Poetics and Conversation

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For many literary scholars, "The Poetics of Conversation in Twentieth-Century Literature and Criticism" includes looking for conversational features of the language in poetry, plays and fiction. One might argue that Frost or Williams writes poetry very close in style to real everyday American English speech, or that Mamet and Pinter approximate everyday talk in their plays in certain ways. The poetics of their productions might consist in this approximation to real talk, but it might also consist in precisely the opposite, namely in creating something beyond everyday talk, through developing its own special conventions. Burton and Fludernik have approached the poetics of conversation in literature by examining literary representations of everyday talk exchanges, using the tools of conversation analysis to investigate how well these representations approximate real spontaneous talk—or conversation, as I will call everyday talk exchanges involving two or more participants with approximately equal opportunities to contribute to the ongoing interaction. Just as one can describe literary productions by comparison with conversation, so might we also approach conversation as a literary object.

Indeed, before we can accurately judge just how close a literary work comes to natural everyday conversation or just how and where it differs from conversation, we need a good description of everyday talk to serve as our model. There will probably never be a complete description of natural conversation following the principles of literary theory, first because literary scholars have not set themselves to the task of analyzing everyday talk, and second because linguists are generally interested in other aspects of language, though Tannen and

Chafe have produced something like a literay description for certain features of transcribed conversation. Still, a worthwhile goal for literary theorists and linguists alike interested in the creation of a poetics of conversation would be just that: describing all the features of everyday talk as if it were a literary production. Just as a linguist can use the tools of conversation analysis to investigate the language in poetry, plays and literary dialogue, so one might attempt a close reading of all sorts of conversation as literary objects. Certainly, I don't intend anything quite so ambitious here.

Instead, I propose to present a few particularly interesting transcriptions of real conversation to demonstrate just how poetic our everyday talk can be at times. I hope to show that conversation contains essentially the same poetic features as literary texts. My corpus consists of many hours of audio-taped conversation recorded and transcribed by my students and me, according to conventions summarized at the end of this article. Most of the excerpts come from real conversations among family members and friends, fellow students and colleagues. Permission to tape the interactions was usually secured beforehand, and our recorders were placed in view of everyone present, though some conversations were recorded surreptitiously and permission to use them was secured after the fact. More often than not, we were ourselves participants in the conversations we recorded, so that I had access to background information about the settings and participants from the ones doing the recording in each case. I have subsequently assigned fictional names to all participants to preserve anonymity for everyone involved, as my students and I promised those we taped. These names differ in some cases from pseudonyms I used for these same speakers in excerpts from this data base analyzed in earlier talks and publications.

The so-called observer's paradox states that it is impossible to observe how people behave when they are not being observed. Won't conversationalists talk differently if they know the tape recorder is running? One response to this problem is simply to recognize that all talk obeys certain constraints. We all monitor our own speech based

on a whole range of contextual features, so that our awareness of being recorded adds just one more ingredient to the recipe. Another response could be to record conversation surreptitiously, and ask permission to use the recording after the fact. Many linguists view this method of data collection as unethical. Some of my own early recording was done surreptitiously before I became sensitized to the ethical ramifications of this practice. After incurring the wrath of two friends I had recorded and increasingly experiencing pangs of conscience, I decided always to ask in advance of taping. In any case, my comparison of openly recorded versus clandestinely recorded conversation turned up only momentary taping effects. As often as not, when I inserted a fresh tape, my subjects registered surprise that the recorder was still running—proof positive that they had forgotten they were being recorded. My experience has been that conversationalists can only orient themselves to the tape recorder for a short period, and that their behavior returns to normal fairly rapidly. While we constantly react to the contextualization cues of our interlocutors, and we can adjust our speaking register to accommodate all sorts of changes in our visible audience, we seem hard put to key on hearers not directly present in the room. A tape recorder on a book shelf or a coffee table has little if any effect on a speaker directly engaged in conversation with a friend.

Still there are obvious effects of recording on many of my tapes. Tannen (1984) describes her host's recurrent comments on the recording equipment cluttering his Thanksgiving table. Such recording effects occur most frequently at the start of a cassette, reflecting the attention of conversationalists to the moving or restarting of the recorder. Occasionally, members of the present group state that they flatly refuse to talk while the machine is running. Sometimes someone converses only in whispers, at least for a time. The opposite effect is probably more common, namely the desire to perform for the recorder. Some speakers switch to a dramatically higher register or to a resonant stage voice. Others switch into a second or foreign language—whether to show off their language skills or to prevent under-

standing is not always clear. Of course, neither of these behaviors lasts for very long. My recordings also contain scattered examples of speakers producing a string of profanities, usually close to the microphone. Occasionally, speakers explicitly comment on their dislike for being recorded. On one tape in my corpus, a young man announces that he wants to go on record with a prediction; and in another passage, a speaker takes advantage of the recorder as a reason to tell a joke. In the final analysis, while I feel it is necessary to take explicit recording effects like these into account, I do not view the presence of taping equipment and conversationalists' awareness of being recorded as factors capable of skewing the data, particularly not now that we have large corpora to compare. The observer's paradox will not go away, but we have good reason to trust the data we have observed, even though our presence as observers was known.

All the recordings of conversation were made in the United States between 1985 and 1997. Most of the participants were native-born white Anglo-American English speakers, many of whom were born in and most of whom live in the upper Midwest, though a handfull hail from the East Coast. Despite the obvious cultural bias and the particular idiosyncrasies inherent in this or any corpus of conversation, I hope to have selected passages resembling those my readers are used to hearing and telling. Furthermore, I trust that the illustrations recall strategies most readers recognize and use themselves.

On the down side, for readers unaccustomed to it, transcribed conversation initially appears rather jumbled and chaotic on the page. We feel comfortable listening to conversations, whether live, video-recorded or audio-recorded, however, everyday talk takes on a foreign aspect when transcribed. Interruptions, listener feedback, simultaneous talk and disfluencies such as false starts and self-corrections, stutters and filled pauses like "um" and "ah" all make a conversational transcript less linear and fluent than the carefully marshalled paragraphs of a short story and less orderly than the artificially discrete speeches assigned to successive characters in a play script. I have simplified the transcriptions where the minutiae of timing and over-

lap were irrelevant to the point being made, but often such details can be quite revealing. For instance, disfluencies routinely mark the openings of stories, and the particulars of audience participation correlate in interesting ways with switches from serious turn-by-turn conversation to wordplay or storytelling. Hence, I generally opt for fairly detailed transcriptions. The effort we invest in careful transcription and close attention to details of conversation repays the reader many times over in the insight so gained. Nevertheless, the transcription remains only a partial representation of the auditory record. The conversion into writing with words separated by spaces fictionalizes the spoken data in obvious ways, but transcription is necessary to enable close analysis.

Written texts are structured around complete sentences, while spoken language is organized around intonation units, for the simple reason that speakers must stop to breathe every so often. Intonation units tend to be about five words long and to contain one new idea unit each, typically a subject and a predicate, according to Chafe (1994). Thus, an intonation unit may assume the form of a grammatical sentence, though it need not. In terms of prosody, intonation units are likely to begin with a brief pause and to exhibit a coherent intonation ending in a contour interpreted as clause-final. They generally contain one or more intonation peaks. The three sequential intonation units from a conversation I recorded are typical in all these respects, where bolding marks intonation peaks.

Sybil: We were **trying** to de**fine**-
Tom: Was **that** just last **night**?
Sybil: some **aspects** of healthy **food**.

Intonation units from conversational stories generally pattern the same way, as the example below, again from my corpus, illustrates.

and I was so **interested**,
the **fire** was all **gone**,

In terms of function, intonation units typically identify some refer-
ent given in the foregoing discourse or the physical setting of the
utterance and say something new about it. A second pair of intonation
units from the same story illustrates this principle. In the first unit, *we*
identifies the protagonists of the story already active in the foregoing
text and says something new about them, namely that they could see
a glow. Then the second unit picks out *the glow* in the previous unit
for attention with the pronoun *it* and predicates new information of it,
namely that it should not have been there.

> we could see the glow in the western sky
> and it shouldn't have been there.

This characteristic flow from given to new information is based on
intonation, and thus distinguishes talk from written language, accord-
ing to Halliday (1967). Language in both mediums can be analyzed
into clauses with Themes and Rhemes, but written language lacks the
organization into Given and New information characteristic for spo-
ken language with its patterns of intonation. Printing each intonation
unit on a separate line and using punctuation and italic print to sug-
gest intonation contours yields a reasonable representation of speech
and information flow for most purposes.

I use standard spelling with appropriate contractions for normal-
speed casual talk even when a spelling like *hafta* or *gotcha* comes closer
to the actual pronunciation than *have to* or *got you* respectively. This
lets me reserve such markers for especially rapid and exaggeratedly
careless speech, where they signal a style switch by the speaker. The
only exception I have made to this rule is the rather frequent single
unit *y'know*, which must remain distinct from the two-word phrase
you know to reflect the rhythm of talk and to avoid confusion.

I will use the phrase "poetic language" equivalently with "poetic-
ity" in the sense of Jakobson (1960) to mean language focused on the
message itself. This definition grew out of the Prague School of lin-
guistics and is shared by many representatives of Russian Formalist
literary theory. Jakobson specified this definition to mean language

produced by a speaker projecting the paradigmatic axis of selection onto the syntagmatic axis of combination, that is: the attention the speaker usually focusses on combining structurally appropriate elements is now focused on choosing elements associated in other ways. Thus, the formulation *boys buy toys* would score quite high on Jakobson's scale of poeticity, due to its alliteration, assonance and end rhymes; compare the otherwise similar clause *kids buy playthings*. The associations between words do not end with sound similarities: according to Saussure (1911), associations include all sorts of parallelism from alliteration and rhyme to similar spellings, shared suffixes, puns and allusions.

In the paragraphs below, I will explore how conversationalists employ such rhetorical devices as parallel structures, simile and paradox, how they create complex patterns of wordplay, and how they weave their turns together in co-narrating stories.

Let's start off with a straightforward example of parallel structures, taken from a conversation collect in the ground-breaking *Corpus of English Conversation*, edited by Svartvik and Quirk (1980), the so-called "London Corpus."

> Cecilia: And this was in a stone castle, you see.
> Bloody cold.
> Basil: A stone castle,
> and excessively bloody cold.

Here already we see the interactive nature of conversation. Of course, conversationalists repeat their own words and structures, not just those of other speakers, as in the next example taken from another corpus of transcribed taped conversation, namely Erickson (1984):

> A   He was talkin' about
>   how they was corruptin' the votin'.
>   They threw him out.
> B   Yeah.
> C   He told us about that at a B.Y.F. meetin' too.
> A   Threw him out {louder}
> B   Uh huh.

D   Y'know what is this dude-
A   I mean
        thew him out
        I don't just mean put him,
        I mean **thew him out** {increasingly loud}

Erickson calls this a "crescendo sequence" constructed to compel audience response, typical of the competitive interaction between the African American teenagers in the group he studied. Even when the other participants contribute no words to the figure as such, their responses and interruptions contribute to its overall effect.

Moving from figures of form to figures of content, let us now consider a very effective example of paradox in spontaneous conversation, an exchange which I recorded myself.

FARMER'S WIFE

Pat: So I married a farmer,
            but I'm not a farmer's wife
Others: {laugh}
Tom: Well, that's certainly nicely put.
            I really like that.

Just because this conversation was spontaneous, that does not mean we must assume that Pat invented this figure on the spot. Indeed, because of the unplanned face-to-face character of conversation, participants often recall clever turns of phrase and recycle them in later conversation. Note also that Pat's paradoxical statement consists of two intonation units, each analyzable as a grammatical clause, consisting of five and seven words respectively—quite typical for conversation, as we have seen.

Similes are far more frequent in everyday talk than metaphors, discounting, of course, all the dead, basic-level and constitutive metaphors found everywhere in language, as described by Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and others. Conversationalists naturally set off explicit images with *like* in most cases, as in the passage below, where the simile *I was just like a leaf in the wind* summarizes preceding talk and collects separate figurative possibilities into a single image,

which plays itself out in the narrative. Darrel is recounting how he came to study physics, in particular how his father sought to guide him into engineering.

LEAF

Darrel: he said
       "you might want to think about engineering
       as a major
       because you're just pretty flexible when you get out."
       now I don't think he was actually twisting my arm,
Ellen: right.
Darrel: but I was-
       I was just like a leaf in the wind at that point.
       o I majored in engineering,
       but all the time I was majoring in engineering
       I- I felt like
       I really didn't want to go out and be an engineer,
       and part of it was I didn't want to
       but part of it was
       I- I just felt like I couldn't uh
       be like the other engineering majors
       and really y'know get into that kind of job.
       I had sort of a sense of inferiority
       about some aspects of technical things even then.
       but anyway, I pushed
       I got into a major
       where I got to take a lot of physics.
       and I liked the physics stuff
       because it was more abstract.
Ellen: right.

Darrel has a doctorate in physics, and has worked as a physicist in a research facility, but he has returned to graduate school to work on a second Ph.D. in English. The *leaf in the wind* offers a particularly apt image for the story Darrel tells about his undergraduate days, especially since he still has not determined his final career choice. He reports feeling that he "really didn't want to go out and be an engineer"; that he "couldn't be like the other engineering majors and really get into that kind of job"; and that he had "sort of a sense of

inferiority about some aspects of technical things." Darrel comes off as defensive about his scientific background in conversation with Ellen, a fellow doctoral student in English. Notice in particular the repeated stutters on the pronoun *I*. Perhaps the physical scientist chooses an image like the leaf in the wind in conversation with a life-long philologist precisely to underline his insecurity in the world of engineers and to ratify his membership in the confederation of English students. As we see here, storytellers may build their narratives around a formulaic phrase. The phrase may stand near the beginning of a story, or it may appear closer to the middle, where it can draw together the threads of the narrative to that point and provide a controlling image for what follows.

Punning is a special sort of wordplay generally associated with humor, and characteristically polyphonous and interactive in conversation. In the next transcription of a passage of recorded conversation, Roger is talking about dolphins within an extended discussion of human and animal intelligence, and already playing with the word *pod* to form the nonce diminutive *poddy*, which may suggest *potty*. Then Jason creates an explicit pun by re-analyzing the word *poddy* due to its phonetic similarity with *party*, and cleverly combines it with *animal* in reference to the dolphins being discussed to echo the popular phrase *party animal*.

PODDY ANIMALS

Roger:	And it seems to be a completely egalitarian band.
	There isn't a leader in a dolphin-
	do they have pods?
Jason:	I don't know what they're called.
Roger:	Whales are pods.
	I don't know what dolphins are.
	I guess they're pods too.
	Poddies. (1.3)
	Anyway {laughing}.
	Yeah but I mean-
Jason:	They're poddy animals.
Roger:	{laughs}
Jason:	{laughs}

Roger: Oooh.
               That's- that's like a blow to the midriff,
               Y'know. {laughing}

Roger's response to the pun, claiming physical pain, is not untypical for conversationalists who pun competitively and avoid praising each other's productions—even as they laughingly enjoy them.

This passage not only illustrates spontaneous punning, but also demonstrates the potential of joking to change a topic and to influence the direction of conversation, in this particular case to transform an impending monologue into a more balanced conversation, and so to move from information exchange to group rapport as the goal of the talk exchange. Instead of continuing his speculations on dolphins, Roger feels compelled to comment on Jason's pun, and his hyperbole is met in turn with laughter, which further illustrates the potential of joking to affect the course of a conversation.

Conversationalists play shifting roles, exaggerate, feign hostility and offense, and pretend misunderstanding to create humorous talk. In the passage below, Teddy brings out an unexpected interpretation for the idiomatic phrase *see more of someone*, pretending to have understood *more* in reference to physical quantity. Vera repeats the line to show her appreciation, then closes the interchange with an imitation of a drum riff ending in a rim-shot.

MORE OF HIM

Vera: I thought I'd get to see more of him
               once we got married.
Teddy: But there wasn't any more of him.
Jim: {laughs}
Vera: {laughing} there wasn't any more of him.
               Okay.
               Bum bi bumbum, cha.

Teddy's humorous intrusion not only disrupts the prevailing turn-taking structure, and realigns the participants to include him, but also changes the topic. Since puns are tied into the sequentiality of turn-taking, they can have a wide range of effects on the organization of

the conversation in progress. This differentiates punning based on intentional misunderstanding of previous talk from other strategies such as irony, overstatement and sarcasm for the creation of conversational joking.

Rather complex patterns of wordplay are also fairly common in everyday conversation, although, admittedly, the next example is far more successful than most. In the passage below, two brothers, Brandon and Ned, are laughing about what they consider an illogical remark by their mother, Lydia, overheard from the adjoining room, where Lydia is talking to Brandon's daughter. Visiting at the home of their parents, Brandon and Ned fall back into patterns of talk developed when they were young: they laugh about their mother's habits of unreflected speech and at each other's verbal slips, as well as engaging in word play freely.

HURRY AND GET RESTED

Lydia:	We had such a nice day today,
	so you hurry and get rested.
	Because you're going to have
	a big nice day tomorrow.
Brandon:	Hurry and get rested.
Ned:	{laughs}
Brandon:	That's oxymoronic.
Ned:	{laughing} Yeah.
	Can you imagine the ox?
Brandon:	No, but I've spotted the moron.
Ned:	I see. {laughing}
	You'd think as dumb as oxes are,
	to call one a moron
	would be tautological.

Certainly, the two speakers here conspire to co-create a highly poetic little composition. Brandon overlaps with the end of Lydia's sentence, but it does not count as an interruption, since Lydia cannot hear it in the next room, and the others have not been attending to what she is saying anyway. Once Ned shows his appreciation with

laughter, Brandon goes on to comment precisely on the nature of Lydia's infelicitous utterance. This comment sets off some complex verbal fireworks, which shows how word play itself may become the primary cohesive element in a conversation. Ned begins to reanalyze *oxymoron* into its folk-etymological elements with *Can you imagine the ox?*; then Brandon takes over with a new suggestion: *I've spotted the moron*. Finally, Ned draws the proposed *ox* and *moron* segments together and rounds out the whole exchange with a reference to tautology, which resonates with the original meaning of *oxymoron*. Punning ceases to count as disruptive in conversation when the goal of talk itself consists in word play, rather than in the exchange of information and narratives. If we engage in conversation to enhance rapport and pass the time of day pleasantly, then punning may amount to the cohesive force in a stretch of conversation.

Beyond its function of shifting topics and realigning the participants in a conversation, wordplay may possess a metalingual thrust, in the sense of Jakobson (1960). Brandon's mocking repeat and comment serve a metalingual function in commenting on the form of talk, and its social or group control function of labeling some sorts of talk as inappropriate within the ongoing interaction. Significantly, Brandon and Ned share the joke and the metalingual comment on Lydia's seemingly contradictory speech, but Lydia herself receives no feedback from them in this instance.

In the next passage, we can observe allusion during the co-creation of a scenario characterized by hyperbole and aeronautical imagery. Once a pun has introduced a play frame, all kinds of humor become acceptable. In the passage below, Frank establishes a humorous key with hyperbole, first in his choice of vocabulary like take off and *payload*, then in his grossly exaggerated *twenty tons*, though no laughter ensues until he commences his claim to have *never seen an insect that big*. The play frame takes firm hold when Ned and Brandon begin suggesting inappropriate names for the insect. Frank enlists Brandon as a witness to his hyperbole, then extends his aeronautical metaphor, using the specifically aircraft term *fuselage* twice and *wingspan* once.

Finally, he puts an end to his own extended metaphor and hyperbole in offering an objectively appropriate comparison with a humming-bird.

BIG BUG

Ned:	I keep hearing people call them things like hornets.
Frank:	Let me tell you.
	That dude was big enough
	to take off with a payload
	of about twenty tons.
Ned:	Well what do you call it?
Frank:	I didn't know what to call it.
	I had never seen an insect that big.
	Ever.
Ned:	{laughs}
Frank:	The only thing I could think to call it-
Ned:	{laughing} Call it, "get thee hence."
Brandon:	Call it sir.
Ned:	{laughs}
Frank:	Let me tell you what I call it.
	"My God look at that big bug."
	It had a fuselage that big. {holds up fingers}
Ned:	{laughs}
Frank:	Yeah.
	Brandon, I'm not exaggerating, am I?
Brandon:	Oh no, no.
	Easy.
Frank:	It had a fuselage like that.
Ned:	{laughs}
Frank:	And a wingspan like that.
	Oh man.
	Never seen one like that.
Ned:	So we're talking primordial here.
Frank:	It was just slightly smaller than a hummingbird.

Notice particularly that Brandon's *call it sir* echoes a line from an old riddle joke, one version of which goes as follows:

Question:	What do you call a seven-foot, three-hundred-pound bully armed to the teeth?
Answer:	Sir.

The allusion works on several levels at once in conversational humor. First of all, conversationalists gain prestige any time they can successfully weave an allusion into the fabric of spontaneous conversation. According to Freud (1905), we derive a childlike pleasure from the serendipity of finding old acquaintances in new environments. Thus, even unfunny allusion can excite a laugh of recognition and a moment of rapport between participants in a conversation, because they can bask in their shared ability to identify the relevant piece of pre-existing text.

Further, reference to a joke makes Brandon's line a special type of allusion for purposes of conversational humor. Allusion to a text funny in itself has an obvious double humorous potential, first in its actual contribution to the current text, and second by recalling the original text for listeners in the know. Moreover, in the present case, the original joke revolves around a pun. In the question, *what do you call* has the force of 'how do you designate,' whereas *sir* in the answer reanalyzes the question as something like 'how do you address.' Brandon's turn also works as a pun itself along with the allusion and word play proper based on the inappropriateness of *sir* as a class name. Finally, the allusion is especially apt in its reference to a rather large member of the species as well, so that it works on several levels simultaneously.

Any unannounced intertextual reference or allusion poses an understanding test, which can elicit laughter and enhance rapport in its own right. And Brandon's turn combines allusion with punning and word play, so it should pose a compound test. Interestingly, Ned responds to the test immediately and appreciatively, while Frank fails to react to it, perhaps because he was intent on delivering his own line, though he may simply have been unfamiliar with the joke in question as well. This appreciation for a witty allusion and the differential reaction to it are the sorts of data participants take more or less conscious note of, and they ultimately accrue to the personalities conveyed in humorous conversational interaction.

Let's turn now to narrative. Conversation is the natural home of sto-
rytelling, and so it comes as no surprise that conversational narratives
rate high on the scale of poeticity. The following example of conversa-
tional storytelling reveals especially interesting patterns of repetition
and parallelism. In this excerpt, Vivian tells the story of a neighbor
who mistook her two sons for twins. One of those sons, Earl, and his
wife Alice are Vivian's conversational partners. The humor she finds
in the recounted events and her enjoyment of the memory entice
Vivian into repeating salient elements of her story during the initial
telling. Vivian then repeats two pivotal utterances of her story once
again to summarize and conclude the topic, after Earl tells a related
story of his own two similar looking children. Notice that Vivian is
already repeating from Alice's introductory passage, which contains
three separate wordings for the same state of affairs, namely: "are
they twins?"; "they're twins"; and "our kids are twins." Thus, there is
definitely a formulaic feel to the phrase by the time Vivian repeats it
in the second version of the story.

TWINS

{Alice and Vivian looking at pictures of (grand)children}

Alice: people have asked us,
         "are they twins?"
         not just once.
         {to Earl} how often have people asked us
         if they're twins,
         if our kids are twins.
Earl: well.
Alice: I mean seriously.
Earl: fairly often.
Alice: fairly often.
Earl: more often than I would've imagined.
         yeah, I consider it such a stupid question.
         for me it's=
Vivian: when we moved to Pennsylvania,
         Delbert and Earl walked to school by some neighbors,
         and I met that lady one day
         when we were very new,

and she said,
"oh, you're the one with the twins."
and I said, "oh no,
maybe you mean my boys
that are a year and a half apart."
"oh no, they're twins."
{laughing} this lady was telling me,
"oh no, they're twins."
I said,
"I have sons a year and a half apart."
"ah, well I think they look like twins."
and I could've just throttled that woman=

Earl: this was like the woman who said to me,
when I said Lilly has just turned three
"oh, you mean four."

Vivian: isn't that charming,

Earl: I said,

Vivian: when somebody tells the parents what-

Earl: "she's my daughter.
She's three."

Vivian: I could've just **kicked** that woman.
"oh, no, they're twins." {laughing}

Looking just at the story Vivian tells, abstracting away from Earl's intervening story, and eliminating all repetition, we might propose the following structure as the basic narrative.

1   when we moved to Pennsylvania,
      Delbert and Earl walked to school by some neighbors,
2   and I met that lady one day when we were very new,
3   and she said, "oh, you're the one with the twins."
4   and I said, "oh no,
      maybe you mean my boys that are a year and a half apart."
5   "oh no, they're twins." {laughing}
6   and I could've just throttled that woman

But this stripped-down version leaves out much of interest in the story. Labeling the first five units Vivian produces without interruption as A-E, we see that the next three elements appear to paraphrase B-D in reverse order. Alternatively, the second clause labeled as C may be heard as a separate statement attributed to the neighbor with

no important consequences for the point at issue here. Labeling the resolution as F, the two final elements following Earl's story also repeat E and F nearly verbatim, though in reverse order:

A	when we moved to Pennsylvania,
	Delbert and Earl walked to school by some neighbors,
B	and I met that lady one day when we were very new,
C	and she said, "oh, you're the one with the twins."
D	and I said, "oh no,
	maybe you mean my boys that are a year and a half apart."
E	"oh no, they're twins." {laughing}
E	this lady was telling me, "oh no, they're twins."
D	I said, "I have sons a year and a half apart."
C	"ah, well I think they look like twins."
F	and I could've just throttled that woman=
F	I could've just **kicked** that woman.
E	"oh, no, they're twins." {laughing}

The repetition of elements F and E practically verbatim following Earl's response story nicely illustrates the salience of dialogue and evaluation in personal anecdotes. At the same time, it shows how Vivian gets the final word on her own story, rather than letting Earl determine its interpretation with his comment and response story. Clearly, different representations and labelings of a story can reveal new insights into its organization, as I demonstrate in Norrick (2000).

Finally, let's look at two examples of conversational co-narration. The first passage below shows multiple participants recounting a recurrent past experience. Annie and Jean are cousins in their late twenties or early thirties; Helen is Annie's mother and Jean's aunt. All three have lived in close proximity their whole lives, so that they may be said to form a loose family group. They are gathered before a late-afternoon Thanksgiving dinner in the living room of the house where Annie and Helen live.

TIPSY

Annie:	And I always thought
	that her and Vance
	just were great together.
Jean:	Yeah.
	Used to get s-
Helen:	They were both good.
Annie:	Yeah.
	They were really good.
Jean:	You could go over there around the holidays
	and get **smashed** before you left the place.
Helen:	Oh yeah.
Jean:	We used to have the last appointment, right?
	Remember, the two of us would go?
Annie:	Yeah, yeah.
Jean:	"Want some wine girls?"
	"Sure we'll have a glass of wine."
	You walk out of there you're half **tip**sy.
Annie:	You were under the **dry**ers.
Jean:	Well sure.
	And he'd be pouring the wine
	and we were tipsy
	by the time we walked out of that place.
Annie:	Then he moved all the way out at Rand Road.
Jean:	Near the town show, remember?
Annie:	Yeah.
Jean:	We went there.
Annie:	We used to go there.
	And then we went on to Union Road,
	when he was there.
Jean:	Yeah, yeah.
	We followed him around.

Here we find many devices characterizing the exchange as a recollection of shared past experience. Jean initiates the co-telling with an ostensible request for confirmation in the tag question "We used to have the last appointment, right?" though she does not pause long for a reply and receives none, so that the question stands simply as a marker of shared background knowledge. Then with "Remember, the two of us would go?" Jean explicitly seeks testimony from Annie, who

this time complies with "Yeah, yeah." Jean again questions Annie with *remember* later in the exchange, again receiving a positive *yeah* in return. Then Jean's "Well sure" in response to Annie's "You were under the dryers" and Annie's near repetition of Jean's "We went there" as "We used to go there" count as instances of checking details and coordinating accounts of the shared experience. All these markers of shared experience also serve as cues in the creation of a joint production.

Co-telling is quite prevalent, though Jean clearly remains the primary narrator. Helen confirms Jean's basic point about drinking at the hairdresser's at the outset with "Oh yeah," and Annie not only confirms Jean's claims but adds the salient detail about being "under the dryers" as well. Annie's co-telling, however, veers off in the direction of telling what happened to Vance and his partner, which suggests another point about collaborative family tales, namely that disagreements during co-narration tend to arise especially about the point of the story.

From Jean's perspective, the story focusses on the availability, consumption and effects of alcohol at the hair-dresser's, but Annie is far more concerned with Vance as a good hairdresser and how the sisters followed him as he moved around. Jean comes around to this point of view in the end, agreeing with Annie and summarizing the story in line with her interpretation: "Yeah. Yeah. We followed him around." This final agreement about the point of the narration caps off an interaction already filled with signals of shared group identity and high rapport.

The next and final excerpt was recorded in the same setting as the previous one, but now Lynne is present as well. This story with its focus on the immediate family demonstrates how group dynamics can shift based on family membership. Annie's younger sister Lynn had remained silent during the foregoing talk of hair-dressing because she had at the time been too young to accompany her older sister, aunt and mother on trips to the beauty parlor. But as this conversation continues, Lynn finds occasion to introduce a story of a third sister,

Jennifer, who is not present in the group, which suddenly makes their aunt Jean a partial outsider for the moment as someone not living in the same house when the reported events took place.

During most of the preceding interaction, Jean had controlled the floor, and she holds out as long as she can while Lynn attempts to begin her story. Even then, Jean waits only till the first pause before attempting to ratify her status as a family member by hopefully contributing a detail to the story, albeit in the form of an uncertain request for confirmation: "She put something on her head, a bag or something?" And as soon as Lynn appears to have finished her story, Jean again wrests control of the floor with a comment about her own hair, which leads back into more general talk not focussed on the nuclear family.

POODLE

Jean:	Annie gave me a permanent once, too.
Lynn:	Annie did?
Jean:	Once and only once.
	{general laughter}
	I would never allow her to touch my hair again.
Lynn:	Well remember the time-
Jean:	**Yoooh.**
	Talk about afro
	when afro wasn't even in **style**.
	My god.
Annie:	Well see I **started** [something.]
Jean:	[Frizz ball.]
	I was a frizz ball.
	It wasn't even afro.
	I was just **frizz**.
Lynn:	Remember [when-]
Jean:	[It was] **terri**ble.
Lynn:	Jennifer,
	the first time Jennifer had a perm
	when she came home.
	It was the funniest thing.
Jean:	She put something on her head,
	a bag or something?
Lynn:	She wore her-
Annie:	{laughs}.

Lynn:	Well she wore her-
Helen:	"Hair ball, hair ball."
	Yeah. Because she-
Annie:	She just always had this **hood** on.
	And she ran right upstairs,
Lynn:	**No.**
	First she **threw** her bag up the stairs,
	almost **hit** me.
Annie:	Oh yeah.
Lynn:	Then "**bang.**"
	The door slams.
	And I'm like-
	I was on the **phone**.
	I was like
	"Ah I don't know.
	My sister just walked in.
	I think something's wrong."
	And [then she ran up the stairs.]
Annie:	[Oh that's it.]
	"I look like a damn **poo**dle."
	{general laughter}
Lynn:	Like **sobbing,**
	"I look like a poodle."
Helen:	Aw {laughing}
Annie:	Then she came down to eat
	and she'd **wrapped** a towel around her head.
Helen:	Aw {laughing}
Lynn:	She barricaded herself for a while in her room.
Jean:	**My** hair takes like **this.**
	I mean.
Annie:	Yeah.

Lynn first announces her story with: "Well remember the time—," before Jean will let her have the floor. As we saw above, the preface with *remember* provides a way of explicitly marking a story as familiar to at least some participants. When Jean again seems to have finished, Lynn reiterates her *remember*-preface and allows Jean one final evaluative comment before plunging into the story about Jennifer's first perm.

Both Annie and Helen are involved in co-telling the story. Helen adds only a bit of dialogue and sympathetic *aws*, but she makes the

most of this contribution, since, as Tannen notes, animating dialogue illustrates shared experience (1989: 11). By contrast, Annie makes extensive contributions but receives corrections from Lynn on almost every detail she adds. Thus Annie's description "She just always had this *hood* on" is allowed to stand, but her following statement that "She ran right upstairs" elicits a prompt *no* from Lynn, who proceeds to place herself in the center of the story's action. Again when Annie attempts to add a piece of dialogue: "I look like a damn *poodle*," Lynn objects to her tone, saying it was "Like sobbing" and rendering Jennifer's sentence as sad rather than angry, and deleting the *damn*. Finally, even Annie's statement beginning "Then she came down to eat" displeases Lynn, who insists that Jennifer first "barricaded herself for a while in her room." Although Lynn has a hard time getting started and has difficulty responding to Jean's query about what Jennifer wore on her head, she controls the story through to the end, as becomes quite clear in Annie's acquiescent responses to Lynn's corrections: "Oh yeah." and "Oh that's it." Lynn further cements her own authority as teller by strategically deploying details only she could have access to, for instance the bag thrown up the stairs, the slamming door and the fact that she was on the phone at the time.

Even without a final coda expressing agreement on the evaluation of a past event or on the point of the story about it, collaborative narration serves to ratify group membership and modulate rapport in multiple ways, first because it allows participants to re-live pleasant common experiences, second because it confirms the long-term bond they share, and third because the experience of collaborative narration itself redounds to feelings of belonging.

In conclusion, we have seen that conversation illustrates many features we generally associate with poetry and literary texts, though it necessarily adheres to conventions of its own. Spontaneous everyday talk displays characteristic patterns of line, rhythm, stress and information distribution; it thrives on a polyphonous coherence compounded of listener feedback, simultaneous talk and disfluencies. Conversation typically takes place in face-to-face interaction between

two or more participants in real time. The participants generally share roughly equal speaking rights but pursue distinct goals and needs evident in their sometime collaborative, sometime competing voices. A fuller description of the structures found in spontaneous everyday talk would be necessary for a complete, well-grounded consideration of "the Poetics of Conversation in Twentieth-Century Literature and Criticism."

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TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Each line of transcription contains a single intonation unit.

She's out.	Period shows falling tone in the preceding element.
Oh yeah?	Question mark shows rising tone in the preceding element.
well, okay	Comma indicates a continuing intonation, drawling out the preceding element.
Damn	Bold typeface indicates heavy stress.
bu- but	A single dash indicates a cutoff with a glottal stop.
says "Oh"	Double quotes mark speech set off by a shift in the speaker's voice.
[and so-]	Square brackets on successive lines mark
[Why] her?	beginning and end of overlapping talk.
and=	Equals signs on successive lines shows latching
=then	between turns.
(2.0)	Numbers in parentheses indicate timed pauses.
{sigh}	Curly braces enclose editorial comments and untranscribable elements.

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