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Part 5: Performance, framework and storyboard

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In this last part of the book, I will describe the elements of the performance, the underlying framework and the storyboard technique. I will discuss the different elements in similar stories, and the identical elements in different stories. Next, I will describe the role that cultural and metalinguistic codes play in the narrative choices of the performer. Finally, I will describe how the performers create their performances while they benefit from the specific Fongbe roots and codes that I described in the chapters of part 2.

17. The underlying framework

The discussion in chapter 11 showed that all stories have identical rhetorical phenomena. They have a start, a peak and a denouement, as well as an end. The issue of this chapter is whether the performers systematically carry through a framework.

All stories start with the introduction of the pair of agents and continue with the presentation of the topic. A majority of 70 % of the performers introduces the pair of agents before mentioning the topic. However, in the remaining 30 % of the corpus, the performers use a plot that differs from the ‘real’ history of the story. They introduce the agents and start with telling a topical news item about the agents, before presenting the topic. The performer is whetting the audience’s appetite by telling a small extra story that anticipates the topic of the story. The digression reports an outrageous incident between the agents that recently happened. The extra story takes about 50 utterances, and actually resembles the present-day ‘scoop’ that tabloids publish when breaking news on celebrities. After the scoop and its juicy details, performers continue the storytelling with the presentation of the topic. Actually, some performers skilfully choose the scoop to build up suspense, before they tell the topic of the story.¹¹² The next step in the story is the introduction of the central participant. In some of the stories, the performer spontaneously introduces the central participant. The accomplished performers use a flashback to introduce the central participant (see 11.2.). Note that the use of the definite marker indicating the central participant, his paraphernalia and his aliases may facilitate the structuring of recognition of the audience.

When the performers tell the peak, they convey the complication or the problem that one of the agents has to deal with. After the peak, the performers report an event or an action of one of the pair of agents. They may repeat this sequence up to three times. The recurrence may add up to four successive and similar pairs of sequences.

¹¹² Calavi 16 shows a fine sample of a scoop.

The sequences on the agents do not show a literal repetition, but they convey a recurrent message.

The order of sequences in the framework is a systematic one: the duped Agent A takes the lead, and then the impostor Agent B takes his turn. Let us remind ourselves that the pair of agents embodies the polarity that marks their actions. Agents are the operators of the message that is encoded in a binary opposition of actions and counteractions (Greimas 1966: 172ff.). The sequences do not always coincide with the paragraphs of the timing of the pattern of pauses; one paragraph may consist of two sequences of actions. Hence, I prefer to use the term sequence to explain the binary framework of the plot.¹¹³ The performers rehearse the event that constitutes the peak several times. The performer is free to improvise the alternate sequences that repeat the peak. All stories show the technique that carefully arranges the structure of the sequences that follow the peak. The alternate sequences respect the principle of duality too. Note that duality is also an outstanding mnemonic device in the improvised ‘free-for-all’ part of the performance. The polarity of the properties of the agents facilitates the recall of the actions and the moving forwards of the story (Bartlett 1932). Performers have a free choice between two types of recurrence. The first type of recurrence shows a maximum of three repetitions of which the last one shows a turnaround of the action of Agent A. The second type of recurrence shows a second repetition that provides us with new information.

Performers sometimes offer new information in the sequences that follow the recurrent sequences. This new information is about the agents and leads to the denouement. These sequences show a remarkable change of tempo. The central participant runs a risk, and the performer gathers momentum to stop the course of events. The performer tightly strings several clauses in one single utterance by cutting down on the pauses (see 9.2.6.). The central participant is about to tackle agent B to force the denouement, which is the defeat of Agent B. The story ends with the penalty of Agent B. The performance of the Abomey-Calavi edition of the ‘The sadist co-wife’ (AC 2) gives a fine example of the recurrence. The framework of the comic trickster stories is identical to the one of dramatic stories. However, performers often start trickster stories with a scoop on recent behaviour of agent B, before they start to tell the story.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Recall that a new paragraph conveys the end of ‘old’ information; new information is imminent.

¹¹⁴ The performer of one of the trickster stories for example starts with the African harrier-hawk that describes the House of Rain in the Country of Sky where all the houses are built of white beans’ puree, and where teenagers play a ballgame with edible peppery fritters (Ay 3).

This practice makes clear that it is up to the performers to show off their personal skills and style to keep the audience hooked.

The following figure shows the rudimentary framework of the hwènùxó, and the ‘free-for-all’ part of the performance that is up to the performer to choose:¹¹⁵

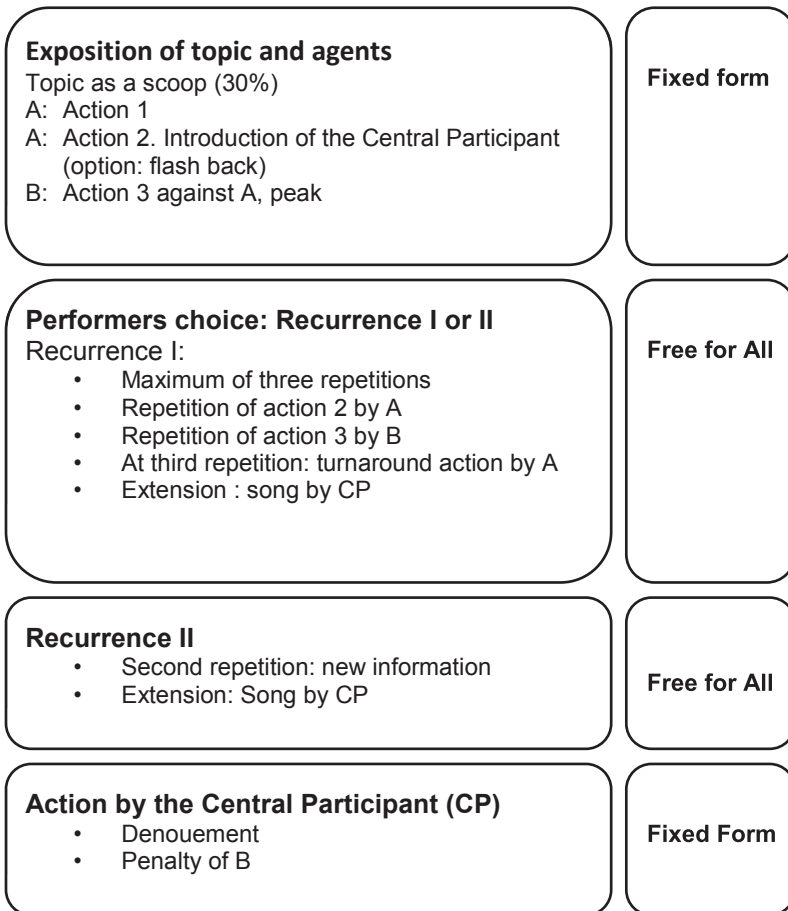


Figure 14 Framework of the hwènùxó stories

Storytelling is to perform all the way through this well-known framework of structured discourse. Actually, the performer is free to disclose manifold and multi-

¹¹⁵ CP is the abbreviation of central participant.

coloured variations within the compliant requirements of the framework of the **hwènùxó** and the opposite properties of the agents.