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A Note on Ethnopoetics and Sociolinguistics

A NOTE ON ETHNOPOETICS AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS

DELL HYMES

The field of ethno poetics is associated primarily with the verbal art of other societies, especially societies traditionally studied by anthropologists (e.g., Hymes 1981, 1985, 1987; Tedlock 1983; Swann and Krupat 1987). Important work has come to be done with materials in American English, especially that of Virginia Hymes with the Appalachian stories of Charlotte Ross, and related works of students in the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, although much of it is as yet unpublished.

The principles of patterning found in this work have not played a part in the work of sociolinguists concerned with the interplay of oracy and literacy in our society. In these notes I would like to show that sociolinguistic work may benefit from understanding its materials in ethno poetic terms. It appears that ethno poetics has discovered a universal sector of language use, one as essential to the analysis of language as the established sectors of phonology and syntax.

The main principles to be taken into account are five:

(1) Performed oral narratives are organized in terms of lines, and groups of lines (not in terms of sentences and paragraphs).

(2) The relations between lines and groups of lines are based on the general principle of poetic organization called equivalence (Jakobson 1960). Equivalence may involve any feature of language. Features that counted to constitute lines are well known: stress, tonal accent, syllable, initial consonant (alliteration), and such forms of equivalence are commonly called metrical. Lines of whatever length may also be treated as equivalent in terms of the various forms of rhyme, tone group or intonation contour.

initial particles, recurrent syntactic pattern, consistency or contrast of grammatical feature (e.g., tense, aspect). The latter kinds of equivalence are particularly found in Native American traditions.

(3) Sequences of equivalent units commonly constitute sets in terms of a few pattern numbers. Sets of two and four are commonly found together, as are sets of three and five. Where one of these pairs is the unmarked pattern, the other pattern may serve as a marked feature for emphasis and intensification (cf. Hymes 1985b, 1987).

(4) Texts are not ordinarily constituted according to a fixed length or fixed sequence of units. Rather, each performance of a narrative may differ from each other, responsive to context and varying intention. The patterning of a text as a whole is an emergent configuration (cf Hymes 1985a).

(5) Variations and transformations in narratives appear to involve a small number of dimensions, corresponding to the components of the ethnography of speaking.

Three English Examples

A good many scholars present texts in terms of lines. What is rare is recognition that stories may consist not only of lines, but also of groups of lines, indeed, that such groups may bespeak a thoroughgoing rhetorical art that organizes the story and shapes its meaning. Put otherwise, it is rare to find a model of the mind of the narrator that understands it as proceeding along not one track, but two-- not only a track of what, but also a track of how, organizing performance through the synchronization of incident with measure.

We are only at the beginning of what can be learned, but enough has come to be known to indicate that the principles of narrative performance are not limited to any language, cultural tradition or area, but rather are universally human. We must imagine children as being born with the capacity to acquire mastery of such form. Local circumstance will determine the particular groupings acquired-- two and four, three and

five, or some other. Local circumstances will also condition the degree of mastery acquired. As with grammar, so with discourse: not every one has access to all that has come to be done with it, or is given encouragement to extend its range. The systemic potential of English, say, far exceeds any lowest common denominator of competence among those who speak it. When texts come from a culture grounded in oral tradition and a narrative view of life¹, it is not surprising to find text after text that shows rewarding artistry. In a society such as our own, when personal narrative competes with mass media amidst a perpetual circulation of paper, and personal experience is discounted as 'anecdote', it would not be surprising to find that artistry is less. When texts come from experiences that lack personal identification, or circumstances that discourage acquired modes of telling, effective shaping seems even less likely.

It appears, however, that effective shaping of stories is far more pervasive than one might expect, that the impulse to narrative form is far from paved over or drowned out, even in unfavorable circumstances. The principles and approach discussed here make possible a new dimension and new degree of precision. Let me here reanalyze three short narratives told in English by urban Black children, two in the context of a research project, one in a classroom. All show competence of form in even brief compass, and in the last, a complexity not hitherto observed.

The analyses are given in detail in order to both demonstrate the presence of the patterning, and to indicate the nature of what might be found by others in other materials. It is likely that the domestic ethnography of the United States, in which so many anthropologists now engage, encounters a multitude of narratives, analysis of whose form in this way would be illuminating for both the work in question and for the general nature of verbal competence. Linguistic ethnography ought not to begin at the water's edge, but owe a responsibility to inherent form wherever it appears, classroom, street corner, doctor's office, suburban train.

Two Texts From Labov's Work in New York City

The research conducted in the 1960's in New York City by William Labov (see Labov 1972a, 1972b) has become a sociolinguistic landmark. Variations in pronunciation which had been set aside as "free" were shown to be predictably governed; the irreducible heterogeneity of an urban metropolis was shown to contain a speech community in terms of agreement on the social meaning of certain changing sounds; an initial cornerstone of linguistics as a science, regularity in the outcome of sound change, was shown to be observable not only after the fact but in progress, contrary to the expectation of many. Out of this work came also an influential framework for the analysis of narrative (see Labov and Waletzky 1967, Labov 1972c). That framework is known for a definition of narrative in terms of the question said to be faced by any narrator, 'So what?'. A well-formed narrative includes an answer to that question, a dimension Labov calls 'evaluation'. An example frequently used in talks was one in which the narrative line concludes with a statement not part of the temporal order, to the effect that 'And that man was my own brother'.

Labov's interest in the transformation of experience into narrative (1972c) led him to compare young people's stories of their own experience with their accounts of television programs that they had watched. One of the latter is shown below as published by Labov (1972c: 367)².

a This kid--Napolean got shot
b and he had to go on a mission.
c And so this kid, he went with Solo.
d So they went
e and this guy--they went through this window,
f and they caught him.
g And then he beat up them other people.
h And they went
i and then he said
that this old lady was his mother
j and then he--and at the end he say
that he was the guy's friend.

The story is one of a series of accounts of a television program popular at the time, "The Man From U.N.C.L.E.". Labov reports that it is typical of many such narratives of vicarious experience that his group collected:

We begin in the middle of things without any orientation section; pronominal reference is many ways ambiguous and obscure throughout. But the meaningless and disoriented effect of 17 (the number of the story in the article) has deeper roots. None of the remarkable events that occur is evaluated.

Labov contrasts the story with a second, one of true personal experience (which is considered below).

An ethnopoetic perspective shows the story to have a considerable degree of structure. Recognition of such structure helps recognize that evaluation is actually present.

Syntactic and lexical parallelism shows the story to have two parts. Each part is built on a distinct framework. In the first part the framework is 'this kid', 'this kid', 'this

guy'. In the second part the framework is 'And then he'. The two parts are distinct. The second part has no variant of 'this kid, etc.'. 'And then he' does not occur in the first part.

Several features of the story indicate that it rings changes on these two frameworks in pairs of lines. Notice the repetition of 'so' in the third and fourth lines (the only occurrence of 'so' in the story). Notice also the parallelism of 'they', 'they' in the next two lines. Notice again the parallelism in the last lines of 'he said/that' and 'he say/that'. I take each case to consist of two lines (Labov shows them on the page as each two lines, but assigns each only a single unit symbol (i,j)). Until this point each line after the first has begun with a particle or particle pair (---, and; so, so; and, and; and then, and). Initial 'that' fits this sequence, especially given the expectation of pairing that has been established. (Thus the series given at the end of the preceding sentence concludes: and then, that; and then, that).

Recognition of the two parts and of the parallelisms within them indicates that the story should be displayed in the following way:

This kid--Napolean got shot	1
and he had to go on a mission.	2
And so this kid, he went with Solo.	3
So they went.	4
And this guy--they went through this window,	5
and they caught him.	6
And then he beat up them other people	7
and they went	8
and then he said	9
that this old lady was his mother	10
and then he--and at the end he say	11
that he was the guy's friend.	12

Notice the occurrence of pause and recasting lines 1, 5 and 11 (marked in the transcription by a pair of dashes). This feature occurs at the outset of the story, and at the outset of the concluding segment of each part. One may suspect that it is an expressive marker that goes with the units at boundaries.

There is clearly a formal competence, an ability to organize narrative lines in terms of initial particles, and to group them in terms of recurrent parallels. The short text is indeed a model of symmetry. Its profile is as follows:

A	a	1, 2
	b	3, 4
	c	5, 6
B	a	7, 8
	b	9, 10
	c	11, 12

The particular narrative task, talk about a television program, may have elicited little more than the ingredients of formal competence. Nonetheless, recognition of the shape of the story makes it clear that the culminating segments (B bc) provide evaluation and point, the answer to the question, 'So what?'. Contrary to Labov's comment, evaluation is present. The phrase 'that he was the guy's friend' is quite analogous to 'and that guy was my own brother'. What is missing is not evaluation, but sufficient information ('orientation') to understand what is being evaluated, the point of the evaluation.

To this story Labov contrasts a narrative of personal experience. Here it is as presented in Labov (1972c; and Cazden 1970).

a **When I was in fourth grade--**
 no, it was third grade--

(b)³ **This boy he stole my glove**

c **He took my glove**

d **and said that his father found it downtown on the ground.**
 (And you fight him?)

e **I told him that it was impossible for him to find downtown**
 'cause all these people were walking by
 and just his father was the only one
 that found it?

f **So he got all (mad).**

g **So⁴ then I fought him.**

h **I knocked him all out in the street.**

i **So he say he give.**

j **and I kept on hitting him.**

k **then he started crying**

l **and ran home to his father.**

m **And the father told him**

n **that he ain't find no glove.**

The story is quite parallel in structure and evaluative features, Labov writes, to another fight story. The point is said to be self-aggrandizement, and almost every element contributes to that evaluation, being designed to make the teller look good and the other

boy look bad. The story

follows the characteristic two-part structure of fight narratives in the B[lack] E[nglish] vernacular; each part shows a different side of his ideal character. In the account of the verbal exchange that led up to the fight, Norris is cool, logical, good with his mouth, and strong in insisting on his own right. In the second part, dealing with the action, he appears as the most dangerous kind of fighter, who 'just goes crazy' and 'doesn't know what he did'....his opponent is shown as dishonest, clumsy in argument, unable to control his temper, a punk, a lame, a coward.

Labov points out earlier that when he ran home, 'his very own father told him that his story wasn't true'. And adds here,

No one listening to Norris's story within the framework of the vernacular value system will say 'So what?'. The narrative makes its point and effectively bars this question.

The story makes its point not only in terms of values but also in terms of form.

The rationale of Labov's grouping of the story into fourteen units (1-14 in 1968, a-n in 1972c) is not explained nor is it entirely evident. We do not know whether or not the lines or units correspond in some way to intonational contours or tone groups. The emphasis in the analysis on narratives as temporally ordered clauses suggests that syntax is the basis of the units. There is, however, a syntactic inconsistency. In units d, e and i, a verb of saying and what is said is distinguished as a separate line. In m,n what is said is distinguished as a separate line. Perhaps m, n show emphasis and a sense of pairing analogous to that at the end of the preceding story. I suspect that the separation of m, n is correct, but then the exact parallel in e ('x told y/that...'), where both object and 'that' are present, should be regarded in the same way (d lacks object, i lacks both object and 'that').

It can be guessed that a sense of pairing of segments is present in Labov's groupings: ab, cd, ef (in the first part); gh, ij, kl, mn (in the second part). Yet features of content or participant role do not coincide consistently with the designated segments. New segments are indicated within a single actor's turn and talk at two places (c, d; m,n), but not within an extended other (e). Lines (c-d, g-h, k-l, m-n) are pairs of segments with a

constant single actor, while (e-f, i-j) have change of actor. Possibly no consistent rationale is intended.

Ethnopoetics makes it necessary always to raise the question of criteria underlying segmentation of a text into lines, and to seek to discover what groupings the lines may have, together with the meanings signalled by such patterning. Such a questioning of the present story discovers an organization that supports Labov's sense of it, and hence an added dimension to what the narrator knows and does.

The story makes use of three- and five-part relationships. The first five lines show an intersection of two three-part sequences, a rhetorical integration usually found where three- and five-part relationships are found (in a number of American Indian languages of the North Pacific Coast, in texts from the Finnish *Kalevala*, narratives from Appalachia, in the Greek of the Epistle of James). In such a five-part sequence the third element is outcome of an initial triad and simultaneously onset of a second triad. (In effect, rhetorically, $3 + 3 = 5$). In these first five lines the third line, 'this boy he stole my glove' culminates lines 1-2-3, and initiates a second triad of 3-4-5, where 4 is a continuation and 5 the outcome.

When 'I told him/that...' is taken as two lines, then the next sequence also has five lines (7-11). The third line (9) is a pivot, although there is not a sense of two interlocking sequences of action, but of two interlocking sequences of argumentative analysis.

These two five-line sequences develop the cause of the fight through reported speech. The narrator's response is longer in lines, and more complex. The report of the fight and its outcome begins with the only instance of an initial particle pair ('So then'), and proceeds with units of single and paired lines, a faster pace. The two pairings of lines at the end, with each line having an initial particle, may be intensification. Such a device, pairing as intensification against a background of three and five-part patterning, is known from other traditions.

These groups of lines have as content changes of participant actor: he, I, he in the sequence that reports the verbal exchange and its outcome; I, he, I, he, the father in the sequence that reports the fight and its outcome. There is a three-step sequence, then, in the first part, with the other boy's deed as onset, Norris' response as ongoing continuation, and the other boy losing his cool, getting mad, as outcome. There is a five-step sequence in the second part, with 'I fought him' as onset, 'he gives up' as continuation, 'I kept on hitting him' as outcome of an initial triad. Here one sees structurally expressed Labov's point that the teller is 'the most dangerous kind of fighter', who 'just goes crazy' and 'doesn't know what he did'. This local climax simultaneously initiates a closing triad, with the other boy crying and running home as continuation, and the father's statement as outcome to the sequence and the story.

Here is a profile that summarizes these relationships:

A	a	1-5
	b	7-11
	c	12
B	a	13-14
	b	15
	c	16
	d	17-18
	e	19-20

The story can be displayed as follows (integrating indications of its profile as a framework):

A(a) When I was in fourth grade--	1
no, it was in third grade--	2
this boy he stole my glove.	3
He took my glove	4
and said that his father found it downtown on the ground.	5
[And you fight him?]	6
(b) I told him	7
that it was impossible for him to find downtown	8
cause all those people were walking by	9
and just his father was the only one	10
that found it?	11
(c) So he got all (mad).	12
B (a) So then I fought him.	13
I knocked him all out in the street.	14
(b) So he say he give.	15
(c) And I kept on hitting him.	16
(d) Then he started crying	17
and ran home to his father.	18
(e) And the father told him	19
that he ain't find no glove.	20

The two part structure of fight narratives, and the presentation of self, are present not only in content, but also in the shaping of poetic form.

A narrative from Michaels' work in the Boston area

Classrooms continue to be a place in which unfamiliar pattern is taken to be absence of pattern. This is especially likely when only one pattern is recognized, as when telling or writing of a story is understood only in terms of a certain traditional logic. It may be reasonable to expect children to learn the rhetorical patterns that prevail in the dominant culture. It is not reasonable to confuse being able to tell a story with being able to tell a story in a certain way. Only by accepting the ability to tell stories that children may already have can one fairly judge their competence and connect what they have to learn with what they already know.

Sarah Michaels has made a valuable contribution to this problem through her study of 'sharing time' in a Boston-area classroom. Children were expected to come forward and share an experience with the rest of the class. The classroom Michaels studied had both white and black children. The teacher's expectation of what it means to tell a story was such that white children were more likely to be recognized as telling a story, and allowed to finish one, than black children. By careful analysis of transcriptions, Michaels has been able to show that some of the stories told by black children had traditional patterning not recognized as such (1981, 1983). The story discussed below is taken from Michaels (1983: 33). To her recognition of organization in terms of lines and parts is added further analysis of organization in ethnopoetic terms, terms which suggest further expressive richness. Let me first display the story as it would appear if typed as a paragraph, and then as analyzed in terms of lines. The latter presentation goes beyond that of Michaels in a few respects.

Paragraphed typing of the story

On George Washington's birthday I'm goin' ice (?)⁵ my grandmother. We never um haven't seen her since a long time and she lives right near us. And she, and she's gonna, I'm gonna spend the night over her house. And every weekend she comes to take me, like on Saturdays and Sundays, away from home and I spend the night over her house. And one day I spoiled her dinner. And was having, we was, she paid ten dollars, and I got eggs and stuff, and I didn't even eat anything.

Lines according to intonation and pause

On George Washington's birthday	1
I'm goin' ice my grandmother	2
We never um <u>haven't</u> seen her since a long time	3
and...she lives right near us	4
And...she, and she's gonna	5
I'm gonna spend the night over her house	6
And...every weekend she comes to take me	7
like on Saturdays and Sundays	8
away	9
from home	10
and I spend the night over her house.	11
And one day I spoiled her dinner	12
...um and was having um, we was um	13
she paid ten dollars	14
and I <u>didn't</u> even <u>eat</u> anything.	15

As Michaels points out, the story has three parts. The parts are signalled by both wording and intonation. With regard to wording, the story makes use of expressions of time to mark the start of a new segment, as is common in oral traditions. There are three such time expressions, here, 'On George Washington's birthday' (line 1), 'And...every weekend' (7), 'And one day' (12). Each introduces a unit.

Sharing time presentations are characterized by a rising intonation, but not all lines have it. In this story the characteristic rising intonation occurs with the opening lines of a segment: 1, 2, 3, 4 in the first, 7, 9; 10 in the second, 12, 13 in the third. Note that the second line of the segment (8) has a time expression, 'on Saturdays and Sundays', expanding and doubling the time expression of its first line, 'every weekend'. Taking this into account, one can see that each segment begins with at least a pair of opening markers. The first segment (let us call it A) has two pairs of lines with rising intonation (1,2; 3,4); the second segment has a pair of lines with time expressions (the first having also rising intonation), and a pair of lines with rising intonation (7, 8; 9, 10); the third segment has a pair of lines with rising intonation (12, 13).

The ending of each segment is marked by intonation, but not by rising intonation. There is acceleration, beginning after the first word, in lines 6 and 11. In line 16 there is low accent before each of the four words after the first (indicated here underlining the first letter of the words). The only final boundary marker of the story occurs at the end of this line.

Low accent occurs once in the midst of the story (before 'haven't' in line 3), and with each of the first three words in the first line. The first and last lines (1, 16) make it appear that multiple occurrences of low accent function as a boundary marker.

Each segment is thus marked at both beginning and end. Notice also that each of the first two segments comes round to the same point: 'I'm gonna spend the night over her house'.⁶ Such coming round is a frequent formal marker in oral traditions, and sometimes a significant expression of pervasive theme (cf. discussion of "The Crier" in Chapter 6 of

Hymes 1981). Perhaps the third segment can be taken as addressing the same point. That seems the case, and on two levels.

Simply in terms of the three segments, one can see that the first relates staying over as an upcoming event of importance to the narrator; the second includes places in the event in terms of an important pattern; the third reports a notable occasion within that pattern. On a close reading, however, the relationship of the segments needs further explication. On the face of it the first two segments contradict each other. The initial time expressions are not themselves necessarily inconsistent, to be sure. If 'George Washington's birthday' (A) was not on a weekend, then 'every weekend' (B) is an expansion of 'spend the night over her house', from 'I'm gonna (this particular time)' (A) to simply 'I (every weekend)' (B). But how can it be true that 'every weekend she comes to take me' (B), if it is true that 'we haven't seen her since a long time' though 'she lives right near us' (A)?

The crux and resolution would appear to lie in the third segment. It would appear that 'We haven't seen her since a long time' (A), because 'one day I spoiled dinner' by not eating anything, although 'she paid ten dollars.' That Leona is going to go on George Washington's birthday, then, is news, and news that anticipates weekly visits. The actual temporal order is in effect something like (C) (A) (B).

The ambiguity as to narrative time of (B), indeed, allows one to imagine it both as central to the spoken story and as pertinent to not one, but three points in the sequence of events alluded to in what is spoken. It is as if (B) is a variable that can be variously tensed and marked or not marked for negation. The implied sequence would appear to be (B) C (B) A (B): 'I [used to] spend the night over her house', [but] 'On George Washington's birthday' 'I'm gonna spend the night over her house', 'and every weekend' 'I [will] spend the night over her house'. (B) is central to all this, and is also the expressive peak of the story. It is in (B) that an initial time expression is doubled ('every weekend', 'on Saturdays and Sundays'), and that the characteristic rising intonation divides the story into finer lines

than anywhere else, occurring on successive phrases, one a single word, framing 'away', 'from home'.

The lines within each of the three segments appear to be grouped into sets of five, five and three. In (A) rising intonation and time expression distinguishes 1, and rising intonation distinguishes 2, 3 and 4, while 5 and 6 show a three-step progression in formulation (...she, and she's gonna, I'm gonna---) characterized by the acceleration at the end. In (B) rising intonation and time expression distinguishes 7, time expression distinguishes 8, rising intonation distinguishes 9 and 10, while 11 is characterized by acceleration.⁷ In (C) rising intonation and time expression distinguish 12, rising intonation distinguishes 13, while 14-15-16 are characterized by a three-step progression (she paid, I got, I didn't) and acceleration at the end.

These relationships can be summarized in a profile, using lower case letters for the distinguishing of lines and groups of lines, and larger case letters for sets of such groups. In the terminology developed for American Indian narratives, lower case letters mark 'verses', larger case letters mark 'stanzas'.

A	a	1
	b	2
	c	3
	d	4
	e	5-6
B	a	7
	b	8
	c	9
	d	10
	e	11
C	a	12
	b	13
	c	14-15-16

Building on Michaels' work, I have suggested that the story has form and meaning to a finer point than previously recognized. There are not only segments, and lines within segments, but patterned groups of lines. When intonation and time expression markers are taken as consistent indicators of lines throughout, the organization of the story is found to make use of a patterning based on grouping in terms of two pattern numbers, three and five. Such a principle is one of the two so far known to be widespread in the world. Moreover, when the relations among units are examined in terms of the principle of arousal and satisfying of expectation, the story is expressively complex indeed. In a three part sequence one expects some form of onset, continuation, and outcome. This story suggests a multiplicity of such relationships.

(1) As the story is told, the sequence of segments (ABC), the outcome (C) is the fact that 'one day I spoiled her dinner'. It stands as completion to an onset (A) of 'I'm gonna spend the night over her house' and its implication appears to be 'even so I spend the night over her house'.

(2) When the story is put in its inferred temporal sequence, (CAB), the outcome (B) is a hoped-for expected recurrent state. It completes an onset of misbehavior (C) that a continuation (A) shows to have been penalized, but now forgiven.

(3) When the story is considered in the light of the likely inference that 'every weekend' had once been the case, but then ceased to be so, (B) appears to figure as both onset and outcome in an implied longer sequence. (B) figures as an outset (past) to a continuation (C) that had as outcome an end to 'every weekend' (a negation of (B)). That negation has had a continuation (A), however, that arouses expectation of reinstituion of the initial state (future). Expressive details, indeed, show this protean stanza to be the story's expressive peak.

As noted at the beginning of this section on English narratives, this bit of 'sharing time' shows a complexity not hitherto observed. That surface simplicity may disclose

complexity should not surprise us. The point was made many years ago by Edwin Burgum Berry about the lyric, and seems necessary to any consideration of elaboration or restriction of codes and texts (cf. Hymes 1980: 43). Ethnopoetic perspective helps to see more of what is there.

¹ See Hymes and Cazden (1978).

² These two stories are cited by Cazden (1970: 300-1) from Labov et al. 1968: 298-9 (on pp. 300-1 in *Pride and Holmes, Sociolinguistics*). In Labov et al. 1968, and Cazden 1970, segments are marked by the numbers preceding the lines (1-10 in the first story, 1-14 in the second). In Labov 1972c the stories are marked by letters at the same points, as shown here (a-j, a-n).

³ The omission of "b" here is no doubt a printing error. The corresponding line in Cazden 1970 is marked (appropriately in that context, taken from Labov et al. 1968, with "2").

⁴ Labov 1972c has only 'Then' at the beginning of this line, whereas the earlier publication has 'So then'. Subsequent omission of "So" is more likely than its earlier interpolation. Also, the emphasis of double particle marking (both 'So' and 'then') fits the structural position of being the start of the second part of the story.

⁵ Michaels was not able to identify these sounds with confidence, and I can think of no likely interpretation.

⁶ Michaels reports (p. 33) that when played side by side, these two phrases are indistinguishable.

⁷ In Michaels (1983) 'like on Saturdays and Sundays' is set apart as a line, but without a number, and 'away' and 'and from home' are on the same line. All are associated with the same number line, 8. I have given each a separate number (7, 8, 9). This analysis thus shows the story to have 16 lines, not, as in Michaels' analysis, 14. (In Michaels 1983, the second segment has lines 7-9, and the third segment 10-14.)

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