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“Oh Talking Voice That Is So Sweet”: The Poetic Nature of Conversation*

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

POETS, playwrights, and listeners to stories told in conversation are in love with the speaking human voice. In poems, in plays, and in telling friends about something that happened, people strive to capture the lilt, the verbal twist, the particular nuance of what someone said in conversation.

Many fiction writers locate the roots of their art in conversational stories. The Mississippi-born writer Eudora Welty, for example, in *One Writer's Beginnings*, describes her excitement when, as a small child, she set off on a car trip with her parents and a gossip neighbor:

My mother sat in the back with her friend, and I'm told that as a small child I would ask to sit in the middle, and say as we started off, "Now *talk*."

There was dialogue throughout the lady's accounts to my mother. "I said" . . . "He said" . . . "And I'm told she very plainly said" . . . "It was midnight before they finally heard, and what do you think it *was*?" (pp. 12–13).

* The examples of spoken and written language that I analyze here were also discussed in a paper entitled "Involvement as Dialogue: Linguistic Theory and the Relation between Conversational and Literary Discourse," in Michael Macovski, ed., *Dialogue and Critical Discourse* (1997, pp. 137–57). The analysis was conducted with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful for this support. My discussion of poetic features in conversation is based upon my book *Talking Voices* (1989).

SOCIAL RESEARCH, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Fall 1998)

Welty traces her beginnings as a writer to her fascination with gossip—the stories about people she heard in conversation.

The black South African writer Mark Mathabane grew up in the ghastly shacks of Alexandra, Johannesburg, in a world where no books were in view and neither of his parents could read or write. Years later, when an American talk show host asked how he developed his love of literature, Mathabane answered,

The seeds of this love for knowledge and for reading were planted . . . when my mother would gather us around the fire—usually we were wracked with pangs of hunger, because there was nothing to eat—and she would tell such mesmerizing stories, vivid images, deeply entertaining and instructive. And then we'd forget that we were hungry. And I think that her knowledge of these stories became our library, and if I am asked, "Where do you trace your creativity to," I think to those days.¹

In a sense, the challenge faced by writers of fiction and poetry is to reproduce, in writing, the mesmerizing effect of spoken language—a challenge articulated by the British poet Stevie Smith in *Notes on Yellow Paper*: "Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, semi-colons, dashes, pauses and paragraphs?" ([1936] 1982, p. 46).

Most of us tend to think of literature as the artful use of language, and conversation as a messy, graceless, quotidian use of it. But the magnetism of stories told in conversation, and the fascination that everyday language holds for so many verbal artists, belies that belief; so does the research I have been doing over the past two decades, showing that forms of language that we think of as literary are found in everyday conversation. Literary critics have long labored to elucidate the workings of literary language. I have focused my research on how the voice talking in everyday conversation casts its magical spell.

Ordinary conversation, I have tried to show,² provides the source for what I call linguistic strategies that are artfully developed in literary discourse. Put another way, ordinary conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that have been thought quintessentially literary. These strategies, which are shaped and elaborated in literary discourse, are pervasive, spontaneous, and functional in ordinary conversation. These poetic linguistic elements drive both conversational and literary discourse by means of patterns of sound and sense. Sound patterns—the musical level of language, including rhythm, intonation, and prosody—involve the audience with the speaker or writer and the discourse by sweeping them along, much as music sweeps listeners along, luring them to move in its rhythm. (William McNeill, in his book *Keeping Together in Time* [1995], shows that moving together in rhythm in itself creates a sense of rapport and community.) At the same time, involvement is created through listener participation in sense-making: by doing some of the work of making meaning, hearers become participants in the creation of meaning in conversation.

Conversation is not a passive endeavor of listening to someone else speak. Nor is it a matter of serial passivity, in which a person actively speaks then remains passive while another speaks. Engaging in conversation is always active, thanks to these two types of involvement.

The involvement strategies I identify in conversation are also those that literary analysts have independently identified as important in literary discourse. The three I have examined in depth are repetition, dialogue, and details. Repetition establishes rhythm and also meaning by patterns of constants and contrasts. Dialogue—the representation of voices (what has been called, erroneously I argue, “reported speech”)—creates rhythm and musical cadence as well as setting up a drama-like scene in which characters interact with each other and engage in culturally recognizable activities. Details provide seeds from which listeners sprout characters, emotions, and meanings.

Some years ago, I wrote a book about the work of a modern Greek author named Lilika Nakos.³ In the course of researching that book, I spent a great deal of time with Nakos, by then an old woman, at her home in Halandri, outside Athens. In answer to my questions, she told me about the circumstances under which she had written her novels. Her answers often included incidents that were also fictionalized in the novels. When I later compared Nakos's conversational renderings of her experience with her fictional accounts of the same events, I was struck that her stories told in conversation were more involving—in a sense, more poetic. The novelistic versions are more literary in the sense of using elaborated metaphors and developed scenes. (Thus, to say that Nakos's conversation is more "poetic" in the sense of "more involving" does not undercut the literary inventiveness of her fiction.) Setting excerpts from the conversation beside excerpts describing the same material in the novels sets in relief the poetic quality of the conversational narratives—and illustrates the poetic nature of spontaneous conversation.⁴

Lilika Nakos (1899–1989) was a member of a group of Greek writers known as "The Generation of the Thirties" who forged the novel form in modern Greek. One of the first women to write prose fiction in Greek, Nakos was known for her lyrical use of the demotic, or spoken language.⁵ Indeed, a contemporary critic, commenting on Nakos's early writing, proclaimed that she wrote "not literature, but conversation." He perceived her writing to be so conversational in tone that he did not see it as literature at all.

Consider, to start, an excerpt of Nakos's conversational discourse alone, in order to show what I am calling its poetic nature. The first example is taken from a conversation in which Nakos is telling me about the circumstances that led her to write one of her novels.

Example 1: "What, humorous?"

Lilika Nakos wrote her most commercially successful novel, *Mrs. Doremi (I Kyria Ntoremi)*,⁶ in 1947 for a French-language mag-

azine in Switzerland. She subsequently rewrote it in Greek, and it was published in Athens in 1955. During the devastating German occupation of Greece during World II, Nakos starved, froze, was beaten, and lost most of those she was close to; her mother died shortly after the war as a result of hardships she suffered during it. The death of her mother, who had been her only family and her main companion and responsibility, freed Nakos to leave Greece, which was then embroiled in a civil war as devastating as the world war upon whose heels it followed. In 1947, she returned to Switzerland, where she had grown up from the age of twelve, where she had written her first work in French, and where she had developed a reputation as a writer before she returned to her homeland, Greece, at the age of thirty-one.

The following excerpt is from a conversation in which Nakos was telling me about how she came to write the novel *Mrs. Doremi*, her only comic novel. She had just arrived in Switzerland and was sitting in the train station, destitute and aimless. An acquaintance from her earlier time in Geneva approached and told her that a magazine editor had heard about her arrival and wanted to commission a novella—a humorous one. She remarked, “What, humorous?” She wasn’t feeling humorous at all because, as she explained,

Den eicha tipota.
Oute na koimitho,
oute na fao,
oute domatio,
oute tipota.

I didn’t have anything.
Neither to sleep,
neither to eat,
neither a room,
neither anything.

I have laid out the transcription of Nakos’s conversation in lines, not to pretend that it is poetry but to reflect the rhythmic chunking that is created in speaking by intonation and prosody. It is hard to render a sense of the Greek in English translation because Greek is, by virtue of its grammar as well as its conventional use, far more elliptical than English. Structures that are natural and

grammatical in Greek sound truncated and ungrammatical when rendered in English. I'll try to show how this works.

The first line contains two negatives:

<i>Den</i>	<i>eicha</i>	<i>tipota.</i>
Neg.	(I) had	nothing

One could render this in English as “I didn’t have anything” or “I had nothing,” but in either case, the double negative is lost. (The more literal translation, “I didn’t have nothing,” sounds either ungrammatical or extremely colloquial in English.) Nakos then illustrated this negative statement with three specific lacks, three things she didn’t have, also expressed in elliptical form:

<i>Den eicha tipota—</i>	I had nothing—
<i>oute na koimitho</i>	nowhere to sleep
<i>oute na fao</i>	nothing to eat
<i>oute domatio</i>	no room
<i>oute tipota.</i>	no nothing.

Looking at the Greek in the left column, one can see that it contains more parallelism than the English in the right column: the word *oute* was spoken four times, each time beginning a new burst of speech bounded by a coherent intonational contour—in other words, a separate phrase. In order to allow the reader to perceive more directly the rhythm of the Greek, I present a word by word gloss:

<i>Oute</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>koimitho</i>
Neither	to	(I) sleep
 <i>oute</i>	 <i>na</i>	 <i>fao</i>
neither	to	(I) eat
<i>oute</i>	<i>domatio</i>	
neither	room	

oute *tipota.*
neither nothing.

Part of the impact of this segment in Greek derives from its iconicity. The elliptical grammatical expression in Greek reinforces the impression of scarcity that Nakos is describing. Furthermore, the rhythm established by the parallelism ("not to sleep, not to eat, no room, no nothing") creates a listing intonation that implies a longer, perhaps even an endless, series, of which only three items are specified. At the same time, this rhythmic pattern involves the hearer in the world created by the narrative, with its sense of isolation and deprivation.

Against this background, Nakos describes why (and, elliptically, how) she complied with the request for a comic novel:

<i>kai mou edose pentakosia frangka.</i>	And he gave me 500 francs.
<i>Piga,</i>	I went,
<i>pira domatio,</i>	took a room,
<i>efaga,</i>	ate,
<i>kai archisa na to grapso.</i>	and began to write.

The three statements of what she did not have are now matched rhythmically by three statements of what she was able to get with the five-hundred-franc advance. Again, to give a sense of the elliptical nature of the Greek expressions, I present a word by word gloss:

Piga,
went

pira domatio,
took room

efaga
ate

<i>kai</i>	<i>archisa</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>grapso.</i>
and	began	to	it	write

I have omitted the grammatically requisite pronouns in English to represent the sparsity of the Greek; one must try to hear it, though, as perfectly grammatical, and to sense that the first person is included in the verb.

It is puzzling, in a way, that Nakos included the first line, "Piga," because semantically the word doesn't add anything to the story. I suggest that this line is there mostly to supply a third element to balance the list of three items she lacked: "nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, no room." Moreover, one may wonder why, in the first case, "nowhere to sleep" and "no room" were both present since they are essentially synonymous. Here too, the rhythmic realization of three is crucial to create a listing intonation, where the list effect suggests that there are more items that could have been listed than are actually named. At least three items are needed to make a list. The parallel rhythm is complete with the final line, which varies from the preceding three: "and I started to write," much as the last line of the preceding "verse" ends with a change in syntax ("No nothing") as well as intonation (the last item has falling rather than rising intonation).

This brief example shows the poetic nature of ordinary conversation, by which I mean that conversation creates involvement through audience participation in sense-making and rhythmic patterns. In this example, the linguistic elements I focused on are repetition and ellipsis, but I have no doubt other elements are at work as well.

The next two examples compare conversational and fictional accounts of the same events in order to show that the conversational discourse is more "involving" than the fictional.

Example 2: "To the kitchen!"

Toward a New Life (*Yia Mia Kainouryia Zoi*) is another of Nakos's major novels. It was written before World War II but was first published in 1960. It too was serialized for Greek television in the 1980s. Partly autobiographical, the novel is about a young woman, Barbara, who lives with her mother in Athens during the period of the repressive Metaxas dictatorship immediately before the entry of Greece into World War II. During one of our conversations, Nakos told me about her experiences as the first—and for a significant period of time the only—woman journalist in Greece in the 1930s. This is what she said (the English follows the Greek):

*Ego egrafa stin Akropoli
kai olo mou legan
"Stin kouzina! Stin kouzina!"
Nai, mia mera thimosa k'ego
sto diefthindi.
"Ma i kouzina thelei fayi,
a ma pios tha ergasti?"*

I wrote for the Acropolis
and they kept saying to me,
"To the kitchen! To the kitchen!"
Yeah, one day I got mad at the director.
"But the kitchen needs food,
so who's going to work?"

In the novel, this exchange is expanded and elaborated. Barbara's director says:

*"De thelo ego ginekes mesa sta grafia," xefonize. "I gineka einai fti-
agmeni yia tin kouzina kai to kravati." I Varvara tote den vastaxe
ke apantise: "Ma i kouzines, stratige, chriazonte simera pola chri-*

mata yia na yiomisoune trofima. Ego doulevo kai i mitera mou magirevi.

"I don't want women in the offices," he yelled. "A woman is made for the kitchen and the bed." Barbara then couldn't restrain herself and answered, "But kitchens, general, require a lot of money nowadays to fill them with food. I work and my mother cooks.

Let's consider the ways that the conversational version of the story is more involving or poetic. Nakos told me she was taunted,

"Stin kouzina! Stin kouzina!"

"To the kitchen! To the kitchen!"

This taunt, which is ambiguously attributed ("they kept saying to me"), is, first of all, elliptical. "To the kitchen" is a short way of saying, "Go to the kitchen," which in itself is a figurative representation of, "You should be in the kitchen." That she should be there because she is a woman is implied, not stated. All these implications are lexicalized and elaborated in the novel and attributed to the director (the person who in our day might be called managing editor) of the newspaper:

"I don't want women in the offices," he yelled. "A woman is made for the kitchen and the bed."

Nakos's response, as she reported it to me, is similarly elliptical:

"But the kitchen needs food (*thelei fayi*), so who's going to work?"

The rhetorical question, "Who's going to work?" is an elliptical way of saying that Nakos herself had to work; "the kitchen needs

food” is figurative in that the kitchen is anthropomorphized. The assumptions underlying this statement are spelled out in the novel:

“But kitchens, general, require today a lot of money to fill them with food (*chriazontai trofima*). I work and my mother cooks.”

Nakos also employs a more formal register in the fictional version. In our conversation, she used the demotic or vernacular term for food, “*fayi*,” but in the novel she used the formal register, or puristic form, “*trofima*.” The verbs, too, are different: in speaking, she said “*thelei*” (“needs”) food, whereas in the novel she wrote “*chriazontai*” (“requires”) food. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the idea that she wrote conversation, not literature. Clearly, her literature is not the same as her conversation. Her conversation is, paradoxically, more poetic, in the sense of creating involvement through the figures ellipsis and repetition, as well as the vividness created by use of the vernacular. The novel is more elaborated and written in a more formal or literary register.

I am not suggesting that the conversational version is in any sense the real one, what really happened or what was actually said. Quite the contrary, any human use of language is a creation; that is why I insist that there is no such thing, literally, as reported speech: even if a speaker recreates the exact words that were said, the fact of creating them in a new context constitutes an original utterance.⁷

Example 3: “I am a little ant”

In the next and last example, I again juxtapose two versions of the same events, one as spoken by Nakos in conversation with me and the other as she wrote it in her novel *Toward a New Life*. The conversation took place as Nakos and I were sitting on the porch

in front of her summer house in Ekali, a suburb of Athens. The house, which was later razed to make way for an apartment building, had been built by Nakos's father. (Nakos had hidden Communists there during the dictatorship.) In telling me the circumstances surrounding her writing of this novel (she said she wanted it to stand as a protest against the repressive Metaxas regime), Nakos told me about a woman who became a character in the novel: a young Communist whose real name was also the name of the character in the book, Chrysa (literally, Gold.) Nakos told me that Chrysa, who had been her friend and a frequent visitor to her home, was arrested and imprisoned in Athens. When Nakos went to visit her in prison, she discovered that Chrysa had been tortured.⁸ Following are juxtaposed excerpts from the conversation on the left and from the novel on the right, first in Greek and then in a free translation into English.

Conversation

*Piga sti filaki
m'ena mantili
etsi palia dimena sa ergatria.*

*Kai ti ferane.
Kai ti na do?
Ti ferane etsi dyo nosokomes.
Kathise sta kagela
kai mou leei,
"Lilika
an se zitisa
den einai na sou po
ti travixa ego,
yia na mathis omos ti travaei
o Ellinikos laos.
Ego 'me ena mirmigaki.
Afto to mirmigaki na foundosi*

Fiction

*"Ela pio konta," tis eipe.
Kai koitaxe yiro tis
san na fovotan
na min tin akousi kanenas.
"Den boro na milo dinata
kai den kanei.
Kai an sou po ti mou kanan
den einai yiati
zito tin symponia kanenos.
Mono tora kai si kratas mia pena
kai prepei na xereis ti yinete
ston topo mas.
Prepei na xereis tous dimious.
Ma de sta leo afta, Varvarva,
yia na kles.
Ma yia na xereis
ti travaei o kosmakis*

yia n'alaxi i zoi
ton anthropon pou ergazontai.
Leei, "Min kles, min kles.
Ego," leei, "eimai ena mirmigaki.
Kai esi," leei, "na se fonaxa
yiati, epi-epidi grafeis.
Echete kathikon eseis oi grafiades."
Etsi milouse, "oi grafiades."
"Na xerete ti travai
o Ellinikos laos."

I went to the prison
 with a kerchief
 like that, poorly dressed,
 like a worker.

And they brought her.
 And what do I see?
 They brought her like this,
 two nurses.
 She sat by the bars
 and she says to me:
 "Lilika, if I asked for you
 it's not to tell you
 what I went through,
 but for you to learn
 what the Greek people go through.

I am a little ant.
 This little ant will expand
 to change the life of working people."
 She says, "Don't cry, don't cry.
 I," she says, "am a little ant.
 And you," she says, "I called you
 because, si- since you write.

kai poi einai oi stavriotides tou.
Eisai nea. . .
tha ziseis
kai prepei na xereis
ti felana oi diktatories. . .
Yia mena den beirazei. . .
Ti eimai allo para ena halikaki,
ston kosmo pou chtizetai,
ston kosmo pou erchete.

"Come closer," she said to her.
 And she looked around her
 as if she was afraid
 someone might hear.
 "I can't speak loudly,
 and I shouldn't."
 And if I tell you what they did to
 me,
 it isn't because I'm looking for
 anyone's sympathy.
 It's only that now you hold a pen,
 and you should know what's
 happening
 in our country.
 You should know the
 executioners.

But I don't tell you this,
 Barbara,
 to make you cry.
 But for you to know what the
 people
 go through,
 and who their crucifiers are.
 You are young. . .

You have a responsibility,
 For me, it doesn't matter.
 you scribblers.
 (That's how she talked,
 "scribblers")
 in the world that is being built,
 to know
 what the Greek people go
 through.

You will live,
 and you should know what
 dictatorships
 are good for.
 What am I, but a little stone,
 in the world that is coming.

(The image of Chrysa as a little ant appears elsewhere in the novel:)

Kai i Chrysa ystera
 skeftiki eipe:
 "Ach! ki ego etsi
 thelo na eimai.
 Ena anonimo mirmigaki
 na kouvalao
 petradaki me petradaki
 yia na chtisti
 enas kosmos kainouryios.

And then Chrysa,
 thoughtful, said:
 "Ach! And I want to be like
 that.
 An anonymous little ant
 to drag
 pebble after pebble
 to build a new world.

I have been intrigued, in all the years since this conversation took place, and am constantly struck anew when reading the transcript, that the story as Nakos told it to me is more moving than

the one that appears in the novel. I can hardly read the lines “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” without feeling the urge to cry. What is it about the spoken version that has this effect? Again, the combination of musical rhythm created by the alternation of small bursts of speech and pauses plus the repetition together create involvement. Furthermore, the elliptical expression makes the listener fill in meaning and therefore have strong feelings for what is filled in. Finally, visual details create images that lead the listener to reconstruct a scene. All these are ways that, as the Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin put it, “the listener becomes the speaker” (1986, p. 68).

First, a detail leads the hearer to create an image of how Nakos was dressed: “with a kerchief,” “like a worker.” Next, the scene is set with a repetition that is lost in the English translation:

Kai ti ferane. (And they brought her)

Kai ti na do? (And what do I see?)

Ti ferane etsi dyo nosokomes. (They brought her like this, two nurses.)

The repetition of *kai ti* (pronounced “ke-tee”) in the first two lines is lost in English because the word *ti* is actually two different words, homonyms. In the first line, *kai ti ferane* (“and they brought her”), *ti* means “her,” spelled in Greek with the vowel *ita*. In the second line, *kai ti na do* (“and what do I see?”), *ti* means “what” (spelled in Greek with the vowel *iota*). When the third line picks up the phrase *ti ferane* (they brought her), the repetition of *ti* continues a thread woven through the three lines, rather than resuming a thread that has been lost in the English.

In both languages, the interjection “What do I see?” creates a pause as the reader waits to see what Chrysa looks like, just as Nakos or Barbara waited to see her friend brought. This iconically creates suspense.

Part of the rhythm of the spoken Greek is created by the repetition of the word *leei* (“she says”), which is uttered four times, three of them in consecutive lines during the part of the greatest

emotional intensity, when Chrysa tells Nakos not to cry. Elliptically, by representing Chrysa as telling her not to cry, Nakos informed me that she was crying. The repetition, "Don't cry, don't cry," is similar to the repetition in the earlier example, "To the kitchen, to the kitchen." The repetition creates a sense of repeated action.

In this section, the word *leei* is used to introduce the dialogue and then is interjected between subject and verb, an unlikely but not ungrammatical placement in English. In the following I present the English with the phrase "she says" rendered in Greek because the single word suggests the rhythm better than do the two words required in English. (*Leei* is pronounced "lay-ee," with slight emphasis on the first syllable.)

Leei "Don't cry, don't cry."
 I," *leei*, "am a little ant.
 And you," *leei*,
 "I called you because,
 si- since you write.

The repetition of *leei* creates a thread through the discourse that has a hypnotic rhythmic effect; it also reminds the hearer of Chrysa's presence and her voice at each repetition.

Contrast the direct address, "Don't cry, don't cry," with the novel:

Ma de sta leo afta, Varvara, yia na kles.
 But neg. you say these Barbara for to cry.

"But I don't tell you this, Barbara, to make you cry."

The repetition in "Don't cry, don't cry" iconically creates the impression that Barbara was crying continually. Also, the line of dialogue prompts the hearer to imagine a scene in which Nakos is crying and Chrysa is comforting her. The very sparsity of the dialogue, in other words, prompts the hearer to do more work

and create a more complete scene. In contrast, the line of dialogue in the novel does not create the image of Barbara crying—at least not as surely or as dramatically. It does not prompt the reader to imagine as vivid a scene as does the spoken discourse.

We are reminded of Chrysa again when, in the spoken story, Nakos interjects (after quoting Chrysa as saying “You have a responsibility, you scribblers”):

Etsi milouse, “oi grafiades”
Thus (she) spoke, the writers

“That’s how she talked, ‘scribblers.’”

The Greek word *grafo* (“to write”) yields the noun *grafiades* in the demotic vernacular, much as we get the noun *writer* from the verb *to write*. I use the term *scribblers* to suggest the vernacular tone of the Greek *grafiades*. The more standard Greek term would be *syn-grafeis*, a term that Nakos doesn’t use in the novel either. There she uses metonymy instead: “You hold a pen.”

Repetition is also crucial in the central metaphor of the conversational version, which is also used in the novel but in another section: that Chrysa is a little ant who is doing her part to build a new world. From the conversation:

Ego ’me ena mirmigaki.
I am a little-ant

Afto to mirmigaki na foundosi
This little-ant will expand

yia n’ alaxi i zoi
to change the life

ton anthropon pou ergazontai.
of the people who work.

Leei, *"Min kles,* *min kles.*
 She says, Don't cry, don't cry.

Ego," *leei,* *"eimai* *ena mirmigaki."*
 I, says, am a little-ant.

The Greek word that must be represented in English by "little ant" is a single word, *mirmigaki*. It is a word that has an iconic effect in itself. The "i" sound (as in English "bee") is one of the few phonological linguistic universals: in all known languages, this vowel is used in words referring to something small.⁹ This sound, which occurs three times in *mirmigaki* (*meermeeengakee*), is echoed as well in the verb *eimai* (pronounced *ee-may*), "I am." The word *mirmigaki* also communicates smallness by virtue of the diminutive ending *-aki*. So all these levels work together to create an effect of the smallness of Chrysa, the "little ant."

The relationship between the little ant and the new world is explicit in the novel; indeed, it is one of the novel's central metaphors and also lends it its optimistic title. In the conversation, Chrysa says simply that she is a little ant and the little ant will grow to change the life of working people. In the novel, in the section quoted first, Nakos uses the metaphor of a stone instead:

What am I but a little stone
 in the world that is being built,
 in the world that is coming.

In the later section, the figure of the ant is elaborated, and it is a simile (in other words, the comparison is explicit) rather than a metaphor (which is left to speak for itself):

I want to be like that. An anonymous little ant, to drag little-stone after little-stone, in order to build a new world.

In the novel, there is also more elaborate condemnation of the dictators who have tortured Chrysa, in fancier terms:

Prepei na xereis tous dimious. . . .
Ma yia na xereis ti travaei o kosmakis
kai poi einai oi stavriotides tou. . . .
Kai prepei na xereis ti felana oi diktatories.

And you should know the executioners. . . .
But to know what the people go through
and who their crucifiers are. . . .
And you must know what
dictatorships are good for.

All these examples are meant to show that the conversations in which Nakos told me about the events in her novels is more poetic than the fictional renderings of the same events. I am using the word *poetic* to refer to the use of such involving linguistic elements as rhythmic repetition, ellipsis, and figurative language that both sweeps hearers along and requires them to participate in sensemaking by imagining scenes suggested by the discourse. The fictional recreations of the events are artful as well, only in a more elaborated, literary way.

I hope this exercise has helped explain the magical power of stories told in conversation—why the talking voice is so sweet.

Notes

1. Mathabane (pronounced motta-BAHnay) was a guest on *The Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU-FM, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1989, on the publication of his book *Kaffir Boy in America*.

2. The book in which I lay out and support this claim is *Talking Voices*.

3. In writing the book, I confronted the dilemma of choosing a form for the subject's name. Her surname in Greek is Nakou (pronounced nah-koo), but her father's surname is Nakos. In Greek, a woman's last name is in the genitive case: literally, she is the Lilika belonging to Nakos. Greek women usually, but not always, adapt their names in English and European languages to reflect the same form as their husband's or father's. This is what Lilika Nakos did when publishing in French (though I also encountered, occasionally, the spelling Nacos), and her

few works published in English in the United States (translated from French) were published under that name as well. That is why I opted for the name "Nakos," even though I knew her as "Lilika Nakou," and that is how she is known to Greek audiences.

4. In this project, I was immeasurably aided by my research assistant Christina Kakava. She helped transcribe my taped conversations with Nakou and identified the passages in the books that corresponded to them. She also provided her own commentary on the comparison in her master's research paper. The analysis presented here is mine, but I have drawn upon Kakava's observations about Nakos's lexical choices.

5. The "language question" in Greece is a complex and highly politicized issue with a long and much-remarked history. When Greece achieved liberation from four hundred years of Turkish occupation, there was a movement to return to classical Greek in order to purge the Greek language of Turkish influence as Greeks had purged their land of Turkish rule. As a compromise between those who wished to revive classical Greek and those who wished to retain the form of Greek that had developed naturally over the years (demotic), an expatriate Greek scholar named Korais developed a synthetic form of the language that was purified of Turkish influence and reintroduced many grammatical aspects of classical Greek that had been lost through natural processes of linguistic change. This form of Greek, called puristic (*katharevousa*), was legally imposed as the official language of public discourse, with the result that fiction writers found themselves forbidden to represent the language of spoken discourse in print. For a brief summary of the influence of the language question on the development of modern Greek literature and Nakos's place in this history, see Tannen, 1983. For a detailed discussion of the language question and Greek literature, see Bien, 1972.

6. The title *Mrs. Doremi* refers to the first three notes of the musical scale, "do-re-mi." It comes from the nickname given to Nakos by the students to whom she taught music in a high school in Crete in 1933. Following her father's death, Nakos had been obliged to go to work to support herself and her mother, and to repay the debts her father had left. Having been raised in the upper class district of Plaka and the cosmopolitan city of Geneva, she spent a harrowing year as a high school teacher on the still wild island of Crete before locating a position as a high school teacher in Athens.

7. In *Talking Voices*, I argue that we should abandon the term "reported speech" in favor of "constructed dialogue" in order to move away from the misconception that a speaker can ever be merely a reporter and to reflect the real creativity involved in any act of speaking.

8. As I recount elsewhere (Tannen, 1983), Nakos said that Chrysa was suspended upside down and beaten, with her slip stuffed into her mouth to muffle her screams. Then a woman burned her genital organs with a match.

9. The universality of the association of what linguists call the high front vowel, /i/, with smallness is observed by Sapir (1929), Jespersen (1933), and Jakobson and Waugh (1979).

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