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ABSTRACT

The textbuilding conventions of courtship narratives told by older women of contrasting ethnic minorities are examined. Listener responses to the stories indicate that storytelling conventions are not shared or understood by all listeners. It is proposed that membership in different speech communities based on factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, and family affects the textbuilding conventions speakers have available to them. It is further proposed that such cultural embedding can confuse the foreign students who, when faced with a second language interaction, can easily neglect the very ethnographic information they might be sensitive to in their own language. Activities encouraging foreign students to explore a wide range of possible interpretations for a given interaction can help students focus on problem-solving strategies rather than on simple interpretations, solutions, or cultural stereotypes. (MSE)

Language is Culture: Textbuilding Conventions in Oral Narrative

Sandra Silberstein

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I provide empirical evidence for, and suggest theoretical implications of, a rather common observation: all native speakers of a language do not talk the same. Beyond the oft-cited phonological variation of dialect speakers, I argue that membership in different speech communities based on such factors as age, gender, ethnicity, and family affect the textbuilding, or storytelling, conventions speakers have available to them. I suggest, further, that listener response to a story may turn on whether or not listener and narrator share these conventions.

That native speakers of differing backgrounds tell and receive stories differently has important implications for the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. In particular, communicative competence must turn, in part, on the extent to which one has learned to recognize the ways in which such factors as age, gender, ethnicity, and family are embedded in the narrative choices made by speakers of a language. If native speakers of nonoverlapping speech communities can find each other incomprehensible, how confused might a nonnative speaker be, trying to make sense of a narrative that adheres to nondominant, and presumably unfamiliar, speech conventions, for example, a story told by an older, female speaker from an ethnic minority?

In this paper I look at a single courtship narrative (told by an older Jewish woman), examine some listener response to that story, and discuss the results of a study which compares and contrasts this story with others. As a result of this comparative work, I am able to hypothesize storytelling conventions made available by membership in demographically based speech communities. Finally, I demonstrate that knowledge of storytelling conventions can illuminate areas of cross-cultural confusion uncovered by our study of listener response.

In the end it is this cultural information which will help us understand one courtship narrative. In fact, issues raised here about conventions, about personal

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style, about critical theory remain within the context of a single question: What does one need to know in order to understand and therefore describe a single text?

In the context of storytelling, it requires a story to understand how I came to be interested in the implications of describing a single text.

Originally, I was interested in much more general questions about how people tell stories in the context of longer interactions. As part of a pilot study, I hired a friend, a male linguist, to interview middle-aged Jewish women. One evening my friend broke down in a mock confession over the phone. Partly in parody of listener response, partly in venting his own frustration, he complained: "I don't care what you think of me; [these] women are terrible storytellers. They add all these details, which, far from adding to the point, detract from it. In fact, there is no point to their stories." It struck me that this wonderfully honest and perceptive expression of frustration was reflective of more generally held attitudes—attitudes which my friend had been able to name and parody. He understood before I did that his feelings were an important part of our joint research, and that our investigation should include an examination of listener response. As a result, this paper and the study it reports is built around that story from the pilot study that evokes the most diverse reactions, even among my colleagues, Mrs. Blum's "Within a Two-Week Period I Had Five Proposals"[1]:

WITHIN A TWO-WEEK PERIOD I HAD FIVE PROPOSALS[2]

S: Can you tell me about any of your dates? Do any of them stick out in your mind?
[
B: Yes yes =
S: =((very soft vocalization))
B: I had ah - within a two-week ((laughing)) p(h)eriod I had five proposals.
[
S: ((voiced smile))
((S turns over tape))
S: Yeah ah
B: Anyway=
S: =So we were talking about your five proposals.
B: Yeah ((laughs)) ((quickly)) Five proposals in a two-week time. It=
[
S: ((voiced smile))
B: =seems that ah - ((tsk))[3] I met my husband Jack Blum at a fraternity affair at Carlisle,

[1]The transcript omits several embedded anecdotes which are not the subject of this paper. The anecdotes are discussed at some length in Silberstein (1982). Their omission should in no way suggest that the transcript reflects a *kernel* or *real* story. Rather, the transcript comprises part of a longer tale.

[2]Transcript format is that developed by Gail Jefferson, as outlined in Sudnow (1972). Those conventions used here are detailed below:

A. Overlapping utterances
The point at which an ongoing utterance is overlapped by another is marked with a single left-hand bracket at the point where the overlap begins:
S: Can you tell me about any of your dates? Do any of them stick out in your mind?
[[

B: Yes

The point at which overlapping utterances stop overlapping is marked with a single right-hand bracket:

S: Lots of people
] [ ]
B: a number of boys yes.

B. Contiguous utterances

When there is no interval between adjacent utterances, the second being latched immediately to the first (without overlapping it), the utterances are linked together with equal signs:

B: Anyway=
=
S: =So we were talking about your five proposals.

C. Intervals within utterances

A short untimed pause within an utterance is indicated by a dash:

\- B: It's ah, u::m what's the big fraternity you know - Z.B.T.

D. Characteristics of speech delivery

A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable it follows:

: B: So I said well, I have this: - other fella that- ah,

A double colon prolongs the extension:

:: B: It's ah, u::m what's the big fraternity you know - Z.B.T.

A period indicates a stopping fall in tone, not necessarily the end of a sentence:

. B: Phi Ep.

A comma indicates a continuing intonation, not necessarily between clauses of sentences:

, B: It's now Z.B.T. Yes. It was Phi- he was Superior at Phi Ep,

A comma indicates a continuing intonation, not necessarily between clauses of a sentence:

S: =Oh he was from Phili, okay
[
, B: his name was Bob Singer,=
S: Okay
=[
B: he's studying law,

A question mark indicates a rising inflection, not necessarily a question:

? S: You didn't like *any* of them?

A single dash, immediately following a word indicates a halting, abrupt cutoff. In the example below, note the distinction between an untimed pause and a halting cutoff:

\- S: =You were- that you were going with this - no?

Emphasis is indicated by varieties of italics and larger print:

italics B: No: I wa- they were just *dances*, that's all.
LARGE B: Which is now Beta Sigma Rho. NO! Which is not Beta Sigma
PRINT Rho=

Audible aspirations (h) are inserted where they occur occur;
double parentheses are used to enclose descriptions of phenomena not easily transcribed:

(h) B: I had ah - within a two-week ((laughing)) p(h)eriod I
(()) had five proposals.

Double parentheses are also used to provide other details of the conversational scene:

((S turns over tape))

or to describe various characteristics of the talk:

B: ((quickly)) Five proposals in a two-week time.

E. Other transcript symbols

Vertical ellipses indicate the omission of intervening turns of talk:

B: A:nd - he was right, we got married and
]
S: Hum
. .
. .
. .
B: That was the beginning.

[1]((Tsk)) indicates a dentalveolar click.

S: ((vocalization))
B: Dickinson Law. He:'s the Superior from- Penn State, a:nd h:e is-
S: What's that mean Superior?
B: Head of the fraternity.
S: I: see um yeah
B: [Phi Ep.
S: Uh huh
B: Which is now Beta Sigma Rho. NO! Which is not Beta Sigma Rho=
S: [((vocalization))
B: =that's another boy I dated excuse me.
S: [((laughs))
B: It's ah, u::m what's the big fraternity you know - Z.B.T.
S: ((with recognition)) Z.B.T.,
B: It's now Z.B.T. Yes. It was Phi- he was Superior at Phi Ep,=
S: [right
B: =((tsk))
S: ((vocalization))
B: and he was in Carlisle visiting, ah - some mills in Pennsylvania. He was a senior, and he - had an idea that he was gonna have a chain of hosiery mills. This is what he wanted to do.
S: Hum
B: And there were some in- there was one plant in York Pennsylvania ((quickly)) he came down to visit. While he was down he visited, at the fraternity house. I was going with a young attorney, oh he was to be an attorney=
S: =Uh hum=
B: =from Philadelphia. Bob Singer was his name.
S: ((voiced smile))
B: A:nd ah - I met Jack and that same night I met two other boys who were visiting. And
S: [*H(h)uh!* So you had the one fellow who was in town and these three visitors. - Right?
B: [No - no=
S: =You were- that you were going with this - no?
B: [No. No no no. No. I had a date with this boy from Philadelphia=
S: =Oh he was from Phili, okay
B: [his name was Bob Singer,=
S: Okay
B: =[he's studying law,

S: Right
B: his brother's a Rhodes Scholar.
S: Huh
B: A:nd his brother was there that night, I danced with him=
[
S: Um hum
B: =and I - um one of the fellows came over and asked to dance with me and it was *Jack Blum*.
S: Hum
B: And you know at fraternity dances you dance with=
S: =Lots of people
[ ]
B: a number of boys, yes.=
S: =Yeah
B: ((tsk)) And I danced with two other boys, who were visiting at the fraternity and- by coincidence they were- from Penn State, there was sort of gathering or something there, a:nd whe:n - the next week I got a letter, from Jack, inviting me, to a fraternity dance. I could not remember which one he was.
S: *((laughs!))*
B: I couldn't figure out which one of the three this Jack Blum was.
S: Now did you know which one of the three you liked best?
B: I didn't like *any* of them. I wasn't-
[
S: You didn't like *any* of them?
B: No: I wa- they were just *dances*, that's all.

.
.

B: But ah, then, I went to the fraternity house and he was very lovely, as I said he was Superior at his house that means he's the head of the house.=
S: =Uh huh
B: A:nd he was- highly- he was older.
S: ((vocalization))
B: He had worked four years before he went to college.
S: Ah
B: And ah- he was one of the top honor students,=
S: Um hum
=[
B: and I think third in his class at the ah- in accounting and- he was:- quite a boy. Anyhow - I went there, and that- and there I met a girl by the name- of Ruth D:eutsch, from Allentown, and she was there, with her childhood sweetheart, Art Schwartz. Well, ((tsk))
S: ((softly)) hum
B: when I told her- oh she was telling me that I had the best date in the house and I said well ((tsk)) I'm not staying, I'm leaving=
[
S: ((laughs))
B: =tomorrow. She sa- if you do, she says, that is the meanest cruellest thing

that anybody could ever do. How could you *do* that to such a wonderful *boy?*

S: *Huh!*

B: So I said well, I have this. . . . that- ah,

S: [((laugh))

B: wants me to come over there, and I know him he's from my home town Harrisburg, and I said ah - I'm gonna leave. Oh she says, . . . ! would have no respect for you at all she says I thought I liked you when I met you but she says ((tsk)) - you are really cruel. Well I had a very- I was a very conscientious=

S: [Whoa (it b- and)

B: person and very sensitive and it bothered me. (I'm- I'm)

S: Um hum

B: So I called the other boy up and told him I *just* can't do it I'll come to another fraternity affair but I just can't *do* that. And we had a very nice time. We really did. I enjoyed it, ((tsk))

S: [ ] Um hum dum

B: =and he started writing to me, and in the meantime I was dating all the time.

S: Um hum

B: And ah, I had these other boys, and- I don't know whether it was because they *knew* that this boy had a crush on me or what but everybody started proposing!

S: *OH WOW!*

B: [Well, well when finally, when Jack proposed to me ((tsk)) - ah, I told him frankly I wasn't in love with him. And he said that didn't make a bit of difference to him. Because he knew that I=

S: [((vocalization))

B: =was in- that he- that he was in love with me, and he didn't- it didn't bother him one bit he knew that- eventually. He says I know the kind of person you are, and he- I was just timid that was i- mostly my problem. And -he was right, we got married and

S:] Hum

. . .

B: That was the beginning,

As it became clear that Mrs. Blum's tape elicits quite different responses from different listeners, I began to solicit reactions whenever I could from both linguists

and laypeople: older and younger, Jews and non-Jews. While some listeners found this a "wonderful" story, others evidenced no taste for telling me why the story perplexed or even offended them. I do not claim my sample to be statistically representative, but the complaints which attend this story are so systematic, they provide important clues as to the questions we should be asking about the tale. What follows is a description of the most systematic negative responses to Mrs. Blum's story—responses, I will argue, which are due to cross-cultural confusion.

LISTENER RESPONSE

In fundamental ways, Mrs. Blum's rendition fails to conform to some listeners' notions of how a courtship should be presented. While it violates some listeners' expectations from the point of view of both content and structure, the scope of this paper allows for discussion of issues of content.

"Irrelevant Details"

Some listeners complain of irrelevant details. They question why we need to know the name of Mrs. Blum's suitor, Bob Singer; her friend, Kay Hartman, even her parents' friend, the girl at the party, Ruth Deutsch, and "her childhood sweetheart." And they question why we are given geographical markers for Mrs. Blum's suitors. Still others wonder why Mrs. Blum struggles so hard to correct irrelevant details. Why they ask, do we need to know the precise name of Jack's fraternity?

Details "in Poor Taste"

Some listeners find Mrs. Blum's use of status markers to be in poor taste. Why, they ask, do we need to know that her suitor's brother was a Rhodes Scholar? In fact, many question, or are put off by, Mrs. Blum's frequent assurances that Jack was "superior" in many ways.

Some listeners find the discussion of other suitors "unkind to one's spouse" and report that it makes them somewhat uncomfortable. More evidence for this point of view is provided by another interviewee, Mrs. Brooks, who finds such storytelling within her family "rather disloyal" and even "rather objectionable."

Lack of Certain Relevant Details

Many who listen to Mrs. Blum's story feel they lack the information they need to understand why she chose to marry Jack Blum. They complain that they have no sense of the rapport between the two and no real sense of who Jack Blum is, other than superior of his fraternity, an older man, and an A student. One listener complained that she felt Mrs. Blum herself to be absent from the story. And another listener reported that, despite all the details provided, he simply could not form an image of these people in his mind; he found the story frustrating because of his own lack of identification with it.

A FIRST APPROACH TO THE TEXT

It is tempting to seek a relatively straightforward descriptive metaphor to help those who misapprehend Mrs. Blum's discourse. At first I considered the metaphor

of a skeletal, kernel story comprehensible to anyone but made confusing to some by Mrs. Blum's embellishments. Indeed, our task would be a good deal simpler if the following paragraph, written for an earlier draft of this work, could explain the problems some listeners have with Mrs. Blum's story:

> To the skeleton of her story, Mrs. Blum adds expansions, embellishments, and several subsidiary anecdotes. If one is unfamiliar with a storytelling tradition which fits amplifications to a particular audience at the moment of the telling, one will find this story hopelessly baroque—filled with diversions that prove to be cul-de-sacs along the way. One must learn to read Mrs. Blum's markers, often constructed of paralinguistic signals, if one is to find the kernel story, hidden among its amplifications.

Elegantly simple. And a rich tradition of 20th century structural linguistics is consistent with this kind of kernel/embellishment model.[4] Readers will recognize Chomsky's sentence-level deep and surface structure as within this tradition. Each of these theories of language and culture implies that beneath the messy instances of language data which confront the linguist, there is something more real or concrete.

My intent is not to dismiss the contributions of a structural approach to language, but rather to note that it does not respond to the questions raised here. The notion of a kernel story, a text deep structure, does not help me to describe those aspects of Mrs. Blum's story that listeners find perplexing. I can create seemingly unembellished versions of her story that are far easier to follow for an initially confused listener, but these kernel stories are in fact my creation, and, as linguist Deborah Tannen commented upon being presented one of these, "That's not Mrs. Blum's story." In fact, what I will argue is that a story does not contain detail, a story *is* detail. Thus we need to analyse Mrs. Blum's story on its own terms, to discover what is conventionalized about her story and what is unique. To do so, one needs to compare and contrast this story with others.

As I already had Mrs. Blum's daughter's story on tape, I had some strong evidence that people in the same family tell stories in similar ways. A careful examination of stories elicited from the rest of Mrs. Blum's family and another multi-generational family suggests that there are family-based narrative conventions—that there are storytelling conventions that inform the choices that members of the same family make when telling stories. What I will not argue is that narrative conventions determine how we speak. I do not mean to suggest that every elderly, Jewish woman from Ohio will tell the same courtship story. What I do suggest is that parameters such as family, age, gender, ethnicity seem to constrain the choices one has available when one builds a story. To be sure, one's choices are at the same time convention-

[4]Structuralist analyses from Propp (1928 [1968]) and Levi-Strauss (1955) on have documented *stock* characters and key elements in narrative. Following Barthes, Chatman (1978), for example, posits kernels and satellites as the staples of narrative structure. The function of satellites "is that of filling in, elaborating, completing the kernel: they form the flesh on the skeleton" (p. 54). The concept of an invariable kernel story—the real story beneath its embellishments—is consistent with the work of many current theorists. It is close to inappropriate extensions of the Chomskyan notion of deep and surface structure to text grammars; to the structuralist/semiological theories which posit a *concept* independent of a language which signifies it, or an abstract *langue* independent of instances of its use, *parole*; and even to those Marxists who posit a base (economic and historical forces) which determines a superstructure (cultural forms): (c.f. Van Dijk [1972], Barthes [1957 (1970)], and, for a critique of vulgar Marxists, Williams 1977).

alized and unique. I am suggesting that when we tell a story, we choose from among the conventions of the speech communities to which we belong. The set of choices we make for any given telling is, in fact, unique. Mrs. Blum will never again tell her story to anyone else, even to me, in quite the same way. But the choices that we make over and over again, the systematic choices one makes among conventions is what I define as *personal style*.

THE DATA

Courtship stories were elicited, against which to examine Mrs. Blum's text, from all members of her family and all members of another multi-generational family. The groups are quite similar except with respect to ethnicity. Mrs. Blum's family is Jewish; the McCloud/Brooks are white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. These demographics allowed me to explore storytelling conventions along the parameter of family and to raise hypotheses about gender-based, generational, and ethnic traditions in storytelling. Family and ethnic conventions will be the focus here; some hypotheses about generational constraints are raised in the final section of the paper.

Space constraints preclude a detailed description of data collection. It suffices to note that courtship stories were elicited in the context of longer oral history interviews; the circumstances of data collection were comparable.

FAMILY CONVENTIONS

While there are a great many similarities among stories told by members of the same family, our focus here will be those conventions which illuminate Mrs. Blum's tale and the confusion it evokes.

The Blum/Meyer Family

"That Was the Beginning". In the case of each Blum/Meyer speaker, some part of the story is framed with a phrase much like Mrs. Blum's final phrase, "that was the beginning." Her daughter says, "that was the beginning of our romance." Her granddaughter say, "that was the beginning of . . . the relationship." Her grandson offers, "that was the beginning of the courtship." As I note elsewhere (Silberstein, 1982), like Western fairy tales, the Blum/Meyers focus on necessarily rocky beginnings which precede mature relationships.

Courtship Storytelling as Teaching Devices and Loci for Discussions of Morality. Morality and mores figure prominently in these stories. Moral content is part of the vocabulary of motive of the Blum/Meyer woman.[5] More than this, a fascination with the changing moral code characterizes some of the stories in all three generations. This may be because of the situation in which we had all come together. Mrs. Blum's granddaughter was trying to decide whether to marry the man with whom

[5] I refer here to C. Wright Mills' (1940) notion of a *shared vocabulary of motive*. Mills argues that stated motives must be seen as articulations within ideologies shared with one's community– articulations within a shared vocabulary of motive. So powerful is the need to conform to a shared vocabulary of motive, Mills points out, that people will actually refrain from doing something if they cannot locate a reason for it in this shared vocabulary, i.e. "What will I tell my friends?"

she lived; she and I were in Ohio to attend the wedding of a mutual friend. Thus, the topic of changing mores was particularly salient.

Evidence that, like Mrs. Blum, the second-generation Meyers have used their courtship story as a teaching device comes from Mrs. Blum's daughter who reports that she and her husband usually told their story to the children around anniversary time.

The Two Suitors Convention. Other suitors and dates figure prominently in the Blum/Meyer stories. The phrase, *two suitors convention*, is suggested by Jean Kennard (1978) who, in her book *Victims of Convention*, examines the use of two suitors in the nineteenth century novel. She points out that the function of this tradition is to present the heroine/reader with a set of qualities which she must either reject or accept. Maturity is defined by choosing the right suitor. In like fashion, Mrs. Blum says of Jack: "He was so good and so wonderful and so bright. The kind of a person that- I really wanted but was afraid to let myself go I think." Mrs. Blum's granddaughter's narrative is similar. At the time she met her future husband, she was in the process of rejecting the wrong suitor:

> I was not really satisfied in the relationship because I had sort of been bringing him up. I was sort of his girlfriend and his mother and social counselor, I really liked him and I really enjoyed being with him, but it wasn't- I didn't want to run the whole show you know. That's what I found myself doing more and more.

In contrast, Jean describes her husband:

> One of the things when I first met him and, you know he told me he wanted to do when he finished was you know to be in academia. [Um hum] That really appealed to me in terms of the kind of lifestyle that I wanted to be associated with. [Um hum, um hum] And I'm sure that that was part of my decision-making in deciding to become involved with him, because I was interested in a man whose goals and whose lifestyle would be compatible with something that I could feel comfortable in. . . .

Like the nineteenth-century novel, then, these stories demonstrate the maturing process of a female who learns to make the right choice. The *two suitors convention* is particularly appropriate for stories meant to serve as teaching devices. Mrs. Blum's careful detailing of Jack's attributes serves as a display that she made the right choice and demonstrates how she knew. While some listeners find the citing of other suitors "unkind to one's spouse," the two suitors convention and the mentioning of other dates in general can serve as a kindness to, and enhance the impression of, one's partner. By demonstrating that they had other options, these narrators suggest that the person they chose was the most desirable. More importantly, perhaps, the convention teaches the point of view that one should date a number of people before one chooses a partner. This is clearly an assumption shared by all members of this family and is reflected over and over again in these stories.

Use of Demographic and Competence Markers. At least in the first and second generations, the Blum/Meyer stories serve as displays that narrators have made the right choice.[6] It should not surprise us, then, that narrators in this family cite

[6]Generations are numbered first through third with the first representing the oldest speakers.

demographic and competence markers. Like Mrs. Blum, they want us to know on what basis they made their decisions. Unlike Mrs. Blum, the stated bases of these decisions includes more than demographics. The second-generation storytellers speak of attraction and romance; the third generation speaks of attraction and compatibility. But everyone in this family marks their partners in terms of their membership in social communities and/or their professional affiliations. Citing others, Mrs. Blum's son-in-law tells us that Ellen Blum Meyer was a "very pretty Jewish girl." Ellen tells us that he was "part of a group of young men all of whom had been in the service, and all of whom were in their mid- to late-twenties, none of whom were married, and they all were working for their fathers."

Unlike the McCloud/Brooks stories, this kind of demographic marking is obligatory for the Blum/Meyer narrative. Recall that an attachment to an academic lifestyle made a suitor attractive to Mrs. Blum's granddaughter.

Animated Interaction. In brief, the Blum/Meyers appear to be more animated in part because of a consistent use of humor, raised volume, faster speech (more words per minute) contrasting intonational contours, and a much greater affinity for direct-quoting (they utilize this device twice as much as do the McCloud/Brooks.) Similarly, perhaps because of a greater cultural affinity, the Blum/Meyers and I interact a good deal more, overlapping and linking our utterances to each other.

I find this particularly suggestive as these are all features which enhance audience involvement and which Tannen (1979) finds typical of her New York Jewish Eastern European subjects. (The Midwestern Blum/Meyers are originally from Western Europe.)

The McCloud/Brooks Family

I include a brief discussion here of the ways in which the McCloud/Brooks stories differ from those of Mrs. Blum's family. Again, the focus is on those conventions which illuminate Mrs. Blum's telling and the confusion it evokes.

"That's How We Met". While the Blum/Meyers frame their courtship tales as beginnings, each McCloud/Brooks speaker frames a courtship story with a phrase much like "that's how we met." This may be because their stories serve, not as teaching devices, but as oral history.

Courtship as History. These stories do not seem to be told often and McCloud/Brooks speakers call forth a good deal more searches than do the Blum/Meyers. As precise historians, they also show some preference for specific time markers such as "two weeks ago," as opposed to the Blum/Meyer preference for nonspecific markers such as "some time later."

Censored Stories. While citing other suitors is a central feature and an important teaching device in Blum/Meyer stories, these elements are carefully censored from McCloud/Brooks narratives, although such suitors usually existed. Evidence that discussing other suitors is not considered appropriate by the McCloud/Brooks comes from second-generation Kay McCloud Brooks. When I asked her if she had ever heard the story of her mother's other suitor, she responded that she expected she had but "wouldn't have responded favorably. . . . After all she chose my Dad, that

was years ago. . . . That was the past. She'd made a choice. Why keep harping on, or harking back to, might-have-beens?" Kay avows that she "would never have repeated" the story. And she never did.

Demographic Information as Secondary. The Blum/Meyers rely on demographic information to build a sense of community and worthiness of a spouse. In McCloud/Brooks stories, less demographic information is cited about partners and, when such information occurs, it is made to seem incidental. Here is another example from Kay McCloud Brooks, "The Army Signal Corps group that Ed was attached to had a dance once a month."

ETHNIC TRADITIONS

I raise two hypotheses about the different ethnic traditions from which these families draw. The first has already been suggested when I noted that the animation and interaction of Blum/Meyer narratives may be ethnic in origin. The second hypothesis is that Mrs. Blum's family may well have available to its conventions of a European Jewish matchmaking storytelling tradition. I present two stories from Ausubel's *Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (1948):

The Aristocrat

Shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, a shadchen [matchmaker] called on a lady client in Minsk.

"How much dowry have you?" he asked delicately.

"Two thousand rubles."

The shadchen then took out his little black book and said, "Well now, let's see! H-mmm. For two thousand rubles I can give you a doctor."

"No, I don't want a doctor."

"Maybe you'd like a rabbi?"

"No, no rabbi."

"How about a cantor?"

"No, no cantor."

"Then what is it you want?"

"I want a worker."

"A worker? You're a smart one! For two thousand rubles you think you can get a worker?" (p. 416)

In this story it is the capacity of the man for a remunerative career that is stressed. Jack Blum, too, was described as a man who knew "what he wanted to do" in the business world.

Here is the second tale from Ausubel:

Speak Up

"You faker, you swindler!" hissed the prospective bridegroom, taking the shadchen aside. "Why did you ever get me into this? The girl's old, she's homely, she lisps, she squints—"

"You don't have to whisper," interrupted the shadchen, "she's deaf too!" (p. 418).

Health and appearance are stressed for women in the matchmaking tales. Similarly, Mrs. Blum's daughter was described as a "pretty, Jewish girl and she's healthy." Clearly this is an allusion to, as well as a parody of, these traditional tales.

CONCLUSION

It remains only to use knowledge of courtship storytelling conventions to illuminate areas of confusion documented by our study of listener responses. Remember that Mrs. Blum was experienced as providing irrelevant details (names and places), and details in poor taste (suitors and competence markers), while omitting relevant details of her relationship with Jack.

"Irrelevant Details"

In part, details of fraternity affiliation and geographical origin serve to describe friends and potential partners in terms of membership in social communities. As we have seen, such markings are important to Blum/Meyer stories. Of similar importance can be the naming of other suitors. In addition, older narrators in both families tend to search for names—names of people, names of places. Older people have a memorializing quality to their stories as they try to recreate the world.

Details "in Poor Taste"

Discussions of other suitors is characteristic of Blum/Meyer stories. While the use of competence markers may be ethnic in origin, both kinds of details serve as displays that one made the right decision, and as teaching devices for mate selection.

Lack of Relevant Details

In part, this complaint turns on the fact that Mrs. Blum's notion of relevance so differs from that of some listeners. It is the Jewish women who systematically find this a wonderful story. Non-Jewish men most often find this narrative not to their taste. But some of the constraints on relevance may also be generational. It is only in the stories of the third generation that I find discussion of the quality of the relationship and explicit mention of rapport. It was the younger listeners who missed this information in Mrs. Blum's story.

What I am arguing finally is that one cannot make sense of Mrs. Blum's story without understanding the conventions from which she chooses. If one does not share her background, and hence her narrative strategies, one may very well not like or even comprehend her story. I am arguing, further, that it is just such cultural embedding that can confuse the foreign student who, when faced with a second language interaction, can easily neglect the very ethnographic information she might be sensitive to in her own language.

In my ESL classes, I have given students problem-solving activities which reflect cross-cultural confusions I have experienced in my home society. In these exercises, my goal is not to provide a formulaic solution for each problem. Rather, the intent is to encourage students to explore a wide range of possible interpretations for a given interaction. Often I have had no single interpretation to offer my students. This forces us to focus, not on definitive solutions, but rather on problem-solving skills or strategies. Students come to understand that no one feels always comfortable in any environment. But the anthropologist within us can render us better communicators and actors in a world of diverse human interactions.

English today is used by groups of people throughout the world - both native and non-native speakers - each with different views of the world to express. ESL/EFL teachers may have to assess carefully their own culturally based interpretations of the varieties presently in use. Only then, can we work to lessen the confusion of the non-native speaker confronted with an unfamiliar or non-dominant variety of English.

What we as teachers must never do is to urge students to rely on cultural stereotypes. I am suggesting, rather, that students of culture be sensitized to the impact on narrative choices that membership in diverse speech communities can have in a pluralistic society.

All of us need to remember that a perplexing story is not necessarily a bad one.

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