8-31-2007

# Temporal Landscapes of Morality in Narrative: Student Evaluation in a Thai Parent-Teacher Conference

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**Abstract**

As many scholars have noted, narrative is a primordial human tool for making sense of life experience (Brockmeier, 2000, Ochs & Capps, 2001). While often described as a mode of relating experience that organizes events along temporal dimensions, research has also shown how participants in narrative activity explore the experiential logic of events by theorizing and evaluating the causes, consequences, responses and attempts to deal with problematic or unexpected situations (Ochs et al, 1992, Stein & Glenn, 1979). This paper explores how educators and parents evaluate the moral identity of a problematic student through narrative activity in a Thai parent-teacher conference. Drawing on Taylor's (1989) conceptualization of "the good" as a moral space of questions within which modern persons orient themselves, the paper extends Taylor's metaphor of orienting persons in moral space to orienting them in time. Focusing in particular on the use of tense, aspect and modality in temporal perspective taking (Andersen, 1997), the analysis focuses on how narrators discursively configure an ideal moral landscape which narrated persons are temporally positioned within-- as having realized or having failed to realize "the good".

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VERSION #2: August 31, 2007

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Short Title: Temporal Landscapes of Morality

Size: 8,500 words, 144KB

ABSTRACT

As many scholars have noted, narrative is a primordial human tool for making sense of life experience (Brockmeier, 2000, Ochs & Capps, 2001). While often described as a mode of relating experience that organizes events along temporal dimensions, research has also shown how participants in narrative activity explore the experiential logic of events by theorizing and evaluating the causes, consequences, responses and attempts to deal with problematic or unexpected situations (Ochs et al, 1992, Stein & Glenn, 1979). This paper explores how educators and parents evaluate the moral identity of a problematic student through narrative activity in a Thai parent-teacher conference. Drawing on Taylor's (1989) conceptualization of "the good" as a moral space of questions within which modern persons orient themselves, the paper extends Taylor's metaphor of orienting persons in moral space to orienting them in time. Focusing in particular on the use of tense, aspect and modality in temporal perspective taking (Andersen, 1997), the analysis focuses on how narrators discursively configure an ideal moral landscape which narrated persons are temporally positioned within-- as having realized or having failed to realize "the good".


Key Words: narrative, temporality, identity, morality, parent-teacher conferences, modality, aspect, Thai, Thailand, education

Author Biography:

Kathryn M. Howard is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research explores processes of language socialization in linguistically diverse communities in formal (e.g., classroom) and informal (e.g., home or play group) educational settings. Her ethnographic, discourse analytic research in Northern Thailand has examined the social practices of respect, politeness and intimacy among preschool and school-aged bilingual children, and how these practices mediate social relationships and identity in both the local vernacular and the national standard language.

"To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (Taylor, 1989: 27).

Narrative is a powerful tool for the interpretation of experience. By juxtaposing and relating events on a narrative timeline, we as human beings explore, display, and assert our understandings of the relationships between events in our experience and the relevance of those events for our current and future ways of being. Through narrative we attempt to grasp the continuity of our experience over time, and by grasping this continuity we are able to articulate where we stand in relation to moral frameworks. Such orientation in moral space, as Taylor (1989) has pointed out, is a necessary basis for the modern conception of self. This paper explores narrative as an activity in which frameworks of moral evaluation are configured, and in which persons are evaluated in relation to these frameworks. While these frameworks are often conceptualized metaphorically in spatial dimensions, I argue that conversational narrative provides a means for configuring temporal landscapes of moral evaluation by virtue of a) its structural organization and b) the use of grammatical tense/aspect/modality within the logical and temporal organization of narrative. In the narrative genre, speakers orient themselves and others in relation to discursively configured realized, existent and hypothetical worlds.

According to Taylor, modern subjects draw on morality as an interpretive framework to make sense of experience and to imbue action with significance. Morality provides the "background we assume and draw upon in any claim to rightness" (8-9). Defining morality consists not only in classifying social obligations according to some external sense of "right" action, but also in understanding "what makes life worth living"; a sense of morality includes notions such as  "what it is good to be" and "the nature of the good life" (3-4). This 'good life' of modern morality is situated in the ordinary conduct of work and family life, rather than being defined in terms of some higher spiritual ideal.

Taylor argues that the modern moral compass supplements or supplants the moral directives of "objective" institutions (such as religion) in modern life: So, how do modern subjects navigate their moral worlds? Three basic elements of "moral thinking" are outlined by Taylor—a sense of obligation to and respect for others, a sense of what makes life meaningful, and a sense of dignity. This sense of dignity is concerned with "the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us" (15). The moral framework guiding our responses to problematic and unexpected events is referred to by Taylor as "the good," which he views as a moral space of questions within which we orient ourselves: "the notion of self... is meant to pick out this crucial feature of human agency, that we cannot do without some orientation to the good, that we essentially are (i.e., define ourselves at least inter alia by) where we stand on this" (33).

In narrative activity, speakers discursively configure or presuppose these moral frameworks for evaluating conduct and action. Narrative, like life, often presents problems, or unexpected turns of events, which must be dealt with and responded to by

characters in the narrative drama as well as participants in the storytelling (narrative)

event: These problems raise questions about how to respond, and the modern moral

compass that Taylor describes helps narrators to make sense of persons' responses and

moral reactions. In narrative activity moral identities (including that of the participants in

the event of narration) are explored as narrators represent and evaluate the actions and

circumstances leading up to and following problematic events. The analysis presented

here extends Taylor's metaphor of orienting in moral space, to a notion of orienting

within moral landscapes that are constituted in temporal dimensions. Narrative

characters' actions, experiences and characteristics are evaluated in relation to

discursively constructed worlds that are expected, normative, and desirable.

According to Taylor, modern conceptualizations of the good are not defined as a

set of rules to live by. Instead, the good is a set of the right answers to questions about

our manner of living the ordinary life: "We take as basic that the human agent exists in a

space of questions. And these are the questions to which our framework definitions are

answers, providing the horizon within which we know where we stand and what

meanings things have for us" (29). If one understands the good as a framework of

answers to questions, and sees the questions as partially composed of "what ought to be

done", and "what it is good or valuable to be", then the answers must constitute those

responses, attempts, and methods for dealing with problems and circumstances, the

description and evaluation of which are at the very core of narrative activity. Moral

frameworks consist of real or hypothetical worlds in which certain actions and ways of

being occur.

An analysis of narrative time must go beyond the notion of narrative as

representing a sequence of events in a given time frame (e.g., past, present, future).

Instead, narrative is a medium through which past, present and future are brought

together in a unity of relevance and consciousness (Brockmeier, 2000, Heidegger, 1953,

Ochs, 1994, Ricoeur, 1981). The story genre evokes a relevant past which has an impact

on the present and implications for the future: "The existential 'now' is determined by the

present of preoccupation, which is a 'making-present,' inseparable from awaiting and

retaining" (Ricoeur, 1981: 169). Not only do we bring the past to bear on the present and

future, but we also bring the present to bear on the past, or on the future.[i] By relating our

quests in narrative, which are brought to bear on our actual situations and understood in

terms of their consequences for our destiny, we create an understanding of who we are

and who we have become: "repetition for Heidegger means more than a mere reversal of

the basic orientation of care toward the future; it means the retrieval of our most basic

potentialities inherited from our past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny"

(Ricoeur, 1981: 176). The weight of the past, then, plays a role in defining who we have

become, temporally positioning us in relation to the good.

Moral evaluation in educational settings

Parent-teacher conferences are activities in which the teacher presents a report on

the successes and failures of the student. As representatives of a powerful institution,

teachers and administrators communicate to parents the institutional expectations and

requirements by which a student's actions may be judged. This moral evaluation of the

student involves social stratification, as the student gets identified in terms of how he or

she compares with other students of the same age and level. The way in which educators

identify, characterize, and evaluate students is highly consequential, impacting students' educational, social, and affective trajectories. Mehan (1996) argues that the identification of students—by being labeled e.g., 'gifted', 'normal', or 'learning disabled'— is produced in multiple events, genres, and registers, and involves the progressive objectification of perceived student attributes as these discourses of identification become further removed from the contextually contingent behavior of the student. This process of identification "structures students' educational careers by opening or closing their access to particular educational opportunities" (Mehan, 1996: 271). Fleeting and seemingly insignificant events in which students are characterized, evaluated, and identified are powerful because they form a link in a chain of events through which particular identities get stabilized, solidified, and "thickened" such that they become more 'real' for both institutional agents making decisions that affect a student's trajectory, and for the student herself (Holland & Lave, 2001, Wortham, 2003, 2006). These events of identification reproduce social structure through the application of category labels such as "normal" or "disruptive", and characterize individual students as typically thinking, feeling, and acting in particular ways.

Parent-teacher conferences are one site in which such identification takes place. They are described as events in which accounts and evaluations of student progress, achievement, and behavior feature prominently (Baker & Keogh, 1995, Garcia Sanchez & Orellana, 2006, Pillet-Shore, 2003a). In the parent-teacher conference presented here, the student is evaluated as someone who violates the obligations and expectations established by convention, by the institution, and by the typical actions of other students. In Taylor's (1989) terms, teachers develop and explain their perspective on what

constitutes the good, and evaluate students in relation to that perspective. But the student

is not the sole story personage whose identity falls under scrutiny at such meetings: When

problems arise, the parents, teachers, and program administrators are all considered

responsible for taking appropriate actions to resolve them. The conference also involves

the characterization and evaluation of the parents' and the teachers' conduct related to the

student (Baker & Keogh, 1995, Garcia Sanchez & Orellana, 2006, Pillet-Shore, 2003b).

<br>

Data and Methods: The Parent-Teacher Conference

This paper examines the discursive construction of moral identity in a parent-

teacher conference that occurred in a Thai college setting. The data used for this study

comes from a meeting between a student's father and the program administrator of a

teacher preparation program at a Teacher's College in Bangkok Thailand.[ii]

Teachers—concerned about the academic performance of a 20-year-old female student

approaching the final year of this three-year teacher certification program—asked the

student's father to attend a parent-teacher conference. According to her teachers, this

student's performance in the program had been problematic from the start. Throughout

much of the conference, the program director is speaking to the father about the student,

and another teacher joins the conference later. Although the student was also expected to

join the conference, she failed to attend. The conference lasted approximately forty-five

minutes and included three participants: Professor Fah is a female professor and director

of the teacher-training program; Po is the father; and Mek is a male teacher who joined

the conversation later in the session. The conference was audio taped with the

participants' permission, and transcribed by a native speaker. [iii]

Over the course of this meeting the program director delivers, piece by piece, the bad news to Po about his daughter's situation in school and its implications for her academic future. The student has failed to fulfill several of the program requirements, including a test and an internship, and she has an extremely low grade point average that is not adequate for graduation from the program. Po indicates that he was not aware of the problem, and that he lives too far from the school to stay informed about her progress. Despite the fact that the situation is characterized by the program director as being beyond the point of no return (i.e., that there is no way that the student will be able to graduate), she entertains a delicate negotiation with Po for much of the conference by describing the student's actions and leaving him to conclude the actual consequences of the situation.

Participants in parent-teacher conferences are generally focused on the central problematic situation of a student's performance in school. This commonly held understanding about the goals of parent-teacher conferences frames participants' interpretation and participation in this event. As long as the meeting continues and no other activity frame is keyed (such as talk about other matters), the participants draw on their expectations about this event in order to interpret ongoing talk. To the extent that talk within this event explores causes, consequences, and responses to the central narrative problem of the student's academic failure, the entire meeting is treated in my analysis as narrative activity, or more specifically as a conversationally co-constructed "story" (Ochs et al. 1992). While much work on narrative conceptualizes this form of discourse as a largely monologic activity (Labov, 1972), narrative analysis within discourse studies treats it as a dialogic and highly interactive activity in which

conversational participants co-author the discourse either through active contributions or through visible displays of attention or stance (Goodwin, 1984, Ochs et al, 1989, Quasthoff, 1997, Sacks, 1974). Within this storytelling activity there are multiple embedded, co-constructed narratives, with different participants as principle tellers, that together constitute episodes of the larger story.

<div align="center">Narrative Logic and Narrative Structure in Evaluation</div>

Narrators in this parent-teacher conference sketch out moral landscapes and locate narrated actors temporally in relation to the obligatory, desirable, and normative worlds configured in those frameworks. This is accomplished and understood through a conjunction of the specific grammatical marking of temporality, the narrative exploration of the causes and consequences of action, and by the structural / thematic conventions of the narrative genre.[iv] Previous work has elucidated the organization of narrative defining it in terms of its logical relationships, and characterizing it as a mode of discourse in which the causes and consequences of a central problematic event are explored. In their analysis of story comprehension, Stein and Glenn (1979) articulate an experiential logic of stories which includes a setting, initiating event (IE), response to the IE, attempts to deal with the IE, the resolution or consequences of those attempts, and reactions to such consequences. Similarly, Ochs et al. (1992) define a type of narrative activity called a story that is primarily concerned with understanding a problematic event: a story is "narrative activity which articles a central problematic event or circumstance arising in the immediate or distant past and the subsequent past, present, and future actions/states relevant to interpreting and responding to the problem" (43).

Ochs et al. (1992) and Ochs & Capps (2001) show that the experiential logic of narrative plays a particularly important role in the dialogic co-construction of moral stance in conversational narrative: As explanations of the causes and consequences of problematic or unexpected events, stories build theories of experience that are made available to be challenged and negotiated, including the appropriateness of the actions, beliefs, and motivations of story characters. This dialogic problem-solving nature of narrative provides an important resource for morally positioning narrative characters and participants. Stories are always recounted from a particular perspective, and because they address a problematic or surprising event, this perspective often constitutes a moral stance: "Recounting the violation and taking a moral stance toward it provide a discursive forum for human beings to clarify, reinforce, or revise what they believe and value" (Ochs & Capps, 2001: 46).

Narrative discourse contains different phases that provide varied resources by which narrators evaluate moral identities. In the *story preface*, the narrator secures the attention and interest of co-participants, characterizes the nature of the upcoming story, and seeks alignment for holding the floor over multiple turns (Quasthoff, 1997, Sacks, 1974). *Story settings* provide background information about the time, place, participants, and circumstances of the action presented in the narrative (Labov, 1972). The background information included in narrative settings provides frameworks for understanding and explaining the events delineated in the narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In the *complicating action,* stories proceed through webs of logic and sequence that underlie the exploration of *initiating events* along with their *causes*, *attempts* to deal with the events, *consequences*, and protagonists' *responses* and *reactions* to those events (Ochs & Capps,

2001).

In order to gain an understanding of how these narrators draw on the discursive resources of story structure, story logic, and grammar, I will first use Ochs & Capps' (2001) framework to analyze the basic story logic contained in the narrative activity that occurs throughout this parent-teacher conference. At the beginning of this meeting, the program director, Professor Fah, lays out what she sees as the basic *problem* to be addressed in this meeting: the focal student's low achievement and failure to fulfill requirements. This introductory narrative discourse also describes the *responses* of students and teachers to this problem, various *attempts* to deal with it, the *consequences* of these responses and attempts, and *reactions* to these consequences. In addition, co-narrators explore various possible reasons (*causes*) for the student's poor performance. The narrative depicts an unsuccessful student who has failed to complete several program requirements, and who has received very low grades for her work, despite repeated attempts by teachers and fellow students to intervene. This early and central episode of the story sketches the following logic:

1. Problems (Initiating Events):

> • the student has failed to start an internship;

> • the student has failed to take a test, leaving one course unfinished;

> • the student has received unacceptably low grades.

2. Responses to the problem:

> • the teachers do not know what to do.

3. Attempts to deal with the problem: [v]

> • the teachers sent someone to find the daughter when she failed to attend the

meeting at which internships were assigned.

4. Consequences:

• no resolution of the problem, the problem is getting progressively worse;

• the student will not be able to graduate;

• the student always gets the worst score, which is bad for her self-esteem.

Once the current, problematic state of affairs has been explicated, the program director takes the story back in time, to a period when she first noticed the student's problems, providing the nature of the problem, as well as her response and attempts to resolve it, as represented in the following list.

1. Problem leading to the Initiating Event:

• the student's language skills were noted by the program director and teachers to be inadequate during her first year.

2. Responses to the problem:

• none.

3. Attempts to deal with the problem:

• the program director discussed the student's low language proficiency with her;

• the teachers talked to the student about the problem.

4. Consequences:

• the student expressed her desire to remain in the program and claimed that she was highly motivated to improve her English.

5. Reaction (to student's claims):

• the student is allowed to stay in the program.

This second episode of narrative activity explores the web of causes and

consequences leading up to the student's current problem, and the program faculty's actions in addressing the problematic situation. After this narrative episode, the story continues to be told in a similar fashion, as the co-narrators weave in additional story elements that explain the story's problem, lay out possible consequences, evaluate the methods, and attempts to deal with the problem by various story characters, or provide accounts in defense of their own methods and actions.

*Establishing the Frame in the Story Preface*

In the same way that diagnosis of a problem can organize the talk and interpretation of talk in a patient's visit to a doctor's office, the implicit goal of parent-teacher conferences—discussing, evaluating and problem-solving the performance of a student—organizes the talk within this activity. Very soon after the father's arrival the program director begins her delivery of the news by eliciting his opinion of his daughter. [vi]

Segment 1: Framing the parent-teacher conference. (Professor Fah, program director; Po, the father). [vii]

4 Fah:      pòkkatì lέw nísǎy pen yaŋŋay khá ʔây nǔu nîa
             'Usually, how is her personality, that child?'

5 Po:      man khɯɯ mm꞉ phǒm mɔɔŋ duu man kô yàŋŋán
             'It is, mm, as far as I can tell,'

6           mây hěn pen lay
             'I don't see anything wrong.'

7 Fah:      lɔ̌ə   há
             'Really?'

8 Po:      kháp
             'Yes.'

9          (5.0)
           ((sound of shuffling papers and boxes))

By eliciting Po's perspective on his daughter, Professor Fah establishes a frame of interpretation for talk in this meeting: that it centers on trouble. In line 4, the professor asks Po to characterize his daughter's "usual" demeanor, to which he supplies a hedged and non-committal response "as far as I can tell I don't see anything wrong." Professor Fah immediately displays a stance of non-alignment toward this assessment of the student's character. Her utterance in line 7 is an unspecified interrogative which locates the entire previous utterance as a problem, and more specifically displays doubt about the previous statement. Her five-second pause after line 8 foreshadows a possible dispreferred response (such as disagreement), so it is also a sign of trouble. After this display of her non-alignment to Po's characterization of his daughter as having no problems, and given that the participants in this activity know that parent-teacher conferences are meant to assess the progress of students, Professor Fah's talk in this story preface foreshadows her negative evaluation of the student.

*Configuring a Conventional Grid in the Story Setting*

With the interpretive frame firmly established in the story preface, Professor Fah's story setting launches a description of the program, its requirements, and current students' typical activity in the program. This setting (in Segment 2) configures a grid of conventionality as necessary background for interpreting the moral force of the events to be recounted in the later phases of the narrative.

Segment 2: Configuring the conventional grid

10 Fah:       khɯɯ yàŋ níi yàak ca− ca rian hây sâap wâa

'It's just that, I would like- like to inform you that,'

11 Po:      kháp
           'Yes?'

12 Fah:     thəəm nií ñia  (4.0)  thəəm nií ñia thúk khon náksừksăa thúk khon
           'This semester, (4.0) this semester everybody, all the students'

13          ca tôŋ fừkŋaan
           'will have to do an internship.'

14 Po:      kháp
           'Yes.'

15 Fah:     ná há  law  ca tôŋ sòŋ pay fừkŋaan
           'Okay? We have to send them for an internship.'

16          ʔəə (.5) ciŋ ciŋ lɛ́ɛw chûa m–  ʔəə thəəm thîi fừkŋaan ciŋ ciŋ ñia
           'Uh, (.5) actually, the section- uh, the semester for an internship, in
           actuality'

17          khɯɯ (1.8) thəəm  plaay (.2) khɔ̌ŋ pii náa
           'is (1.8) the final semester (.2) of next year.'

18 Po:      kháp
           'Yes.'

19 Fah:     tɛ̀ nɯ̂aŋ càk  ʔəə ʔacaan thîi pừksăa ñia kleeŋ wâa
           'But because, uh, the advisors fear that'

20          n– n– náksừksăa ca mii panhăa ʔalay
           'the s- s- students may have some problems,'

21          law kô  ləəy hây  pay fừk sá kɔɔ̀n thəəm  ñii
           'we therefore had them do an internship this semester.'

22 Po:      kháp
           'Yes.'

23 Fah:     [ná há  ]
           ['Okay?']

24 Po:      [kháw   ] kháw kô bɔɔ̀k phŏm mɯ̌an kan

[ 'She-   ] she told me that too.'

25 Fah:     khà  phùa  wâa thəəm thəəm  plaay nĩa
            'Yes. In case, the- the last semester,'

26          thâa khay sămâat hăa ŋaan tham dây ləəy
            'if any students could find a job,'

27          tua ʔeeŋ kô ca  dây  sabaay
            'they themselves would be fine.'

28 Po:      kháp
            'Yes.'

29 Fah:     cháy máy há man ca dây còp lew nɔ̀y
            'Right? So they will graduate a bit early.'

30 Po:      kháp
            'Yes.'

31 Fah:     dây ŋaan tham lew nɔ̀y
            'Get a job a bit early.'

32 Po:      kháw kô pay bɔ̀ɔk phǒm mǔan kan yaŋŋíi
            'She also came to tell me that."

        In this story setting the program director informs the student's father of the

current program requirements and the progress of other students in the program.

Professor Fah characterizes internships as an institutional requirement, the timing of

which has been moved forward from a later semester to an earlier one by the program in

which the students are enrolled. Fah then provides a warrant for that program decision,

describing the felicitous personal and financial benefits of earlier internships-- graduating

early and getting a job early-- and explains that the students' participation in internships

will allow them to reach the valuable goals of graduating and working. This narrative

setting also represents the normativity of internships within the program, reporting that

"everybody, all the students," must conduct them.

In this narrative setting, Professor Fah explains institutionally authorized program requirements and relates the desirability of conducting an internship as a valuable method of achieving socially acceptable goals and avoiding socially undesirable problems. Internships are also characterized as normative activities in the sense that students are expected to do them, and in the sense that "everybody" does them. The narrative setting, then, establishes a conventional grid [viii] for students in this academic program, configuring the dimensions of what is institutionally expected of them, what is normative among those students, and what is desirable or socially acceptable for the students to do. This conventional grid serves as a moral landscape in relation to which individual students can be evaluated.

*Complicating Action*

Following the setting phase of the story, Fah describes the complicating action: specific past events leading up to the initiating, or problematic situation.

Segment 3: Complicating action

33 Fah:       khà  (.8) ta ní n̈ia (.4) phน̌an kháw maa kan
              mน̌a wan thîi pὲɛt n̈ia ná khá
              'Yes. (.8) Now, (.4) her classmates all came on the eighth.'

34 Po:        kháp
              'Yes.'

35 Fah:       maa cəə kàp ʔacaan l̈iaplɔ́ɔy
              'They all came to see the teachers already.'

36           law kɔ̂ mɔ̂ɔp tua hây pay fน̀kŋaan
              'We assigned each of them an internship,'

37 Po:        kháp
              'Yes.'

38 Fah:       sàŋsɔ̌ɔn pay luam tháŋ law phน̂ut thน̆ŋ ʔây  wíchaa

'Having instructed them, we also spoke about the courses'

39                  thĩi rian thəəm tɔɔ pay dûay
'that they would study next semester,'

40                  sŵŋ pen lŵaŋ sămkhan thâŋ nán ləəy
'all of which were important things.'

41 Po:           kháp
'Yes.'

42 Fah:         kháw kɔ̂ mây maa hăa ləəy
'She didn't come at all.'

43 Po:           lŵɯ kháp
'Really?'

44 Fah:        hâ (.8) hây phŵan taam
'Yes. (.8) We sent her friends to find her.'

In the narrative setting from segment 2, Professor Fah had explained the problems with not having an internship, as well as the benefits of having one. In segment 3, she recounts the attempts of the teachers to enroll students in internships and advise them on their progress through the program at a required advising meeting. She reports that all of the other students attended this advising meeting and were assigned internships. And finally, Professor Fah characterizes the advising meeting as the place where students could learn about these internships and obtain other important information about their academic program. In this complicating action, then, Professor Fah continues to configure a conventional grid, against which Po's daughter will be evaluated, by constructing a model of normative actions performed by most students in response to the situation. In stark contrast to the other students' successful fulfillment of obligations, Professor Fah then recounts Po's daughter's failure to seek an internship or attend the

advising meeting. This juxtaposition situates Po's daughter outside the conventional grid, in contrast to the norm set by the other students' actions.

Up until this point, Fah has accommodated Po's stated perspective on his daughter (that she is usually "okay"), by maintaining a distance from the narrative problem, gently leading up to it through an elaborate story setting and complicating action that together establish a conventional grid for interpreting the conduct of this particular student. After having mentioned this first, and most major, problem, a floodgate of problems seems to burst open, breaking her story free from these polite constraints. In line 45, she begins relating a series of problems with the student's academic endeavors.

Segment 4: Narrative problems

45          lɛ́ɛw kɔ̂ mii wǐchaa nɯ̄ŋ thîi yaŋ mây sèt
            'And there is one course she hasn't finished yet.'

46                    (1.5)

47 Po:      ʔɔ̌ɔ
            'Oh?'

48 Fah:     ná khá kháw kɔ̂ mây maa sɔ̀ɔp
            'Okay? She didn't come to take the test.'

49 Po:      lɯ̌ɯ kháp
            'Really?'

50 Fah:     kàp ʔacaan
            'With the teacher.'

51          ná há law kɔ̂ mây lúu ca wâa yaŋŋay
            ' Okay? And so we don't know what to do.'

52                    (1.0)

53 Fah:     ʔa lɛ́ɛw kɔ̂ khanɛɛn kɔ̂ mây dii ná khá

'Uh, and her grades are not good, either.'

54 Po:      lɯ̌ɯ kháp
            'Really?'

55 Fah:     khanɛɛn nîa  (1.0)  thɯ̌ŋ nɯ̀ŋ cùt hâa lɯ́ pàaw
            'As for the grades (1.0) whether they reach 1.5,'

56          kɔ̂ mây sâap
            'I'm not sure.'

57 Po:      ʔóoy rian yêɛ
            'Oh! She studies badly.' ((surprised))

58 Fah:     khâa ca mây còp ʔaw
            'Yes. She will not be able to graduate.'

59 Po:      lɯ̌ɯ kháp
            'Really?'

60 T:       khâ
            'Yes.'

In segment 4, Professor Fah relates various ways in which this student has failed to meet program requirements and expectations. While in segment 3 she had positioned the student in relation to a narratively configured conventional grid, in segment 4 the professor characterizes the student's conduct as unconventional in relation to a commonly understood, institutionally authorized framework of evaluation, such as taking final exams and maintaining a reasonable grade point average. Fah explains that the teachers do not know how to resolve these problems, and finally suggests that a major consequence of the unresolved problematic situation is that the student will not be able to graduate. Po continues to maintain his own narrative perspective, expressing surprise and lack of knowledge about his daughter's performance, perhaps as means of accounting for his own failure to intervene earlier in his daughter's academic troubles.

Professor Fah discursively configures moral frameworks that can be used to make sense out of Po's daughter's actions, and these frameworks make use of the kinds of moral thinking laid out in Taylor's (1989) argument, which includes considerations of obligations and respect, what makes life meaningful, a sense of dignity. Addressing considerations of obligations and respect, Fah explains the program requirements and faculty expectations that have been dashed by the student (flouting her faculty advisors, skipping exams, getting poor grades). Failing to conform to the norms set by other students' actions, as this student does, threatens her personal dignity (the ability to command the respect of others). And Fah's narration also references considerations of what makes life meaningful as she evaluates the desirability of achieving socially meaningful goals (graduating, getting a job) that this student will not achieve. These frameworks constitute the good- a moral landscape of evaluation- as narratively configured by the teacher. Represented within this interpretive framework, the actions of Po's daughter are situated outside the horizon of the good.

## Moral Positioning through Tense, Aspect and Modality

"To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space."
(Taylor, 1989: 28)

Within the conceptualization of the good developed above—as an obligatory, desirable, and normative world among alternates—the temporal dimension of morality is an important narrative resource for positioning people in relation to moral frameworks. This good world can be described as having been realized or unrealized, as existing or absent, and as hypothetically probably or improbable. This section focuses on how Thai

narrators use grammatical markers of tense, aspect and modality to orient story characters

and protagonists within the temporal landscape of moral evaluation. [ix]

*Constructing the good: A hypothetical world.*

Co-narrators must construct the moral frameworks and conventional grids that are

used to orient narrated persons, including themselves, in relation to the good. In Thai,

narrators use the temporal particle, *ca* (usually future tense),[x] to sketch out the landscape

of the normative and socially expected world of situations that constitute the good.

*An obligatory future.* The future tense and the modality of obligation are used

(often together), mainly in the setting phases of narratives, to represent an ideal

hypothetical world that fulfills social obligations and expectations. In Thai the following

grammatical items are used to construct such a world:

ca ('will/ would'): a pre-verbal particle marking a relative posterior time (future,

conditional, habitual, hypothetical situations).

*tôŋ* ('must'): a modal verb of obligation (deontic modality).[xi]

In the following examples, in the process of configuring the conventional grid by

which narrated situations and persons will be judged, the teacher depicts a hypothetical

world in which certain acts are expected of moral actors.

Segment 5: (lines 11-12)[xii]

Fah:      thəəm nii  nîa (4.0) thəəm nii nîa thúk khon náksừksăa thúk khon
          'This semester, (4.0) this semester everybody, all the students'

          **ca tôŋ** fừkŋaan
          **'will have to** do an internship.'

Segment 6: (line 14)

Fah:        ná há law **ca tôŋ** sòŋ pay fɨ̀kŋaan
            'Okay? We **will have to** send them for an internship.'

Segment 7: (line 90)

Fah:        khâ **ca** còp nîia **tôŋ** dâay yàŋ nɔ́ɔy sɔ̌ɔŋ cùt sǔun sǔun
            'Yes. **To** graduate, students **must** get at least 2.0.'

In these segments, Professor Fah uses the grammatical marking of future and obligation together to construct a hypothetical temporal frame for obligatory actions, describing would-be conduct that is socially or institutionally expected, such as doing an internship, sending students on internships, and getting a 2.0 grade point average.

*A conditional future.* The future particle (*ca* ) also marks a conditional future, and in this narrative activity speakers use it to construct an ideal world that will result if certain felicitous actions are carried out. In segment 8, for example, the teacher is describing the future situation that she believes would result from having an internship. If the students complete their internships now, they will later reap the benefits.

Segment 8: (lines 24-30)

Fah:        phɨ̀a  wâa thəəm thəəm  plaay nîia
            'In case, (during) the last semester,'

            thâa khay sǎamâat hǎa ŋaan tham dây ləəy
            'if any students could find a job,'

            tua ʔeeŋ kô **ca** dây sabaay
            'they themselves **will** be fine.'

            cháy máy há man **ca** dây còp lew nɔ̀y
            'Right? So they **will** graduate a bit early.'

            dây ŋaan tham lew nɔ̀y
            'Get a job a bit early.'

*Constructing the already good: A realized world*

Co-narrators temporally position narrated persons in relation to moral frameworks by identifying them as individuals who have already performed moral actions, had moral experiences, or who already possess certain characteristics. Using the grammatical constructions that express completive, realized, perfect and experiential meanings, narrators represent a "good" world that has been realized through these experiences, actions or characteristics.

*The already good.* Co-narrators orient themselves and others within these temporal landscapes of evaluation by indicating that appropriate and expected actions have been completed or realized, which is accomplished (in part) by with the grammatical and lexical forms equivalent in meaning to "already":

*kɔ̀ɔn* : an adverb and preposition meaning "before"

*rîaprɔ́ɔy* : an adverb (lit. "tidy, orderly") used to refer to achievements or

accomplishments that are completely or thoroughly done.

*lɛ́ɛw* : a present perfect marker highlighting the current relevance of a preceding

situation (sometimes translated 'already', with the emphatic nuance that term

sometimes conveys) (Howard, 2000).

In segments 9 and 10, Professor Fah indicates that she and others have already taken actions that she had earlier narrated as lying within the domain of the good: For the program faculty, having assigned each student to an internship; for the students, having sought and secured an internship assignment.

Segment 9: (line 20):

Fah:         law kɔ̂  ləəy  hây  pay fʉ̀ksǎa **kɔ̀ɔn** thəəm  nîi
            'And so, we gave them an internship **before** this semester.'

Segment 10: (lines 32-34):

Fah:         phʉ̂an kháw maa kan mʉ̂a wan thîi pɛ̀ɛt nîa ná khá
            'Her classmates came together on the eighth.'

            maa cəə kàp ʔacaan **l̃iaplɔ́ɔy**
            'They all came to meet the teachers **already**.'

In these segments, teachers and all of the other students are described as having realized expected and normative actions, thus they are temporally positioned as lying squarely within the horizon of the good.

*The experienced good*. Co-narrators use experiential markers, resultative markers and perfect markers to describe a person's past experience of the good world, which places the experiencer within that world at the moment of the narrative telling. In this narrative, the experiential and resultative were used in this way:

*khǝǝy* : an experiential marker indicating that a situation has been experienced at some time prior to a reference point.

*wáy* : (lit. 'to put away') a completive/ resultative marker.

In the following example, Professor Fah uses these markers to characterize herself as having experienced the good, emphasizing that she had already had the experience of making attempts to deal with Po's daughter's problems. The use of the resultative marker indicates that this attempt was made not only prior to the *narrated* reference point (before the student finished her first year) , but also that it had continuing material and/or emotional consequences that were relevant at the time the story was being recounted. The use of these two markers together emphasizes the realization of this relevant experience.

Segment 11: (lines 62-66):

Fah:       ńî tɔɔn thíĩ tɔɔn thíĩ ʔacaan ʔɛɛn fàak mûa pii nɨ̀ŋ ńîa
           'When, when Professor Ann admitted her in the first year,'

           dây **khəəy** rian ʔacaan **wáy**  phɔɔ còp  pii nɨ̀ŋ pay lɛ́ɛw ńîa
           'I **already** had the chance to inform the professor that, when she had
           finished the first year,'

           **khəəy** rian ʔacaan ʔɛɛn **wáy** wâa hhh.
           'I had **already** informed Professor Ann that hhh'

           phasǎa kháw ńîa mây khɔ̂y dii
           'her language was not so good.'

Here Professor Fah argues that she had already attempted to address problems with this

student that were evident in the first year of her studies, by informing her colleagues that

she had noticed problems with this student's language skills. By describing these actions

the narrator represents herself as someone who has already taken appropriate steps in

relation to the central problematic situation presented in the narrative.

*Constructing the un-good: An unrealized world*

        Just as story characters and co-narrators can be morally evaluated by recounting

how they have acted in ways that have allowed them to realize the ideal hypothetical

world, they can also be oriented outside of the good by not having taken actions , had

experiences, or possessing characteristics that would realize that world. These negative

observations evaluate the student by directly invoking the ideal hypothetical world

constructed as the good in earlier narrative segments, against which she is compared.

        *The not yet good: unrealized past actions*. Those outside the realm of the "good"

are depicted as *not* having realized expected, normative or appropriate past actions. In

such instances, the grammatical negator *mây* is found in utterances otherwise describing

actions that would fit within the good. In the following examples, the teacher mentions

required or expected actions that the student has failed to perform: coming to get an

internship (an expectation mentioned in segment 3), finishing a course and taking a test

(commonly understood expectations).

Segment 12: (line 41)

Fah:          kháw kɔ̂ **mây** maa hǎa ləəy
                       'She did **not** come at all.'

Segment 13: (line 44)

Fah:          lɛ́ɛw kɔ̂ mii wíchaa nɯ̀ŋ thîi yaŋ **mây** sèt
                       'And there is one course she still has **not** finished.'

Segment 14: (line 46)

Fah:          kháw kɔ̂ **mây** maa sɔ̀ɔp
                       'She also did **not** come to take the test.'

      *The not yet good: the lack of past experiences*. Utterances containing the

experiential marker are negated to depict a person who has never yet experienced a

certain aspect of the "good":

      *mây khəəy*: negative + experiential, indicates a relevant situation which has not

      yet been experienced.

Segment 15: (lines 59-61)

Fah:          ciŋ ciŋ kháw mây dây mây dây dây sɔ̌ɔŋ kwàa
                       'In fact, she hasn't gotten, hasn't gotten more than 2.0.'

          ná há **mây khəəy** thɯ̌ŋ (.8) ná khá
                       'Okay? She **has never yet** reached it, (.8) okay?'

In this example, Professor Fah reports that Po's daughter has not yet reached even a

minimal grade point average in her courses.

*The un-good: negative present states*: The un-good are described as lacking positive qualities, through the use of negated stative verbs in the present time frame. It is noteworthy that the student and the things closely associated with her are frequently characterized as failing to represent positive qualities, rather than as being outright "bad". In segment 16, the student's grades are described as "not good", and in segment 17 she is described, by both father and teacher, as "not enthusiastic".

Segment 16: (line 50):

Fah:    ʔa lɛ́ɛw kɔ̂  khanɛɛn kɔ̂  **mây dii**  ná  khá
        'And her grades are **not good** either, okay?'

Segment 17: (lines 80-81):

Po:     mây mây **mây katʉʉlʉʉlón**
        'She's not- not- **not enthusiastic**.'

Fah:    khâ kháw **mây katʉʉlʉʉlón thâwrày** ná khá
        'Right. She is **not very enthusiastic**, okay?'

*The unattainable good: impossible worlds*. The student is also described as lacking the possibility to reach the "good", because current circumstances do not provide a route to achieving desired goals. In segment 18, the teacher describes the consequences of the student's present circumstances-- not being able to graduate; and in segment 19, the teacher claims that there is no possible action she could now take in order to achieve the desired grade point average.[xiii]

Segment 18: (line 55):
Fah:    **ca mây** còp **ʔaw**
        'She **will not be able** to graduate.'

Segment 19: (lines 94-95):

Fah:    sɯ̂ŋ tham thâwlay
       'No matter how much she does,'

       kɔ̂ **mây mii thaŋ** thîi **ca** thɯ̌ŋ sɔ̌ɔŋ
       '**there is no way** that she **will** reach 2.0.'

In these examples a description of a hypothetical good world (graduating, reaching a certain grade point average) marked by the Thai future marker, is collocated with terms expressing negative possibility indicating that the hypothetical good world is unattainable.

       *The future: A probable un-good world*. The teacher also occasionally describes a likely future in which the student has not achieved normative goals and desired actions or outcomes. This is accomplished through the conjunction of the future particle and the negative marker, as in segment 20.

Segment 20: (lines 95-96)

Fah:    mây thɯ̌ŋ nɯ̀ŋ ca m-
       'Her grades won't reach one, won't-'

       **ca mây** thɯ̌ŋ nɯ̀ŋ cùt pɛ̀ɛt sá dûay sám pay
       'she **will not** even reach 1.8.'

*Tense, mood and aspect in narrative temporality*

       In narrative temporality, the weight of the past is brought to bear on who we are, as we orient toward a future of possible worlds (Brockmeier 2000; Ricoeur 1981). Our sense of morality involves orienting within the landscapes of moral evaluation that are configured, in part, through narrative activity as the right ways of responding to life's challenges. Temporality is the compass that establishes where we stand within that landscape: The hypothetical world of the good can be realized, existent and possible, or it can be unrealized, non-existent, and impossible. Narrators sketch out the landscape of

moral evaluation, and position people within (or outside of) this realm through the evaluative power of temporal perspective-taking (Andersen 1997) in narrative. As Andersen argues, tense and aspect is used by speakers to convey "a particular perspective on an event or a situation, including temporal and aspectual attributes of the situation or event" (1). Tense, aspect, and modality play a crucial role not only in presenting perspectives on temporal relations along a chronological timeline, but also in displaying different perspectives on the moral standing of story tellers and protagonists.

Conclusion

Taylor (1989) describes morality as existing within a space of questions about what it is good or valuable to be and what makes life worth living in the everyday realms of our work and family. Moral thinking, in his view, involves a sense of obligation to and respect for others (what is obligatory), a sense of what makes life meaningful (what is desirable), and a sense of one's own dignity (e.g., what is normal). Narrative explores how actors respond to the questions that life poses, how they feel about, react to, and attempt to resolve problematic or unexpected situations. In the process of recounting such events, co-narrators negotiate evaluations of what is obligatory, normal, and desirable to be and do. Narrative activity not only draws upon presupposed frameworks of morality in constructing characterizations and evaluations of story characters, it is also a prime site for narrators to build and construct those frameworks for use in current evaluations. Narrators configure grids of evaluation that apply to the current circumstances just as they explicitly or implicitly link current descriptions to the metapragmatic models that "mediate" our sense of identity (Wortham 2001, 2006).

Ochs and Capps (2001) describe the power of narrative to legitimize expectations:

By its very nature, narrative is a genre in which co-narrators not only depict and characterize the actions of narrated persons, but also configure the framework of interpretation for understanding the events thus depicted. Narrative settings often provide the backdrop against which interlocutors can interpret the problematic nature of events being depicted. As such, narrative settings are often used to elaborate and affirm the institutional, social, and conventional authority of the expectations that have been dashed by the story's central problematic event. In the data examined here, a student's parent and teacher are meeting to discuss her status as a student, as well as their roles as parent and teachers. In so doing, they characterize the student (and themselves) in relation to moral worlds that can be realized through the methods that each person employs in the avoidance and resolution of problems. This ideal moral landscape is sketched out in the story setting and complicating action, and constitutes a framework against which protagonists' thoughts, feelings and actions can be compared. The story's protagonists can be described as having realized this hypothetical, morally correct world through their actions, experiences and characteristics, thus orienting them within the temporal landscape of "the good". In this case, the problematic student's actions are set against the backdrop of institutional and conventional expectations as well as other students' normative behavior. She is described as not having realized the expected and normal conduct, as not possessing the characteristics associated with "normal" or "successful" students, and as unable to take actions that would place her in the realm of the "good" student.

The means by which teachers identify and frame children is consequential on a number of levels. It may be that the characterizations in this parent-teacher conference

arose out of a chain of characterizations and identifications that impacted this student in ways not visible in this data. The interpretation of the student as built in this narrative activity will certainly be consequential for her future identity both as a student and as a daughter. Earlier studies have shown that American educators tend to evaluate students' success or failure in terms of internal dispositions (such as ability, behavior and psychological states) (Mehan et al, 1986). Mehan (1996) found that school psychologists, teachers, and parents drew on different factors to explain the academic difficulties of problem students: School officials and psychologists described the student in terms of stable, internal characteristics in numerical terms as compared to age-grade norms, while teachers and parents spoke about the student in more contextual terms, mentioning situational contingencies (such as task and motivation) and changes over time (such as changing interests). In this data, while internal factors are sometimes mentioned ("she is not enthusiastic", "her English is not so good") the Thai educators represent this student in ways similar to the American mother in Mehan's data: her failure is largely explained in situationally contingent (not attending a test, missing an advising meeting) and historical (changing from motivated to not enthusiastic) terms. Rather than identifying the student's internal and stable dispositions, the factors used in explaining her failure are largely unstable (e.g., lack of effort) leaving open a possible future in which the student could hypothetically succeed in academic endeavors, given the right circumstances.

In Thai evaluations of students, it is notable that people are seen as becoming, rather than being, and as containing multiple potentialities across timescales across this lifetime and beyond. The discourses of evaluation seen here crucially involve characterizing the student as *not yet good* as opposed to bad, and as *not possessing* the characteristics of the

good, as opposed to possessing negative qualities: She is characterized as *un-good*, rather than as positively bad. This conceptualization of the person allows for the possibility, and perhaps even assumes, that she will someday reach her potential as a good person, and walk in the sunny landscape of the good.

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[i] Brockmeier (2000) notes that certain narratives, such as narratives of trauma and loss, are "static"-- destined to remain fractured and disjointed from the temporality of our life stories (67-68). These narratives must remain beside, and not integrated into, one's preceding or following life experiences, for there is no making sense of such tragedies. I would add, however, that these narratives also often constitute the inescapable emotional fabric of everything that follows, and the emotional filter over the memory of everything that preceded them.

[ii] In Thai colleges and universities parent-teacher conferences are conducted only under special circumstances at a time mutually agreed upon between the teacher and the parent In Thailand, unlike the United States, parents are considered to be the legal guardians of undergraduate students, thus information is shared more freely with the parents of college students than it is in the US context.

[iii] I am most grateful to Dr. Shoichi Iwasaki, who collected this data as part of a larger Thai language data corpus, and who generously shared the corpus with me and other scholars of the Thai language. I am also grateful to Dr. Amy Meepoe Baron who transcribed and consulted with me extensively on translations of this text. She and Ms. Jai Chenawongsa consulted with me on matters of Thai language grammar and use more generally. I must also gratefully acknowledge Dr. Supa Angkurawaranon and Dr. Ketckanda Jaturongkachoke, who have also consulted with me on matters of Thai language, grammar, and culture.

[iv] Bauman (Bauman, 2004) defines 'genre' as "a constellation of systemically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse" (3).

[v] Another response to the problem remains implicit, namely the fact that the program director called the student's father to this parent-teacher conference.

[vi] This is similar to the way that doctors have been found to deliver "bad news" through "perspective-display sequences" (Maynard, 1990). In these sequences, doctors delay the delivery of bad news by attempting to elicit the patient's opinion on their own diagnosis. In this way, the doctor can design his delivery of bad news in a way that displays (partial) alignment with the patient's viewpoint. I would like to thank Jeanne Katzman for pointing this out.

[vii] See Appendix I for transcription conventions used in the data segments.

[viii] This term was suggested by Elinor Ochs.

[ix] Grammatical description in this section draws on Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005), Smyth (2002), and on Bybee et al's (1994) typological, cross-linguistic description of the evolution, meaning, and use of tense, aspect and modality.

[x] Thai does not have obligatory tense marking. *ca* is not an absolute tense marker, but rather indicates a time frame that is posterior relative to a presupposed reference point. Smyth (Smyth, 2002) refers to *ca* as a marker of future tense, while Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005) refer to it as a marker of 'challengeability'. As such, it often allows an epistemic stance reading including some element of doubt or uncertainty. It has hypothetical, conditional, habitual (i.e. similar to 'would'), and relative future uses.

[xi] These two items can be used in combination.

xii Line numbers refer to the lines, consecutively numbered, in the transcript of the whole conference.

xiii There is a wide range of possibility modals in Thai, including pre-verbal modal auxiliaries, and serial verb constructions that are lexically determined and thus depend on the particular verb being used. For that reason they are too numerous to enumerate here.