

13 *Laughter is the best medicine: roles for prosody in a Murriny Patha conversational narrative*

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13.1 Background

In 1972 Michael Walsh went to the former mission of Port Keats, now the community of Wadeye, in the Northern Territory to begin PhD fieldwork on the Murriny Patha (Murrinh-Patha) language (Walsh 1976b). So began his long association with the community and the language that continues to this day. Michael is held in very high esteem in Wadeye and his long association with the community has not gone unnoticed. In December 2005, on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Sydney, two senior Murriny Patha women, Phyllis Bunduck and the late Elizabeth Cumaiyi, sent congratulations and well-wishes in Murriny Patha to be played at the party to celebrate his retirement.¹

Many of his academic papers are peppered with Murriny Patha examples and with anecdotes about fieldwork with Murriny Patha speakers. He has written about a variety of topics including Murriny Patha morphosyntax (Walsh 1976a, 1976b, 1987, 1996b) and semantics (Walsh 1993, 1996a, 1997b), language socialisation at Wadeye (Walsh 1990), Murriny Patha song (Barwick et al. 2007, Walsh 2007a, 2007b, 2010, Walsh & Blythe 2006), as well as interactional styles in both conversation and in legal settings (Walsh 1991, 1994, 1997a).

Another of Michael's interests is Aboriginal narrative. In Walsh (in press) he proposes 10 features of Aboriginal storytelling that are perhaps different from 'Anglo' storytelling, even if only by degree. Although he does not say so explicitly in this paper, Michael is interested (pers. comm.) in how Aboriginal people judge storytelling to be good or bad. Although Aboriginal oral tradition is acknowledged as being one of the oldest in the world, and as being different in many respects from storytelling in European culture, academics know little of the Indigenous orientation to the storyteller's craft.

Most of the work on narrative in Australia focuses on formally elicited narratives. The interactional nature of Aboriginal storytelling is generally understated in the Australianist literature. This is perhaps unsurprising as there has been very little work to date on natural

¹ Phyllis's late husband, Kevin Bunduck, a well known artist, was one of Michael's main consultants in the 1970s and 1980s.

conversation in Aboriginal Australia, and even less on conversational storytelling. However, if there is one thing of which we can be sure, it is that storytelling is a performance, and that great storytellers know how to hold their audience. We might therefore expect great tellers of formal narratives to hone their craft in natural conversation.

Research in conversation analysis reveals conversational narratives to be seldom (if ever) produced merely for entertainment. Instead they are normally produced in order to achieve some sort of practical activity (Mandelbaum 2003). Conversationalists tell stories in order to provide accounts for their actions or to blame others, complain, invite, etc. Thus stories, like other conversational phenomena, are produced in response to the contingencies of the interaction as it unfolds. Conversational narratives are sequentially organised in terms of storytelling sequences or episodes (Jefferson 1987, Sacks 1974, Schegloff 1992) and their trajectories tend to differ when produced as an initial story or a second story (Sacks 1992:vol. 2, 3-16, Schegloff 1992, 1997).

Participants in conversation, as well as designing aspects of their talk in ways that display a personal orientation towards their recipients (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974:727), also design aspects of their talk so as to reflect the particular type of activity in which they are engaged currently (e.g. Stivers 2007). Conversational narratives are told in ways that reflect the storyteller's sensitivity to the needs of the recipients of the story and are designed so as to best effect the personal objectives of the teller. Specialised features of story design might be reflected in the teller's use of gesture, gaze or word selection, or in the creative use of prosodic marking. This chapter is concerned with conversational storytellers' distinctive use of prosody to phonetically design stories for their recipients so as to accomplish their specific interactional objectives.

13.2 A fragment of conversational narrative

In the data used for the study reported in this chapter, the two women previously mentioned, Phyllis and Elizabeth, are engaged in a dyadic conversation when the topic turns to the death of Elizabeth's son (G). This sparks a series of reminiscences about the deceased son. Initially Phyllis tells the story about how she and her daughter reacted to hearing the distressing news of his death. This short story had left Elizabeth feeling very sad. Then Phyllis tells a second story that greatly restores her friend's good cheer. The second story is a lighthearted reminiscence about a very funny conversation when G was still alive. In what is a particularly masterful piece of storytelling, Phyllis tells the second story in a way that makes her friend laugh out loud. Key to the effectiveness of the storytelling is the elaborate prosodic marking of reported prior speech. As she tells the story Phyllis takes on various vocal characteristics of the prior conversationalists, mimicking the ways that they spoke so as to distinguish contrastively who was speaking to whom. In fact both women laugh hysterically throughout the story. However as we will see, Phyllis does more than merely mimic prior voices. Her elaborate use of prosody is central to injecting the story with the humour necessary to lift the spirits of her unhappy friend, making her laugh out loud. In this chapter we will examine a single fragment of conversation. Having already made Elizabeth laugh many times previously, in this fragment Phyllis recruits perceptually isochronous timing² to trigger a further outburst of laughter.

² This phenomenon is discussed in Couper-Kuhlen (1993) and Auer, Couper-Kuhlen and Muller (1999). See also Couper-Kuhlen (1999) and Klewitz and Couper-Kuhlen (1999) for cases of isochronous timing signalling reported speech.

In Fragment 1 Phyllis is telling Elizabeth a very funny story about two young boys who use the incorrect name for a species of edible mollusc. In Murriny Patha the particular molluscs, ‘spiny chitons’, *Acanthopleura spinosa*, are correctly referred to as *ku tjipmandji*. However the boys had previously overheard adults dysphemistically refer to these molluscs using the term for female genitalia, to which they bear a striking resemblance.³ They have thus innocently repeated the improper term. Here Phyllis reports a conversation between one of the two boys, A, and his classificatory ‘grandfather’, G – Elizabeth’s now deceased son. Because G and A stood in a classificatory ‘maternal grandparent’ relationship, they address each other with the reciprocal kinterm *thamuny* (in this case G is A’s classificatory ‘mother’s father’, whereas A is G’s classificatory ‘daughter’s son’, see Figure 13.1).

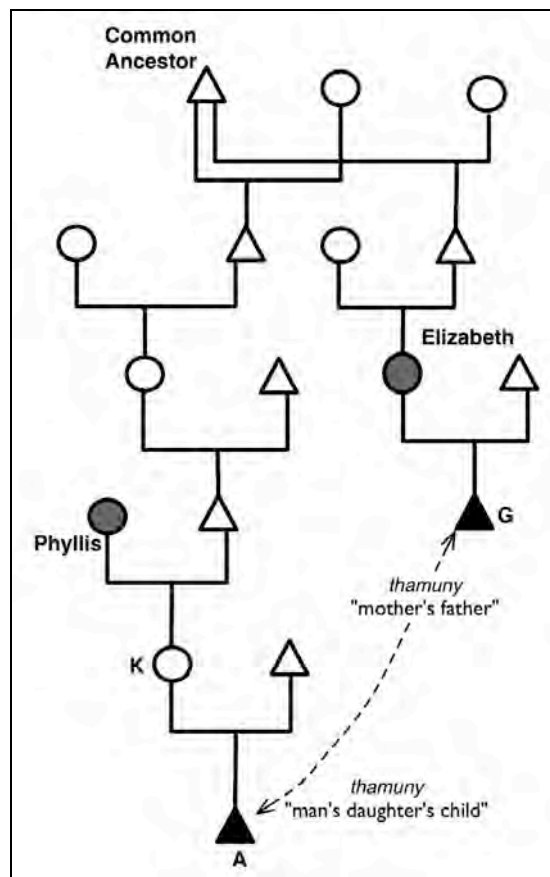


Figure 13.1 Interaction between Phyllis’s grandson, A, and Elizabeth’s son, G. A and G address each other with the reciprocal kinterm *thamuny*

In lines 530–536 of this fragment, Phyllis recounts how her daughter K had informed Elizabeth’s son G and his friend (B) about what the two boys had said. The two men (G and B) had burst out laughing, as did both Elizabeth and Phyllis as Phyllis retold the story. In lines 534 and 536, K (as reported by Phyllis) instructs G to ask the young boys what it was they had found on the reef.

³ In Murriny Patha, all entities pertain to one of 10 nominal classes. Most noun phrases include an appropriate nominal classifier as the left-most word. The nominal classifier *ku* denotes all animates as well as a range of other entities, including female genitals. All other body parts take the ‘residue’ class *nandji*. See Walsh (1997b) for details.

Fragment 1 Detailed transcription (Spiny Chitons, 2004-08-08JB03b)

530 Phyl K deɬdi~↓;
 'Daddy.'
 531 (0.6)
 532 Phyl K kaka~↓;
 'Uncle.'
 533 (0.9)
 534 Phyl K ɬ*nan'gudharrpunintha perninta nyinda;*ɬ ((high, creaky))
 'Ask those two male non-siblings,'
 535 (0.1)
 536 Phyl K Thanggu^oɣu ngarra kalpa damninthangkarduyu.
 'what sort of *ku*-things were you two male non-siblings looking
 for on the reef.'
 :
 :
 ((50 seconds removed))
 :
 :
 604 Phyl <ɬAwu bematha kanggurl ngay pangu
 605 wurdamna>wal>tjidamhath^o. ((lento, accelerando))
 Oh my brother's son's son was laughing at him so much his
 sides were aching.
 606 (0.6)
 607 Eliz Mhm_
 608 Phyl G =th(h)aɬm(h)u:~↓ny. ((breathy, singsong))
 'Grandson.'
 609 (1.55)
 610 Phyl G Ku thangɬgu kama:~↓. ((breathy, singsong))
 'What sort of *ku*-things might they be?'
 611 (1.4)
 612 Phyl A K(h)arda ɬa^omatha *tha*muny; ((high, excited, creaky))
 'Right here grandpa.'
 613 (1.3)
 614 Phyl A Ku terertniminya. ((high, excited, creaky))
 '[there are] lots and lots of them.'
 615 (0.26)
 616 Phyl A ma[mɬ]etetwurrān ngarra kalpa:ya: mamaward[a;=a]wu:;=
 'They were all sticking to the reef', he then said to him. Oh!
 617 Eliz [m-] M[m:;]
 618 Phyl =ku be: pe:ninta ɬku^o wu[rdamninthardarr^onderwarda pangu.]
 The two men had pains in their backs from laughing about those
ku-things.
 619 Eliz [Mmh:mh mh ha ha ha ha ha] ha
 620 (1.2)
 621 Phyl thamuny thamuny wangu. ((creaky))
 [laughing] at his daughter's son.
 622 (0.7)
 623 Phyl G ya thaɬma:~ny↓; ((singsong))
 'Hey grandson.'
 624 (1.3)
 625 Phyl G ɬhambinyikatwa;^o ((high, creaky, piano))
 'You made a mistake.'
 626 (1.3)

Fragment 1' (The same fragment showing the morphemic representation and glossing.)⁴

604	Phyl	<i>awu berematha kanggurl ngay pangu</i>						
		Oh! the.whole.time	woman's.br.so.ch	1SPOS	DIST			
605	Phyl	<i>wurdam -na -waltji -damatha</i>						
		3SS.30.NFUT -3SMIO	-have.aching.sides.from.laughing					-really
606		(0.6)						
607	Eliz	<i>Mhm</i>						
608	Phyl	<i>thamuny</i>						
609		(1.55)						
610	Phyl	<i>ku thangu kama</i>						
		animate what	INDEF					
611		(1.4)						
612	Phyl	<i>karda damatha thamuny</i>						
		here really	mo.fa					
613		(1.3)						
614	Phyl	<i>ku terert -nimin -ya</i>						
		animate many	-very -DUB					
615		(0.26)						
616	Phyl	<i>mam -let -REDUP =wurran ngarra kalpa -ya</i>						
		3SS.8.say/do.NFUT -stick.to -REDUP =3SS.6.go.NFUT	LOC reef -DUB					
		<i>mam -na -warda awu</i>						
		3SS.8.say/do.NFUT -3SMIO -then Oh!						
617	Eliz	<i>m- Mm</i>						
618	Phyl	<i>ku bere peninth ku</i>						
		animate Right! 3DU.M.NSIB	animate					
		<i>wurdam -nintha -rdarrerndern -warda pangu</i>						
		3sS.30.NFUT -DU.M.NSIB -have.aching.back.from.laughing	-then DIST					
619	Eliz	<i>Mmh mh ha ha ha ha ha ha</i>						
620		(1.2)						
621	Phyl	<i>thamuny -REDUP -wangu</i>						
		man's.da.ch -REDUP -directional						
622		(0.7)						
623	Phyl	<i>ya thamuny</i>						
		DUB man's.da.ch						
624		(1.3)						
625	Phyl	<i>tham -winyikat -wa</i>						
		2SS.24.RR.NFUT -make.a.mistake -EMPH						
626		(1.3)						

⁴ Abbreviations used in this chapter: 1, 2, 3 = first, second third person, 27 (i.e. an additional numeral between 1 and 38) = verb class, br = brother, ch = child, da = daughter, DIST = distal, DU = dual, DUB = dubitative, EMPH = Emphatic, F = feminine, INDEF = indefinite, IO = indirect object, LOC = locative, M = masculine, NFUT = non-future, NSIB = non-sibling, POS = possessive, REDUP = reduplication, RR = reflexive/reciprocal. S = singular, S = subject, so = son.

In this story, Phyllis seldom uses speech verbs to frame reported speech.⁵ Instead she tends to incorporate the information about the reporting of speech into the reported speech itself. As we will see, prosodic marking plays an important role in indexing the reported speaker. However, for indexing who was being spoken *to*, her preferred method is to use ‘ill-fitting’ vocative expressions, usually kinterms. Kinterms index a relationship between a pair of individuals. Thus for every *mother*, there must be a corresponding *son* or *daughter*. For every *grandparent*, there must be a corresponding *grandson* or *granddaughter*. Ordinarily Phyllis calls Elizabeth *newuy*, ‘daughter’ or *wakal*, ‘child’.

In a turn spanning lines 608 and 610, Phyllis reports G’s question to his classificatory grandson A, ‘*Thamuny*, what sort of *ku*-things⁶ might they be?’ The kinterm *thamuny* (line 608) does not fit the ‘mother-daughter’ relationship of the two conversationalists. This misalignment in the participant frame cues the following question, *ku thangu kama*, ‘What sort of *ku*-things might they be?’, as originally hailing from someone other than Phyllis and addressing someone other than Elizabeth. In other words, the utterance being reported originally hailed from a speaker who addressed his recipient as *thamuny*. Because the kinterm *thamuny* is reciprocal, the problem for Elizabeth is determining which line of talk hails from the ‘grandfather’ and which hails from the ‘grandson’. Phyllis compensates for this indexical shortcoming⁷ by globally marking the reported utterances in a manner characteristic of the speakers being reported.

The kinterm *thamuny* (line 608, pronounced th(h)a↑m(h)u:~↓ny.) and the question *ku thangu kama*, ‘What sort of *ku*-things might they be?’ (line 610, pronounced ÷Ku thangu kama::~↓.÷) are both produced with breathy voice and with an excited, singsong voice quality, characterised by exaggerated pitch excursions. The reported turn sounds like an adult speaking to a child. The utterance is hearable as mimicking the ‘grandfather’s’ question to the ‘grandson’. The reported voice of G is represented by the italicised *G* at the beginning of lines 608 and 610.

The grandson’s answer is spread over three Turn Constructional Units (TCUs)⁸ – lines 612, 614 and the first half of line 616 (hence the italicised *A* in the transcript) – ‘Right here grandpa, lots and lots of them, they were sticking to the reef’. The first two TCUs (lines 612 and 614) that form part of the ‘grandson’s’ answer also have a rather different sort of excited voice quality. These turns both have creaky rather than breathy voice. Although the peak pitch is not particularly high, the mean pitch is higher than the prior talk and the pitch range is narrower (gone is the singsong intonation), making the lines perceivable as having the high register one might associate with a child. The third TCU of A’s reply (line 616) sees a shift to perceptually isochronous timing.⁹ (The isochronous timing in lines 616–621 will be discussed below in section 3.) The *thamuny* in line 623 sees a return to the singsong intonation that we saw in lines 608 and 610, which was attributable to the ‘grandfather’, G. This singsong intonation is sufficient to flag the following turn *thambinyikatwa*, ‘you made

⁵ In this narrative Phyllis uses only 12 quotative expressions to animate over 40 different reported turns-at-talk.

⁶ See footnote 3.

⁷ Elsewhere in this conversation, Phyllis uses non-reciprocal vocative kinterms to index both reported addressee and reported speaker. Thus, the vocative kinterm *daddy* not only indexes a father as the reported addressee, it also indexes a son or daughter as reported speaker. A reciprocal vocative kinterm (e.g. *cuz*) can only index the relationship between the pair of individuals (e.g. a pair of cousins).

⁸ In conversation analysis, Turn Constructional Units or TCUs (Sacks et al. 1974) are the basic building blocks for conversational turns. They are generally considered to be units of talk that are possibly complete from the perspective of syntax, intonation and pragmatics (cf. Ford, Fox & Thompson 1996, Ford & Thompson 1996).

⁹ In their paper on the prosodic marking of reported speech, Klewitz and Couper-Kuhlen (1999:474) note that the particular ‘prosodic formatting of a voice may well “evolve” during the stretch of the speech being reported. When this happens, the left- and righthand boundaries may end up being different ...’.

a mistake', as also hailing from G (even though *thambinyikatwa* bears none of the other prosodic characteristics previously attributed to him). The characteristic global prosodic marking thus mimics the sounds of the reported speakers' voices, effectively disambiguating the reciprocal kinterm *thamuny*.¹⁰

13.3 Rhythmic effects

A rather different sort of prosodic formatting can be heard in the middle of this fragment. The large extended turn that extends across lines 616 and 618 is a complex construction. The turn is comprised of three syntactically distinct units. The speech verb *mamnawarda*, 'He then said to him', occurs mid-way between two other syntactic units: *mamletetwurran ngarra kalpaya*, 'They were sticking to the reef', immediately prior; and *awu ku be penintha ku wurdamninthadarrerndern warda pangu*, 'Oh! the two men had pains in their backs from laughing about those *ku*-things', immediately after. (The two men are Elizabeth's son G and his friend B.)

These two lines of talk also constitute three distinct pragmatic units. The first is a unit of reported speech. The second is a quotative expression that reports the prior speech. The third is the narrator's commentary about what the reported addressees (the two men) did upon hearing what the young boy said.

Intonationally, the extended turn is cast as a complete entity – one that is not easily subdivided. All three syntactic/pragmatic units are produced without any pauses or gaps; indeed the first word of the final unit, *awu* ('Oh!', line 616), is latched onto the previous unit (the framing speech verb *mamnawarda*), where there is a very slight pitch reset. The first two syntactic/pragmatic units both fall under the same rise-fall tune, but the third unit falls under a second rise-fall tune. Effectively, both tunes comprise a larger 'supratune' that dips in the middle. As such it resembles a single large intonation unit, one that is not so easily subdivided. From an intonational perspective, the turn does not reach possible completion before reaching the word *pangu* (line 618), where the terminal intonation is fully falling.¹¹

The turn has an additional prosodic feature that has not been represented in the transcript, namely the rhythmic use of isochronous timing. Although Phyllis's storytelling is replete with a variety of prosodic marking, isochronous rhythm does not feature very prominently in the Murriny Patha conversational data. It may be that the language is not as well suited to this kind of prosodic marking as English. In conversation polysynthetic verbs generally have just one stressed syllable (at most two); the Murriny Patha clause may be less amenable to rhythmic manipulation than the English clause, which, being composed of generally shorter words, has more stressed syllables to play with, per unit of time. The paucity of isochronous timing thus makes its occurrence particularly significant.

The extended turn has two rhythmic patterns: a slow pattern and a fast pattern. If we consider the talk as comprising rhythmic cells where each of the stressed syllables constitutes a beat at the start of each cell, then the cells of the slow pattern are just under one second in duration (see Figure 13.2), whereas the cells of the fast pattern are approximately 0.4 seconds in duration (see Figure 13.3).

¹⁰ In this passage and others, Phyllis also recruits distinctive local prosodic marking (that is, of very short passages of talk, such as accented syllables) for additional disambiguation (see Blythe 2009a, 2009b).

¹¹ Perhaps it would be fair to say that intonationally the unit comes to 'local' completion at the end of the word *mamnawarda*, though it is not 'globally' complete until the end of the word *pangu* (see Ford & Thompson 1996:150). Note for instance Elizabeth's *Mm* (line 617). Ford and Thompson note that these 'small, non-floor-taking turns' may occur at points of 'local' completion, where further talk is being projected.

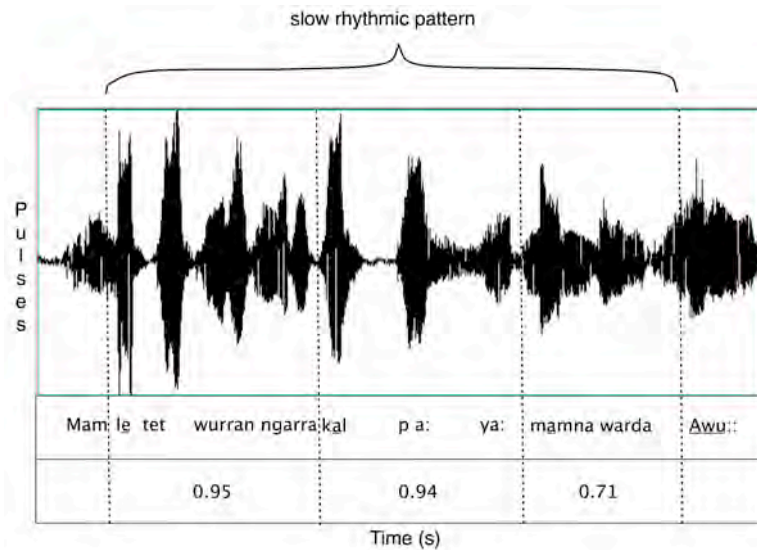


Figure 13.2 Waveform of line 616 of Fragment 1 showing the slower isochronous timing

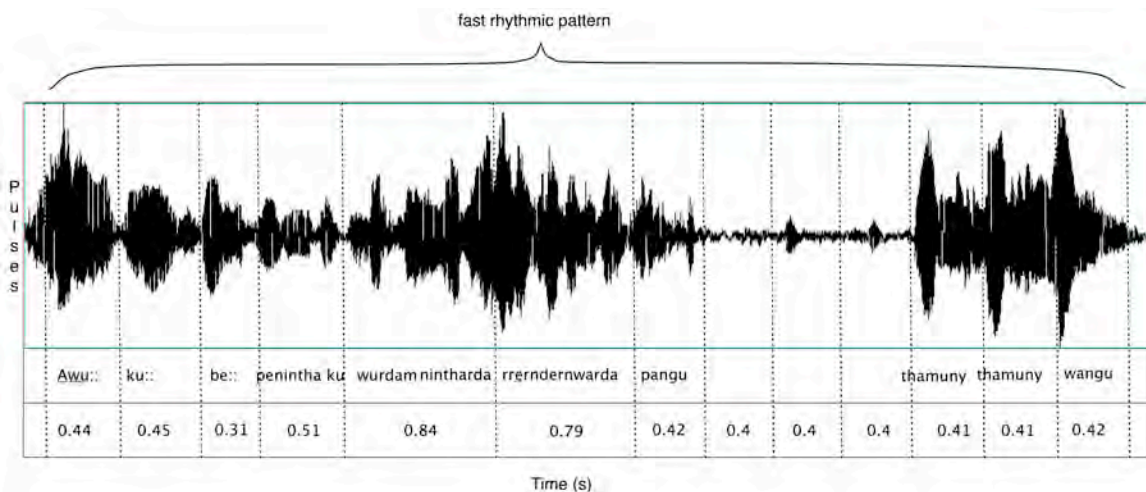


Figure 13.3 Waveform of lines 616 – 621 of Fragment 1 showing the faster isochronous timing

The slow pattern is set up by the even duration between the stressed syllables *le*, *kal* and *mam* (as in *mamlétetwurran*, *kálpaya* and *mámnawarda*, respectively). This regular duration sets up the expectation that the next word will also place a beat at an interval of similar duration. However, the third cell containing the word *mamawarda*, ‘he said to him’, does not reach its completion; it is terminated at 0.71 seconds. The next stressed beat is the word *awu*, ‘Oh’, which is the first beat of the first cell of the faster rhythmic pattern. Although the word *mamawarda* is not truncated, its cell is (see Figure 13.4). This accounts for why the word *awu* is perceivable as being latched onto the end of *mamawarda* (note the equals sign in the line 616 of the transcription).

[slow pattern]	mam/ le tetwurrān	ngarra/	
	/k a l p a : y a :	/	
	/ m amnawarda	← truncated cell	
[fast pattern]	/Awu::	/ku:	/
	/be::	/pe:nintha ku/	
	/wurdamnintharda=	/	
	/= rr ernderwarda	/	
	/pangu	/	
	/	/	/
	/thamuny	/thamuny	/
	/wangu	/	

Figure 13.4 Lines 616–621 of Fragment 1 represented as rhythmic cells

In the verb *wurdamninthardarrernderwarda* (line 618), *-darrerndern* is a coverb which means ‘to get a sore back from laughing’. In larger polysynthetic verbs, the coverb generally attracts primary stress (usually the first syllable, though not always). In careful speech there may also be some secondary stress on the first syllable of the verb. Thus, a verb like *wurdamninthardarrernderwarda* might be expected to have the following stress pattern, *wùrdamninthardarrérnderwarda*. However in the conversational data, it is unusual to find verbs bearing more than a single stressed syllable. This verb (as it occurs in line 618) has no perceivable stress on the first syllable, perhaps because there is a barely perceptible nominal classifier *ku*, ‘animate’, immediately preceding the verb. Even so, the first syllable *wu* and the stressed syllable *rrern* are 0.8 seconds apart, which is the equivalent of two (0.4 second) rhythmic cells. Similarly *rrern* and the first syllable of *pangu* (which is mildly stressed) are 0.8 seconds apart. The entire verb is 1.6 seconds in duration, which is the equivalent of 4 cells. The only stressed syllable in the verb, *rrern*, places a beat at what would be the start of the third cell. We can thus conceive of this word as fitting within the faster isochronous pattern, even though a few beats have been skipped.

The fast rhythmic pattern includes all of the speaker’s commentary about the two men having sore backs from laughing. This fast pattern continues into the next line (621) *thamuny thamuny wangu*, ‘at his daughter’s son’.¹² The gap between *pangu* and *thamuny* (i.e. the gap at line 620) is 1.2 seconds, effectively three empty cells. The syntactic unit, *thamuny thamuny wangu*, is an increment to the prior turn (Ford, Fox & Thompson 2002, Walker 2004). It serves as an elaboration that explicates the source of the men’s amusement as being the young boy, A.

The slow pattern includes both the reported speech and the speech verb *mamnawarda*, ‘he then said to him’.¹³ This line of reported speech is itself a continuation of A’s answer to his grandfather. The slow isochronous rhythm has scope over both the reported speech and the utterance that reports the reported speech, thus echoing the verb’s association of the reported speaker A with his reported utterance. On the other hand, the slower isochronous rhythm, by having scope over both the talk that outlines the actions of the men in laughing (line 618) and over the talk that indexes the root-cause of their actions (the young boy, line

¹² Technically A is really G’s *mo.fa.fa.so.da.so.da.so* (see Figure 13.1). However, through same-sex sibling merger (Scheffler 1978:115) G’s *mo.fa.fa.so.da.so* (Phyllis’s husband) is a categorical ‘brother’. Because a man treats his brother’s kin as his own, A becomes G’s ‘daughter’s son’.

¹³ Klewitz and Couper-Kuhlen (1999) also found that prosodic formatting sometimes extends beyond the confines of the talk being reported. This leaching into the surrounding talk takes the form of pre- and post-voicing. Effectively, the prosodic formatting flags a passage of talk as having report speech in its vicinity.

621), associates their laughing with the source of their amusement. In this way, isochronous timing is also recruited for referential disambiguation. Because the kinterm *thamuny* is reciprocal, the potential ambiguity as to whether *thamuny* is being used to index the grandfather or the grandson (see Figure 13.1) is resolved by the partitioning of the two rhythmic patterns.

The actions of the young boy (in speaking) and the two men (in laughing) are contrasted through the isochronous rhythms. The two actions are in a cause and effect relationship: the two boys used the wrong name for the molluscs – the men laughed. The faster isochronous rhythm is also in a dependency relationship to the prior rhythm – it is perceivable as faster only because the prior rhythm is slower. It is perceptually dependent on the prior rhythm for effect. So what effect does it actually produce? In line 619 Elizabeth bursts into hysterical laughter. This laughter overlaps the faster rhythmic pattern. The onset of these laughter particles coincides with the fifth beat of the faster isochronous rhythm – overlapping the verb *wurdamninthardarrerndern*, ‘the two men had aching backs from laughing’. However, the onset of the laughter is prior to the coverb *-rdarrerndern*, which carries the lexical meaning, ‘to have an aching back from laughing’. Therefore Elizabeth’s laughter is not triggered by the semantics of this verb, because the meaning of the verb is not yet clear. Both women had already been laughing numerous times previously during the telling of this very funny story so would have been primed for further jocularities. This particular passage sets Elizabeth off laughing all over again. The onset of this particular stretch of laughter seems to have less to do with a punchline or with any humorous content, than with the juxtaposition of actions and with dramatic delivery. This burst of laughter seems to have been triggered by Phyllis’s dramatic rhythmic portrayal of the cause-and-effect relationship between the participants’ actions, as indexed by the dependent nature of the contrastive prosodic patterning.

Phyllis’s flair as a narrator is second to none. The elaborate use of prosody in her storytelling shows not only great sophistication for its ability to resolve difficult referential problems, it is also extremely entertaining. In this passage, and indeed throughout the entire story, Elizabeth hangs onto Phyllis’s every word. Note that in this fragment, Elizabeth’s audible responses are confined to the non-floor-holding response tokens in lines 607 and 617 and the burst of laughter in line 619. The large complex rhythmic turn in lines 616 and 618, with its incremental rhythmic echo (line 621), is the *pièce de résistance* in a rich banquet of prosodic flavours. The turn is rhythmic. It is dynamic. It commands attention. It has ‘stage-presence’. Phyllis’s storytelling is a theatrical performance in which she plays all of the roles, and narrator to boot.¹⁴ However, this is not a performance for just anybody – it is specifically recipient-designed for Elizabeth who was in need of cheering up after the earlier reminiscence about her deceased son. It is a storytelling with a need to entertain and it delivers in spectacular fashion.

The delicacy with which Phyllis handles Elizabeth’s grief is evident in her not changing the topic altogether, but in telling a second story that, like the former, is also a reminiscence about the same deceased son. Doing so, she honours the son – allowing her friend her right to grieve; yet she relieves some of the burden of her sorrow by injecting the story with humour. The distinctive use of prosodically marked reported speech is central to bringing off this delicately handled humour. Prosody here plays an important role in recipient-designing the story for Elizabeth and in achieving Phyllis’s objective of cheering up her friend.

¹⁴ In this story Phyllis reports the voices of seven different reported speakers. Most of the reported turns are prosodically marked in some fashion.

13.4 Conclusion

Michael Walsh is himself a particularly engaging storyteller and has a very good sense of humour. Although I'm sure he always had it, I'd like to think he has become imbued with some of the wicked sense of humour that so many of his Aboriginal consultants possess.

Whilst distinctive use of prosody is certainly not unique to Aboriginal storytelling, it definitely plays an important role making a storytelling more lively. Interesting use of prosody is almost certainly something that all story recipients latch onto (whether consciously or not) in judging a story to be well-told. Prosody is like the herbs and spices in a good cook's pantry. When used by an expert, it can make any good tale particularly tasty.

Key to transcription

[, [,] ,]	Overlapping speech
(0.9)	Silence (i.e. 0.9 seconds)
(.)	0.1 seconds of silence
-	An abrupt cut off, usually a glottal stop.
=	Latching, or disjointed transcription of same speaker's utterance
St <u>re</u> ss	Stress is marked by underlining.
: , ::	Colons indicate lengthening or drawl.
<Text>	Utterance delivered slower than surrounding speech.
>Text	Quick uptake of speech, a rush-though.
°Text°	Utterance is softer than surrounding talk.
Te(h)xt	Audible aspiration in the middle of a word, or a word internal laughter particle.
.	Fully falling terminal intonation.
;	Mid-low falling terminal intonation.
_	Flat final intonation (does not rise, nor fall).
↓, ↑	Marked shift to higher or lower pitch.
:~↓	Colons followed by a tilde and then a downward arrow indicate a drawn-out syllable that falls gradually in pitch.
÷Text÷	Utterance has an animated or excited voice quality.
((text))	Transcriber's comments

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