

“We’ve never been close, we’re very different”

Three narrative types in sister discourse

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Drawing on interviews I conducted with women about their sisters, I identify three narrative types: small-n narratives, big-N Narratives and Master Narratives. Small-n narratives are accounts of specific events or interactions that speakers said had occurred with their sisters. Big-N Narratives are the themes speakers developed in telling me about their sisters, and in support of which they told the small-n narratives. Master Narratives are culture-wide ideologies shaping the big-N Narratives. In my sister interviews, an unstated Master Narrative is the assumption that sisters are expected to be close and similar. This Master Narrative explains why nearly all the American women I interviewed organized their discourse around big-N Narratives by which they told me whether, how and why they are close to their sisters or not, and whether, how and why they and their sisters are similar or different. In exploring the interrelationship among these three narrative types, I examine closely the small-n narratives told by two women, with particular attention to the ways that the involvement strategies repetition, dialogue, and details work together to create scenes. Scenes, moreover, anchor the small-n narratives, helping them support the big-N Narratives which are motivated in turn by the culturally-driven Master Narrative.

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Introduction: Searching for stories

In connection with my recent research, I have conducted, taperecorded and either transcribed or had transcribed interviews with women of a range of ages and cultural backgrounds about their relationships with their sisters. Perhaps the term

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"focused conversations" is more accurate than "interviews," since I did not ask a pre-set series of questions but merely began by saying something like, "Tell me about your sister(s)." Much as I would if the conversation had arisen naturally, I asked followup questions as they occurred to me and at times interjected observations about my own two sisters. During these focused conversations, I encouraged my interlocutors to relate specific incidents. Later, in reading the transcripts, I found myself highlighting in yellow any section in which a speaker did so — that is, when she told a story. As a result, while my main goal has been analyzing sister discourse, I have also investigated the role and nature of narrative. In this pursuit, I identified three narrative types, each operating on a different level of abstraction: small-n narratives, big-N Narratives, and Master Narratives. Big-N Narratives and Master Narratives have been key in helping me understand how the women I talked to conceptualize and talk about their relationships with their sisters. Examining small-n narratives, in addition to yielding insight into sister discourse, has also contributed to my understanding of the nature of narrative and its centrality in conversational discourse and cognition. In addition, it has reinforced the importance of involvement strategies I investigated in earlier research: repetition, dialogue, and details, and, above all, the ways that these discourse strategies combine to create and reinforce scenes in which people are engaged in culturally identifiable and personally meaningful interactions or activities.

The theoretical framework in which I work is interactional sociolinguistics. This means that my fundamental analytic method is taperecording naturally occurring conversation, then studying the transcript. Yet in my research on sister discourse, I have set up and tape-recorded interviews, or focused conversations. In this way I have spoken with over a hundred women of varying ages and cultural backgrounds, mostly in one-on-one interviews, occasionally in small groups. Finding myself conducting such interviews created, at first, a sense of cognitive dissonance. I found myself wondering, "What's an interactional sociolinguist like you doing interviewing people like this?" Pondering this question led me to re-examine my interest in narrative.

I have long been aware of the unique role played by narrative in conversational discourse. In this spirit, I have cited an excerpt from *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty's (1984) autobiographical exploration of the influences that led her to become a fiction writer. Welty writes:

Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening *to* them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are *there*. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole. (14)

This passage describes the way I approach interviews with women about their sisters: I wait and hope for a story to come out, like a mouse from its hole. Arranging conversations hastens that process, increasing the chances that I'll snare a story. Realizing that stories are the quarry I seek has led me to consider the nature of narratives, the role they play in my research on sister discourse, and the light they shed on that discourse as well as on the question all my research addresses: How does language work to create meaning and negotiate relationships?

Focusing on these aspects of narrative also brought me back to a set of phenomena I have been examining for many years: involvement strategies in conversation. In a book entitled *Talking Voices* (Tannen [1989]2007) I developed the thesis that everyday conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that are often thought to be quintessentially literary. The features I studied in depth are repetition, dialogue, and details. I further posited that these and other involvement strategies combine to create scenes, and that scenes are the context in which meaning is conveyed and understood in interaction. Much work, my own and others', both before and after the publication of *Talking Voices*, examines repetition (e.g. Johnstone 1994, Schegloff 1997, Rieger 2003, Stivers 2004) and what has often been called "reported speech" (e.g. Coulmas 1986, Mayes 1990, Gunthner 1999, Buttny 1998) but which I argue is more accurately termed "constructed dialogue." Briefly, the term "reported speech" implies that a speaker is a neutral conduit, simply "reporting" discourse that was created by another speaker in another context. In contrast, I argue that dialogue — discourse framed as a speaker's voice — is primarily the creation of the one who utters it, just as surely as dialogue in a play or a work of fiction is the creation of its author. Thus the concept constructed dialogue is inseparable from a theory of conversational discourse as composed of the same linguistic elements and processes as literary discourse.

Less work has been done on details or the related phenomenon, imagery, and little if any attention has focused on the overarching strategy, scenes. Indeed, I myself, while continuing to include analysis of repetition, dialogue and details in my research and teaching, have tended to lose sight of scenes. In examining the stories told by women about their sisters, I concluded that the scene, and its role in creating involvement in discourse, helps explain why I listen for and treasure narratives in seeking to understand sister discourse. As I demonstrate below, the scene is the heart of a small-*n* narrative in conversation much as it is in a play. Speakers create scenes in order to support the point of their discourse — what they are telling me about their sisters. By presenting themselves and their sisters engaged in activities that are culturally recognizable and interpretable, speakers dramatize their sense of their sisters; of themselves in relation to their sisters; and consequently of their sisters' and their own characters.

In what follows, I explore the involvement strategies repetition, dialogue, and details, and their function in creating scenes in narratives told to me about sisters. First, however, I propose and explore a three-tiered notion of narrative, distinguishing among three types: small-n narrative, big-N Narrative and Master Narrative. A small-n narrative is the discourse type frequently referred to as a "Labovian narrative," using Labov and Waletzky's (1967) analysis of personal experience narratives as the touchstone. In my interviews, these are accounts of specific events and interactions that speakers told me had occurred with their sisters. A big-N Narrative refers to the theme that a speaker is developing in telling me about her sister(s) and in support of which she tells the small-n narratives. A Master Narrative is a culture-wide ideology that shapes the big-N Narrative. The Master Narrative driving the big-N Narratives in my interviews is an apparent assumption that sisters are expected to be close and similar. This Master Narrative, I argue, explains why just about every American woman I spoke to told me early on, often in her first sentences, that she and her sister(s) are close or not close, and similar to or — more often — different from each other, or similar in some ways and different in others. Finally, the ubiquity of this Master Narrative leads me to revisit and interrogate the dynamics of closeness/distance and sameness/difference as interrelated continua along which speakers array their relationships.

Three narrative types

Gee's (1999) distinction between big-D discourse and small-d discourse has become commonplace in discourse analysis, where small-d discourse refers to specific words spoken or written, and big-D Discourse refers to culture-wide ideology and assumptions. Thus, for example, Kendall (2007), in an essay entitled "Father as Breadwinner, Mother as Worker: Gendered Positions in Feminist and Traditional Discourses of Work and Family," analyzes the small-d discourse of two dual-career couples to show that the way they talk about their finances positions the father as the breadwinner whose income covers basics like mortgage and food, and the mother as a worker whose income pays for extras like a beach home. Kendall characterizes this ideological framework as a "traditional discourse" of work and family, in contrast with the "feminist discourse" that the parents in the study espouse: that they share equally in both the work sphere of earning money to support the family and the home sphere of childrearing.

The distinction I propose between big-N Narrative and small-n narrative is modeled on Gee's big-D and small-d types of discourse. The concept of Master Narrative, however, is a third, even broader tier. In the next section, I introduce and exemplify these types of narrative in reverse order. In addition, I discuss how

involvement strategies, including scene, figure in these narratives, and also examine the dynamics of closeness and sameness as they figure in these narratives and in discourse in general.

Master narrative: Sisters should be close and similar

Since beginning work on sister discourse, I have had variations of the following conversation innumerable times. Someone asks, "What are you working on now?" and I reply "Sisters" then add, "Do you have any?" If the answer is "yes," I ask about them. One woman with whom I had this conversation replied, "My sister and I have a fraught relationship. We were never close. We're very different." On hearing this, I chuckled, then had to explain why. She had, in this brief statement, encapsulated what just about all the women to whom I have spoken about their sisters told me sooner or later — usually sooner: whether or not they are close, and whether and how they are similar or (more often) different. So ubiquitous was this way of framing their sister relationships that I came to think of talk about whether sisters are or are not close and whether and how they are similar and/or different as motivated by a Master Narrative that forms a canopy over the discourse.

I have long been intrigued by the relationship between the dynamics of sameness/difference and closeness/distance (Tannen 1994). That they are intimately related was noted by Brown and Gilman (1960) in their classic article introducing the notion of power and solidarity as fundamental to language and interpersonal interaction. Brown and Gilman align solidarity with sameness, and power with difference. In defining their notion of power, they write, "the V form is linked with differences between persons" (256). In contrast, in defining "the solidarity semantic" they note, "If A has the same parents as B, B has the same parents as A. Solidarity is the name we give to the general relationship and solidarity is symmetrical" (257). For Brown and Gilman, then, difference and sameness play key roles in understanding power and solidarity respectively, and sibling relationships are a key site for understanding these dynamics. If we align solidarity with closeness and power with hierarchy, then siblings are seen as both close and equal. This view of siblings underlies the oft-heard statements "We are like sisters" and "We are like brothers," which are understood to mean "We are close" and also "There is no hierarchy between us, we are on an equal footing."

Closeness, however, does not necessarily entail equality, nor does hierarchy necessarily entail distance, and there is no better illustration of this than the sibling relationship. Siblings are indeed emblematically close (as reflected in the metaphorical use of the phrases "like brothers" or "like sisters"). But siblings are also emblematically unequal because they are age-graded: the older sibling has author-

ity and power over the younger. So fundamental is age-grading among siblings, that even twins whom I spoke to typically identified the one born minutes earlier as older, and the one born minutes later as younger. For example, a 57-year-old woman I interviewed began by listing her siblings: the oldest, she began, is four years older than she; the next had just turned 59. Then came herself and her identical twin, about whom she said, "She's the baby. I'm four minutes older." Her twin, whom I interviewed separately, also said at the outset that her twin sister is four minutes older. They also both told me almost immediately how similar they are. One warned that when I talk to her sister by phone, "You'll think it's me. We sound the same." The other told me that she and her twin are so close that they are "part of each other."

The fundamental nature of the relationship between the sameness/difference and closeness/distance dynamics was established not only by Brown and Gilman's power/solidarity dynamic but also by Becker's (1995) notion of "cline of person," "a grammatical continuum from oneself to the most distant 'other' upon which all the people, things, and events of experience are arrayed." Becker demonstrates that the cline of person is "A central thread — perhaps *the* central thread in the semantic structure of all languages..." (109). "The cline of person," he argues, "underlies most linguistic systems, as well as words, systems of deixis, number, definiteness, tense, and nominal classifications, among others" (110). Two simple examples are the deictic pairs "this/that" and "now/then" which locate objects as spatially and temporally close to or distant from the speaker, respectively (119). Just so, women's tendency to classify and describe their relationships to their sisters as close or not close and as similar or different places them on "a continuum from oneself to the most distant 'other'."

The closeness/distance and sameness/difference dynamics also came up repeatedly when I asked women, for a previous book (Tannen 2006), about their mothers and daughters. Then too I was almost always told sooner rather than later "We're close" or "We're not close," and "We're the same" or "We're different." Either sameness or difference could be cited as reason either for being close or for encountering conflict and creating distance. However, women who spoke to me about their sisters far more often told me that they are different. If they mentioned ways they are the same, it was almost always after having told me of many ways they are different, often with reference to culturally established dualities. I heard, for example, with reference to a bedroom shared, "My side was neat, hers was a mess," or the reverse. I heard often that one was obedient, the other rebellious; one stayed near their parents or home town, while the other couldn't wait to get away; one was a tomboy, the other a "girly girl"; one was a reader, the other preferred outdoor activities; and the widespread and particularly regrettable, it seemed to me, distinction that one was smart and the other pretty. I also heard about differences

in life style ("She goes for big houses, I live in a small apartment"), life circumstances ("I have grandchildren and she doesn't"), or outlook on life ("We define ourselves differently").

So many of the women I spoke to devoted so much of their discourse to describing how they and their sisters differed that I concluded they were reacting to an assumption that sisters ought to be similar. A typical observation was, "People can't believe we're sisters because our sensibilities are so different." The assumption that sisters should be similar is ironic, given how frequently women told me that they and their sisters are different. It seems that it was precisely because they felt that sisters are assumed to be similar that so many of the women I spoke to organized their discourse around ways that they and their sisters differ. This is especially true since speakers could interpret a given behavior as evincing either similarity or difference. For example, one woman told me many ways that she and her sister differ, then noted ways that they are the same. She said, for example, that they both have masters degrees in subjects that are internationally related: she has an MBA in international business, while her sister has a masters degree in international communication. She might well have referenced this information as evidence of their difference: her interest in business and her sister's in communication. Instead, she emphasized their shared international focus. Interestingly, though, she noted this similarity in order to illustrate that they both differ from their brother.

The point is not whether it is regarded as positive or negative to be close or distant, similar or different, but rather how common it is for American women to characterize their relationships in terms of these dynamics. For this reason, I came to think of the assumption that sisters should be close and similar as a Master Narrative shaping the discourse about sister relationships that I heard from American-born women. I say "American-born," because the women I spoke to who were raised in other countries did not organize their discourse in this way. Thus a woman who was born and raised in Vietnam never mentioned whether she and her sister were close or not, nor whether they are similar or different. Instead, the assumption that organized her discourse was respect. She told me that she had an older sister who annoyed her by telling her what to do and how to do it. (This is a circumstance I heard about from many American women as well.) Though she dislikes her sister telling her what to do, respect for her elder requires that she not express her displeasure, so she accepts the instructions pleasantly, then pleasantly ignores them. The other three women I spoke to who were raised in non-Western cultures, one from India and two from the Philippines, did mention being close to their siblings, but never mentioned being not-close, nor whether they are similar or different. The discourse of the two Philippine women was organized around the big-N Narrative of what was expected of them as oldest sisters. The Master Narrative in these cases was one of age-grading and its consequent obligations and

privileges. Finally, one woman I spoke to who did discuss ways that she and her sister are similar and different but never mentioned the word "close" was Dutch. Though five examples cannot be offered as proof, they support the suggestion that the Master Narrative that sisters are expected to be close and similar is particular to those born and raised in the United States, and, moreover, that Master Narratives are culturally-mediated ideologies and assumptions.

Big-N Narrative

The Big-N sense of narrative has become ubiquitous in public discourse. There is also a ubiquitous and synonymous use of the word "story," so we may also speak of big-S Story. I will cite just a few of the many such instances I have encountered in recent months.

In newspapers, magazines, and public commentary, "narrative" and "story" are used to mean almost any kind of account, explanation, or even excuse. For example, an article in *Newsweek* magazine quotes a college admissions officer as saying that he favored a particular applicant because "The narrative of the application presented a growing, natural scholar..." (8/27/07 p. 59). Here "narrative" means the way the applicant presented himself and his life experience throughout his application, not just in a specific story he recounted. Former senator Bill Bradley (2007) uses the conceit of "false narratives" to refer to assumptions or premises that he goes on to refute. He writes:

...I believe we've been told a story about America that simply isn't true. ... It's a story of no possibility — of too few resources and no political will; of fear and lack of compassion; of individual consumerist values at home and 'America only' policies abroad. (xiii)

He then frames his proposals for solutions to America's problems as "the new American story." Bradley uses the terms "narrative" and "story" interchangeably with a vast range of meanings, including "facts," "beliefs," "explanations," "assumptions," "accounts," and so on.

A use of "narrative" in public discourse that has much in common with what I call Big-N Narrative in my sister interviews refers to a theory of causation. For example, in explaining the rising inequality and increasing separation of rich and poor, Paul Krugman (2007) distinguishes between two "narratives," the "economist's view" that "economic changes drive political changes" and "an alternative story" that political polarization has caused rising inequality. A similar use of the term appears in a book review by the physician-writer Jerome Groopman (2008) who identifies several "narratives that we draw on to make sense of disease," which

he also calls “mind-body narratives.” Most of our mind-body narratives, Groopman explains, are rooted in religious notions of disease as demonic possession. This was followed historically by science’s “skeptical narrative” and then by the now-popular notion that stress causes disease which Groopman traces to a Czech physician, about whom he writes, “His narrative fit well into the cultural discourse of the cold-war era...”

Using “narrative” to mean “theory of causation” or “plausible explanation” becomes the source of humor in a *New Yorker* cartoon set in the stock cartoon scene of a psychotherapist’s office. Sitting in his upholstered armchair, the psychotherapist tells a glum-faced client, “Look, making you happy is out of the question, but I can give you a compelling narrative for your misery” (12/10/07 p. 92). In another *New Yorker* cartoon portraying another stock scene, a man dressed in a coat and carrying an attache case stands at the door of a bedroom in which a woman is pulling the covers over her naked body and a man wearing only underwear is sitting on the side of the bed, apparently attempting to escape. The caption reads, “I know what you’re thinking, but let me offer a competing narrative” (9/6/04 p. 138). Both cartoons draw humor from the frequency with which the terms “narrative” is now used and the broad range of meanings it represents.

These examples from public discourse illustrate the use of the term “narrative” to mean explanation, theory of causation, theme, assumption, or idea. In this spirit, I suggest the term Big-N Narrative to refer to the overall way that women I spoke to characterized their relationships with their sisters. That is, when women told me that they and their sisters are close or not close, similar or different, they provided explanations based on family circumstances and/or personal characteristics. One common family circumstance was birth order. Many women told me that their older sisters were protective, helpful, or bossy, and that they idolized their older sisters and tried to emulate them. Many women told me that they were given or assumed responsibility for younger ones, which they either resented or welcomed, and that they enjoyed or resented the younger trying to tag along and copy them. Another common circumstance was a family trauma such as divorce, illness, death, alcoholism or abuse. Many women explained that a trauma that befell the family during their childhoods either drew them closer to their siblings or drove them apart. A speaker might explain that she and her sister are close because they lived on a farm where they had no company other than each other’s. The theme that growing up on a farm made them close is the big-N Narrative that provided what Becker (1995) identifies as a “coherence principle” organizing the discourse. Put another way, a big-N Narrative resembles what Davies and Harré (1999) term a “storyline.”

For me, a large part of understanding sister discourse lies in discerning patterns in big-N Narratives across multiple speakers.

Involvement strategies in small-n narratives

At the same time that I am attuned to big-N Narrative patterns across speakers, I find myself listening for, and asking for, small-n narratives in order to really get a handle on what an individual speaker has in mind when she develops a theme. And in identifying these stories in transcripts of interviews, I almost immediately noticed the key role played by the "involvement strategies" I have previously identified. Whereas a big-N narrative provides a storyline or theme that is driven by a Master Narrative of closeness or distance and sameness or difference, small-n narratives are the accounts of specific events that speakers told me in order to illustrate and support their big-N Narratives. These are the canonical (not figurative) "stories" by which a speaker communicates a sense of her sister(s) and of their relationship(s).

As noted above, I have demonstrated in previous work (Tannen [1989]2007) that linguistic elements we think of as quintessentially literary, such as repetition, dialogue, and details, are the fundamental meaning-making strategies of everyday conversation, and that they work together to create scenes: "people in relation to each other, doing things that are culturally and personally meaningful" (31). It is through scenes that speakers convey and listeners glean meaning. I would now add that a small-n narrative is a series of scenes, so the concept of scene is central to our understanding of narrative and to why narrative is central to our understanding of discourse. The scenes created by dialogue, details, and action, and reinforced by repetition, helped me understand what the women I talked to were telling me.

In the next section I illustrate how small-n narratives support big-N Narratives which are shaped by Master Narratives and also how the involvement strategies repetition, details, and dialogue work in the narratives by creating scenes.

Dialogue in small-n narratives

In my first example, dialogue creates a scene that illustrates the speaker's big-N Narrative, that is, the coherence principle or storyline by which she characterized her relationship with her sister.

A frequent theme, or big-N narrative, that many women offered as an explanation for estrangement from or disapproval of their sisters is the sister's failure to show caring or offer assistance in the face of illness, divorce, or other hardship. (Conversely, accounts of a sister's help and concern on such occasions were frequently offered as narratives to support the Narrative that, despite frustrations or complaints, the sister was cherished because she came through in a time of

need.) Following are two examples in which women recounted small-n narratives of failure to provide support in times of crisis, which proved the speakers' big-N Narratives that they are not close to their sisters because of faults in their sisters' character or behavior. In addition to addressing the Master Narrative that sisters are expected to be close — hence the need for an explanation of why these sisters are not — these stories also reveal a culture-wide Master Narrative that sisters are expected to support each other in times of personal crisis.

During a casual conversation that began more or less as I described at the outset, I asked a woman I had just met if she had any sisters. She said she didn't, but her mother did, and their relationship was not good. She then told me that her mother spoke rarely to her sister, the speaker's aunt, because the aunt is self-centered and selfish. That was the big-N Narrative that motivated this woman's discourse. The woman then told me that her brother had lifelong medical problems, and her aunt failed to display interest or concern for the brother's health or the resulting hardship experienced by her mother, the aunt's sister. This information was background to the small-n narrative, the account of a specific event, by which she illustrated her point about her aunt: One time, she said, her brother was hospitalized in New York City, and her mother had gone there to help him out. While there she talked to her sister on the phone, describing the situation and what she had gone through in dealing with her son's hospitalization. Her sister's response was, "Why don't you tell me about something fun you do? You're really a downer."

This line of dialogue is written, in quotes, at the top of the page on which I wrote notes from this conversation. This obviously was not the first thing I heard in the conversation, but it was the first thing I wrote: it was on hearing this line of dialogue that I searched for a note pad, wrote the line down (double checking the exact wording), and began taking notes on the conversation. Until that point, the account I was hearing did not differ markedly from other, similar tales I had heard. But the dialogue communicated, encapsulated, the aunt's callousness in a way that the previous expository description had not. I knew that this was a line I could use because it helped create a scene: the speaker's mother in an extremely difficult situation — stranded in a large, intimidating city (note the specific detail: New York; I was also told the name of the hospital), having to deal with the many challenges of hospitals and the anxiety of a child's illness, talking on the telephone to a family member who should be expressing concern. In the context of this scene, her remark dramatized the aunt's callousness. Thus, the involvement strategy, constructed dialogue, gave substance to the small-n narrative of this phone conversation, which supported the big-N Narrative that her mother was not close to her sister because of the sister's selfish character. Moreover, I would argue that the speaker was motivated to offer a narrative in order to explain why her mother had little contact with her sister — that is, why they are not close. In other words,

the Narrative was occasioned by the Master Narrative that sisters are expected to be close.

I encountered a similar use of dialogue in another woman's account of a problematic sister — in this case, the speaker's own. This conversation, too, was with a woman I was meeting for the first time. She began by rolling her eyes when she answered in the affirmative my question about whether she had a sister. She then established the big-N Narrative that would drive everything else she told me: She and her sister did not have a good relationship because of her sister's selfishness and self-centeredness. In particular, the sister did not fulfill family responsibilities but relied on her (older) sister, the speaker, to do everything. To support this evaluation of her sister, the speaker told me a small-n narrative: when their father was nearing the end of his life and the family was gathered by his bedside, her sister decided to leave. "You'll be there," she said. "You can tell me what's happening."

In this instance, too, the coherence principle of the big-N Narrative driving the speaker's discourse was a sister's callousness, selfishness, and failure to fulfill responsibilities as a family member. The specific event recounted — the sister's departure at the time of their father's death — was a small-n narrative that supported the big-N Narrative or theme: my sister and I are not close because she is irresponsible and selfish. As in the previous example, the big-N Narrative is motivated by the Master Narrative that sisters are expected to be close. In this example, as in the one immediately preceding, the key involvement strategy was constructed dialogue, which was effective because it capped and helped create a scene that dramatized the speaker's point. The word "dramatize" is not only metaphoric; it captures the sense in which framing discourse as someone's speech is not passive "reporting" of words uttered by another, but rather dialogue constructed by the speaker to convey ideas relevant to the conversation she is taking part in, just as a playwright constructs dialogue in a drama written for the stage.

Involvement strategies and three narrative types

The two brief examples presented above emerged in conversations that I did not schedule in advance and did not tape record. In this section I examine in more detail discourse that I tape recorded in two separate pre-scheduled interviews. My analysis illustrates how involvement strategies in small-n narratives work to support big-N Narratives which are inspired by culture-wide Master Narratives.

The conversations of which the following excerpts were part, are two of seventy five one-on-one interviews I conducted with women about their sisters. I used my social network to identify women who were interested in talking to me. In a minority of cases, I spoke to women I knew slightly or well; in the majority, I

was referred to women I had never met before and did not expect to meet again. Although I made no attempt to get a representative sample of any kind, I intentionally included women of a range of ages and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, Examples 1 and 2 are taken from a conversation I conducted with a friend's mother who was visiting her daughter in the city where I live. I was eager to include her in my study because, at 80, she was older than many of the other women I had spoken to.

I conducted most interviews in the speakers' homes, though if that was not convenient, we met at their place of work, a restaurant, or, in a very few cases, my home. I spoke with out-of-towners over the phone, typing their words in real time rather than tape-recording. I began all interviews by greeting my interlocutors and engaging in small talk as seemed appropriate given the basis of our connection, and repeating that I will not use anything from the interview without first getting their approval. If the speaker was someone I knew socially, I began with the usual social small talk. I met my friend's mother, Colleen, in the guest apartment in her daughter's home, where Colleen and her husband stay during their visits. Before the interview began, Colleen showed me photographs of herself and her family, and explained that her husband is my friend's stepfather, whom she married after her first husband died. We then sat on the couch and I began the interview by saying, "Just tell me about you and your sister."

Example 1: Sameness despite distance

Everything Colleen told me about her relationship with her older sister, who had died a few years earlier, supported this big-N Narrative: Colleen and her sister, who was a special and wonderful person, were similar at bottom despite numerous surface differences, and close despite having lived in different cities for most of their lives. When Colleen was growing up, her sister lived with an aunt in a distant city in order to get medical care for an illness that sadly stunted her growth.

Colleen began by indicating her sister in a photograph and saying:

My sister was, she was ill for about nine years. And so and she's eight years older than I am. This is Jeannie, that's little Jeannie Bean. She was four feet eight.

The big-N Narrative that her sister's life was conditioned by her childhood illness and consequent small size is thus set at the start of our interview. Colleen also establishes her affection for her sister by using her pet name, "little Jeannie Bean." In her next turn she told me, "We had a unique long distance relationship," then explained how Jeanne encouraged and cared for her as she was growing up, despite their physical distance. Thus, in accordance with the Master Narrative that sisters

should be close, Colleen places her relationship with her sister on a continuum of (emotional) closeness and (physical) distance.

Immediately after thus setting the stage, Colleen drew on the second part of the Master Narrative, telling me of the ways she and her sister were different but also similar. Their differences included life circumstances (Colleen married twice and had children, Jeanne never married and had no children) and interests ("I'm a periodical reader, she is a book reader"). Nonetheless, Colleen said, "deep down, we were very much alike." Importantly, they were both lifelong caretakers, "So I was emulating her I'm sure by always doing something for someone." Furthermore, they had "the same habits": "You did your laundry on Monday, and you did your ironing on Tuesday, and Thursday you cleaned the house. And we both had that habit."

Example 1 is a small-n narrative that Colleen told in support of the big-N Narrative that she and her sister were similar despite surface differences.¹

She would go to the library
and she would say,
"I've read the most wonderful book.
You really ought to get this."
I may have bought that book
or I may have gone to the library
and read the very same book
at the very same time.

One time she called she said,
"Oh I finally bought a coat,
it's so different."
I said "What is it?"
She said "It's red,"
and she said,
"It's not a real bright red,
but" she said "it's like a knit coat,
but it's not a regular knit wool
that you knit a sweater with,"

1. In this and subsequent excerpts, I lay out lines in breath units to better capture the rhythms of speech. Quotation marks are my interpretive representation of dialogue. Question marks indicate grammatical questions, not rising intonation, but periods mark sentence-final falling intonation as well as grammatical sentence endings. Commas indicate phrase-final intonation, implying "more to come." Three unspaced dots (...) indicate a brief pause. Three spaced dots (...) indicate ellipsis: lines or words omitted. A hyphen (-) indicates a false start, abrupt and momentary cutting off of speech. CAPS indicate emphatic stress. Arrows indicate lines that are key to analytic commentary.

and I said, "You're kidding."
I said, "Is it a long coat or a short jacket?"
"No, it just comes down to the knee."
I said, "I don't believe this."
She said "What?"
I said, "I have the very same coat."
I just bought it over at so-and-so."
And we had the very...
we would do that.

This two-part illustration of their similarity begins with a quasi-narrative describing an event that occurred repeatedly (reading the same book at the same time without knowing of the other's choice) and a canonical small-n narrative about an occasion when they learned that they had bought the same coat.

The impact of these narratives is reinforced by the repetition of words and syntactic paradigm:

the very same book
at the very same time.
I have the very same coat.
and we have the very...

The repetition of the words "very same" followed by "book," "time" and "coat" sets up a parallelism by which the word "same" can be omitted in the last line: "we have the very" where the word "very" is understood to be the first word in the phrase "very same." It hardly matters what the omitted words (same taste?) might be.

The impact of this small-n narrative is also due in part to details that create an image of a coat:

it's red
not a real bright red
a knit coat
not a regular knit wool that you knit a sweater with
comes down to the knee

The image is formed by the coat's color (red), material (knit wool) and length ("down to the knee"). That the coat was unusual ("it's so different," "not a regular knit wool") renders it more surprising and significant that Colleen and Jeanne had bought the same one.

Finally, the phone conversation that provides the scene of the small-n narrative is created by constructed dialogue. I will lay out the dialogue as it would appear in a work of fiction, where paragraph indentation signals speaker exchange, whereas in speaking it is represented by the introducers "she said" and "I said," along with

changes in voice quality. Too, this layout makes clear that dialogue is constructed by speakers to create dramatic impact much as a writer uses dialogue in fictional narrative.

"Oh I finally bought a coat, it's so different."

"What is it?"

"It's red. It's not a real bright red, but it's like a knit coat, but it's not a regular knit wool that you knit a sweater with."

"You're kidding. Is it a long coat or a short jacket?"

"No, it just comes down to the knee."

"I don't believe this."

"What?"

"I have the very same coat. I just bought it over at so-and-so."

Along with the dialogue, details contribute to the scene that dramatizes not only the sisters' similarity but also their closeness. The surprise information about their having bought the same coat is revealed in a phone conversation between sisters who talk frequently and exchange mundane information about shopping and other daily events.

The small-n narratives that Colleen tells about reading the same book and buying the same coat as her sister supports her big-N Narrative that the sisters were close and similar despite living far from each other and living apparently very different lives. The point of the narratives is highlighted by repetition, while details and dialogue work together to create a scene in which the listener gets a glimpse of the sisters' intimate relationship and share their surprise and pleasure on learning of their shared experiences. By illustrating that she and her sister, despite surface differences, were "very much alike" and, despite physical distance, very close, Colleen served the culture-wide Master Narrative that sisters should be similar and close.

Example 2: A scene of closeness

I will cite one more excerpt from Colleen's interview in order to illustrate the creation of a scene, and to demonstrate the power of scenes to support a big-N Narrative. The following segment is another quasi-narrative in that it recounts an event that happened repeatedly, not just once.

Colleen told me that she worried about Jeanne living alone as she aged, so she repeatedly invited Jeanne to come live with her and her husband George so they could take care of her. Two years before she died, Jeanne finally accepted the invitation. Colleen described the following scene from that period of their lives:

'Course Jeannie was kind,

Jeannie was just plain kind.

I can still,
when she came to live with me,
it was so much fun.
George would get up
and he's out getting breakfast or something
and Jeannie would poke her head in the door
and I'd say "Come on in here."
She'd say "No,"
y'know, just- don't forget,
we lived together in Florida
for about two and a half years.
She'd say "No I'll just-"
"Jeannie come over here."
And she'd-
then I'd pull her down in the bed
and she'd lay there
and lay down beside me
and I'd hold her hand.
She had these tiny little hands,
you know tiny little hands,
and like a little bird, bird hand.
We'd lay there
and we'd start to talk
and we'd laugh
and we did a lot of that all growing up.
We would lay down in the bed together
and we'd just talk.

This moving scene of the two elderly sisters side by side in bed holding hands vividly reinforces Colleen's big-N Narrative of her close relationship with her older sister. Indeed, it deepens the sense of closeness by representing it in the physical as well as emotional realm.

The emotional impact of the scene is reinforced by syntactic repetition:

and she'd lay there
and lay down beside me
...
We'd lay there
...
We would lay down in the bed together

The repetition of a syntactic paradigm also emphasizes the sisters' closeness as evidenced by their lifetime of talking and laughing together:

and we'd start to talk
and we'd laugh
and we did a lot of that all growing up.

Repetition also reinforces Colleen's claim that her sister was a wonderful person, a sub-theme of the big-N Narrative that organized her discourse. The scene of the sisters in bed of a morning is introduced by a repeated statement about Jeanne's character:

'Course Jeannie was kind,
Jeannie was just plain kind.

Interestingly, the narrative says more about Colleen's kindness, in inviting her sister into her home and even her bed, than about Jeanne's, but the story does illustrate Jeanne's unassuming nature by showing that she initially resists accepting the invitation ("Jeanne come over here") to replace her brother-in-law in her sister's bed. The refusal, moreover, is repeated:

- She'd say "No,"
y'know, just- don't forget,
we lived together in Florida
for about two and a half years.
- She'd say "No I'll just—"

The humility evinced in Jeanne's reluctance to accept her sister's invitation is reinforced by the self-deprecating "just" in the second iteration ("She'd say 'No I'll just—'").

These small-n narratives excerpted from my interview with Colleen demonstrate why I wait for stories to come out, like a mouse from its hole: by telling these stories, recounting these specific events, Colleen gave me a sense of her sister and their relationship that could not be communicated by general description. The excerpts also illustrate how involvement strategies within the narratives work together to create a scene which dramatizes the aspects of the sister relationship that constitutes Colleen's big-N Narrative, or storyline. Moreover, they show how placement on the closeness/distance and sameness/difference continua provide a Master Narrative for Colleen's sister discourse.

Example 3: Us against the world

My final example comes from a conversation I had with Kate, a woman of 34, the youngest daughter of a friend of mine. I had met Kate briefly at a party hosted by her mother, after which I interviewed her in her home. Kate's big-N Narrative, the theme that provided a coherence principle to her discourse, was that all three of

her older siblings — two brothers and a sister — had always protected her, and that they were all united because of hardships they faced when their parents divorced. In illustrating this big-N Narrative, she recounted the following small-n narrative from her childhood.

One summer the family spent several weeks in a distant city where their mother was teaching at a summer program. During the day, the children were left in the care of one of their mother's students, a stern young woman whom the children disliked. During this time, Kate contracted pneumonia, and the babysitter locked her in her room "so my siblings couldn't get to me," presumably so they would not catch her illness. For Kate, however, this isolation was a torment from which she was heroically rescued by her older siblings:

It was the WORST THING
that could have ever happened to me.
I felt like, I felt like uh ..
it was just horrible.
So they climbed up to the second floor,
they CLIMBED UP the uh the-
I could say it was a lattice
to the second floor of the house,
and they snuck into the room,
and they got me.
You know, it was just this...
They would do that,
just us against the world type of thing.

At this point I asked, "Did they do that because they knew you'd be terrified?" Kate replied by repeating, "It was us against this evil babysitter [laughs]." She then continued her story:

And then my sister,
my sister,
this is classic,
my sister,
she's still this way,
if anything happens that,
to anybody,
she'll do- she- she's gonna be the one
who will lash out at ...
She um took the babysitter's like prized hairbrush.
This woman had beautiful long hair
and brushed it all the time.
And she took it

and she CHEWED on it,
and tore the brussels- bristles- brussels,
whatever you call them,
the bristles out. [laughs]
And the woman was just,
and she said,
"The dog, the dog did it.
The dog, so sorry."

As Kate articulated, the first part of this small-n narrative supported the big-N Narrative that her older siblings protected her and that they all were united "against the world."

A repeated syntactic frame encapsulates the point of the narrative:

us against the world type of thing.
It was us against this evil babysitter [laughs]

The second part of the narrative illustrates that Kate's sister in particular was "fiercely protective": she avenged the wrong Kate suffered by destroying the perpetrator's prized possession. This climax is emphasized by lexical repetition within a line of dialogue that also provides a coda:

and she said,
"The dog, the dog did it.
The dog, so sorry."

By repeating "the dog," Kate stresses her sister's daring in putting one over on the enemy, the babysitter.

Details, repetition, and scenes work together to emphasize the story's theme as well:

So they climbed up to the second floor,
they CLIMBED UP the uh the-
I could say it was a lattice
to the second floor of the house,

The heroic effort undertaken by Kate's siblings is highlighted by her repetition of and emphatic stress on the phrase "climbed up"; the difficulty of the climb is emphasized by the word "lattice," a structure attached to the outside of the house. The image of a team of children scaling a wall to rescue their little sister is the scene that dramatizes the point of Kate's story: that her older siblings protected her, and they all stuck together, in the face of hardships caused by their parents' divorce.

Repetition and details also account for the impact of the damage Kate's sister inflicted on the babysitter's hairbrush:

And she took it
and she CHEWED on it,
and tore the brussels- bristles- brussels,
whatever you call them,
the bristles out. [laughs]

In a followup email exchange, Kate assured me that her sister did literally chew the brush, leaving teeth marks which the babysitter never distinguished from dog teeth marks. And the detail that her sister tore out the bristles (following Harvey Sacks [1971], Kate's saying "brussels" for "bristles" is probably a sound touch-off occasioned by proximity to the similar-sounding word "brush" in "hairbrush") provides an image of a damaged brush more vivid than would a general description such as "She destroyed the brush." Moreover, the addition of "she took it" results in the repetition of a syntactic paradigm (took it/chewed on it/tore the bristles) that creates the impression of a series of actions, which has more impact than a two-part "chewed" and "tore" alone would have had.

Kate's small-*n* narratives about her siblings' dare-devil rescue and her sister's avenging the wrong done her support her big-*N* Narrative: that her older siblings protected her as all four united in the face of hardships imposed by their parents' divorce. As Kate put it elsewhere in her discourse, she and her siblings were "INCREDIBLY close growing up. We were sort of each other's comforting." Thus, the big-*N* Narrative was shaped by the Master Narrative of closeness.

Conclusion

One woman I interviewed, remarking on the number of stories she was telling me, said, "All relationships are stories." This insight has stuck in my mind because it captures why, in my attempts to understand sister discourse, I have conducted interviews, even though I still regard interactional sociolinguistics as my theoretical framework and analysis of naturally-occurring conversation as my fundamental method. I have therefore interrogated the role of interviews in discourse analysis, observing that one of the main advantages of conducting interviews, or focused conversations, is the increased opportunity to elicit narratives. Focusing on the centrality of narrative has, in turn, reinforced the importance of the involvement strategies repetition, constructed dialogue, and details. Moreover, I have examined the key role played by the overarching involvement strategy, scenes.

I have suggested, moreover, a three-tiered notion of narrative to describe patterns I observed in interviewing women about their sisters. The highest tier is the Master Narrative, a culture-wide ideology providing assumptions which members

of that culture take for granted. These assumptions are unstated, but shape what speakers decide to say. In talking to women about their sisters and examining the transcripts of focused conversations, I was immediately struck by how often, and how quickly, American women told me whether or not, and how and why, they are close to their sisters, and whether and how they and their sisters are similar or different. That so many women chose to organize their discourse in this way is evidence of a Master Narrative by which sisters are expected to be close and similar.

The next two tiers of narrative types, big-N Narrative and small-n narrative, are modeled on Gee's distinction between big-D and small-d discourse. I use the term small-n narrative to identify what is commonly thought of as a story. In my interviews, these were accounts of events and interactions involving their sisters that speakers told me had occurred. I propose the term Big-N Narrative to refer to a storyline or theme that functions as a coherence principle organizing a speaker's discourse about her sister(s). The Big-N Narratives structuring the interviews, like those I excerpt and discuss above, typically place a speaker somewhere on the continua between close and distant, on one hand, and similar or different on the other. Usually, speakers described themselves and their sisters as unique combinations of these dynamics, and explained why and how they believed they had come to be so. That is why I concluded that the stories women told me were small-n Narratives offered in support of big-N Narratives which were motivated by an unarticulated Master Narrative — a culture-wide ideology that I found to characterize the collective discourse of individual speakers. In other words, women tended to locate their sister relationships as close or not close, and to describe themselves and their sisters as similar and/or different from each other, in response to a culturally-mediated assumption that sisters are expected to be close and similar.

I hope thus to have contributed to sister discourse in particular and discourse analysis in general as well as to narrative theory.

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