

Riddling and Lying: Participation and Performance

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Introduction

Ferguson's work on proverbs and riddles (Ferguson and Preston 1946a, 1946b, Ferguson and Echols 1952, Ferguson 1954) is one of the least-known aspects of his scholarly activity as a linguist, but as he has noted (p. c.), it 'shows one aspect of my interest in language and society.' It certainly qualifies as the earliest published manifestation of this interest. According to Dil's (1971) bibliography, Ferguson completed his dissertation on Bengali and had his first paper published ('A Chart of the Bengali Verb') in 1945; the papers on Bengali proverbs and riddles were published in the very next year.

The practice of following or combining a study of a people's language with a study of their folklore or verbal art is less common now than it was in the first half of this century, but in adhering to it, Ferguson was following the anthropological linguistic tradition of Herder, Boas and Sapir. As Bauman (1977) has noted, these legendary predecessors of Ferguson's represented an 'integrated vision of language, culture and verbal art,' one which faded as linguistics asserted its 'disciplinary autonomy'.

I share Bauman's view, however (ibid: 17), that a unified perspective is beginning to re-emerge through work in the ethnography of speaking by linguists, anthropologists and folklorists. The scope of this area has been outlined by Hymes (1964: 101):

In one sense this area fills the gap between what is usually described in grammars, and what is usually described in ethnographies. . . . In another sense, this is a question of what a child internalizes about speaking, beyond rules of grammar and a dictionary, while becoming a full-fledged member of

its speech community. Or, it is a question of what a foreigner must learn about a group's verbal behavior in order to participate appropriately and effectively in its activities. The ethnography of speaking is concerned with the situations and uses, the patterns and functions of speaking as an activity in its own right.

The correctness of Bauman's assessment is shown by Ferguson's work itself, which includes, in its most recent phases, attention to topics like 'The collect as a form of discourse' (1976) and 'Sports announcer talk' (1983) which fall squarely within the ethnography of speaking.

In this paper, I will attempt to follow Ferguson's earliest and most recent phases by studying the verbal artistry of a people whose grammatical usage I have previously described (1974, 1985), but doing so within the framework of an ethnography of speaking. My focus will be on the nature of riddling and lying on one of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. Collections of Sea Island folklore like Parsons (1923) include a rich stock of riddles and lies, but they are abstracted from the setting in which they were performed. There is also an extensive literature on the structure, definition and significance of riddles and tall tales (see, for instance, Potter 1950, Taylor 1951, Georges and Dundes 1963, Scott 1969, Maranda 1971, Thomas 1977, Pepicello and Green 1984), but, with rare exceptions (Abrahams 1983, Bauman, in press, Evans 1976) this literature tells us little about riddling and lying as verbal activities. Following the terms of the ethnography of speaking, we wish to specify what one needs to know to participate appropriately in riddling and lying: not just what riddles or lies are like, but how instances of each genre are performed and responded to in socio-cultural context.

Riddles and lies are only two of the genres which occur in a speech event referred to in the Sea Island area as 'telling riddle', 'telling lie' or, most generally, 'telling story'.¹ Other genres which occur in this speech event include: folk-tales (ranging from Brer Rabbit and other animal stories to 'Preacher' stories; see Greene and Sharpe 1984); 'smutty' or stag stories; and short rhymed verses or 'toasts'.²

Although some of the individual genres still survive – even flourish – in parts of the Sea Island area, 'telling story' as a whole was, by native accounts, more frequent in the 'old days,' that is, four or five decades ago. At that time, there were more people in the area (1,000 or more on the island on which I worked, compared with less than 100 today), and they would often get together after farming or fishing all day, and 'tell story' for entertainment. Another popular setting for this speech event was during the packed boat-trip to Savannah, Georgia to sell produce, or in Savannah itself, where residents from different is-

lands, would compete with each other in telling stories as well as selling produce.³

Today, because of ecological and economic factors,⁴ the population of many Sea Islands has dwindled considerably, and the incidence with which one encounters the traditional linguistic patterns and folklore which made this area such a rich resource for students of Afro-American history and culture (Jackson et al. 1972) has diminished. This is not to suggest that intriguing African and Afro-American traditions do not continue on the Sea Islands (see Jones-Jackson 1983), nor that distinctive patterns of verbal artistry do not remain. But among the middle-aged and younger Sea Islanders, television, pop-music and other speech events have replaced 'telling story' as central means of entertainment. To get an idea of what riddling, lying, and other 'telling story' genres were like in their hey-day, one has to depend on the older residents of the area.

The data

The data for this study consists of a tape-recording made in 1972 of three older residents on one of the South Carolina Sea Islands participating in a 'telling story' session: Mr. Walters, 71, his wife Mrs. Walters, 69, and their close friend, Mr. Jones, 69. (These names are all pseudonyms.) At the time, they were the only representatives of the over-sixty age group on their side of the island, and constituted a closely-knit, natural interaction group.

The data is artificial insofar as it was not a spontaneous 'telling story' session on which I happened to stumble, with tape-recorder conveniently in hand. As part of a project to use the resources of the community to create reading materials for the island's two-room school, I went around recording life-histories, narratives and folklore from the residents of the island. This particular session was arranged by me, and it was clear that the participants had not, in recent times, actively taken part in 'telling story'. Mr. Walters and Mr. Jones kept asserting that they knew 'a whole bunch o' story' but that they had 'gone from them now'. As Mr. Jones explained, his voice trailing off wistfully: 'Since we get old now, we can't remember them . . . we can't remember them . . .'

There is something else missing from this session, apart from lack of practice. It comes out in Mr. Walter's comment as he tries to remember more riddles:

I know a whole BUNCH o' riddle, but, you know ... if I had somebody to START it, who could, ah, dig up my remembrance, and, ah, TUNE me up, WARM me up, and what not ...

Tuning up would, ideally, require more participants, ready with their own stock of stories, riddles, and lies. The content (and the form) of their 'stories' would remind other performers of related 'stories', which they could then tell in turn; the competitive element would be stronger, and the positive (and negative) evaluations of the audience made more powerfully. In this particular session, there are really only two performers. Mrs. Walters tries throughout to contribute, but aside from introducing one brief riddle which is easily solved, she serves more as audience and evaluator than performer. I suspect that this had less to do with her competence in the relevant genres than with a restriction on performance in 'telling story' to adult males; almost all the traditional stories which I collected on this island were from older men, and Heath (1983: 183), describing the southeastern Afro-American community of Trackton, notes that it was boys who excelled at lies there ('the performance of a "true story" in which they "talk junk."') I myself attempted to play the role of audience and respondent too, as well as my native experience in a similar Caribbean culture would allow, but in this role I was hardly as effective as Mrs. Walters.

Limited numbers of participants and lack of practice do not make for the most memorable story-telling session ever. But what resulted from the session that evening, with only two performers and one 'audience,' was quite successful. A total of nine folktales or stories, ten riddles, and four 'lies' was generated, and, for the rest of my stay on the island, the participants frequently talked about the fun they had had during this session and asked to hear the tape-recording of it.

Even more significant as evidence of the validity of the data was my almost total inability to determine the direction of the session. I would sometimes use lulls in the session to ask for specific material, but in almost every case, my requests were either ignored, or acknowledged without being acted upon, quite unlike the case with individual interviews. For instance, after Mr. Walters had told a highly successful preacher story, there was a pause of about eleven seconds which I tried to fill with Labov's (1972) 'danger of death' question. Note what happened:⁵

JRR.:

Well, Mr. W., you ever, you ever, am, you ever been in a situation where you thought you was close to death? Like, you know, hunting, or out at sea, or anything like that?

Mr. Walters: Ooh, Yeeeah!

JRR.: (Warming up) Where you thought you was almost gone?! (2 second pause.)

Mr. Walters: Ah, ah, I gon tell y'all another lil piece about a preacher again. Now, let me see, let me see how that go. ... Ah! (Breaks into preacher-story)

Mr. Walter's reaction here made me aware that my question was inappropriate in several ways. In the first place, I was not a performer, and only performers are allowed to change the current genre (although they can respond to suggestions on this point if they see fit). In the second place, even performers don't shift genres as abruptly as I was trying to do. If A tells a lie, B must respond with another lie. Successive turn-taking in that genre will depend on who knows more instances of that genre and can most swiftly fill in the pauses between successive performances, but a switch to another genre must be naturally engineered. We will see what this involves when we discuss the switch from riddles to lies in this session. Thirdly, my illegal interruption was threatening Mr. Walter's right to perform a story which he was merely perfecting in his head before bringing it unto the floor. Finally, the genre into which I was attempting to channel the session was not even one which normally occurs in 'telling story.' This happened at another point when I asked for proverbs, and was similarly ignored; proverbs do not come up in these sessions unless they occur in a story. I consider these failures on my part, and the fact that I was made to discover them, a victory for the participants, and a vindication of the integrity of the session as an exemplification of 'telling story.'

In discussing the data, we have already touched on several general characteristics of 'telling story,' but before going on to examine what is specific to riddling and lying, one other characteristic of the larger speech event in which they occur should be emphasized. The goal of story-telling, like other local speech events, is not just entertainment, nor enlightenment, nor education (though it is all of these), but the earning of positive evaluation and approval.⁶ This approval derives, in the first instance, from the specific audience before which one performs, and, by extension, from the larger community in which one's reputation is established. Abrahams' (1971: 28) characterization of folklore as 'all conventional expressive devices available for performance and the achievement of performer status within a socially bounded group' is relevant here, as is Bauman's (1975: 293) formulation of performance as 'a mode of spoken verbal communication ... [involving]

the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence.' Whether riddling or lying, performers try to match or outdo each other's displays of competence, and to win more positive evaluation from the audience. As we discuss the individual genres, we will pay particular attention to the evaluation process, and the strategies which performers use to win status.

Riddling

Riddles are brief, stylized forms which contain a puzzle for respondents to solve. Regardless of whether the surface structure is that of a question or not, every riddle has the underlying form of a question (Maranda 1971: 195), or the illocutionary force of a request. Defining riddles in such a way as to distinguish them uniquely from other genres is a challenging exercise. For our purposes, it is enough to note that riddles usually contain at least one proposition or deep structure sentence (Scott 1969: 137) which expresses the puzzle and simultaneously provides the clue to its solution in a metaphorical comparison between one object or event and another. Here are a few examples from the recorded session, all of which occur in Taylor (1951):

1. Ten thousand window and one door. (A cast-net)
2. What come up to the door and don't never come in? (A road.)
3. What round as a dollar and busy as a bee? (A watch.)

In riddling, the roles of the participants shift continuously according to whether they act as riddler/performer or respondent.⁷ The role of riddler is granted by unspoken consent to the first participant who can pose a complete, formally coherent riddle to the assembled group. Exactness of form is important in both riddles and their answers, and participants often spend the moments between the solution of one riddle and the start of another trying to reconstruct all the elements of a riddle which they remember only in part. The first participant to formulate a complete riddle holds the floor, and he or she performs as riddler until the correct answer is given by respondents or revealed by the riddler. Participants who try to hold the floor as they stumble to formulate their riddles may be displaced by others who blurt out complete riddles:

Mrs. Walters: What go - what go round the - the - ah -

Mr. Walters: (Rapidly interrupting) A plate of money you can't count, and cake you can't cut!

Once a formally complete riddle is on the floor, the business of respondents is to try to answer it. How participants respond right after the riddle is posed provides the first evaluation of the riddle's difficulty (and worth). A respondent might say right away, 'I know that', and give the correct answer. Riddles that are so readily answered earn little credit or approval, and the strategy of the riddler is to produce riddles which are not immediately known to the respondents, and allow him to hold the floor for a longer time as respondents try to figure it out. Only three of the ten riddles produced in this session were answered in the first turn of respondents. In one case, the person who responded first did not have the exact answer at her fingertips, and had to keep justifying her right to the floor:

Mr. Jones: What holler all night, and never, don't never stop holler?

Mrs. Walters: I know that! I know that! Ah - wait - wait - Oh! Tree-hollow.

More typically, respondents will indicate that they do not know the answer. They might then repeat the riddle to themselves, over and over, or ask the riddler to say it again, or try to figure out the answer silently, or admit that they used to know the answer but can't remember it. All of these responses please the performer, but the most positive evaluation in this phase of the riddling exercise is when respondents indicate that they are totally stumped, by making statements like: 'You got me now, with THAT,' or 'You got me,' or 'Got me there' (all involving 'got').

Note that responses of this type are not admissions of defeat or requests for the riddler to provide the answer. They are acknowledgements of the difficulty of the riddle, in response to which the riddler typically offers additional clues. These may involve references to related items in the immediate surroundings, or references to the shared experiences of participants. For instance, after Mr. Jones produced riddle 2 above, it was followed by silence, and he added, 'You come through it just now. You come through it just now.' Another frequent clue is, 'Most everybody got one. Most everybody got one,' indicating, incidentally, that riddles are usually about everyday objects or events, disguised in metaphor to look unfamiliar.

Even if respondents indicate that the riddle is difficult to solve, they are still expected to attempt an answer:

Mr. Jones: (In response to a riddle from Mr. Walters): Now, I

might say right, and I might say wrong.

Mrs. Walters: Well, say it anyhow!

In response to wrong answers, the riddler might say, 'Nooo,' following this by repeating the riddle or providing other clues, indicating in either case that the riddle remains unsolved. There is a standing rule that no new riddles will be introduced until the one on the floor is solved. This rule is invoked when Mr. Walters tries to introduce a new riddle (actually, it is the set-up for a lie, the genre to which Mr. Walters wants to switch) while Mr. Jones still has an unsolved riddle on the floor. Mrs. Walters has just suggested one possible answer to Mr. Jones' riddle. Mr. Jones has just answered, 'Nooo,' and Mr. Walters breaks in:

Mr. Walters: What's the largest watermelon you ever seen, Mr. Jones?

Mr. Jones answers:

I don't know. I don't know. But y'all ain't get THAT -
bout the ten thousand window and one door.'

And Mr. Walters has to admit defeat on Mr. Jones' riddle before he can launch into his own performance.

Respondents indicate defeat on a riddle, and request the riddler to furnish the correct answer by saying, 'I crave.'⁸ Once one respondent says this, the riddler checks with other participants to ensure that they all 'crave,' which they may do by verbally repeating the formula, or nodding their heads in the cultural signal for 'yes.' The riddler then provides the correct answer. The reaction of respondents after the answer is given may be simply, 'Oh, I see,' or 'Yes,' indicating that they understand the metaphorical puzzle involved in the riddle, but do not find it earth-shaking. Alternatively, however, they may reveal deeper admiration for the artistry involved, by means of prolonged laughter (compare Potter 1950: 938 on this point), or statements like, 'Aah! Well, tha's allright. Tha's allright!'

There are thus two points at which evaluation of a riddle's excellence are made: right after the riddle is presented, where respondents indicate whether it is easy or hard for them to answer, and right after the correct answer is provided by the riddler if no one has been able to guess it. However, perhaps because riddles themselves are so short and so numerous in any one session, a performer needs to produce several good riddles in a session to earn credit as a good riddler. From this perspective, it is clear that Mr. Jones is a more successful riddler in this session than Mr. Walters. Even though Mr. Walters produces two unsolved riddles, Mr. Jones outmatches him, producing seven in all; three of them remain completely unsolved, and two are solved only after extensive cluing on his part.

Mr. Jones's strategy throughout the riddling phase of the session is to keep the floor and maintain the role of riddler, which he does easily with a ready stock of riddles. When his riddles are solved, he sometimes uses the turn in which he is supposed to acknowledge the correctness of the answer to introduce another riddle, accomplishing two moves in one turn:

Mr. Jones: Yes. Yes m'am. Well, what turn over all day and never stop turn over? Turn over right now. Never stop turn over.

By using this strategy, he dominates the riddling section of the session, producing the most riddles, occupying the floor as he offers participants clue after clue, and even, at one point, demanding the positive evaluation he deserves for providing the correct answer to an unsolved riddle:

Mr. Jones: A net.

Mrs. Walters: Ooooh! (laughter)

Mr. Walters: What you say 'bout a net?

Mr. Jones: A net. Cast-net.

JRR: Yeah - ten thousand window and one door.

(Pause of 3 secs. Mr. Walters makes no further comment.)

Mr. Jones: (To Mr. Walters and Mrs. Walters) What y'all think bout that? Tha's allright!

Mrs. Walters: Yeah, that's ALLright!

Mr. Walters: Yeah, we'll hold that until we learn better.

In this example, we can see an important part of Mr. Walters's strategy. Although it was he who introduced the first riddle, Mr. Jones soon demonstrated that HE was the master-riddler, and it was only near the end of the riddling section that Mr. Walters could remember and introduce another riddle. Unable to match Mr. Jones as a successful riddler, Mr. Walters equalizes the situation by playing the role of respondent with less enthusiasm than he might. When he knows the answer to a riddle Mr. Jones has posed, he gives it right away, but when he does not know it, he doesn't keep guessing, as a good respondent should, but remains silent, as if trying to remember a riddle of his own. When pushed to respond, he says simply, 'I crave,' and when the correct answer is provided, his positive evaluation is minimal.

The principal means which he uses to redress the situation, however, is to change the genre from riddling to another genre in which his competence is stronger. He does this in a natural way, by asking a

question which has the superficial form of a riddle, but is not: 'What's the largest watermelon you ever seen?' There is no neat 'riddle-answer' to this question, since it is really the set-up for a lie. But in acknowledging the incorrectness of the answers he gets, the way is cleared for Mr. Walters to launch into the lie itself. The strategy is a valid one, smoothly executed on the second try (the first try was inappropriately placed in the middle of Mr. Jones' unsolved riddle, as noted above). Once Mr. Walters performs this first lie, Mr. Jones starts lying too, and we hear no more of riddles.

Lying

Lies, also known as tall tales, little jokes, or lying stories here and elsewhere (Thomas 1977, Tanna 1984: 57), are like folktales in length. Like folktales, they also involve a detailed recounting of experience, but unlike them, the central character is not some conventionalized other (Preacher, Brer Rabbit, and so on), but the narrator himself or herself. The focus of the lie is an experience which the narrator has had with a person, animal, plant or thing whose attributes are larger than those normally encountered in real life; so much so that we know at once that the experience is not real, but fictitious.

Lies usually begin with a sentence indicating that they are about something that happened to the narrator at some time in the past. They may also specify, at this point, where the experience took place, but this detail may be saved for the ending or the post-lie discussion. Although the body of the lie contains episodes or complicating actions similar to those of folktales and other narratives (Greene and Sharpe 1984), the action is peripheral rather than central, and description is lavished on what we may refer to as 'exaggeration features' - each of which amplifies the larger than life quality of the animal or object which the lie is about. In addition, lies should contain enough detail and vividness to make them seem plausible as real-life experiences, even though everyone knows that they are not. The most successful lies appear to be those with the richest exaggeration features. The last line is usually a punch-line with a final, climactic exaggeration feature.

In order to clarify these remarks and pave the way for further discussion, the four lies which were performed during this session are presented below (titles were added by me).⁹

(A) 'The largest watermelon I ever seen' (by Mr. Walters)

I see a man raise a watermelon once. This watermelon was on

a hill, was on the side of a hill, you know, and they had - just like you gone up on the mountain and had them road, road on the side of the mountain - it was on the hill, like that. And that watermelon grow so large until they - he roll it up on the side there in a low place, and been using it for a BRIDGE.

(Mr. Jones laughs; Mrs. Walters says, 'A bridge! Craz(y)!')

People used to come by from everywhere to look at that watermelon. It was grown so large, until it grow so high until cars couldn't even much go OVER the bridge! (Mr. Jones: 'Goodness!') And they had to - every two or three days they had to put another wedge on the side of um to keep um from rolling down, you know. (Mr. Jones: 'Umm-hmm'!)

And they been about five thousand people been there been looking at that melon that Friday afternoon. And one of them wedge slip out, and that melon start down the hill. And when it strike itself in front of them rock, it break in half, and the water come out of um drowned over five hundred head of people!

(B) 'Mosquitoes on the railroad track' (by Mr. Walters)

You know, I was, I was in, ah, in Florida. And ah, I'll tell you the place directly - in Augess, Florida. (Mrs. Walters, in tone of incredulity: 'What!') Augess, a little place I been in they call Augess, Florida. A little old country town. And, ah, we was laying, working on the railroad laying steel. Another time that day, railroad been going on just right by this big oak tree. And just like, we didn't going no place off - we just get our lunch, and, nothing to sit on, but some people been sitting up on the border of the rail, some been sitting on the cross-guards. That was, one of them cross-guards was MY seat. And was so much mosquito up there until you had to mind when you open your mouth to put your food in it, that the mosquitoes don't go in along with the food! (Mr. Jones: 'Mm hm.')

And then, some of them mosquitoes was so large up there, would just come up and hit you in your back, would knock you over on you face. (Mr. Jones: 'Mm hm'!)

And I was sitting down, right 'gainst the border of the railroad line. And, ah, one of them mosquitoes 'light on the cross-guard in the back there, and crawl and come up to the steel and sting me in my back! (Mr. Jones: 'In my back!') And when I jump up and look round, that scoundrel bill-where, where, where that mosquito bill went through that steel and sting me, he been there pulling back, trying to get his bill out. And that hammer I had there for driving

them, ah, spike down with, I took my spike, my hammer, and I brad that son-of-a-bitch on the other side, on the side I was sitting on. And he couldn't get out. Couldn't get it loose.

And now, I was the last man on the end. I didn't tell nobody nutten 'bout it, you know. And later on that day, when the freight car come, freight train come, when the train get right there, with the load of steel beeen going on further up the road for the stop for we to unload it, it wreck that whole flat-car load of steel. Nobody didn't know what was the trouble. They been there THREE WEEKS trying to clear up that track right there where all that steel had that thing all wind up there where they had that big wreck. And after I see all that been going on, I took my cap and I leave, before they find out that I was the man who brad that mosquito-bill on that railroad. Cause, see, they would put me to trouble for that, you know. And I gone, and never did come back. But I know, the last report I hear they was STILL working there for three weeks, been trying to get that old mosquito frame out the way, where they could lay that railroad track in back through there again.

(Mrs. Walters: 'Oh-oh! Mr. Jones: 'Ye-es, sir! Yes, sir!') And that was a SMALL mosquito!

(C): 'The Big [Alligator] I killed' (by Mr. Jones)

Well, I been in the woods one time (Mr. Walters starts laughing in anticipation), and I kill - a gator. I kill a big old gator, seven foot and a half. And that gator was so big, after I kill the gator, I couldn't DRAG it. I couldn't drag it. That gator was so large, I went back home, and I get my cow, and my piece chain, fix it to the gator, pull it. And after I - ah - pull that gator home, that gator was, I'd say about, I don't know, am, about ten or twelve feet. That gator was 'bout TWELVE FOOT long. (Mrs. Walters: 'Oh?!') And might be longer than that!

(JRR: 'Really?!')

That was the biggest gator I ever did see in my life. I couldn't get it to hold. I just gone home, went home, and get my cow and cut it out. When I got home I cut it. When I got home, I cut it. Cow took it home, and skin it. But I cut it, and I ain't get but fifteen cents for it!

(D): 'The time I went fishing' (by Mr. Jones)

I been in the woods one time, and cap, I caught some FISH! I caught some lil ones and some Big ones, in the net. (JRR: 'Mm hm.')

And I cast, cast, cast, cast... The first one got out. Ah, and I cast again - caught the other one. Allright, Tchoops (sucking teeth

to indicate disgust, annoyance). The biggest fish get out and left all the little one in. (Mr. Walters laughs softly).

And I say 'Don't know what I gon do with this small one.' I throw um 'way. And then, with my last cast, I come and bring um home and cook it for the dog.

In the transcripts of these lies, we have included comments made by the audience during the telling of the lie. We shall take up shortly the nature and significance of comments made after the lie is completed. First we need to discuss briefly the role of the performer, and that of the audience, in lying.

Apart from the basic responsibility of the performer to provide a good lie (see below), he or she is required to do two things in the telling of it: maintain fluency (don't stumble, stutter, or be inconsistent about details), and keep a straight face (don't laugh!). Both are important for credibility.

As in riddling, the audience shows its evaluation of the lie at two (different) points: during the telling of the lie itself, and after it is finished. The evaluation may take the form of laughter, or overt complimentary statement ('That's allright!') or perpetuation of a mock seriousness which extends, and supports the reality of the performer's lie. Comments like, 'My goodness!' or 'Good lord!' - uttered in feigned shock or amazement - are in this last category. Also in this category are requests for further details about the experience, which give the performer a chance to expand his lie. For instance, after the initial loud laughter following (A) had died down, Mr. Jones asked Mr. Walters if this had happened on a particular island, and Mr. Walters responded: 'No, ah, that, that been a place I was they call Junior City!'. The audience responds to this with fresh waves of laughter, and Mr. Walters adds an even finer detail: 'That's, that's seventy-five miles on the other side of Spider City.' The audience breaks into laughter again at these specific names for fictitious places.

The extent and quality of audience reaction at these two points indicate their evaluation of the lie and its performance. On the basis of audience reaction, it is clear that Mr. Walters is a better liar than Mr. Jones, just as Mr. Jones had been the better riddler. The audience reaction during and after Mr. Walters's lies is characterized by long, hearty laughter, and the ready participation of the audience in the mock seriousness referred to above. Mr. Walters' second lie (B) is marked by loud hooting laughter from Mrs. Walters, and repeated comments of 'Oh boy! Oh boy!' from Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones's first story (C) does not provoke much audience reaction throughout, but afterwards merits

mock amazement from Mrs. Walters: 'Fifteen cents?' and further elaboration from Mr. Walters: 'That wasn't enough to pay the postage of it!' Mr. Jones builds on these comments, adding, with a sad shake of the head: 'No sir. Not at all. All that - work too hard, and only fifteen cents!', and the audience breaks into peals of laughter.

However, Mr. Jones's second story (D) does not get any audience reaction at all when it is finished. There is a nine second pause after the last line, indicating that the audience did not even realize that the lie had been finished. After this pause, Mr. Jones recycles the last part: 'Last cast, carry um home and cook it for the dog,' and breaks into a giggle. Everyone realizes now that the lie is over, and there is brief laughter (more 'polite' than hearty). Mrs. Walters says 'Aw, Lord,' but there is no further comment. Mr. Walters mutters softly to himself for a while, and then changes the genre to 'smutty stories' (his term), satisfied that he has won this round. Judged by audience reaction, he has scored two big successes, and Mr. Jones only one.

Mr. Walters' lies are superior to Mr. Jones' in the close detail which they are spelled out, and in the richness of the 'exaggeration features' which they contain. (B) for instance, contains at least eight¹. Mosquitoes were so plentiful that you had to mind that when you opened your mouth for food, they didn't go in 2. the mosquitoes were so big that if they hit you in your back, they would knock you over on your face. 3. This particular mosquito was so strong that it was able to ram its bill through the steel rail and sting the narrator. 4. It took a hammer and spike to 'brad' it to the track. 5. The mosquito frame was so bulky that it caused a wreck of the approaching freight-train. 6. The wreck was so bad it took three weeks to clear. 7. The situation was so serious that the narrator had to quit his job to protect himself. 8. With all this, the mosquito in question was only a SMALL one. Mr. Jones's second story, however (D), contains only two 'exaggeration features': 1. He caught a BIG one, but it got out. 2. He caught some little ones, so small that he took them home and cooked for his dog. Even these points are not skillfully deployed. The performer simply asserts the BIGNESS of the fish that got away: he does not dramatize it by comparison to other recognizably big things, or describe some fantastic consequences of its huge size. Even the action of taking the small fish home to cook them for his dog is not that unusual in this community.

The audience fails to respond positively at the end of Mr. Jones's lie because it remains too close to real life, too close to the ordinary chit-chat that they exchange about the events of the week. They may chit-chat more often than they engage in lying or the bigger speech-

event of which it is a part, but they have not forgotten the rules and standards which characterize this genre. Even in an engineered session like this one, they adhere to traditional conventions.

Conclusion

We have considered the nature of participation and performance in riddling and lying from the perspective of an ethnography of speaking. Although the data for this study were drawn from a Sea Island community off the coast of South Carolina, readers familiar with similar genres in other communities will undoubtedly recognize some elements.

Some may wonder why linguists should not leave the analysis of genres and verbal activities like these to folklorists and anthropologists. The answer is that material of this type can lead us to fruitful revisions of our concepts of competence and performance (see Hymes 1971), can challenge and enrich our attempts to describe the structure of units beyond the sentence, can illuminate our interest in language use and the relation between language and social life (see Roberts and Forman 1972, Ferguson 1977), and can lead us to the answers to questions we have barely begun to ask, such as, 'What is language good for, anyway?' and 'Why does anyone say anything?' (see Hymes, *ibid.*, Labov 1972: 48). Space does not permit us to develop these larger implications, but it is these that should entice us to attend to riddling and lying in addition to phonology and morphology, as Ferguson first did four decades ago. We have as much to bring to and gain from the study of these verbal activities as the folklorists and anthropologists and literary scholars. If we each make our contributions, the harvest should be bountiful for all.

Footnotes

This is a revised version of a paper originally written for a class taught by Dell Hymes at the University of Pennsylvania several years ago, and it has benefited from his comments. I am also grateful to Charles A. Ferguson for copies of relevant papers by himself and others (although he did not know what I was writing this paper for) and to Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman for feedback and references. I also wish to thank my wife Angela for helpful comments and encouragement.

- 1 The nasal in 'telling' is usually dental or alveolar rather than velar, but in order to avoid phonetic notation and maintain readability, we will not generally attempt to indicate phonological features of Sea Island speech in this paper.
- 2 For example, from Mr. Jones: 'Little Jack Horner/Sitting in the corner/Eating he Christmas pie/He juk in he thumb/And he pull out a plumb/Oh, look what a good boy we am!/Haw haw haw, haw haw haw!/Oh, look what a good boy we am!/'
- 3 The popularity of Savannah as a meeting-place for 'story-tellers' in the old days is documented in Parsons 1923: xv.
- 4 These include: the pollution of oyster-beds whose farming had employed hundreds, emigration to urban centers in search of employment, the effects of World War II, and the displacement of locals by hoteliers and real-estate dealers seeking to turn the sea-islands into the tourist paradise of the South.
- 5 I should note that in other fieldwork within this community and elsewhere, I have found that questions involving danger, death, superstitions, ghosts and the like often do get the interviewee interested and speaking excitedly along the lines predicted by Labov (1972). For my own views on the issues raised by Wolfson (1976) about the use of strategies of this type in fieldwork, see Rickford (to appear).
- 6 Mr. Walters and Mr. Jones were both deacons in the local Baptist church, with well-deserved reputations as pray-ers and singers; but even in these sacred speech events, the performance element was still present. For instance, after being commended for a particularly moving prayer which he delivered at a prayermeeting, Mr. Walters said, beaming: "I can kick up a little bit of dust sometimes - if I got somebody to start the fire for me, and kind of warm me up. It'll make you rub your eye, anyhow."
- 7 According to Tanna (1984: 48), one element in the appeal of riddles in Jamaica, which similarly occur in story-telling sessions, is the fact that 'the role of questioner changes rapidly and that everyone can participate in answering.' Note, incidentally, that the Jamaican riddles have a formulaic opening, 'Riddle me this, riddle me that, guess me this riddle and perhaps not' (ibid.) which is not attested in our data, but may once have been current in this area and may still be on some islands.
- 8 Compared with 'I give (up)' - the equivalent formula in parts of the USA and Caribbean, this is a more powerful admission of defeat for respondents and success for the performer.
- 9 Richard Bauman has drawn my attention to the fact that the watermelon story and the mosquito story occur on p.540 and p.509 respectively of Baughman 1966.

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