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CHAPTER FOUR

Hearing Voices in Conversation, Fiction, and Mixed Genres

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INTRODUCTION

Bleich (to appear) observes that, in light of growing concern with intertextuality, two elements not usually found in purely cognitive approaches to language, *affect* and *dialogue*, become central. These two elements are central to this lecture as well. The lecture draws on an ongoing research project comparing conversational and literary discourse.¹ The thrust of this research is that ordinary conversation and literary discourse have more in common than has been commonly thought.² Whereas conversation is generally thought to be messy, pe-

¹ Research on the material presented here was begun with the support of a Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship. Discussion of dialogue in conversation is drawn from Tannen (1986a). An earlier version of this paper appears as "The Orality of Literature and the Literacy of Conversation" in *Language, Literacy, and Culture: Issues of Society and Schooling*, edited by Judith Langer (Norwood, NJ: Ablex). Revision into the current form was carried out during a sabbatical leave from Georgetown University, with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful to Lambros Comitas and the Joint Program in Applied Anthropology of Teachers College Columbia University for providing affiliation during this leave.

² Christopher Ricks (1981:42), in reviewing Goffman's *Forms of Talk*, reports feeling "what everybody always feels about the main contentions which issue from somebody else's discipline: that it is odd that certain things need to be said." Just so, it will seem odd to some, in particular to creative writers, that I feel it needs to be said that literary language is made of the stuff of ordinary conversation. W.H. Auden, for example, is reputed to have commented that "poetry is memorable speech"; similar observations are reported by Heath (1985:4), who observes that early American writers believed "their work constitutes a linguistic 'reconstitution' of ordinary language." Furthermore, Heath (1986:287) notes, "It is a paradox of postmodernist literature in the United States that what is considered most literary is that which is most like oral language."

are contexts in which Michelle and her friends choose to write to each other rather than speak. Michelle reports that sometimes they wrote notes at home and brought them to school ready to deliver. In this written genre, the diction, vocabulary, and fluency are more reminiscent of the story told in conversation than of the one written for class:

High! What's up? I'm kool! I'm cranking in science with Norm N. & Nate Noster. Party train up the butt!

* *

You would look so good /w the one and only Tom Baxter! So go for it! He loves you yeah yeah yeah!

* *

[about a friend who got into trouble with a teacher] Karen is dead. Shams! DIES! Dead meat all over the street!

Involving, or poetic, aspects of this discourse abound: formulaic phrases which echo songs, including repetition ("He loves you yeah yeah yeah"), conventionalized sayings ("Go for it!", "one and only," the now-familiar "What's up?"), rhyming ("Dead meat all over the street!"), repetition (as above, plus "dead" repeated in the last excerpt), paraphrase with increasing intensity ("shams, dies"), visual punning ("High!", "kool"), and stylized vocabulary ("cranking," "Party train up the butt!"). The point I wish to emphasize here is that it is not the writtenness of the written assignment that accounts for its linguistic form but the context in which it was produced, and the genre associated with that context.

EMOTION AND COGNITION: MINGLING LITERATE AND LITERARY STRATEGIES

In her memoir of her parents Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, anthropologist and linguist Mary Catherine Bateson (1984) recalls her efforts to take into account the emotional basis of cognition in confronting the task of communicating ideas that evolved in interaction. Her discussion of this process shows the error of the assumption that academic discourse is emotion-free, emotion being appropriate to fiction. Appointed rapporteur for a conference her father organized on cybernetics at Burg Wartenstein, Bateson (1984:180) "reached the conclusion that my book would be true to the event only if it followed some of the conventions of fiction" because the "conventions of academic reporting . . . would mean editing out emotions that seemed to me essential to the process."

Bateson contrasts her approach with that taken by Arthur Koestler,

who organized a conference at Alpbach on a similar topic at the same time. According to Bateson, Koestler tried to separate ideas and emotions and produced two books, a conventional conference proceedings and a novel: "The emotion was edited out of the formal proceedings of the Alpbach Symposium, which came out dry and academic, and resurfaced in the novel as rage." In contrast, Bateson continues:

There is a sense in which the emotion was edited into [my] book, for I used my own introspective responses of dismay or illumination to bring the reader into the room, and worked with the tape-recorded discussion so that the emotionally pivotal comments would be brought out rather than buried in verbiage.

The successful result of Bateson's effort is a book entitled *Our Own Metaphor* (1972), a document which uses linguistic means commonly found in fiction to "report" the proceedings of the conference. The novelistic devices, I suggest, make the ideas that emerged in the conference available to readers in a way more closely paralleling the way conference participants were able to perceive them.

To see how Bateson achieves this, consider the following excerpt which begins in the middle of an exposition presented as the dialogue of a participant called Tolly:

"I'll begin with an extremely simple picture, by way of introduction, and then elaborate it. This will be like those initial minutes in the movies when you see the introductory pictures which give you an idea of the kind of movie it's going to be while telling you who the main characters are, and so on.

"Let's imagine a pendulum swinging back and forth." Tolly hunted around for chalk and then he drew this picture. "This means that for some interval of time the pendulum swings to the right, shown by the arrow labeled R. Here's an occurrence, shown by a point, and then the pendulum swings to the left for some other interval, shown by the arrow labeled L. The occurrence is the end of the swing. You can think of the same picture as representing a billiard ball rolling back and forth on a frictionless table between two reflecting boundaries. Left, right, left, right, and the occurrences are the bounces."

Horst did a double-take. "You mean the *point* indicates the moment it changes from right to left?"

Tolly nodded gleefully. "Yeah. That's right. Unconventional." Once Horst had called my attention to it, I realized that this was indeed unconventional. The minute I stopped thinking that the arrow indicated the direction of the pendulum (which it did not, because the diagram of

a light changing from red to green to red would have looked exactly the same), I realized that Tolly was doing the strange thing of using an *arrow* to represent something stable (an "interval of condition-holding" he called it) and a *point* to represent change, the occurrence that initiates new conditions. This was the exact opposite of the convention Barry had used in his diagram, where arrows had represented the transition from, say, organic to non-organic nitrogen compounds, or Fred, who had used arrows to represent causation. It was not yet clear whether these conventions were simply freakish and arbitrary, or whether this choice of symbols was a first step toward new kinds of meanings. (pp. 166-67)

It would be possible to double the length of this paper by analyzing the many ways this passage is written like fiction (and also the many ways it is not like a transcript of speech). I will refer briefly to a few.

By calling the speakers by first names (Tolly, Horst, Barry, Fred), Bateson brings us closer to them than we would feel if they were referred to by last names only (for example, Holt) or title-last-name (for example, Dr. Mittelstaedt or Professor Commoner). She presents Tolly's ideas as dialogue rather than paraphrasing them—with attendant interjections and colloquial diction ("say," "Yeah"), contractions ("I'll," "it's," "let's"), fragmented syntax ("Unconventional."), and italics for key words that would have been prosodically emphasized in speech ("*point*," "*arrow*"). The possible responses of readers are represented, prefigured, and created by the dramatized responses of the audience-participants ("Horst did a double-take"). Note, too, that Horst's response is described as an image of nonverbal behavior, requiring the audience to supply the meaning of a double-take much as they would on observing it in interaction. Many of the paralinguistic features which frame speech by letting us know how speakers mean what they say—for example, tone of voice, rhythm, intonation, and laughter—are described and aided by adverbs ("Tolly nodded gleefully"). Moreover, the importance of the ideas is highlighted by representing the narrator's own developing cognitive state ("I realized . . ."), as well as by prefiguring future cognition ("It was not yet clear . . ."). This last device simultaneously builds suspense.

Suspense is also created by the scenically graphic but otherwise puzzling description of apparently irrelevant behavior such as "Tolly hunted around for chalk and then drew this picture." How does it contribute to our understanding of the ideas presented to tell us that the speaker hunted for chalk? Contrast this with the conventional academic-writing locution, "See Figure 1." In the latter case we see only the figure. In Bateson's description, we see not only the figure (or, rather, the "picture"), but also the human interaction that gave rise to it. Furthermore, the interruption in exposition gives readers

time to prepare to focus attention on the figure/picture, much as the conference participants prepared to focus on the illustration as Tolly prepared to draw it. Finally, Tolly is represented as using a simile in his opening lines, likening the figure he is about to draw to a movie lead-in.

In deciding that she had to use techniques common in fiction in order to make the abstract ideas discussed at the cybernetics conference available to readers, Bateson acknowledged the emotional basis of cognition. To do this, she presented the ideas as dialogue. We have thus come full circle to Bleich's (to appear) observation, cited at the outset, that dialogue and affect are central.

The emotional basis of cognition is also at the heart of a discussion by Shirley Brice Heath of the process of becoming literate. Heath (1985) explains that the literacy needed for success is not merely a matter of decoding skills but rather entails a complex set of behaviors that are acquired only when written materials are integrated in a life that provides situations in which what has been read is subsequently talked about. Similarly, incipient literates must have models of literate adults with whom they feel intimate. It is the human intimacy, or involvement, that gives motivation and meaning to the acquisition of literacy, as to any other culturally significant activity.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that storytelling—conversational or literary, spoken or written—makes use of constructed dialogue which, by its particularity, occasions the imagination of alternative, distant, and other worlds. By this act of imagination, the hearer or reader participates in sense-making and is thus moved to a sense of rapport that is the means to meaning in both conversation and fiction. I demonstrated that the dialogue in a conversational story was constructed, not reported. Drawing on examples of Brazilian and American narration of Little Red Riding Hood, I suggested that the creation of dialogue is associated with "vivid" storytelling style. I illustrated the overlapping of linguistic patterns in spoken and written discourse types by presenting examples of speech and writing produced by junior high school students in three different contexts. The final section demonstrates how one writer used literary linguistic means to enhance an academic writing task, means which enhance, rather than excluding, emotional involvement.

Such mixing of genres reflects the mixing of spoken and written modes in our lives, much as Heath (1985) notes that people must talk about what they read, to be motivated to read. To dramatize this, I

end with an excerpt from an essay about Lubavitcher Hasidim, an orthodox Jewish sect living in Brooklyn, New York. In this excerpt, the author, Lis Harris (1985), constructs (I shall not, for now-obvious reasons, say that she "reports") her conversation with a Hasidic man:

"Thanks," I said. "By the way, are there any books about Hasidism that you think might be helpful?"

"There are no books."

"No books! Why, what do you mean? You must know that hundreds of books have been written about Hasidism."

"Books about Hasidic matters always misrepresent things. They twist and change the truth in casual ways. I trust Lubavitcher books, like the 'Tanya' [a work written by the movement's founder] and the collections of the rebbe's discourses, because our rebbe got the information in them from the rebbe before him, and so on, in an unbroken chain. I trust scholars I can talk to, face to face."

The effectiveness of presenting this interchange of ideas as a dialogue is by now evident. Harris presents herself as naive to the point of rudeness ("You must know . . ."), so that the Hasidic man can be shown to explain his view in detail. His explanation, furthermore, dramatizes the intertwining of speaking and writing in the passing down of a written text—the Tanya—by the great religious leaders (rebbe) who are also great scholars—interpreters as well as receivers of that text. The text, in other words, is meaningless apart from its interpretation, which is found in people, not in print, and from the interaction among people ("scholars I can talk to, face to face").¹²

Heath (1986) quotes at length the poet William Carlos Williams and cites classical and medieval rhetoricians and grammarians to the effect that "literate knowledge depended ultimately on oral reformulations of that knowledge" (282). Similarly, Heath (1985) notes that early American schools emphasized opportunities for talk and for extended debate about interpretation of written materials. It is for this reason that contemporary academics are forever holding meetings, conferences, lectures, and institutes such as the present one—wanting to see scholars face to face rather than encountering them only through their written productions, and wanting to interact with them.

The Hasidic view of books, and Harris's presentation of it, like Bateson's depiction of the Burg Wartenstein conference, and her discussion of how she depicted it, underline the reason for the centrality

¹² A similar image of Hasidic disdain for written materials disconnected from people emerges in Myerhoff's (1978:271–72) account of a great Hasidic rabbi who "ordered that all written records of his teachings be destroyed. His words must be passed from mouth to mouth, learned by and in heart."

of dialogue and its relation to other aspects of language which create involvement in speaking and writing. Like such linguistic patterns as repetition, details, imagery, and formulaic expressions, dialogue provides particulars by which listeners and speakers collaborate in imagining and participating in similar worlds. Along with these and other poetic figures, dialogue helps provide the emotional basis of communication, for there is no understanding without caring.

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