Inside the Classroom (And Out)

Untiedt, Kenneth L.

Published by University of North Texas Press

Untiedt, Kenneth L.
Inside the Classroom (And Out): How We Learn through Folklore.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7372.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7372
Some Aspects of Language in Selected Cowboy Poetry

by Mary Jane Hurst
The popularity of cowboy poetry increases every year. The Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, which debuted in 1985, has become an annual event, attracting world-wide media attention. Cowboy festivals have sprung up throughout the country, and recitations by cowboy poets have become a regular part of county fairs, folklore meetings, museum shows, and even business openings in the West and Southwest. Cowboy poets have achieved a kind of celebrity status, appearing, for example, on the Tonight Show and being written about in People magazine. Collections of cowboy poetry, cowboy stories, and cowboy songs have sold well for university presses and other publishing companies. For its intrinsic merits and because of its widespread popularity, cowboy poetry deserves serious academic attention.

In an earlier article in Concho River Review, I discussed ways in which cowboy poetry is related to other, more traditional forms of American literature, and I argued that a full appreciation of contemporary cowboy poetry requires a recognition of the genre’s critical and thematic ties to history, particularly to a strong oral folk tradition in America and to the Old Southwest Humor of the nineteenth century. More recently, in “‘The Rain is the Sweat of the Sky’: Cowboy Poetry as American Ethnopoetics,” Scott Preston also places cowboy poetry within its larger context of American literary history, noting that “cowboy poetry demands a reexamination of assumptions about the development of American literature and its role in the life of the country.”

David Stanley’s summative “Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview” not only references Alan Lomax’s tracing of cowboy poetry’s roots to the “verbal art of soldiers and sailors, largely English and Irish in origin, which combined with the songs and hollers of black cowboys and the corrido tradition of the vaqueros,” but extends those roots to
include first, the expressions of herding cultures throughout the centuries and second, many educated borrowings “from the forms, metrics, and images of folk song, the Bible, classic literature, and contemporary verse.”

Notwithstanding its clear ties to mainstream elements in history and literature, cowboy poetry utilizes a distinctive idiom. In the present essay, I would like to examine a few notable aspects of cowboy poetry’s language, contrasting cowboy poets’ use of certain features of language with that of other poets. As David Stanley has said, “Far from being doggerel, cowboy poetry, both classic and contemporary, is more complex and subtle than it may seem on the surface.” The present discussion will draw primarily on eight poems chosen at random from Hal Cannon’s 1985 collection entitled *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*. The selected group includes Omar Barker’s “Jack Potter’s Courtin’,” Allen McCanless’s “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy,” Gail Gardner’s “The Dude Wrangler” and “The Sierry Petes,” Bruce Kiskaddon’s “That Little Blue Roan,” Georgie Sicking’s “Old Tuff” and “To Be a Top Hand,” and Don Ian Smith’s “Old Horse.” All of these are now cowboy classics, though some have been composed more recently than others. About half of the poems are centered on descriptions of people or animals, and about half are narrative.

Verb usage is always an important indicator of style. These selected cowboy verses make use of relatively few linking verbs. Be verbs are outnumbered by almost a five to one margin; only eighty-two linking verbs appear in the eight poems, compared with 357 action verbs. This figure even includes the fifteen be verbs in “Jack Potter’s Courtin,” which appear in the poem specifically to illustrate the difficulty a shy cowboy has in keeping a conversation going with “a gal named Cordie Eddy, mighty purty, sweet and pure,” whom he wishes to marry. The poem notes that Jack rides a hundred miles to see her:

\[
\text{. . . a-sweatin’ with the thought} \\
\text{Of sweetsome words to ask her with, the way a feller ought:}
\]
“I’m just a humble cowhand, Miss Cordie, if you please,
That hereby asks your heart and hand upon my bended
knees!”

It sounded mighty simply, thus rehearsed upon the trail,
But when he comes to Cordie’s house his words all
seemed to fail.

‘Twas “Howdy, Ma’am, an’ how’s the crops?
An’ how’s your Pa and Ma?”
For when it come to askin’ her, he couldn’t come
to taw.8

Except for the portions of direct discourse between the cowboy
and Miss Cordie, which are intended to convey the cowboy’s awk-
ward inarticulateness during a romantic situation, this poem, like
the others, contains few linking verbs.

The variety of action verbs in cowboy poetry is striking. Ani-
mals are said to bush up, buck, fight, react, outfigure, moan and
frisk, for example. Cowboys understand, learn, forget, shoot, figger,
recall, savvy, suffer, kiss, smash, blink, build, spy, and die. The range
of verbs describes typical actions of a cowboy, roping, branding,
and riding, but the verbs also ascribe specific qualities to cowboys.
For instance, the verbs understand and learn, or synonyms for
them, such as figgered out or savvy, appear in almost every poem.
The cowboy, then, is portrayed as thinking about his life and
adapting to his environment.

Verbs with particles are quite common in cowboy poetry, as in
sets up, look out, coiled up, branded up, and lapped on. Previously
used in informal or colloquial expressions, particles today are quite
common in writing as well as in speech. Normally, we do not even
notice particles in standard contemporary English except when
purists, mistaking them for prepositions, object to their position at
the end of a sentence, as in “She took the trash out” or “He tried
the sweater on.” The appearance of particles in early cowboy
poetry would have been more of a distinctive feature, marking the language as casual and non-traditional.

A number of verbal idioms are also used in cowboy poems: cowboys “get to talkin’,” “take a hint,” “fall in love,” “pop the question,” and “keep under control.” These idioms add to the informal, oral, and free-spirited tone of the poetry. Yet, many verbs are formed in ways more typical of older dialects of English. In Gail Gardner’s “The Sierry Petes,” for instance, the cowboy “sez” he “aint a-goin” but starts “a-packin,” while the devil can be seen “a-prancin” and “a-bellerin.” The orthographically-represented pronunciation of sez and the deletion of final -g, as in packin rather than packing, along with the nonstandard grammar shown by aint, mark regional and social dialect. Verb forms in cowboy poetry are also notable in the use of the prefix a-; as in a-packin or a-bellerin. Whereas particles represent a newer development in the English language, a-prefixing reflects a much older form. Long ago featured in standard English, a-prefixing now appears as a fossilized presence in older nursery rhymes, stories, and songs (as in “a-hunting we will go”) and in certain socioeconomic dialects within certain geographical regions. Linguist Walt Wolfram describes the a-as “an older form which has now become socially stigmatized.”9

Although commonly associated with Appalachian English or other rural southern dialects, the appearance of a-prefixing in cowboy poetry proves its wider usage. Of course, some of the cowboy poets or their ancestors originated in the Appalachian region or elsewhere in the South. Another literary example of a-prefixing occurs in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*; even when that novel was published in 1885, Huck’s language was meant to depict him as a lower-class, backwoods boy.10 It might be argued, of course, that a-prefixing is not a stigmatized feature to those individuals in whose dialect the form appears. Indeed, in some cowboy circles, a-prefixing might be said to mark in-group status.11

Although good poetry is not nearly as full of adjectives and adverbs as the popular stereotype would suggest, cowboy poetry contains noticeably fewer modifiers than do other types of poetry.
Built almost exclusively around strong, active verbs, cowboy poetry is far from being exclamatory or flowery. Adjectives in cowboy poetry are as scarce as trees on a West Texas ranch. There might be a few groves scattered around, but mostly there is only an isolated example here and there. The 1885 classic “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy” by Allen McCanless, for example, includes thirty-four action verbs (such as *emigrated*, *started*, *stretches*, *hint*, *ride*, and *bake*), but only three adjectives (*all*, *luckier*, and *small*) in its ten stanzas about the cowboy’s way of life.

In all, the eight cowboy poems selected for this discussion contain only seventy-nine adjectives and thirty-three adverbs. The adjectives are thus outnumbered by the 357 action verbs almost five to one. Many of the adjectives are quite ordinary, such as *big*, *silver*, *good*, and *patient*. The adjectives *sad* and *gentle* appear numerous times. A few adjectives, such as *ancient* and *artistic*, are a bit more unusual for this ordinarily plain and unostentatious verse. Some adjectives, such as *sweetsome*, are formed through compounding, which is more typical of older forms of English. Hyphenated adjectives are common, as in *pump-tailed*, *long-fered*, and *Gawd-forsaken*. Dialectical pronunciations of these adjectives and adverbs are often rendered through variant spellings or distinctive orthography, as in *yeller* for *yellow*, *shorely* for *surely*, and *ol’* for *old*.

To see how these proportions and types of verbs and adjectives in cowboy poetry compare to other types of verse, we could examine the language in some familiar canonical poems. For purposes of the present discussion, the following seven poems have been selected at random from a classic anthology: Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “To Helen,” Theodore Roethke’s “Dolor,” two sonnets by William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) and Sonnet 29 ("When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes"), Karl Shapiro’s “Auto Wreck,” and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Break, Break, Break.” These canonical poems are drawn from a range of time periods and reflect various styles and themes. Obviously, this
is just a small sample, and there are, admittedly, limitations in comparing one small group of poems with another equally small group. The seven traditional poems contain slightly fewer linking verbs than do the cowboy poems. The traditional poems contain 101 action verbs and fourteen linking verbs, at a seven to one margin, compared to the five to one margin of action verbs to linking verbs in the selected cowboy poems. The verbs in the mainstream verse, such as *dips, spatters, invites*, and *blooms*, are just as concrete as in the cowboy verse.

However, a great difference can be found in the use of adjectives between the two sets of poetry. The mainstream poems contain sixty-five adjectives and thirty-seven adverbs, thus using almost as many modifiers (102) as verbs (115). In the two Shakespearean sonnets, the number of modifiers is the same as the number of verbs (eighteen). This compares to the cowboy poetry in which the 112 modifiers are dwarfed by the 439 verbs. Moreover, the adjectives in the canonical poems are more learned, as in *inexorable, unalterable, occult, expedient, sullen, Nicean*, and *agate*. The adjectives in these poems are not necessarily more flowery, but they are multisyllabic and somewhat out of the ordinary.

Shakespeare’s extensive vocabulary of some 30,000 different words is often contrasted with the King James Bible, which contains only about 8,000 different words. No one would dispute the richness of expression in the King James Bible, despite its more limited vocabulary. Similarly, it would be nonsense to disparage cowboy poetry because it uses simple and unadorned words. Still, many people associate a varied and developed vocabulary with clarity and precision of thought. So, why would cowboy poets express themselves with few direct and ordinary adjectives, relying mainly on plain, active verbs to convey meaning?

There are at least three answers to this question. The most obvious answer is that cowboys are writing in their native idiom, expressing themselves honestly and truthfully in the same plain, direct, and action-oriented manner found in their everyday speech. A second and related explanation for the language patterns in
cowboy poetry could be associated with the fact that in some ways, cowboy verse resembles prose more than poetry, a connection to be expected given cowboy poetry’s ties to tales, stories, and the old southwest tradition of humorous legends. But, third, it seems that cowboy poets are also somewhat self-conscious in avoiding fancy or unusual language, as if in reaction against the popular stereotype that poetry should be exclamatory or flowery. In fact, however, David Stanley sees the imagery in “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy” as being “taken directly from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*.”\(^{14}\) Just because a cowboy poet writes with simple and direct language, it does not necessarily follow that the author is uneducated.

Poetry can be written in diverse forms and can appeal to diverse types of people. Cowboy poetry expresses itself in its own fresh and authentic idiom, and we need not wish that it were anything other than its own natural self. The cowboy poets’ efforts may sometimes be the object of bemusement or even satire, but their poems will also be the object of appreciation for their form as well as for their content because, in addition to the information cowboy poems provide about the cowboy’s life, the poems also tell us about the cowboy’s language. As shown in the present discussion, elements of conservatism (as in the preservation of older forms of language such as compounding and *a*-prefixing) and elements of innovation (as in the presence of particles and other free and informal manners of expression) co-exist within the social and

---

Mary Jane Hurst, May 2005.

ENDNOTES

3. Ibid. 6.
4. Those interested in the meter and rhyme of cowboy poetry should consult David Stanley’s discussion of those subjects in “Orderly Disorder: Form and Tension in Cowboy Poetry.” Stanley’s core observations about the significance of language in cowboy poetry are similar to mine. He concludes that “cowboy poetry exemplifies this continued questioning of language and of the stability of the text” (123). Among others who have given specific attention to language issues in cowboy poetry are Scott Preston in “‘The Rain is the Sweat of the Sky’: Cowboy Poetry as American Ethnopoetics” (especially the section subtitled “Linguistic Parallels between Cowboy Poetry and Ethnopoetries”) and Buck Ramsey in “Cowboy Libraries and Lingo.”

One other study of language in cowboy poetry that deserves particular notice is Barbara Barney Nelson’s “Every Educated Feller Ain’t a Plumb Greenhorn: Cowboy Poetry’s Polyvocal Narrator.” Nelson argues that public performances of cowboy poetry are changing in or even the loss of a “collective narrative voice” (49). She claims that, “In old cowboy poetry the dramatic . . . narrator usually speaks with a plural voice (we) representing the culture, usually as a minor character within the drama, watching from the fringe of the action” (49). Modern cowboy performances, she says, have changed the genre so that “new cowboy poetry seems to address a spectating audience rather than speak on behalf of and to a specific dramatic audience of working class cowboys. The narrative voice changes from polyvocal to first person singular and becomes more autobiographical, didactic, and omniscient” (55). Undoubtedly, Nelson is correct that media attention, popular performances, and new audiences are influencing developments in contemporary cowboy
poetry. However, all living entities, including languages, are constantly changing. Changes in language or in anything else can be, but are not necessarily, bad.

Nearly everyone who writes about cowboy poetry comments upon its distinctive language and upon its roots in the oral traditions, but the point still needs to be emphasized that part of what cowboy poetry is all about is language.


6. For present purposes, forms of *be* were not included in tallies of linking verbs if they were used as auxiliaries, as in “He had been walking.” Only *be* verbs used as the main verbs of a clause (as in, “He was cold and hungry”) were counted as linking verbs.


8. Ibid. 16.


10. Lamont Antieu discusses a-prefixing in “‘I’m a-going to see what’s going on here’: A-prefixing in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” While Huck Finn’s portrayal as an unsophisticated, backwoods boy is carefully represented by his speech, his language actually proves him to be an “active and discriminating” speaker and listener (Hurst, *Voice of the Child* 103). Throughout the novel, Huck Finn uses language for maximum effectiveness, whether he is implying a falsehood, pretending to be someone else, or engaging in some other complex linguistic maneuver.

11. A-prefixing can be better understood after a review of its historical origins. Wolfram (“A-Prefixing”) attributes the form to prepositional phrases. Pyles and Algeo (264) specifically attribute the *a-* in aside, alive, aboard, and a-hunting to an earlier form of *on* plus the word. Oliver Farrar Emerson (151) attributes the prefix *a-* to various origins: from Old English *of-* in adown, on- in away, and- in along, and *ge-* in aware and afford; from Old French *en-* in anoint; and from other borrowed sources in other words. Such diversity in the origins of the *a-* prefix can also be traced through entries from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and from the *Middle English Dictionary*. The prefix *a-* has actually been lost from some verbs since the Middle English period; Emerson’s *Middle English Reader* (321) reveals, for example, that Middle English *afinden*, derived from Old English
gefíndan, has now lost the a- to become the streamlined find. All living languages change over time, and modern English is substantially different from Old or Middle English. Readers today even have difficulty with Early Modern English texts such as the King James Bible or Shakespeare’s plays.

In Old English, of course, ge- was used to mark past participles, as in fremman “to do,” fremede “did,” and gefremed “done” (Pyles and Algeo 125). So, in addition to the phonological connection of ge- with a- (as indicated above in find, afford, and aware), could there be other connections between the two forms? For example, could remnants of ge- from the past participle have become erroneously associated at some point with the emerging present participle in some dialects? I know of no hard evidence for such a possibility, but it is unsatisfactory to try to explain a-prefixing solely by the prepositional phrase theory. Actually, Wolfram has also stated that “the form may function differently in different constructions, as suggested by the differences in serialization for progressive and adverbiaal a-prefixing” (“Reconsidering” 252). Frazer’s subsequent essay “More on the Semantics of A-Prefixing” sheds further light on this complex and interesting form.

12. For purposes of this discussion, articles (a, an, and the), possessive pronouns (such as my), and demonstrative pronouns (such as that) were not counted as adjectives. Words such as paper clip and Holy Land were treated as double nouns rather than adjective plus noun formation. The word not was not counted as an adverb.


15. Jim Hoy plots the future of cowboy poetry on the same axis the present essay finds reflected in the language of past and current cowboy poetry: conservatism and innovation. He predicts that “the best cowboy poets will take cowboy poetry down two paths in the future: the innovators will expand the possibilities for the genre, while the traditionalists will preserve the best of the past” (295). The present discussion revises and updates an earlier article of mine (“Linguistic Innovation and Conservatism: Dialect in Cowboy Poetry”) which appeared in the New Mexico Humanities Review.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


