Narrative Initiation in Personal versus Co-Constructed Narratives

One of the five dimensions of narrative described in Ochs & Capps (2001) influential work *Living Narrative* is that of tellership. Tellership refers to the extent of involvement by participants in the telling of a narrative (24). Narratives with single, primary tellers who recount a story to a mostly passive audience are generally considered "personal" (or "low involvement" using Ochs & Capps term). Polished written and oral narratives such as literature or well-rehearsed anecdotes can be considered personal narratives. Co-constructed (alternatively "high involvement") narratives, however, involve multiple tellers who collaborate to create a narrative. While there may still be a primary teller in co-constructed narratives, other participants influence the direction the narrative takes by asking questions, making challenges, and commenting on the events that occurred (55). Characterization of narratives as either personal or co-constructed is difficult, since narratives rarely fit neatly into one or the other category. Instead, narratives generally fall somewhere in the middle of a continuum. At one end of the continuum, narratives involve a single teller; at the other end, narratives have multiple co-tellers. Various levels of moderate involvement fall in between (20).

Given the seemingly infinite range of involvement storytellers can choose from in constructing their narratives, how is it that all conversation participants know what level of involvement is appropriate for a particular narrative? Sociolinguists generally assume that speakers intuitively adhere to certain rules when taking part in conversation (Cortazzi 1993:26). Additionally, telling a story is accomplished not only by the speaker's manipulation of talk, but through the "finely tuned process of hearer participation" (Schiffrin 1987:17). Any rules for involvement then, would have to be acknowledged by both the speaker and the hearer. It seems

reasonable that it is the primary storytellers[1] who utilize some sort of signal such that other participants in the conversation know whether the forthcoming narrative is intended to be more personal or co-constructed, and therefore act accordingly.

In attempting to determine if such a signal exists, I supposed that this signal would be located at the beginning of narratives, or close to it. This assumption seems justified because the storyteller would need to define what level of involvement she expects from her audience at the beginning of her narrative, if the rest of the narrative is to follow in that manner. In this paper, I looked specifically at the beginnings of narratives and attempted to determine whether there were any patterns that influenced whether the narrative was more personal or co-constructed. In particular, I analyzed the usage of discourse markers, and the proposal section of narratives.

Literature Review

In his book *Narrative Analysis* (1993), Martin Cortazzi constructs a model for the way conversational participants negotiate the intrusion of a narrative into the flow of conversation. Cortazzi argues that narratives are introduced into turn-by-turn talk using the following sequentially ordered elements: *proposal, acceptance, narrative, and receipt* (29). He defines the proposal as the primary storyteller's offer to tell a narrative to the other conversation participants; the acceptance is the listeners' acknowledgement of the teller's right to tell the story (30). As Cortazzi points out, the proposal and acceptance are necessary to begin a narrative because without them, the primary storyteller may be seen as imposing his narrative upon his audience (29). Examples of proposals include utterances such as "I have to tell you…" or "Did I tell you about…?" The acceptance to which would be something like, "Oh, tell me about it" or

[1] The "primary storyteller" in this paper is defined as the participant who initiates the topic of the narrative and relates events known to himself, but not other conversation participants

"No, I haven't heard about that." Additionally, Sacks (1974) argues that the proposal often contains a preface or abstract, such as "Something really funny happened today…" that highlights why the proposed narrative would be of interest to the other participants.

While very insightful, Cortazzi's model seems somewhat narrow in that he describes the narratives he analyzed as "extended turns" with "no transition relevance points", indicating that he views narratives as being mostly personal rather than co-constructed (30). Since co-constructed narratives are in fact, the more common type of narrative in everyday life, I thought it would be highly relevant to examine whether the proposal section of the narrative differs in personal versus co-constructed narratives.

Aside from looking at the proposal section, it seemed that discourse markers might also play a significant role in determining whether a narrative would be personal or co-constructed. In Schourup's (1999) overview of discourse markers (DMs), he highlights the most prominent characteristic of DMs, that of connectivity (230). Connectivity refers to the usage of DMs to signal the relationship between one speaker's utterance and another's response and create inter-utterance coherence (Schiffrin 1987). Since DMs play a major role in how a particular utterance is interpreted, it seems plausible that primary storytellers may utilize DMs in order to convey the level of involvement they expect from the other participants.

Neal Norrick's (2001) study on the usage of the specific DMs *well* and *but* found that both of these DMs are used similarly in narrative (851). Primarily, Norrick argues that they have an organizational function and are used to signal transition points in narratives, such as the beginning and end, and also focus listener attention on the point of the story. He also found that

when *well* and *but* are used to introduce the first intonation unit[2] (IU) of the narrative proper, they function primarily to signal to the listener that the narrative is beginning (854).

Norrick examined only co-constructed narratives in his study, and I was interested in whether a similar usage of *well* and *but* (and other DMs) would be found in personal narratives. If on the other hand, a difference in the usage of DMs in the two narrative types was found, this could possibly indicate that DMs function to signal the level of involvement expected of the storyteller's audience.

Data

The data analyzed were from a set of conversation recordings made by students in Deborah Keller-Cohen's Fall 2006 Linguistics 362 class. Six narratives classified as co-constructed and five narratives classified as personal were analyzed. Selection of narratives was based on whether they were easily identifiable as either personal or co-constructed – narratives that were ambiguous or somewhere in between were avoided. No other criteria (such as gender, number of participants, age, or race) were used in selecting narratives; however, due to the data set, all conversation participants analyzed were between the ages of 18-21.

A narrative was defined as personal if there was a clear primary teller who was the sole director and constructor of the narrative. Interjections by other conversation participants were limited to minimal responses (such as "yeah" and "mhmm"). In all the personal narratives analyzed, there was a series of at least ten intonation units spoken by the primary storyteller with no contributions from other participants. Conversely, narratives were defined as co-constructed

[2] An intonation unit is defined in this paper as a stretch of speech uttered under a single intonation contour, as defined by the conversation transcriber.

if there was high involvement from non-primary tellers, who contributed to the content and direction of the narrative.

In order to select narratives for analysis, it was first necessary to define what counted as narrative. Labov defines narrative as a way of representing past events using a sequence of temporally ordered clauses (225). Using this definition, I considered even the most minimal narratives, with few clauses. However, all the narratives I ended up using for analysis were much more extensive that this (ranging from 12-45 intonation units).

The start of a narrative was defined as the first intonation unit related to the topic of that narrative (usually the proposal section). I avoided narratives that had ambiguous or indeterminable proposal sections. I did this because I specifically was interested in looking at how the proposal section relates to the involvement of the participants in the conversation.

In order to analyze the usage of DMs in narrative initiation, it was necessary to first define the criteria for identifying DMs. My qualification of a lexical item as a discourse marker was based on its ability to be removed from the utterance without changing the meaning of that utterance and its usage to signal connectivity between two or more parts of speech.

I looked at the usage of DMs at three positions within the beginning of the narratives. First, I looked at DMs located in the first intonation unit of the narrative proper, since this was where Norrick found that DMs are used to signal the beginning of the narrative (854). For example, in the narrative below (pg. 6), I considered Roger's "Ok (.) so in the, in the last part we're supposed to talk…" as the beginning of the narrative proper[3], while his "Like you know did I tell you this story?" was considered to be the proposal, and Ariel's "What story?" was considered to be the acceptance.

[3] The narrative proper was defined as the body of the narrative, immediately following the proposal and acceptance sections.

Additionally, I looked at the usage of DMs in the proposal section, as well as in the intonation unit immediately preceding it. If DMs did play a role in participants' level of involvement in the narrative, it seemed likely that they would be located in one of these positions.

Roger:	*Like you know did I tell you this story?*
Ariel:	**<Hx> @@**
	No:o @ <Hx>
Roger:	XXXX right there?
Ariel:	<H><Hx> *What story?*
Roger:	*OK* (.) so in the,
	In the last part we're supposed to talk about just like a wrap up,

Analysis

As Schiffrin (1987) and Cortazzi (1993) describe, the proposal section of a narrative may take the form of a question (such as "You know what happened?") or a statement or offer (such as "I must tell you this."). In all six of the six co-constructed narratives analyzed, the primary storyteller used a question form in the proposal section to ask for permission to continue with the narrative. One example of the use of a question in the proposal is in the following narrative when Samantha asks Gabby if she wants to know what happened.

Samantha:	Hello (…) XXX (…)
	So you want to know what happened? (..)
Gabby:	*Yes, what happened?*

Gabby's reply can be considered an acceptance to Samantha's proposal, using Cortazzi's terminology. By answering "Yes" and further asking, "What happened?" Gabby is in effect,

telling Samantha that she wants to hear Samantha's narrative. The proposal section for two more of the co-constructed narratives are shown below and follow a similar pattern.

Debbie:	=No but listen. Ok like- I had- *you know how I called into work sick?*
Kristin:	*Mm hmm.*

Jo:	*did I tell you,* That I'm – I sort of have my own resolution to be nice to Lee [until she really screws up
Beth:	[*yeah uh huh.*

In both of these examples, the storyteller makes a proposition to tell her story, and receives a positive response to her question. The storyteller then proceeds with her narrative.

For all the co-constructed narratives, I noticed that the "listeners" interjected their own question or comment within three intonation units of the beginning of the narrative proper, which indicated that they had interpreted the narrative as being co-constructed. This finding lent further strength to my assumption that listeners interpret the appropriate level of involvement fairly early in the narrative. In particular, it appeared that it was the proposal and acceptance that defined the level of involvement expected by the primary storyteller.

In all of the above examples, by asking a question, the primary storyteller is actually creating the first part of an adjacency pair. Adjacency pairs are paired utterances created by different speakers that have a first part and a second part, such that the presence of the first part requires a particular second part (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). By requiring a response from the other participants, the primary storyteller may be signaling that they welcome and encourage contributions from the other participants.

In complete contrast to the pattern found in co-constructed narratives, the proposal sections in personal narratives did not truly appear to be proposals, but merely statements informing the listeners that a narrative was forthcoming. For example, in the conversation below, John commands his audience to "listen to this" before beginning his narrative. The other participants are not given a chance to accept or reject his narrative as they are in co-constructed narratives. The lack of an acceptance section is apparent as John immediately launches into his narrative in the line following the proposal.

John: (.) *Well listen to this, (.) listen to this.* U:m (.) oo ah,
(..) Stefja? (.) Stephanie, (.) her finger last night?
I guess she cut a little bit of it, or something?
And like (.) YEAH uh [so like when she]

Melissa's narrative was initiated in a similar manner. She prefaces her narrative with "because like the whole thing happened like this," and immediately commences her narrative which begins with "like at the very end of the night…"

Melissa: But th- this is my favorite though,
(..) because like the whole thing happened like this,
(.)like at the very end of the night like when I was going to leave or whatever,

In all five of the personal narratives analyzed, a statement, rather than a question, was used in the proposal section. The narratives also all surprisingly did not contain an acceptance by any other participants in the conversation. The primary storytellers simply launched into their narratives immediately following the proposal (if it can be called that).

Based on these findings, it seems that a primary storyteller uses an adjacency pair if he wishes active involvement from other participants in his narrative. In contrast, by using a statement, which does not require a response, the storyteller may be signaling that he wishes to be the sole creator of the narrative, and that other participants should act more as a passive audience.

In my analysis of DMs, however, I did not find a significant discrepancy in DM usage between the two narrative types. In the table below, I list all of the DMs used in each of the three positions I looked at: the narrative's proposal section, the IU immediately preceding the proposal, and the first IU of the narrative proper.

Table 1. Discourse marker usage at three narrative initiation positions

Narrative	**IU pre. Proposal**	**Proposal**	**1st IU of Narr.**
Tom (Co-constructed)	✖	✖	So
Lauren (Co-constructed)	But	✖	O.K.
Garri (Co-constructed)	✖	So	So
Liz (Co-constructed)	✖	Oh my god	✖
Ellen (Co-constructed)	All right	Well	So
Charlie (Co-constructed)	Oh my god	✖	OK
TOTAL # DMs	3	3	5
Stephanie (Personal)	✖	✖	So
Lauren (Personal)	Oh my god	✖	✖
Lauren #2 (Personal)	✖	Well	So
Ellen (Personal)	✖	But	✖
Michelle (Personal)	But	✖	Like
TOTAL # DMs	2	2	3

✖ = No discourse marker used at this position.

There did not appear to be an obvious difference between the two narrative types in the number of discourse markers used at any of the three positions. DMs were used at each position at least twice in both types of narratives. This indicated that the presence of a DM at an initial position did not function to signal the level of involvement expected; therefore, if there were a

correlation between the type of narrative and usage of DMs, it would have to be in *which* DM was used.

However, no significant relationship was found between which DM was used and whether the narrative was personal or co-constructed at any of the three positions. There was at least one DM at each of the three positions that was the same for both narrative types. Because of these findings, it seemed reasonable to conclude that the usage of DMs at the beginning of narratives does not have a relation with the type of narrative.

It was interesting to note, however, that the DM *so* was used almost exclusively in the first IU of the narrative proper. This finding supports Schiffrin's (1987:200) idea that *so* is used to mark transitions between subordinate (side-information) and dominant (main point) units in narrative. *So* was used five times in the narratives to mark the transition from the proposal (which can be considered subordinate) to the narrative proper (dominant). Also intriguing was the tendency for the DM *oh my god* to be used at positions preceding the narrative proper. *Oh my god* seems to indicate enthusiasm and may be used by the storyteller to create interest in the forthcoming narrative.

Conclusion

My findings compel further research and analysis, especially related to the seemingly perfect correlation (at least in the narratives I analyzed) between whether the proposal was formatted as a question or a statement, and the narrative type. As discussed previously, it may be that by creating an adjacency pair before the narrative proper begins, the primary storyteller is signaling or inviting listeners to be highly involved in the construction of the narrative. In contrast, the audience may get the idea that they are not welcome to participate in the narrative if

the storyteller does not even give them a chance to accept or reject the narrative. Future studies done on a much larger scale would prove useful in determining if this pattern truly exists. Additionally, my analysis did not take into account the relationship between the speakers, how the narrative fit into previous conversation, or other factors (age, ethnicity) which may have had a significant impact on the data.

My analysis of discourse markers showed good evidence that DMs probably do not play a role in signaling to the audience the level of involvement expected of them. I originally hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in both *how often* DMs were used as well as *which* DMs were used between narrative types. However, it seems that my hypothesis was unfounded. I did find, interestingly, that the DM *oh my god* seemed to be a popular way of introducing a narrative. Further research will need to be done to see, for instance, if this DM is a feature of young people's speech or how its function differs from the DM *oh*.

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