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How is conversation like literary discourse? **The role of imagery and details in creating involvement***

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"I wish you were here to see the sweetpeas coming up."

A line of a poem? It could become one. But as it was, it was just a fragment of conversation, words uttered by a friend on one coast to a friend on the other. But these words have something in common with a poem: emotion. They spark a flash of feeling. They make us not just *think* about, but feel, the distance of the American continent separating two people, the longing to be in the presence of someone loved, to report not important events, but small ones, small perceptions.

"I wish you were here to see the sweetpeas coming up."

Why is this more moving than the simple, *I wish you were here*? Partly because *Wish you were here* is a fixed expression, a cliché. But mostly, I think, it is because of the sweetpeas — small and ordinary and particular. The sweetpeas coming up provide a detail of everyday life that brings everyday life to life. The sweetpeas create an image — a picture of something, whereas *Wish you were here* suggests only the abstract idea of absence. And the sound of the *sweetpeas* is moving: the repeated high front vowel, /i/, suggests something small and tender, and this impression is intensified because it echoes the same sound in *here* and *see*. Similarly, the repeated, symmetrically bounding sibilants /s/ and /z/ in /switpiz/, almost adjacent to the /s/ of *see*, are soothing and alluring. And semantic associations are at work as well: One is moved by the *sweet* of *sweetpeas*, the word *sweet* having gathered meaning associated with people, their character and their relationships. It would not have been quite as touching (to me) to say,

I wish you were here to see the geraniums coming up, or the tomatoes, or the egg plants.

In thinking about why I had an emotional response when my friend said, *I wish you were here to see the sweetpeas coming up*, I was reminded of the line from T.S. Eliot's poem: "I am moved by fancies that are curled around these images and cling." My topic here is the way that fancies curl around and cling to images.

More specifically (and more prosaically), I will consider here the role of details in creating images which suggest scenes which trigger emotions and make possible both understanding and interpersonal involvement.

The role of details in involvement

My study of details is part of a larger project in which I am exploring the observation that conversation — ordinary talk — uses the same linguistic strategies as literary discourse to create interpersonal involvement and meaning. The idea is not that conversation and verbal art are the same, but that literary discourse — poems, short stories, novels — artfully shapes the strategies that are spontaneous in everyday conversation. As Friedrich (1986) amply demonstrates, the relationship of literature to conversation is not one of poetry vs. non-poetry, but of relatively more and less poetry. He shows, further, that to understand the workings of everyday conversation, one must account for its poetic nature. That is what my current project is designed to do.

In pursuing a poetics of talk, I have been interested in how the levels of sound and meaning contribute to involvement.¹ I have suggested that sound, including intonation and prosody, creates involvement by rhythmic engagement, and meaning-making strategies such as dialogue, indirectness, and what Levin (1982) calls "thought figures of speech" create involvement by requiring the audience to participate in sensemaking. Today I want to consider the level of mutual participation in sensemaking as essentially a response to image, and the power of images to communicate meaning and emotions as residing in their power to evoke scenes. Images are associated with scenes, and understanding is derived from scenes, by patterned association, or abduction, as Gregory Bateson (1979) calls it. In the terms Ohala (this volume) applies to phonology, it is meaning by analogy. Scenes can do this because it is at the level of the scene that people are observed in rela-

tion to each other, doing things that are culturally recognizable and personally meaningful.

Through images created in part by details, a hearer or reader imagines a scene. I use the term "imagine" intentionally — both in relation to "images" and in relation to Friedrich's (1986) sense of the individual imagination. According to Friedrich (1986:17), language "is inherently, pervasively, and powerfully poetic", when "poetic language" is defined as "all parts of a language that exemplify a figure" (24). Furthermore, he observes, "it is the relatively poetic nature of language ... that most deeply and massively affects the imagination..." (17). Details are poetic in this sense: They fire the individual imagination. And the activation of the individual imagination makes it possible to understand another's speech. Crucially, it is in the individual imagination that meaning is made, and there that it matters. Moreover, it is the creation of such shared meaning — communication — that unites individuals socially, in a community, and personally, in relationships. Conversely, it is through the creation of a shared world of images that individual understanding is achieved.

The function of details in conversation

Becker (1982:126) demonstrates that every utterance has an esthetic dimension which "appears only at the level of the particular". Details are an expression of the particular in discourse. One example comes from a conversational story told by a Greek woman about being assaulted by a strange man in Paris. She was saved by an American man who appeared suddenly. This is how she introduced the American:

- (1) *kai ekeini tin ora*
bainei
san apo michanis theos,
enas Amerikanos
yiro sta evthominda,
then tha xechaso pote
ena, forouse ena me megala karro poukamisa
 and just then
 (there) entered
 like an act of God,

an American
 about seventy years old,
 I'll never forget
 a, he was wearing a shirt with large checks

If communication were only a matter of conveying information about events, then the visual pattern on the man's shirt would not add materially to the story. And yet it does. Indeed details like this *make* a story. In terms of Chafe's (1985:116) three types of involvement in conversation (self-involvement of the speaker, interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer, and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about), recalling the pattern on the American's shirt reflects the speaker's involvement with her own memory. The checkered shirt may have been salient to the Greek woman because it was a typically American fashion. But the detail of the checkered shirt is also functional in the creation of interpersonal involvement: the rapport which is being created between the speaker and her audience by means of this story. Picturing the shirt the man wore (and his age) helps the hearers to imagine a particular man dressed in a particular way. Finally, emphasizing that she remembers (indeed, will never forget) what he wore, reinforces the hearer's sense of the vividness of the memory — a testament both to its reportability and to its authenticity.

Narrative is a genre particularly given to the use of details since it is by definition devoted to describing scenes and events from the past. Within narrative, details are especially frequent in what Labov (1972) has called the orientation sections of conversational narratives: the part that provides background information. (See Johnstone 1987 for examples and discussion of orientational detail in a corpus of midwestern narratives). Such common orientational material as names, dates, and names of places are details. In conversation, speakers often make an observable effort to get these details right:²

(2) It was back in ... what. '66? '67?

In a way, such mental scavenging seems to be more for the speaker's satisfaction than for the hearer's. Yet it gives an impression of verisimilitude to a hearer: recalling names, dates, and places is a familiar, recognizable memory process.

Details are pervasive in nonnarrative (or quasi-narrative) as well as narrative discourse, as memory provides material for conversation. In addition to the common practice of struggling to recall specific names, dates, and places, speakers are often specific about other details which might

seem irrelevant to hearers or observers. For example, in the following dinner table conversation, a speaker recites a childhood address. At this point in the conversation, it has emerged that Steve and Peter, who are brothers, lived in quonset huts as children. (Quonset huts were odd-looking temporary structures constructed by the United States government to house veterans returning from World War II and their families). As a listener, I expressed interest and asked how long they had lived in them. Peter answered, *Three years*. Then:

- (3) Deborah: It's a long time.
 Steve: Yeah. **From the time I was one ... to the time I was four and a half.**
 Deborah: Did you go to s
 didn't you all have to go to school?
 Peter: Yeah I went to **kindergarten and first grade.**
 Deborah: Wow! ... So it was a whole community
 with other people living in them too.
 Peter: It was great!
 Steve: It was a really close community
 cause everybody [was
 Deborah: [Woulda been nice
 Steve: /?/
 Peter: We all moved in at the same time,
 and j- just hadda remember your address.
Ours was ... 1418 F.

How is the audience helped by knowing the address of the quonset hut in which Peter and Steve lived? In an information-focused way, not at all. And yet one can easily imagine the urge, in telling of a past time, to recall and utter a precise address or telephone number or name. If applying Chafe's schema of three types of involvement, one would easily place this in the category of self-involvement: the speaker's involvement with his own recalled experience. And yet these types of involvement are intertwined with each other. Because the urge to remind oneself of addresses, telephone numbers, and names is recognizable, specifying the address contributes something to the hearer's involvement with the speaker and with the recalled image. And it lends a sense of authenticity, of vivid recall. Similarly, Steve's addition of his precise ages at the time he lived in the quonset huts, like Peter's naming the grades he attended (*kindergarten and first grade*), does not contribute anything substantive to the answer that they

lived there three years, and yet it does. It creates a picture of a child of one to four a half, of Steve as a child of one to four and a half, just as Peter's recitation of *1418 F* creates an image of a child intently memorizing and reciting his home address.

Another example of the use of details in nonnarrative conversational discourse comes from the same conversation as Example (3). The discussion has turned to cartoons: the men in the conversation maintained that they had enjoyed cartoons as children, whereas the two women recalled having been disturbed by the violence in cartoons. Steve observed that the response of the women, as children, occurred because *You took them literally*, whereas his own response was sanguine because he knew the characters weren't real. He explained,

(4) Steve: It wasn't like there were hearts and liver.

This example supports my argument both in its form and in its meaning. Steve is claiming that he didn't have an emotional response to cartoon characters getting hurt because the cartoon didn't show the visual details that would make the characters and their suffering seem real: human parts like *hearts and liver*. At the same time, he makes his point in conversation by naming these specific body parts rather than by making an abstract statement like, *It wasn't like they had human parts*.

Details in conversational and literary discourse

Early in my analysis of conversational and literary discourse, I noted that linguistic strategies which are highly valued in literary analysis are often devalued, even scorned, in conventional wisdom applied to conversation. Whereas scholars study repetition and constructed dialogue in literary texts, repetition is considered a weakness in common parlance (one can say, *You already said that*, or *Stop me if I'm repeating myself*, but not *Wait a minute, I haven't repeated my point yet*), and the litany of *So he says, so I says* is emblematic of trivial chatter. Similarly, the use of details is most frequently considered a conversational liability in information-focused interchange, as in *Never mind the details. Tell me all the gory details* is heard as a marked request (though the telling of details might be expected in intimate conversation about topics of mutual interest). *Boring details* is a routinized collocation.

A woman reported that her family habitually refers to her grandmother as "I had a little ham, I had a little cheese." This cryptic representation of Grandmother's conversation captures, for them, the impression that Grandmother is boring because she tells too many details about insignificant matters. But if it is boring when Grandmother tells what she ate for lunch, why is it moving to be told what Rhoda, the heroine of Joan Silber's novel *Household Words*, ate for lunch shortly after her husband's death?

- (5) She sat in the kitchen eating her usual lunch, **a mound of cottage cheese piled over lettuce** (no eating from the container: like a colonist in an outpost, she was strict about keeping proprieties even when no one was looking).

The effectiveness of this passage comes from many linguistic strategies, including the simile that compares Rhoda to a colonist at an outpost: an apt suggestion, by abduction, of her feelings on suddenly being widowed. But this simile is enhanced, indeed triggered, by the scene of Rhoda sitting down to a solitary lunch of cottage cheese on lettuce.

My Great-Aunt had a love affair when she was in her 70's. Obese, balding, her hands and legs arthritically misshapen, she did not fit the stereotype of a woman romantically and sexually loved. But she was — by a man, also in his seventies, who lived in a nursing home but occasionally spent weekends with her in her apartment. In trying to tell me what this relationship meant to her, my aunt told of a conversation. One evening she had had dinner at the home of friends. When she returned home, her man friend called. In the course of their conversation, he asked her, *What did you wear?* When she told me this, she began to cry: *Do you know how many years it's been since anyone asked me what I wore?*

The association of details with intimate involvement is used by the author of *Household Words*. When, for the first time following her husband's death, Rhoda finds herself attracted to a man, her attraction is demonstrated by attention to the details of his body:

- (6) Eddie Lederbach's **hands were long and graceful, with soft, sparse hairs growing tenderly about the knuckles**. She was not prepared for a complexity of emotions. ... **His lips moved wetly** in nervous speech. (101)

The other man that is presented in such physical detail is Rhoda's husband, and it is the recollection of details that makes his memory painful. Waking up after having fallen asleep in her clothes following his funeral,

- (7) She thought...of **his body's outline, the particular barrel-shape of his ribs, and the chest, bifurcated and hard under the coating of light brown hairs.** The absence of his form **under the covers of the bed next to her** engendered in her a sudden rage, as though she'd been robbed in the night. His bed was undisturbed, **the chenille spread tucked properly around the pillow.** She felt panicked and afraid — **an actual physical shudder came over her,** and then she had a dreadful urge **to beat at the covers of his bed,** to make him come out. (85-86)

To say that *His bed was undisturbed* conveys the idea of the dead husband's absence. But the details of description: *the chenille spread tucked properly around the pillow*, conveys the image of the bed, not just the idea of it. *She felt panicked and afraid* tells what she felt, but that *an actual physical shudder came over her* and that she had an *urge to beat at the covers of his bed*, convey images that prompt readers to imagine how she felt. For Rhoda, and for readers, specific details trigger emotions.

Other genres

I will give one more example of spoken discourse to illustrate how it makes use of details to create an emotional response as well as understanding of the speaker's point. This example is conversational, but it is not from ordinary conversation. It comes from a relatively formal conversational genre: a radio talk show.³ The guest, Vic Sussman, a writer who, some years earlier, had left Washington DC to homestead in Vermont, had recently returned to live in Washington. In answer to a question by the show's host, he explained how he had reached the decision to move back to the city. His explanation describes what James Joyce called an epiphany: a moment of sudden realization, which Joyce saw as the basis for the fictional short story.⁴ Sussman makes it possible for listeners to understand his epiphany (an internal emotional experience) by creating, with words, an image of a scene: a scene composed of external details. The emotional impact of the scene he describes (together with the musical qualities of his delivery) is attested by the host's spontaneous response.

The excerpt in Example (8) follows Sussman's explanation that he made the decision to move back to Washington during a visit to the city for

a Thanksgiving dinner. (Implicit in his discourse is the information that he had been recently separated from his wife.) He had delivered some book reviews to The Washington Post, which is located in the midst of downtown DC:

- (8) Guest: And I remember stepping out,
 2 I think **this was November,**
 3 and I stepped out onto
 4 somewhere around **18th and M,**
 5 or **18th and L,**
 6 **at lunchtime,**
 7 and it was one of those **warm, clear days in November.**
 8 And there was a **lunchtime press of people,**
 9 **tremendous crowds, ...**
 10 and I stood there,
 11 and for the first time
 12 I stood there,
 13 not as a member of uh of A marriage.
 14 I stood there alone.
 15 And, ... **the traffic** was there,
 16 **the noise** was there,
 17 the **swirl** of people, ...
 18 and I suddenly looked at it,
 19 for the first time,
 20 through my eyes. ...
 21 And I loved it.
 Host: Hm.
 Guest: And I've always had a dichotomous feeling
 23 about the city.
 24 I grew up in New York,
 25 and moved to Washington in the 50's,
 26 but that was the first time I stood there,
 27 and I had had the experiences
 28 that I had set out to have,
 29 in the country.
 30 I didn't need to do it anymore.
 31 And very few people,
 32 I mean I'm very fortunate.

- 33 Very few people get to really live their fantasies.
 34 It was over.
 35 I- I wrote a piece for NPR,
 36 in which I- I used the line,
 37 I said,
 38 (This actually happened.)
 39 I said, "**An elegant woman brushed past me,**
 40 **and the smell, the aroma of her perfume**
 41 **mingled with the musk of asphalt."**
 42 And I just felt like,
 43 ["This is where I belong."
 Host: [chuckle] hm m m m m m m m

The transcription of the host's responses (*hm*, [chuckle] *hm m m m m m m m*) are inadequate to capture their vocal quality: They have the character of what Goffman (1981) called "response cries", a spontaneous expression of sudden feeling.

There are many poetic aspects of Sussman's account that contribute to the emotional impact of his discourse: repetition (for example, *I stood there*, and *for the first time*); a compelling rhythm, created in part by the repetitions as well as strategic pauses; words with literary connotations (*press* and *swirl of people*, *aroma* — important enough to be self-corrected from *smell*, *mingled*). Moreover, his voice takes on a breathy, emotionally tinged quality beginning in line 17 with *the swirl of people* and building to the climax which the host responds to with her first *hm* following line 21. And throughout, he uses details, as shown in bold. As earlier predicted, many of these details cluster in the opening orientation section: He tells the specific street corner he was on: *somewhere around 18th and M, or 18th and L* (and note that he makes a point of getting it right, as was seen in Example (1)), the time: *around lunchtime*, the season and weather: *one of those warm, clear days in November*, and the scene: *a lunchtime press of people, tremendous crowds*.

The final image which evokes a strong response from the host is especially interesting because it is identified as a quotation from a "commentary" Sussman wrote for delivery on National Public Radio ("a piece for NPR"), an oral repetition of a text written for oral delivery. In these lines, the words are carefully chosen to capture the moment of epiphany in a combination of visual impressions (*an elegant woman, the asphalt*) and olfactory

impressions (*the aroma of her perfume, the musk of asphalt*) which combine two seemingly incompatible worlds: one beautiful (the woman) and one ugly (the city street with its *traffic, noise, and asphalt*), with the result that the otherwise ugly city became infused with beauty and drew him to it. The host's response is overlapped with the verbal coda to the guest's story (*and I just felt 'This is where I belong'*), evidence that her response is to the immediately preceding image rather than the evaluative (Labov 1972) coda.⁵

I will present one final example, this one from a written genre but also one that cannot easily be categorized as literary or nonliterary. Rather than identifying the source at the outset, I would like to invite readers to ask themselves what kind of text the following opening sentences come from.

- (9) Charles and Jeanne Atchison live near the Cowboy City dance bar on a gravel street in a peeling white and gold mobile home. Weeds sway in the breeze out front. It's a street with a melancholy down-on-one's-luck feel about it. The town is Azle, Tex., a tiny speck on the periphery of Fort Worth.

Are these the opening lines of a short story? A magazine article? The excerpt is from the front page of the Business section of the *New York Times* (Sunday November 9, 1986), that soberest of all American newspapers. The article begun by these lines, about a man whose career was ruined because he blew the whistle on his employer, contains all the literary strategies I have been investigating, such as dialogue (for example, ***'It's sort of like I was barreling along and I suddenly shifted into reverse'***; *Mr. Atchison said with a rueful smile. 'Well, welcome to whistle blower country'*), figures of speech (for example, *Mr. Atchison wound up out of a job and spinning in debt. He's working again, in another industry, slowly trying to patch the leaks in his life*). But most striking, I think, is the reporting of details of scene and character which are not just literary-like encasements for information but have no informational value at all. How can a journalist writing for the business section justify "reporting" the name of the dance bar near which the man lives, the colors of his mobile home, that his face was "stony" and mustache "sparse"? When did journalism begin to sound like literary writing?

Columnist Bob Greene traces it to 1963, when Jimmy Breslin wrote a column entitled "A Death in Emergency Room One" detailing the last moments of John Kennedy's life. According to Greene, Breslin's column

"literally took his readers into the corridors and operating rooms of Parkland Hospital on that day". Greene calls it "the most vivid piece of writing to come out of the assassination of John F. Kennedy". "The most vivid piece of writing". This concern with journalistic writing as writing rather than as reporting is reminiscent of Jakobson's (1960) "poetic function": "the set toward the message", or the use of language in which it is the language itself that counts most.

Greene says, "Journalists today are trained to get those telling details quickly..." He suggests that this style of reporting satisfies the public's curiosity. But why is the public curious about such details? The key, I believe, lies in Greene's observation that Breslin "literally [by which he means, of course, figuratively] took his readers into the ... rooms". What purpose is served by feeling one has been in the rooms where an event occurred? The pleasurable sense of involvement.

The centrality of scenes: neurological evidence

I will conclude by citing neurological evidence for the centrality of scenes in cognition. Many of the essays by neurologist Oliver Sacks (1986) discussing patients with bizarre neurological disorders make this point. I will mention only one.

Mrs. O'C., a woman in her nineties, awoke one night to hear music. At first she thought someone had left a radio on, but then she realized that this could not be coming from a radio. Not only were there no commercials, but the songs were those she had not heard since her long-forgotten early childhood in Ireland, a country she had left at the age of five. And with the songs came similarly forgotten scenes of happiness from a time when she was loved, as a small child, before she was orphaned and shipped to America to live with a stern aunt. Sacks discovered, through an EEG, that Mrs. O'C.'s sudden songs were caused by temporal-lobe seizures which "are the invariable basis of 'reminiscence' and experiential hallucinations" (127). Indeed such "experiential hallucinations" can be created by electrical stimulation of particular points in the cerebral cortex in conscious patients. "Such stimulations would instantly call forth intensely vivid hallucinations of tunes — people, scenes, which would be experienced, lived, as compellingly real..." Furthermore, "Such epileptic hallucinations or dreams ... are

... accompanied by the emotions which accompanied the original experience" (130). For Mrs. O'C., too, "there was an overwhelming *emotion* associated with the seizures ..." (135). In Sacks' words, Mrs. O'C. "suffered from 'reminiscence,' a convulsive upsurge of melodies and scenes..." Sacks observes that this testifies "to the essentially 'melodic' and 'scenic' nature of inner life..."

The melodic and the scenic parallel the two dimensions I had identified as creating involvement in discourse: what I had earlier (Tannen 1984) thought of as the sound level, which sweeps the audience along, and the meaning level, which forces the audience to participate in sensemaking. The melodic and the scenic parallel even more closely the duality that Friedrich (1986: 39) identifies as constituting language: "the symbolic process that mediates between, on the one hand, ideas/feelings and, on the other hand, the sounds produced...", the "musical" and the "mythic" which also accounts for poetry. Sacks' account, in this and other essays, contributed to my realization that sensemaking is essentially scenic.

This neurological evidence for the scenic nature of inner life contributes to an understanding of the function of details in creating involvement. The invoking of details — specific, concrete, familiar — allows an individual to recall and a hearer or reader to imagine a scene that has both meaning and emotion. It is this creation of meaning by means of emotion, and emotion by means of meaning and sound, that drives both conversational and literary discourse.

NOTES

*Earlier and significantly different versions of this paper were presented as "I Had a Little Ham, I Had a Little Cheese: Getting Involved with Details in Greek and American Conversational and Literary Narrative," at the International Pragmatics Association meeting in Antwerp, Belgium, August, 1987, and "Epistemology and a Poetics of Talk: Creating Involvement with Details," at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, November 1987. All these presentations are based on material developed in my book, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). I first developed a framework for examining conversational and literary discourse with the help of a Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship. The current research and writing was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft by Paul Friedrich and Pamela Downing. I also thank journalist Bob Greene for permission to quote from his Chicago Tribune column, although neither he nor I could identify the date the column appeared.

1. Some background on the concept of involvement is in order. In prior analyses of casual conversation (Tannen 1984, 1986), I have identified a range of linguistic strategies which contribute to conversational style as linguistic means for serving the universal and conflicting goals of involvement and independence. This theoretical framework is derived from Lakoff's (1973, 1979) schema for politeness phenomena (wherein politeness can serve distance, deference, or camaraderie), Goffman's (1967) notion of two types of deference: avoidance rituals and presentational rituals, developed on analogy of Durkheim's positive and negative religious rites; and the reformulation by Brown and Levinson (1978) of Lakoff's and Goffman's schemas as negative and positive face. Brown and Levinson define positive face as the need to have one's wants approved of by others, and negative face as the need not to be imposed on by others. It struck me that these are not two different, parallel needs but simultaneous, paradoxical ones. They are paradoxical because anything one does to serve one *necessarily* violates the need for the other. Involvement, which serves the positive face need, is *necessarily* a threat to independence, the negative face need. And conversely, anything that serves the need for independence is a threat to involvement. As Becker (1982) puts it, all communication labors under paradoxical commands: "I am the same as you", and "I am different from you". Scollon (1982) observes that utterances do not serve one or the other of these needs, but must serve both in balance.

Although all speakers signal involvement in some way, assumptions about the appropriate way to signal involvement, including assumptions about how much detail is the right amount (and, by implication, how much is too much or too little), are individually and culturally relative. The esthetic exemplified in this paper is one expression of the role of details in creating involvement; the general role of details, I believe, is universal, but how much detail, of what type, in what context, will differ both individually and culturally. In response to my oral presentation of this paper, William Leap commented that he believes a Ute speaker would likely omit details, leaving them to the hearer to fill in. This too, I observed, creates involvement by supplying just the right amount of detail for a given discourse esthetic, leaving it to the hearer to participate in sensemaking by filling in unstated meaning. The esthetic Leap suggests for Ute is similar to that described by Scollon and Scollon (1984) for Athabaskan in their article aptly entitled "Cooking it up and boiling it down".

2. Example (2) is taken from a story told by a woman in a small group in answer to my question about whether anyone had had any experiences they recall while riding the subway (all did). The narrative from which this comes is analyzed at length elsewhere (Tannen 1978). Examples (3) and (4) are taken from an extended transcript of a Thanksgiving dinner table conversation that I have analyzed in numerous previous studies (especially Tannen 1984): a conversation among six friends and acquaintances. Here, but not there, conversational excerpts are presented in poetic lines rather than prosaic paragraphs, in order to reflect in print the rhythmic chunking that characterizes all spoken discourse — a phenomenon that Chafe has written about extensively (see for example Chafe 1986). As the transcript indicates, I was one of the participants in the conversation.

Transcription conventions:

- ... Three dots: pause
- .
- Period: sentence-final falling intonation
- ,
- Comma: clause-final intonation (more to come)
- ?
- Question mark: rising intonation
-
- Underline: emphatic stress

/?/	Inaudible utterance
[Brackets connecting simultaneous speech (both spoken at once)
A	Pronunciation of word "a" as /ey/ rather than schwa
()	Parentheses: "parenthetical" intonation

3. One could argue that talk show talk (in England, chat show) is not conversation, strictly speaking, but an interview. There is precedent in the sociolinguistic literature for using conversational interviews as conversational data, most notably the extended work of Schifffrin (for example, Schifffrin 1987). I will not tackle here the theoretical question of the status of such data but would like simply to note that it is an intermediary genre, something more formal than dinner table conversation but less formal than a prepared lecture. This excerpt is from "The Diane Rehm Show", aired on WAMU in Washington, DC on February 18, 1988. I am grateful to both host and guest for their permission to use this excerpt.
4. Joyce's short story, "The Dead", recently made into a film by John Huston, revolves around an epiphany: Gabriel's realization that his wife has known a passion which his own life experience has not included.
5. When I called Sussman to get his permission to use the excerpt, it emerged in our conversation that although the incident described in this striking image "really happened", it didn't actually happen at a single moment. In writing this memorable line, Sussman conflated impressions that he had actually experienced at different moments during the day. This is artistic creation. The writer also provided further external evidence for the effectiveness of this image: It was after reading this line in Sussman's NPR commentary that the Washington Post editor decided to consider hiring him for his current job. The editor remarked, "That's the best writing I've seen in weeks".

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