The Way Stylized Language Means: Pattern Matching in the Child Ballads

Cathy Lynn Preston
University of Colorado at Boulder, Center for Computer Research in the Humanities (CCRH), Hellem 101, Campus Box 226, Boulder, Colorado 80309-0226, USA

Abstract: This paper suggests ways in which the pattern-matching capability of the computer can be used to further our understanding of stylized ballad language. The study is based upon a computer-aided analysis of the entire 595,000-word corpus of Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1892), a collection of 305 textual traditions, most of which are represented by a variety of texts. The paper focuses on the “Mary Hamilton” tradition as a means of discussing the function of phatic language in the ballad genre and the significance of textual variation.

Key Words: ballad, “Mary Hamilton,” phatic language, textual variation, collocation, stylized language, epithet, concordance, verbal echoes

“Gay lady,” “a year but and a day,” and “there were ladies they lived in a bower” are examples of the collocations and stylized phrases and lines, often referred to as commonplaces or formulae, which appear in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and Scottish popular ballads. Though considered as one of the dominant features by which a ballad text or a borrowing from a ballad text might be identified, scholars have disagreed about how such linguistic features function within ballad texts. This paper will suggest ways in which the pattern-matching capability of the computer can be used to further our understanding of stylized ballad language.

My study is based upon a computer-aided analysis of the entire 595,000-word corpus of Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898), a collection of 305 textual traditions, most of which are represented by a variety of texts (for example, Child 173, “Mary Hamilton,” is represented by 28 different texts). These texts have oral, manuscript, and printed sources (popular broadside as well as popular and scholarly editions) primarily from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By mechanically highlighting similar linguistic features in a variety of concordance-like compilations, the computer enables the scholar to identify stylized patterns and their variants (see Appendix A for sample concordance page). By analyzing pattern and variation in one ballad text, its textual tradition, and the corpus as a whole, one can begin to describe a type of formulaic stylization which is both phatic and culturally symbolic in function, but which also can be individualized and is, therefore, of semantic significance beyond the formulaic cultural associations of the genre.

Phatic Language

Normally defined, phatic language is that speech which almost totally lacks denotative meaning and connotes little more than a sense of a shared awareness. For example, many forms of contemporary salutation are phatic. In normal conversation, someone saying “good morning” or “good afternoon” rarely means in any literal way that it is a good morning or that it is a good afternoon. The meaning of the expressions lies in their stylized form, not in the denotative meaning of the words, and their significance lies in their participants’ acknowledgement of a shared cultural framework. Analogously, there is a phatic element in language — shared dialect, vocabulary, idioms, and so forth — which conveys a recognition of mutual belonging. This phatic level of language enables one to participate in or bars one from participating in a particular group culture, its world view, and the artistic productions exhibiting that world view because it is the comprehension of the phatic level of language which initially enables or signals entrance to that world.

To respond to and understand a ballad, one must be able to recognize and respond to the phatic elements of the text. One’s initial entrance to the world of the ballad is through its form, textual and musical. That entrance may be instigated visually for a participatory lay audience by the graphic representation of sets of four-line stanzas or for the academic critic by a recognition that the stanza is an abcb-quatrain in which four-stress and three-stress lines alternate, a couplet with seven stresses to the line, or an abcb-quatrain in which all lines are composed of four stresses. Or the entrance may be gained through the auditory sense; one hears a particular set of textual rhythms or musical rhythms and tonal fluctuations. In each case what one responds to is a particular kind of structural unity — a syntax, if you will. It matters very little what the words are that fill the syntactic structure. The initial entrance to the text by means of a conscious or an unconscious recognition of its syntax merely places the reader or the audience in the world of the ballad; it does not generate any specific meaning. The range of the world one is able to enter, though, is controlled by one’s historical and cultural learning, and part of that learning or conditioning lies in one’s respective participation in the various aspects of folk, popular, and elite cultures. This does not mean that form cannot achieve meaning; it can and does. It simply means that one should differentiate between initial and secondary responses, because it is the first that enables the second and to some extent controls and directs it.

Not only may the larger syntactic or structural features of the ballad function phatically, but the individual couplets, lines, and phrases can as well. In each, it is not initially the individual words which the reader or audience responds to, but the phrasal unit. Just as the independent clause, “There was a young lady from York,” slips the reader or audience into the world of the limerick, so too the independent clauses, “My father was the duke of York” and “There were ladies, they lived in a bower,” slip the reader or audience into the world of the ballad. It makes no difference which town is involved, or which person, or what that person is. What is important is the stylized phrase and the way that phrase is formulated. One says “limerick,” the other says “ballad,” and the worlds which the reader or audience enters are quite different; consequently, the way that the reader or audience is prepared to react to the text that follows is different. The traditional ballads are filled with such phrases as even the most casual glance at a concordance will show.

Finally, even individual words and their epithets function phatically. For example, there are innumerable references to females in the Child corpus. They are referred to as “girl” (25 occurrences), “dame” (115 occurrences), “damosal” (20 occurrences), “lass” or “lassie” (300 occurrences), “maid” or “maiden” (1500 occurrences), and “woman” (510 occurrences), but by far the most commonly occurring form is “lady” (3300 occurrences) which seems to function as a generic term covering all the others. “Lady” is then one of the many words synonymous with balladry and, when coupled with the other phatic elements, functions similarly. “Lady,” in turn, may be combined with one of several adjectives: “beautious,” “black,” “blessed,” “bonny,” “bravest,” “brave,” “braw,” “bright,” “brisk,” “brown,” “crafty,” “dainty,” “dear,” “dutiful,” “English,” “fair,” “false,” “fine,”