

“He’s dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy”: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Steinbeck’s Lennie Small

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In John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men*, George Milton, Lennie Small’s friend, says to another friend, Slim, that Lennie “is dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy.”

The conventional reading of Lennie is that he is retarded, and this is why George has to travel with him, protecting him, since Lennie cannot take care of himself. In a view that is typical of much of the literary criticism of the novel, Howard Levant (1974) says that Lennie is “a huge, powerful, semi-idiot who kills when he is frightened or simply when he is thoughtless . . . Lennie is a reduction of humanity to the lowest common denominator.” According to this view, Lennie’s retardation explains why he periodically “does bad things,” getting both George and himself into trouble and forcing them to abandon one temporary home after another. These troubles derive in large part from Lennie’s attachment to “nice things . . . sof’ things,” including the fur of animals and women’s hair. He likes these things so much that he cannot help petting them, and when he pets, he pets too hard — not knowing his own strength — and thus sometimes kills the objects of his affection. This is what happens at the end of the novel, when Lennie kills Curly’s wife. Rather than turn him over to an enraged mob, George feels forced to shoot his friend himself. Lennie’s inability to learn from previous mistakes has brought his life to this tragic close. Such is the conventional view.

But how “dumb” is Lennie really? And how sane?

This paper will consider the questions of Lennie’s retardation and sanity and attempt to use linguistic methods of inquiry in an analysis of the dialogue that Steinbeck has fashioned in *Of Mice and Men*. Specifically we will ask: What does it mean to “sound dumb”? Is Lennie in fact retarded? To answer these questions we will consider in turn Lennie’s phonology, syntax, and semantics. We will compare his speech to clinical, linguistic, and psycholinguistic studies of various types of exceptional language use. Finally, we will attempt to relate these considerations to broader patterns in the novel.

I. Phonology

There are a number of nonstandard phonological characteristics of Lennie’s speech. In general, these processes seem driven by ease of articulation: in particular, we notice open syllables, cluster reduction, assimilation, and final consonant deletion. For example, Lennie drops the /t/ in “tha’s” and “jus” (alternately spelled “jes”), the /d/ in “stan” and “an’,” the /g/ in “nothin” and “strokin’.” He also makes use of ellisions and contractions: “gonna” for “going to,” “musta” for “must have,” “wun’t” for “wouldn’t,” and so forth. Consonant reduction is seen in “Make ‘um stop, George” (p. 111 of the Modern Library edition, NY: 1937), fronting in “You ast George,” (p.129).

Yet since these pronunciations are largely shared by the other characters in the novel,

mostly farmhands in the Siskiyou highlands near Weed, California, we must conclude that Lennie's phonology is for the most part merely dialectical. George also, for example, says "tha's" and "an'" and "nothin'" and "gonna" and "'um." The only nonstandard pronunciation that seems unique to Lennie is his use of "ast" for "ask," hardly sufficient data to argue for a pattern of distinctiveness.

Not only is Lennie's phonology not distinctive, it is not consistent. Occasionally Lennie will replace his final consonants: "That's it — that's it. Now tell how it is with us" (p. 28). He can even rise to a level of eloquence, in which a standard pronunciation seems to match a sudden verbal fluency. One example is the joyful, shared narration of the Edenic myth that is so important to both George and Lennie.

Lennie begs for another telling of this familiar tale: "Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it" (pp. 29-30).

George is impressed by Lennie's rendition and wonders why he has to participate: "You got it by heart. You can do it yourself."

Indeed, Lennie's language here is not only eloquent, it is almost perfectly metric. This may be a child's vision of Eden, but it is not a child's voice telling it, either in imagistic or phonetic control (notice all the word-ending "t's" and "k's" in place). We will learn later that this speech of Lennie's amounts to a synopsis of George's (surely oft-retold) version of their paradisiacal retirement home: "Maybe we'd have a cow or a goat, and the cream is so God damn thick you got to cut it with a knife and take it out with a spoon . . . Sure, we'd have a little house an' a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an' in the winter we'd keep a fire goin' in it" (pp. 101-102). The point, however, is that Lennie's version, while truncated, is perfectly controlled in its phonology and syntax. It amounts almost to a versification of the prose original.

What accounts for this sudden eloquence? A reader can only speculate. The author may, for example, be "standing in" for his character on some meta-representative level, in order to suggest Lennie's desperate faith in his trumped-up future: the inconsistency can be justified, but it remains inconsistent.

Is this a problem? It depends on the reader. Here, it seems to me, we meet a fork in the road, a possible divergence in the foci of linguistic and literary analyses. It may well be true, as Zellig Harris (1952) has plaintively said, that "the analysis of the occurrence of elements in the text is applied," by literary scholars, "only in respect to that text alone — that is, in respect to the other elements in the same text, and not in respect to anything else in the language." It seems to me also true, however, that within this chosen world, literary scholars, in their search, as M.P. O'Connor (1982) has noted, for "affective" elements, are less likely to be derailed by the above-mentioned sorts of inconsistency. If the register of Lennie's speech "changes" at any one point in the novel, a literary critic is likely to say that the author is attending to other matters; whereas, I take it, the pattern-gathering linguist (again following O'Connor) either gives up that pattern or that text and goes on to other issues.

At any rate, phonology does not seem helpful in answering the questions we have posed ourselves, so let us move on in our analysis of the text.

II. Syntax

In general, it may be that Lennie's syntax is as nondistinctive as is his phonology. One problem is that this is a matter that cannot be determined with precision, for the simple reason that we rarely have instances where two characters (much less more than two) attempt the

same type of structure, one character doing it successfully, the other character “failing.” We can say, however, that Lennie’s nonstandard syntactic locutions seem to match those of other characters in “distance” (measured in number of operations) from standard speech.

One example is subcategorization errors. Lennie says “Ah, leave me have it, George” (p. 15), using “leave” for “let,” whereas George says “I ain’t gonna remind ya, fear ya do it again” (p. 17), substituting “fear” for “afraid.” These and similar “errors” are of roughly similar magnitude and are again nondistinctive.

Another nexus for comparison are relative clauses and embedded questions. Here at first there would appear to be some difference between how Lennie and George, at least, handle these syntactic strings. George seems to have few problems with them: “We’d have our own place where we belonged” (relative clause, p. 102); “Tell you what made me stop that” (embedded question, p. 73). Lennie, however, seems not to have mastered these structures yet: “The one that his old lady used to make hot cakes for the kids?” (p. 99). Here, showing a child’s ignorance of *wh*-movement constraints, Lennie substitutes “that his” for “whose.”

On the other hand, Lennie is capable of producing an embedded clause with *wh*-movement, a syntactic structure whose difficulty is presumably equivalent (at least) to the misanalyzed “whose” clause: “Tell about what we’re gonna have in the garden” (p. 29).

Thus, we are left with the unsatisfying conclusion that both characters are (at least intermittently) able to produce correct NP relative clauses (“what” clauses as objects), but that Lennie, at least, is not able to produce a correct genitive relative clause. Again, the data are nonglobal and inconsistent. Therefore, either because the data are not conclusively differential, or because they are inconsistent, syntax does not seem to be the key to unlock Lennie’s exceptionality.

III. Semantics

It is in the semantics of Lennie’s speech that we find the richest indications of his exceptional mind.

There are, to begin with, certain incidents of ignorance or misunderstanding. They have been made much of in other readings, and perhaps a single instance will suffice here.

Curly has shown his animus against “big guys,” and George is advising Lennie how to handle Curly if there is a confrontation:

“Don’t let him pull you in — but — if the son-of-a-bitch socks you — let ‘im have it.

“Let ‘im have what, George?” (p. 56)

In the literal-minded deconstruction of the idiom, Steinbeck is showing us that Lennie’s understanding of the implicature of the utterance is deficient. Fine. But there are other, subtler ways of using dialogue to make the same point.

For example, Lennie’s slow train of thought — his ‘thinking out loud’ — and his propensity to repeat certain key phrases, even as he is rapidly moving from topic to topic, is evident in the following exchange with Curly’s wife.

Lennie has just confessed that he likes to pet “nice things . . . sof’ things.”

“[She] was a little bit reassured. ‘Well, who don’t?’ she said. ‘Ever’body likes that. I like to feel silk an’ velvet. Do you like to feel velvet?”

“Lennie chuckled with pleasure. ‘You bet, by God,’ he cried happily. ‘An’ I had some, too. A lady gave me some, an’ that lady was — my own Aunt Clara. She gave it right to me — ‘bout this big a piece. I wisht I had that velvet right now.’ A frown came over his face. ‘I lost it,’ he said. ‘I ain’t seen it for a long time’” (p. 156).

The awkward swearing, the straining to remember a close relative’s name (Aunt Clara

had raised Lennie), the need to physically measure the length of the long-lost velvet, the sudden recognition that the material had been lost years ago — all of this is a superficial indication of a halting thought process.

More subliminally effective, however, is the repetition of certain deictic forms: "I . . . that . . . my . . . it . . . me

. . . this . . . I . . . I . . . that . . . I . . . it . . . I

. . . it." This repetition dreamily and frighteningly limns an "I-it" world, suggesting an exclusionary inner reality in which Lennie is forever lost to the world around him.

It is in these multiple patterns of repetition that Steinbeck most clearly depicts Lennie's distinctive speech. Lennie's speech in fact gives him away. It suggests that he is doomed to a life of repetition: he cannot avoid doing the things that he does. There are scores of examples of his compulsive behavior, but one of the most haunting is in Chapter 5, in a soliloquy addressed to the dead puppy, which takes place just before Lennie will kill Curly's wife. The following is an excerpt showing some of the repetitions:

"Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. . . . Now maybe George ain't gonna let me tend no rabbits, if he fin's out you got killed . . . An he'll say, 'Now jus' for that you don't get to tend no rabbits' . . . God damn you . . . Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice . . . Now I won't get to tend the rabbits . . . You wasn't big enough . . . They tol' me and tol' me you wasn't. I di'n't know you'd get killed so easy" (pp. 147-148) (ellipses added).

The repetitions of the central phrases "got to get killed" and "tend [no] rabbits" help to fill in the picture of how Lennie uses language. One's impression here is that Lennie is almost helpless, passive in the grip of ideas that are overwhelming him. He seems both frightened and obsessed. The language seems so powerfully charged, so distinctive, that we may want to stop and ask ourselves: Is this really the speech of a retarded person? This question is best answered by comparison with recorded speech of retarded subjects.

IV. Retarded Speech

It may by now be clear that for numerous reasons, I do not believe that Lennie's language is that of a severely or moderately retarded individual, such as those examined by Yamada (1988) or Curtiss (1988) (even allowing for differentiating affect).

These two important studies both show considerable semantic deficits in the language of the examined subjects. For example, there are serious propositional and lexical deficiencies in the speech of Rick (Curtiss, 1988), a severely retarded 15-year-old:

R: (I) Played checkers. [R. doesn't know how.]

S: How do you play?

R: You just, you just put one pile in.

S: One pile of what?

R: One pile of cards.

S: And then what?

R: And then you put another tape. [R. is looking at a tape recorder.]

Here Rick confuses checkers with cards, and cards with tape recorders. His words seem to have *only* linguistic weight — i.e., one NP is as good as another — and no referential, real-world value. Rick seems largely limited to the moment at hand and the immediate sensory world around him.

By contrast, Lennie would have no difficulty distinguishing a puppy, for example, from a rabbit. He certainly would be able to talk knowledgeably and with some descriptive detail about both puppies and rabbits, with neither in front of him. Unlike Rick, Lennie does have extra-linguistic reference, and an ability to retain that reference from one moment to another (in fact for years, as the novel shows). Lennie's problem is that this extra-linguistic reference is extremely limited — in fact, Lennie's world will soon consist almost exclusively of mice and puppies and rabbits, as we will show.

Another characteristic of retarded speech is confusion over concepts of number and time. When a sentence calls for numerical reference, Marta (Yamada, 1988), a moderately retarded late adolescent, simply plugs any handy number into the appropriate slot — usually “two” or “three,” her favorite numbers. She shows a similar uncertainty with notions of time, her adverbials and verbs sometimes functioning at cross purposes. “It's very soon that they asked us to fly out,” is a typical sentence.

One simply cannot imagine Lennie making such mistakes. He shows both an awareness of time and an ability to understand its measurement. He frequently asks George how long it will be before they buy their fabled ranch, and when at last the moment seems at hand, he says:

“When we gon'ta do it, George?”

“In one month. Right squack in one month . . .” (p. 107)

Thus, George answers with the precision — if not the predictive accuracy — that Lennie is asking for.

Another of Marta's speech productions is what Yamada calls a “spiel” — an extended soliloquy marked by logorrhea, speech formulae (set phrases that appear reiteratively in these spiels), illogic, unclear anaphoric reference, and frequent inappropriate topic switches. The following is an example recorded by Yamada, with the set phrases italicized.

“It was kind of stupid, for Dad an' Mom got um three notes, one was a pants store, (of) this really good friend and it was kind of hard. An' the police pulled my mother out of (there) an' told the truth. I said, 'I got two friends in there!' The police pulled my mother (and so I said) he would never remember them as long as we live! An' that was it! My mother was so mad!”

A comparison of this spiel with the earlier quoted speech of Lennie's shows a number of significant differences. In Marta's speech, the words are just words. The deictic references seem to be forgotten before the sentence has even ended. Nouns and pronouns move in and out in an ever-changing (though curiously patterned) kaleidoscopic jumble. There is no sequential logic. Each sentence seems spoken by a different speaker, with a different tale to tell.

Compare this with Lennie's artful, if tortured, soliloquy. Here, as in Marta's speech, there is perseveration. Certain key phrases are repeated. But there is a considerable difference in degree of referentiality. The spiel contains lots of language but little thought. There is no ongoing reference to any extra-linguistic reality. Marta repeats her set phrases because that is virtually all the language she has. Words for her are linguistic slot fillers, almost meaningless in themselves. “Communication” for Marta means producing familiar and comforting sounds in the presence of other people.

Steinbeck makes Lennie repeat, on the other hand, to achieve maximum referentiality. The words may refer to an ideational reality, however idiosyncratic and fantastic, that the reader understands (communicative referencing), they may refer to other words in the same speech for emotional effect (emotive referencing), or they may refer to important themes of the author (thematic referencing). As Lennie speaks them, they are simple words, but they do not,

at least to my mind, suggest simple retardation.

V. Schizophrenic Speech

To me, the circular, obsessive, endgame logic of Lenny's eulogy over a dead puppy indicates some degree of schizophrenia. Indeed, this assessment is forcefully supported by the several talking hallucinations that will appear to Lennie on the following pages, among them a gigantic, ear-wagging, schoolmasterly rabbit. These hallucinations appear without bidding and exist only to take Lennie to task, telling him how selfish and crazy and stupid he is. They amount to a classic demonstration of schizoid self-destructiveness.

Now, it is certainly true that other hallmarks of schizophrenic speech are missing from Lennie's puppy-eulogizing soliloquy. Specifically, his speech does not show notable morphological or syntactic aberrations, completely agrammatical strings, bizarre illogic, klanging, echolalia, etc.

Yet there is one characteristic of Lennie's soliloquy that is strongly indicative of schizophrenic speech, and that is the obsessive perseveration we have already noted. Perseveration is not uniquely characteristic of schizophrenic speech, of course. In their study of this speech, Herbert and Waltensperger (1982) found that repetition occurs widely among brain-damaged and organically-impaired populations, including retarded persons. Still, the manner of Lennie's perseveration is quite distinctive. Compare it with the following recorded schizophrenic speech, from the Herbert and Waltensperger study.

"Soon get me home by Easter I hope. Soon may I come home to you at Easter by my birthday. I hope to be home. I hope to be home. I hope to be home soon, very soon. I like chocolate eclairs. I fancy chocolate eclairs. Donuts. I want donuts." The perseveration here is clearly denser than in Lennie's soliloquy, the words repeated more often, more closely together. The force generating them is something akin to word play. The sudden topic shift (from home to eclairs) may remind us more of Marta than it does of Lennie. There is an odd antiquarian cast to the language ("soon may I," "fancy") that seems to occur with some frequency in the speech of educated schizophrenics.

Yet the two speeches are similar, too, in their self-centeredness (the éclair fancier has his own exclusionary reality), their artfulness, and most remarkably in their obsession with a single idea. "Home is presumably where "eclairs" are eaten, just as "no rabbits" is the anticipated outcome of the puppy "getting killed." The obsession in both cases is what supplies the logic, the feeding of one sentence into another, which in turn produces the greatest common difference between Lennie and the éclair fancier on the one hand, and Marta on the other. Can simple retardation account for the degree of obsession apparent in Lennie's speech? It seems doubtful.

Other factors advance the argument for Lennie's schizophrenia. His soliloquy does not mark the first time that he has mentioned tending rabbits. The idea comes up on seven distinct occasions (initiated by either George or Lennie) in the first eighteen pages of Chapter 1. To take care of rabbits is a dream of Lennie's, part of the Edenic myth. But he has dreamed the dream so often that it has taken on a life of its own, turning into "schizophrenic disorganization," in which, as defined by Cameron, "social communication is gradually crowded out by fantasy." This is a perfect description of the pathetic attempts that Lennie makes to communicate with both Curly's wife and Crooks, the humpbacked stable buck; both times he helplessly mentions his dream, and neither character is able to understand him. ("You're crazy as a wedge," Crooks says, and Curly's wife says, "I think you're nuts.")

Some readers may object that Lennie does not *always* sound so confused. True, but real

schizophrenics do not always speak in schizophrenic speech, either. In any case, we need to remind ourselves that Lennie is not a real person, but a fictional construct, one that is being manipulated by his creator for his own purposes. If I am correct, one of these purposes is semi-realistically to represent a mildly retarded, mildly schizophrenic person tragically adrift in a world that is incapable of caring for him. (If I am right, when George says to Slim that Lennie is “dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy,” he is simply selecting what he believes to be the lesser of two evils, both of which he really thinks are true. Cf. George’s many private references to Lennie as a “crazy bastard.”)

Obviously, Steinbeck was no clinical psychiatrist, and his purpose in writing *Of Mice and Men* is not to provide textbook examples of schizophrenic speech. Naturalistic representation is not his highest priority. Furthermore, even when Lennie’s speech does “sound schizophrenic,” the author has other designs to attend to.

VI. Broader Patterns

One of these purposes is purely thematic. Thus, at the same time the repetition of “tend [no] rabbits” and “got to get killed” may suggest schizophrenic perseveration, they also reach spatially throughout the novel to reinforce two important themes. The first reaches back to the Edenic myth of bucolic retirement, the second ahead to George’s feeling that he has no choice but to kill Lennie. (In fact this second theme has been reiteratively drawn as a circumstantial necessity for killing animals: Candy’s dog must be shot because it is old, Slim’s puppies must be drowned because the mother cannot take care of so many, the bear-like Lennie must be shot to prevent his falling into the hands of the mob.) The morality of these killings may of course be questioned (and has been, at some length), but the point here is that the killings are thematically linked, and the repetition of the phrase “got to get killed” points to this linkage.

The truth is that Lennie and Steinbeck are both compulsive repeaters. Perhaps no other author — certainly no other major novelist — repeats so much, in so many overlapping cyclical patterns. Steinbeck not only repeats words and phrases, of course. He repeats gestures, conversations, stories, actions, incidents, descriptions, themes, images. A productive example would be instances of the cave-cage-trap-mouth image cluster: counting them would take some time.

All of this is done to help the reader, of course. Most are admirers of Steinbeck’s artful design, but there are readers who complain that Lennie’s influence on his creator becomes too pervasive in *Of Mice and Men*. Some readers question the degree of repetitiveness in general in the novel. The suggestion has been that many of the events are over prepared, and that the ending, in which George struggles with himself for several pages before killing Lennie, is excessively drawn out.

Whatever the merit of these complaints, they overlook the triumph of the creation of Lennie Small. In Lennie, Steinbeck has found a perfect foil, an obsessed individual whose halting language credibly reflects his limited grammar, his inner conflicts and the themes of the novel, while at the same time building enormous sympathy for the character.

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