

## Talk About Acting and Constraint in Stories About Organizations

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Six stories from conversations about organizations are examined for information about how the conversants define the character of their organizations and their own roles within them. The analysis demonstrates that each story exhibits two kinds of conversational markers, *action markers* (statements that organizational actors are acting independently of organizational constraints) and *constraint markers* (statements of organizational characteristics which prevent individual freedom of action), juxtaposed sequentially throughout the conversations. This sequential juxtaposition is shown to be an effective thematic device for analyzing conversational codefinitions of self and organization.

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ALTHOUGH STORYTELLING HAS BEEN STUDIED for centuries, only recently have social scientists recognized stories as legitimate objects of research. Studies of stories separate roughly into two categories: those focusing on the formal aspects of narrative (Propp, 1968; Rumelhart, 1975; Bower, 1976; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; and Brewer, 1985) and those concerned with the social functions of narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972; Sacks, 1974; Jefferson, 1984; Polanyi, 1978, 1979, 1981a,b; and Edwards & Middleton, 1986). In this paper, I deal with the latter category by examining how stories communicate information about tellers' roles in organizations, even when such stories are ostensibly about some other subject. Far from being a simple recitation of a narrative, stories told about organizations involve complex conversational negotiations that fit tellers and their subjects to their organizations. These stories provide valuable information about how members of organizations see themselves and the groups to which they belong.

I define a structure which I find in all stories about organizations which occur in conversation. This structure is revealed through the juxtaposition of conversational markers which occur consistently in such stories. I then use this structure as a scaffold for my interpretation of the themes about organizational status that I see being played out through the discourse.

My argument is developed in six stages: (1) a brief review of story research; (2) an explanation of *action* and *constraint* markers in stories;

(3) a description of the three methods by which I gathered stories to analyze; (4) a description of the organizations from which the example stories were taken; (5) an analysis of the six example stories; and (6) a discussion of implications and conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on stories has gradually changed its focus from the assumption that stories exist apart from their tellers to the idea that stories are the outcomes of interpersonal communication which contain information about the social worlds of both tellers and auditors. This change in focus can be identified in six key lines of research.

Labov and Waletzky (1967) argue that stories relate information about their tellers' worlds through conversation. They analyze several hundred tape-recorded interviews in which subjects are asked to tell stories in response to pointed questions (example: "were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of getting killed?"). Though these researchers are primarily concerned with analyzing stories' constituent parts, the better to correlate information in the story with the event it describes, they do so in the expectation that they will eventually be able to make "...close correlations of the narrator's social characteristics with the structure of their narratives..."(13).

Labov (1972) further pursues this aim in his study of the vernacular used by inner-city black youths. In this work, Labov explains how storytellers typically establish a *raison d'être* of their stories. Labov describes several linguistic devices (intensifiers, comparators, correlative, and explicatives) which tellers use as evaluative techniques to avoid receiving the withering rejoinder, "so what?" in response to their stories. Though auditors are still not considered as co-constructors of the story in this research, Labov has taken a major step in that direction by pointing out that the *teller* realizes how his/her story might affect listeners. Thus, the listener is assigned a role, if only an imputed one.

Harvey Sacks (1974) analyzes the telling of a dirty joke among four conversants, demonstrating a complex series of moves designed to negotiate the teller's right to relate the story (that is, to claim the "floor" for the story's duration), as well as a number of other constraints imposed by the auditors, dictating when and how the story could be told and the reaction to it. This research, together with a series of Sacks' unpublished lectures, has spurred several projects by his students and others designed to bring to the forefront the social concerns of both the teller and the auditors. At this stage, investigators begin to consider the oral narrative as an outcome of conversation.

Jefferson (1984) builds upon Sacks' observations to argue that the occurrence of stories in discourse must be viewed not simply as a negotiation of teller and auditor rights, but as a fragment embedded in a larger framework of conversation. Jefferson observes that stories are both *locally occasioned* (that is, they emerge from turn-by-turn talk) and

*sequentially implicative* (that is, upon their completion, stories re-engage turn-by-turn talk). Jefferson recognizes that there are subtle ways in which tellers and auditors interact to frame a story. At this point, research has moved far from the earlier, simplistic notion of the story being a "text" which is simply "recited" by a storyteller. As Polanyi (1981a) observes, "According to Sacks, Jefferson, and other ethnomethodologists, the social constraints on conversational storytelling make it impossible to re-tell 'the same story' because in any telling storytellers necessarily include formulations. . . which make explicit their awareness of the state of the ongoing talk. . . [as well as] the precise identity, interests, and states of understanding of the various story recipients. . ." (p. 315).

In her dissertation and subsequent articles (Polanyi 1978, 1979, 1981a,b), Polanyi argues for considering the story as a site for cultural analysis where the turn-by-turn talk of conversants reveals important information about their characteristic attitudes, emotions, and behaviors (Polanyi, 1981b). This research takes a "step back" from the immediate local conversation to argue that conversants speak from their own cultural frameworks and that these frameworks emerge in talk to frame the story, limiting some of its characteristics and enhancing others, just as does local information about the context. Interestingly, Polanyi's research brings us full circle to the early work of folklorists and anthropologists who used stories as a "way in" to understanding culture.

One final research program in conversational storytelling, as it relates to social roles, is that of Edwards and Middleton (1986), who propose not only that stories are jointly constructed through conversation, but that discourse plays an active role in how the stories are *remembered*. They argue that conversants' communicative "frames" of experience must literally meld to negotiate what the story "facts" shall have been, thus providing us with the most fully realized picture of story-talk yet available in the literature.

Considered sequentially, these six research programs show an increase in our conception of the richness of story-talk. Specifically, the following "moves" are made: (1) from the notion that story-texts exist apart from conversants to the recognition that story-texts are co-constructed through the act of discourse; (2) from the view that story texts are replicated in approximately the same form again and again, to the view that stories are unique to the conversations in which they occur; and (3) from the focus upon the content of stories as the chief object of interest, to emphasis upon how stories, growing from the experiences of their tellers, serve to reinterpret and re-portray the story's "actual events" with each telling.

The present research draws upon all of these perspectival shifts. By viewing organizational story-talk as an indicator of how conversants negotiate with each other to define the degree to which they can act as free agents in organizations, I am reaffirming that such discourse

is co-constructed, is unique to conversational context, and is an effective way to show how story "facts" serve to define the organizational roles of the conversants.

By using the phrase "in organizations," I may lead some readers to assume that I am endorsing a structuralist/functionalist view of the ontological status of organizations, a perspective which might seem to belie the interpretive slant suggested by the six key lines of research. By looking at stories co-constructed in conversation, however, I mean to oppose the notion that the organization exists as a reified entity which encompasses organizational actors, yet remains somehow apart from them. When one examines organizational story-talk, one is seeing much more than a static "picture" of the organization; one is in fact seeing the "organization" in the process of being constructed.

To see why this is so, we need only look to the six lines of research summarized above. For example, one important finding is that stories never remain the same from one telling to the next. Why do stories possess this unstable quality? First, there is no entity called an "organization" that exists (apart from the actors who make it up) to be told about; thus, what we come to call "an organization" cannot be pinned down long enough to make a narrative account of it. In a sense, the organizational actors *are* the organization, and the act of storytelling is one of many communicative events by means of which organizational "reality" is continuously created and modified.

Second, because of the ephemeral nature of this phenomenon that advocates of the functionalist paradigm (mistakenly) reify as "organization," researchers often overlook the fact that each time a story is told about the organization, it is a different "organization" that is being spoken of. When we look at organizational stories, we do not observe a stable "organization" being reflected in the narrative from one telling to the next; rather, we see a dynamic nexus where individual creativity intersects (and often clashes with) how the story's co-constructors are making sense of their coexistence with other organizational actors.

Nevertheless, as we look at the current research on organizational stories, we confront precisely this misguided reification of organizational structure. As Silverman and Jones (1976) note, our current accounting practices (of which stories may be considered an example) often lead us mistakenly to grant ontological status to the structures which we sustain only through discourse. As we examine the six stories comprising our sample, then, it will be helpful to remember that the conversational participants are engaged in the act of making an organization and not simply in reporting facts about it.

More importantly, the present research applies our knowledge of story-talk to an area of the discipline which sorely needs it: organizational communication. Studies considered to be on the leading edge of research in organizational narrative still focus on stories as established,

even as *written*, texts (Martin & Powers, 1981; Martin, 1982; Wilkins, 1983), and take no cognizance of the ever-changing nature of the stories themselves or the organizations about which they are told.

### ACTION AND CONSTRAINT MARKERS

My thesis is that organizational story-talk contains two kinds of markers, which I call *action* and *constraint* markers, the interplay of which serves to define the organizational roles of the storyteller and/or the subject(s) of the story. "Organizational story-talk" is a narrative which: (1) is believed by the teller and/or the audience to have a basis in fact; (2) recounts an event which has taken place in an organization of which the teller and/or the audience either are or have been members; and (3) is told in the context of an oral discursive interaction involving the teller and at least one other person (who may or may not be a member of the organization which the story is about). An *action marker* is a conversational reference whose purpose is to establish that a story's characters are acting as they choose to act, independently of the regulative rules of the organization of which they are (or were) members. A *constraint marker* is a conversational reference which refers to regulative features of the organization which constrain the story's teller or characters from acting as they choose.

The paradox that individuals act freely in organizations, but are at the same time constrained by regulative organizational features, has been noted by many researchers (see, for example, Bittner, 1974; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Conrad, 1983; Giddens, 1976; and Knorr-Cetina, 1988). Poole and McPhee (1983) summarize the essentials of the debate over this problem:

In organizational research we confront an undeniable paradox: People create, maintain, and control organizations, yet organizations attain a life of their own and often overshadow, constrain, and manipulate their members. Who controls whom? Which is the primary cause and which the derivative? . . . The explanation of this complex relationship is one of the great goals of organizational studies and also one of its greatest problems. . . (pp. 195-196).

A recent and theoretically exciting approach to the solution of the action/constraint paradox occurs in *activity theory* as advanced by Yrjo Engestrom (1987). Building on the cultural-historical tradition of Soviet developmental psychology (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontyev, 1978), Engestrom argues that the individual, while free to act in (and change) a given activity system, is nevertheless bound by rules of the community which exist historically antecedent to his/her performance as a member of it. Engestrom states that the contradictions which arise from the "push-pull" tension between acting and constraint impel organizational actors toward a creative definition of their organizational identities.

The stories analyzed in this paper offer six examples out of a virtually infinite number of ways that the organizational actor can coformulate definitions of self and organization in ways satisfactory to both.

Critical to Engestrom's theory is the notion that language provides the chief tool for this coformulation to occur. Nowhere is this principle more clearly evidenced than in the co-construction of stories through conversation. In all six stories, not only do the tellers and auditors show a marked awareness of the tension between action and constraint (both their own and that of the characters in their stories), but the ways in which they achieve the balance between acting and constraint are highly *creative*, in precisely Engestrom's sense.

Conversationally co-constructed stories are the linguistic means whereby a new context is reformulated, providing frameworks in which to cast narrative events each time the story is retold. Thus, Engestrom provides a novel way to conceptualize Polanyi's (1981a) assertion that one cannot "tell the same story twice." At each retelling, the teller must adjust the language of the story to accommodate different contexts, different auditors, and different historical circumstances (because more time has passed since the last telling, presumably providing opportunities for events to occur which may modify how the teller chooses to cast the "facts" of the story).

#### HOW SAMPLES WERE OBTAINED

The stories analyzed in this paper were drawn from three sources: (1) stories noted in conversation, and then written down soon after; (2) transcriptions of tape-recorded stories told at the request of an interviewer; and (3) published narratives or transcripts. Each source presents its own advantages and disadvantages.

The first method, using a written record of stories heard in conversation and remembered (e.g., "The Chairman's Desk" and "Walking Out on the Big Guns"), is most effective for getting the story without intruding in the "natural" flow of the conversation. This method worked well to a point, but I found it wanting in at least two respects: (1) many salient features of the story-talk were lost due to the auditor's inability to notice, remember, and record subtle characteristics of the conversation; and (2) expectations about anticipated findings influenced the data that were selected for recording. I was able to adjust somewhat for these problems by deriving the general framework first, based upon my analysis of transcribed conversation, and then retrospectively applying it to the remembered story.

The second method, prompted tape-recording and later transcription of stories ("Running Dogs 1," "Running Dogs 2," and "The Final Indignity"), gets around the problem of faulty memory and at least some recorder bias, but does so at the expense of a full replication of the conversational context in which most stories are told. Intuitively, we sense that a story told because an auditor requests it is different from a story told because it just "occurs" to the teller to relate it. Prompted, the teller almost certainly feels that s/he is "on stage" and thus the narrative delivered into a tape recorder will probably be more formal than the

one spontaneously contributed to a conversation. This artificiality cannot be avoided in the case of requests for specific stories ("Running Dogs 1"), but in the case of stories which emerged in the context of long interviews (such as "The Final Indignity"), the teller seemed to forget the presence of the tape recorder, and the stories appeared to grow more out of a natural dyadic interaction, even though the presence of widely-interspersed questions, as well as the setting (a formal request for the interview), surely inhibited the talk somewhat.

In transcribing these stories, I have omitted certain conventional indicators, such as length of pauses and dialect markers. While this omitted data might conceivably be of some relevance to the claims I make, I believe that, at this exploratory stage of research into organizational story-talk, such sophisticated conversational analysis is inappropriate. We need first to decide whether it is worthwhile to study the informational content and the grosser levels of talk structure for clues to attitudes about organizations before tackling the finer points. Accordingly, I have included in my transcriptions the following indicators: (1) turns at talk (because interruptions and floor time can, for example, serve as prime pointers to teller confidence about status in the organization); (2) vocalized pauses (because they can be taken as evidence of certainty, or lack of it, about the story's facts); (3) markers of casual speech ("sittin" not "sitting") (because these can indicate how much "at ease" the teller is); and (4) responses of encouragement or discouragement by the researcher or auditor (because the teller typically interprets these as warrants to adjust the telling of the story).

The advantage of gathering stories by the third method, using published transcripts (Lt. Colonel Oliver North's "Casey at the Books"), is that one is dealing with material transcribed by professionals which has been subjected to review. Yet there are two problems with such stories: (1) data about the rules governing story transcription is at best sketchy and often completely lacking; and (2) one cannot escape having been influenced by having read the narrative context in which the transcript is embedded. To adjust for the former difficulty, I tried to make note of anomalies in the transcriptions. As for the second difficulty, a partial compensation is that we are looking at a phenomenon which is as yet unexamined in the literature—attitudes about organizations as reflected in story-talk—so the conclusions offered by the transcribers about other implications of their transcripts may, for the present, be disregarded.

In spite of their individual shortcomings, these three methods produce texts which enable us to take an important first step in seeing organizations as emergent in story-talk. I hope that discussion of these data will improve not only our understanding of organizational stories themselves, but also of our ways of representing them.

## DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATIONS FROM WHICH STORIES WERE TAKEN

Of the six stories chosen for analysis in this essay, the first five are told about two academic units devoted to the study of communication at a large Midwestern university, the speech communication department, and an institute which specializes in critical studies of popular culture. Though some of the same interests, faculty, and facilities are shared by the two departments, it is generally acknowledged that their widely divergent theoretical viewpoints lead to competition rather than cooperation. Some of the graduate students who appear in the stories as tellers, auditors, and characters occupy offices in the basement of the same building in which faculty from both departments have their offices on the first and second floors.

These first five stories run the gamut of organizational life in a university academic unit and have been chosen to enhance reliability by providing maximized comparisons. Tellers include former students ("Running Dogs 1"); current students ("The Chairman's Desk"); and faculty ("Running Dogs 2"). General subject areas addressed by the stories include recreation ("Running Dogs 1 and 2"); the office/work environment ("The Final Indignity"); relations with department administration ("The Chairman's Desk"); and relations with faculty ("Walking Out on the Big Guns"). The characters appearing in the stories are similarly diverse: students appear in all five stories; faculty in three ("Running Dogs 1 and 2" and "Walking Out on the Big Guns"); and an administrator in one ("The Chairman's Desk").

The sixth story ("Casey at the Books") comes from a completely different environment: the complex web of organizations, subunits, and cabals whose interaction led to the Iran-*Contra* arms debacle. This organizational context, involving treachery, war, violence, and blackmail, is far removed from the staid academic life, and for precisely this reason is interesting. When one sees the pattern of discourse references to action and constraint in two such distinct contexts, one is better persuaded of their ubiquity in storytelling.

## ANALYSIS OF THE SIX STORIES

Before considering the six stories, it would be helpful to list the rules by which markers of action and constraint can be identified. First, action and constraint markers typically *occur as pairs* so that they define each other; where you find one, look for the other conjoining it, either immediately or nearby. Second, to identify *action markers*, one should look for storyteller assertions that someone (either the teller or a character in the story) has acted in some way which establishes independence from organizational rules. In some cases, the assertion of independence will be obvious; for example, most organizations are replete with stories in which one employee reportedly "tells off" a



superior, regardless of the consequences. In other cases, however, the assertion will not be so obvious; for example, most organizations also have stories in which organizational rules are relaxed in deference to the achievement of some employee ("after those sales she generated last quarter, she can do no wrong"). Because the organizational rules defer in such stories (that is, they relinquish their power to constrain), they can be seen as indirect action markers, because the individual has done something which permits him or her to transcend the rules. Third and finally, to identify *constraint markers*, look for statements which in some way limit the ability of tellers or actors to do as they wish. Once again, these may be references to events in which the rules are enforced upon some hapless individual or group, or they may refer to situations in which the individual is depicted as *less* powerful than the organizational rules governing him or her (the organization is granted power by default, as it were).

In addition to these three basic rules, one overriding proviso should be noted: there are many different levels at which action/constraint pairings may be analyzed in any discourse sample. Thus, one should not only choose a level and analyze the pattern inherent in it *at that level*, but also realize that choosing a different level generates a different analysis. Rather than calling these "levels," I prefer to use the literary term "themes," and to state the principle as follows: *any instance of organizational story-talk includes a large number of themes of action and constraint.*

An example will illustrate this principle. Suppose, in a story, one encounters the statement, "Now that Jones is the boss down there, I'll bet that's the last time Smith orders something without going through central receiving." Disregarding the fact that this single statement cannot be appropriately analyzed apart from the context of the story in which it occurs, it is easy to see that at least two seemingly contradictory assertions about action and constraint are being made. On one reading, the individual about whom this assertion is made may, in the past, have successfully defied some implied organizational rules about "proper channels" for purchasing (the reference to this instance being "the last time" could suggest that the employee might have gotten away with this sort of thing previously). Thus, this could be viewed as an example of an *action marker*.

On an alternative reading, however, the implication may be that the organization has come down rather hard on this individual, thus providing us with an example of a *constraint marker*. Neither of the two readings is the more "valid," because both can be seen in the story, depending on the interpretation one chooses to use as a starting point. Moreover, the situation gets even more complex when one is dealing with stories which have many assertions, interpretable at many levels, and from the perspectives of both storytellers and characters in the story.

With these rules in mind, let us turn to the six examples.

The first story (Example #1, "Running Dogs 1," below) has several markers of action and constraint. This story, related by a former student who had returned to defend his dissertation, concerns the origin of this student's academic department's softball team name. "The Running Dogs of Empiricism." Not only does this story clearly show the presence of action and constraint markers, but it proves that even a story about a seemingly trivial subject can contain a wealth of information of interest to organizational theorists—all revealed in the talk which shapes the story. Since the story was elicited, I have marked the turns, "I." (for interviewer), "R." (for respondent), and "T." (for a third party who joins the talk after turn [16]).

Example #1: "Running Dogs 1"

- [1] I.: Okay. Go.
- [2] R.: Aah. Well, when I first got here, I dunno, back in '77 or '78, the department really didn't have a, uh, softball team. It was called—they did have a team, but it was called the "Sneak Thieves."
- [3] I.: The "Sneak Thieves"?
- [4] R.: Yes=
- [ ]
- [5] I.: Hehhehhehheh.
- [6] R.: =the "Sneak Thieves" and they were really terrible, and, in fact, they were so bad that the people who were playin' on the team, like, like [x], for example, was playin' and a couple of others were embarrassed to show up, and so—and, besides, the name was really embarr=
- [ ]
- [7] I.: That is pretty embarrassing.
- [8] R.: =rassing, and our record was was horrible, so the team pretty much disbanded=
- [ ]
- [9] I.: Uh-huh.
- [10] R.: =and, uh, since I love the—I love softball and everything, I didn't think that that should be, so we reorganiz—I reorganized the team, and, uh, we were sittin' around tryin' to think up names, I was sittin' with [y], tryin' to, to think up names, and my background is uh, uhh, Marxist=
- [ ]
- [11] I.: Oh.
- [12] R.: =and, [z] [n.b.: respondent's advisor], uh=
- [ ]
- [13] I.: Oh, I see, sure.
- [14] R.: =( ) dissertation committee, but, anyhow, uh, so I was thinking of "Running Dogs of Capitalism,"=
- [ ]

- [15] I: Yeah.
- [16] R.: and uh [y] is in, uh, behaviorism, so she's empiricism. . .  
 [Story is interrupted as teller breaks off to talk to a faculty member, who mentions that "The Running Dogs' are still in business."]
- [17] R.: . . . I was telling him about how the, uh, the name "Running Dogs" came about. Anyhow, [y] and I. . .
- [18] T.: Well, I'd better go.
- [19] I.: I'll see ya,--.
- [20] R.: Ok, it was "Running Dogs of Capitalism," but, but, we made the, uh, concession for [y] to call it the "Running Dogs of Empiricism," 'cause she was an empiricist.

The teller of this story has included several *action* markers, such as the following, all at turn [10]: (1) he corrects himself from saying "*we* reorganized the team" to "*I* reorganized the team"; (2) he credits himself and [y] with the responsibility for coming up with a new team; and (3) he implies that he alone is the impetus for reconstituting the team ("I didn't think that that should be").

This turn occurs at a point in the stream of talk framed by *constraint* markers both before and after it. At [6], for instance, the teller "sets up" two organizational obstacles over which he will triumph in [10]: (1) the team's "really terrible" play; and (2) the "embarrassing" name, "The Sneak Thieves." There is some confusion apparent as to which reason accounts for the failure of members to show up, because he again refers to quality of play at [8], "our record was horrible." Normally, one might believe that remarks about playing quality are irrelevant to the main point of the story, the origin of the team name. Yet his reinforcement of the condition of the team is more significant *if we consider it as a marker of constraint*. The teller has gone to a great deal of trouble to let the auditor know why it was necessary for *him* to reorganize the team, which may reflect the urge in organizational cultures (in Western countries, at any rate) to establish identity through individual achievement.

Yet, it is also characteristic of organizational actors in such cultures not to claim too much credit, as teller may have done in [10]. Thus, at [12], we find teller returning to organizational constraints in choosing the name; however, these constraints are of an entirely different order from the team's poor quality of play and the embarrassing name. At [10], and continuing in [12], teller establishes a justification based on philosophical perspective when he refers to his advisor, [z], an individual known by the auditor and others to have a Marxist perspective, and further at [16], where he draws the distinction between his own "Marxist" view and the "empiricist" viewpoint of [y]. He seems to be saying in these passages that his choice of the name was not an individual act of whim, but was justified given his field of study. At [20] he adds a more practical constraint when he refers to a "concession" to [y] in slightly altering

the name. In other words, he portrays himself as having successfully carried off the balancing act that all members of organizations are required to do: simultaneously to be a "can do" achiever and, at the same time, a "team player."

Given this introduction to the kinds of expressions that can serve as *action* and *constraint* markers, let us introduce a second story, on the same subject (Example #2, "Running Dogs 2," below), the context of which is quite different. The interviewer is a Ph.D. student and the storyteller is his academic advisor, with whom he has been talking about current research projects. The subject of "Running Dogs 1" has come up, but the faculty advisor has a different story to tell.

Example #2: "Running Dogs 2"

- [1] R.: We had a—we had a woman here who was herself a Chinese national and her name was [x], or something like that,  
and=  
[
- [2] I.: I think I think I've heard of her.
- [3] R.: =of course there was a reference to their "Running Dogs of Imperialism"=  
[
- [4] I.: Uh-huh.
- [5] R.: =on the Chinese uhh mainland=  
[
- [6] I.: Uh-huh.
- [7] R.: =following the Maoist revolution and uh my assumption, eh, because she was playing with us at the time and there were a number of uh uhh Marx-ists in the program=  
[
- [8] I.: Ohh.
- [9] R.: =in our program, not just in the Institute, playing with us, was that in some way it was a veiled reference to that, because we had previously been called "The Commie Cubs"=  
[
- [10] I.: Hehhehhehheh.
- [11] R.: =that this was just an extension=  
[
- [12] I.: Hahhahhahhahah.
- [13] R.: =ah ah of that=  
[
- [14] I.: Aah-hah-hah.
- [15] R.: =and in fact, then, when it became kind of the "Running Dogs of Empiricism," that took on the character of the of the class conflict within the Department, and—between us and the Institute folks. But that was my impression.

[At this point, interviewer thinks the story has ended and switches off the tape recorder. However, the faculty member appends a further explanation.]

[16] R.: What I'm trying to remember is if we went from "The Running Dogs of Empiricism" to "The Commie Cubs," because sometimes in our history we were "The Commie Cubs" as the "Communication Cubs" but at the same time reference to=

[

[17] I.: Ooh, I see.

[18] R.: =Commie Cubs" so it it was the "Running Dogs" the uh you know it was a uh kind of double meaning=

[

[19] I.: Hehhehhehhehheh.

That's too much.

[20] R.: I dunno file that away.

[21] I.: Ok.

In "Running Dogs 2," the action/constraint juxtaposition plays itself out in two distinct phases, one before the tape recorder is turned off (turns [1] through [15]), and the other afterward (turns [16] through [21]). One of the possible themes underlying this juxtaposition is the question of whether the team is named in deference to one person, the Chinese woman [x] referred to in turn [1] (references to this idea can be classified as *action* markers, because they exalt the power of the individual over the organization), or whether more complex organizational forces function to determine the name (references to this idea can be classified as *constraint* markers, because they imply that the organization has more influence than the individual).

The first action/constraint sequence begins in turn [1], as the faculty member introduces the person whose background will serve as the inspiration for the team name. Immediately, however, he introduces a rather odd structural constraint in turn [3], by specifying that the team name refers to "running dogs of imperialism," a somewhat insulting reference to the country in which the woman is receiving her education. I identify this as a constraint marker because it specifies an organizational fact about a character in this story which makes a modification of the team name necessary. In other words, the individual's influence is curtailed by her organizational status as a Chinese national.

But then, in turn [7], teller returns to specifying an action marker about this woman as he states that the name is a result of the fact that "she was playing with us at the time," and in this respect, it seems that the organization conforms to her. On the other hand, one must not give her too much credit, so another constraint marker is specified, also in turn [7]: the name wasn't due just to the Chinese woman's influence, but also to the fact that "there were a number of . . . Marxists in the program."

Teller reasserts an action marker of a different sort in [9] when he states that there were Marxists in "our" program. When the faculty

member refers to Marxists being in "our" program, he is reasserting that the responsibility for the name is as much "our" (that is, the department's) doing as "theirs" (the institute's), thus providing an example of a "group" action marker.

Yet there was not complete freedom of action, if we are to believe the next structural constraint marker, also in [9], since teller states that it was a *former* team name (a structural imposition from the past) which primarily influenced the choice of the present name (in turn [11], he says the name was "just an extension").

To conclude this action/constraint sequence, teller returns to an action marker in [15] when he says that the name "took on the character of the . . . class conflict within the Department. . . between us and the Institute folks." I identify this as an action marker, because it asserts individual capability (i.e., the ability to choose a name which *both organizations can live with*) largely due to the fact that neither organization can come up with a suitable reason to enforce its preferences in choosing the name.

The second sequence ([16] through [21]), includes a three-part action/constraint juxtaposition pattern, beginning in [16] with the teller reassessing what was said earlier in turn [9]. In [9] he specified an historical structural constraint on the team name ("Commie Cubs" leading to "Running Dogs of Empiricism"), but in [16] he allows that it may have been the other way around, so that the organizational constraint may not have been operational at all. Thus he begins this sequence with a rather indirect action marker.

But then teller follows up with a constraint marker in [16] by stating that the name is derived from the "communication Cubs" (so the name has to do with the field of study, and not with a person at all). The sequence concludes in [18] by returning to an action marker—"it was a . . . kind of double meaning"—which reasserts the possibility that the Chinese woman in [1] may have influenced the name after all. This final reference may be "neither fish nor fowl," in that it implies both kinds of markers, thus ending the sequence with a *coda*, or a linguistic device signifying an end to the narrative (Labov, 1972) which also performs a balancing function.

Yet, in spite of the patterned sequence of action/constraint markers in both versions of the story, and despite the fact that the stories are in no way incongruent (none of the "facts" in either story necessarily contradicts those in the other story), we sense that the tone of "Running Dogs 2" differs from that of "Running Dogs 1."

I suggest that at least one of the reasons for this difference may be the relative organizational sophistication and respective areas of interest of the two tellers. The teller of "Running Dogs 1" is a student of cultural studies, with a Marxist perspective, about to receive his Ph.D.; the teller of "Running Dogs 2," on the other hand, is a tenured faculty member of the speech communication department, a person of considerable

experience and reputation in the field, known for his bent toward quantitative research. If our central assumption is correct—that organizational story-talk reveals information about its teller's conversational defining of the organization—then there ought to be differences in the way these two tellers play out the action/constraint markers. And there are.

First, notice the difference in the *focus of interest*. One of the central concerns of the first teller (the purported philosophical clash between empiricism and Marxism which results in the compromise name referred to in turns [16] and [20]) is not even mentioned by the second teller. How do we get from "imperialism" to "empiricism"? Teller one specifies the link, while teller two ignores it.

What might this difference tell us about the organizational roles of these two individuals? We can deduce that the perspective of teller one (cultural studies/Marxism) is very different from the quantitative, functionalist viewpoint of teller two, and conclude that a *philosophical* divergence might be much more important to teller one. We might further speculate that the second teller, being more caught up in the details of his profession, simply does not consider a philosophical divergence to be a significant matter, compared with his considerably more sophisticated ideas about what these facts might mean to the functioning of his organization. Such professional concerns with structure usually manifest themselves at a later stage of organizational involvement, so one might deduce that the second teller has spent a longer time with the organization than the first.

Given the philosophical perspectives of the two tellers, one might also suppose that teller one might be more amenable to the Marxist idea that symbols are significant tools in the political process than teller two, whose main interest is in the more pragmatic organizational implications of such labels.

One could further unravel the organizational roles based on these interesting differences, but that would be belaboring a point which should now be clear: when we examine organizational story-talk, we are immersed in a very rich field which reveals much more than simply the "facts" of a story.

A second difference between the two tellers lies in the degree to which they are willing to *elaborate information about action and constraint*. Teller one is content to make relatively brief references, while teller two obviously possesses a more complex level of knowledge about organizations and uses it to elaborate several points, even those the auditor professes to understand.

At turn [4] in "Running Dogs 2," for instance, the interviewer acknowledges that he understands the reference to "running dogs of imperialism," and yet teller insists upon elaborating this point in turn [5] ("on . . . the Chinese mainland"), to which he again receives acknowledgment, followed by yet another elaboration in turn [7] ("following the

Maoist revolution"). This willingness to elaborate repeatedly is so marked that teller two even *re*-initiates the telling of the story (in turn [16]), in spite of the fact that the interviewer's laughter at turns [11], [13], and [15] demonstrate that he understands the joke. Teller specifies the play on words in turn [16] ("we were 'the Commie Cubs' as the 'Communication Cubs'").

Here again, we are presented with an extremely rich field when we speculate about the *organizational* reasons for this difference in presenting the action/structure pattern. The most obvious point is the relative status of the conversants. In "Running Dogs 1," the conversants are near equals, while in "Running Dogs 2," teller is in a noticeably more powerful position, speaking as he is to a student who is also his advisee. Thus, the tendency for teller two to lecture is accentuated by the context.

Another clue to organizational role difference, based on these tellers' willingness to elaborate, can be found in their respective degrees of knowledge about the organization. Teller one is no longer a member of the organization in which teller two is firmly entrenched, so that the information used by teller two to elaborate his points may be either unknown or uninteresting to teller one.

Let us turn now to a third story in which the conversants, as well as the characters who people the story, are of low status in their organization, and are humorously aware of this fact. Both the interviewer and respondent (storyteller) are Ph.D. students in the same academic department. This story is a fragment which occurred within an interview lasting approximately two hours. (Two of the central characters, [x] and [y], are married: the husband has a locked office, but the wife does not.)

#### Example #3: "The Final Indignity"

[2] R.: ( ), [x] and [y] were moving, they got the U-Haul and they went by [office number] first to clean out—I think it was just [x]'s office, maybe [y]'s too—but it seems like, if I can figure this out, they only cleaned his out. She didn't have a locked, I think she didn't have much there, but he had a lot of stuff there. So he gives her the keys to go and unlock the office, he's gonna park the truck or move=

[

[3] I.:

( ).

[4] R.: =I know, I think he was gonna get the, uh, the dolly upstairs or something. So then [z] and I and somebody else went back there and we opened the door and there were pieces of concrete that big blocks and just general debris all over his desk and a huge hole in the ceiling. Somebody had been working—was it the first floor or the second floor?—it might have been ( ) in the second floor they were working and stuff started falling down in there and I mean I dunno if they didn't know it was falling down in there or if they thought, you know it's just the basement or what. Anyway, he thought it was pretty funny, but [x], you know a goodbye gesture from the building.

The action/constraint pattern is fairly obvious in this story, playing itself out around a theme of relatively powerless organizational members attempting to leave their organization with at least some measure of



dignity and being opposed, not by a person or group, but by the building in whose depths they have toiled for years!

The first action marker can be seen in turn [2], as the story's main characters are preparing finally to end their sojourn as graduate students to take "real jobs." This is followed by a constraint marker, also in turn [2], as teller refers to the fact that the woman did not have a locked office, implying that, in regard to the building at least, some graduate students were worse off than others. Action is highlighted at the end of turn [2] ("he's gonna park the truck") and the beginning of turn [4] ("he was gonna get the . . . dolly upstairs"), but constraint is reimposed in turn [4] as the departing student finds debris all over his desk from the ceiling. There is even an amusing twist to end the story in turn [4], as teller offers a somewhat backhanded action marker ("I dunno if [the workers] didn't know it was falling or if they thought . . . it's just the basement"), suggesting that it was nothing personal, but then following that with a final constraint marker ("[it was] a goodbye gesture from the building"), so that the building really has the last word.

The tendency to resign oneself to what one cannot change is reflected clearly in "The Final Indignity," and there is a feeling of grudging affection for the organization which is found in neither "Running Dogs 1" (because the teller is no longer a member), nor in "Running Dogs 2" (because the teller is well-established in the organization).

In Example #4, which was gathered by method one and is hence not a verbatim transcript, three variants of a single story are presented, in turn, by a Master's student (M), a Ph.D. student (P), and a faculty member (F). These stories were written down and put aside long before analysis of the preceding three stories brought to light the presence of action/constraint markers. Thus, the analysis of this fragment is a reinterpretation of material obtained prior to the formulation of my central claim. The conversants have been talking about storytelling and trying to recall some "good ones."

#### Example #4: "The Chairman's Desk"

- [1] M.: Of course, you've heard the one about [the department chairman's] desk. At one point, early in the 1970's, it got so messy that security police called to tell him that his office had been ransacked by campus radicals.
- [2] P.: I heard it was the health department who called and complained it was a sanitation problem.
- [3] F.: Well, I heard that, when they finally did clean it off, they found a folder at the bottom of all the paper, with the label on it, "somebody's dissertation."

Notice the now-familiar pattern: (1) the assertion of a structural constraint on action (the chairman's, that is) in turn [1] (security policy calling the chairman to task), paired with (2) an action marker in the same turn, "...his office had apparently been ransacked by campus radicals . . ." (that is, by a group of people who are, at least potentially,

the speaker's peers), followed by (3) a reassertion of structural constraint at turn [2], in a slightly higher key, by reference to a violation of the sanitation code, and concluded by (4) a reassertion of the chairman's freedom of action, in that it is an unfortunate student who is (by agreement among the conversants) seemingly made the butt of a particularly cruel turn of events.

One could dismiss the playing out of the action/constraint pattern in this conversation as simply coincidence, occurring in this way because three people happened to be in possession of three variants of a common story which they happened to tell in this order. However, there is clear evidence that, far from being a felicitous juxtaposition of story fragments, a visible cadence, governed by relative status, appears to ordering this exchange. Why, for instance, did the faculty member introduce her variant at turn [3] with no comment at all about which of the graduate students has the "correct" version of who called the chairman? The faculty member gives assent to neither the "campus radical" nor the "sanitation code" version, but instead "trumps" the two students with a somewhat painfully funny punch-line about how powerless they are in the hands of the faculty.

The differential status among the participants may also be ordering the exchange by contributing to selective perception of the "facts" of the incident. As Edwards and Middleton (1986) report, "what we know, or can remember, is largely what we have experienced and shared with other people, including what we have been shown and told" (p. 423). "The Chairman's Desk" is a co-constructed account in this very sense. Why? Because the Ph.D. student's version of the story was not the only one he had heard: he knew the "campus radical" version, too, but that was not the one he had chosen to recall in this conversation. He brought into the exchange a *different* version, probably in order to "one-up" a junior colleague (the Master's student who spoke in turn [1]), only to be "one-upped" himself by the faculty member. In the presence of two people, one of whom had less status than he, but the other of whom had more, his version struck a balance between the initial depiction of an authority figure (the chairman) as relatively powerless in turn [1], to a co-constructed image of the same chairman as doubly powerful (having not only the freedom to ignore conventions about neatness, but also the fate of students in his hands) in turn [3].

Given this interpretation, it is not unusual that the action/constraint markers are placed as they are. This pattern reflects who has a stake in asserting authority. The Ph.D. student's authority lies in demonstrating more sophistication than a "mere Master's student," while the faculty member wants to prove that *no* student is very powerful.

In retelling the story twice since that incident, this Ph.D. student has acknowledged using the faculty member's punch-line (though he framed it in the context of the actual conversation), plus his own version of who called the chairman. Thus, his retelling serves as an

example of Edwards and Middleton's co-constructed account. The faculty member, presumably being privy to "inside" information (she says the story was told her *by* the chairman himself), is assumed to be an authoritative source, and so the "new" punchline is appropriated in the student's subsequent tellings to make a "hybrid" story whose modification is played out according to the differential status of its co-constructors.

Nor is this instance of action/constraint juxtaposition in organizational story-talk simply a one-shot occurrence, for *exactly* the same pattern, with two of the same participants, plays itself out again, later in this conversation, in a story I will call "Walking Out on the Big Guns." The speakers are the same Master's student (M) and the faculty member (F) who spoke in "The Chairman's Desk."

Example #5: "Walking Out on the Big Guns"

- [1] M.: There was this one student, and he got a question during his prelims that he couldn't answer, so he just walked out. His advisor went looking for him and found him at a bar and talked him into coming back and answering the question.
- [2] F.: There's a version of that at [university at which faculty member got her doctorate], except that the student came back, didn't answer the question satisfactorily and had to do it over later.

Once again, note the constraint/action/constraint/action pattern in [1] (couldn't answer question/walks out/is recalled by advisor/answers question), to which the faculty member feels compelled to assert a counter-story in which the conclusion is a *constraint* marker, demonstrating that the student gets away with nothing.

The final example of organizational story-talk is a story called "Casey at the Books," taken from the testimony of Oliver North before the Senate select committee investigating the Iran-*Contra* incident (*Taking the Stand*, 1987). Admittedly, the rules regulating interaction in such a context are somewhat different from those governing "ordinary" conversation; however, legal testimony, which relies almost entirely upon witness narrative to establish proof (Bennett & Feldman, 1981), assigns to the story much more evidentiary status than does perhaps any other form of discourse.

This story occurs in what at first seems to be a completely inappropriate place in the proceedings. North has been asked by special prosecutor Niels whether CIA Director William Casey knew of the plan to send money from the Iran arms deal to the Nicaraguan *Contras*. North's reply is, on its face, extremely tangential.

Example #6: "Casey at the Books"

- [1] Mr. Niels: Did you have other discussions with Director Casey on the subject of use of these arms sales proceeds for the *contras*?
- [2] Lt. Col. North: Yes, we did. Director Casey, who is very clear in my records of communications with him, is a man for whom I had enormous respect. I respected him as a—a man of incredible experience; probably the most

well-read man I have ever met and dealt with on a direct, face-to-face basis. I watched Director Casey, on trips when I'd travel with him, read an entire book in one plane flight.

In fact, on one occasion, he finished an entire book. As I recall, it was Paul Johnson's book, *Modern Times*, which is like this in paperback. And then I noticed he was working on the yellow legal pad as we were flying along. And I said, "What'd you do with the book?" He said, "I'm tired of reading, I've decided to write my own." and he'd finished Paul Johnson's book, which he then gave to me. (*Taking the Stand*, 1987:199)

In this story, the theme underlying the action/constraint pattern relates to the intellectual capacity of its chief character, William Casey. The relationship to organizational roles is more indirect here, since the constraints overcome by Casey presumably are not *directly* concerned with his position as CIA director. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the probable intent of the story is to clarify Casey's role.

The story proper begins with the phrase in turn [2], "In fact, on one occasion. . ." The action/constraint sequence starts with an action marker, the phrase "he finished an entire book." This is followed by a constraint marker describing the large size of the book ("which is like this in paperback"), which in turn is followed by an action marker (Casey is depicted as working on "the yellow legal pad"). Casey is shown acknowledging a further constraint ("I'm tired of reading"), which is immediately followed by an action marker ("I've decided to write my own").

Given that this story seems unresponsive to Nields' original question, we are justified in asking, "What is its function?" To answer this question, we must look at the organizational context that is the subject of this line of inquiry. At issue is whether or not Casey knew of the Iran-Nicaragua connection, and whether he had apprised the President of this information. North's testimony is concerned, in large part, with establishing the reliability of his own and others' recollections of the events. Therefore, his story about Casey is clearly framed to make the point that Casey had been fully competent when these events had taken place. Thus, the telling of this story is not beside the point at all. In fact, it may be one of the most persuasive ways for North to make his case.

North had a number of evidentiary options available to him at the time he told his story. In reply to Nields' question, he could have cited Casey's record in foreign affairs, referred him to others who knew and trusted Casey, or simply stated that he believed in Casey's competence and hoped they did, too. But the choice of a seemingly-unrelated story framed in the action/constraint pattern tells us not only about Casey—it also informs us about Oliver North.

When we look at the story as an indicator of North's organizational role in the affair, a great deal about the idealistic, "gung-ho" Colonel is explained. Under pressure of questioning in a high-profile government investigation, North chose to recall a relatively trivial incident.

The reason is that *this is exactly the kind of incident that would impress an Oliver North*. It is the kind of vivid, emotional narrative that North could internalize about the man at whose feet he had learned about covert operations, and whom he obviously worshipped as a hero. Casey's encouragement of North's tendency to make decisions based on a rather boyish naivete about world affairs was referenced by Daniel Schorr in his introduction to *Taking the Stand*:

The way North talked was the way the CIA's clandestine operations people used to talk before the agency was burned by Congressional investigations in the mid-1970s of assassination plots, illegal surveillance and drug experiments. Then the CIA grew up. It was, indeed, because the CIA had grown up that Casey found it difficult to get it to play his games. (*Taking the Stand*, 1987:xii)

But Casey had found a protege in Oliver North, someone who would stay with him and believe in the "old" CIA. Once again, the action/constraint pattern within organizational story-talk allows us to probe the seemingly inconsequential stream of conversation for evidence of how actors and organizations are co-constructing their identities.

#### DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has identified the action/constraint juxtaposition pattern in six story samples, obtained by three different methods, involving stories told by and about organizational members of widely varying status. I have demonstrated that these stories, when analyzed against the backdrop of the action/constraint pattern, reveal valuable information about the storytellers, the story's characters, and the story's auditors.

One point which I have not discussed in detail is the presence of the underlying theme upon which the action/constraint juxtapositions pivot. In "Running Dogs 1," the theme concerns whether teller has achieved anything individually; in "Running Dogs 2," whether or not the team was named after a particular person; in "The Final Indignity," whether the characters can depart their organization unscathed; in "The Chairman's Desk" and "Walking Out on the Big Guns," the question of who has the power; and in "Casey at the Books," the capability of a key organizational member. Obviously, without identifying these themes, there is little value in specifying action and constraint markers. I also admit that the themes I have used to make sense of the stories emerge from my reading of them, which is to say both that other researchers may identify a different theme, and that a story may simultaneously display more than one theme.

Students of literature have known of this multiplicity of frames of reference for some time; however, this obvious fact has, with very few exceptions, escaped the notice of organizational story researchers who continue to write of organizational stories as if each represents a single "type," as in the "Is the Big Boss Human?" story (Martin et al., 1983). I believe that projects such as the present one can help foster aware-

ness of human interaction in the co-construction of organizational stories.

Some might object that this study has only found in stories what was already known from other sources. However, the purpose of this research is just this accomplishment. Having answered the question of *whether* analyzing organizational story-talk reveals accurate information about how tellers see the organizational roles of themselves and others, we are in a position to move to the more difficult task of using the story-talk as the primary source of information.

This research strategy should prove valuable to organizational communication research, which has only comparatively recently evolved from its simplistic notions about linear forms of communication to a realization that organizational actors occupy a complex social field whose description is only crudely approximated through quantitative methods. Yet, despite this broadening of perspective, organizational communication scholars have virtually refused to look at the *act* of discourse in the workplace, focusing instead upon the information content of messages, characteristics of communication channels, and so forth. Research on stories has, in particular, suffered from this unfortunate narrowing of perspective.

Ultimately, I envision that organizational actors, especially managers, will be trained in discourse analysis. Most people who work with others practice a form of discourse analysis, crude and unscientific though it may be. Why, then, can we not train organizational actors as competent analysts of human talk? Employees trained in such a manner would be alert to subtle nuances in the organizational environment, its culture, and its climate. Most importantly, the employee cued to the subtleties of discourse would be highly aware of the element which is perhaps more important to organizational success than any other: the *quality* of personal relationships.

Beyond these pragmatic considerations lies the broader question of whether the action/constraint pattern is characteristic of other forms of human discourse. In this regard, it might be worth noting that the action/constraint pattern was first suggested to me by analyses of how writers plot fiction: they "set up" obstacles for their characters to triumph over, only to have them encounter other obstacles which they conquer in turn. Perhaps, in telling stories about organizations (the most obvious and ubiquitous form of social constraint for most adults), we become "conversational novelists," maintaining interest by keeping up the suspense of whether we or the organization will triumph in the end.

Many other forms of common discourse also conform to the action/constraint pattern. For example, when we teach our students how to write a "problem-solution" or a "criteria-satisfaction" speech, aren't we telling them to first define the constraints, and then to demonstrate how they will act to conquer them? It may be that acting and constraint comprise the essential dialectical tension which defines human existence,

and that organizational story-talk is merely one manifestation of this tension.

Before we can think on this scale, however, we must (1) find ways of identifying and classifying the manifold guises of organizational discourse (of which story-talk is but a single expression); (2) develop methods which will allow us to gather organizational discourse accurately and unobtrusively, yet without intruding upon employee privacy; (3) develop coding systems which will enable us consistently and accurately to describe organizational discourse; and (4) summarize the multiple streams of research which inform discourse analysis, as well as the literature on interaction in organizations, with the ultimate aim of describing a sound theoretical framework from which to launch multiple programs of research. This will not be an easy task, but by pursuing it, we will not only come to a more realistic understanding of the organizations of which we are members, but of ourselves as communicators whose complexity demands theories which are sufficiently sophisticated to account for the ways we link self and organization.

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