

## **The Evolution of an Oral Tradition: Race-Calling in Canterbury, New Zealand**

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The roots of the contemporary study of oral tradition lie in the German Romantic movement, for example in the work of great collectors of oral folklore such as the Grimms. But collecting folklore is one thing; understanding exactly what an oral tradition is and how oral traditions are transmitted is another. The most significant contribution to such an understanding has been made by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Their seminal theory of oral-formulaic performance has given rise to a great deal of scholarly activity.<sup>1</sup>

One curiosity is how little of this research has taken place within linguistics. There are good reasons why more of it should have been conducted there. First, it is research into the nature of performance. If we take linguistic performance in general to consist of the uses to which native speakers put the linguistic resources that they have at their disposal, then oral-formulaic theory should be of interest to linguists. Second, Parry and Lord make claims about the way in which memory is engaged during performance, claims that should also interest linguists who are concerned with performance. Third, linguistics concerns itself with native speakers' linguistic resources. One of the primary resources of oral-formulaic performance is an inventory of oral formulae. Formulae are clearly lexicalized linguistic fragments very like the idioms of normal speech. It follows from considerations such as these that it should be possible to undertake quite exacting linguistic research into oral-formulaic traditions, and thus lend a high degree of linguistic precision to the approach of Parry and Lord, in the process making this approach more empirically vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

It is particularly interesting to attempt to do so in the case of oral transmission, since greater

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<sup>1</sup> Summarized in Foley 1985, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> In the following work by the author and his associates this has been attempted: Kuiper and Haggio 1984, 1985; Haggio and Kuiper 1983, 1985; Kuiper and Tillis 1986.

linguistic precision should lead to greater insight into how traditions emerge, evolve, and gel into more or less fixed forms. This can only rarely be done from recorded sources, but New Zealand race-calling is one such tradition.

The sport of kings is a popular one in New Zealand, as is the associated activity of gambling on the outcome. Its popularity is such that the commentaries provided by race-callers can be heard emanating from suburban dwellings, particularly on the weekend. The speech of New Zealand race-callers is an oral tradition. It is passed down from one caller to the next in an unbroken chain. Normally such traditions are able to be reconstructed only by comparative investigation (see Kuiper TBP), but the tradition of race-calling is more immediately accessible because its origins lie in the history of broadcasting.

Before the advent of radio, patrons attending horse races had to find out for themselves how the race was proceeding. This was facilitated by the racebook, which showed the colors of the owners in the case of gallops and trainers in the case of harness racing, but there was no on-course commentary. Gambling was permitted by law only at the track, although illegal bookmaking also took place with an associate of the bookmaker phoning through the information of placings to the bookmaker from the course.

The broadcast of a racing commentary was one of the earliest external radio broadcasts in New Zealand, preceded (appropriately enough) only by an account of a rugby football match. This first call was made in June 1926 in Christchurch by Allan Allardice on amateur wireless and was followed in the same year by further meetings broadcast on commercial wireless. Those who had early wireless sets were in some cases able to get the better of the bookmaker by learning of the results from their wireless and then placing their bets with the bookmaker before he received the results by phone.<sup>3</sup> The origins of racing commentary in New Zealand can therefore be precisely fixed with the King's Birthday meeting of the Canterbury Park Trotting Club in Christchurch in June of 1926. But the oral tradition of Christchurch race-callers did not spring fully fledged into being on that date. To understand its evolution requires us to look at the contemporary tradition and to retrace its development.

### **The Contemporary Tradition**

The leading contemporary exponent of the Christchurch tradition of race-calling is Reon Murtha. He is a full-time employee of Radio NZ and calls all the major race meetings in the Canterbury district of the South

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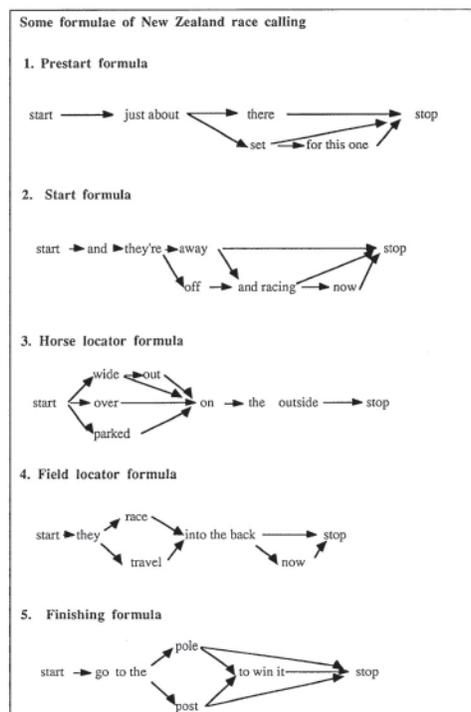
<sup>3</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 6.6.1966.



field again. After repeating this pattern a number of times until the finish of the race, they go through a final cycle. At any time during a cycle the callers may indicate where the field currently is in the race, or they may interpolate commentary on an untoward happening where one takes place, for example a collision between horses.

### *Formulae of the Contemporary Tradition*

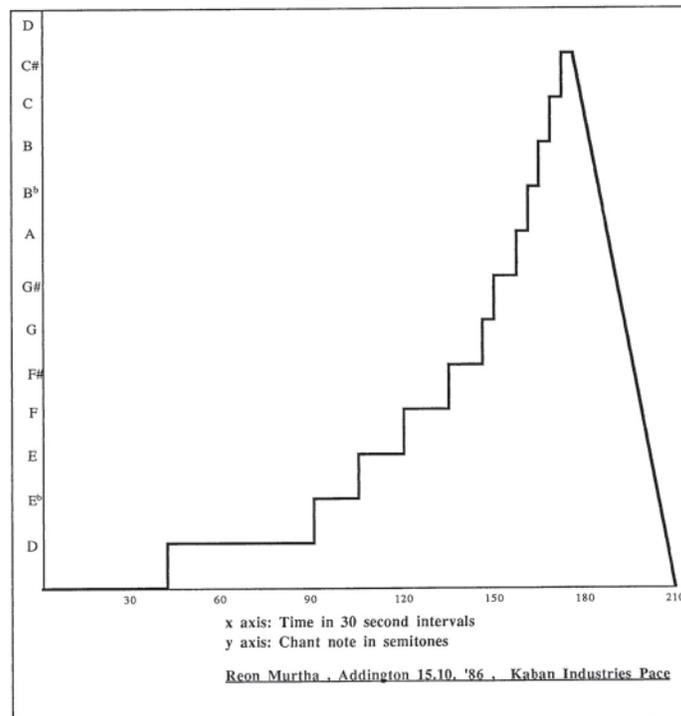
At each point in the commentary's discourse structure, commentators select what they are going to say from a dictionary of formulae, each one of which is indexed for a particular part of the discourse. There are formulae used to indicate the location of horses in the first cycle: for example, the formula *first out was...* is used on the initial cycle. There are loop formulae that specify either the location of the field on the track or the location of the field in the race: for example, *They race their way down the back* is a field locator formula often used in a loop. As well as being discourse-indexed, formulae also have the structure of finite state grammars; a sample of common formulae might look as follows (figure 2):



There are hundreds of these formulae and race-calling is constructed almost entirely of them. On occasions when something very untoward happens, a commentator will resort to non-formulaic speech; for instance, when a race is held in heavy fog the commentator will indicate that he cannot see the horses on the far side of the course by employing speech for which the oral tradition of race-calling provides no ready expression.

### *Chanted Prosodics*

Race-calling in Canterbury province is chanted. Commentators basically sing their call in a monotone, with a small amount of prosodic variation in the way of the occasional fall tune at the end of a cycle, or more unusually during a cycle. The chant is modulated according to the distance the race is from its conclusion. Reon Murtha normally covers an octave with a gradual ascent by semitones in the earlier part of the race and a steep ascent by semitones toward the finish. After the finish he descends during the final cycle and reverts to normal speech intonation towards the end of the final cycle. The tune of a typical call is given in figure 3:



*Extraordinary Fluency*

As a result of speaking in this way, race-callers achieve an extraordinary fluency. Their speech exhibits virtually no hesitations, false starts, or pausing. They also speak with an even syllable-production rate. They do not speak rapidly, just very fluently.<sup>4</sup>

**The Evolution of Race-Calling**

Such are the major features of the contemporary race-calling tradition. But this snapshot is taken from the high ground. There are many variations within the performances of one caller, and there is variation among callers. But it is equally clear that there is a tradition linking all the contemporary practitioners, as can be shown by looking at the evolution of the call over the last forty-five years. Unfortunately, no recordings appear to remain from the very earliest days, but samples of the calling tradition are available from 1935 on. These recordings are tantalizing, first because they commence only relatively late in the given race and second because there are so few of them. Thus they afford a close-up view of the evolution of the call, but do not provide enough evidence to indicate how reliable a guide they may be to the whole of the tradition at the time. Notwithstanding such problems, these early calls do provide a basis for some interesting observations.

*Discourse Structure*

The basic nature of the discourse structure seems to have been established by 1935. Frank Jarrett, the caller at that time, used the same three rules as Reon Murtha, but Jarrett's particular implementation of them is different from that of his successors. First, he seldom called the whole field. Although we have only the latter end of two races, the second one is long enough to have permitted at least one cycle to cover the whole field. Second, the number of horses called per cycle was variable. It does become smaller as the horses approach the winning post, but it tends to bob up and down. Third, he called only the leaders on the final cycle after they passed the post.

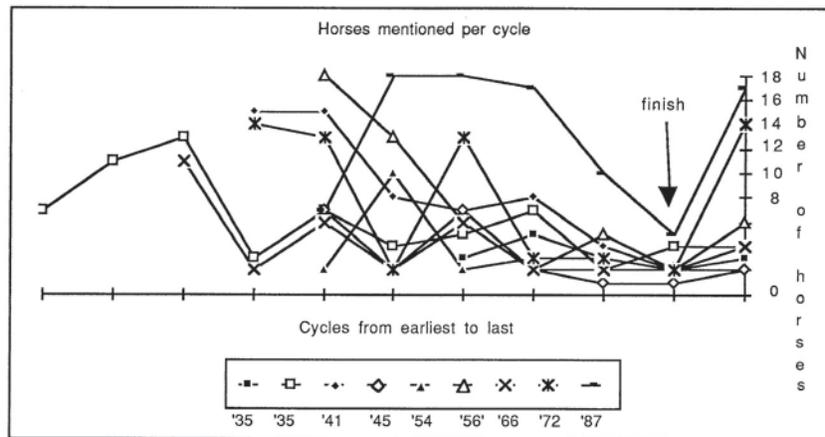
Dave Clarkson, Jarrett's successor, was more likely to cover the whole field but again not on a regular basis. From time to time he cycled through the leaders only. This way of proceeding is shared among a number of

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller description of the contemporary New Zealand oral tradition of race-calling, see Kuiper and Austin 1990.

callers in the contemporary tradition. Clarkson’s rule seems to be that he called the whole field unless he was calling the leaders or unless the race was reaching its final stages; at that point the tail end of the field was left uncalled. Clarkson also cycled on the leaders at the conclusion of the call for quite a long time. He might cycle more than five times on the leaders as they approach the winning post, and he does not call the whole field past that point.

The third caller, Reon Murtha, implements the discourse rules differently. On the first cycle he will call only a section of the field, namely those that either did well at the start or began badly. He will then cycle through the whole field, or as much of it as he can see, until very near the end and only then reduce the cycle to the leaders. He also calls the whole of the field past the winning post. These trends can be seen in figure 4:



A second change in the way discourse structure rules have been used is in the loop formulae. When Jarrett looped using a field locator, he employed either a race locator or a track locator formula but not both. He also tended to employ field locator formulae within the cycle quite frequently. In the early calls Clarkson had a strong preference for race locators as loops, but in the last two races tended to use track locators more often. There is an interesting distinction here between racing and harness racing. When calling gallops where the track is much larger, the commentator is more likely to call the race location because the field passes indicator pegs that mark the distance left to run. In harness racing with its smaller track, it is easy to mention the track location since it changes frequently. Reon Murtha’s practice is generally to locate the field by its location on the track at the beginning of the race, in the middle stages to

call both the track location and the race location, and at the conclusion of the race to mention only the track location.

We can conclude that the discourse structure rules for race-calling were established by 1935 but that their implementation has changed over the years. The present practice of Reon Murtha seems to be governed by a logic that supposes that at the beginning of the race the distance left to run is not important, so that mention of it is omitted from the first and perhaps second loop. In the middle of the race it is important to indicate both where on the track the field of runners is and how far the race has still to run, while at the end of the race only the location on the track is significant since the winning post is in a predictable place after the field has rounded the home turn.

A third area in which the tradition has changed is the order in which horses are called. The discourse structure rules require that horses are called in the sequence in which they come. But horses are also located relative to other horses. The syntax of English makes it possible to name horses in the reverse order to that in which they are currently running: for example, *horse 1 is behind horse 2*. Such reverse order makes difficulties for the caller in that he has to have two horses in view and reverse the order in the syntax. It also creates problems for the hearer in that he or she hears horses in the reverse order and has to transpose them to get the right order. On those grounds one would predict that reversals are rare, and that is certainly the case, but they do occur. Dave Clarkson was the only one of the three callers to show reverse order, with five reverses in the 1941 call, one each in the '45, '55, and '56 calls, and none in the '66 call. All except one are subject to a special condition, namely that the horse being called in second place has been mentioned earlier as coming in front of the horse in first place. An example of this special situation would be: *Column is four out on the outside of these three and appears to be galloping well. Cardigan is following Column*. It seems, in short, that the evolution of the call has moved to prevent reverse order sequences.

### *The Evolution of Formulae in Race-Calling*

Given the limited size of the sample, it is not possible to detail the evolution of specific formulae. However, the formulae used by Frank Jarrett in 1935 are, in many cases, still in use today (figure 5 below).

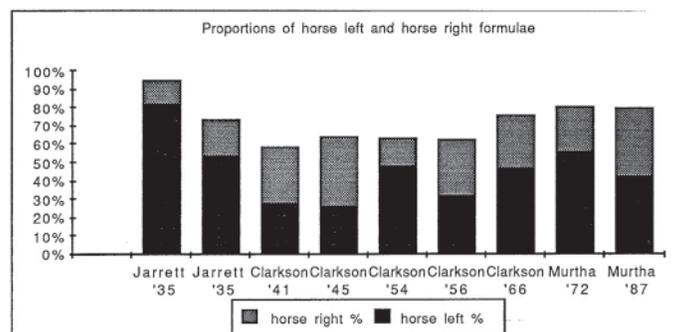
Formulae in use in 1935 and still in use in 1990

NP is in the lead.  
 NP's gone into the lead.  
 NP's (closely) followed (now) by NP.  
 The leader (now) is NP.  
 NP is wide out.  
 NP's (in) on the rails.  
 NP's got clear.  
 NP's flying down the outside.  
 NP1's X lengths clear of NP2.  
 NP is next.  
 then comes NP.  
 NP's moved up.  
 NP1 from NP2.  
 Then NP.  
 NP1 is going (up) to challenge NP2.  
 X lengths away (now) is NP.

These formulae have the locations for horses (designated by NP for Noun Phrase) either on the left of the formula or on the right, or have two locations with one at either end. The normal location for horses might be expected to be in left-hand position, since that arrangement would make the horse the subject of the sentence. However, there are advantages to having the horse in the right-hand position, since uttering a formula gives the caller time to pick up which horse is next. To place the horse into right-hand position requires a variety of syntactic strategies including the following:

- passivization, e.g. *NP1 is followed by NP2*
- preposing around *be*, e.g. *And going up with them is NP*
- adverbial fronting, e.g. *Every yard they go she's losing ground*
- there* insertion, e.g. *There's NP1 going up on the outside of NP2*
- extraposition, e.g. *It's NP on the rails*
- right dislocation, e.g. *He might get to him, Integrity*
- complement in preposition phrase, e.g. *Then a length to Patriss*

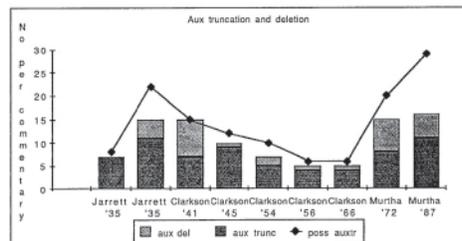
The figure below indicates the three callers' mix through time of left and right placement (figure 6).



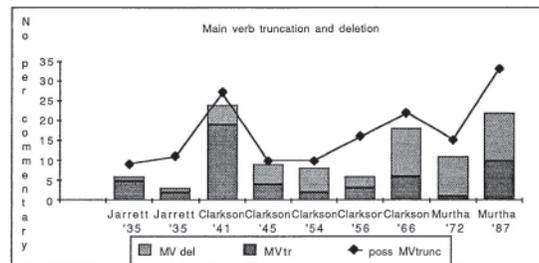
Taking into account that race-callers speak under pressure of time and while trying to recognize horses in the field, one might hypothesize that they would opt for the simplest syntactic structures to indicate the location of each horse. Given the large proportion of phrases that have horses on the right and the syntactic cost of doing so in terms of the complexity of the constructions involved, we have to argue that the syntactic cost is worth the benefit of having the horse on the right at least a good deal of the time.

There appears to be a stylistic element underlying this phenomenon. During a call a commentator will often use a number of formulae all of which have horses left and then switch to horses-right formulae. A stylistic explanation would hold that the caller wants to create some variety in the call and thus changes the basic location in which horses are placed from time to time. But this rationalization fails to explain why the variation is usually in blocks. This characteristic can be explained by the fact that, regardless of whether horses come on the left or the right of a formula, the crucial thing from the caller's point of view is to have text between one horse and the next. If switching from horse-left to horse-right formulae could be done on a turn and turn about basis, the caller would end up with two horses next to each other—a situation that would be more awkward for the commentator in terms of speech processing as well as for the hearer, who would not have formula text to indicate the relationship between the two horses.

A second plausible prediction about the structure of formulae that follows from the theory that callers will endeavor to simplify the syntax of their call wherever possible is the following: where formulae contain auxiliary or main verbs that can be either truncated or deleted, they will be truncated or deleted with increasing frequency over time. Thus we would expect verbless formulae to evolve, and this has in fact happened. A formula like *NP1 on the inside of NP2* is verbless. But the question is whether it is actually verbless or whether the verb is deleted by the caller as he makes the call. If there were a trend towards increasing deletion and verblessness, then this should show in the tradition. As figures 7 and 8 illustrate, the trend is currently in the opposite direction, at least as far as Reon Murtha is concerned.

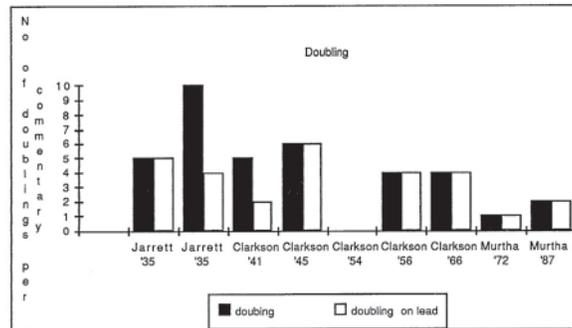


These figures indicate that Dave Clarkson increasingly truncated and deleted deletable verbs, but that Reon Murtha does so less frequently.

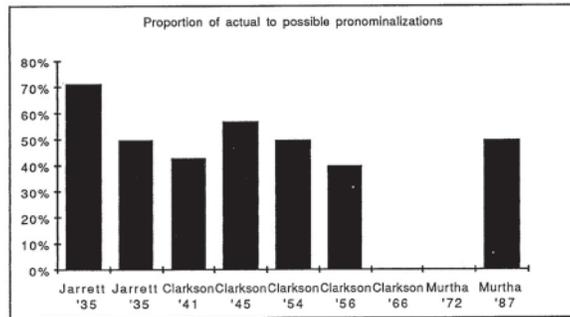


There is an explanation for this variance. Since formulae are finite state grammars, at the point where truncatable or deletable verbs appear in the formula there will be three alternative paths through the finite state diagram. Callers may choose the full verb path, the truncated verb path, or the deleted verb path. There is a processing trade-off for each of these paths. Selecting the shortest path means having to pick up the next horse from memory that much faster, while at the same time managing to pack so much more into the commentary. Picking up the next horse a fraction of a second faster on a regular basis puts the caller under just a little more pressure. Second, taking the path of reduction or deletion changes the rhythmic structure of the call. Race-callers have a strong metrical quality to their chant, with long and short syllables being accentuated differently. Verbs that can be truncated or deleted are rhythmically weak and so serve an important rhythmic function.

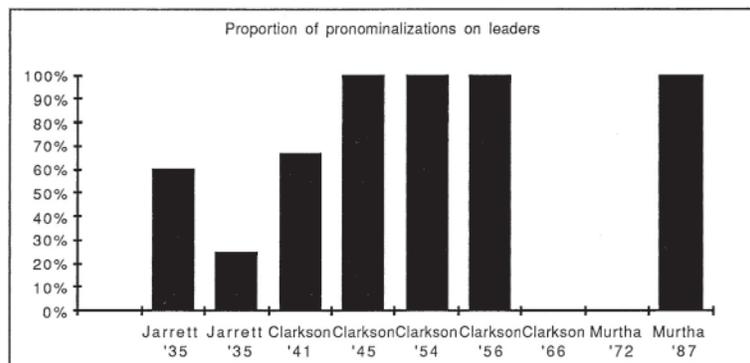
There are other areas where, counterintuitively, callers have opted for greater syntactic complexity. Occasionally callers mention a horse twice in a row. I have termed this process “doubling” since it often involves the repetition not just of the horse but of the whole or part of the previous formula: for example, *Gold Bar still out in front by twelve lengths. Gold Bar by twelve lengths.* Doubling is efficient from a speech production perspective, since the second mention does not require the horse to be identified in the visual field; but it is less efficient in giving the audience as many passes through the field as possible. But doubling serves a purpose other than communicative efficiency, one that explains why doubling is to be found in all the commentaries in the sample. In the early commentaries most cases of doubling were of the leading contender, while in the latter part of the sample all cases are of the leader or the horse that is about to become the leader. Thus doubling has come to be a rhetorical device for highlighting the front-runner at the beginning of the cycle (figure 9).



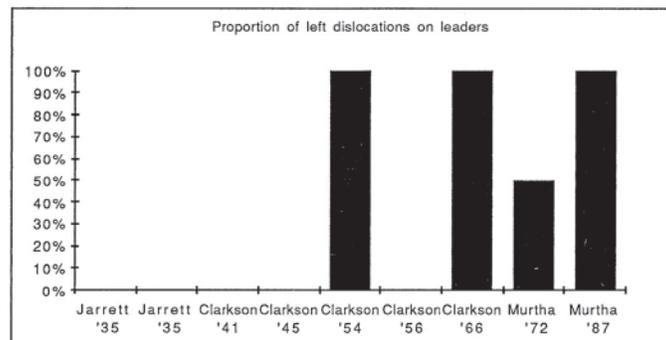
Communicative efficiency might be thought to require that the second mention should be pronominalized. But again the data suggests otherwise (figure 10).



Of the possible NPs that could be pronominalized only a relatively low fraction actually are, and this fraction has decreased over time. Furthermore, given what happens in the case of doubling, it is not surprising that where pronominalization does take place it has become restricted to the leaders, since it is always associated with doubling (figure 11).



Left dislocations are a last parallel example. Occasionally callers produce left dislocated structures, e.g. *Johnny Globe, he pokes his nose in front*. In the early commentaries there are no left dislocated structures. But when they do appear later, they are also almost exclusively a device for topicalizing the leader (figure 12).



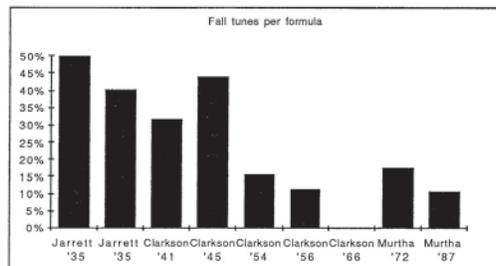
This analysis of some of the syntactic properties of formulae has falsified an extreme form of the hypothesis that formulaic speech will be syntactically simple. In many areas simplicity in the syntax runs counter to the way in which the tradition has evolved. Since formulae are memorized and later recalled rather than constructed in speech, this complexity is not surprising. The syntax of formulae has evolved to provide callers with structures that will place horses in the order in which they are actually running and to focus on the leaders in a variety of ways. These syntactic properties of formulae also seem to fall into two groups—those where individual callers are able to have their own idiosyncrasies and others where the tradition has made what appears to be a categorical determination that a particular feature shall be exclusively of a certain kind. Features relating to verb truncation and deletion appear to be of the former kind, whereas rhetorical devices that focus on the leaders appear to be of the latter.

### *Evolution of the Chant*

On listening to the recordings on which this study is based for the first time, one feature of the development of the tradition stands out starkly: the development of the chanted prosodics. The two commentaries by Jarrett and the first two Dave Clarkson tracks are intonationally relatively normal. Jarrett drones a little and has normal fall contours at the end of many of his sentences. Toward the finish of the race he does raise

the pitch of his voice semitone by semitone, but his highest pitch is reached not at the point at which the horses pass the winning post but a few seconds earlier. The first Dave Clarkson commentary is almost speech-like, with relatively normal intonation. In the second Clarkson speaks with a mainly level intonation, but with a nuclear fall tone relatively early in many formulae and therefore with a rather long following tail. This pattern gives a kind of characteristic “dive bomber” melody to his 1945 call. But in 1954 Clarkson is chanting in a manner very similar to that of contemporary callers. At the end of the race his pitch rises steadily until the race reaches its climax. In the later commentaries he is occasionally so excited that his voice breaks on the top notes like that of an inexperienced tenor.

Speculating on the development of the chant, I would suggest that callers are likely to chant at the conclusion of the race as their pitch elevates and the level of excitement rises. This is certainly the case in Dave Clarkson’s 1945 call. Concurrently in that call the number of fall tunes decreases markedly while Clarkson is chanting, so it may well be that the chant spread backwards to cover the whole race. A prediction that follows is that the number of fall tunes will decrease with the advent of the chant, and this prediction is borne out (figure 13).

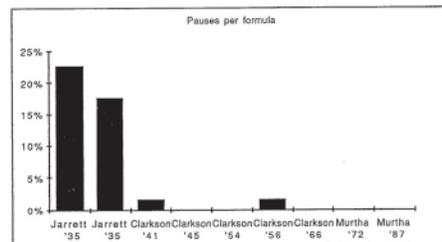


The number of fall tunes decreases markedly with Clarkson’s call. The normal pattern in the contemporary tradition is for there to be only an occasional fall tune, usually coming at the end of a cycle. This change goes hand in hand with the development of the chant.

### *Fluency*

The manifestations of extraordinary fluency also coincide with this period in the evolution of the call. Jarrett pauses quite frequently and hesitates in a normal manner. But after the first years of race-calling, Dave Clarkson almost never pauses and seldom hesitates in any way. In his

1972 commentary Reon Murtha has one hesitation, but the 1987 call has none and this is the current norm (figure 14).



However, self-repair is occasionally to be found, not surprisingly given the complexity of the caller's task. What is surprising is that it occurs as little as it does and is not linked with hesitation more often than it is. Reon Murtha is able to perform self-repair with no hesitation at all. His self-repairs are, for example, not preceded by voiced pauses as a number of Jarrett's are.

## Conclusions

By 1935 some of the basic features of race-calling were already established. The discourse structure rules had evolved into something much like their present form and the call was largely formulaic. However, it was not yet chanted and was relatively normal in its fluency. Many other aspects of the current race-calling tradition appear to have evolved during the career of Dave Clarkson. Relatively early in his career the chant becomes mandatory, and the various features for highlighting the leaders such as doubling, left dislocation, and leader pronominalization are incorporated. During his career other characteristics, such as reverses of horse ordering, disappear. The more recent feature of calling all the horses in each cycle until relatively late has been added by Reon Murtha. The relatively low incidence of verb truncation and deletion also appears to be a feature of Murtha's call.

What has been demonstrated in this study is how quantitative methods that look in detail at specific linguistic features of an oral-formulaic tradition can give additional precision to the study of such traditions and also contribute to a better understanding of those features that are mandatory versus those that allow for variation both in the calls of individual callers and from one caller to another. Such methods also show in a series of snapshots the evolution of single features of an oral tradition. Many more such features might have been selected; together they form a

complex repertoire of traditional resources that callers have at their disposal.

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