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Participants in Nambiquara Myths and Folktales

Margaret Lowe

The Nambiquara narrator introduces characters into a story in such a way as to distinguish the principal character, other major characters, and minor characters.

Principal characters are introduced in the title of a myth. Major characters are introduced either by a fronted topic in the form of a nominal phrase or by a description of their entry into the scene. Minor characters are introduced either by a simple motion verb or by a kinship term.

Any character can be dismissed from the narrative either by a complete change of scene or by a motion verb that takes him away from the scene.

Correct referents are established and maintained in narrative, whether they speak or act, by the judicious use of conjunctions and culturally expected sequences of action.

This paper describes ways in which Nambiquara¹ narrators introduce characters, how they keep the correct referents, and how the characters are dismissed from the story.

The characters divide into three categories, and the methods of introducing them vary accordingly. There is one principal character without whom there would be no story. There may be other major characters who influence the whole story or an important part of it. There may also be minor characters who are little more than props and exert minimal or no influence on the course of events in the story.

For Nambiquara myths principal *character* is a better term than *participant* or *actor* for the role described because the latter two imply that this person is the chief participator or actor in the story, and this is not necessarily so. The principal character says and does nothing at

all throughout some narratives, although he does most of the action in others. The criterion for choosing the principal character is not how much he is on stage, but whether there would be a story at all without him.

1 Text summaries

Abridged versions of three Nambiquara stories serve as the background from which most of the examples in this paper come. The principal characters in these stories are the anteater, the water boa's daughter, and a child.

Every Nambiquara Indian asked has declared that the first story is about the anteater, not about the man around whom most of the story revolves. In the structure of the story as well, the anteater is the principal character.

The beautiful water boa's daughter initiates the second story, though she is depicted only as sitting on the water boa's back and doing no speaking. She is a good example of a principal character who does almost nothing in the story.

In the third story a child is the principal character, but in this case he is also the main actor.

1.1 The anteater

Anteater was making arrows and using fine hawk feathers. A man came along and asked for hawk feathers so he too could make arrows. Anteater refused to give him any, but took him up a tree so he could get some hawk feathers of his own. Then anteater left the man up the tree and caused the tree to grow very tall so the man could not get down. A frog came up to the man who was by now hot and thirsty. Frog offered him a lift down on its back, but the man refused.

A monkey came up and offered the man a lift down. Although by this time the man thought he would soon die of hunger and thirst, he still refused help.

Then a vulture circled overhead and offered to fly the man down on its back. Since the man expected to die of heat and thirst up in the tree, the man got on the vulture's back and was flown to safety.

Then the vulture promised to give the man some poisonous narcotic tobacco to pay back the anteater. The man gave it to the anteater, who smoked it and went mad. They fitted a gourd on his head. Since then he has had a snout and has eaten only ants.

1.2 The water boa's daughter

A young man fell desperately in love with a very beautiful girl he

saw. He was determined to win her. The obstacle was that her father was the water boa.

A dove came along and told the young man that if he was willing to follow his advice he would win the maiden. The man agreed, and he and the dove set off down a long dark tunnel. Eventually they came to a forest lake. The beautiful girl was sitting on the water boa's back in the middle of the lake. Dove told the man to go sit beside her. The man did so and a horse fly bit him, sucking his blood. Thus he paid the bride price and won his bride.

1.3 The child who made food

Father and son had an argument as to whether flutes could be heard playing. Finally the child got angry and told the father to take him into the jungle and leave him there. The father did so.

He returned home without the child, and the mother asked what had happened. Father returned to the jungle and found manioc growing for the first time, but no child.

2 Principal character

The principal character is introduced at the beginning of the narration by the title of the story. This title may be in the form of an existential clause or a summary of the main event of the story. In either case the title is not part of the main event line of the story, but rather precedes the first event.

An existential clause when used as a title always introduces the principal character and is the first clause of the narrative. It is distinguished from other clause types because it consists of a nominal followed by a verbal complex *ta¹hxai²hē¹ra²* 'as I was told' or *nū²nha²-wa²* 'I think I'm telling the story accurately'. (For an account of verb suffixes and the verbal verification system in Nambiquara see Lowe 1972).

Examples 1 to 4 are story titles expressed in existential clauses; 1 is the title of the anteater story and 4 the title of the story of the water boa's daughter.

- (1) *Wa³tī³kah³lxah³lo²su² ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².*
anteater it-was-told
'There was once an anteater.'
- (2) *Kxā³nāu³ut¹tai²na² āx³kax³lu³su² xyau²xai³nū²nha²wa².*
long-time-ago old-woman lived
'A long time ago there lived an old woman.'

- (3) *Ya²na¹lha³ho²su² ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².*
 jaguar it-was-told
 ‘There was once a jaguar.’
- (4) *Txi³ha²ta³nū¹tai²na² ā²sa³wi³ha³xi³su² nū²nha²wa².*
 water-boa’s daughter was
 ‘She was the water boa’s daughter.’

The narratives of examples 5 to 7 begin with a title that summarizes the most important event in the story. The event itself is not fully described at the beginning of the story, but later in its proper time sequence in the event line.

- (5) *Wē³sa² yain³txa² xwen¹kxe³su² ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².*
 child food that-was-made it-was-told
 ‘This is the story about the food the child made.’
- (6) *Sai³ki³nā³xa² kxā³nhi¹nū¹tai²na² six³whin¹jah³la²*
ho³hxai³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².
 orphans long-ago the-devil ate-them-all-up-it-was-told
 ‘About the orphans, a long time ago the devil ate them all up.’
- (7) *Ax³kax³la² ha³yo²xi²ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².*
 old-woman shed-skin-it-was- told
 ‘There was an old woman who shed her skin.’

Examples 2 and 7 are from different recordings of the same story; one has an existential clause title and the other a summary title.

3 Major characters

Apart from the principal character many myths have one or more other major characters. The influence of these may pervade the whole story as they influence the principal character, but grammatically they are handled differently.

For example, in the story of the child who made food, the father who argues with the child and precipitates the whole action is a major character. In the story of the anteater, a large part of the narrative is taken up with the account of the interaction between the man and the vulture, both major characters.

A major character can be introduced by a fronted topic in the form of a nominal phrase referring to him. This occurs as the first phrase in the stretch of narrative where he appears.

In example 8, *ā²nū²su² nū³ta²a²sa²kxai²lu¹* is the noun phrase referring to the man, but the clauses immediately following refer not to the man but to the anteater making arrows. Only after this has been described does the man come into the event line of the story. This is

done by the use of the motion verb ‘came’. The man came to the anteater and so entered the scene.

- (8) *Xnē³nū²la² ā²nū²su² nūn³te²a²sa²kxai²lu²
wa³tī³kah³lxa³lho²nū¹tā² ā²hau³ta² kâi³ye²yhu¹tax³we³ta²sa²kxai³
tau²ta²we³ta² kâi³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra² te³na¹ ā²nū²su²
nūn³te²a²sa²kxai³lu¹ wxā³nū²la².*

sequence man also-prominence anteater arrows the-feathers-he-
was-making-with-regard-to hawk’s-feathers he-was-making
sequence man also-prominence came

‘So about the man, the anteater was making arrows out of
hawk’s feathers and the man came (up to him).’

Major characters may also be introduced by a description of their entrance on the scene. In example 9, which is from the anteater story, the vulture enters the story when he is described as circling above the man before he flies down to him.

- (9) *Nxe² xyau²tēn²su² wa²luh³xa² ta²a²kxai³lu²
xyau²kxi²te²a² ā²nā³ka³na² tī³nha¹ ā³sa¹xne³ki²la²
yâi¹ nxe²xai³tīt²tu²wa² jāx¹ye²ta¹hxai²hē¹ra² te²sē¹ra².*

and-so while-he-was-there vulture prominence the-man-who-
was-staying above-(him) path circling ideophone it-flies that’s-
how-he-related-to-him as-I-understand-it

‘While the man was there, a vulture, vultures usually circle over
the heads of people, that’s what this vulture did to the man, as I
understand it.’

Kinship terms may be used to introduce major or minor characters. Thus in the story of how the child made food both father and mother appear on the scene without any other introduction. Example 10 shows this in the case of the father who is shown to be a major character, not by his introduction but by the role he plays later in the narrative.

- (10) *Wāix³la² wī³nu²kxai³lu² nē³ka²ta³nū²la²
xai³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra² xna²ha¹te¹ si³yo³nān²tū³
ā²wē³sa²nū¹ta² ā²ki³lhax³nū¹ta²kxai³lu¹ xai³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra².*

child’s father led-then went attention-switch behind-(him) son
went

‘The child’s father went on in front. Behind him the child
went.’

4 Minor characters

Minor characters enter the narrative only once and have virtually

no influence on the major characters or the course of events. For example, the frog and the monkey each offer to carry the man down the tree. But since they are so small, their offers are declined, and nothing more comes of their action—they are minor characters.

The mother of the child who made food has a conversation with her husband on the whereabouts of the child. She also sees leaf cutter ants with manioc leaves for the first time. The mother has no impact on the child or the story, however. She also is a minor character.

Minor characters may enter the text in one of two ways. They may enter as the subject of a motion verb taking them into the scene together with double identification of the character or else by a kinship term.

- (11) *Nxē³sxā³ xyau²kxi²tāu³ān¹tux³ti¹ ta²ki²ha² te²a²kxai³lu¹
kā³lxīn³ta² te²a²kxai³lu¹ xwā³ye²ta¹hxai²hē¹rī¹ te²sē¹ra².*
then while-he-(the man) monkey prominence monkey
prominence came as-I-understand-it
Then while the man was there, the monkey came to him, as I understand it.'

The monkey in example 11 enters the scene by means of the motion verb 'came', and the identification of the monkey is repeated the second time by a synonym.

- (12) *A³nū²la² xī³xī²xna²ha¹te¹ ā²hāx³ka³nū²su² te²kxai³lu¹ ih¹xnē³te²-
sin²ta²ku² wē³sin³ti² ā²nū²su² tē³sxā³ xī³yā¹xn²nān³ta²ku²
nxe³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra² te²sē¹ra².*
(the father)-leaving and coming home-attention-switch the-
mother prominence what's-going-on it-was-told as-I-
understand-it
'On the father's arrival home, the mother said, "What's going on? Didn't you bring the child?"' as I understand it.'

In example 11 the child's mother is simply introduced by her kinship to the child. Every child presupposes a mother, and so the mother needs no further introduction.

5 Dismissal of characters

There is no distinction made between the dismissal of principal, major, or minor characters. Any character may be dropped from the scene of action in one of two ways. Either there is a total change of scene with the resultant dismissal of all characters in the scene, or else one character leaves the scene by the use of a suitable motion verb.

The most commonly used is the verb to leave or a verb that has as one of its components the root of the verb to leave.

Examples 12 and 13 show how a whole scene can be changed and a minor character, the child's mother, dismissed in the process. The text has been talking about the child's mother and what she saw. Then comes *xna²ha²te¹ ā²kxā³nxa²* 'scene change, some time previously'. In reply to the mother's question in 11 as to what happened, the scene reverts back to when the father and son started their journey into the jungle. The mother is not mentioned again.

- (13) *Xna²ha¹te¹, ā²kxā³nxa² ā²wī³na² ā²ki³lhax³la² ē³ye²jāu³xa²
ĩ³ye³kxi²te³lhā³ ta¹hxai²hē¹ra² xnē³txi¹ xīn¹kxai²nān² tū³ ...*
scene-change, some-time-back father son the-words-said he-
said it-was-told listen, when-you-go
'Now, some time back, the son had said to the father, "Listen,
when you go"'

The other method of dismissing a participant, when the scene does not change, is to use a suitable motion verb, usually 'leave'. For example in 14 the anteater has taken the man up the tree. The anteater is effectively dismissed from the scene by the words 'The anteater left and came down.'

- (14) *Wa²tī³kah³ lxa³lho²te²u¹ta²kxai³lu² ā³sxā³ ka²nxi²ta¹hxai²hē¹ri¹.*
the-anteater left came-down
'The anteater left and came down.'

Similarly in example 15 of the same text the small monkey offered the man a ride down the tree on his back. The man refused because the monkey was too small, and so the monkey left. The monkey is thus dismissed from the story.

- (15) *Ā²nū²a²nū¹ta² xyau²kxi²jah¹lo²nū¹tā² wa²tī³kah³lxa³lha²
sa²xwe³kxi²jah¹lo²nū¹tā² wān³txi³kxai³lu¹
kāi²nā²xna³ĩ¹ ā³nhait¹sa²so¹xna²ha¹ha²kxai³ tē³sxā³
a³hi²sa²kxa²yān³tī³su² nxa²ha¹ĩ¹ xne³ta¹hxai²hē¹ra²
te²sē¹ra² xnē³sxā³ xyau³kxi²nhe².*
the-man the-one-who-was-there anteater one-who-had-been-put
his-words you-are-not-big I-slip-off-you take lest-I-fall I-say-to-
you-it-was-told as-I-understand-it thus leave-and
Then said the one who was there, the one who had been put
there by the anteater, "You are not big (enough). I don't want
to slip off you and fall to the ground." And so he (the monkey)
left.'

6 Tracing characters within the narrative

It is important not only to know how characters are introduced into a narrative and dismissed from it, but also to know who does what throughout. The problem is complicated by the fact that in Nambiquara there are no subject or object indicators on constituents of transitive clauses; neither is there a fixed order that determines which element is subject and which is object. Both SOV and OSV orders are permissible. Furthermore, many of the subject and object pronouns in a text are deleted.

Nambiquara has several methods for keeping track of characters in a narrative. First is the use of culturally expected sequences termed *scripts* or *dyads*, giving an expectation of who might normally do what. The sequence conjunction $n\ddot{u}^2la^2$ assures the hearer that the sequence is proceeding as expected, or else the adversative conjunction $xn\ddot{e}^3to^3ta^1$ alerts the hearer to the fact that the normal script is not being followed at that point.

Second is the use of conjunctions in dialogue to keep the references straight. The same adversative conjunctions can be used to signal change of speaker when the second contradicts the first. Or the attention-switch conjunction $xna^2ha^1te^1$ is used to signal change of speaker when no disagreement is involved and the second speaker accepts what the first has said and carries it forward.

Third is occasional restatement of an event with precise indication of who did what to keep the referential pattern up to date.

6.1 Scripts or dyads

A *script* in this context is a series of culturally predictable events (the idea came from an unpublished paper by Roger Schank). Once a script has been activated any member of the culture is able to predict the events occurring in it. A *dyad* is the simplest kind of script, in which only two events occur, such as offer and acceptance.

In Nambiquara the sequence conjunction $n\ddot{u}^2la^2$ assures the hearer that the expected sequence is taking place, as in example 16:

- (16) $\dot{A}^2kox^1ko^1n\ddot{u}^3xa^2 a^2ta^2la^2n\ddot{u}^3n\ddot{u}^1t\dot{a}^2 \dot{a}^2t\dot{r}^3nh\dot{a}^3la^2n\ddot{u}^3n\ddot{u}^1ta^2kxai^3lu^2$
 $\ddot{u}^3h\ddot{u}^1yhu^1ta^1hxai^2h\ddot{e}^1ri^1 xn\ddot{e}^3te^2s\ddot{e}^1la^2 n\ddot{u}^2la^2 \ddot{u}^3th\ddot{u}^2nh\ddot{u}^2la^2$
 $\ddot{r}^3ku^3li^2 ye^3ka^2n\ddot{a}u^3ki^2 ku^3n\ddot{u}^2la^2 \dots$

bad-tobacco devil's-tobacco poison-tobacco he-gave-him I'm-told sequence light sequence smoke once smoke-sequence
 '(The man) gave the bad devil's poison tobacco to him (the anteater) and he (anteater) lit (it) and smoked (it) and'

Here the man offers tobacco to the anteater, which is an expected action for a host toward a visitor. The anteater accepts—expected action—and he smokes it. The change in actor—from the man who offers to the anteater who receives—is indicated solely by the conjunction *nũ²la²*, from which we conclude that the expected sequence has occurred. The tobacco is not the expected kind for a visitor, even though the behavior is expected; and from that discrepancy hangs the rest of the tale.

6.2 Conjunctions

When no predictable sequence is present, as often happens in dialogue or many other interactions between characters, the attention switch conjunction *xna²ha¹te¹* is used to signal change of speaker or actor. In the story of how the child made food we have the father and child walking single file down the trail, the father in front. Then after the attention-switch conjunction we are told about the child. (See example 10 above.)

In example 17 the man is speaking, but a quotation following *xna²ha¹te¹* is from the vulture. Similarly in example 18 the vulture's speech is followed by *xna²ha¹te¹*, and then the man's words.

- (17) *Yã³lu²sa²ha²kxai³, wãn²sa²ha²hxai³ sa³nhai³
nxe³ta¹hxai²hẽ¹ra² te²sẽ¹ra² xna²ha¹te¹
xne³ti¹ ta³lo³hẽ¹t³sẽ¹ri¹*

I'm-thirsty I'm-hot I-am closing-quote-margin as-I=understand-it attention-switch listen get-on-my-back

'(The man said to the vulture,) "I'm thirsty, I'm hot," he said.
"Listen, get on my back," said (the vulture to the man).'

- (18) *Hit³san¹ji¹ xne³ta¹hxai²hẽ¹ra² te²sẽ¹ra² xna²ha¹te¹
ã²nũ²a²hxi²sen²su² sa²xwe³kxi²sa²ha²kxai³lũ¹.*

are-you-angry closing-quote-margin as-I-understand-it attention-switch a-man put- me-up-here

""Are you angry with me?"' said (the vulture to the man). "A man put me up here," (said the man to the vulture).'

In the case of conversation, an adversative conjunction may be used instead of the usual attention switch. This indicates that there is disagreement in the reply of the second speaker. In example 19, a father speaks to his son. After an adversative conjunction the child's reply is given contradicting what has been said.

- (19) *Xne³xna²ha¹te¹, xwai³lxa² wĩ³na² wãn³txi² kxai³lu¹
hai³txi³ ain³kxi²nũ²xna²ha¹jau³xa² e³kxi²to³.*

*hxân³nhai¹ â³nâx³to³sa²xnân³nhai¹, xnê³to³ta¹
kwxâ²nî¹lxi¹ wâi²la² yân³su² hân³su² hân³ nhai¹.*

attention- switch child's father's words negative words-which-I-
understand-of-you you-have-not-been-saying I-hear-nothing
adversative nonsense flute sound is-sounding,

'Then the child's father said, "I don't understand what you
say. I hear nothing." But (the child answered), "Nonsense.
The flutes are playing.''

The adversative conjunction *xne³to³ta¹* indicates both that the speaker has changed from the father to the child and that the expected agreement of the script has not occurred. It is from this argument that the story springs, because the child gets angry and goes off into the jungle.

6.3 Restatements

In Nambiquara there is no overt way of marking subjects or objects. A third way of indicating unambiguously which character does which action is to restate the action in such a way as to clarify the actions of at least one character. This clarification is made by the addition of further information in the restatement. In example 20 we have 'these children the jaguar found' as the initial statement. There is no indication in the verb of that statement as to who did the finding, nor is there any distinction between singular and plural. In the restatement, however, we have 'these armadillo children house where they lived'. This clearly indicates that it was the house of the armadillo children, so we conclude that the jaguar found the children at their house and not the other way round.

- (20) *Xnê³ta²a²sa²kxai³lu¹ ya²na¹lhah³lo²nû¹ta²kxai³la¹
a³tî²ta¹hxai²hê²ra² kxa²yuh³xa² wê³hax³li³nû¹tâ²
nû³na² â³lxa²ta²nû¹ta² â²wâ³hax³li³nû¹tâ² â²xyau²-
thî³na²sa²kxai²lu² ya¹na¹la²nû¹ta²kxai³lu²
a³ya²tî²ta¹hxai²hê¹ra².*

these (armadillo children) jaguar found animal children
armadillo this-armadillo children the house-where-they-lived a-
jaguar found

'These (the armadillos) the jaguar found. The jaguar found the
house where the armadillo children lived.'

7 Restrictions on verbs

A verb that introduces a restriction on another verb can be used to

clarify a situation. In example 21 we are told that the armadillo children took tough grass. Here there is no ambiguity; the tough grass cannot take the children so the subject of 'take' is known. The next verb is 'tie', and its subject will be the same as that of the last verb unless there is a conjunction telling us that there is a change of subject. So in this case it is clear that the children tied the jaguar. The verbs to take and to say are most commonly used to disambiguate in this way since the subject of each must normally be animate.

- (21) *Nũ²la² nũ³nũ¹tã² ã²wẽ³hax³li³nũ¹tã² a³lo²xi³-*
nho²su² tĩ³nho²kxai³lu² so¹xi²tẽ³na¹ ya³na¹la²nũ¹ta²kxai³lu²
taih³kxi²yah³lxi³ta¹hxai² hẽ¹ra¹.
 sequence the-armadillo-children tough-grass fiber take-sequence
 jaguar tie-3rd-person-it-was-told
 'Then the armadillo children took some tough grass fiber and
 tied up the jaguar.'

Notes

1 Nambiquara was classified by McQuown and Greenberg (1960) as in the Ge-Pano-Carib phylum. There are approximately two hundred speakers of Nambiquara in Northwestern Mato Grosso, Brazil. The number of dialect groups remains uncertain at present. The data and information in this paper come from Ivan Lowe and are based on field work done between 1960 and 1976 in accordance with contracts between the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro and more recently between the Institute and the Fundação Nacional do Índio. The present paper was written under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics at a 1976 field workshop held in Porto Velho, Rondônia, Brazil, under the direction of Joseph E. Grimes. The author is indebted to Grimes and Ivan Lowe for helpful discussions and comments in the development of this paper.

The phonemes of Nambiquara are /p/, /t/, /k/, /d/ (implosive alveolar stop), /x/ (glottal stop), /j/ (alveolar affricate), /n/ (with six allophones: [m] after nasalized glide *ãu*, [bm] after oral vowel glide *au*, [gŋ] preceding a velar stop and following an oral vowel, [ŋ] preceding a velar stop and following a nasal vowel, [dn] on all other occasions following oral vowels, and [n] on all other occasions following nasalized vowels), /N/ (voiceless nasal), /r/ (only in the final syllable of the independent verb), /l/ ([ɫ] after front vowels), /s/, /h/, /w/, /y/. Vowels occur in oral and nasalized series (nasalization is written with a tilde *˜*): /i, e, a, o, u/, and two vowel glides /ai/ and /au/. Both series of vowels also occur laryngealized, indicated by a ʔ over the vowel letter. There are three tones in Nambiquara, indicated by raised numbers ¹, ², ³/ at the end of every syllable. ¹ is a down glide, ² is an up glide, and ³ is a low level tone.

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