

"You Gotta Know How to Tell a Story": Telling, Tales, and Tellers in American and Israeli Narrative Events at Dinner

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**“You gotta know how to tell a story”:  
Telling, tales, and tellers in American  
and Israeli narrative events at dinner**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the degree of cultural diversity in the dinner-table conversation narrative events of eight middle-class Jewish-American and eight Israeli families, matched on family constellation. Conceptualized in terms of a threefold framework of telling, tales, and tellers, the analysis reveals both shared and unshared narrative event properties. Narrative events unfold in both groups in similar patterns with respect to multiple participation in the telling, the prevalence of personal experience tales, and the respect for children’s story-telling rights. Yet cultural styles come to the fore in regard to each realm as well as their interrelations. American families locate tales outside the home but close in time, ritualizing recounts of “today”; Israeli families favor tales more distant in time but closer to home. While most narratives foreground individual selves, Israeli families are more likely to recount shared events that center around the family “us” as protagonist. In modes of telling, American families claim access to story ownership through familiarity with the tale, celebrating monologic performances; but in Israeli families, ownership is achievable through polyphonic participation in the telling. (Ethnography of communication, language and culture, conversation analysis, folklore, narrative)\*

Story-telling in ordinary talk between intimates is one of the most common enactments of narrative discourse. We tell stories to each other as a means of packaging experience in cognitively and affectively coherent ways (Labov & Fanshel 1977, Sacks 1974), or in the terms of Bruner 1990, as a way to test the borderlines between the exceptional and ordinary. Fisher 1987 considers the narrativization of experience a basic human need; the essential nature of human beings is captured by the metaphor of man as *homo narrans*. Extending Kenneth Burke’s definition of man as a symbol-making and symbol-using animal, Fisher proposes an all-encompassing definition for the role of narratives (63):

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The idea of human beings as storytellers posits the generic form of all symbol composition. It holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one's life.<sup>1</sup>

Although the narrative use of language, as insisted by Hymes 1982, is a universal function, such use can be expected to vary culturally as do other ways of speaking. Indeed, oral narrative styles vary by culture for both adults and children, as shown both by work adopting a cross-cultural perspective (e.g. Scollon & Scollon 1981, Tannen 1980) and by comparative studies in the context of language socialization (e.g. Heath 1983, Schieffelin & Ochs 1986). My goal here is to apply a culturally sensitive analysis to narratives told in the course of dinner-table conversations in middle- to upper-class Jewish-American and Israeli families. To apply such an analysis, we need first to understand the nature of the narrative event in question.

Conversational story-telling can be looked at from a social-interactionist position, as interaction, with a focus on how the narrative emerges in its context, and/or as discourse, with a focus on the textual end product abstractable from the context. The first approach is represented by work on conversational story-telling from the perspectives of both ethnomethodology (e.g. Jefferson 1978, Sacks 1974) and discourse analysis (Polanyi 1989, Schiffrin 1984, Tannen 1984); such work shows the manner in which the structure of oral narratives is conversationally accomplished. Particularly relevant here are studies focusing on narratives during family dinner-table conversations (Erickson 1982, 1988; Ochs et al. 1989; Ochs et al. 1992). A complementary, rich source of information on this dimension is provided by studies in folklore that highlight the poetic and social interactional aspects of performance (Bauman 1986, Briggs 1988, Hymes 1981, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1975, Shuman 1986). By contrast, the discourse approach is best illustrated by Labov's influential work (Labov & Fanshel 1977, Labov & Waletzky 1967), which unveils the structural coherence of seemingly chaotic conversational renderings of personal experience.

The narrative events examined here, performed by both adults and children, function as crucial socializing contexts for family interaction in general, as claimed by Bernstein 1971. Hence a further perspective that needs to be added is cross-cultural variation in practices of narrative socialization, as suggested by cross-cultural and cross-ethnic studies of language socialization (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992, Heath 1983, Miller et al. 1990, Schieffelin & Ochs 1986).

Yet none of these approaches on its own captures the unique nature of family narratives. We need an approach that accounts simultaneously for

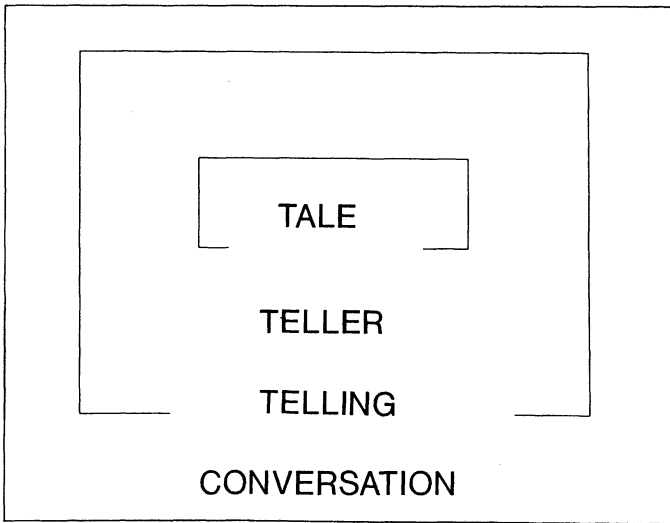


FIGURE 1: Dimensions of narrativity.

family story-telling as an event, a social action unfolding in real time, as well as (at the discourse level) a text about other events. The links and transitions between these two realms are provided by performer/tellers. Dinner-table narrative events are unique: they represent a three-way intersection of the act of narration, the textual content and form of the narrative, and the persons responsible. Taking all three dimensions together, narratives become *narrative events*.<sup>2</sup> Like other speech events, narrative events have their specific norms governing the scene, participation rights, message content, message form, and rules of interpretation (Hymes 1974:55-8). In narrative events, these features can be seen as subsumed under three dimensions of narrativity: telling (narration), tales (narratives), and tellers (narrators). In oral story-telling, the realm of telling is embedded (in an open-ended fashion) in the realm of conversation, and the realm of tales within that of telling, as depicted in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

Telling is the act of narrating in real time, the actual performance of a story before an audience. In the terms of Goffman (1981:144-5), telling is enacted by the role of the speaker as *Animator*, the one responsible for the sounds that make intelligible speech come into being. The central issue of performance in family narratives is a social-interactional one: who participates in whose stories, and how. To narrate “is to make a bid for power” (Toolan 1988:6); entering the telling mode in the family context raises the issues of narrative participation rights. Even when such rights are assumed

by virtue of social role in the family, as with parents, they still need to be renegotiated conversationally on each specific occasion (Jefferson 1978, Polanyi 1989, Polss 1990). For children, both participation rights and modes of story entry remain goals to be achieved with some difficulty. The division of telling-space may vary by role in the family (children vs. adults) as well as by role and culture, as when children in one culture are granted storytelling rights over and beyond their rights in another. Cultures also may differ in the framing of transitions from the realm of conversation to the realm of telling, as well as in the importance of the telling with relation to the tales.

*Tale* is the stuff from which narratives are made. The term refers to the two dimensions of narrative captured in the poetics of narrative fiction by the distinction of *fabula* vs. *sjuzet* (in the Russian formalists' terms) or *story* vs. *narrative* (Rimmon-Keenan 1983). The *fabula* or the *story* of narratives "designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events" (Rimmon-Keenan, 3). In other words, in experience-based narratives, the *fabula* consists of the real-world building blocks used for the construction of the story. The *sjuzet*, on the other hand, relates to the way in which the story is shaped in the making: the "spoken or written discourse that undertakes the telling." In the actual discourse, events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, and content is filtered through some perspective, sometimes called a "focalizer" (Rimmon-Keenan, 74). It is the responsibility of the *Author* (Goffman 1981:144-5) to select the words in which the *fabula* is encoded in a way that is still retrievable for the audience. Cross-cultural variation in *fabula* choice may be expressed in spatio-temporal orientation of narrative plots (e.g. recent vs. not-recent past) or in the type of protagonists that are foregrounded (self vs. other). However, cultural attitudes to children about the way they are telling a story. As one father told his son, who failed to give a convincing performance of a joke learned from the father, "You gotta know how to tell a story."

*Tellers* (performers) may or may not be the persons accountable for the story. This is the role called the *Principal* by Goffman (1981:144-5): the one committed to what the words say. In personal narratives, all three speaker roles (principal, author, and animator) can merge into one. In a personal narrative, it is the Principal who has actually experienced the events recounted and claims authorship for the narrative, acting also as Animator. But more generally, and especially when children are involved, the three speaker roles may be realized by different speakers. A mother who repeats to the father a story of personal experience, recounted to her earlier by her child, may act only as Animator (if she quotes verbatim); or she may take authorship rights, if she edits the child's version. In either case, the child remains the principal for the story. From a cross-cultural perspective, the relation of tellers to

telling and tale raises issues of authorship vs. performance: How is authorship emically defined? Who, in each culture, is entitled to tell whose stories?

#### BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The database for the study consists of 264 narrative events that occurred during two dinner-table conversations with eight middle-class Jewish-American and eight Israeli families.<sup>4</sup> All Jewish-American families were residents of the Boston area; all Israeli families lived at the time in Jerusalem. The narrative events were examined as part of a larger project investigating the pragmatic socialization of children in the presence of a member of the research team who came from the same cultural background as the family. Following initial contacts by phone, the observer visited the home and got acquainted with the family prior to recordings. The same observer stayed with the family throughout the research period. The families were told that we were interested in comparing Israeli to American family dinners, and they were provided with details when interested. The observers were invited to join the families for dinner as a matter of course. Hence the situation in which we are comparing the groups is that of families interacting with a semi-official guest. As will be discussed later, interaction with the observer proceeded differently in the two groups, revealing a cultural difference in this mode of family self-presentation. All families participating in the project came originally from a European background (mainly from Russia and Poland) and hence share a Jewish Eastern-European heritage. The parent generations are native-born American or native-born Israeli. The American and Israeli families were matched for number and ages of children.

#### *Segmentation and coding*

*Narrative events* were defined broadly as conversations that recapitulate past events. Since the perception of what constitutes a narrative may well differ from children to adults, or across cultures, we deliberately avoided imposing further structural criteria on tales (e.g. number of events mentioned).<sup>5</sup> The segments extracted from full transcripts of the dinner conversations vary in length from brief exchanges, of a few seconds, to long elaborated happenings, of up to 10 minutes. Boundaries of the segments were decided textually, in agreement among three analysts, on the basis of transition markers signaling entrances and exits from the telling realm. Analysis of the texts proceeded by a set of quantifiable coding categories, designed to capture variation on each dimension of narrativity. The categories used and the findings from the coding are integrated into the discussion.

In the following I address the degree of cultural diversity between Jewish-Americans and Israelis in their attitudes toward telling, tales, and tellers in family narrative events. I argue that, considered from this threefold frame-

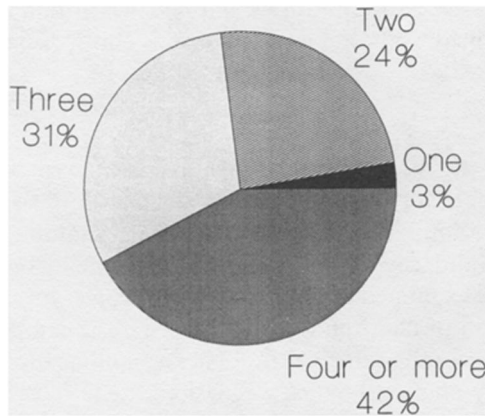


FIGURE 2: Number of participants in narrative events.

work, family narrative events of the two groups share certain features attributable to the speech event in which they are embedded. Yet the groups differ culturally in the structuring of each dimension of narrativity, and in the relative importance granted to each: Jewish-American narrative events foreground tellers and the act of telling, while Israeli narrative events prefer to focus on tales and tellers. The argument is developed as follows: the degree of cultural diversity is discussed, first, in terms of the division of narrative space between members of the family and styles of story initiation; second, in terms of the spatio-temporal orientation of tales, and the degree of conventionalization in the transformation of tales into telling; and third, in terms of the relationships between ownership of the tale and participation in the telling.

#### ISSUES OF TELLING

##### *Gaining access to narrative-space: Children and adults*

Family dinner-table narratives tend to be jointly constructed affairs (Erickson 1988, Ochs et al. 1989). In our case, collaboration takes several forms: stories are co-narrated, constructed through question/answer sequences, or told with sporadic but meaningful contributions from an active audience. In all these, telling is shared by several members of the family, sometimes including the observer. Collaborative process is at work in both Israeli and American narrative events: in almost half of the narratives, more than four members participate. By contrast, less than 5% are performed by just one participant; see Figure 2. What these numbers mask, though, are cultural

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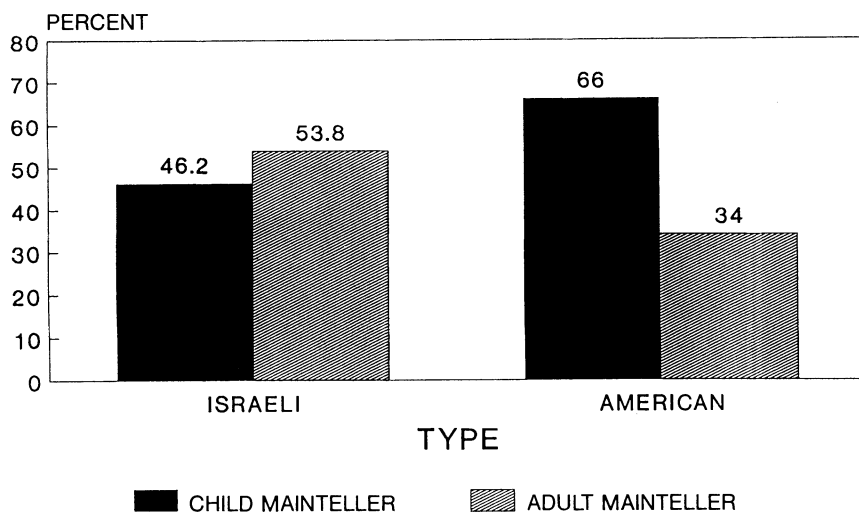


FIGURE 3: Maintellers: division of telling space.

styles of participation; as will be shown, Israeli and Jewish-American families differ greatly in the way they draw lines of demarcation between *teller(s)* and *audience*.

Israeli and American families differ in their attitudes toward the division of telling-space, as well as in members' modes of participation in narrative events. Consider attitudes toward the division of telling-space between adults and children. In both groups, dinner time is perceived as a prime occasion for spotlighting children as narrators. To reveal attitudes toward children, we first divided narrative events in terms of identity of the predominant *mainteller(s)*, as either *child* (or children) or *adult(s)*; see Figure 3. In a further analysis, we identified the *initiator* of the narrative event by role in the family as *child*, *father*, *mother*, or *observer*; see Figure 4.

The degree to which children are considered conversational partners in adult company is noteworthy across the two cultures. In discussing determinants of cultural variability in conversation, Schieffelin & Eisenberg (1984: 382) note:

Cultures vary along a continuum ranging from societies in which children are not allowed or expected to talk to adults or strangers and/or are not thought of as co-conversationalists to those in which children are actively encouraged to talk to adults, who in turn support this interaction and try to understand it. In some societies adults think it is important to elicit speech from children, socializing them in terms of production and interaction skills (e.g., Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, white middle-class Amer-



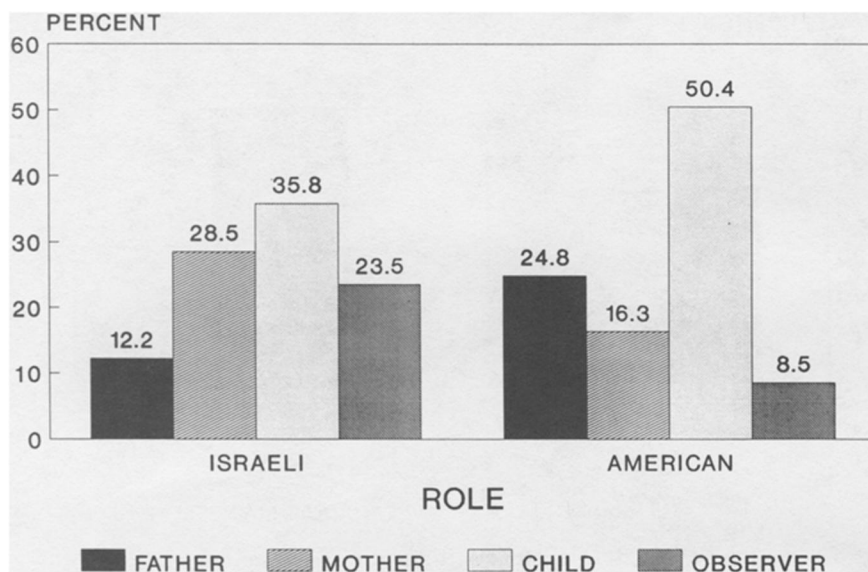


FIGURE 4: Narrative initiation.

ican); but in other cultures children are encouraged to be quiet and speak only when spoken to (e.g., rural Louisiana Blacks, Luo in Kenya).

We found that, across the two groups, children take up 42% of all narrative space (see Fig. 3). The case of the middle-class families studied here well exemplifies a cultural pattern which treats children as rightful co-conversationalists; in both the Jewish-American and Israeli families, children around the dinner table share, in the terms of Goffman (1981:131-2), an official status as *ratified* participants.<sup>6</sup> The pattern is most salient in the American families (see Fig. 3). American children act as maintellers in 66% of all narrative events, leaving the adults as maintellers of 34%. But the adults in the Israeli families take up a much higher proportion of narrative space, playing the dominant role in 54% of narrative events. In line with the overall attitude toward the division of narrative space between adults and children, American children are also more active story-initiators (by 15%) than Israeli children.

This difference points to a cultural distinction in modes of narrative socialization at dinner. Notions of tellability and cultural styles of telling are acquired by children both by engaging in the telling and by being exposed to stories told by others. The American families tend to emphasize socialization by allowing for the display of narrative practice; but in the Israeli families, children are given a higher chance to act as active (or non-active) story recipients.

This does not necessarily mean that Israeli children engage generally in less display of narrative than do American children; stories may be told by children at other points during the day, to siblings or one parent. But it does mean that dinner-table conversations, where both adults and children jointly participate, are perceived by the American families as an occasion to focus on the children as narrators; in the Israeli families, narrative space is divided between adults and children. From the children's point of view, different gains are involved in each practice. Being encouraged to tell stories may be important in developing confidence in performing rights and the skills of narration (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992); however, acting as primary or even secondary audience to adult stories allows access to the experience of significant others, thereby expanding the bases for identification (Miller et al. 1990) and shaping cultural notions of tellability or *reportability* (cf. Hymes 1981).<sup>7</sup>

*Narrative initiation: Insiders and outsiders, women and men*

Adult roles also are differently distributed across the two groups, most notably in regard to the observer. Observers in the Israeli families initiate 15% more narrative events than do the observers in the American families (see Fig. 4). In other words, the observers in the Israeli families seem much more confident in their story-telling rights than their American counterparts. Or, as suggested by Deborah Tannen (personal communication), the Americans may have different ideas about their *obligations*, rather than their rights: with their scientific tradition of "objectivity" in social science, perhaps they feel it incumbent upon them not to participate any more than necessary. This result ties in with other observations on the relations between observers and families in the two groups.

In both groups, observers (with one exception) were invited to join the dinner table as a matter of course; but the nature of their interaction with the family differed in key, and consequently in rules of interaction. In terms of the continuum of formality proposed by Irvine 1979, the generally prevailing key of family discourse (because of intimacy among participants) is that of informality. Yet there are differences of degree between the two groups: Israelis seem to celebrate the outermost informal end of the continuum. Consequently, observers are drawn into the circle of conversation from the onset, and interact with all family members, not only in the role of familiar guests but rather as actual or potential friends. This is in line with the ethos of solidarity in Israeli culture, which tends to symbolically minimize social distance (Blum-Kulka et al. 1985, Katriel 1986). One of the privileges granted to friends is that of both self-directed and other-directed narrative initiation. Observers in the Israeli families accordingly share initiation almost equally with other members present.

Being a familiar guest at the American family's somewhat more formal dinner table does not bestow on the observer the privileges granted to friends;

though partaking in the interaction, the observer does so cautiously, under the rules of interaction governing communication between nonintimates. Not being overtly active in narrative initiation is one way in which such caution is exercised. Hence it is not surprising to find that observers in the American families are engaged in less than 10% of story initiations.

Another difference between Israelis and Americans is in the relative parts played by mothers vs. fathers in narrative initiation. In the Israeli families, mothers have twice as many initiations; in the American families, fathers play a slightly more active role. This finding is in line with general patterns of participation rates in dinner-table talk. Following the categories proposed by Bublitz 1988 for topical action, we have analyzed the proportional role of fathers vs. mothers as topic initiators throughout the entire conversation: out of 47 parent-introduced topics, Israeli mothers introduced 76.5%; but out of 67 parent-introduced topics in the American families, fathers introduced 66%.

One reason for these findings may be the American perception of the occasion as having formal overtones because of the presence of the observer. Though the serving of food is accomplished mostly by the mothers, the fathers in these families take it upon themselves to *entertain the guest*, e.g. to introduce topics and to use narratives to keep the conversation going. By contrast, in the Israeli families, the mothers seem to take charge of the event, both in instrumental terms (here too it is mostly the women who serve the food) and by keeping the conversation going.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Styles of narrative initiation*

The solidarity ethos of Israeli society, as manifested in attitudes toward the observer, finds further expression in styles of narrative-event initiation. Consider story entry. In an independent study of the same corpora, Polss 1990 has analyzed in detail the types of devices used by initiators and story recipients in the course of story-entry talk. Germane to the discussion of attitudes toward telling is her analysis of the types of devices used in responsive utterances. Following Tannen's distinction (1984, 1985, 1989) between *high-involvement* and *high-considerateness* conversational styles, Polss distinguishes between high-involvement and low-involvement narrative response strategies.

High-involvement responses focus on the tale and the teller; in Tannen's terms, they show active "participatory listenership" (1984:30). These include devices such as request for information, confirmation of information, and listener contribution to the narrative. Low-involvement responses focus on the telling; they signal message reception, thereby confirming the teller's success in aligning story-recipients. These include different types of *uptakers* (Edmondson & House 1981:62-3), e.g. neutral back-channeling responses

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(*mhmm, uhuh, yeah, right, okay, etc.*) and emotively colored ones (*really?, good, for heaven's sake*).

Polss found interactive, high-involvement style more characteristic of story entry in Israel than in America: the proportion of high to low involvement styles is 82% to 18% in the Israeli narratives, compared to 69% to 31% in the American stories. Thus Israeli story-opening exhibits a higher emphasis on coparticipation and demonstration of personal involvement. Israeli coparticipants frequently interpret story-initiator information, showing their concern with tale and teller.

- (1) Israeli family 7: The conversation takes place as the family is getting ready to sit down at the table. Present also are the daughter (16) and the two sons (12 and 10).<sup>9</sup>
- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Observer: <i>etmol hayinu [//] hayiti ecel pnina ve + . . .</i> | Yesterday we were [//] I was at the home of Pnina and + . . . |
| 2 | Mother: <i>ve-cvika?</i>  | And Cvika?  |
|   | Observer: <i>ve-cvika ken.</i>                                  | And Cvika, yes.   |
|   | Mother: <i>nu # ve-ex halax?</i>                                | So how did it go?   |
|   | Observer: <i>haya meod nexmad.</i>                              | It was very nice.   |
|   | [Story]   |   |

The fast rate of speech, lack of interturn pauses, and dialogic unfolding of this story entry places it high on the involvement continuum. The story recipient's high engagement can further be seen by her use of what Tannen (1984:118) calls "cooperative promptings" at every turn (e.g., "So how did it go?") Americans, by contrast, exhibit less relative focus on interpersonal involvement, devoting their efforts to floor-management tasks aimed at securing the telling.

- (2) American family 2: The children are Martin (8m), Daniel (6m), and Tamara (4f). The conversation takes place in the middle of dinner.
- Martin: My best friend got about + . . .
- Observer: You see me and my best friend were studying *rockets?*
- Observer: Uhuh.
- [Story]

The shared features noted here are high degrees of collaboration and of inclusion of children in narrative events. Cultural diversity is revealed in attitudes toward tellers – the question of who participates – and in styles of story entry. This trend for cultural diversity of a gradient nature, against a background of shared orientations, is also noticeable in attitudes toward tales.

TRANSFORMING TALES TO TELLING

*Cultural variation in spatio-temporal orientation of tales*

Where do tellers find the tales for constructing narratives at dinnertime? Certainly not in fiction; the vast majority of narratives in both groups (90%) are derived from real-life experience. In predominantly adult narratives, fictional topics do not exceed 4%.

In child-involved narratives, fiction does play a role (14%). Israeli children mention fictional characters from story books (Aladdin is one) and tell the contents of movies and books. American children talk about fictional characters from television: Sesame Street, Bugs Bunny, etc.

We have analyzed spatio-temporal framing by coding the two dimensions independently. First, since our definition of narratives included only stories of the past (see Ochs et al. 1989 for a different notion of temporal framing in family narratives), we distinguished narratives by temporal reference, including *today* ("I finished my assignment today in um and . . ."), *recent past* ("I met an interesting man on the beach last week"; "Last night Debbie . . ."), or *distant past* ("that happened about five years ago.") Cases which were either timeless (such as jokes and fiction), or lacking in cues for reliable assignment to a "recent" or "distant" time frame, were excluded from this analysis, leaving a corpus of 195 clearly time-framed marked narrative events (out of 264). Second, we defined narrative spatial orientation as geared either toward the *home*, the *world of school and/or work*, or any other location in the *world*. For example, a narrative about how the substitute teacher behaved that day is considered a "today/school" narrative, a visit to the museum last week is a "recent-past/world" story, and a teenager's early childhood memory about a family pet is a "distant-past/home" story.

In terms of their spatio-temporal framing, family dinner narratives defy the expectations of literary critics. Toolan (1988:1-2) defines narratives as "a recounting of things spatio-temporally distant." This might be true for fictional narratives; but most family narratives are definitely not temporally, and only partially spatially, remote from tellers and audience. Considered together for both groups, the majority of temporally marked narratives (63%) concern events of the very recent past – today, yesterday, or last week – leaving 42% to focus on events from the distant past ( $n = 195$ ); see "Past 1" and "Past 2" in Figure 5. In terms of location, half the narratives analyzed fall into the third group, being located in the world. A third concern school or work, with the rest (12%) being located in the homes; see Figure 6.

Within this general framework, however, we find cross-cultural preferences. The distribution by story time in Israeli and American narratives shows that story time is very different in the two groups (Fig. 5). The most striking difference is revealed in regard to the "today" frame: in the American families, almost half the time-marked narratives focus on *today* (46%). Telling about the happenings of the day thus stands out as the most important single time frame for American narratives. By contrast, in Israeli narratives, "today" stories take up only one-quarter of narrative space (24%). For Israelis, the recent and nonrecent past are the preferred time frames, taking up over three-quarters of narrative space (76%). The difference lies in general preference for time frames, not in choice of topics within the frames

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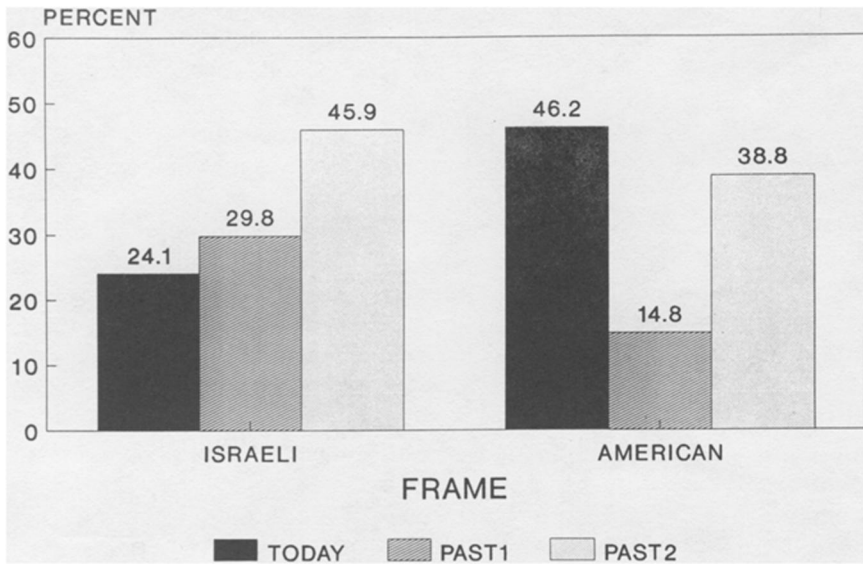


FIGURE 5: Temporal tale frames.

chosen. For example, for both Americans and Israelis, stories of the distant past cover a rich variety of topics. These include a series of humorous anecdotes about house painters that the family employed over the years, the story of an exceptional shopping expedition, several camping and travel stories, and anecdotes from the children's earlier years.

Cultural preferences for the tale's spatial frame are revealed in the choices of home orientation vs. school or work orientation (see Fig. 6). For both groups, about half the narratives are world-oriented, concerning spatial frames such as museums, camping grounds, or shopping malls. But Israeli narratives are markedly more home-oriented than American. In a considerable proportion of Israeli narratives (20%), the locus of the tale is at the home; by contrast, home stories are quite rare (6%) in the American corpus. The Israeli home stories include stories about birthday celebrations, family pets, grandparents visiting, or specific incidents that link the world and the home, such as the story of a mother's anxiety on coming home and not finding her two (early teen) sons there when she expected them.

An interesting corollary to Israeli home orientation is provided by analysis of the types of protagonists foregrounded in family narratives (Figure 7). We have divided protagonists as *self*, *other*, or *us*. For both Israelis and Americans, attention is divided almost equally between stories that involve the self as protagonist and those concerning others. The prominence of the self as protagonist is not surprising, given that family dinners provide a

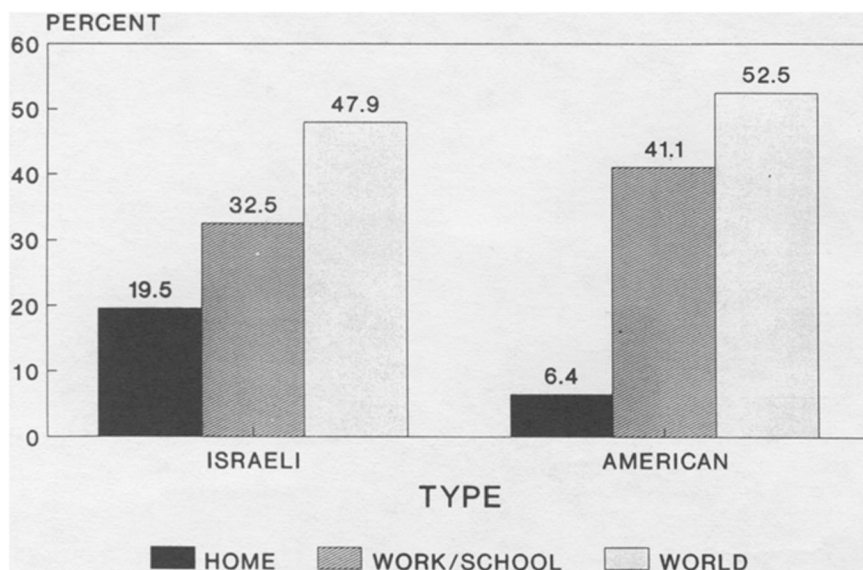


FIGURE 6: Spatial tale frames.

unique opportunity for each member to use the narrative mode for raising issues of personal concern before a presumably supportive audience. Stories about others often involve the self too, e.g. the self as critical observer, as when the narrative concerns a teenager recounting an incident between the teacher and another student. The third category, “us stories,” are quite rare in both groups; but they are more likely to appear in the Israeli narratives than the American. Furthermore, the nine Israeli “us narrative” events are rather long and elaborated happenings, lasting up to seven to eight minutes each, while the two American “us narrative” events are much shorter (3–4 minutes) and less elaborated.

We have seen that the groups differ culturally on the dimensions of spatio-temporality. For the Americans, the process of transformation from tales of today to the actual telling is enacted in a culturally specific, ritualistic way that is unparalleled in the Israeli narrative events.

*“Today” rituals: Who will I tell how my day goes?*

In an imitation of domesticity, a call girl in an American movie from 1990 (*Pretty Woman*) greets her customer with “How was your day, dear?” But judging by our dinner-table conversations, this conventional query functions socially in much richer ways than merely a sign of wifely concern. Narratives about the day’s happening figure in both Israeli and American dinner-table

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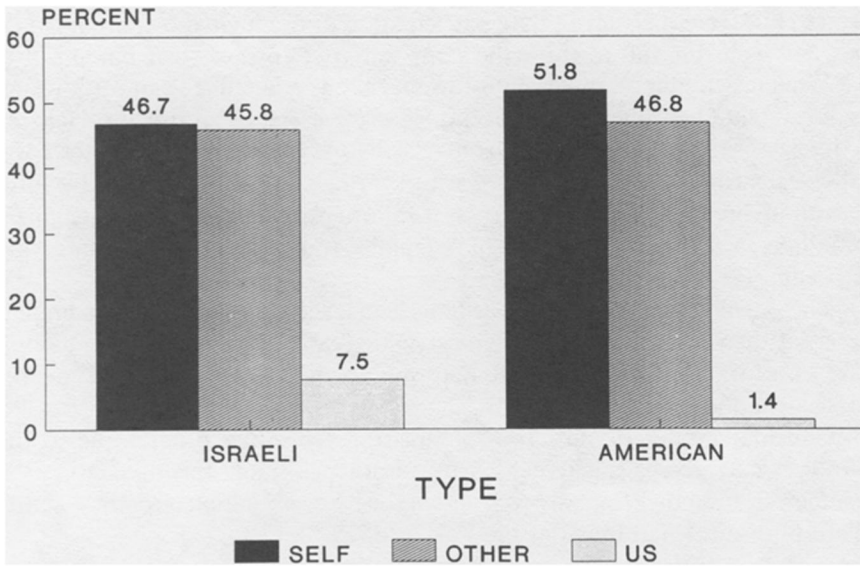


FIGURE 7: Tale protagonists.

talk, but it is only in the American families that such narrative events take on the features of a proper interaction ritual (Goffman 1976). “Today” narratives seem to combine three ritualistic features: the recurrent nature of the activity type, and the role expectations that it entails; the formulaic, repetitive language of the opening phase; and the ritual constraints governing the type of conversational contribution expected.

As an activity type, “today” narratives resemble early childhood *formats of interaction*, which are “standardized . . . interaction patterns between adult and infant that contain demarcated roles and eventually become reversible” (J. Bruner 1983:120). Within the family context, the roles of demarcation cut across *insiders* and *outsiders*: thus the observer at the family dinner table has in this case no participation rights, never asks (and is not being asked) about other’s or his/her own day. This is not surprising, given that “today” rituals, like early childhood interaction formats, are based on a very high level of shared assumptions of both a cognitive and an affective nature. Members of the family have basic cognitive scripts about each other’s activities during the day, and they act on the assumption that deviations from such scripts (the stuff narratives are made of) are a matter of mutual interest and concern.

Theoretically, within the family circle, all members have reciprocal rights and duties to participate; but in practice, reciprocity is limited to spouses,



since children either self-initiate participation or are invited by parents to do so, but as a rule fail to show the same initiative toward their parents.

Whereas childhood interaction formats act as a language acquisition support system (J. Bruner 1983), “today” narratives act as a critical socializing context for the acquisition of narrative skills. As the analysis of the texts will show, the ritual can be performed with varying degrees of success. The processes involved in causes of success or failure provide contexts of socialization in regard both to the choice of acceptable topics and to appropriate ways of telling.

The opening phase of “today” rituals is marked by clear discourse boundaries at the point of initiation. The stylistic features of the opening gambit are of a formulaic and repetitive nature, allowing for only a limited degree of lexical and syntactic variation.

Consider modes of initiation. Transition from any other topic to the “today” narrative is enacted either by an other-initiated formulaic question (some variation on *How was your day?*), or by a self-initiated *today + action verb* phrase (“I had lunch at the Parka today.”).

- (3) American family 6: The children are Andrew (10m), Jessica (8f), and Joshua (3m). This “today” story is the first, to be followed by several others at the same meal.

- 1 Father: Jessie, how was your day? ←
- 2 Joshua: Ooooh aaah ←
- 3 Mother: What was the best part of your day, Jessie? ←
- 4 Jessica: After lunch.
- 5 Joshua: I get xxx
- 6 Jessica: xxx
- 7 Father: You were out playing in the rain.
- 8 Jessica: Uh-huh. [=! affirmative]
- 9 Mother: Do you have your templates, Jessie?
- 10 Jessica: xxx
- 11 Father: [=! talking to Andrew] Really? What happened after lunch? You left for the beach yesterday?

The transition from the previous topic is often minimally marked by the use of a discourse marker (cf. Schiffrin 1987), e.g. *so*.

- (4) American family 2: Present are also the children: Daniel (6m), Marvin (8m), and Tamara (3f).

- 1 Father: So, Tamara, what did you do today? ←
- 2 Mother: <xx help yourself> [>]
- 3 Father: <What’d you do today, Tamara?> [<]  
End@

- (5) American family 7: The children are Aaron (9.5m) and Abigail (7f).

- 1 Mother: So what did you accomplish today? ←
- 2 Father: xxx
- 3 Aaron: Uh, uh.
- 4 Father: Yes
- 5 Mother: Yes [= laughing]
- 6 Father: Well #  
[Story]

The salience of the ritual becomes particularly evident through self-nomination. The right for telling your day is implicitly felt to be equally shared, as voiced by 4-year-old Sandra. With no preliminaries, Sandra at some point in the middle of the dinner turns to her mother and asks a question.

- (6) American family 4: The children are Jordan (7.5m) and Sandra (4f). Sandra's initiation takes place half an hour into the dinner.
- 1 Sandra: Mommy to who will I tell how my day goes? ←
  - 2 Mother: OK let's hear your day.
  - 3 Sandra: Well # I xxx played puzzles xxx I made xxx [continued]

Sandra's question shows that she is already aware of her rights for displaying her day, and moreover that she offers her day as a gift to be received. It is the duty of her family to appoint a receiver for the gift; and indeed, her mother acknowledges the gift, accepting it on behalf of all present (*Okay, let's hear your day*), thereby giving the signal for the ritual to begin. In other words, the ritual requirement in the case of self-nomination is for recipients to display positive acceptance – not only yielding the floor for the teller, as is the case in all narratives, but also paying homage to the specific offering made.

In other-initiated narratives, the opening gambit creates a slot that the recipient is expected to fill with a narrative of the *doings* and *accomplishments* of the day. In this way the ritual constraint that operates determines the type of contribution expected from both initiators and respondents. In ex. 4, the child is *probed to conform* to this *conversational demand* (cf. Dascal 1983:109), while in ex. 5 the adult provides the expected narrative. What distinguishes the family "today" ritual from similar rhetorical routines in other types of interaction (e.g., *How was your weekend?* at the office) is apparently the notion of accountability. In the family, a question like *How was your day?*, especially when addressed to children, implicitly invites a narrative no less than does an explicit query about the day's happenings. In other contexts, of course, a narrative may be neither invited nor much wanted. It is through the notion of accountability that we can understand how somebody's day can be topicalized, objectified, distanced, and contemplated with care.

- (7) American family 8: The children are Jared (11m) and Robin (9f). The mother's move follows a request from Robin to change the subject discussed previously.
- 1 Mother: I want to talk to Jared about his day, because he said it was so horrible. ←
  - 2 Jared: It was not horrible, it was just boring. ←
  - 3 Mother: Why was it boring Jared?
  - 4 Jared: It was really [//] actually that's not quite true. This person who studies lungs came in for science +\
  - 5 Mother: Lungs?
  - 6 Jared: Yeah, and she said [//] she showed us some slides and brought in a plastic dog's lung  
[continued]

As these examples show, both children and spouses are invited to participate in the ritual. But as noted, nomination rights are not quite equally distributed. We encountered only one instance where a child tries to nominate a parent, rather than vice versa.

- (8) American family 7: The children are Aaron (9.5m) and Abigail (7f).  
 1 Andrew: What happened at work today Mother? ←  
 2 Mother: Well I bet you, one power trouble at work today.  
 3 Andrew: Oh really. [=! laughs]  
 4 Mother: [=! laughs] Oh God.  
 5 Abigail: You should drop your jobbie. ←  
 6 Mother: I know.  
 7 ? : Drop your jobbie.  
 END@

This example shows one way in which the ritual may fail: neither party (certainly not the mother) seems to consider the question as a serious attempt to initiate a “today” ritual. When no narrative comes forth, another child offers a personal comment (T5), which serves to change the topic. In the case of successful “today” narratives, the same slot often is filled by prompts to continue, worded in no less formulaic ways than initiations.

- (9) American family 4; Sandra is 4; also present is Jordan (7.5m).  
 1 Father: So what else did you today Sandra? ←  
 2 Sandra: Um xx beads, puzzles and I played clock  
 [continued]  
 (10) American family 4.  
 1 Mother: What else did you do today, dear? ←  
 2 Father: That’s all.

Such constraints on initiation and participation rights, as well as on modes of telling, turn “today” narrative events into a clearly delimited speech events that impose specific rights and duties on all participants. For the gift of a *today story* to be well received, it must be a substantial gift. The first operating constraint is one of selection. Not all the day’s happenings are worthy of telling: adults explicitly call upon nominated tellers to exercise criteria of interest in regard to the tale before launching into the telling; thus 8-year-old Jessica (T3 in ex. 3) is asked to tell *the best part of her day*. A long account of a soccer game by an 8-year-old boy is interrupted as follows.

- (11) American family 4; Jordan is 7.5.  
 Father: Jordan, would you like to tell us something? Other than soccer, what happened today?

Child tellers are required to order the day’s happenings by relevance (*Tell us the worst/best part of your day; What were the highlights of your day?*) prior to foregrounding one particular chain of events as a narrative topic. Children are also explicitly socialized in modes of telling. They are required, in the terms of Genette 1980, to turn *stories* into true *narratives*. An extreme example of this process is illustrated by the narrative event I refer to as “Everybody’s Day.”

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- (12) Everybody's day: American family 5. The family has three children: Dorothy (13f), Beatrice (10f) (also called Harriet), and Matthew (4m).
- 1 Father: So how was your day Harriet? <You're supposed + \> [>]  
 2 Bea: <Daddy [=! offended]> [<].  
 3 Father: What?  
 4 Bea: Cut that out. [%com: Be does not like to be called Harriet]  
 5 Father: You're supposed to say "Oh it was wonderful xxx"  
 6 Bea: Daddy [=! annoyed] no lozzie [unclear ?] [/] <lozzie> [?][>]  
 [=! laughs].  
 7 Father: <=! laughs> [<]  
 8 Mother: xx Why don't you tell us about your day now?  
 9 Matthew: My [//] your day.  
 10 Bea: Mine?  
 11 Matthew: xxx.  
 12 Father: Your first?  
 13 Matthew: And your tenth.  
 14 Father: Oh [=! laughs].  
 15 Matthew: Be tell your day. ←  
 16 Bea: I woke up and I got dressed and xxx [=! speaks very softly]. ←  
 17 Matthew: What?  
 18 Father: Speak up.  
 19 Bea: # um # I woke up and got dressed and went to xx xx  
 20 Father: You didn't bother to eat any of breakfast or lunch?  
 21 Bea: Nope.  
 22 Father: And I made you such nice french toast too.  
 23 Matthew: No then <my day!> [>]. ←  
 24 Father: <Oh is it your turn now?> [<] ←  
 25 Matthew: After Be comes me [=! laughter]# my day # washed and woke up ←  
 # then go do nothing # then googo then doodo [=! laughs]. ←  
 26 Father: Matthew!  
 27 Matthew: Oh [=! laughs]  
 28 Father: You can do any of that # whatever it was.  
 29 Dorothy: Matthew now # can I go?  
 30 Matthew: No. First I wake up # then go to bed # then wake up <then go to bed  
 # then I wake up # then go to bed> [>]  
 [=! laughing].  
 31 Father: Oh [=! laughs] <you just lost your turn> [<]  
 32 Matthew: First I wake up # then + \  
 33 Bea: Matthew!  
 34 Father: No, stop.  
 35 Matthew: xxx.  
 36 Bea: Matthew you had a very <boring day> [>]. ←  
 37 Matthew: <Here go Mommy> [<] ←  
 38 Father: First I wake up # then I go to nursery school  
 %com: [=! imitates the way Matthew speaks]  
 39 Mother: Listen to this family.  
 40 Mother: First I woke up and then had breakfast.  
 41 Matthew: Then you had nothing [=! laughs].  
 42 Mother: Then I had my shower.  
 43 Matthew: Then you had nothing [=! laughs].  
 44 Mother: Then I did the wash. I made the lasagne+ . . .  
 45 Dorothy: Now it's my turn Matthew. ←  
 46 Father: First I ate breakfast # then I got up.  
 47 Bea: Daddy [=! annoyed tone].  
 48 Mother: Oh [=! laughs].  
 49 Father: Then I didn't take a shower. Then I brushed my teeth # then I went ←  
 outside # then I got dressed + \

- 50     Bea: Daddy [=! shouting]!  
 51     Mother: Oh [=! laughs].  
 52     Father: Then I took my shoes off and put my pajamas back on # went to the  
           basement # did some work # caught a pigeon # <made the pigeon for  
           lunch> [>]  
 53     Matthew: <Oh [=! laughs]> [<].  
 54     Father: <Then I drove you all to> [<] [/] then I [/] then I went to # Wool-  
           worth's bought something that I had to return later in the day as usual  
           because I always have to return everything I buy.  
 55     Bea: You can't buy things.  
 56     Father: um # then we went to the library.  
 57     Bea: And found nothing.  
 58     Father: And I went with a girl who found nothing. Then we went out <of the  
           library + \> [>]  
 59     Bea: <Okay> [=! shouted]!  
           [Turns into a discussion about whose books are on whose library card]

“Everybody’s day” displays the typical features of the “today” ritual in its insistence on equality in rights of participation (on turn-taking, see particularly T24, T25, T29, T45), on the repetition of the formulaic questions (T1, T8, T15), and on the type of sequential coherence built up from “your day” questions responded to by action verb series. But it is a ritual gone sour, negative rather than positive in affective outcomes.

Several indicators in the discourse combine to show us what is going wrong, and thereby also reveal underlying norms for how it should have gone. First, there is a double message in the father’s initiation: he uses the formulaic *How was your day?*, but prefixes it with an unusual term of address (which his daughter does not like), and follows it with a metacommunicative statement (*You’re supposed to say . . .*). He thus sets a playful tone for the interaction, implying that it is not to be taken seriously. But the mother shifts the key back to a serious tone (T8), and the children spend a considerable amount of metacommunicative energy – in line with the general tendency of American family dinner talk to topicalize turn-taking (Blum-Kulka & Sheffer 1993) – arguing for their share in the family’s “today” narrative space.

By shifting the argument constantly from the realm of telling, in which the issue at hand is a share in the “today” ritual, to the realm of conversation, in which the issue is floor management, the speakers indicate most clearly a dissatisfaction with the unfolding of the event. Thus, in T23, Matthew claims his share in the ritual of telling one’s day; his utterance is an attempt to enter this specific telling realm. His father’s response, *Oh, is it your turn now?*, switches back to the realm of conversation, thereby implicitly inviting talk for talk’s sake rather than compliance with the demanding task (in terms of content) of telling one’s day. In T24, the framing of the event shifts from the frame of telling one’s days, in which it is meaningful to exchange and evaluate personally owned days, to the loosely defined frame “talk about the day,” in which the focus is on having a share in the talk, rather than on

telling one's own day. Subsequently, the realm of the tale is affected as well, yielding extremely poor "today" stories in terms of information.

The first child to speak on topic, Beatrice (T16–22), fails to provide an interesting narrative; she is interrupted by her younger brother, Matthew (T23), who is dismissed (T33–34) as having defied expectation for making a substantial contribution of any kind. While Beatrice still conforms to the rules, though not very successfully, Matthew steps out of the rules completely. Deliberately or not, his account actually parodizes both the requirement for informative substance (T25, T31) and relevance. His father dismisses him by moving from the realm of telling to the realm of conversation, negating a conversational turn that fails the "today" requirement (*You just lost your turn*); but Beatrice's evaluation of the tale (*Matthew you had a very boring day*) imply a critique of the teller as principal (T36). The mother's metacomment in T39 (*Listen to this family*) suggests an awareness that things have gone wrong; yet her own attempt at a change of *footing* (Goffman 1974:124–60) goes back to the earnest, but not good enough, report mode earlier initiated by her daughter (compare T16 to T40 and T44).

The event culminates with the father giving an echoed, free indirect speech, mocking imitation of Matthew's account (T38), only to go on (T46ff.) to offer a parodized version of a "today" report of his own. Framing the report as a parody of the real thing is indicated by an unlikely reversal of chronology (*First I ate breakfast then I got up*), followed by the negation of an event (*then I didn't take a shower*). Audience response (T47, 48, 50, 53) wavers between clear annoyance, which in the case of the daughter may mean taking offense (see T47), and laughter, which seems to indicate in this case that both mother and son align with the father's choice of telling-frame.

The overall message of this failed narrative event relates to tales, telling, and tellers. In regard to the tale, it evokes the requirements of "today" tellability: to provide a significant contribution to the ritual, you have to select, order, and dramatize the events of the day. A failure to do so shifts the focus of the narrative event from the realm of telling back to the realm of conversation, and changes its key; these transformations result in the disintegration of the "today" ritual. Tellers, encompassing in this event both the role of animator and an accountable principle (Goffman 1981), are highly vulnerable to such transformations, finding themselves being challenged both on account of their tales (e.g. *boring day*) and their participation in the telling.

What is the overall function of the "today" rituals in the American families? In terms of discourse goals, they occupy a curious place between transactional and interactional speech (Brown & Yule 1983:1–2). The role of the ritualistic question *How was your X* can set off different types of speech events. In case it is completed in a two-move exchange, as might be the case among co-workers in an office situation, we have before us an interaction ritual (in Goffman's sense) that will tend to serve mainly phatic interactional

goals, aimed predominantly at the maintenance of social relations, rather than the transmission of information. But in the family the same question sets off very different kinds of expectations. Here the transmission of (narratively filtered) information is not only tolerated, but actually required, and the interactional goal achievable is not just social harmony but rather “affective convergence” (Aston 1988:255). The ritualistic mode seems to satisfy this variety of expectations; it provides conventionalized ways for the show of reciprocal interest and affect in the family, while simultaneously serving as a socializing context for transmitting cultural notions of appropriate ways to transform tales into telling.

In contrast, the Israeli time-framed narratives exhibit only few of the features of the “today” ritual. We do find that the activity type is enacted, especially by parents asking their children about the activities of the day. As in the American families, such questions expect a response in the form of a narrative, rather than phatically. Failure to provide a narrative is responded to by further probing (see T4, 5, 8 in ex. 13).

- (13) Israeli family 4: The family has two daughters, Ruti (12f) and Naomi (8f), and one son, Yaron (4m).
- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Mother: <i>Yaron # tesaper lanu &lt;ma asita hayom ba-gan&gt; [&gt;]</i> | Yaron, tell us what you <did in school today> [>]           |
| 2 | Ruti: <i>&lt;ma [//] ex haya ba-gan&gt; [&lt;]</i>                       | <What [//] how was school> [<]                              |
| 3 | Yaron: <i>naim</i>   | Pleasant.   |
| 4 | Mother: <i>naim? ma haya naim? tesaper lanu ex haya naim?</i>            | Pleasant? What was pleasant? Tell us how it was pleasant. ← |
| 5 | Yaron: <i>sixaknu</i>  | We played.  |
| 6 | Mother: <i>be-ma sixaktem?</i>   | What did you play with? ←                                   |
| 7 | Yaron: <i>be-misxakim.</i>   | With games.   |
| 8 | Mother: <i>eze? ba-xuc? ba-xacer?</i>                                    | Which? outside? in the yard? ←                              |
- [continued]

But initiation of such narrative events varies with child and family. Transition to a narrative concerned with the day’s happenings is initiated either by a variant of *What did you do in school (today)?*, as in ex. 13, or more typically, by a topically specific question, as in ex. 14.

- (14) Israeli family 6, with twin girls aged 6: Lilax and Iris.
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Father: <i>lean halaxtem hayom be-shiur teva?</i>       | Where did you go today during your “nature” lesson? |
| Lilax: <i>la-giva hazoti she-pa’am she-avra halaxnu</i> | To this hill that we went to last time.             |
- [continued]

The time marker *today* tends to appear in stories told about children, rather than by children in response to “today” elicitation. An example is a story told mainly by a mother, with some participation from a child, about the adventure her 4-year-old daughter had at school when a rooster jumped on her; or a story, again told by a mother, about how 6-year-old Rami missed the bus to school. The need to mark narratives temporally tends to be reserved by Israelis for stories from the past. One device is the use of *pa’am*;

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literally *pa'am* means 'once'; and as in English, it figures in conventional story beginnings. Examples from the family narratives vary in topic, as seen in exx. 15–17.

- (15) Israeli family 2: The children are Shlomit (12f), Riki (10f), and Mika (5f).  
 Father: *hayiti pa'am be-shuk aravi ve-ani* I visited once an Arab market and I  
*halaxti liknot kishuim vehayu sham* went to buy some zucchini and there  
 [continued] were
- (16) Israeli family 2.  
 Mika: *ani roca lesaper bedixa. pa'am axat* I want to tell a joke. Once a man  
*halax ish* went . . .  
 [continued]
- (17) Israeli family 1: Yoash is a guest, a friend of the family.  
 Yoash: *shamati pa'am et ex korim la, hag-* I once heard, what's her name, Mrs.  
*veret Milo* Milo  
 [continued]

Other time-marking devices used include concrete specifications of time (*last week/yesterday/last year/about a month ago*), as well as sequential ordering of events relative to self (*the first time I went to the University*).

Talk about the day's activities lacks the ritual constraints on participation structure: we found no indication in the Israeli discourse of an expectation for all to participate, as in the American families. What seem to be missing are both the accountability requirement, in regard to the most recent time frame, and the expectation for a display of reciprocal interest in each other's day.

The difference between the two groups in regard to "today" narratives reflects to some extent a wider cultural difference in the way verbal elements of social interaction are conventionalized. Relative to Israeli society, American social interaction seems much more governed by situationally conventionalized scripts (see Blum-Kulka 1992 for elaboration), which in turn pale by comparison with the degree of linguistic conventionalization observed for Japanese social behavior (Ide 1987). From this perspective, *How was your day*, apart from its broader cultural and familial functions, is yet one more instance of the rich repertoire of routinized interaction rituals in the United States.

CULTURAL STYLES OF COLLABORATION

*Issues of co-ownership vs. co-performance*

The degree of participation in the telling raises the issue of how access to the information contained in the tale, i.e. the *tale-ownership*, is related to the *entitlement* to tell the story (Shuman 1986:137–41). In other words, whose stories in the family are told by whom and to whom? In discussing narratives that call for audience response, Sacks (1978:261) notes that it is the "involvement in it [the story] that provides for the story's telling." Personal experience grants ownership, and shared experience grants joint ownership:



“Parties who have experienced an event together are jointly in a position to describe it to someone else” (Goodwin 1981:159). As noted by Miller et al. (1990:298), “The conditions giving rise to joint ownership are more likely to occur in intimate relations than in non-intimate ones.” Members of the family, being part of an intimate network, come to the dinner table with knowledge of both shared and unshared events. Although the conditions for claiming joint ownership may be met, the fact that several people are in a position to tell a story does not result necessarily in joint performance: Mothers regularly tell stories *about* children in the presence of the children (Miller et al. 1990), claiming sole performance rights on jointly *owned* stories. The reverse may be true as well; at least during the dinner-table conversations studied here, highly involved audience response to a story of personal experience (or knowledge) may turn the telling into a joint performance, implying a process-motivated claim to joint ownership. Hence ownership rights through access to the tale have no one-to-one correspondence to performance rights through access to the telling.

As the first step in exploring the interrelations between these two dimensions, I consider each independently, and then explore the culturally preferred intersections observed in the family narratives.

One way to approach story ownership is by considering access to the knowledge of the events recounted: is the narrated event (the *fabula*) known to the teller only, or is it shared by any other participants? Abstracting the nature of the narrated events from the verbal narratives by considering textual indicators, we follow Labov & Fanshel (1977:62–4) in distinguishing individually known *A-events* (known to teller only) from two-party shared *A-B events* (known to teller and one other participant) and generally known *O-events*. Specific to the family scene is a fourth type of *fabula*, *F-events*, which are shared by all members of the family.<sup>10</sup> A breakdown of the data using these categories, as presented in Figure 8, suggests that Americans and Israelis only partially share attitudes regarding the degree of novelty expected from narratives around the dinner table.

In both groups, *A-events* dominate (66% and 69%). This is not surprising, given that dinner time provides a unique opportunity for all to share personal experiences with intimates. Family dinners with young children do not seem to occasion stories concerned with the state of the world; *O-event* narratives are almost absent from this speech event. For Americans, the next most frequent category following *A-events* is *A-B events* (30%). For the most part, these recount events experienced jointly by a child and one of the parents. For the American families, there is a marginal 3.5% of *F-event* stories. On the other hand, for the Israelis, *F-event* narratives prove a viable category, representing 9% of all stories told. It is interesting to note that, for Israelis, the percentage of *F-event* narratives in child-involved narratives rises to 15%, while in the equivalent set of American stories it drops to 2%.

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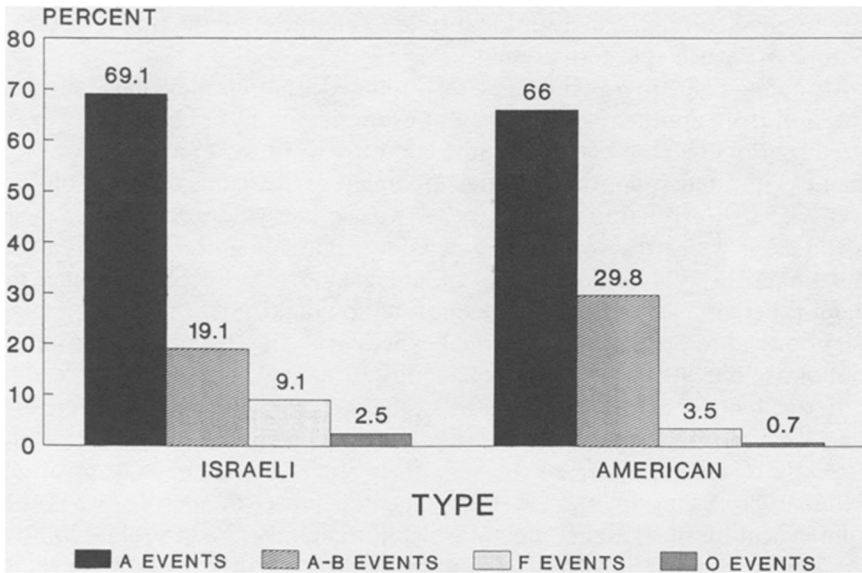


FIGURE 8: Tale event-types.

Consider now modes of performance. We can distinguish three major modes of telling: *monologic*, *dialogic*, and *polyphonic*. Even though family narrative events are jointly constructed affairs, styles of collaborations vary from low to high participation by participants other than the primary narrator(s). At the dominantly single-voice end of the continuum, we find monologic narratives, in which one primary narrator remains in control of the floor throughout the event. The audience at such events responds indirectly, sustaining the telling but not involved in the tale. At the multivoiced, polyphonic end, we find narratives that defy the distinction of primary vs. secondary narrator(s), being constructed in close collaboration between several participants. Between these two ends, we find dialogic narrations, constructed typically through a question/answer format.

A multiplicity of voices at the level of telling (in the polyphonic mode) can also transform relations between tellers. In the terms of Goffman (1974:127), the audience at such events is transformed into “fellow performers” who become “inhabitants of the same realm.” For Tannen (1989:12), it is an issue of involvement: “an internal, even emotional connection individuals feel which binds them together to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories and words. However, . . . [it is] not a given but an achievement in conversational interaction.” In Tannen’s analysis of a dinner conversation between friends (1984), she found this achievement of high

involvement through conversational style to characterize the three Eastern-European Jewish speakers present.

Monologic narratives tend to be self-initiated, though they may follow a question from another participant. For example, in the Robbery Story analyzed by Polanyi (1989:66), the topic is put forward by a participant other than the storyteller, appealing to the appointed participant's expertise on the events to be narrated. Turning to the two women who got robbed, their friend asks: "I heard secondhand or whatever that you got robbed. - Yeah. - What happened?" Nor do tellers of monologic narratives necessarily have to claim experiential warrants for the tale - although, around the dinner table, tales do tend to be stories of personal experience. The distinctive feature of monologic narratives is the recognizability of a single narrator's voice.

In the dialogic mode, narration proceeds through a question/answer format, whether the story is self- or other-initiated. This is the mode that children use to tell stories from the very early stages of language acquisition (Ninio 1988, Sachs 1979). A well-documented subset of such stories is the joint evocation of shared events, in which the caretaker and the child jointly recount the story (Heath 1982, Snow 1991). But whether or not the events to be recounted are known to both adult and child, elicited narratives with young children tend to remain collaborative, with story contributions distributed between adult and child (Snow & Goldfield 1982).

Polyphonic narration is enacted in principle through both co-performance and co-ownership. Co-performance requires access to the tale, or at least shared access to its social context. This access takes into account an individual teller's *information state* (cf. Goffman 1974:133) as to "why events have happened as they have," as well as participant's familiarity with the underlying sociocultural scripts that make narratives "ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives" (Fisher 1987:63). Co-ownership may be culturally interpreted as entitling all co-owners with story-telling rights (but not necessarily so; see Miller et al. 1990, Shuman 1986).<sup>11</sup> The outcome will be a jointly constructed narrative, where division lines between primary and secondary narrators are blurred. The issue of telling rights in such cases may vary culturally in regard to all participants, or only in regard to children. If children are included in the circle of right-holders, a child may feel licensed to contribute on topics felt relevant, whether the story is initiated by an adult or another child.

Israelis and Americans seem to differ in preferences for these three modes of performance. Quantitative analysis of a subsample of the narratives included here (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992) shows that Americans prefer the monologic, display mode in 60% of the cases, with a preference for the dialogic mode in 29%. Israelis, by contrast, make use of all three styles, preferring both the dialogic (49%) and the polyphonic (30%) to the monologic (24%).<sup>12</sup>

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TABLE 1. *Styles of participation*

Event-type	Mode	
	Polyphonic	Monologic
Shared	Israeli/American	American
Unshared	Israeli	Israeli/American

But the cultural difference in regard to both ownership and performance rights is revealed mainly in the diverse ways the groups interpret the relationship between these two dimensions. Excluding dialogic, typically adult/child narration from this analysis, we can detect four types of interaction between access to the tale and participation in the telling. In the following I argue that the two groups differ in their preferences for these, as shown in Table 1.

Among the four possible configurations between event type and mode of telling, Israeli and American narratives seem to share two: telling shared experiences collaboratively in the polyphonic mode, and allowing predominantly solo performances of personally known stories. However, the American families support monologic performances even when tales are known to more than one participant; and Israeli narration may unfold in a highly collaborative way, even in unshared tales.

The distribution among these four modes shows these preferences as representing a gradient phenomenon; see Figure 9. In both groups, shared experiences told collaboratively and single experiences told monologically constitute the bulk of narrative events (77% for Israelis, 84% for Americans). For Israelis, the third choice is to tell unshared events in a polyphonic mode (18%); for Americans, it is to tell shared events in the monologic mode (12%). In the following, I illustrate the way cultural styles are manifest within each of the two major modes of telling.

*The monologic mode: Telling shared and unshared events*

A culturally shared and highly prevalent mode of telling (43% for both groups) is the dominantly monologic performance granted occasionally to sole tellers who recount (mostly but not exclusively) personal experience. In one such case, an Israeli woman describes in great detail the nightmarish dream she had about getting lost on one of the campuses of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In another instance, an American teen-age girl recounts a confrontation she had with a teacher in school. In the following example, the story offered by the observer terminates a series of stories concerning memories of food from childhood, all embedded in members' attitudes towards the religious practices of the parent and grandparent generations.

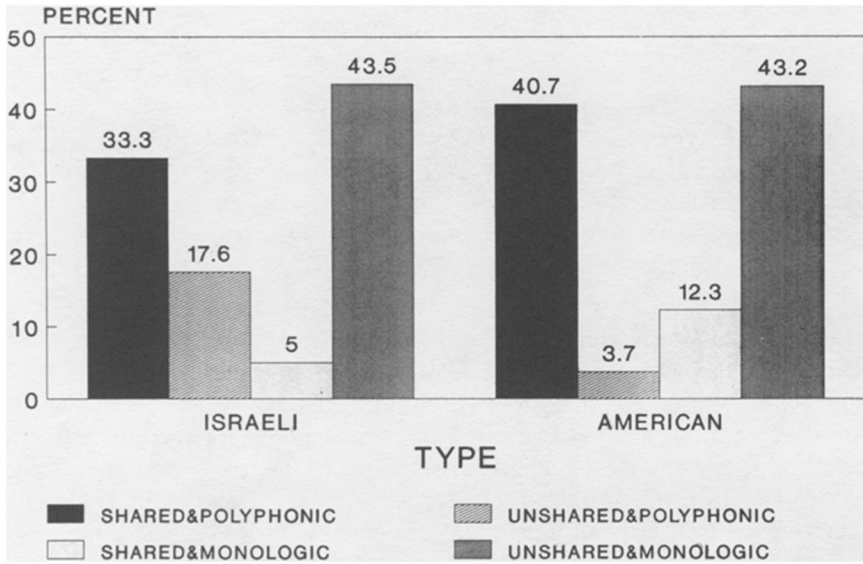


FIGURE 9: Ownership vs. performance in telling tales.

(18) Israeli family 1: The children are Nadav (11m) and Jonathan (10m). The segment follows several exchanges concerning food and eating habits.

- 1 Observer: *aval ha-ax sheli Avner haya noda be-bareranuto be-oxel. hu mamash hayu shloshta dvarim she-hu axal ve-zehu.* But my brother Avner was well-known for his pickiness in food. There were actually three things he ate and that's it.
- 2 Mother: *ma?* What?
- 3 Observer: *chips ve-stek ze haya ha-xx. ve-ani zoxeret she-od basar bishvil she-hu yoxal basar notnim lo. Sonya hayta notenet lo avatiax be-onat ha-avatixim xotxet lo she-yaani kaxa + \* Chips and steak it was xx # And I remember that more meat so he'll eat meat they would give him. Sonya [%com: Sonya is the teller's stepmother] would serve him watermelon in season # would cut it so + \
- 4 Mother: *++ lo yargish. bis me-ze ve-bis me-ha-hu.* (that) he won't notice; a bite here ← and a bite there.
- 5 Observer: *ve-kshe-hu higia le-cava hu na'asa gorme kaze oxel ve-mitanyen bemisadot. hayom shuv ani lo yoda'at ki hu dos yesh lahem kol mine isurim. aval ba-tkufa she-hu od haya xiloni hu na'asa axlan bilti ragil ve-hu amar "axshav ani mictaer al kol ha-shanim she-haya oxel kol kax tov <ve-ani> [>] ve-ani lo neheneti me-klum."* And when he got to the army he became such a gourmet, eating and interested in restaurants. Now again I don't know, since he became observant, they have all these rules. But during the period while he was still nonobservant, he turned into a great eater and said, "Now I'm sorry for all these years when there was such good food and I, and and I didn't enjoy it at all."
- 6 Mother: *<ken?> [<]* <Yes?>

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- 7 Nadav: *ani af pa'am lo ectaer.* I shall never regret it. ←  
 8 Observer: *lo # kol ze ba lomar lax she-ata lo* All this means that you can never  
*yaxol lada'at ma yihye be-od + \* know what will happen in another  
*@End* + \

The story of Avner, the non-eating child transformed into a gourmet adult—only to lose access (from the teller's point of view) to gourmet food, through newly acquired religious practices – is exceptionally rich in cultural themes, negotiating transitions between life cycles in the Israeli context (child/soldier/adult) and Jewish life styles (non-observant/observant); see Polanyi 1989 for analysis of cultural themes in American stories. For the purposes of the present analysis, the mode of telling is of interest. The example illustrates that, even in the monologic mode, when recounting unshared events, Israeli audience response goes beyond brief *uptakers* (Edmondson & House 1981). In T4, the evaluative detail added by the mother is her own logical inference, never mentioned by the main teller. The child's comment in T7 indicates how carefully he had been listening to the story; in the Israeli families, children typically act as active audience to all stories told, regardless of tellers (adults or children) and topic. In the American families, child participation in the role of active audience seems more restricted to child-related topics (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992).

In the American families, monologic telling is not restricted to unshared events. In 12% of the American (non-dialogic) narrative events, a sole performer is granted telling rights for a tale; this happens in only 5% of the parallel cases in the Israeli families. Consider the following personal experience narratives told with the explicit purpose of entertaining.

- (19) The bug: American family 3. The children are Samuel (10m) Joshua (6m). Talk on hikes precedes this segment.
- 1 Mother: Daniel loves that.  
     %com: [Daniel is her husband]
  - 2 Samuel: Really?
  - 3 Mother: I on the other hand [/] He loves to commune with nature. Me, I can take nature through a glass window.
  - 4 Samuel: xxx
  - 5 Mother: A glass window # with the bugs out # and anything that's more than ←  
     four feet removing themselves from my presence I can't deal with them  
     [=! laughs]. We had a bug once in the shower # and Samuel called  
     me in on a Friday afternoon # wouldn't you know it # and he screams  
     "Ma!" and there is this thing # if it wasn't two inches big # I thought  
     it was the most disgusting and somehow as disgusting as they are small  
     # they get worse when they get larger # and there I was # it wasn't even  
     afraid # it wasn't running # it was taking its time # it was sort of tak-  
     ing a little walk across the shower. I would at least appreciate it if they  
     were afraid +/
  - 6 Observer: But no. ←
  - 7 Mother: + ^ But no, it sat there, very territorially, so I said "Get rid of it," he  
     said "I'm not getting rid of it, you get rid of it," and of course Dan-  
     iel was nowhere around.
  - 8 Observer: Of course, right. ←
  - 9 Mother: So we had to shpritz it to death.

- 10 Observer: Of course. ←
- 11 Mother: Oh, it was horrible, and the darn thing was so resilient it wouldn't die, you know I find that absolutely appalling + \
- 12 Observer: It wasn't xxx
- 13 Mother: That's right, well by the time we finish with them, they would be + . . . Cockroaches are going to inherit this earth one of these days.
- 14 Father: Well, you weren't using insecticide though.
- 15 Mother: I was using mildew spray xxx and that bug had the nerve to walk around in it yet # but finally it gave up # the ghost # and then we had to dispose of it. So I said "Go ahead # Samuel # dispose of it." He says "I'm not touching it # you touch it." So I took it out with thirty layers of tissue # so that I wouldn't even feel its shape and I picked it up and I threw it into the bathroom toilet.
- 16 Observer: She hasn't gotten over it. ←
- 17 Mother: I'm still thinking about it. I can see that bug # and I have visions of it rising up yet like a phoenix to haunt me.  
END@

The Bug Story is initiated by the mother, who remains the primary narrator for its duration. Though both father and older son (Samuel) are familiar with the events, audience response is limited to sustaining the act of telling through appropriate backchanneling and clarification comments (T6, T8, T10, T12, T16). The teller's comment on her relations with nature (*I can take nature through a glass window*, T3) serves as bridging talk to introduce her dramatic encounter with a spider in her bathroom on a Friday afternoon. She then manages to entertain her listeners by using several evaluative devices to highlight the turning points of her narratives (e.g. direct quotes, a shift to the use of the present tense; see T5, T7). Her efforts are fully appreciated – as can be seen by audience reactions in T6, T8, and T16. Finally, she concludes by providing a Labovian coda (Labov & Waletzky 1967:39); visions of the bug rising like a phoenix clearly link the past to the present.

The Bug Story shows that co-ownership of the tale does not necessarily entail equal rights for the telling. Narrative events can distinguish tellers from experiencers. In the Bug Story, the teller is the chief but not sole experiencer in the events narrated; yet she is granted full telling rights, foregrounding her story-telling skills as individual performer.

*The polyphonic mode: Telling shared and unshared events*

As listeners, we tend to expect collaboration in the telling when access to the tale is shared by several of the participants. Thus stories about a couple's trip abroad may be told to friends jointly, or in a monologic style, but with frequent interceptions from the other "knowing" participant. Shared ownership of the tale in the family may cut across generations, or create ownership affiliations between any group of members, either by true experience or by claimed familiarity with the events. Events that happen to parents jointly, prior to their children's birth, are one source for generationally defined ownership. In one case, the story of the parents' courtship is told in collabora-

tion by both parents in response to a 10-year-old's question: *ex at ve-aba higatem le-ahava me-aruxat-erev pshuta?* 'How did you and Dad come to be in love from a simple dinner?'

The story of the parents' courtship is an example of the type of narrative which may be told again and again, because of its relevance to the history of the family. Memories from a shared past carry the potential to become part of the familial narrative repertoire, their telling triggered by the presence of a new audience. Our presence at the dinner table might have occasioned the retelling or construction of several such *family fables*. Consider the potential of the following recollection of a family reunion as a candidate of being or becoming a family fable.

- (20) American family 7: Children are Aaron (9.5m) and Abigail (7f).
- 1 Father: Yeah # anyway we had a big family reunion.
  - 2 Abigail: What's a family reunion? [=softly]
  - 3 Mother: That was all the members of the family [//] all relations.
  - 4 Father: Well # you can't be more specific.
  - 5 Mother: Not all.
  - 6 Abigail: All the members of his side of the family. ←
  - 7 Father: Yes # it was all of my father's [//] my father and both of his sisters and all their children # and all the grandchildren.
  - 8 Aaron: We were one of the grandchildren # right? ←
  - 9 Father: Right.
  - 10 Mother: Um hm.
  - 11 Father: So all these people were at this big reunion. And there wasn't enough room to sleep inside the house. So a lot of people bought # had or rented.
  - 12 Mother: Rented. Nobody had # everybody rented.
  - 13 Father: Yeah? Everybody rented RVs, which are these motor homes which you sleep in. And are not real comfortable.
  - 14 Mother: And they're not real private.
  - 15 Father: xx didn't seem to mind.
  - 16 Mother: Well you just [//] you were so shy Abigail # you you wouldn't talk ← to anybody. And you just stayed inside the RV and you never wanted to come out # see everybody. You just wanted to stay inside and read books and play with your toys.
  - 17 Aaron: She could read then?
  - 18 Mother: Well she had some books that she looked at the pictures # you know.
  - 19 Aaron: Yeah.
  - 20 Abigail: Picture book? Picture book?
  - 21 Aaron: Pretended to read # pretended she was grown up.
  - 22 Mother: Uh huh. And when anybody tried to talk to you # you'd run away and hide in the RV.
  - 23 Father: Except for Pearson.
  - 24 Abigail: Yeah in the RV I would go. ←
  - 25 Father: You visited xxx P. He picked you up. xxx feet and sat you on his back xxx started asking you about the pictures.
  - 26 Abigail: Huh
  - 27 Father: You succumbed to his charms. xxx have [=! laughter]  
END@

The polyphonic mode of telling is particularly suitable for stories that have the family "us" as protagonist, and which are relevant in terms of contribu-



tion to the building of familial and individual identities. The Family Reunion story is not about self or other, but rather reflexively about “us,” the family, and the way we were then. Its relevance stems from stressing family continuity: it seems to be saying “Here is something we did together, even if you children do not remember it all.” Revealing several sides of Abigail’s younger personality, the story is particularly relevant for the child protagonist: it provides her with a sense of the continuity of the self, combined with the opportunity to reflect on her younger self as compared with her current self. The suggested key for reflection is a humorous one; the child is invited to join the others in laughing at her own shyness then, and the attraction that broke it. The text contains indicators that the story has been told previously. Abigail’s first contribution to the narrative (*all the members of his side of the family*, T6) suggests familiarity with the tale, or at least parts of it. A later remark (*yeah in the RV I would go*, T24) can be taken either as her recollection of the events, or as her acceptance of her parents’ version. The story is thus on its way to becoming a family fable.

Telling is carried by both parents, with a shift in appointed audiences. The father seems to be talking first to the Observer; but the mother deliberately shifts perspective, appointing Abigail, the heroine of the story, as primary audience (*you were so shy Abigail*, T16). Aaron, the older brother, takes the role of the challenger, doubting his mother’s version (*She could read then?*, T17) – and once reassured, insisting on his sister’s limitations (*[She] pretended to read*, T21). The mother aligns with her son by picking up the 3rd person reference to Abigail (*Well she had some books*, T18); then, treating the exchange with Aaron as a “side-sequence” (Jefferson 1972), she shifts back to addressing Abigail directly. Thus, although in different narrative roles, eventually all family members collaborate in constructing a narrative that may well become part of the family’s fable repertoire.

In the Israeli narratives, by contrast, sharing the tale is no prerequisite for participation in the telling. Even when the specific events are strictly of the A-event, “only teller knows” type, in the family they are told against the background of shared sociocultural scripts which in turn provide occasions for nonexperiencer participation. Israeli dinner-table participants seem to take full advantage of their familiarity with such scripts. In 18% of the (non-dialogic) Israeli narrative events, singular tales get a polyphonic telling. In the American families, we detected only three such examples (4%). In the following narrative, the fact that the story concerns an A-event does not prevent other members from taking an active part in the construction of the story.

- (21) *Saving a watermelon*: Israeli family 4. The family has two daughters (Ruti, 11, and Naomi, 8) and one son (Yaron, 4). The story follows an account of a car accident the mother was involved in the same day.

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- 1 Father: *ani etmol* [/] *ani etmol hicalti avatiax*. I yesterday [/] I saved a watermelon yesterday.
- 2 Observer: Oh [=! laughs]
- 3 Naomi: *ex* [/] *ex*? How? How?
- 4 Ruti: *ex hu hicil*? How did he save it?
- 5 Father: *atem lo ta'aminu. ani nasati li # hayiti ba-boker # ze haya etmol # ken # hayiti hare etmol ba-boker ba-bank <lifnei hacaharayim.>* [>] You won't believe it. I was driving, in the morning, it happened yesterday, yes, I was at the bank yesterday before noon.
- 6 Mother: *<avatiax al ha-sakin.>* [<] Watermelon by the knife. [an expression used by watermelon vendors]
- 7 Father: *lo ze lo al ha-sakin. mazal*. No, it's not by the knife. Lucky.
- 8 Observer: *ani mekava she-lo <sikanta et acmexa>* [>] [=! laughs] I hope you didn't endanger yourself [=! laughs]
- 9 Father: *<ve-ani nosea li>* [<] *me-ha-super be-giva hacarfati # ma at mekava?* And I'm driving from the supermarket on French Hill # what do you expect?
- 10 Observer: *she-lo sikanta et xayexa + \* That you didn't risk your life almost.
- 11 Father: *kimat*. [=! exclamation]
- 12 Mother: *oy va-avoy li*. Near the Super in the direction of the traffic lights, and suddenly I see a woman walking with a child (female) and suddenly a bag starts rolling down the slope, and the child wants to run there and is yelling and her mother is holding her.
- 13 Father: *be-super lemata le-kivun ha-ramzor ve-pitom ani roe holexet sham isha im ezo yalda ve-pitom ve-eze sakit matxila lehitgalgel bamorad # ve-he-yalda roca laruc <le-sham ve-coraxat>* [>] *ve-ha-ima maxzika ota*. The child.
- 14 Observer: *<ha-yalda xx [<]* So at the beginning I didn't see what it was but it rolled with great vigor; everybody is laughing.
- 15 Father: *az ba-hatxala lo raiti ma ze aval ze hitgalgel be-merec*. Shitty watermelon.
- 16 Ruti: *avatiax dafuk*. I saw that it's not worth stopping it with the car, so I stopped the car quickly and ran, and managed to catch the watermelon that was rolling in the bag, and it came to no harm, I returned it safe and sound into the arms of the little girl.
- 17 Father: *raiti* [/] *raiti she-lo keday la'acor et ze im ha-oto, maher acarti et ha-oto ve-racti ve-hiclaxti litfos et ha-avatiax she-hitgalgel be-tox sakit # ve-lo kara lo shum davar # bari ve-shalem hexzarti oto le-zro'ot ha-yalda*. The sobbing child.
- 18 Ruti: *+> <ha-yalda ha-mityapaxat>*. [>] You stopped the car, you stopped the + \
- 19 Mother: *<acarta et ha-mexonit>>* [<] [/] *acarta et ha-me + \* I passed it. I stopped the car.
- 20 Father: *avarti oto. acarti et ha-mexonit + \* You braked, got out of the car and saved the watermelon?
- 21 Mother: *acarta ve-yaradta me-ha-mexonit ve-hicalta et ha-avatiax?* I gave her a watermelon and saved the life of the family there.
- 22 Father: *natati la avatiax ve-hicalti et xayeha-mishpaxa sham*. And what did they say to you, this family?
- 23 Mother: *ve-ma amru lexa ha-mishpaxa ha-zot?*
- 24 Observer: Oh [=! laughs]

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- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 25 | Father: <i>"toda raba be'emet toda ve-shuv toda."</i>   | "Thank you very much really and thanks again."   |
| 26 | Mother: <i>be-amerika ish lo haya ose et ze.</i>  | In the States nobody would have done it.   |
| 27 | Father: <i>be-amerika avatixim ze masoret lehacil.</i>  | In the States there is a tradition to save watermelons.  |
| 28 | Mother: <i>ze rak ba-arec &lt;mishehu yored me-ha-mexonit.&gt; [&gt;]</i>                             | It's only here that somebody would get out of the car.   |
| 29 | Father: <i>&lt;ma at medaberetxx&gt; [&lt;&gt;] dvarim kaele + . . .</i>                              | What are you saying, things like this . . .  |
| 30 | Ruti: <i>&lt;be-amerika yesh xx xx xx&gt; [&lt;].</i>   | You have in the States.  |
| 31 | Father: <i>hem meod adivim ba-dvarim ha-ele.</i>  | They are very polite in these things.  |
| 32 | Observer: <i>aval avatiax, im ha-yalda hayta raca la-avatiax az haya yaxol lihyot nora mesukan.</i>   | But a watermelon, if the child would have chased the watermelon things might have become very dangerous. |
| 33 | Father: <i>lo. hayta sham beaya. zot omeret ha-ba'aya shel ha-isha hayta o ha-avatiax o ha-yalda.</i> | No. There was a problem. I mean the woman's problem was either the watermelon or the child.              |
| 34 | Mother: <i>ve-hi hexlita ha-yalda &lt;be-shlav dey mukdam&gt; [&gt;].</i>                             | And she decided for the child quite early on.  |
| 35 | Father: <i>&lt;hi hexlita ha-yalda&gt; [&lt;] # aval ha-yalda hexlita avatiax.</i>                    | She decided (for) the child, but the child decided (for) the watermelon.                                 |
- END@

This story is offered as a humorous counterpoint to the preceding narrative by the mother, recounting her near escape from a car accident. The father embeds the upcoming story in the ongoing conversation by repeating the verb *save* (in the previous story, *saved from the incident*) in the new and unexpected context of *saving a watermelon*. Unlike the Bug Story, the watermelon incident is based on events known to the teller only. Yet, in the Israeli family, participants take an active part in the performance from the onset. The high level of involvement (Tannen 1984, 1989) can be glimpsed by just scanning the names of the participants making comments during the event (wife, Observer, both older children) and by noticing the high proportion of overlapped talk.

The nature of audience participation changes with different phases of the narrative event. The event is composed of three phases: the opening (T1–13), which provides the abstract and the general setting (time and place); the main body of narrative (T14–18); and the discussion of its point (T19–35); cf. Polanyi 1989. In the opening phase (T1–13), audience response takes the form of what Tannen (1984:118) calls "cooperative prompting": both children display interest (T3–T4), the wife debates jokingly the kind of watermelon in question (T6), and the observer expresses empathy for the teller experiencer (T8).

The teller presents the main events of the story – including setting, complication, and resolution in Labovian terms – in turns T13, T15, T17. Audi-

ence response at this stage is diminished, recipients confining themselves mainly to backchanneling.

But once the happy ending becomes evident, the audience takes on a highly active part both in embellishing the story and in debating its point. In T18, Ruti uses a phrase borrowed from the language of written Hebrew fairy tales ('the sobbing child'), which serves to dramatize the scene of the story's denouement. The child's sobbing is implied in an earlier statement by the teller ('she is yelling', T13), but is never mentioned again. This evaluation of the tale is offered because it coheres with the rest, not because the speaker has first-hand or vicarious proof for it being "true."

The point of the narrative emerges in collaboration among several participants. In response to his wife's clarification question (T21), the teller reformulates the point of the story as concerning 'the saving of a family' rather than 'saving a watermelon' (T22). In the side-sequence that follows, wife and husband disagree about the plausibility of the event taking place anywhere but in Israel. The mother's attempt to explain the narrative's coda, in terms of cross-cultural variability as regards norms of politeness (T26, T28), is rejected by both father and daughter (T29, T30, T31). Note that the girl shows her alignment with her father's position by cooperatively overlapping talk (Tannen 1984:118) that actually completes the father's utterance (T30).

In T32-T35, the three adults return to the issue of the point of the story. By rephrasing the "true" nature of the complication as a case of real danger (T32), the Observer reinforces the transformation of the narrative's point, from being an entertaining anecdote about "saving a watermelon" to being a serious story about saving lives. The discussion foregrounds the status of the narrative as a moral construct (cf. Fisher 1987), giving it meaning through negotiating the nature of the moral dilemma at hand. Husband and wife collaborate in underscoring this new angle, by shifting perspectives (T34-35) to the viewpoint of the woman with the child, for whom the problem was one of protecting her child rather than the watermelon.

This example shows that Israeli participants do not feel restrained by non-access to actual experience to claim authorship for the story. Though the fabula of the watermelon is derived from the personal experience of the teller, the other participants in the event take a highly active part in the story's construction, especially in negotiating its macrolevel point. The process culminates in a joint agreement as to the point of the story; this agreement, as well as the high degree of participation throughout, reveal a preference for a multivoiced mode of performance in this group. But collaboration goes beyond performance: through the process of becoming *fellow performers* in the telling, participants claim joint ownership of the tale. In other words, in monologic unshared event narratives, ownership rights are reconfirmed through the telling; but in the process of a joint performance of an (initially)

unshared event, ownership rights may be generated performatively through the very act of participation in the telling.

These examples show that the two groups differ in attitudes toward the relationship between ownership and performance. Israeli families reveal a flexibility in regard to both dimensions; they strive toward joint ownership for all narratives. This trend is manifested by the high degree of participation in the telling of both personal narratives and shared family events. By partaking in the construction of the story, members of the Israeli family use narrative authorship (Shuman 1986:174–8), to make claims for joint narrative ownership.

In the Jewish-American families, however, participation in the telling seems preconditioned by joint access to the tale. Thus the recollection of shared family memories (the Family Reunion story) is accomplished with the help of several family members. But, in contrast with the Israelis, story authorship is highly valued. Hence we note a trend to allow for the display of individual story-telling skills even in cases where the tale is known to more than one participant (the Bug Story). For these families, authorship through performance is used to assert and/or achieve individual ownership.

#### CONCLUSIONS

I have grounded my analysis of family narrative events in the threefold framework of telling, tales, and tellers. The distinction between the first two dimensions is certainly not my discovery. Under different guises, it concerns students of both narratology (e.g. Genette 1980, Rimmon-Keenan 1983) and folklore (e.g. Bauman 1986, Briggs 1988, Young 1987). My inclusion of tellers within the same paradigm is meant to emphasize the social constitutive nature of oral story-telling – and within it, the role of individual selves (e.g. in the presentation of self as protagonist and/or performer) in relation to the other two realms.

This model permits us to isolate the shared and unshared properties of Jewish-American and Israeli family narrative events. We have found similar patterns with respect to multiple participation, the prevalence of personal experience stories, and a respect for children's story-telling rights. These patterns probably derive as much from a common Eastern-European oral story-telling tradition as from narrative practices prevalent in middle-class families in the Western world. As documented by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1974:283), oral story-telling has been a cultural focus in Jewish society from time immemorial; it was frequent and important in traditional Eastern-European communities, it was egalitarian (everybody could tell), and was not limited to specific speech events. By contrast, features like the dialogic nature of many oral narratives (Polanyi 1989) or the deliberate involvement of children in

story-telling (McCabe & Peterson 1991) characterize White North American mainstream practices.

However, the two groups also differ in many respects. The differences show up both in the ways of construing each of the three narrativity dimensions independently, and in the interplay between them. Access to telling is less available to Israeli than American children, but is more available to Israeli than American observers. Spatio-temporal framing of tales in the American families locates stories outside the home, but close in time; Israeli families favor stories more distant in time, but located in the home. While most narratives in both groups recount individually known events with self as protagonist, Israeli families are more likely than Americans to recount family-shared events that center around the family ("us") as protagonist.

In the transitions between the realm of conversation and the realm of telling, American families search for clear demarcation lines, occasionally ritualized, as in the "today" stories. The high-involvement style of Israeli story entry tends to blur the boundaries between the two realms. Israeli narrative events often begin and end in a highly polyphonic mode; while the opening phase establishes shared access to the tale, the closing phase focuses on negotiating a shared interpretation of the story's meaning, seamlessly moving back to the realm of conversation.

The relations of the tellers to the tales and/or telling is also perceived in culturally distinct ways. Americans support tellers by attending to individual telling rights, but Israelis tend to support tellers by attending to the tale. Access to story ownership in the American families is asserted through familiarity with the tale, but in the Israeli families it is also achievable through participation in the telling. As a result, monologic modes of telling in the American families extend to shared events, while telling of unshared events is celebrated by Israelis in the polyphonic mode. The proposition unique to the Americans seems to be "Let me tell our story"; for Israelis, it is "Let us (all) tell your (singular) story."

Yet all these families share an Eastern-European background. As such, all could be expected to manifest in narratives the high-involvement conversational style found by Tannen 1984 to typify Jewish New Yorkers from the same background. Spolsky & Walters (1985:64) argue that this high-involvement style has an analogy in Eastern-European learning styles of the Yeshiva, where participatory listenership and rapid turn-shifting "mark the discussion of equals." Another analogy is provided by styles of worship in the synagogue: the Eastern-European temple is seemingly chaotic, compared to the Asian or Western European, yet this "chaos" is governed by underlying ideological principles, which allow for a higher involvement on the part of the individual worshiper.

Ideology is also a strong motivating factor in understanding Israeli con-

versational style. As elaborated by Katriel 1986, the Israeli style emerged against the background of a strong ideological opposition to all things associated with Eastern-European diaspora traditions, including ways of speaking. On many dimensions of language use, the Israeli style has indeed been shown to break away from traditional modes (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1992, Katriel 1986). But simultaneously it seems to show strong traces of cultural continuity. We first noted this trend in the prolific use of affective nicknames and endearments, which echo in their suffixes Yiddish and Slavic sound patterns (Blum-Kulka & Katriel 1991). The study of family narrative events provides a second example. Compared to the Jewish-Americans, the Israelis are more involved in all aspects of narrative discourse, sharing both tellings and tales.

From this comparative perspective, the impact of Eastern-European traditions is less noticeable in the narrative discourse of Jewish-American families. In their case, it is American culture which seems to have played the formative role. Thus the emphasis on individual rights and self-accomplishment, seen in attitudes toward the telling, could be expected from sociological accounts of American society (e.g. Bellah et al. 1985). The ways that Jewish-American narratives differ from Israeli narratives echo American ways of speaking, although they may well differ in style from narratives in other American speech communities.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Other approaches to narrative stress the *socioculturally* constitutive role of narrative practices (Bauman 1986, J. Bruner 1986, E. Bruner & Gorfain 1984). As formulated by Bauman (p. 113), “narrative . . . is not merely a reflection of culture, or the external character of social institutions, or the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes, but is constitutive of social life.”

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term from Bauman 1986, who follows Roman Jakobson in distinguishing the narrative context of the situation, namely the narrative event, from the story-world evoked through the telling, namely the events narrated.

<sup>3</sup> See Young 1987, especially chapters 1–2, for a philosophically attuned discussion of the phenomenological framework for the analysis of the different narrative realms involved (in her terms *storyworlds* and *talewords*).

<sup>4</sup> The families were selected by the snowball technique: all adults had to be college-educated, professionally employed, and native-born Israelis or Americans. The full sample includes three groups: native-born Israelis, native-born Jewish-Americans, and native-born Jewish-American immigrants to Israel. Three dinner conversations were recorded (twice by audio and once by video) for each family, within a period of two to three months; all families (including children)

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participated in an ethnographic interview following the recordings. For further details on the project see Blum-Kulka 1990, Blum-Kulka & Katriel 1991, Blum-Kulka & Sheffer 1993, Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992, Olshtain & Blum-Kulka 1989.

<sup>5</sup> The common practice in studies of children's narrative development is to insist on two consequent and causally or temporally related events (Labov & Waletzky 1967) as a minimal requirement for a segment of text to be considered a narrative. On one occasion, we used this definition to allow for comparability across data sets collected under different conditions (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992). But we found the definition inadequate for capturing the richness of conversational narratives at dinner. From a young child's perspective, recounting a single past event during one short speaking-turn (not an "extended turn," as in conversation-analytical accounts of story-telling) may very well count as "telling a story." Operational definitions of what constitutes a narrative need to accommodate the type of discourse in which the narrative is embedded, as well as variation in participants' emic perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> Goffman (1981:131-2) distinguishes official, ratified participants vs. unofficial (unintentional) *eavesdroppers* and (intentional) *overhearers*.

<sup>7</sup> I use "reportability" here in the sense of Hymes (1981:82): the knowledge that competent members of a culture or community have as to what behavior is reportable in that community.

<sup>8</sup> An interesting issue, beyond the scope of this article, is the gender differences between the parents, noted at the family dinner table, as related to possible gender differences in speech in the two respective societies at large.

<sup>9</sup> Transcription follows the CHILDES system (MacWhinney 1991:122-5) as follows: < > overlap; [>] overlap follows; [<] overlap precedes; # short pause; [/] retracing without correction; [//] retracing with correction; + \ interrupted utterance; + . . . trailing off; + ^ quick uptake; +, self-completion; ++ other-completion; [=] text] paralinguistic material; [%com] contextual information. Punctuation marks are used to mark utterance terminators. Some deviations from CHILDES were introduced: the use of capitals and quotation marks for reported speech, to ease reading; and the segmentation of the text by turns (the relevant units here), rather than utterances. Participants are identified by role (for adults) and by name (for children). Age and sex of child are given in parentheses, in that order: Andrew (8m) = Andrew, aged 8 years, male. Conversational features (e.g. interruptions and overlaps) are marked approximately on English translations from Hebrew. Leftward arrows to the right of the transcript point to the passages being discussed.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of textual indicators for event type would be: *A funny thing happened to me today* (A-event); *Remember the time I walked you to school?* (A-B event); *Remember our last camping?* (F-event); *I was surprised by the results of the election* (O-event).

<sup>11</sup> As Shuman (1986:31) notes: "One must have information in order to talk about something. However, people with the information are not necessarily entitled to tell what they know."

<sup>12</sup> Included in this analysis were all narrative events from one meal of 10 American (five middle-class and five working-class) families and five Israeli middle-class families ( $n = 73$ ).

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