

The Signifying Monkey is well-known character in African-American folklore. To ‘signify’ means to brag. Several versions of a folk ballad or ‘street toast’ about the Signifying Monkey were recorded in the 1960’s and 1970’s. One version begins:

Lean your ear over here just a minute.
Gonna tell you ’bout the jungles and a certain monkey in it.
Now this monkey, he never had no name,
But his signifyin’ s..t was a m....rf....n’ shame.

In *Marmaduke Multiply*, a 19th century study book for schoolchildren, the multiplication table is set to verse and illustrated . The rhymes are trite, along the lines of:

Sally tarries by the gate;
Four times seven’s twenty eight.

I wrote *The Multiplying Monkey* in an attempt to join the Signifying Monkey with Marmaduke. It borrows rhythms, phrases and thematic elements from the street toasts, creating a more entertaining tour of the multiplication table. I paid a great deal of attention to the rhythms. I violate strict meter in many places, but this is intentional. You may find that some lines seem uneven or inconsistent on first reading. If so, memorize a stanza, and try reciting it as it might be by someone who had repeated it dozens of times. When the appropriate syllables are dropped or run together as in casual speech, differnt and more interesting rhythms will emerge.

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The Multiplying Monkey

Lean your ear over here just a minute;
Gonna teach you how to multiply the numbers with one digit.
A certain little monkey gonna help us in this game—
He’s the Multiplyin’ Monkey. He ain’t got no other name.

The very first thing this monkey's gonna do—
He's gonna multiply 2 times 2.
Both you and I done that before,
So we both know the result is 4.

Now the Multiplyin' Monkey is a clever little guy.
He's not scared to give '3 times 3' a try.
So he climbs a little higher, and he swings up on a vine,
And he vanishes in the treetop saying, 'That produces 9.'

Big old lion strolling through the jungle one day,
Multiplyin' Monkey tease and say:
'Old Mr. Lion, you think you're pretty mean,
'But you're so dumb you don't know that 4 times 4 is 16.'

Now the King of the Jungle knows that without trying.
'You just think you're smart,' says the lion.
'If I catch you, Monkey, you won't survive.'
Little monkey smiles and says, '5 times 5 is 25.'

Then he peels back his lips in a monkey grin
Saying, 'You'll lose this contest, and I'm gonna win.'
Lion eyes the monkey and, without skipping a beat,
Shares a few words that I don't wish to repeat.

Monkey says, 'I've got a multiplying shop in my tree top
'And I won't stop till you drop.
'The lion licks what the monkey kicks;
'6 times 6 is 36 !'

'I'm the math professor Monkey with the multiplying mind,
'And the time's coming up when you'll be falling behind.
'You could square 7 if you was a real lion.'
Lion growls, '7 times 7 is 49.'

Lion says, 'I'm the King of the Jungle, I know my times table,
'I can multiply more than you'll ever be able!'
Then up he rose, and with a mighty roar,
He cried, '8 times 8 is 64!'

'I say now, Monkey, you've had your fun.
'9 times 9 is 81;
'Ten squared's a hundred, and I ain't done,
'Eleven times eleven is one-twenty-one.'

Now, the multiplying duel reached a fever strain;
The other creatures in the jungle heard the thunder, feared the rain.
The lion was hot; smoke was pouring from his mane.
The monkey was using every cell in his brain.

'Whoa,' cried the monkey, 'Don't go no higher!
'Your little brain may catch on fire.
'Squares are great, but there's much more to do,
'Such as 9 times 8 is 72.'

The story continues, as the animals battle through all the multiplications. As in the folk ballad, the taunts become greater and greater until, in a careless moment, the monkey falls from the tree and the lion pins him. The monkey uses all his cleverness to talk his way out and return to the tree tops, whence the signifying and multiplying never end.

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