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## Local Color: Orientational Detail in Midwestern Personal Narrative

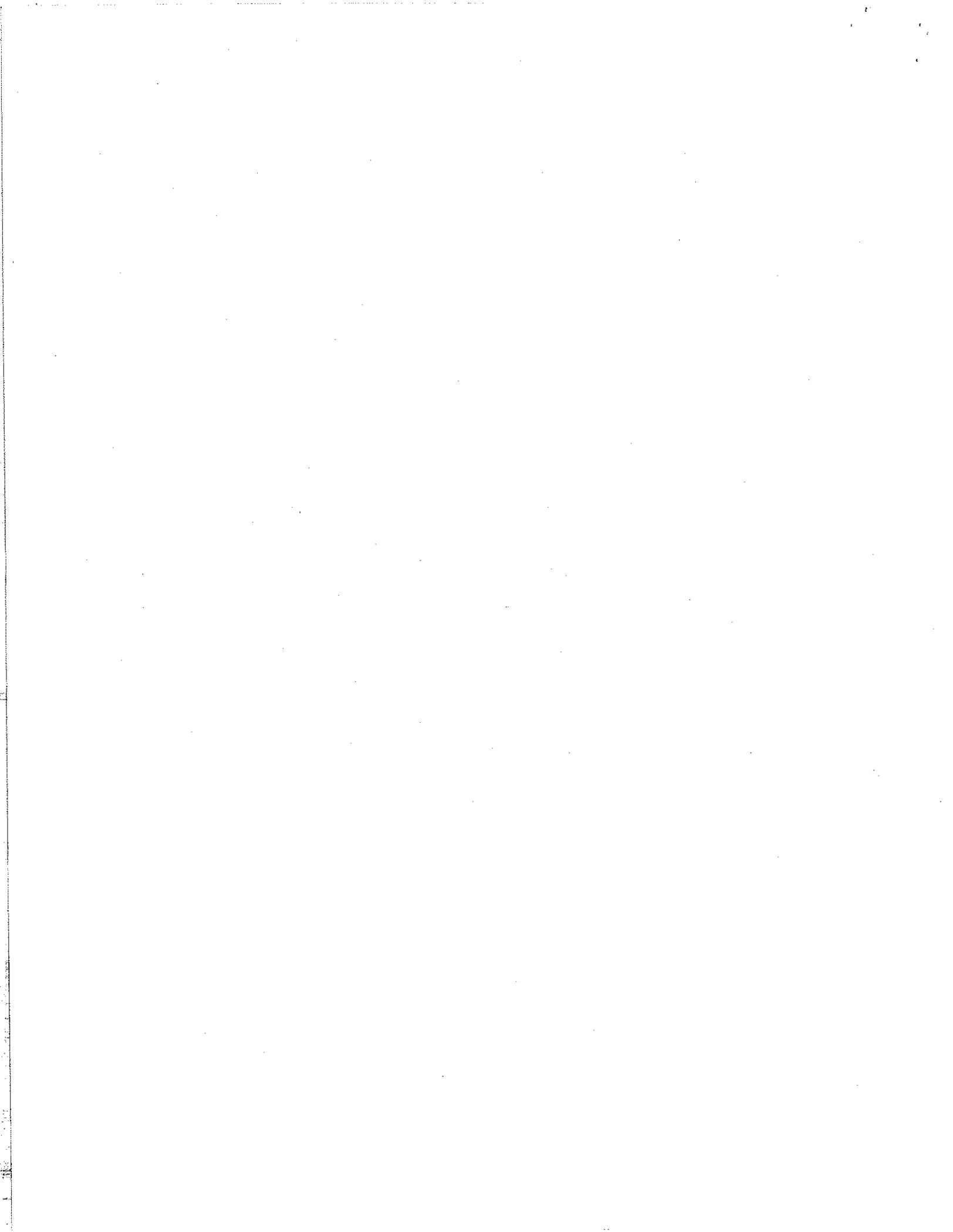
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### 0. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the last twenty years there has been a flurry of interest in the linguistics of spontaneous spoken narrative, sparked by William Labov's (1972; Labov and Waletzky 1967) work with 'oral versions of personal experience.' Linguists including Labov (1981), Polanyi (1985), Schiffrin (1981; 1984), and Wolfson (1982), as well as linguistically-minded folklorists and anthropologists (Stahl 1977; Bauman 1986), have made important observations about the discourse structure and the pragmatics of spoken narrative, and about how personal experience stories mirror and create social relationships and cultural ideologies. Cross-cultural research on narrative like that of Chafe and his colleagues (Chafe 1980) has compared Americans' narratives to those of various non-Americans, and Heath (1983) and others have analyzed the narrative styles of American minority groups.

Yet there is one rather remarkable gap in our understanding of spoken narrative, remarkable especially in light of the sociolinguistic tradition in which most linguistic scholarship on narrative finds its roots. We know almost nothing about regional variation in American narrative styles. In fact, the question of regional variation has almost never been raised. With few exceptions, the sociolinguists who have analyzed spoken narrative have implicitly assumed that the features and functions of the narratives with which they were working—narratives told, for the most part, by urban northeasterners—were common to all American narratives, or at least common to narratives of 'mainstream' Americans (a category which is never well defined).

Thus, Labov's descriptions of 'well-formed narratives,' descriptions which were based on studies of an isolated Martha's Vineyard community and of New York ghetto black youths, have widely been taken to be applicable to any narrative data, in spite of the fact that rural relic areas and urban ghettos tend to be characterized by non-mainstream speech forms (as Labov's own work, as well as the work of many other dialectologists, has shown), and despite the fact that, as Kochman (1981) and others have pointed out, blacks and whites have different communicative styles. Polanyi's (1985) study of conversational storytelling, which uses as data stories told mainly by Jewish New Yorkers, is entitled *Telling the American Story*,<sup>2</sup> although there is clear evidence that New York Jews differ from many other Americans in their discourse style (Tannen 1981). In their discussions of the functions of tense choice in narrative, Schiffrin (1981) and Wolfson (1982) both discuss stories by Philadelphians, again implicitly claiming that their findings are generalizable to stories told by any other Americans, or perhaps any other English-speakers, even though dialect studies have shown that urban speech is unlike rural speech. The work of Chafe and the other 'Pearl Story' researchers (Chafe 1980) treats Americans as an undifferentiated group with which other (also undifferentiated) cultural groups are compared. Of the studies of spoken stories mentioned above, Heath's (1983) is the most sensitive to intra-American differences in story forms and functions, but Heath discusses in detail only two communities, both southern and both working-class. In general, though we have long been aware of regional differences in phonology, morphology, and syntax, and while we have more recently become aware of interethnic and regional differences in conversational style (Tannen 1984), we have tended to assume that narrative could be treated in a universalizing way.



The discussion which follows is based on a corpus of fifty-eight personal experience stories told in the course of casual conversation by fifty-nine middle-class white men and women who are natives or long-term residents of Fort Wayne, Indiana and the surrounding rural area, as well as on my four years of participant observation as a non-native resident of Fort Wayne. Fort Wayne stories differ in some crucial ways from the urban northeasterners' stories analyzed by Labov, Polanyi, and others, and these differences force us to reevaluate some basic claims which have been made about the nature of conversational narrative.

In this paper, I will discuss one of these differences. The feature I will describe has to do with the nature and function of orientational detail in personal narrative. I will begin by reviewing what others have had to say about what orientation is and what it is for. Then I will describe what I will call 'extra-thematic orientation': orientational details which, for the purposes of setting a story's scene and contributing to its theme, seem over-specified. I will give examples of extra-thematic orientation from the Fort Wayne stories, where this sort of highly specific detail is extremely common. I will then suggest and discuss two reasons for the use of extra-thematic orientation in personal narratives, reasons which are tied to regional facts: local views about the relationship of narrative to reality, and local norms for conversational interaction.

### 1. Thematic orientation and setting

It has long been recognized that 'setting' is an essential component of stories. Stories take their audiences out of the here-and-now world into a different world, and storytellers have to make it clear what this different world is like. In order to make sense, stories have to be situated, most often explicitly, in time and space, and hearers need to know who the characters are and what they are engaged in doing. In Prince's (1982: 73) terms, the setting of a story is 'a set of propositions referring to [a] (backgrounded) spatio-temporal complex.' While setting is not essential to narration *per se* (talking about events in the past), it is essential in storytelling.

The term 'orientation' originates with Labov (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972), who uses it to identify the clauses in personal experience narrative which describe its setting. Labov points out that orientation occurs throughout a story, as it is needed to keep listeners informed about changes in scene or characters, but that stories typically include a group of orientation clauses near the beginning.

Other narratologists have described the discourse realization of setting in stories in similar ways, and often in the same terms. For Bauman (1986:38), for example, 'orientations' in stories describe their 'background and potentiating conditions.' Polanyi (1985:12) uses the term 'durative-descriptive clauses' for the clauses in stories which encode settings. Chafe (1980: 41-42) takes a cognitive approach to the structure of stories; he claims that 'background orientation'—information about location in space and time, about the social context, and about background activity—is required by 'the self' so as not to feel disoriented and uncomfortable.

### 2. Extra-thematic orientation

To the extent that orientation serves to realize setting in stories, one would expect there to be fairly clear limits on how much orientation one should find. To conform with the Gricean maxims for conversation in general, storytellers should provide just as much orientation as is necessary to inform audiences about the settings in their stories; one should expect to find no more details than are necessary for hearers to figure out the crucial background information, and no details which are extraneous to the story's theme. But many personal experience stories include far more orientational material than should be strictly necessary, orientational material which in some cases has no apparent bearing on

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the story at all. I will refer to this sort of detail—detail which is not necessary for scene-setting—as 'extra-thematic orientation.' By extra-thematic orientation, I mean orientational material which satisfies the following criteria:

(a) Extra-thematic orientation is not relevant to the story's plot and does not reappear in the plotline of the story. Thus 'we were in high school' is thematic orientation in a story about dating, while the name of the movie the couple saw on their first date is extra-thematic; 'it was in May of the year' is thematic in a story about a fraternity prank involving a commencement tent, while 'it was the day after Valentine's' is extra-thematic in a story about a car wreck which had nothing to do with Valentine festivities or even winter weather.

(b) Extra-thematic orientation constitutes new information for the story's audience. Thus names of familiars can serve as thematic orientation, since they help the audience to identify characters, but names of strangers who are also identified by their roles in the story are extra-thematic.

Though it does not occur in all of them, extra-thematic orientation is very common and very salient in Fort Wayne stories. Of the fifty-eight Fort Wayne stories I have examined, forty-one include some extra-thematic orientation, and many include a great deal. Stories about experiences which, for the purposes of what is suspenseful or unusual about the story, could have happened anywhere, are identified as having happened 'out by Homestead High School' or 'in the Rolling Hills Addition' or 'at the Hollandin Hotel in Cleveland Ohio.' Stories which are timeless in their effects are referenced to 'the day after Valentine's Day,' 'in 1949 when I started college,' or 'about nine o'clock one night.' Movies which were the incidental background for other events are identified by name: 'We were going to see *Oh, God*'; 'Laura and I were going to go see *Gone with the Wind*.' People unknown to a teller's audience are referred to with first and last names: 'Let's see, his name was Louie Moore'; 'And so Bobby Jones, who was usually the ringleader ... came over.' And events which frame stories are described in detail, these descriptions sometimes making up half of the transcribed text. That there is a felt need for extra-thematic orientation is especially clear in one of the stories, in which the teller says 'I forget his name' in several attempts to call to mind the name of a character whose name the audience would not have recognized anyway.

### 3. Uses of detail

In a recent paper, Tannen (1987) suggests several functions served by highly specific detail in conversational and literary discourse. For one thing, details serve to create involvement by forcing readers or hearers to make active use of their imaginations. This use of detail is similar to that of 'displaced orientation,' Labov's (1981) term for orientation clauses which occur outside of the initial orientation section of stories. Labov claims that displaced orientation is often evaluative, underscoring the unusual nature of events by bringing the unusual nature of their setting to hearer's attention. Tannen also claims that details provide hearers with a way of showing that they care; that they are willing to listen to more than the bare bones of a narrative account. Thirdly, Tannen suggests that details make it possible for people to imagine distant, alternative worlds, or to call to mind familiar worlds.

It is with this third function of detail—the role of detail in the creation of a world—that I would like to begin my discussion of the function of extra-thematic orientation in Fort Wayne stories. My claim will be that there are important differences among storytellers and groups of storytellers in what can constitute an appropriate world for a story. In Fort Wayne, the world reflected in personal experience stories must be the real, familiar, local world, even when the story's events could in principle have taken place anywhere. This is because of local beliefs about the nature of storytelling as it relates to truth.

### 3.1 Detail, factuality, and local relevance

It is possible to conceive of the relationship between events and stories in a number of ways. One view holds that stories are iconic of events that really happened. In this view, stories are verbalizations of experience; stories recreate history. The events recounted in stories were actually discrete and actually occurred in the order in which they are reported; the meaning of the story is meaning which was there as the events happened, and storytellers are like cameras which capture life without analyzing it.

Though this view of storytelling informs some scholarly discussion of narrative,<sup>3</sup> it is generally thought of as naive. There are, in fact, some obvious ways in which stories report things which could not have happened or are unlikely to have happened. For one thing, storytellers often 'report' speech which was not spoken: things people *did not* say, or things narrators were not in a position to have heard (see Tannen, 1986, for a discussion of such 'constructed dialogue'). For another thing, stories which are about events which repeated themselves to distraction tend far more often than randomly to report exactly three occurrences of the annoying or frightening event, the third occurrence being the one which is reacted to in the story.<sup>4</sup> There are also other, less empirical reasons for supposing that stories are not iconically related to events; see, for example, the papers in Mitchell 1981, most of which discuss 'the illusion of sequence.'

From this theoretical perspective, all tellings are fictions, in the sense that all tellers make choices about what to present and how to present it most effectively. But from a more ethnographic perspective, it is possible to separate factual discourse from fictional discourse, sometimes very clearly. The line between what counts as 'fact' and what counts as 'fiction' in recountings is culturally drawn, and a teller's responsibility to be 'factual,' and how this responsibility is carried out, depend on how the social cohort defines factualness, on the culturally defined genre of the telling, and on the immediate social and rhetorical contexts.

For Fort Wayne's storytellers, recountings of personal experience must be factual.<sup>5</sup> What this means is that the events in personal experience stories must in theory be verifiable by other witnesses to these events. A person who tells good stories, in Fort Wayne eyes, is someone to whom interesting things have happened; Fort Wayneers do not value, and in fact rarely notice, verbal ability *per se*, and a person perceived as dressing up ordinary events in gifted talk would be regarded with suspicion. Fort Wayneers talk about good stories, not about good storytellers. Since personal experience stories are most often told to people who were not witnesses of the recounted events, most Fort Wayne stories are not in fact verifiable as they are being told. However, they must be made to sound verifiable. This culturally-based requirement for factuality affects the nature of orientation in Fort Wayne storytelling. Fort Wayne stories must be relevant in the real human world by being about real people and real human events, and they must be relevant in the local world by being anchored to real places and times.

In order to be relevant in their human world (that is, in order to make believable points which can be acted on in the real world), Fort Wayne stories must be about actual, named people and about things that really happened to people. Personal experience stories thus serve some of the functions which are served elsewhere by fictional stories. Tales about anthropomorphic animals, like Aesop's fables, Brer Rabbit stories, or the animal 'trickster' stories common in many American Indian cultures, are not used in Fort Wayne to make ethical points; such stories are told only to children, for fun, if at all. Neither is there a genre of moral tales involving fictional people, like, for example, the Middle Eastern 'Juha' stories about a sly peasant whose intrigues serve to make points about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The social functions fulfilled elsewhere by stories like these are

fulfilled in Fort Wayne by personal experience stories, in which real people, speaking in the first person, learn lessons or demonstrate normative behaviors.

By the same token, stories which might elsewhere be perceived as fictional are often perceived in Fort Wayne as factual. Biblical stories, for example, which are used to make points relevant in the human world, are often perceived as portraying real events.<sup>6</sup> When fictional stories are told, they must be clearly distinguished from real ones. If they are not, people feel tricked and angry. Just as they must be tied to real people, Fort Wayne stories must be tied to real places and times in the local world. Because much of the value of Fort Wayne personal stories is in the fact that they are presented as having really happened, the creation of a 'storyworld' (Polanyi 1985) in stories of this kind is complex. It must be possible, from what a teller includes in a story, to identify accurately where and when the events took place. Names, places, and times must be included in stories even when they have little or no bearing on the narrated events, because the mention of real people, real places, and actual times creates a factual storyworld. Fort Wayners use extra-thematic orientation, then, to show that they are following their rule that stories are to be about things which really happened, and which could be factually verified, and that it is the stories that are interesting, and not the storytellers.

### 3.2 Detail, audience, and meaning

A dominant trend in the study of verbal interaction in general, and narratology in particular, is to see meaning as jointly produced by interactants in the process of their discourse. Stories are seen not as texts, but rather as 'transactions' (Smith 1981): the meaning of a story is negotiated as the telling proceeds, and is by nature indeterminate. Audiences search among possible meanings, 'performing' meaning as they read or listen (Bruner 1986: 25).

The negotiated nature of a story's meaning sometimes affects the form of its telling. Successful storytellers tailor their stories to what they take to be their audiences' expectations, and some audiences break into the telling to suggest ways for the teller to adapt the story to their ongoing interpretations. Polanyi (1979; 1985) and Schiffrin (1984), both of whom have worked with urban northeastern storytellers, give extended examples of stories which are full of overt audience suggestions as to what the stories should mean. Polanyi, for example (1985:64-74), shows how a woman's story about fainting on the New York subway starts out with one sort of point and ends, after interjected comments and questions by its hearers which take up almost half of the story's transcript, with a different sort of point.

In Fort Wayne storytelling, responsibility for meaning is not shared in the same way, and the negotiation of meaning takes a much less overt form. This has to do with local norms for interaction in general. In Brown and Levinson's (1987[1978]) terms, politeness norms in Fort Wayne are more of the 'negative' sort than of the 'positive.' This is to say that Fort Wayners are relatively reserved, feeling that others' need for privacy may be more important than their need for intimacy. Fort Wayne's characteristically reserved interactional style affects the texture of casual narration. Overt audience participation in storytelling is almost nonexistent; when audience contributions to stories do occur, they are limited to very brief supportive *yeah's* and *right's*. Co-conversationalists' participation in the storytelling process takes the form of quiet deference to the speaker's right to the conversational floor, and tolerance not only for quick, adroit stories but also for stories which are hesitant or less than perfectly clear. Fort Wayne audiences comment on stories only after they are over, and even their comments are usually minimal: approval for a successful story takes the form of a laugh or the contribution of a related story, and disapproval for a story which fails is often not voiced at all, but signalled with a change of topic. Audience participation in the creation of meaning thus takes place covertly rather

than through explicit verbal commentary, and after the story rather than during it; Fort Wayne storytellers cannot depend on their audience's help as they tell their stories, and it is incumbent on them to decide in advance how their audiences will be likely to interpret what they say, and to tailor their stories accordingly.

These facts provide a second sort of explanation for the prevalence of extra-thematic orientation in Fort Wayne stories. Since audiences do not break into stories with requests for clarification, tellers cannot expect to be told when settings are unclear. It is thus to a teller's advantage to err on the side of too much orientation, at the risk of including some irrelevant material, rather than on the side of too little, at the greater risk of not being understood at all. For another thing, extra-thematic orientation can be used as a mechanism for eliciting backchannelling from one's audience. The following excerpt is from a story about the narrator's encounter with an erratic driver; after considerable ethical deliberation, the narrator decides he's 'gotta do something,' and alerts a sheriff who has providentially arrived on the scene. For the purposes of the point it makes about civic responsibility, the events could have occurred on any road, at any time. In this segment of the story, extra-thematic orientation is used at the beginning of the story to check audience listenership.

Jack: About a month ago *see* we were going to a church league softball game ...  
that ... they'd had the games all scheduled for the diamond at Homestead  
High School.

*You know where that's at?*

Doug: Uh-huh .. yeah

Jack: Well we're going up Twenty-Four,  
getting ready to turn there an- at Ranch Eggs...

In addition to setting the story in the real, local world (a month ago, on the way to Homestead High School for a church league softball game, on Route 24 near Ranch Eggs), extra thematic details give Jack a chance to find out whether Doug is listening to him. He does this with 'see' and 'You know where that's at?', both of which request a response from Doug, and the second of which receives one. Extra-thematic orientation is thus a way Fort Wayners adapt to a second local rule for storytelling: the rule that tellers are responsible for making meaning explicit, and audiences must limit unelicited suggestions and backchannelling to a minimum.

#### 4. Detail and locality

I have suggested two ways in which Fort Wayners' use of extra-thematic orientation is related to local norms for storytelling. Extra-thematic orientation creates 'local color' in stories, by anchoring them to the real, local world, and in storytelling interactions, by adapting them to local norms for conversational interaction in general. Detail, then, is one of the many ways storytellers connect stories to places, and one of the many ways stories reflect the communicative norms of the speech communities in which they are told. The general point I hope to have made in this paper is this: like any other form of discourse, personal narrative can only be fully understood in its particular cultural context and by looking at differences between stories in addition to similarities among them. Narratologists need to supplement the valuable work that has already been done on personal experience stories with new work which takes account of variation in narrative forms and functions, and which takes an ethnographic perspective in explaining narrative variation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper is part of my ongoing study of the relationships among narrative, place, and community. I would like to thank the Fort Wayne students and storytellers who provided much of the data for this study, including all the stories used here.

<sup>2</sup>Polanyi provides a disclaimer (1985:6-8) in which she says that her data is not in fact representative of all Americans; still, the book's title reveals the assumption that differences in narrative themes or styles among various groups of Americans are not thought to be very significant.

<sup>3</sup>For example, many discussions of the historical present explain this phenomenon by saying that past events are sometimes reported in present tenses because speakers see past events again, as if the events were actually happening again (see Wolfson 1982:11-22 for an overview of this literature). Clearly, such explanations of the historical present are based on the assumption (usually implicit) that stories re-create actual events, in the order in which the actual events really happened.

<sup>4</sup>The duck-hunting story analyzed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) is an example of a story of this kind, though Labov and Waletzky do not mention this fact about it; stories involving three occurrences of an event are very common in the Fort Wayne corpus.

<sup>5</sup>Heath (1983: Ch. 5) shows how acceptable levels of factuality and fictionality differ in the two communities she has studied. For working-class southern Blacks, stories must be imaginative and fantastic; for working-class whites, stories must hew to the verifiable truth, and 'telling a story' is tantamount to telling a lie.

<sup>6</sup>To cite one instance, the 'story' of creation is widely held to be factual, and there is recurrent public debate, in the editorial pages of the Fort Wayne newspapers, about the relative merits of Biblical and anthropological 'theories' about the origin of life.

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## The Fall and Rise of the Preposition *vir* as Variable Object Marker in Afrikaans

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### 0. The aim of this paper

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate by means of a quantitative analysis that indirect objects as well as direct objects marked by the preposition *vir* 'for' in standard Afrikaans are at present involved in a process of resistance to language engineering. This entails that *vir*, a stigmatized grammatical marker of non-standard origin, has resisted attempts to suppress it by means of language planning and is presently gaining ground over more highly favored variants.

### 1. Method of analysis

The results are based on a VARBRUL analysis of data extracted from ten written texts (see sections 4.1 & 4.2) rendering four data bases containing, respectively, 460 and 499 coding strings where *vir* marks the indirect object in early and present-day Afrikaans, as well as 439 and 557 coding strings where it marks the direct object in early and present-day Afrikaans.

The strings containing *vir* as marker of the indirect object were coded for three factor groups, namely (1) the presence or absence of *vir*, (2) the text source, and (3) the semantic category (addressee, recipient, aide) of prepositional phrases containing *vir*.

The strings containing *vir* as marker of the direct object were coded for only two factor groups, namely (1) presence or absence of *vir*, and (2) text source.

The results obtained are best interpreted against the socio-historical and linguistic backgrounds presented in the following two sections.

### 2. Socio-historical background

When the Cape Colony of South Africa was formed at the southern tip of Africa under Dutch rule in 1652 (Elphick & Giliomee 1979), the settlers were Caucasians of Dutch, German and French descent and slaves mainly from the Orient, particularly Malaysia. Both groups of settlers encountered two indigenous groups, namely pastoral clans of Khoikhoi (Hottentots) and nomadic bands of Khoisan (Bushmen) who initially resisted the process of settlement but later acquiesced due to the ravages of conquest and disease.

The group with the highest status ranking, the Free Burgers, spoke non-standard dialects of Dutch, German or French as well as at least a rudimentary version of some contact language such as Malayo-Portuguese or the Broken Dutch of the Khoikhoi.

Because conversion to Christianity was set as a precondition for the freeing of slaves during the eighteenth century, slave-owners did not encourage religion among their subjects. The consequence of this policy was the large-scale conversion to Islam by the slaves, and eventually by a section of the Khoikhoi, resulting in a sizable present-day Afrikaans-speaking Islamic community in the Cape Province of South Africa. One of the first known texts in Afrikaans, a portion of which was analyzed for this paper, was published in 1869 by means of the Arabic orthography in Malay Afrikaans, a non-standard dialect of Afrikaans that developed from the contact languages of the slaves, *inter alia* Malayo-Portuguese and Arabic. It is from the former language that one of the grammatical functions of *vir*, that of marker of human direct objects, is derived.