

MEMORY OF A BALLAD SINGER

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ABSTRACT

Using the repeated recalls of one singer and his generation of a novel ballad, we demonstrate that ballad recall is constrained by rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, and story progression. Changes between singings occur within these constraints.

Inaccuracies occur when stories are passed from person to person (Bartlett, 1932). In contrast, oral traditions, such as ballad singing, have been passed through many generations with relatively few changes. If songs are stable over generations, then they should certainly be stable over repeated singings by one person. Although folklorists often discuss the same ballad as it was sung at various points in history, they rarely compare versions by the same singer (cf. Lord, 1960/1978). Nevertheless, as you will see, a singer can repeat the same ballad with relatively few alterations and without showing the types of changes documented by Bartlett. However, the ballad singer is not performing by a well practiced rote mechanism (Rubin, in press; Wallace and Rubin, in press).

Ballads are a highly constrained tradition. Their characteristics interact to limit variability and thus allow stable transmission over generations and stable recalls of individual ballad singers. To illustrate this point, consider the recalls of four ballads by one singer, Bobby McMillon, referred to as BM.

According to his report, BM perceived himself to be extremely accurate in performing a ballad exactly as he learned it. However, he also knew that he did not accomplish this because of the following incident. As a teenager, while trying to learn songs, he would ask a relative or neighbor, to sing a ballad. Upon returning home, he would write out the words to be sure that the ballad was not lost. These written records were lost shortly after this time and recovered about 20 years later. He was surprised to discover that he no longer sang the exact same words. The changes he reported were small in that they did not change the meaning of the ballad and were not noticed until BM consulted the written record.

The same type of changes reported by BM occurs in every ballad examined (e.g., Wallace and Rubin, in press). Yet, ballads are stable over many transmissions as a result of their properties. What is fixed about a ballad involves characteristics such as the rhyme scheme, the rhythmical structure, and the story progression which act together to limit the possible variations that can occur. These points will be illustrated using BM's recalls of four ballads.

In June, 1983, BM was asked to sing all the ballads he could think of concerning ship and train wrecks. Five months later he sang the exact same songs again. These two versions will be compared for verbal changes.

The four randomly selected ballads to be examined are "Wreck of the Old 97," "Jim Blake," "Golden Willow Tree," and "Sailor Boy." "Wreck of the Old 97" was first reported around 1904, and the event described in the ballad occurred in 1902 (Cohen, 1981; Wallace and Rubin, in press). BM reported learning this from a great-aunt. The first report of "Jim Blake" appeared in 1909 (Cohen, 1981). On the other hand, "Golden Willow Tree" is part of the Child collection ("Sweet Trinity," Child No. 286) and dates at least back to the 1600s (Child, 1894-1898). "Sailor Boy" dates at least to the 1800s (White, 1952).

The ballad with the most changes between BM's two singings is "Sailor Boy." There are three main differences observed between sessions 1 and 2. First, the melodies are not the same. Second, the male character changes from a sailor boy to a soldier boy. Third, in session 1 verses are composed of 4 lines whereas in session 2 verses consist of 6 lines, with lines 5 and 6 repeating melodically and verbatim lines 3 and 4.

Whether the differences between these two sessions represent differences in one person's memory of the same ballad or differences between versions is not clear. BM commented that he knew three different versions of this ballad, each learned from a different person. Yet, there is no indication that he was intentionally singing a different version in the two sessions. On another occasion he was asked to sing all the versions of a particular ballad that he knew (he had just claimed to know five), and he could sing only one.

The types of changes that occur in each of the four ballads are broken down by the frequency of occurrence in Table 1. Most of the changes are synonym and other word changes which do not alter the meaning, rhyme, or rhythm. For example, "Can't you shovel in a little more coal" becomes, in session 2, "Saying shovel in a little more coal," or "She cried bold captain tell me true" is sung as "She cried brave captain tell me true" in session 2. Sometimes a preposition or pronoun changes as in "Lima it's a three mile grade" to "Lima on a three mile grade" and "this morning" to "that morning." Occasionally, words are inserted. Usually these are one- or two-syllable words that are most often inserted at the beginning of a line. For example, "Now watch old 97 fly" becomes, in session 2, "Said now watch old 97 fly." The inserted word may be an adjective as in "I have a daughter that shall be at your command" changing to "I have an only daughter that shall be at your command."

Few lines vary the word order. Word phrases have a unique stress pattern as in a weak-strong or strong-weak pattern. Changing the word sequence throws off the entire line's rhythm.

Occasionally verses are added and dropped from singing to singing. In "Golden Willow Tree" in session 1, BM stops singing after verse 8 and says, "That's about all she (the person he learned from) remembered" and goes on to complete the story line which is the same story line using some of the same phrases that he sings in session 2. It is not clear if he stopped before finishing the song

Table 1
Types of Changes

	Old 97	Jim Blake	Will. Tree	Sail. Boy	Total
Synonym substitution	5	2	3	6	16
Other word substitution (preserving gist)	2	2	2	8	13
Preposition, pronoun, or article change	3	0	1	0	4
Verb tense change	1	0	1	0	2
Insert words (Said, Just, a', As she, and)	1	0	3	1	5
Insert adjective (only, sweet)	0	0	1	1	2
Change word order	2	0	0	1	3
Add/delete verse	0	0	7	3	10
Lines that change meaning (see Table 2)	0	0	1	3	4
4-line to 6-line verse structure	0	0	0	6	6
Total	14	4	19	29	65

because that's how the person who taught him sang it, he was tired, or he could not remember the phrasing of those last verses. Nevertheless, in session 2, he completes these last verses with no hint that they had been omitted before.

In "Sailor Boy," the added and dropped verses do not change the meaning of the ballad or the progression of events. These verses add descriptive or philosophical information, not actions or events, and are not essential to the story. In "Sailor Boy," a girl disguises herself as a sailor and goes in search of her lover's ship. The two added verses comment on the tough life of a young maiden and describe how wonderful the sailor boy is. The omitted verse describes the sailor boy's appearance to his comrades for identification purposes. Some lines from these three verses are also incorporated into other ballads, again indicating their general applicability. This same pattern of omitted and added verses is found in other songs by other singers. In a causal analysis (Trabasso and Sperry, 1985), these verses would not be causally linked to other verses in the ballad. Here, however, story progression may be a better term than causal link. It is not that a succeeding verse or line could not have happened if the prior verse had not occurred, but that if it did not, there would be a different story.

The lines, noted in Table 1, that changed in meaning from session 1 to 2 tell an interesting story and are given fully in Table 2. In the first and last pairs of lines, an alternate phrase is used which preserves the rhythm and rhyme exactly. The alteration does not change any other poetics, nor does it change the story progression. In the middle two cases, there is a change in the first line which alters the rhyming sound required. The succeeding lines preserve the rhyme pattern by using a different. Even so, the rhythm is preserved. In all cases, the meaning of the verse is not altered. Note that end rhymes are often near rhymes rather than exact rhymes. This is typical of ballads. For simplicity such sound patterns are referred to as end rhymes.

Table 2
Lines That Changed in Meaning from Session 1 to 2

"Golden Willow Tree"	
Session 1:	There was another ship and it sailed upon the sea And it went by the name of the Turkish Revelee
Session 2:	There was another ship in the North Amerikee And it went by the name of the Turkish Revelee
"Sailor Boy"	
Session 1:	She had not sailed far over the deep Till a large ship she chanced to meet
Session 2:	She had not sailed far over the main She spied three ships a sailing from Spain
Session 1:	Her boat against the rock she run Crying alas I am undone
Session 2:	Her boat she run against the rock I thought my soul her heart is broke
Session 1:	Go and dig my grave don't cry don't weep Place marble at my head and feet
Session 2:	Go dig my grave both wide and deep Place a stone at my head and feet

As shown in Table 3, the word changes described in Table 1 contain very few words that affect the ballad characteristics. When words involving the characteristics do change, they typically change in a way to preserve those characteristics. Very few of the changes alter the rhythm. When this does occur it is typically the result of adding a one- or two-syllable word to the line and usually to the beginning of the line. Thus, one can relatively easily sing two syllables twice as fast and still maintain the melody and tempo.

Table 3
Number of Word Changes That Affect Ballad Characteristics

	Old	Jim	Will.	Sail.	Total
	97	Blake	Tree	Boy	
Changes	14	4	19	29	65
Changes that alter rhythm	2	0	5	7	14
Changes where					
1 syllable differs	2	0	2	5	10
2 syllables differ	0	0	3	1	3
3 syllables differ	0	0	0	1	1
Alliterations	27	9	29	15	80
Changes with alliterations	1	0	1	1	3
Changes preserving alliteration	0	0	1	1	2
Rhyme pairs	12	10	7	12	41
Changes involving rhymes	2	0	1	6	9
Changes preserving rhyme	1	0	1	6	8

In addition, very few changes involve words that are poetically constrained by rhyme and alliteration. When such words are altered, the poetics are preserved. There are 2 out of 12 cases in which this did not happen. One, involving the end rhyme "learn-return," which changes to "on-return" in session 2, represents a

common variation used by many singers. The other involves the alliteration "straight smokestack," which changes to "tall smokestack" in session 2.

To summarize the arguments thus far, first, ballads are not recalled by an overpracticed rote mechanism, because systematic changes occur from singing to singing. Second, changes that occur happen within constraints, such as rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and meaning present within the ballad. The changes that involve words with constraints tend to preserve those constraints. The possible word choices which can fit these constraints are limited (see Rubin and Wallace, 1986). Further, when alternate words exist that fit such constraints, those words will be found in different versions of the ballad. It is as if the constraints were the fixed part of memory and the words were reconstructed to fit those constraints.

As a demonstration that the various characteristics are known by ballad singers and can be used in recalling a ballad, BM was given a newspaper article about a train wreck and was asked to generate a ballad about it. He spent less than 5 minutes reading the article. He then picked up his guitar, began singing, and produced a 32-line ballad. He made no notes and took no additional time to compose the ballad. Other singers have completed the same task with comparable results (Wallace, 1987).

The generated ballad is unique in that none of the lines are identical to any others BM sang. The melody is also unique. Some of the lines did however express a similar idea to lines from other ballads he had just sung. Table 4 gives lines from the generated ballad along with similar lines as sung in prior ballads.

Table 4

Generated Ballad Lines that are Similar to Recalled Ballad Lines

Generated Lines	Recalled Lines
Not knowing that their master would call their souls away	When that last call shall come from the master and we go to our home o'er the sea
The night was cold and windy as they pulled into town	I stood on the mountain one cold frosty morning, or On a cold winter's night not a star was in sight
Kind folks please do take warning as you journey on through life	Come all ye young ladies and take fair warning from this time now and learn

The same rhyme scheme was used as occurred in most of BM's other ballads. All rhyming sounds in the generated ballad occur in another ballad, but not necessarily with the same word pair. The rhythmical structure and the story progression are also similar to other ballads he sang.

Only a few of the many ballad characteristics are considered here. For example, only verbal content has been examined; equally as much can be said of the musical content.

The above naturalistic observations are being manipulated in laboratory experiments. For example, undergraduate recalls are much more variable and much less accurate when a phrase like "rough

road" is changed to "tough road" to break the alliteration constraint (Wallace and Rubin, in press).

Memory can be very stable without having the exact words fixed. The more characteristics present that interact to limit choices the more stable memories will be.

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