

tence processing. Clearly a more precise understanding of the demands of the specific experimental tasks utilized in psycholinguistics is necessary in order to place the data collected into the proper perspective within the general psychological model of language comprehension. That is, attempts to determine the psychological "reality/validity" of linguistic constituents must be set in the perspective of the level of the behavioral process at which such linguistic structure might be relevant.

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Theoretical Notes

The Effect of Expectations on Conversation*

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In keeping with recent interest in the effect of context on verbalization, Linde (1974) provides an elegant example of how expectations account for choice of articles and surface subjects. She demonstrates that in descriptions of apartment layouts, people tend to introduce a new room with a definite article and in subject position if it is "a room which an apartment may be expected to have." I am concerned with ways in which expectations affect verbalization on the sentence level, but also on higher levels of discourse. I will demonstrate this process by analyzing a natural speech event: a personal narrative told by a woman in a small group about her experience fainting on the New York subway. I will discuss three syntactic elements that mark statements which run counter to expectation, and then will discuss how expectations about storytelling and conversation may help to explain the elusive phenomenon of conversational style.

The small group discussion began with my asking whether anyone had had any interesting experiences on the subway. (See Appendix for the text of the story).

The three sentence-level elements which I will investigate are: *but*, *negation*, and *just*.

In this verbal text, *but* serves as a transition marking the denial of expectations established by more than one preceding clause or of expectations about narrative coherence. The three instances follow¹:

- (1) 11. 36-7 ... BUT ... U-M ... AFTER THAT, ... I could not ride on the subway.

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¹Note: "11. 36-7" represents lines 36-7 in the Appendix.

(2) 11. 48-9 ... but I think of the way the Jews ... were herded into the cattle cars.

(3) 11. 62-3 ... But I was in ... standing in the center of the car.

Sentence (1) is a transition from the explanation (11. 33-35) of why she fainted. She seems to be saying, "But THIS is the main point," against the expectation that anything she would spend that much time talking about must be important. Sentence (2) marks the fact that, as she admits, the comparison she is about to make is not really valid, contrary to our expectations about comparisons. Sentence (3) uses *but* in contrast to the expectation she has just assented to, that she would ordinarily hold onto the strap. What follows explains why she was not holding the strap that time. In this case *but* also serves to move on from the interlocutor's distracting question, back to the point she wants to make, in violation of the expectation that she will relate her next comment to the question posed.

As Labov (1972) has pointed out, negative statements can only make sense in a story about what happened if their affirmative was expected to happen. The first two of the six instances of negatives in the fainting story serve to block in advance the withering question, "So what?"

(4) 11. 2-3 neither one of them really had ... any kinds of endings or anything,

(5) 11. 6-7 I had DON'T even remember FAINTING before in my life

Sentence (4) expresses the speaker's apprehension that the hearers' expectations that a tellable story have a significant resolution may not be met. Closely related to this is the device in Sentence (5) which justifies the story by assuring the audience that it is reportable because it is unusual.

Three other negative statements go together:

(6) 11. 36-7 I ... could not ride on the subway.

(7) 1. 39 I c ... I c-an't.

(8) 1. 51 and I can't do it.

Here the negative statements contrast with the expectation that New Yorkers often ride the subway and can do so comfortably. As is often the case, the occurrence of one element - the negative - coincides with a number of other types of evidence that something special is going on, in this case the repetition, nodals, hesitations, and a false start (see Tannen, in press, for discussion of these and other types of evidence of expectations).

The word *just* marks contrast with the expectation of MORE or SOMETHING ELSE TOO. There are, strikingly, twelve instances of *just* in this short narrative. We can first separate out Sentences (9) and (10).

(9) 1. 52 And it's just as dehumanizing.

(10) 1. 62 ... I was just saying

Sentence (9) is a comparative in the sense of "equally," and in Sentence (10) *just* refers to time immediately preceding. The other ten instances of *just* all contrast what actually happened with the expectation that MORE might have happened. Interestingly, this single function can have opposite effects. In half the examples, the contrast of NOT MORE belittles what did occur, while in the other half it intensifies.

The five which have a belittling effect are Sentences (11)-(15).

(11) 1. 1 I just had ... two p ... particular incidents that I remember,

(12) 11. 3-4 they just happened,

(13) 11. 26-7 and he asked me just two questions.

(14) 11. 32-3 ... A-and U-M ... I just stayed in the ... emergency room for ... I guess an hour.

(15) 1. 24 which was just a few minutes away

Sentence (11) contrasts with the expectation that she might have had many experiences on the subway. Sentence (12) follows the negative disclaimer, "neither one of them really had ... any kinds of endings or anything," evidencing her concern that her story may not meet the hearers' expectations about a tellable story. In Sentence (13) there is a contrast with the expectation that a policeman would ask many questions. Sentence (14) marks her awareness that people might expect her to have needed serious treatment, since she is telling about the event, and so she is belittling the seriousness of her stay in the hospital emergency room. Sentence (15) marks the fact that the "wait" until the next stop was not long. Sentence (15) was uttered with strikingly low pitch and amplitude, which contribute to the belittling effect of *just*, making the entire sentence a kind of throwaway; that is, she fills in the event for the sake of verisimilitude, but marks it as not significant, in contrast with the expectation that only significant elements in a story should be told.

In Examples (16)-(20) *just* again serves to contrast with the expectation of MORE, but in these cases the effect of NOT MORE or NOTHING ELSE is intensifying. It is rather like the effect of Yeats' line from "The Second Coming": "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Although we ordinarily think of "mere" as a belittling modifier, as in "a mere pittance," in Yeats' poem it means "utter" and "utter anarchy" is more disturbing than anarchy mixed with something else. The examples from the fainting story are:

(16) 1. 36 it was just a whole mess.

(17) 1. 50 ... And I just panic.

(18) 1. 15 ... And I just fell down,

(19) 11. 63-4 and I just kind of slid down the pole.

(20) 1. 22 ... and everything just kind of combined.

In Sentence (16) "just a whole mess" is like "an utter mess," and in Sentence

(17) to "just panic" is more intense than panic mixed with other emotions. Sentences (18) and (19) echo each other; in them, *just* serves to make the event more stark and startling. The juxtaposition of *just* with *kind of* is somewhat odd since *just* is an intensifier and *kind of* is a hedge. This happens in Sentence (20) as well. *Just* seems to counterbalance the hedge, making the phrase more impactful than it would be without *just*. (Imagine, for example, "everything kind of combined.") In these sentences, the NOT MORE also implies, "I'm not going to say anything more about it."

These are some of the ways expectations motivate sentence-level verbalization. I will turn now to larger levels of discourse. Furthermore, thus far I have dealt with expectations shared by speaker and hearers. There are often aspects of interaction in which expectations are not shared, and the result is a sense of dissonance or outright misunderstanding.

The speaker follows up her fainting story with the conclusion that subway crowding is dehumanizing like Nazi cattle cars. Other stories told by the same speaker during this discussion show a similar pattern. For example, she tells of having been a cab driver in New York and needing to go to the bathroom. After carefully building suspense and humor by telling how she tried unsuccessfully to get a hotel clerk to give her the key to the hotel women's room, she concludes her story with comments about injustice to women, since male cabbies can easily use hotel men's rooms which are not customarily locked. The fact that she ended up using the men's room was mentioned in such an offhand manner that when I was listening, I missed it entirely and asked her what she had done about finding a women's room. I am quite sure that had I been telling the story, the men's room would have been the entertaining climax to the story of my personal frustration. This speaker, however, seems to think a story is best told for the purpose of drawing a larger conclusion, such as people's callousness or injustice. The other women present apparently did not share her expectation for they went on to tell stories which merely related their experiences.

As a result of these differing expectations, a misunderstanding arose when the speaker tried to include me in the storytelling event by saying 11.40-41: "I don't know if you've ever experienced." She didn't bother to complete her sentence because I rushed to assure her, "I haven't" (1.42). Since I expected the story to be about her personal experience, I meant I had not experienced fainting, but she was apparently formulating the subways-are-dehumanizing idea, and she meant she did not know if I had experienced rush hour on the subway.

In listening to this conversation many times, I have had the chance to find the use of a kind of dissonance I had been vaguely aware of before. I expect a lot of overt agreement in a conversation. The speaker of the fainting story did not have this expectation. For example, when I comment (1.53) "But people were pretty nice, hm?" in fact she agrees with me. Yet instead of saying "Yes, but . . ." she simply states her disagreement: 1.54 "...TSK People . . . are . . . ALWAYS

nice when there's a crisis like that." And she goes on to demonstrate why she does not agree with my implication that people are good at heart.

Furthermore, the two times that others interject comments and the speaker says "Yeah," she does not really deal with the interjections. The "Yeah" is a perfunctory signal that she has heard the comments, even though she will not deal with them substantively.

- | | | |
|---------|----|--|
| (21) 1. | 45 | DT: Oh, rush hour. Not fainting. |
| (22) 1. | 46 | Yeah. The closest thing I can compare it to, |
| (23) 1. | 61 | Third woman: Didn't you used to grab the strap in the subway? |
| (24) 1. | 62 | ... I was just saying . . . Yeah. But I was in . . . standing in the center of the car, holding on the center POLE, . . . and I just kind of slid down the pole. |

She proceeds with the image of herself fainting, which is not directly related to the question. Again, I would have expected the overt agreement, "Well, I usually did," and a contrastive transition, "But THAT time . . .".

It seems, then, that this speaker and I have different models of conversations, with regard to agreement and disagreement, or it may be that I was operating on a conversation model while she was operating on a storytelling model. At any rate, our expectations of how to interact verbally were different during that encounter. Generally, when I talk to people who do not verbalize agreement as I expect them to, I have a vague sense of discomfort, as though things are not quite right. I would previously have put this sense of dissonance in the elusive category of "conversational style," but it can now be seen as a function of differing expectations about how a conversation is conducted.

I have shown a few of the ways that expectation shapes the telling of a story: by triggering *but*, *negation*, and *just*. In these cases, shared expectation was seen to enhance effective communication. But I have also shown how expectations about what constitutes a story and a conversation can differ among people in the "same culture" and thereby cause difficulties in interaction.

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APPENDIX: THE FAINTING STORY

Transcription Conventions

... is a measurable pause, more than .1 second. Precise measurements are available.

.. is a slight break in timing.

. indicates sentence-final intonation

. indicates clause-final intonation ("more to come")

- indicates lengthening of the preceding phoneme or syllable.

Syllables in caps were spoken with heightened pitch or amplitude.

Square brackets enclose phonetic transcription.

Parentheses below the line indicate voice quality of the speaker.

Italics indicates false start.

i>

[ʔ] is a glottal stop.

In line 29 [plriɪd] is to be read "pirreid," i.e., "period."

SPEAKER: I just had... two p... particular incidents that I remember,
... and one- UH-... [ʔ] neither one of them really had... any
kinds of endings or anything, that you know resolution, they just
happened, ... UM... ONE of them was- UH-... back in... what 66?
... 67, ... when [ʔ] I [ʔ] FAINTed on the subway. ... It was very UM... UH...

FRIGHTening experience. ... I had DONT even remember FAINTing before
in my life let alone on the subway. ... A-nd UH-... It was a h...
very hot... August day, ... and I was going into the city, ... from
Queens? ... A-nd... I was standing... in a very crowded car. ... And
I remember *standing*... I was standing up, ... and I remember holding
on to the... center pole, ... a-nd... I remember saying to myself
(chuckle)

... there is a person over there that's falling to the ground.
... And that person was me. ... And I couldn't... put together the
fact... that... there was someone fainting and that someone was me.
... And I just fell down, ... (clears throat) then all of a sudden

there was a lot of space, and... people... helped me up, and... someone
sat me down. ... A-nd then- UH-...

DT²: It wasn't rush hour.

SPEAKER: Yes it was. That's... partly why I fainted... UH... I was under
... tremendous... emotional pressure at the time, ... and personal...
pressure, ... and... the crush... of the BODIES, ... and the no [ʔ] ... AIR
in the CAR, ... and everything just kind of combined. ... A-nd UM-
... TSK it was incredibly HOT, ... a-nd UH-... we waited... until the
next stop, which was just a few minutes away... and then... someone
(low pitch and amplitude)

took me off... the car, ... and he got a policeman. ... and... he came
(Sighs)

over, ... and asked what was wrong, and he asked me just two
questions. Are you pregnant? ... To which I said no. I mean *they*
... like he was told that I had fainted. ... A-nd UH-... UH he said
... in a very embarrassed kind of way do you have your [plriɪd]
now. ... And I said no. ... A-nd then he said okay, and he sat me
down, and they got an ambulance, ... and the ambulance ca-me, and
took me to... a nearby hospital. ... A-nd U-M... I just stayed in
the... emergency room... for... I don't know how long

prostration. ... A lot of it. ... *Having eaten... having... having not*
had... not... EATen... for several DA-YS, ... and... I was job hun [ʔ]
it was just... a whole mess. ... BUT... U-M... AFTER THAT, ... I...
could not... ride... on the subway. ... And to this day I have trouble
... riding on the subway. ... If I'm with someone I feel okay. ... If
I'm alone, ... IN rush hour, ... I c... I c-an't. ... I f... I'm very
very scared of... fainting again. ... UM... I don't know if you've
ever experienced

DT: I haven't.

SPEAKER: ... There is NO experience in the WORLD, ... like experiencing
... rush hour... in the subway. ... UH-

DT: Oh, rush hour. Not fainting.

SPEAKER: Yeah. The closest thing I can compare it to, and I never
experienced THAT, ... and it's probably a FRACTION of what THAT
experience was, ... but I think... of the way the Jews... were herded
into the cattle cars. ... TSK and *that's*... you know... maybe... maybe
part of THAT... ties into that... kind of... thing. ... And I just panic.
... I mean... everything in me... freezes up, and I can't do it.
... And it's just as dehumanizing.

DT: But people were pretty nice, hm?

SPEAKER: ... TSK People... are... Always nice when there's a crisis like
that. ... And... and the context is right. ... I was WHITE, ... I was a
young woman, ... I was w-ell dressed, I was... obviously not... a
pervert, or a deviate, ... or a criminal. ... HAD I BEEN... had I been
... anything OTHER than that... I could've fallen, ... and they would've
stepped OVER me. ... Or perhaps ON me. ... You know cause that's the
way people in New York ARE.

THIRD WOMAN: Didn't you used to grab the strap... in the subway?

SPEAKER: ... I was just saying... I... Yeah. ... But I was in... standing in
the center of the car, holding on to the center POLE, ... and I just
kind of slid down the pole. ... A-nd UH-... it was funny because
... in my HEAD... I said... my AWAREness was such... that I said to my-
self... gee well there's a PERSON over there, falling DOWN.
... And that person was me.

DT: It's weird... mm

SPEAKER: Okay that was... that experience. ... And aNOTHer experience
(almost inaudible)

Tannen, Deborah. "The Effect of Expectations on Conversation." Discourse Processes
1(1978):2.203-209.