

## CHAPTER 6

### Varieties of Conversational Narrative

There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind — the humorous.  
Mark Twain, *How to tell a story*

#### Introduction

This chapter expands the catalogue of conversational storytelling types and addresses the problem of the transition from non-narrative talk to narration proper. It describes the macro-structures and conventions conversationalists key on in responding to the various types of stories. We will survey personal stories of past experience, dream tellings, third-person stories, generalized recurrent experiences, collaborative retelling and collaborative fantasy as well as diffuse stories which flow and ebb during topical conversation. In exemplifying these types of stories, I will be concerned to present some more problematic and marginal examples. My inclusion of these materials represents an attempt to counterbalance the tendency to concentrate on well-organized, single-teller and interview-style stories in work by Labov & Waletzky (1967), Hymes (1985), Bauman (1986), Linde (1993) and others. Research on oral storytelling began with elicited narratives, often from practiced storytellers. It borrowed terminology and preconceived ideas about the form of narrative from literary theory. The standard definition of narrative in terms of temporally ordered clauses excluded several narrative-like genres from research programs. These influences are still evident in our thinking on conversational storytelling. Examination of this wider range of storytelling types reveals different kinds of teller strategies, interpersonal functions and listener input. Polyphonic and diffuse stories test listeners' abilities to reconstruct a coherent narrative and to respond appropriately. Hence, these storytelling types provide a testing ground for the analytical methods developed so far.

Of course, some scholars have considered emergent and polyphonic narratives. Sacks and other practitioners of Conversation Analysis have always oriented themselves entirely to spontaneous narratives, documenting the influence

of active listeners and co-tellers (Sacks 1992; C. Goodwin 1986; Schegloff 1992 and others). Tannen (1978) examined an unsuccessful narrative, which failed to match listener expectations. Falk (1980) treated two-party narration. Michaels & Cook-Gumperz (1979), Boggs (1985), Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph & Smith (1992), Blum-Kulka (1993) have described the interaction of children with adults to create coherent narratives. Polanyi (1985) discusses both negotiated and diffuse stories as special types, but really in spontaneous conversation all stories are diffuse and negotiated to a greater or lesser degree. Chafe (1997) investigates marginally narrative passages of conversation. The influence of these researchers will be evident in the following discussion.

### Personal narratives

Conversationalists tell stories for all kinds of reasons. The examples below illustrate four typical kinds of personal narratives. In the first section, we inspect narratives which enhance the reputation of the teller: A college student tells a story about putting down an older person, and a man tells a story of an encounter with a film personality. In the second section, we turn to stories about events which embarrassed the teller. As told by adults about their childhood, such stories also tend to enhance personal image through a special sort of covert prestige, but also through their humor. In the third section, we investigate two stories told to relate troubles and hence to elicit understanding and commiseration. Finally, we also consider dream tellings which take narrative form in conversation.

### Self-aggrandizement

While most storytellers in my corpus avoid manifestly boastful stories about their own victorious exploits, the students — most especially the male students — often tell self-aggrandizing tales in which they get the better of their fellows or older people. This jibes with what Johnstone (1993) has written about gender and storytelling in conversation. The first passage cited below illustrates the explicit self-aggrandizing type well. Storytellers may, however, boast more covertly, for instance through name dropping and other apparently casual references to prestigious places and activities. The second passage below shows how one speaker presents himself in a rather flattering situation in a story told as an appropriate contribution to the ongoing topic of conversation.

In the first example, Chad and Wayne are sitting and talking to George,

who has a recorder set up in his apartment. They have been swapping stories of their successes, when Chad introduces a narrative in which he puts down an older person. The story presents Chad in a particularly positive light, since he serves as a referee for high school basketball games on a voluntary basis, while the coaches often have baser motives. Chad may be especially concerned about self-presentation in his narrative, because he is aware of addressing a potential audience beyond those present, as shown by his asking George whether he can freely cite "the exact words" the coach used.

### Basketball Referee

- 1 Chad: some parents take it offensive though.
- 2 and- and- ah th- like this past weekend
- 3 this this *one* coach.
- 4 I called a flagrant foul.
- 5 on his fifth and sixth grade team.
- 6 three weekends ago.
- 7 Wayne: flagrant P F. {i.e. personal foul}.
- 8 Chad: flagrant was-
- 9 okay, this was the situation.
- 10 there is a kid, dribbling down the court
- 11 and he has a wide-open lay-up.
- 12 his- his- the kid on his team,
- 13 was right behind him, okay?
- 14 Wayne: uh-huh.
- 15 Chad: and my instinct when I'm an official
- 16 I always say, "let 'em go"
- 17 y'know, lay off them
- 18 so that they don't do something stupid
- 19 y'know hit them in the back and hurt them.
- 20 I always say just let ['em go.]
- 21 Wayne: [you can talk] to them during the game?
- 22 Chad: I just pull the whistle on them.
- 23 I just yell at them.
- 24 the official can say anything.
- 25 no one hears it except- you know, the players.
- 26 I'm like let 'em go, let 'em go.
- 27 well this *kid* trips over his own two feet.
- 28 Wayne: {laughs}
- 29 Chad: and as he's falling,

- 30 he grabs onto the back of the player  
31 holding uh carrying the ball.  
32 and he pulls down his jersey  
33 and pulls him down.  
34 and I was like "whoa, all right,"  
35 I had a decision to make.  
36 obviously it was-  
37 it wasn't with the intent to hurt him,  
38 because he tripped.  
39 but then again he *did* obstruct him  
40 from getting a wide-open lay-up.  
41 so I ju- I was like, "well, you know,"  
42 I called the flagrant,  
43 which is the arms crossed.  
44 if you want to call a flagrant with aggression,  
45 with the intent to hurt,  
46 you have the arms crossed,  
47 then you've got to *swing* them down.  
48 like really, really hard.  
49 Wayne:  
{sniffs}  
50 Chad: then you know it's like  
51 that was a really serious foul.  
52 and that's a technical  
53 and you can get kicked out of the game  
54 for doing something like that.  
55 Wayne:  
56 Chad: m-hm.  
I just called the simple flagrant.  
57 the coach went *nuts*,  
58 he went nuts.  
59 so this past weekend I'm officiating this game,  
60 Wayne:  
61 Chad: uh-huh.  
not- not- not even close to the same situation,  
62 I officiate the entire game,  
63 everything went so smoothly.  
64 he didn't say two words to me  
65 other than, you know,  
66 he warned me about  
67 one of his players almost getting hurt,  
68 I'm like, "whatever."

- 69 you know you just- you blow it off.  
70 you completely look through him,  
71 you say thank you sir, you know,  
72 I'll look into that,  
73 and you walk away.  
74 well at the end of the game,  
75 he came up to me,  
76 and his exact words were  
77 I don't know if I should *bleep* this out or anything,  
78 George:  
79 Chad: nuh.  
the exact words were,  
80 he came- he came up to me and said,  
81 "you mother fucker.  
82 you're holding a grudge from three weeks ago."  
83 and I'm just sitting y'know  
84 and I'm like, "oh my God."  
85 right?  
86 and my first reaction was to say to him y'know  
87 something very sarcastic about his mother?  
88 considering he brought that into effect?  
89 George:  
90 Wayne: m-hm.  
91 Chad: {laughs}  
but I thought,  
92 this guy paid money to be in this tournament.  
93 and I said, "sir, I'm in college,  
94 I can't *remember* three weeks ago,"  
95 and I walked away.  
96 Wayne:  
97 Wayne and George: {laughs}  
98 Chad: {laugh for 2 seconds}  
99 that's what I said to him,  
100 Wayne: [and I walked away.]  
101 Chad: [that's funny.]  
102 and he went *straight* to my coach.  
103 and said "this tournament's this and that  
104 and da da da da.  
105 yadda yadda yadda."  
106 Wayne: and my coach just *laughed* when he heard what I said?  
107 Chad: {laughs} he just laughed,

- 108 he came up to me,  
 109 he was like, "that was *great*."  
 110 I was like, "well, y'know."  
 111 that guy was such a jerk.  
 112 Wayne: that's good.  
 113 Chad: oh I hate that guy.

The teller is in a very strong position in any case, since he does this refereeing voluntarily. Note how he makes a special point to cite the response of his coach, also an adult, who not only supports him, but compliments the humor of his remarks.

Consider first the function of the verb *say* in the unit "I always say, 'let 'em go, y'know'" in lines 16–17. *Say* is hardly literal here; Tannen (1989), Mayes (1990) and Chafe (1994) all comment on the constructed nature of reported speech and its special functions. The phrase "I always say" here describes an attitude or an "instinct," as Chad calls it, and "let 'em go" sums up his philosophy of officiating. "Let 'em go" has a proverbial quality even the first time Chad cites it, but it acquires additional resonance through repetition. After explaining the phrase, Chad repeats the whole unit, "I always say just let 'em go" at line 20. This spontaneous formula then conveniently serves to bridge the digression introduced by Wayne's question at line 21: "you can talk to them during the game?" Once Chad has answered the question, he paraphrases: "I'm like let 'em go, let 'em go" (line 26). Not just this formulaic phrase, but also the central dialogue between Chad and the coach sound as if they had taken on permanent form through retelling. He twice claims to be citing the "exact words" of the coach (lines 81 and 82). Anecdotes and jokes often turn on the exact duplication of dialogue, and this put-down story seems to work the same way.

In the next excerpt, family members are discussing how celebrities suffer for the loss of privacy. Brandon introduces a story about the actor Jack Nicholson, as an illustration of the public harassment of stars. He mentions himself only as an observer to authenticate the story, but, of course, his presence at the theater in question suggests that he engages in the same activities as the celebrity, and this potentially enhances his reputation. Thus can the careful insertion of topically relevant stories serve as covert self-aggrandizement when the stories present the teller in enviable circumstances.

# Jack

- 1 Ned: and Sean Penn.  
 2 but other than that.  
 3 Brandon: I was in New York a couple of months ago.

- 4 and I was seeing a show called M. Butterfly  
 5 with John Lithgow in it.  
 6 it's gotten pretty good uh reviews.  
 7 and one of the people in the crowd  
 8 to see this show  
 9 and to see John Lithgow  
 10 was Jack Nicholson.  
 11 Lydia: uh.  
 12 Claire: oh.  
 13 Brandon: and Jack Nicholson was *hounded* and *hassled*  
 14 and *spoiled* and *dealt* on  
 15 by everybody in that movie theater,  
 16 yeah.  
 17 Brandon: by probably thirty-five photographers outside the  
 18 movie theater um um *theater*,  
 19 was completely public property.  
 20 yep.  
 21 Frank: and to see a person,  
 22 with two body guards to protect him,  
 23 wow, to think [of it.]  
 24 Lydia: [to see] a person in that position,  
 25 where just because he wants to go see a buddy of his in  
 26 a well-respected play in New York,  
 27 to have to put up with that aggravation,  
 28 I can understand why Sean Penn  
 29 has shoved a camera into a cameraman's face  
 30 oh.  
 31 Frank: I can understand why,  
 32 when the thirty-fifth guy  
 33 has jumped over the back wall of his home  
 34 and into his backyard  
 35 to take a picture of his wife  
 36 at the swimming pool  
 37 that a person would get a little,  
 38 yes.  
 39 Frank: testy.  
 40 Lydia: but Jackie Onassis ...

Brandon tells his story in defense of Sean Penn, who has acquired a bad reputation for overreacting to pressures from the public and, in particular, from the press. He is very careful to insert his story at an appropriate point in the conversation, and to draw out the consequences of the story for his argument about Sean Penn, although the story concerns Jack Nicholson. Moreover, he barely mentions his own presence as an observer in the story. Nevertheless, the story serves to place Brandon at the theater in New York with John Lithgow on the stage and Jack Nicholson in the audience, not to mention thirty-five photographers outside. Whether Brandon intends it or not, this story redounds to his personal image as a man of the world who visits New York City, and goes to the sort of play where Jack Nicholson turns up.

Two other observations about this story are worthy of discussion, both of them regarding repetition. The first case occurs in lines 13–15, where Brandon uses parallel phrasing to underscore his argument. The repetitive pattern of syntax and intonation in “Jack Nicholson was *hounded* and *hassled* and *spotlighted* and *dealt* on” nicely emphasizes Brandon’s point about the ongoing pressure of public attention. The second case of repetition concerns the number thirty-five, which crops up in lines 17–18 with reference to the “thirty-five photographers outside the movie theater um um *theater*,” and then again in line 32 with reference to “the thirty-five guy” who has jumped over the wall of Sean Penn’s home. Now, while it is presumably possible that Brandon counted and committed to memory the number of photographers outside the theater, and that he read and recalls the number of the wall-jumper who incurred Sean Penn’s wrath, it is certainly more likely that both numbers are approximate reconstructions. The recurrence of the number thirty-five may reflect a telling strategy: Once a specific number has been mentioned, it is convenient to use it again, especially since the exact figure is irrelevant. Nevertheless, I am enough of a Freudian to believe that the number thirty-five has a special significance for Brandon generally or at least in relation to this story. Either way, the recurrence of numbers is another sort of repetition which may contribute to the recollection and production of stories.

### *Embarrassment*

Most storytellers in my data shy away from explicit tales of personal aggrandizement; in fact, they are much more likely to tell humorous stories about embarrassing events, often from their fairly distant past. Still, a kind of covert prestige attaches to having overcome foolish mistakes in the past. In addition, the ability to laugh at one’s own foibles and errors demonstrates a sense of humor, which

also counts as a virtue. Far from resulting in a loss of face, the telling of stories about personally embarrassing moments actually ends up working as covert self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, this sort of self-aggrandizement is unassailable, since it poses as self-deprecation.

Consider as an example the story of the finger caught in the hole in the excerpt below. Here a woman relates an embarrassing story from her childhood to a group of her fellow graduate students. As her introduction indicates, other speakers had already told stories of “stupid things” they did in their youth. Thus Iris offers a safe contribution to an established topic, rather than risking a new type of story. This strategy practically ensures that her embarrassing tale will elicit laughter and understanding.

### **Finger Caught**

- 1 Iris: Ginger’s story reminded me of
- 2 well I don’t know,
- 3 speaking of stupid things you did in your youth.
- 4 {General laughter}
- 5 I went to the orthodontist one time.
- 6 and they had just gotten-
- 7 they had just redone the whole office,
- 8 it was really nice.
- 9 and they had put in these new *cabinets*
- 10 that had all the tools and stuff.
- 11 and I always- when I was young
- 12 I’d always like y’know
- 13 mess around with things, and stuff.
- 14 and so I y’know put my finger in this-
- 15 there was like this little *hole* in this cabinet
- 16 {teller laughter followed by audience laughter}
- 17 and I put my finger in there.
- 18 and all of a sudden I’m like,
- 19 and I can’t get my *finger* out. {Audience laughter}
- 20 so I kind of start panicking
- 21 because I’m kind of like,
- 22 “what am I going to do?”
- 23 and I didn’t want anybody to see it of course.
- 24 so I’m kind of like
- 25 trying to avoid being seen y’know.
- 26 but, as I’m trying to pull it out,

- 27 my finger starts swelling.  
 28 Ginger: oh.  
 29 Iris: so then I get really sort of panicky.  
 30 and I'm sitting there  
 31 trying and trying to get it out  
 32 and trying to disguise it at the same time.  
 33 and finally the lady  
 34 uh one of the {clears throat}  
 35 dental hygienists  
 36 I mean whatever you call them,  
 37 uh came up and she realized what I'd done.  
 38 so she brought me some some vaseline,  
 39 and put that on  
 40 and helped me try to get the finger out,  
 41 and about five minutes later we got it out, y'know  
 42 {laughing} and then and then she says to me,  
 43 "now don't do that again." {General laughter}  
 44 so I was afraid they were going to  
 45 have to cut open their new cabinets. {More laughter}  
 46 Ellen: or cut open your finger.  
 47 Iris: well no I wouldn't have let them do *that*.

Iris demonstrates particular telling strategies in this story. In her orientation, she self-corrects twice. The first time in lines 6-7 "And they had just gotten- they had just redone the whole office" introduces the general frame. The second time at line 11-13 "And I always- when I was young I'd always like y'know mess around" presents background information. Two indefinite extender phrases occur in the orientation as well: "all the tools and stuff" at line 10 to describe the contents of the cabinets, and "mess around with things, and stuff" at line 13. These phrases gain planning time for the teller, while they serve to engage the imagination of the listeners.

Notice also two uses of repetition. First, Iris repeats the phrase "put my finger in" from line 14 again at line 17 to bridge an episode of laughter. Second, she paraphrases the clause "so I kind of start panicking" from line 20 again in line 29 "so then I get really sort of panicky" to mark a further stage in the main action.

In a group where participants are "speaking of stupid things you did in your youth," Iris acquires herself nicely with a story which elicits a great deal of laughter. Recounting one's own mistakes and problems humorously, and laughing about them with others accrues to covert prestige within the group for the teller.

### Troubles

In this section, we will explore two examples of stories about troubles or problems the teller is going through. Such stories may arise during troubles talk or they may crop up in the course of any conversation, say in explanation of particular behaviors or attitudes. In the first passage below, Addie and Brianne are commiserating with each other about various troubles they have been experiencing lately.

### Fitted

- 1 Addie: and they said "well then we can go shopping."  
 2 {chuckles} and I said "sure."  
 3 Brianne: I know.  
 4 I'm so tired.  
 5 we were all over Rockford shopping today.  
 6 Addie: oh yeah.  
 7 Brianne: bopping around.  
 8 I had to uhmm to get fitted for my bridesmaid's dress.  
 9 Addie: oh.  
 10 Brianne: oh God.  
 11 I was like ready to tell Elinor  
 12 I couldn't be in her wedding.  
 13 Addie: {laughs}  
 14 Brianne: I swear.  
 15 The dress- it looks really bad on me...

The marginal narrative really just consists of the two clauses A-B below, where the initial clause labeled O counts as orientation.

- O we were all over Rockford shopping today.  
 A I had to get fitted for my bridesmaid's dress.  
 B I was like ready to tell Elinor  
 I couldn't be in her wedding.

It is little more than a report of the day's activity, but it contains plenty of evaluation in the phrase "oh God," and in the suggestion that Brianne might refuse to participate in the wedding. This brief story serves not only to let Addie know why Brianne was shopping, but also to introduce the whole problem of the upcoming wedding of a friend, in particular the trouble and expense Brianne has already endured as a bridesmaid.

The next excerpt was recorded at a technical school in Chicago. The story

about a car accident arose during a conversation between an instructor and a student she knew rather well, following a discussion of a writing assignment. Rita is a Hispanic woman who grew up in Chicago, went to work after high school, and returned to school only recently.

### No Car

- 1 Rita: yesterday,
- 2 it was two weeks ago,
- 3 I got in a car accident.
- 4 I was going to work
- 5 and I hit this lady that was turning.
- 6 and I didn't see her,
- 7 so I hit her.
- 8 and she happens to be my aunt.
- 9 Elaine: oh. {laughing}
- 10 Rita: and then I hit her
- 11 and then this other car hit me-
- 12 this big truck hit me in the back.
- 13 so my car got sandwiched.
- 14 and now I don't have no car,
- 15 my boyfriend brings me,
- 16 and I'm, I'm looking for a new car and everything.
- 17 so I'm like, no car.
- 18 Elaine: okay.
- 19 Rita: but I just got whiplash and that's it.
- 20 Elaine: that's it?
- 21 Rita: yeah.

Here again we see repetition used as a bridging device to overcome the brief interruption and get back into the story. After revealing that the person she hit was her aunt and eliciting listener laughter, Rita repeats the phrase "I hit her" from line 7 at line 10. Rita also repeats "no car" from the result in line 14 again at line 17, where it takes on the function of an evaluative coda.

### Dream tellings

Reports of dreams enjoy a venerable history in literature and science. Freud (1950) and Jung (1985) are the classical sources to consult on dream telling; Ferrara (1994) devotes an interesting chapter to dream reports. As she states, "A

complete theory of narrative will have to recognize dream tellings as a special type of personal experience narrative. A study of dream tellings can increase our understanding of the structure of personal experience narratives" (85). Of course, dream reports may occur in therapy sessions and other settings besides conversation. Moreover, they certainly need not assume the form of narratives; indeed, Ferrara herself presents several non-narrative examples. In the present study, however, dream tellings concern us only insofar as they actually occur in natural conversation couched in narrative syntax. When dreams are reported in narrative form, they naturally count as personal experience stories, as Ferrara argues (94-104). Hence, they deserve representation as a special type in this present section.

The passage below contains two reports of dreams by Paula, the secretary in charge of a large university program. Two co-workers, Belinda and Leona, sit together off to one side of Paula at desks of their own. When Belinda mentions dreams in their talk about playing the lottery, Paula announces her first dream report with what must be the most formulaic preface for this sort of story: "you know what I dreamt last night?" The discussion following the dream report breaks off because of an interruption from a graduate assistant working in the adjacent office. Then after an intervening telephone call, Paula returns to the topic of dreams by reporting a particularly fascinating one from her fairly distant past.

### Dreams

- 1 Belinda: you might win.
- 2 it wasn't in my dreams.
- 3 {General laughter}
- 4 Paula: you know what I dreamt last night?
- 5 Belinda: what?
- 6 Paula: I {laughing}
- 7 I dreamt that I had congestive heart failure
- 8 and had to have an operation {laughs}
- 9 Leona: does that mean [something?]
- 10 Paula: [we were going-] see,
- 11 I don't remember exactly.
- 12 but we were going to the hospital
- 13 to see someone else.
- 14 and it turned out
- 15 the doctor took a look at me {laughing}
- 16 and said and said something about I didn't look well
- 17 and that I had congestive heart failure

- 18 and had to have surgery.  
 19 so then they were getting me all ready for surgery.  
 20 and then I woke up. (1.5)  
 21 and I thought of you {laughing} and *your* dreams.  
 22 Belinda: {laughing} my dreams. {Paula and Belinda laugh}  
 23 ----Talk from adjoining room and telephone call intervene-----  
 24 Paula: well I dreamt-  
 25 when I was pregnant with Nat,  
 26 I dreamt that I gave birth to a fox.  
 27 Leona: {laughs}  
 28 Belinda: oh my God.  
 29 Paula: and I can still picture this.  
 30 and there was a fox in the waiting room,  
 31 running around in circles  
 32 because he was so happy because I had a fox  
 33 {General laughter}  
 34 ----Telephone rings-----

As pointed out above, the first dream report begins with a formulaic preface reminiscent of other types of conversational storytelling we have inspected. Then comes a summary abstract in lines 6-8, "I dreamt that I had congestive heart failure and had to have an operation," which differs from those in stories about objective past events only in its explicit reference to the dream context with "I dreamt that." Again in the second report, this explicit reference appears — indeed, it appears twice in lines 24 and 26. Further, in the first report, Paula states "I don't remember exactly" at line 11, and records her inexact memory of the doctor's words in line 16 with "and said something about I didn't look well." The explicit mention of memory, "and I can still picture this," in line 29 in the second report may also emphasize the dream context. In general, conversationalists are especially careful to characterize dream reports as such, just as they are assiduous in marking fantasies as unreal, as we saw in chapter four.

One dream report makes any other topically relevant in conversation, even if the dreams concern very different events. Apparently, when other conversationalists talk about their dreams, it jags our memories to recall our own. Thus, successive speakers may sometimes report their last night's dreams in series. However, Paula's two dream tellings display significant thematic overlap. Both dream reports place Paula in the hospital as the one in need of attention, so it is easy to see how the first might suggest the second on thematic grounds alone.

### Third person stories

All the stories so far in this chapter, indeed the vast majority of the stories in this book and in my data as a whole, represent personal narratives, that is stories in the first person in which the teller is the central actor or affected participant. The sorts of storytelling considered in the preceding sections naturally revolved around personal experiences. Stories for personal aggrandizement, those which describe embarrassing scenes from the past, those which relate troubles from one's own past, and, of course, dream tellings all presuppose first-person narration.

The two narrative passages below differ in that they are third person stories, told not from events remembered first-hand but about someone else. They are further of interest because they are topically connected, illustrating an initial story and a corresponding response story, as described in chapter five. This response story is particularly worthy of attention, because it remains incomplete, prompting the listener to request further information. The two young men in this excerpt have been discussing how dangerous rough-housing can become, when Mark recalls an accident story his aunt told him, and this story in turn reminds Jason of an accident reported about his own aunt. Mark's story was considered in chapter three as an example of repetition used to stress evaluation; in particular, Mark evaluates his story three times with "horrid" in lines 19-20 and 23, then switches to the synonym "terrible" in line 28. then repeats his original rhetorical question.

### Accidents

- 1 Jacob: we've kept everything pretty much under control  
 2 [though this year.]  
 3 Mark: [that's right,]  
 4 you can't wrestle around  
 5 or bad things will happen.  
 6 Jacob: yeah, Roger got [his nose]  
 7 Mark: [you know what] happened  
 8 to my one of my aunt's friends out in Iowa?  
 9 like when- when she was younger,  
 10 she had a headgear from braces,  
 11 and these two girls were wrestling around  
 12 just playing around, wrestling.  
 13 and one girl pulled her headgear off her mouth  
 14 and let it snap back.

- 15 and it slid up her face  
16 and stuck in her eyes  
17 and blinded her.  
18 Jacob: wow.  
19 Mark: isn't that horrid?  
20 that's horrid.  
21 Jacob: [when my-]  
22 Mark: [blinded her] for life.  
23 isn't that horrid.  
24 that's just- I mean just from goofing around,  
25 just from screwing-  
26 a little bit of screwing around.  
27 and if- and another thing,  
28 it- it- it's terrible the things that can happen.  
29 that's why I don't like people  
30 screwing around with swords  
31 and trying to throw people in the showers  
32 and stuff like that,  
33 and everything like that.  
34 Jacob: you know what happened to my aunt Florence  
35 when she was a little girl?  
36 Mark: ooh what happened.  
37 Jacob: she was like screwing around  
38 like around Christmas time?  
39 and like she,  
40 I- I guess this was like  
41 when they had candles on trees?  
42 she lit her hair on fire.  
43 Mark: oh wow.  
44 Jacob: you met her.  
45 Mark: but did anything happen?  
46 she get a burned head or something?  
47 Jacob: uh I don't know,  
48 maybe you could shave her  
49 and look for scar tissue.  
50 Mark: oh I don't want to shave your aunt Florence's head.  
51 does your aunt Florence have like  
52 spinalbifera or something like that?  
53 Jacob: I don't know....

Besides the formulaic repetition of "horrid" already mentioned for Mark's story, we should note particularly the way Jacob picks up Mark's phrase "screwing around" at line 37 in the orientation to his attempted response story. Mark produced three tokens of *screwing* in the evaluative talk following his story: two in the self-correction "just from screwing- a little bit of screwing around" in lines 25-26 and a third at line 30.

The phrase "screwing around" provides an obvious link to Jacob's attempted parallel response story. Jacob begins with a standard abstract in lines 34-35: "You know what happened to my aunt Florence when she was a little girl?" But he apparently lacks the details to reconstruct an incident he knows about only second-hand. He puts together three clauses, one element each for an orientation, background information and main action, as shown below.

- A she was like screwing around like around Christmas time?  
B I guess this was like when they had candles on trees?  
C she lit her hair on fire.

The incompleteness of the story provokes Mark to ask the obvious question: "but did anything happen? she get a burned head or something?" in lines 45-46. This inchoate storytelling also lacks evaluation, and leaves a disconnected impression unlike the personal involvement characteristic of first person stories.

### Generalized recurrent experience

The passage below illustrates a fairly common type of narrative-like representation of a recurrent shared past experience in generalized form without reference to any specific instance. Although the clauses match the temporal order of the events they describe, they are not cast in the preterite, as stipulated for narrative elements. Instead, these generalized collaborative exchanges thrive on verb phrases with *would* and *would be -ing* along with *used to* forms.

Like the two connected stories in the preceding section, this passage concerns primarily a person somehow related to the teller rather than the teller herself. As such, it also counts as a third person account. However, in this case the teller places herself in the story as an observer, much as Brandon did in the story **Jack** in the introductory section of this chapter. Though Ellen appears briefly in the story as someone living in the same house as an undergraduate, she makes no pretense of real familiarity with the women pool players. In fact, Ellen distances herself from the women, noting that "they'd wear, what I thought was kind of sleazy clothing" in lines 9-10, and makes a point of revising her initial

formulation "to pool halls" as "to bars really" in line 12. The generalized report format, further, matches Ellen's approach to the women here, since it allows her to produce a description of a pattern of behavior, as opposed to a specific instance, which would have required her own presence in the bar. This format is typical for reports of information learned second hand, much like gossip.

Ellen and Stuart are students of English in an office Ellen shares with other graduate students in the Department of English. Stuart has told a longish tale about playing pool, which suggests to Ellen a generalized story about a woman she knew in her undergraduate days.

### Pool hall

- 1 Stuart: it's just like I don't know,
- 2 it's not my thing it's just my hobby.
- 3 Ellen: no [I understand.]
- 4 Stuart: [it's just a pastime.]
- 5 Ellen: I had a
- 6 there was a girl in my house
- 7 when I was an undergraduate
- 8 and she, and her friend used to get dressed up
- 9 and they'd wear,
- 10 what I thought was kind of sleazy clothing.
- 11 and they'd go um to pool halls,
- 12 or to bars really-
- 13 Stuart: uh-huh.
- 14 Ellen: and they'd play a couple games
- 15 and they wouldn't play very well.
- 16 and so guys would want to come up and bet them
- 17 and then and uh so they'd lose the first game
- 18 and they'd jerk them for the next three.
- 19 they were so good.
- 20 but I think the dress
- 21 and the uh the being w- women
- 22 had a lot to do with
- 23 being able to draw the [the guys in.]
- 24 Stuart: [yeah.]
- 25 Ellen: the guys thought
- 26 they were going to be making easy money
- 27 and [then they-]
- 28 Stuart: [yeah I've] got a good friend Sherree

- 29 who works down at The Den.
- 30 she's really good.
- 31 she even has a shark,
- 32 a little shark on her poolcase.
- 33 Ellen: really? {laughing}
- 34 [people still don't get it?]
- 35 Stuart: [{and when she closes the thing-}]
- 36 no, they don't *get* it.
- 37 it's terrible.
- 38 but she's good.
- 39 and she doesn't have to hustle anybody.
- 40 Ellen: {laughing} well that's funny.
- 41 it's funny-
- 42 Stuart: tricks of the trade.

If we analyze the passage according to the methods developed for narratives above, we see that it has the same basic structure.

### Background

there was a girl in my house  
when I was an undergraduate

### Main action

A and she, and her friend used to get dressed up

### Evaluation

and they'd wear,  
what I thought was kind of sleazy clothing.

### Main action

B and they'd go um to pool halls,  
or to bars really

C and they'd play a couple games

### Background

and they wouldn't play very well.

### Main action

D and so guys would want to come up and bet them  
E and then so they'd lose the first game

F and they'd jerk them for the next three.

### Evaluation

they were so good.

## Global evaluation

but I think the dress  
and the being women  
had a lot to do with  
being able to draw the guys in.

## Coda

The guys thought they were going to be making easy money

Ellen seems to be formulating a coda in this last line, when Stuart introduces a narrative-like response of his own, so that she trails off. The remainder of her report follows the pattern of conversational stories like *First Job* in chapter two, where background and evaluation interact with narrative clauses describing the main action. One could easily transform Ellen's report into a particularized story by rendering all the verb phrases in the pure past tense. Indeed, the initial clause in lines 6-7 already displays the simple past tense, and might stand unaltered as the introduction to a typical story: "There was a girl in my house when I was an undergraduate." However, the presence of *would* and *were* to throughout obliterates any possibility of distinguishing between narrative elements and narrow frames. This lack of distinction helps account for the somewhat undifferentiated structure of the passage.

## Collaborative retelling

We examined collaborative retelling for fun in chapter four based on the story *Change*, but here I would like to comment on collaborative narration of a familiar story to ratify group membership and modulate rapport. Then we will compare another excerpt which illustrates co-narration of a story for a third party unfamiliar with its content.

## Co-narration to ratify group membership

We have already inspected the introductory passage of *Poodle* as representative of formulaicity in story openings in chapter three, but here group dynamics assume center stage.

## Poodle

- 1 Jean: Annie gave me a permanent once, too.
- 2 Louise: Annie did?

- 3 Jean: once and only once.
- 4 {General laughter}
- 5 I would never allow her to touch my hair again.
- 6 Louise: well remember the time-
- 7 Jean: *yoooh*.
- 8 talk about afro
- 9 when afro wasn't even in *style*.
- 10 my God.
- 11 Annie: well see I *started* [something.]
- 12 Jean: [frizz ball.]
- 13 I was a frizz ball.
- 14 it wasn't even afro.
- 15 I was just *frizz*.
- 16 Louise: remember [when-]
- 17 Jean: [it was] *terrible*.
- 18 Louise: Jennifer, the first time Jennifer had a perm
- 19 when she came home.
- 20 it was the funniest thing.
- 21 Jean: she put something on her head,
- 22 a bag or something?
- 23 Louise: she wore her-
- 24 Annie: {laughs}
- 25 Louise: well she wore her-
- 26 Helen: "hair ball, hair ball."
- 27 yeah, because she-
- 28 Annie: she just always had this *hood* on.
- 29 and she ran right upstairs,
- 30 Louise: *no*.
- 31 *first* she *threw* her bag up the stairs,
- 32 almost *hit* me.
- 33 Annie: oh yeah.
- 34 Louise: then "*bang*."
- 35 the door slams.
- 36 and I'm like- I was on the *phone*.
- 37 I was like "ah I don't know.
- 38 my sister just walked in.
- 39 I think something's wrong."
- 40 and [then she ran up the stairs.]
- 41 Annie: [oh that's it.]

- 42 "I look like a damn *poodle*."  
 43 {General laughter}  
 44 Louise: like *sobbing*,  
 45 "I look like a poodle."  
 46 Helen: aw {laughing}  
 47 Annie: then she came down to eat  
 48 and she'd *wrapped* a towel around her head.  
 49 Helen: aw {laughing}  
 50 Louise: she barricaded herself for a while in her room.  
 51 Jean: my hair takes like *this*.  
 52 I mean.  
 53 Annie: yeah.

Louise first announces her story with: "well remember the time-" at line 6, before Jean will let her have the floor. As we saw in chapter two, the preface with *remember* provides a way of explicitly marking a story as familiar to at least some participants. When Jean again seems to have finished, Louise reiterates her *remember*-preface at line 16, and allows Jean one final evaluative comment before plunging into the story about Jennifer's first perm. Even when Louise has begun her story, Jean waits only till the first pause before contributing a detail in lines 21-22, albeit in the form of an uncertain request for confirmation: "she put something on her head, a bag or something?"

Both Annie and Helen are involved in co-telling the story as well. Helen adds only a bit of dialogue at line 26, and sympathetic *aws* at lines 46 and 49, but she makes the most of this contribution, since, as Tannen notes, animating dialogue illustrates shared experience (1989: 11). By contrast, Annie makes extensive contributions but receives corrections from Louise on almost every detail she adds. Thus Annie's description "she just always had this *hood* on" at line 28 is allowed to stand, but her following statement that "she ran right upstairs" elicits a prompt *no* from Louise, who proceeds to place herself in the center of the story's action. Again when Annie attempts to add a piece of dialogue: "I look like a damn *poodle*" at line 42, Louise objects to her tone, saying it was "like sobbing." She renders Jennifer's statement as sad rather than angry, deleting the *damn*. Finally, even Annie's statement beginning "then she came down to eat" at line 47 displeases Louise, who insists that Jennifer first "barricaded herself for a while in her room." Although Louise has a hard time getting started and has difficulty responding to Jean's query about what Jennifer wore on her head, she controls the story through to the end, as becomes quite

clear in Annie's acquiescent responses to Louise's corrections: "oh yeah" at line 33 and "oh that's it" at line 41.

Even without a final coda expressing agreement on the evaluation of a past event or on the point of the story about it, collaborative narration serves to ratify group membership and modulate rapport in multiple ways, first because it allows participants to re-live salient common experiences, second because it confirms the long-term bond they share, and third because the experience of collaborative narration itself redounds to feelings of belonging. Moreover, collaborative narration helps fix the verbal form of a shared experience for the participants.

#### *Co-narration for a third party*

The next story **Up and Over** illustrates not only co-telling, but also a third person narrative like those in the foregoing section. As pointed out there, the first person perspective is much more usual for the conversational storytelling in my corpus. Here Patricia and her husband Ralph collaborate in telling a story both of them had read in the local newspaper, and perhaps had heard reported on the radio or television as well. Their audience consists of their two daughters Marsha and Amy, both home from college for the long Thanksgiving weekend. A mention of a particular intersection in a previous story about a neighbor provides the occasion for this storytelling. It is also Patricia's reference to the fateful intersection which finally closes the story and the topic. I include the transcript of the discussion following the story proper to show how it weaves its way in and out of the discussion. Talk of slow clocks intervenes, but the topic of the accident remains viable till Patricia officially closes it down.

#### **Up and Over**

- 1 Patricia: but she found a different place  
 2 because she said  
 3 she doesn't like to go over on Flavey Road.  
 4 (1.7) Flavey Road is where that  
 5 truck  
 6 Patricia: truck went over the  
 7 truck  
 8 Ralph: m-car  
 9 Patricia: car killing three people from Grant Lake.  
 10 Marsha: what do you mean the truck went over?  
 11 over what?  
 12 Ralph: [guy from Atlanta]  
 Patricia: [guy] drove all the way over from Atlanta

- 13 without a s- without making a rest stop.  
 14 he had- he didn't have any sleep.  
 15 Ralph: amazing.  
 16 Amy: so?  
 17 Ralph: then he r- then he ran into a car,  
 18 Patricia: got off-  
 19 Ralph: I think he burst into flames, didn't he?  
 20 Patricia: m-hm,  
 21 ca- the truck ran right over.  
 22 Ralph: ran right over him.  
 23 Patricia: right up and over  
 24 and killed three young people.  
 25 Marsha: up and over what?  
 26 Ralph: [a car.]  
 27 Patricia: [a car.]  
 28 Ralph: [at an exit ramp.]  
 29 Patricia: [with three young] coup- three young people in it from  
 30 the Grant Lake Naval Base.  
 31 Ralph: wow.  
 32 Amy: you just kept saying "up and over,  
 33 up and over,  
 34 up and over."  
 35 Ralph: forget it.  
 36 Marsha: [did the truck driver die?]  
 37 Ralph: [just call me if you get too much news.]  
 38 what?  
 39 Amy: just kidding.  
 40 Marsha: they should shoot him.  
 41 Ralph: hoh {with strong exhalation}.  
 42 Marsha: well, that's what he deserves, isn't it?=  
 43 Patricia: =well, he certainly deserves to go to jail.  
 44 Marsha: [did he?]  
 45 Amy: [were all three people killed?]  
 46 Patricia: ha, you never read a follow-up.  
 47 Amy: all three people were killed?  
 48 Patricia: yeah, they were all like y'know  
 49 twenty-one, twenty-two.  
 50 Ralph: yeah, they were about the same.  
 51 Amy: what would you charge him with.

- 52 Marsha: with three counts of manslaughter.  
 53 Ralph: probably manslaughter.  
 54 (3.2) {clock strikes in hall}  
 55 Amy: [I think that reckless driving would be-]  
 56 Marsha: [reckless driving.]  
 57 three counts of manslaughter.  
 58 whole tons of things.  
 59 Patricia: he was probably [asleep.]  
 60 Ralph: [your clock's slow too.]  
 61 Patricia: hm?  
 62 Ralph: your clock's slow, too.  
 63 oh you took the battery out.  
 64 Amy: what kind of truck was he driving?  
 65 Patricia: yeah, but I fixed them, after.  
 66 Ralph: that one, too?  
 67 Patricia: probably.  
 68 Amy and I did it.  
 69 Amy: what kind of *truck* [was he driving.]  
 70 Ralph: [that one is five minutes slow.]  
 71 Amy: so was your truck *driver*.  
 72 Ralph: because your VCR is slow.  
 73 Marsha: mm.  
 74 Ralph: like [almost thirty- fifteen minutes.]  
 75 Amy: [obvious that you killed somebody]  
 76 if it went up and over.  
 77 Marsha: I know, its-  
 78 Patricia: but Flavey Road,  
 79 there's been a lot of accidents at Flavey Road  
 80 because it's ...

The introductory sentence offers a classic example of joint production between two speakers in close synchrony with each other. At barely perceptible hesitations from Patricia, Ralph inserts *truck* and then *car* almost seamlessly at lines 5 and 7. Then in response to a question from Marsha, he and Patricia begin in lines 11 and 12 what seem intended as essentially interchangeable statements — so much so that Ralph simply stops, letting Patricia take over. Ralph appears willing to return to the status of auditor, offering only the comment "amazing" at line 15. But when Patricia fails to continue, Ralph proceeds: "Then he r- then he ran into a car" at line 17, and asks Patricia to confirm his statement that the

truck burst into flames. This motivates Patricia to resume the story. When Marsha interrupts to ask "Up and over what?" at line 25, Ralph and Patricia again respond in tandem: "A car." Then again they resume in tandem, and again Ralph lets Patricia take over. Once Patricia finishes her thought, the story proper is done as well. Hence, Ralph returns to the role of commentator in line 31, remarking "wow."

If we amalgamate and streamline the contributions of the co-tellers, Patricia and Ralph, adhering to the logical order of events, we come up with something like the following basic narrative. This skeleton represents an attempt to meld the contributions of both tellers into a single coherent narrative structure, as a listener might.

- A Guy drove all the way over from Atlanta without a rest stop.
- B He got off at an exit ramp.
- C He ran right up and over a car.
- D He killed the three young people in it.
- E He burst into flames.

When Amy criticizes their joint storytelling technique in lines 32-34, Ralph offers to end the topic with "Forget it," and again in line 37 with the sarcastic remark, "Just call me if you get too much news," suggesting that the girls would know the story if they paid attention to the local news media. But Amy and Marsha find the topic too interesting to let it drop. They continue to ask questions and speculate about the legal ramifications of the case. This discussion brings out further details of the accident, for instance the ages of the young people killed and the conjecture that the truck driver was asleep, but they do not alter the basic narrative structure.

Ralph loses interest in the whole matter, and broaches a new topic regarding slow-running clocks in line 60 and again in line 62. Amy never receives an answer to her question about the kind of truck involved at line 64, because Ralph insists on talking about clocks running five minutes slow. Amy makes a sarcastic remark about the truck driver running slow as well at line 71. Then she and Marsha exchange sarcastic messages about their parents' inadequate narrative skill, with special reference to the recurrent phrase "up and over" in lines 75-77. Ralph seems oblivious to this undercurrent, but mother Patricia addresses their comments indirectly in her return to the original topic of the intersection at Flavey Road in line 78.

### *Co-narration in collaborative fantasy*

We saw in chapter five with regard to the story **Clone Mark** how two students who share an apartment created a fantasy about replacing their third apartment-mate with a more subservient clone. Such fantasies construct a fictional world, by contrast with typical conversational stories, which recapitulate events in the experienced past. But they also differ from literary fictions. Both conversational storytelling and literature generally purport to describe events in the real world, or at least in some potentially real world in the past tense, while collaborative fantasies typically display their irreality with conditional clauses and verb phrases with the modals *would* and *could*. Sometimes conversationalists constructing a fantasy follow standard narrative practice in paying considerable attention to chronological order, as we saw in **Clone Mark**, but in the passage below the participants rather spin out their ideas and elaborate suggestions from each other as they come. Collaborative fantasies represent high-involvement talk in its pure form, where interpersonal interaction prevails over believability and sequentiality.

Shelley and Cal are two students involved in a long-term romantic relationship. They are sitting in Cal's car outside a fast food restaurant, talking about their unwelcome week-long separation over the Thanksgiving break. Shelley will return home the next day, while Cal will stay in his apartment near the university to work. Their collaborative creation of a fantasy about guardian angels allows them to express feelings they might have trouble discussing otherwise.

### **Guardian Angel**

- 1 Shelley: {laughs} I guess I better go.
- 2 Cal: you don't have to.
- 3 Shelley: na, I don't have to,
- 4 but if I want to get up tomorrow morning I do.
- 5 guess *oh* I couldn't believe it,
- 6 I was so happy.
- 7 I wanted to go home Friday morning, right?
- 8 this guy's leaving early early Friday morning.
- 9 well I have an eight o'clock class
- 10 that I don't want to miss because
- 11 it got canceled.
- 12 Cal: {whispered} right.
- 13 the one day I'm like "bless you,"
- 14 I it must be destined for me to go home.
- 15 Cal: someone's looking out for, looking at you.

- 16 Shelley: *and I found someone to work for me right away,*  
 17 *and Julie's going to Finite even,*  
 18 *so she's going to take notes for me*  
 19 *so I have the whole day covered.*  
 20 Cal: *you probably have some guardian angel*  
 21 *that doesn't want to see you die*  
 22 *and I'm going to die in some firey explosion*  
 23 *that [you won't be in.]*  
 24 Shelley: *[don't you dare] say that.*  
 25 Cal: *{laughs}*  
 26 Shelley: *don't you dare.*  
 27 Cal: *I just want that on record*  
 28 *so that if it's true,*  
 29 Shelley: *{laughs} well what if it is-*  
 30 *was because it's my time to go?*  
 31 Cal: *oh and that I was there in place of you.*  
 32 Shelley: *no.*  
 33 *n-n-no,*  
 34 *what if it's my time to go*  
 35 *and it's I'm going to die on my way home.*  
 36 Cal: *so you're going to die with him.*  
 37 Shelley: *yeah.*  
 38 Cal: *so,*  
 39 Shelley: *or maybe not with him*  
 40 *or maybe at at home or something.*  
 41 Cal: *you better *not* die with him.*  
 42 Shelley: *no, aw, no.*  
 43 Cal: *{laughs} ug.*  
 44 Shelley: *you never know {sing-song}*  
 45 Cal: *yeah.*  
 46 Shelley: *oh well.*  
 47 Cal: *well okay.*  
 48 *well see I was looking at it*  
 49 *as a positive on your end.*  
 50 *that you've got a guardian angel*  
 51 *and that=*  
 52 Shelley: *=and that you *don't*? {tsk}*  
 53 *everybody has a guardian angel.*  
 54 Cal: *I don't know,*

- 55 *he hasn't been helping me that much lately.*  
 56 Shelley: *well that's because*  
 57 Cal: *I feel like I'm on my own.*  
 58 Shelley: *well, when you feel *alone*,*  
 59 *that's when he's with you the most,*  
 60 *so, do you know that?*  
 61 *probably not.*  
 62 Cal: *naw I just=*  
 63 Shelley: *=because=*  
 64 Cal: *=like to wallow in my self pity.*  
 65 Shelley: *ri- that's that's that's right.*  
 66 *we all do it.*  
 67 *I do it all the time.*  
 68 *all the time....*

In this collaborative fantasy, no real narrative-like progression can take hold, because the participants continually revise each other's proposed scenarios. Thus, when Cal suggests that he is "going to die in some firey explosion" without Shelley (lines 21-23), she objects "don't you dare say that." Again when Shelley suggests that it is her "time to go" and that she will die on her way home (lines 34-35), Cal's response induces her to revise. When she attempts a very open scenario in lines 39-40 with "or maybe not with him or maybe at at home or something," Cal makes his objection explicit: "you better *not* die with him" (line 41). With no remembered structure to fall back on, this collaborative fantasy drifts into speculations.

### Diffuse stories

In the longish passage below, we see two examples of inchoate narratives, stories which never actually take shape, though interested listeners can certainly reconstruct the events from the fragments produced by two or more speakers. In each case, following a legitimate story preface, a diffuse story emerges from the surrounding talk, if we are prepared to construct it from the pieces supplied.

Sybil and Tom are graduate students living together in a house owned by a professor on research leave. Tom's parents, Yvonne and Lester, have just arrived to spend the weekend with them. As she enters the kitchen where Tom has set up a cassette recorder, Yvonne unveils a pineapple upside-down cake baked according to a new recipe. Talk about the cake suggests to Tom and Sybil a

conversation they had the previous evening, and together they almost tell a story about it. They also play on the taste adjectives they had banded about in that conversation, which here again take on a formulaic feeling.

### Cake

- 1 Yvonne: I found this recipe,  
 2 has zero fat in it.  
 3 Tom: wow.  
 4 Sybil: wow.  
 5 Yvonne: it's probably no good.  
 6 Tom: it looks good.  
 7 looks moist and juicy, cool and fresh.  
 8 Sybil: moist and crispy.  
 9 Tom: crispy,  
 10 no it's not [crispy].  
 11 Sybil: [we were] trying to define-  
 12 Tom: was that just [last night?]  
 13 Sybil: [some aspects] of healthy food.  
 14 Tom: no it was not,  
 15 well, yeah it was,  
 16 [I was just, I was in the mood for.]  
 17 Sybil: [you wanted something fresh and crispy,]  
 18 but then you realized it wasn't just fresh and crispy  
 19 because that could have been crackers.  
 20 it was moist and crispy like an apple.  
 21 Tom: right.  
 22 but, but don't crackers seem kind of stale  
 23 and [crispy?]  
 24 Lester: [yes they do,]  
 25 at night especially.  
 26 Sybil: so you wanted an apple  
 27 and then ah-  
 28 Lester: yep.  
 29 Tom: o- or like a tomato or some lettuce,  
 30 [I would have been happy with some lettuce]  
 31 Sybil: [which wouldn't have been crispy,]  
 32 a tomato wouldn't be crispy, though,  
 33 Tom: no.  
 34 Sybil: so maybe moist and fresh are the two characteristics.

- 35 Tom: yeah right,  
 36 but crispy was what I was more in the mood for  
 37 [actually.]  
 38 Lester: [crackers] are a noontime thing,  
 39 not a nighttime thing.  
 40 Tom: no.  
 41 but crisp, and fresh, and juicy, and moist,  
 42 those are all nighttime things,  
 43 like an apple.  
 44 Lester: we- well, not always.  
 45 Tom: no.  
 46 so- sometimes yes.  
 47 Lester: sometimes it has to be something else, yeah.  
 48 Tom: salty and hot and fatty.  
 49 Lester: that's right.  
 50 Yvonne: that's the best.  
 51 Sybil: {laughs}.  
 52 Yvonne: anytime, anywhere.  
 53 Lester: piece of pie.  
 54 Sybil: hm hm hm.  
 55 Yvonne: [that's not too bad]  
 56 Lester: [with a lot of] lot of ah syrup in it.  
 57 Tom: {laughing} like a cherry pie.  
 58 Lester: exactly.  
 59 Tom: right.  
 60 Yvonne: oh did I tell you-  
 61 Tom: oh by the way, sorry.  
 62 Yvonne: my boss had a bag of  
 63 I think they're like mini-rice cakes.  
 64 Sybil: [oh yeah.]  
 65 Yvonne: [and he said] have- [have]  
 66 Lester: [piece of cardboard]  
 67 Yvonne: have a-  
 68 oh that's what it was.  
 69 "an apple flavored piece of cardboard."  
 70 Sybil: oh ho ho. {sadly}  
 71 Yvonne: and, they were pretty bad.  
 72 Tom: yeah.  
 73 Yvonne: they were not really even apple flavored.

- 74 Lester: {laughs}.
- 75 Yvonne: plus they were,
- 76 I don't know,
- 77 so hard to chew.
- 78 Sybil: m-hm,
- 79 Yvonne: [anyway,]
- 80 Tom: [Sybil] had some of those mini-rice cakes.
- 81 Sybil: yeah, I had some of them.
- 82 I had like honey-nut rice [cakes.]
- 83 Tom: [yeah,] and ah actually hers were really good,
- 84 when you put, uh, some butter and honey on them.
- 85 Lester: yeah. {laughing}
- 86 Yvonne: yeah {laughing} yeah.
- 87 Sybil: yeah.
- 88 that's what you did with them, wasn't it.
- 89 Tom: yeah, actually those were really good
- 90 with butter and honey on them,
- 91 they were little [crackers.]
- 92 Yvonne: [did you] defeat the purpose? {laughing}
- 93 Tom: well, the purpose was,
- 94 maybe at the time just a medium.
- 95 Yvonne: {laughs}.
- 96 Tom: so um uh so I don't actually have to just uh,
- 97 dig my hands into honey and butter, and,
- 98 Sybil: and just eat it off your fist.
- 99 Yvonne: it's just so funny, though.

The first diffuse story begins in lines 11–13 with an utterance by Sybil which could function as an abstract: “we were trying to define some aspects of healthy food,” though Tom disturbs it with his question: “was that just last night?” Tom negates Sybil’s assertion, then accepts it, then proposes a modified reading in lines 14–16: “no it was not, well, yeah it was, I was just, I was in the mood for,” but Sybil completes his thought for him — and with it what might count as a minimal narrative, as outlined below.

#### Trying to Define (Outline)

- A we were trying to define some aspects of healthy food.
- B Tom was in the mood for/wanted something fresh and crispy.
- C then he realized it wasn't just fresh and crispy:  
It was moist and crispy like an apple.

Presumably the collaborative attempt to define just what Tom wanted either led to or followed his realization that he really wanted something “moist and crispy like an apple.” Hence, the order of the clauses above does not match the logical chronology of the reported events. Still, the two clauses B–C reflect the order of the events they report, so that we might allow **Trying to Define** as a minimal narrative. This diffuse story segues into more talk about foods to which the predicates in question apply.

Then at line 60, Yvonne produces a very recognizable story preface: “oh did I tell you-.” Tom begins just after Yvonne to introduce a new topic of his own with: “oh by the way.” When Tom realizes he has interrupted Yvonne, he says “sorry” to signal that she should proceed. Yvonne starts over with an orientation clause in line 62: “my boss had a bag of I think they’re like mini-rice cakes.” However, when she begins another narrative element describing the main action, her hesitation and repetition of *have* prompt her husband Lester to fill in the phrase “piece of cardboard” at line 66. Yvonne improves upon Lester’s suggestion with a simulated boss’s voice: “an apple flavored piece of cardboard” at line 69. Then in lines 71–77, she produces three back-to-back evaluations without a second narrative element: “they were pretty bad... they were not really even apple flavored... plus they were, I don’t know, so hard to chew.” Now, any listener can retrieve the information that Yvonne must have tasted the proffered rice cake in order to have arrived at her evaluations, but the clauses she actually produces never come together into a narrative on the narrow definition. Compare the proposed analysis below.

#### Rice Cakes (Analysis)

##### Preface

oh did I tell you-

##### Orientation

my boss had a bag of mini-rice cakes.

##### Main action

and he said have an apple flavored piece of cardboard.

##### Evaluation

and they were pretty bad.  
they were not really even apple flavored.  
they were so hard to chew.

If we allow for ‘zero clauses’ which listeners retrieve as logical or social consequences from the foregoing talk, for instance that Yvonne accepted a rice cake from her boss and tried it, then the analysis above naturally expands to a

complete narrative. This sort of potential narrative almost but not quite materializing in talk, complete only for listeners prepared to fill in the conveyed information, is precisely what I identify as a diffuse story. This notion of the diffuse story allows us to talk about emergent narratives in natural conversation.

### Conclusions

This chapter as a whole represents an attempt to broaden the basis of what receives attention in the study of narrative. The materials analyzed exemplify many different interpersonal functions of storytelling in conversation. Conversationalists tell stories of personal experience to inform each other about themselves and their values. In doing so, they may align themselves with members of the group present or with the whole group. When evaluations coincide and response stories demonstrate parallel experiences, storytelling enhances rapport between participants. At the same time, personal stories serve to entertain listeners, especially when they are funny. Narrative-like accounts of recurrent experiences share personal experiences in similar ways. We have also seen how conversationalists use stories for argumentation or to illustrate a point. Finally, they tell third-person stories to inform one another of events and to express their feelings about them.

In everyday conversation, stories and narrative-like structures bubble up and recede back into turn-by-turn talk. It is often difficult to decide exactly where a conversational story begins and ends. Sometimes two or more participants collaborate in producing a story, so that it becomes impossible to say just who is the teller or even the primary teller. Nevertheless, participants as listeners can distill a coherent story from the talk which allows them to respond appropriately — sometimes with parallel stories of their own. Indeed, listeners are also perfectly capable of recognizing incompleteness and incoherence in narratives and formulating appropriate questions to fill in the missing information, as we have seen here as well. Problematic and marginally narrative passages provide a testing ground for our analytic methods, but they also show us listeners responding in ways which shed additional light on the data. Finally, teller strategies like repetition, formulaicity, disfluencies and constructed dialogue remain quite constant across the types of storytelling explored.