VARIATION IN DISCOURSE:
MIDWESTERN NARRATIVE STYLE

BARBARA JOHNSTONE
Texas A&M University

Enormous progress has been made in the description of the sounds, words, and grammar of varieties of American English during the past seventy-five years, and especially during the last quarter century. Both in the older tradition of dialect geography and in the newer paradigm of variation studies pioneered by Labov, research on variation in phonology, morphology, and syntax has been relatively unified in focus and in methodology, and its results—though much work still remains to be done—have been relatively clear and cumulative.

The same cannot be said, however, of research on variation in American speech at the level of discourse. While there has been some interest in discourse-level variation, different researchers have pursued this interest by examining different sorts of variables, with a variety of differing research methodologies based on differing views about what constitutes the relevant level of analysis.

It is not my purpose in this paper to propose a unified paradigm for the study of discourse variation. I will simply point out that there is one sort of discourse variation—regional variation—which has not so far been systematically studied, and sketch a description of some of the characteristics of one discourse genre in one region of the United States. I will show how one feature of Midwestern storytelling style, namely the use of highly specific detail, is tied in several ways to local norms for interaction and for the interpretation of talk.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of previous research on discourse-level variation in American speech. I then discuss my general research question: Is there regional variation in discourse, and, if so, what might be the parameters of such variation? I next turn to an analysis of spontaneous personal-experience narratives told by one group of Midwesterners, focusing on their use of details. After summarizing relevant research on personal-experience narrative, I will show how the characteristically highly detailed, realistic style of these Midwestern narratives is tied to regional folk perceptions about language and language use.

Overview of Previous Research

Researchers interested in discourse-level variation in American speech have studied five sorts of variation: stylistic variation, ethnic variation, gender
variation, variation related to social class, and variation related to age. In what follows, I will briefly describe key work in each area.

The study of *stylistic* or register differences in discourse has typically involved analysis of written texts (Joos’s 1967 work on the “five clocks” of stylistic variation is an early example), sometimes contrasted with spoken texts which are analogous in one way or another (Tannen 1982; 1984a). Such studies have been qualitative (e.g., Ochs 1979) as well as quantitative (e.g., Biber 1986), and the variables examined range from syntactic features such as modes of conjoining (Thompson 1984) to more global features such as imagery and reported speech (Tannen 1989).

*Ethnic* variation in discourse has also been the focus of considerable attention. This research tends to be based in the anthropological paradigm of interactional sociolinguistics; its methodology combines ethnography (Kochman 1981) with detailed analyses of conversational data (Gumperz 1982; Dore and McDermott 1982; Erikson 1984). Best understood is probably the communicative style of African Americans (Kochman 1981, Erikson 1984). Tannen has also analyzed the “conversational style” of New York Jews (1981), contrasting it with the style of several Californians (1984b), and Riessman (1988) discusses a Puerto Rican woman’s narrative style.

*Gender* differences in discourse style have also been examined from a variety of perspectives, by linguists interested in the syntactic choices women make (Lakoff 1975), by sociologists interested in the micro-structure of conversation between men and women (West and Zimmerman 1983), and by anthropologists interested in the effects on discourse of gender socialization (Maltz and Borker 1982). The focus has broadened, in the 1980s, to discourse differences keyed more generally to power differences; the best-known work in this area is that of William O’Barr and his colleagues (O’Barr and Atkins 1980; Kramarae, Schulz and O’Barr 1984).

Studies of *social class* variation in American discourse styles are less common, though Labov’s (1972a) study of “the logic of nonstandard English” falls in this category. For British English, there are Bernstein’s (1970) discussions of discourse elaboration and restriction; Dines (1980) has examined the use of the discourse marker *and stuff like that* in Australian English. Discourse-level variation correlated with *age* has been described by child language researchers, who have mainly studied the development of conversational skills in relatively young children (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979; Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan 1977; Michaels 1981). Romaine (1984) has studied the development of narrative strategies in older children, in Scotland.

**Regional Variation in Discourse Style?**

One question that has not been overtly addressed in previous research is
whether, in addition to the kinds of variation described above, there is systematic regional variation in discourse style, analogous to, or perhaps actually tied to, the sorts of phonological, lexical, and syntactic variation described in the dialect atlas tradition and by Labovian variationists. Popular evidence certainly suggests that there is. The tight-lipped Maine farmers of folklore, for example, who tell lost travelers "You can't get there from here," evidence norms for conversational cooperation somewhat different from those of other Americans. Southern women are perceived outside the South as more skilled in genteel small talk than are Northern women; Yankees are perceived in the South as fast-talking and, accordingly, chilly. The popularity of Garrison Keillor's radio portrayals of rural Minnesota was largely the result of his skill at capturing the stereotypically slow, matter-of-fact style of Midwesterners.

Systematic scholarly descriptions of regional variation in discourse would be of interest for two reasons. First, they would take the description of American English a step further. Second, they would help us answer as yet unasked questions about language change and contact: Are discourse-level features less or more resistant to change than syntactic or phonological features? Do changes at the discourse level follow the same pattern of development as changes at other levels? How are discourse-level differences tied to cultural differences?

In what follows I focus on the last of these questions. I examine how one characteristic of Midwestern narratives can be explained with reference to what might be called Midwestern ethnolinguistics: folk views, that is, about what language is for and how talk is related to reality. Natural conversational narrative data from the Midwest is of special interest for two reasons: first, because it provides systematic evidence about the often-invoked but rarely studied American "mainstream" with which other discourse styles are contrasted, and second, because it contrasts clearly with the narratives from the urban Northeast that constitute the data for most previous studies of natural narrative. I will first review this previous literature.

THE LINGUISTICS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

During the last twenty years there has been considerable interest in the linguistic structure of spontaneous spoken narrative, sparked by Labov's work (1972b; Labov and Waletzky 1967) with what he called "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 (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.

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 (Labov and Waletzky 1967, Labov 1972b) of "well-formed narratives," descriptions which were based principally 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). Furthermore, 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, 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 "Pear Story" researchers (Chafe 1980) largely 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 analysis (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 sociolinguists 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 interactional style, we have tended to assume that narrative could be discussed without reference to variation. I suggest that this assumption bears examination.

The discussion which follows is based on a corpus of fifty-eight personal experience stories told in the course of casual conversation by 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. It will become apparent that Fort Wayne stories differ in some crucial ways from those of the urban Northeasterners studied by Labov, Polanyi, and others.

I will focus on one of these differences, which has to do with the nature and function of orientational detail in personal narrative. In the sample story that follows, I have italicized instances of the sort of detail in which I am interested. This story, like all the stories I have examined, arose in conversation among familiars. Its teller is a twenty-five-year-old man, talking to a male friend of about the same age. Ellipses indicate brief pauses; the length of pauses of more than one second are given in parentheses.

My story takes me back to the year nineteen seventy-eight, be my junior year down at Franklin College. Like all good red-blooded American lower-middle-class drinking men, I joined a Greek organization by the name of Phi Delta Theta... And during my years at Franklin College I engaged quite a few crazies there, and namely... in particular one... let's see his name was Louie Moore. One night Louie and I were out drinking a quart of... of tequila, it was in May of the year, and the campus had erected the... commencement tent near the campus center... and we decided to go over, and see what kind of havoc we could raise with the tent. So we sauntered over... Louie stuffed about four or five beers in the back pockets of these rather large baggy pants that he had on, and we walked over to the tent, we checked it out... Re-ah... rearranged about a hundred and fifty to two hundred of the chairs, and then Louie and I decided to climb up on top of the tent to see if we could reach the peak. So Louie climbed up first, I got a little bit chickenshit and decided not—not to climb up so I just... I just watched him. About the time that he reached the peak of the tent, I heard a... a rip... He fell through onto the wooden chairs underneath about... about thirty feet down... We hollered for him, but Louie didn’t answer back. We thought for sure he... he was dead. We ran back over to the fraternity house, just left him laying there, and grabbed a couple flashlights, and we ran back, and found him laying there ah... uh... unconscious... We... we grabbed him, and... and at that time he came to, and was in quite a bit of pain, he complained of lower back problems and tingling in his uh... legs, so we ran back over to the fraternity house, and got a pickup truck... Drove it over... drove it into the commencement tent crushing quite a few chairs as we drove in uh... into the tent, it's a wonder nobody ever heard of this going... going on especially as small as that campus was... So we put Louie on a piece of uh... plywood, and drove him off to the hospital. We got to the hospital, we took him uh... into the em... emergency room, where the nurses wanted to know just exactly what had happened, so we told them that he'd slid off the roof of our fra- off of our fraternity house. They went to... take his pants off they pulled his shoes off... They wouldn’t touch his socks, I don’t think he changed his socks in about three... three weeks He was drunk and r-, rather rowdy... They lift him up, and they took his pants off, and in the back of his pants were all those cans that he was wearing... And they were crushed about that flat [indicates size with fingers], they hadn’t broken, they were about an inch big, they were all expanded and
emptied out, but they hadn’t broken. They said that that cushioned his fall enough . . . to the point where he had fractured and dislocated his hip, but he didn’t do any back damage to himself [chuckles]. So . . . they continued to . . . undress him, they got all . . . all of his uh . . . clothes off, and they gave him a shot for some reason to sober him up, which was the wrong thing to do . . . considering to begin with he was drinking tequila, and was rather rowdy . . . The nurses kept coming in after they . . . got his clothes off of him, and kept lifting up the sheets to . . . to . . . to look at him, and this kinda got him pissed off. . . . So the next time one of . . . one of the nurses came . . . came in, he just flung the sheet completely off, and just said, “All right goddammit if you’ve seen everything that you want to see or would you rather I get up and dance for you?” (1.5) [deep breath]. At that time they decided to give him another shot to . . . sedate him a little bit, so they could control him a little bit better. . . . And they took him in . . . to surgery, put a pin in his . . . in his hip, and put him in a . . . half . . . half body cast, and he was in the hospital for about two and a . . . two and a half to . . . to three weeks . . . Brought him back to school, and the uh . . . authorities were . . . wondering just exactly how he had broken his . . . his hip. There was an investigation . . . into the tent and the mess that was in there including the tire track and all the smashed chairs (1.5) [breath]. But nothing ever came of . . . of . . . of that. As for Louie . . . he uh . . . when they finally took his . . . cast off, we saved those cans of uh . . . beer for him, and he opened them up, and drank them to celebrate taking his uh . . . cast off! [laughing]. (2). And that’s the honest to God truth. . . . All that happened. . . . He’s still . . . alive and well, and believe it or not he’s in Paris . . . becoming a . . . gourmet chef [laughter].

Most of the details occur in the first ten lines or so of the story, before the narrative per se begins. To understand the events of the story, it is necessary for the hearer to know that it involves the teller and some fraternity brothers during their college years; that they had been drinking and that this had led to some destructive exploration of a tent set up for commencement. Note, however, that it is not necessary, in order to follow the events of the story, that the hearer know the name of the college (“down at Franklin College”), the name of the fraternity (“by the name of Phi Delta Theta”), or the name of the story’s hero (“let’s see his name was Louie Moore”); the calendar year (“nineteen seventy-eight”) or the teller’s class standing (“be my junior year”); what sort of liquor was being consumed (“a quart of . . . of tequila”); or how many beers (“about four or five”) and chairs (“about a hundred fifty to two hundred”) were involved. Highly specific details like these occur in several places later in the story, too, as when the teller mentions how long Louie had been wearing the same pair of socks (“about three . . . three weeks”), and how big the crushed beer cans were (“about an inch big”).

The rest of this article is concerned with details like these. I begin by reviewing what others have had to say about what orientation is and what it is for. Then I describe what I will call “extrathematic orientation”: orientational details which, for the purposes of setting a story’s scene, seem overspecified. I provide further examples of extrathematic orientation from the
Fort Wayne stories, where this sort of highly specific detail is very common. I will then suggest and discuss three reasons for the use of extrathematic 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.

**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 terms (1982, 73), the setting of a story is “a set of propositions referring to [a] (backgrounded) spatio-temporal complex.”

The term orientation has been used by Labov (Labov and Waletzky 1976; Labov 1972b) 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. Durative-descriptive clauses describe states and events which are not part of the storyline: characters and their motivations, physical and temporal setting, and background events. Polanyi points out that while the durative-descriptive propositions encoded in durative-descriptive clauses are not part of the core structure of a story, clauses of this type may constitute the bulk of a story. 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.

**Extrathematic 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 general rule that conversationalists provide only the right amount of relevant information (Grice 1967, Levinson 1989), 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 this is not always the case. Many personal-experience stories include far more orientational material than should strictly be necessary, orientational material which in some cases has no apparent bearing on the story at all. I will refer to this sort of detail—detail which is not necessary for scene-setting—as extrathematic orientation.

By extrathematic orientation, I mean orientational material which satisfies two criteria. First, extrathematic orientation has no crucial bearing on the story’s outcome. It 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 extrathematic; “It was in May of the year” is thematic in a story about a fraternity prank with a commencement tent, while “It was the day after Valentine’s” is extrathematic in a story about a car wreck which had nothing to do with Valentine’s Day festivities or even winter weather. Second, extrathematic orientation constitutes new information for the story’s audience. Thus names of familiar are 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 extrathematic.

It is not possible to distinguish thematic from extrathematic orientation simply on the basis of grammatical marking: extrathematic orientation, though often more specific than thematic orientation, is not invariably encoded in definite noun phrases, and the distinction between thematic and extrathematic orientation is only clear in the context of the story as a whole. However, extrathematic orientation is often syntactically more highly specified than thematic orientation. For example, extrathematic orientation is more likely to include definite articles and proper names. The excerpts in Table 1 exemplify this difference.

Though it does not occur in all of them, extrathematic orientation is very common in Fort Wayne stories. Of the fifty-eight Fort Wayne stories I have examined, forty-one include some extrathematic 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 extrathematic orientation is especially clear in several stories in which tellers say "I forget his name" or "Let's see, now what was his name?" in repeated attempts to call to mind the names of characters whose names their audiences would not recognize anyway.

USES OF DETAIL. 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. Further, 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 a result of local beliefs about the nature of storytelling as it relates to truth, and of the predominantly newslike function of stories in the local cultural world.

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, it is generally thought of as naive. There are, in fact, some obvious ways in which stories report things which could not 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 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. 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 an ethnographic perspective, it may be necessary 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, depends 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. What this means is that the events in personal experience stories must in principle 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 Wayners 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 Wayners 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 anthropomorphically related 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 Goha 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. 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. 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 lies in the fact that they are presented as having really happened, the creation of a storyworld 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 extrathematic 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—that it is the stories that are interesting and not the storytellers.

Narrative and news. The presence of extrathematic detail in Fort Wayne stories also has to do with the function of storytelling in the local cultural world: stories serve to convey news. In order to explain how this fact gives rise to the use of detail, let me sketch a model of the various ways stories can be related to daily events.

Narrative can have a variety of functions. On one hand, it can arise directly from and be directly in service of the real, ongoing world. The narratives which eyewitnesses tell to the police, for example, are crucially connected to the real world; to be maximally useful, such narratives must be maximally detailed. A witness to a crime ideally tells exactly what the perpetrator looked like, exactly what time the crime occurred, and exactly where it happened. On the other hand, narrative can be entirely disconnected from the real world. Fairy tales are one such genre; they take place "once upon a time," "in a land far away"; their characters have roles ("Cinderella," "the evil stepmother") rather than real names, and they are described only in the most elementary ways, as "beautiful" or "clever" or "jealous."

Between these two extremes—the police report anchored in the real here and now and the fairy tale tied loosely to a hazy, improbable world—is a range of possibilities. We might conceive of this range as a continuum, as diagrammed in figure 1.

Toward the time-anchored, situated end of the spectrum are personal experience stories which are tied to real places, times, and people. Toward the mythical, placeless end are legends and tales which are tied to places and times more loosely, if at all. Legends like "The Hook," for example (about a one-armed murderer who terrorizes teen-age sweethearts), make specific reference to place and time in each telling, but the places and times are different, depending on where and when the story is told. (The time is always the recent past, and the place is always the closest lovers' lane.) In the middle of the spectrum are various sorts of transformations of personal-experience narrative: moral tales about "when I was a kid" (which, as any child knows
This World

- police reports
- personal experience stories about real people, places, time
- tales presented as personal experience: “This really happened” as introduction to a tall tale
- more legendlike personal experience stories: “When I was a kid. . . .”
- personal experience presented as tales: “Once there was a little girl who. . . .”
- tales about transformed real people, places: “Jenry Hohnstone” stories
- legends about real places: haunted houses, etc.
- tales tied to a place, but the place varies: “The Hook,” etc.
- mythical tales: “Once upon a time, in a land far away”

Any World

who has tried to pin a parent down, do not refer to a specific time and may not refer to a specific place); tales, also told to children, in which personal experience is disguised as myth (“Once there was a little girl” who turns out to be the child’s mother); stories based loosely in personal experience but which transform it into surrealist fiction. (“Jenry Hohnstone” stories, a genre invented by my father, were about a character loosely based on my father and my brother, both of whom are Henry Johnstone; but Jenry had powers and abilities that neither Henry had.) Tall tales, which depend for their effect on the audience’s believing until the last minute that they are personal experience stories, are often marked with a great deal of very specific reference to the real world.

This continuum can be seen as the synchronic reflex of a diachronic process: the process of retelling. As they are told and retold, narratives of personal experience become more and more detached from the real world. The general point of the story becomes increasingly important, and the details less and less important. A story which was originally about something that really happened, to an actual named person at a particular place and time, can gradually come to be a tale which illustrates the sorts of things that can happen to anyone, anywhere and at any time. Memory is edited and superseded with time, and when a report is told as a story, it has to have a point, and it gets rearranged accordingly. Furthermore, tellers can make creative use of the range of possibilities for the worlds of their stories, thus sometimes speeding the process of myth-making and sometimes slowing it.
Orientational detail is the principal mechanism by which storytellers anchor their stories in a world. Stories closer to the “this world” end of the continuum—newer stories, in other words—can be expected to include more orientational detail than older, more tale-like ones. But because storytellers also make creative use of the resources of the “this world/any world” continuum, orientational detail is also a mechanism for making stories sound new even when they are not. Bauman (1986), for example, describes a Texas storyteller who was discovered by folklorists. He began telling stories first at statewide festivals and then at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The texts of his stories become more and more detailed, even though his audiences are less and less likely to have any real need for or understanding of the details, as the teller becomes increasingly conscious of his role as a performer trying to sound as if he were talking to his East Texas friends.

As we have seen, Fort Wayne stories have to be as close as possible to the upper end of the spectrum in figure 1: they have to be connected to the real, current world. I claimed above that this has to do with the requirement that stories sound factual. It also has to do with the requirement that stories be news. With the exception of stories for children and biblical stories, retold stories are not highly valued in Fort Wayne. Storytelling is not a named or noticed event; a “story” is the same as a “report.” In the press, for example, the two terms are used synonymously, and the expression “the story was this” can be used either to introduce a text organized according to an order-of-importance “news schema” (van Dijk 1986) or a chronological story-like text. Thus Fort Wayners’ choices to include extrathematic detail in their stories serve not only to fit the stories to local views about what stories are but also to fit them to local views about the function of narration.

**Detail, Audience, and Meaning.** There is one further way in which Fort Wayners’ use of detail adapts their stories to local norms. This has to do with how conversations work in Fort Wayne. Like their views of what stories are and what they do, Fort Wayners’ view of how meaning is created in conversation is the ordinary, common-sense American view.

A dominant trend in the study of verbal interaction in general, and narratology in particular, is to see meaning as jointly produced by interacants 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 crucially 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 working 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 but, after interjected comments and questions by its hearers which take up almost half of the story's transcript, ends with a different sort of point.

In Fort Wayne storytelling, in contrast, 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 signaled 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 another explanation for the prevalence of extrathematic orientation in Fort Wayne stories. Since audiences do not break into stories with requests for clarification, tellers cannot learn 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 irrelevant material, rather than on the side of too little, at the greater risk of not being understood at all.

For another thing, extrathematic orientation can be used as a mechanism for eliciting back-channelling 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,” since “like maybe [the other driver]’s having a heart attack or something,” and alerts a sheriff who has providentially arrived on the scene. For the purpose of the point it makes about civic responsibility, the events could have occurred on any road. Extrathematic 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 . . . And I was slowing down, got my turn signal on . . .

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), extrathematic 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. Extrathematic orientation is thus a way Fort Wayners adapt to another local rule for storytelling: the rule that tellers are responsible for making meaning explicit, and audiences must limit unelicited suggestions and keep back-channeling to a minimum.

**SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

I have suggested three ways in which Fort Wayners’ use of extrathematic orientation is related to local norms for storytelling: three ways in which extrathematic 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 how stories are meant to function and for conversational interaction in general). The fact that these are “mainstream” American norms does not make them any less local: it is too easy to forget that members of the “mainstream” are products of their local culture, in the same way that members of “nonmainstream” groups are. The way stories are told in Fort Wayne (and in particular the way details are used) both reflects and perpetuates these norms.

The limited study reported here has several wider implications. In the first place, it appears that discourse-level features of American speech may vary from region to region. This is not a surprising finding, but it suggests the need for more, and more systematic, study of regional differences, study based on comparisons of controlled but still naturalistic data. It is important for discourse analysts to consider more carefully than we have in the past
where our data comes from and how much we can generalize from the data we examine. An even greater challenge lies in deciding how discourse-level variables can best be studied.

Second, it appears that discourse-level variables like the use of detail are chosen for nonarbitrary reasons tied to cultural values: Fort Wayners use details not simply to show that they are Midwesterners but to fulfill specific needs for discourse coherence and discourse function. This means that variables like these are different in an important way from variables at the phonological, lexical, and syntactic levels. Phonological variables are relatively free variables, in the sense that the choice of postvocalic /r/, or the collapse or not of /a/ and /ɔ/, have meaning only on the level of social identification and manipulation of the speaker’s social role. The choice of extrathematic detail is not free in this sense, because extrathematic detail is specifically required to adapt stories to local needs.

This fact suggests the possibility that discourse-level variability may differ in other ways as well from lower-level variability. For example, it is possible that change at the level of discourse style may be better explained by means of a model of culture change than by means of a model of sociolinguistic accommodation and divergence, since discourse variables are tied to culture in a way other variables are not. This issue also requires further systematic study.

Notes

This paper arises from 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. Deborah Tannen provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, which appears in the proceedings of NAWV XVI (Ferrara et al., 1988). I have also had very useful suggestions from Kathleen Ferrara, Guy Bailey, and Cynthia Bernstein. Mistakes and misinterpretations are, of course, my responsibility. Portions of this material appear, in expanded form and with a different focus, in Johnstone (1990).

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. Heath (1983, ch. 5) shows how acceptable levels of factuality and fictionality differ in the two communities she has studied. For working-class whites, stories must hew to the verifiable truth and "telling a story" is tantamount to telling a lie.

5. For example, surely some particular person must at some particular time have had a puppy who chewed through his computer power cord just as he finished a fifty-page document he had failed to save on disk. But the story has now become part of the emerging folklore of personal computer use; I have heard it told about several different people as well as an unspecified "this guy" in several different parts of the country. Or, to give another example, George Washington must have done something which gave rise to the "Father, I cannot tell a lie" story, but we no longer know what, and the events are now widely believed to have taken place at Mount Vernon, which was not Washington’s childhood home.

REFERENCES


**AMERICAN DIALECT SOCIETY 1990 WINTER MEETING**

Chicago will be the site of this year’s annual ADS meeting, to be held at the Barclay Hotel, December 27–30. Sessions will include *New Words of 1990* (Dec. 29) with John Algeo, David Barnhart, and Thomas J. Creswell; *Dialects World Wide* (Dec. 30), with Fumio Inoue (Tokyo), John Kirk (Belfast), Miklós Kontra (Budapest), Maria Polykova (Petrozavodsk), Hermann Scheuringer (Vienna), Alan Thomas (Bangor), and Wolfgang Viereck (Bamberg); and *Dialects in the United States* (Dec. 30), with William Kretzschmar, Silke Van Ness, and Pekka Hirvonen. There will also be a joint session with the Modern Language Association, *A World of English* (time and place to be announced), and a general session at the Barclay Hotel on December 29 with papers by Daniel Brink, Richard W. Bailey, Charles Meyer, Victoria Neufeldt, and Allyn Partin. The annual luncheon will be held on December 30, also at the Barclay. For further information contact Professor Allan Metcalf, Executive Secretary, American Dialect Society, MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois 62650 (217/ 479-7049).