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Comments

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Representation and Enactment in Autobiographical Narrative

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Abstract

Speech is multifunctional, both communicating denotational content and establishing interactional positions for interlocutors. In some cases, the denotational and interactional functions of speech interrelate and even depend on each other. This paper describes a type of speech event in which the interrelations between denotation and interaction are particularly salient—autobiographical narratives in which the events described and the relationships enacted run parallel. Further study of such speech events promises to illuminate how the denotational and interactional functions of speech can sometimes contribute to each other.

Whenever people speak, they interact. At the same time as speech represents information about denoted content, it also communicates information about the (momentary or enduring) social identities of speakers and audience members. In many cases both denotational and interactional messages get communicated by the same linguistic forms, but they do not influence each other much. In other cases, however, denotational and interactional messages interrelate and even depend on each other (Greeno et al., 1998; Lave, 1996; Wortham, in press a).

In some cases, then, an account of denotational meaning requires an account of how language can establish social positions for speakers. This paper describes how a particular type of speech event—events that I will call “performed diagrams,” following Parmentier (1997)—can be a productive site for studying how denotational content and interactional positioning can interrelate in verbal communication. In earlier work on classroom discourse, I have described how this type of event sometimes occurs as students and teachers discuss subject matter (Wortham, 1994, 1998, in press a). This paper reports that the same type of event can occur in a different genre, autobiographical narrative. By exploring the peculiar structure of performed diagrams, we can gain insight into how interactional information can in some cases make essential contributions to the communication of denotational content.

Performed Diagrams

In earlier work, I have argued that the interrelation between the denotational and interactional functions of speech can usefully be studied in a particular kind of speech event—in “participant examples” that involve iconism between denoted and enacted patterns (Wortham, 1994, 1998, in press a). A participant example includes at least one teacher or student present in the classroom discussion as a character in the example (Wortham, 1994). Such examples *double* the roles played by the teacher or students singled out,

because they become characters in the example as well as participants in the ongoing classroom discussion. When an example contains participants themselves as characters in this way (for example, “imagine that our Maurice here were a criminal...”), apparently neutral discussion of the example can carry presuppositions about the participants' interactional positions. Discussion of the hypothetical Maurice the criminal, within the example, can covertly communicate things about Maurice the actual student. Because of this doubling, discussion of the example can simultaneously communicate information about the subject matter—thus sustaining an academic discussion—and communicate information about the momentary or enduring social identities of Maurice and others in the conversation—thus contributing to an interactional event among those participants.

Sometimes, the content denoted by a participant example and the interactional event enacted through discussion of that example interrelate in a particular way. The denotational content represented by a participant example and the interactional patterns created while discussing that example can sometimes *run parallel* or be *icons* of each other. That is, in discussing a particular set of events and relationships as the content of an example, teachers and students sometimes *enact* analogous events and relationships in their own classroom interaction (cf. Wortham, 1994, 1997, in press a). While serving as a hypothetical tyrant in a participant example, for instance, a teacher might start acting tyrannically toward students in the classroom interaction itself.

Linguistic anthropologists have described a similar sort of parallelism between denoted content and enacted interaction in ritual events around the world (Parmentier, 1997). Ritual discourse often denotes or symbolizes the sacred. In addition, ritual participants also often *enact* relationships among themselves that iconically signal some aspect of the sacred. In other words, rituals often involve “diagrams” that represent some aspect of the sacred. Participants in rituals often utter or portray these diagrams while simultaneously “performing” or enacting them. The parallelism between representation and enactment makes ritual events powerful vehicles for re-creating sociocultural patterns.

Enacted participant examples are performed diagrams, because speakers both represent an event—as the example—and simultaneously enact an analogous event in the conversation. I have argued that this iconism between denoted content and enacted relationships can make participant examples a powerful site for the reproduction of social patterns in classrooms (Wortham, 1992) and for helping students learn the curriculum (Wortham, in press a). The denotational and interactional information communicated by enacted participant examples can work *together* to commu-

nicate subject matter more fully to students. By both representing and enacting parallel patterns, enacted participant examples can help students understand the underlying curriculum better.

This article describes how performed diagrams also occur in another type of everyday, non-ritual discourse—autobiographical narratives. In order to use performed diagrams as a site for studying how denotational and interactional patterns can interrelate, we need further description of how they appear in other genres like autobiographical narrative.

Autobiographical Narrative

Research on the denotational function of narrative discourse has described presupposed structures and inferential processes that allow people to produce and comprehend narrative. Work by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and by “story grammar” theorists (Mandler, 1984; Stein & Policastro, 1984) describes presupposed structures that allow narratives to communicate denotational information. Other work describes how such structures get inferred and flexibly implemented in actual reasoning (Bower & Morrow, 1990; Trabasso, Secco & van den Broek, 1984).

Labov and Waletzky (1967) also opened up the study of narratives’ interactional functions with their concept of “evaluation,” arguing that narratives position narrators interactionally with respect to interlocutors and with respect to larger socio-moral issues. Subsequent work has described in more detail how narrative in general—and autobiographical narrative in particular—can position narrators interactionally and socio-morally (Hill, 1995; Schiffrin, 1996; Wortham, in press b). The following section applies analytic tools developed for studying the denotational and interactional functions of narrative to one story that contains a performed diagram. See Wortham (in press b) for a more extensive description of the methodological approach.

Jane’s Story

The following story was told by a 57 year old woman to an interviewer as part of a psychological research study. The interviewer simply asked Jane to tell the story of her life “as if it were a novel divided into chapters.” Jane begins with the setting for her story: her mother was a writer, and Armenian; her father was a businessman, and Protestant; her maternal grandparents disapproved of the marriage from the start, and it ended in divorce when Jane was seven. After the divorce her mother needed to work full time and did not know what to do with her child. She consulted with an acquaintance, and she went along with his recommendation to send Jane to a boarding school. Jane refers to this chapter in her life as “the institutionalization of a human being.” She was ostracized because of her Armenian background. She was beaten and humiliated by the teachers who ran the school. She spent five “horrendous” years there, seeing her mother only occasionally. Jane still vividly recalls the happy day on which she left this school, much as a prisoner might recall the moment of leaving jail after serving a long sentence.

Her mother took Jane out of the boarding school in order to return to her parents’ home in Louisville. After a brief time in

which Jane had trouble adjusting to her grandparents’ Armenian neighborhood, Jane’s mother decided to “institutionalize” her again. Her mother again took advice from someone, and she apparently did not realize the nature of the institution. Jane was sent to a boarding school for “delinquents” and “street people.” She was beaten up, her belongings were stolen, and she was miserable. At age sixteen, she ran away from the school and “blackmailed” her mother. She called home and refused to tell her mother where she was, until her mother promised not to send her back to the school.

Her mother acquiesced, and Jane moved with her mother into an apartment near her grandparents. This was a more pleasant period for Jane than the two institutionalizations, but there were still problems. They lived in a predominantly Armenian neighborhood where Jane was ostracized because she was considered foreign. The schools were good, but district boundaries dictated that she had to attend a working-class high school where she again felt out of place. She did well in school nonetheless, and despite the lack of encouragement from her mother and grandparents—who expected young women simply to get married—she went on to college afterward. But after a year she dropped out and went to work.

In her twenties she had what she describes as an “affair” with a man named Robert. He was from a wealthy Armenian family and about eight years older than Jane. Although Robert was not married, neither of them expected that this relationship would last. Jane does not say why, although she does mention that she did not feel a legitimate part of the Armenian community in her grandparents’ neighborhood. She and Robert did not go on dates in public much, but instead met in Jane’s apartment and had sex while her mother was at work. Eventually Robert moved out of town and the relationship ended. Jane began work at a job that she liked. Then she discovered that she was pregnant.

Impending parenthood presents Jane with a choice: will she decide to keep her baby or give it up for adoption? In light of earlier episodes in her story, this is also a choice about whether to treat her baby as her own mother treated her. Syllables underlined in the transcript are stressed. Numbers in parentheses indicate pauses, in seconds. Commas indicate brief pauses, periods indicate sentence-final intonation, and dashes indicate the abrupt cutting off of a sound.

So here, the end of November, beginning of December I find out that I am now four and a half months pregnant. (2.0) Robert came back to Louisville in January. (1.0) It was freezing weather.
5 I- I met him at a hotel and we talked. and he said what are you going to do. I said I don’t know. I was being heavily pressured by, society, my own thoughts, by Robert, by my mother, to give the child up. (6.0) on the night of April fifth, I went into labor,
10 went into the hospital and at two o’clock in the morning on April sixth, 1961- I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. (3.0) while I was in the hospital, I called- again by recommendation the city orphanage. (1.0) at the time, there was a shortage, on good white

15 babies. (3.0) and a very vile woman at the city orphanage, agreed to take my baby until I could make a decision. so I took my my darling Joey, u:m (3.0) hunh (4.0) [Voice quivering] to the orphanage on Thirteenth Street (3.0) and left him there for two weeks. (2.0) two of the hardest weeks of my life. (4.0) and when the two weeks were up, (3.0) I went down there, and this horrendous p- person had these papers out for me, to sign. she had a family all lined up. (1.0) there was a- (1.0) there was a shortage of- like I say they- in those days (2.0) a nice good white baby, was a- short coming a good healthy baby. [Sniff] She handed me the pen (2.0) but I couldn't do it. (5.0) [voice quivering] I said bring me my baby. (6.0) I want you to know this woman yelled at me. (2.0) and tried to guilt-trip me. she said, how dare you do this to me I made place for your baby. I helped you out. you have to sign these papers. I said I don't have to do anything of the sort. I want my child [Sniff] and at first she refused me. and I said I want my baby. (1.0) and she practically threw a temper tantrum right there in the office of the orphanage, and was screaming at me, because she had made room for my baby and she wanted my baby. they brought- my darling baby to me who had (1.0) his skin on his feet and his legs was totally scaled. (1.0) I think they left him alone for two weeks. I mean they- you know how you're supposed to put oil on a newborn's to keep the skin protected because it's tender? my child's body was (1.0) if I hadn't known that it was dryness, it looked like it was infested with some disease. I was ever so glad that I got him out of there got him home, bathed him, rubbed oil on his body, and uh was determined- I didn't know how I was gonna make make it but- I wanted to have my baby. so, I would say that's chapter five. which- determined an awful lot of the rest of my life.

Note that Jane called, "again by recommendation," an orphanage (line 13). Her use of the word "recommendation," especially with "again," indexes her mother's earlier decisions to follow "recommendations" and institutionalize Jane. This time, Jane must make the decision whether to give her own child to an institution.

In this segment of her life story Jane presents five socially salient types of people that appeared earlier in her narrative: ineffective caregivers (like her mother), self-interested advisors (like the man who recommended her first institution—he was financially linked to that boarding school), abusers (like the teachers at the first institution), plus one passive and one active narrated self. These five roles or "voices" recur many times in Jane's story. In her own institutionalizations, she was first a victim of abusers and abandoned by her mother, then she defended herself against the abusers and forced her mother to acquiesce. These same voices and types of events recur in Jane's experience as an adult at the orphanage with her own child.

In the segment above, Robert speaks as a potential caregiver abdicating responsibility. He has already had his

fun and left Jane, and his only response on seeing her six months pregnant with his child is: "what are you going to do?" (line 6). Jane says that she "was being heavily pressured" to give the child up for adoption (lines 6-7). She does not say who actually recommended the particular orphanage, but she does list "society," Robert and her mother as the people pressuring her to give the baby up. "Society," given the earlier characterizations of her grandparents, most likely presupposes them. Robert, her mother and grandparents would all benefit if Jane were to choose adoption. Robert would avoid child support, and her relatives would avoid the scandal of an unwed mother in the family. So these characters all occupy a role analogous to the "advisor" earlier in her narrative: self-interested people pressuring her to send her baby to the institution. The abusive institution is represented by the "vile," "horrendous" orphanage woman (lines 15, 22). "Horrendous" is a term Jane used to describe the abusers and abusive conditions in her two institutionalizations, and thus it helps establish the same voice for the orphanage woman. Like the teachers from Jane's first institutionalization, the orphanage woman is also greedy—as Jane says, "she wanted my baby" (lines 38-39).

So this passage about the orphanage contains ineffective caregivers, self-interested advisors and an abusive institution. It also contains both a passive, victimized self and an active self for Jane. Up until the pivotal section of this segment (lines 27ff.), Jane herself speaks in a passive, victimized voice. She tells Robert she doesn't know what to do (line 6), and she gives in to her family's pressure and turns her child over to the recommended institution. Figure 1 represents the denoted content and the interactional positioning right before line 27. The inner rectangle in this figure represents salient characters and relationships in the denoted content, and the outer rectangle represents the interactional event between Jane and the interviewer. The shapes within each rectangle represent the salient characters or interlocutors.

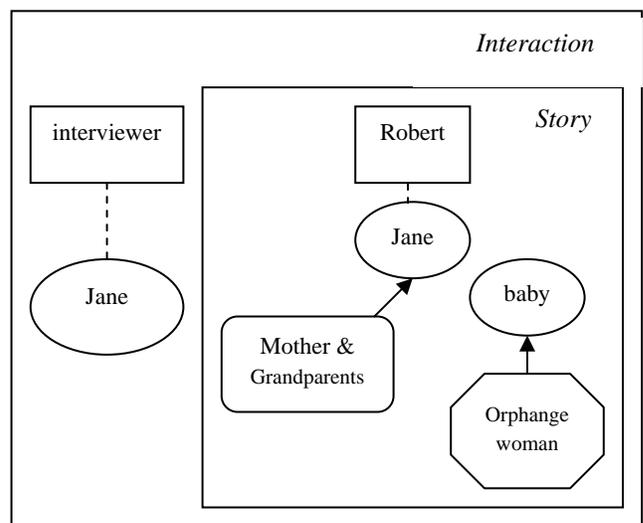


Figure 1. Jane passive at the orphanage

The figure represents Jane underneath the interviewer in the outer rectangle, because the distance between narrated

and narrating selves breaks down at lines 17ff. Jane *enacts* how these past experiences still deeply affect her, by crying in the interview. I will return to analyze the interactional events below, after finishing a description of the denoted content.

As she did during her second institutionalization, Jane develops from passive to active in this episode. This happens in the pivotal section from lines 27-39. These lines accomplish particularly rich characterization, largely because of the dense use of metapragmatic predication (Silverstein, 1976) and quotation. Jane and the orphanage employee both speak with two distinct voices in the encounter described in these lines. At first (lines 27-32) the orphanage woman speaks like an authority figure: she "yelled", she "tried to guilt trip" Jane, and she said "how dare you do this to me." These metapragmatic descriptors presuppose a recognizable type of speech event, with characteristic social types. The woman is like a parent and Jane is like a recalcitrant teenager. In her presentation of the rest of the interaction, however, Jane the narrator switches the characters' voices. From lines 32-39 Jane speaks like an adult. She is rational and even-tempered, saying "I don't have to do anything of the sort; I want my child." The orphanage woman reacts to Jane's maturity and self-assertion like a child that isn't getting what she wants: she "practically threw a temper tantrum" and "was screaming" at Jane.

Note particularly the contrast between *yelling* and *screaming* in these lines. Typically, adults yell and children scream. This contrast sums up the course of the encounter between Jane and the orphanage woman. It is a reversal or a rout. Jane is treated like a child, but she responds like an adult and reduces the institution's representative to a screaming child. Figure 2 represents the denoted content and the interactional positioning at this point in the story. The reversal of direction in the arrows represents Jane's shift from passive to active.

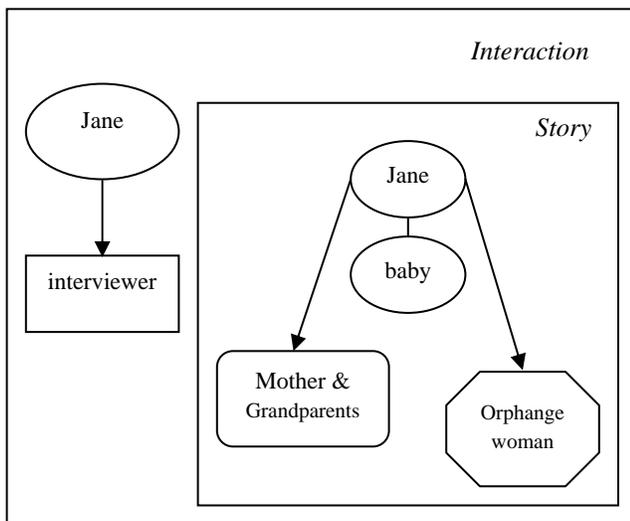


Figure 2. Jane takes control at the orphanage

In the denoted content Jane has asserted her rights as a parent, against the prejudices of society and against the evils of the institution, and she steps forward to care for her child.

This reversal of her relationship with the orphanage woman is so powerful, and so artfully presented, that the reader or hearer will likely admire Jane's resolve and perhaps even share her sense of triumph. In listening to the interview or reading the transcript at this peak moment, one feels that a triumphant development has occurred. Jane seems to have overcome her passive, victimized self and developed her active, assertive self once and for all.

A similar transformation also occurs in Jane's interactional position while she is narrating this segment. Just as in other performed diagrams, in this autobiographical narrative there is an iconic relation between the denoted content and the enacted positioning. The segment begins with the distance between Jane's narrated and narrating selves breaking down. By line 17 her narrated self has yielded to pressure and accepted the recommendation to give her baby to the orphanage. Jane the narrator begins to position herself with respect to the orphanage woman here—clearly distancing her narrating self by describing this woman as "vile." Then Jane stops the narrative and cries (at line 17), as she also did while narrating her first institutionalization earlier in the story. In her breakdown at lines 17-18 Jane *enacts* how much the narrated events still affect her. Thus she positions herself in the interactional event as someone who has been abused and could use some sympathy. In narrating her earlier institutionalization, she also broke down and positioned herself (with respect to the interviewer) as a vulnerable friend in need of a sympathetic ear or perhaps as a client in search of a therapist. Figure 1 represents this by placing Jane underneath the interviewer in the interactional event. She no longer dispassionately recounts her story as a piece of data.

As in the earlier episodes, however, the interviewer does not respond to Jane's crying at all. Jane positions herself as someone deserving of sympathy, but the interviewer does not ratify this position by saying something sympathetic. In the narrated story, Jane has been abandoned by Robert (a failed caregiver). In the narrating interaction, the interviewer maintains scientific distance and does not support Jane. Figure 1 represents this parallelism with the two dotted lines.

The interviewer's scientific distance leaves Jane in a difficult spot. She could intensify her plea for sympathy—by adding painful details or crying harder—or she could return to a more distanced interactional position. Jane adopts the latter option. She recovers and goes on to describe how she routed the orphanage woman. While recounting this episode Jane the narrator comes to speak as an adult in the interactional event. She seems to use her description of the transformation in her narrated self to shift her narrating self back to a more active and competent position. While describing her transformation from passive, victimized child to active, assertive adult, then, Jane the narrator moves her narrating self from the position of a vulnerable, child-like person to the position of a distanced, mature adult in the research interview itself. As the interview goes on, Jane continues to speak in a rational, distanced way. At line 51, for instance, she voluntarily identifies the "chapter" she has been discussing and thus presupposes that the discursive interaction is once again a dispassionate research interview (the interviewer had opened the interview with a request for Jane to divide her story into "chapters," and thus this word

indexes a “dispassionate research interview” frame for the interactional event). At the end of the segment, then, Jane’s narrated and narrating selves are both competent, mature women.

Note the parallel across denoted and enacted events here: both the story and the interaction include a two-part developmental sequence in which Jane goes from being passive, vulnerable and child-like to being active, competent and adult-like. We might interpret Jane’s life story so far as an explanation of how she came to be the mature, competent self she is presenting to the interviewer. She passively endured abuse during her early life, but after claiming her daughter she has become the mature, competent woman we see in the interview. While perhaps partly true, this explanation does not suffice. We cannot conclude that Jane in the interview at age 57 is describing how a *past* passive, vulnerable self has been transformed into a mature, competent one—because this would not explain her repeated *enactments* of the passive, vulnerable self in the interactional event with the interviewer itself. In the interview she is not simply a mature self that dispassionately recounts how her passive, victimized self was transformed into her current, active one. Instead, she *both describes and enacts* the vulnerable and the active selves. Both selves appear in the denotational content and in the interactional event.

In both the past and the present, then, Jane oscillates between more passive and more active selves. Elsewhere, I argue that this happens because the patterns characteristic of the self must be maintained (Wortham, in press b). In Jane’s case they are partly maintained through performed diagrams in everyday first-person discourse. She describes past events in which potential caregivers abandoned her and in which she was first abused and then found the strength to take control of her own life. In the orphanage segment, for instance, she broke out of the interactional position characteristic of her mother (a passive woman willing to let this passivity damage her child) and began to speak as a more active, assertive adult. In the interview situation itself, Jane finds herself in a similar position. She recounts difficult and emotional events, and she breaks down. The person available to support her (the interviewer) refuses. In the interactional event, then, the interviewer enacts the role of absent caregiver. Jane goes on to recover her active, assertive voice by herself. As she did in the denoted events, Jane recreates the transition from vulnerable to competent in the interactional event of narration. See Wortham (in press b) for a more detailed analysis of the performed diagram in this autobiographical narrative.

Conclusion

Jane’s autobiographical narrative illustrates how performed diagrams occur in types of non-ritual discourse other than participant examples. In such performed diagrams the denotational and interactional functions of speech run parallel to each other, as narrators do what they say. I argue that representation and enactment do more than run parallel in such cases, however (Wortham, in press a, in press b). They can interrelate, such that each depends on the other.

In Jane’s narrative, she re-enacts a developmental transition from passive to active, one that might characterize an important aspect of her identity—as a person who repeatedly confronts oppression and triumphs over it. From only this one piece of data, we cannot conclude that this pattern does in fact characterize Jane’s self. But if she were to position herself in this way in many speech events over time, it would be plausible to conclude that this repeated enactment gives important structure to her self (cf. Wortham, in press b). Note, however, that Jane could not have enacted this pattern without the denoted content of her story. It was with respect to her *description* of events from her past that she was able to position the interviewer and herself in these characteristic ways. So the interactional functions of the narrative only occur with essential input from the denoted content.

Similarly, I would argue, the denoted content only gets represented in its full complexity with reference to the enacted events. Jane does not have to denote the full emotional impact of her predicament at the orphanage, because her enactment of a parallel event with the interviewer fills in some of the relevant information. In other words, the power of her story to represent her past experiences comes not only from information denoted by the text. Jane could have described in more detail the character of her relationships with failed caregivers and abusive institutions, and her (repeated) development from passive to active. But instead she enacts some aspects of these relationships, and some aspects of this development, with the interviewer in the event of narration itself. I argue that this enactment complements and enriches the representation accomplished in her story. The interviewer can understand the central developmental issue in Jane’s story better, having enacted part of it with her, than if Jane had read the story in a monotone from behind a screen. See Wortham (in press a) for a more extensive description of how interactional patterns can make essential contributions to the representation of subject matter content.

It makes sense that denoted and enacted patterns in speech would contribute to each other. Since both types of pattern ride on the same semiotic forms, it is more efficient to communicate two partial messages and let hearers infer from both simultaneously. This sort of complementarity between denotation and interaction does not occur extensively in all speech, of course. All speech depends on deictics, and thus virtually all denotation relies to some extent on interactional information (Silverstein, 1976; Wortham, in press a). Performed diagrams represent a special case, however, in which represented and enacted patterns interpenetrate deeply (Wortham, 1997). Further study of this special case should illuminate how denotation and interaction can contribute to each other.

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