibly contradictory quality has to be taken into consideration when people narrate their life-stories. Every individual life narrative must be possible to locate in collective arenas where other persons have lived at the same time and it must be compatible with the local society’s history that has taken place at the same time.

Several of my narrators demonstrated that they were aware of these expectations. Some openly made allusions to well-known facts or events in Visby’s history; some related their stories to collectively accepted grand narratives about Swedish experiences during WW 2 or the building of the welfare society. Without my being able to prove it, I am convinced that some narrators may have chosen to refrain from retelling certain episodes that could have been interpreted as too deviating from the accepted norm system.

A general phenomenon is that some public events seem to possess an extraordinary significance which makes it likely that they are referred to in one way or another when a life history enters a certain place at a certain time (cf. Tangherlini 1990, 377f; Palménfelt 2010, 69f). To characterize these phenomena, I have suggested that we could use the term tradition dominant that the Swedish folklorist Albert Eskeröd (1947, 81) coined to describe supernatural beings dominating local traditions (Charlotte Linde (1993, 23) writes about landmark events). Obviously we can find elements in life histories that possess similar capacities of domination. Naturally, they are seldom supernatural beings, but instead the dominant units in life histories can be points of time, places, events, values, ideas or accepted

emotional attitudes that all have become so firmly established in people's minds that they possess an agency to demand dominant positions in all historical narratives.

We could regard these tradition dominants as verbal expressions of an ongoing interplay between collective ideas and individually expressed narrative forms. They represent different phases in the process of acquiring solid form. By positioning themselves in relationship to these dominant units, narrators inscribe themselves in the collective body or emphasize that they are declining such membership (cf. Bamberg 2007, 172). Dominant units that are repeated often increase in collectivity, gain in volume and importance, which, in turn, makes it ever more difficult for future narrators not to relate to them, which, consequently, strengthens their attractive potential even more.

During this talk, I have been bold enough to maintain that my narrators adjusted their own life histories to fit in with the existing, collectively accepted version of local history. This statement needs to be defended, because such a local folk history certainly does not exist in any material form; probably it does not even exist as an oral narrative. Yet it is a fact that the people in Visby (and the inhabitants of all other places, too) share a fairly exhaustive idea of at least certain parts of their common history. Partly, this view is constructed and communicated when people compare their memories with each other's. Who lived where? Whose house was built first? Where did the railway run? What winds made you feel the stench from the slaughter-house or the hemp-factory? Some institutions have their own histories which may be lumped together: the shops, the factories, the workshops, the regiments, the harbor, the air field, the hospitals, the sports arenas. Local organizations and local politics have their history that at times link into national or even international chains of events.

Together, such fragments add up to a world-view that individuals can accept to a higher or lower degree. As ethnologists or folklorists we are familiar with terms like cognitive universes or local cultures consisting of several traditional elements. Terms like these, however, have a tendency to hide the dynamic aspects of such mental constructions as well as their epic elements like chronology and causality. An alternative would be to call them grand narratives, if we want to emphasize their high degree of collectivity or master narrative if we want to underline their normative functions.

Master narratives seem to lack the folk legends' focal concentration on one single, dramatically charged chain of events. That may be one reason why they seldom show the elaborate form of the verbally formulated narrative. Largely, they consist of non-narrative, descriptive elements and we cannot even say for sure that they have a consistent verbal form. Probably they are never narrated. Instead they are ever-present as collective frames of reference for what is considered to be normal and how it is accepted to talk about local history.

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