Implicit Metatalk Stanislaus

Bodong chant belongs to the genre of death ritual speech parallelism (see Appendix A). As song and dance bodor is an organized form of chanting (umbada) performed by a collective at the high class death rituals. It is a complex semiotic phenomena consisting of kede\{bodor\}, ‘text’ \(t\), bodor, ‘song cycles’, arinna, ‘unison’, and movement which comprises \(\text{sejikena, ‘movement of feet’ and soean}, \text{‘movement of hands’}. Like
IMPLICIT META-TALK AND COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY IN PERFORMANCE: TORAJAN POETICS AND POLITICS

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1 Introduction

Linguistic anthropologists have shown that ritual speeches are mainly characterized by the use of formulaic expressions, high formalization and rigidity. Bloch in discussing Merina circumcision ceremony in Madagascar argues that the ‘highly formalized language’ and the ‘rigidly prescribed behavior in dance movements’ order actions and relationship between participants. In this way there is no way for the structure of role relations and authority to be challenged except by a total refusal to use the accepted form or a total refusal of all political conventions (Bloch 1989 [1974], 24), since “you cannot argue with a song” (ibid. 37). Numerous works have been advanced against Bloch’s thesis (Werbner 1977, Parkin 1984; Schieffelin 1985 for examples).

This paper makes the argument that such rigid prescription becomes in part a resource of knowledgeable social actors who can contest authority in song while preserving the formal structure of the ritual. It will show how Torajan ancestral ritual speech parallelism is put into practice, and how this process is subject not only to regularities but also to happenstance, potentially of the most unpredictable sort. As a result, despite the fact that ritual is highly prescribed, the possible outcomes are unpredictable because its use may put the conventional senses of signs at multiple risks.

The value of a sign in ritual speech parallelism is fixed by its contrasts to other signs. Its use, however, is saturated with pragmatic value according to the subject’s interests. Thus to quote ancestral parallelism in a specific context for a certain purpose is to use it according to the acting subject’s pragmatic interest. The underlying assumption is that agents have the potential to resist and manipulate structural constraints and sometimes marshal enough creative power to transform their structural relations (Giddens 1984). Thus, its use has the characteristic of contingency and becomes a site of contestation (Sahlins 1985; Keane 1997).

The ritual embodies the construct used at various levels, pragmatically and strategically. Above all, just like ordinary speech, ritual speech parallelism also utilizes what Silverstein called a metapragmatic capacity in addition to having a pragmatic aspect (1993). He uses the term metapragmatics to refer to both implicit and explicit metatalk, that is, the talk about the talk. Bateson first used this term in 1950’s, calling it metacommunication and used the concept to explain how children jointly manage a play session. The importance of this concept will be shown at two levels of analysis. First, I will show how social actors utilized this metapragmatic capacity of the language
discursively to strategically transform social relations. Metapragmatic capacity is basic to human ratiocination and allows for the evaluation and alteration of future action. Indeed, it allows agents to reflexively evaluate and explain their use of speech acts and those of others including the rationalizations behind them. A metapragmatic description thus provides us (social actors and analysts) with empirical evidence of what is exactly happening at the moment of speaking in performance. Secondly, I will show the importance of the strategic use of the implicit metatalk and collaboration in ritual as a verbal shorthand to keep the flow of chant without breaking the frame.

Using *badong* (chant for the deceased) as a case study, this paper examines how a ritual leader, speaking up formally and publicly to a rival leader, challenged and transformed the structure of social relations between the rival leader and himself and with their respective co-performers. Prior to taking over leadership, the challenger was a participant to the social event, recognizing his rival as the legitimate leader. By taking up the leadership position (*tomantolo batin*) through implicit metatalk, he usurped the previous leader’s power.

2. *Badong* and its place within Torajan oral tradition

The *badong* chant belongs to the genre of death ritual speech parallelism (see Appendix A). As song and dance *badong* is an organized form of lamenting (*umbatan*) performed by a collective at the high class death ritual. It is a complex semiotic phenomena consisting of *kadon badong*, ‘text lines’, *badon*, ‘song cycles’, *oninna*, ‘unison’, and movement which comprises *teykana*, ‘movement of feet’ and *soeenma*, ‘movement of hands’. Like other dances and songs, *badong* performance is one of the most rule-bounded ritual activities present in Torajan society. Within each level there are rules of combinations which produce meanings. Denotationally, all of these components are fused into a single purpose, i.e. to express the collective grief because a beloved one has passed away. The number of lines to be sung may be in the hundreds depending on the composition the ritual leader makes. These lines express more or less the same life cycles: mythical origin in heaven, life in this world, and the return to heaven (cf. Van der Veen 1966; Rappoport 1997). Within it we can also detect the differential distribution of various kinds of knowledge among performers such as knowledge of leadership, the ability to construct parallel lines, genealogy, voice quality and so forth.

In this performance, the ritual leader composes a line and offers it to co-performers to be repeated and chanted. The line is metapragmatically segmented into eight syllables, which are in turn sung interchangeably by performers. What is interesting is that the eight syllables are further segmented into a 3-3-2 pattern, which corresponds with the grouping of the performers. Semantically, each segment of three syllables is incomprehensible when judged alone, indicating the importance of syntagmatic relations among these segments to produce a totally meaningful line. Some syllables are sung longer than others. The prolonged syllables are then followed by filler syllables or mellisma (cf. Rappoport 1997). Filler syllables continue the last vowel of the syllable, which is preceded by phoneme /h/ (Sandarupa 2004). The repetition of the whole line by co-performers is a tendency to move toward a unified center while displaying and affirming the ordered relations between the (segmented) parts.