

False Starts Can be True

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False Starts Can be True  
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In this paper, I deal with a phenomenon in storytelling in everyday conversation which I call the "true start." Unlike others who have looked at so-called "repairs" in discourse, (Jefferson, in press; Linde, 1975; Shimanoff and Brunak, 1977)<sup>1</sup> I will argue that "true starts" exist and are an unconscious narrative strategy which allows speakers to produce full, "textured" versions of story materials in a social and rhetorical tradition which prefers straightforward, "the facts nothing but the facts" exposition.

These starts which look a great deal like what are normally called "false starts," are not errors in an ordinary sense but serve a strategic function in the conversational and interactional context in which the story is being told.

In storytelling, it often happens that a speaker begins his story, interrupts himself in mid-sentence, introduces background material, often of a descriptive, historical or judgmental sort and then resumes the main storyline by repeating the interrupted sentence and completing it. This is a classical true start situation.

- (1) E I mean . . . I mean . . . did I ever tell you this story about the water? . . . I mean the coke? I went i . . . I always drink coke, right? [yeah] . . . so L is thr . . . walking around with this gallon of spring water and I can't understand why she's walking around with this gallon of spring water and she keeps talking she keeps telling these . . . vague . . . making these vague comments about the restaurants on the New York Thruway and why at least we have this spring water . . . and I . . . you know I didn't know what she's talking about so we go to this restaurant and I order a coke . . . and I ordered some sort of sandwich and I don't think you ever ordered anything

In (1), the sentence beginning I went i . . . is broken off and the material about the water etc. is inserted. E resumes the sentence changing tense to the historical present and completes it: so we go into this restaurant. I went i/so we go into this restaurant comprise the true start. Sometimes the start is less clear, with the speaker repeating not the entire sentence but only some key semantic material from the interrupted sentence to indicate the resumption of the main story line. (See Appendix for an example of this type of true start. See also, Polanyi, 1977, forthcoming b).

In order to understand why speakers use true starts it is important to understand the constraints a speaker must deal with once s/he has decided to tell a story to social equals in a normal conversational setting.<sup>2</sup> S/he must:

1. Negotiate for room in the conversation
2. Introduce a story in a way that is coherent with the preceding discourse.<sup>3</sup>
3. Produce a story with a "point" which can be seen as somehow related to the previous discourse.
4. Structure the story conventionally in order to present the expected information in a way which the audience can easily understand.
5. Develop the story fully enough so that the audience understands why the speaker chose to tell them this particular story at this particular moment. Specifically, the speaker must provide enough information to contextualize the events in the story, its relationship to the discourse, and its relationship to them—why the speaker thought it appropriate to tell the story to them in this particular situation.
6. NOT BORE THE AUDIENCE or appear to be taking up too much time telling the story.

Since I am concentrating here on true starts, I will be looking specifically at those constraints which conflict sufficiently so that the speaker may choose to seem to make an error rather than fail to meet all of the interactional and linguistic obligations of being a narrator.

It is important to remember that normal turn taking is suspended during the duration of a narrative. Once the audience has agreed to hear a story, chances are excellent that the speaker will hold the floor until that story is completed. Even if other speakers cut in or interrupt to ask questions or make remarks, the floor will return to the speaker to finish the story. Since by telling his story he is taking up conversational "room" and constraining other people not to talk, the speaker has to perform well and be interesting to listen to or she will here be guilty of an interactional faux pas. Let us take the constraints listed above more or less in order and see how they may conflict with one another.

Once a speaker decides to tell a story in a conversation, s/he must find an opening in the flow of speakers and topics and negotiate for time. The s/he must signal to the listeners that a story has begun. The sentence with which s/he introduces the story must be in some way coherent with the preceding conversation or listeners will not understand why the subject was changed or what is being talked about. This introductory sentence may serve as an "abstract" of the entire story. However since it is the first sentence of what will be an extended discourse its main function is to tie the story with the preceding conversation. For example, the first sentence in (1), (entitled "Eating on the New York Thruway" and printed in full below) involved potables:

- (2) E I mean . . . I mean . . . did I ever tell you  
the story about the water? I mean the coke?

Since the restaurants on the New York Thruway had been the topic of conversation and both coke and water are reasonable items to procure at a restaurant, the speaker effectively assured the audience that the looming story will, in some way, link up with the topic at hand.

Not only the first sentence of a story, but the point of the story must link up in some way with the preceding discourse. Another constraint a storyteller must meet is to ensure that the story being told has a point - some observation, happening or illustration of the ways of the world which justifies to the listeners why they have listened to the story - otherwise, in Labov's wonderful phrase, the listeners will say "so what?" when the story is over, indicating that the storyteller has lost face more or less seriously in the interaction (Labov, 1972). In point of fact stories often have multiple points each of which is evaluated by evaluation devices and which may satisfy different constraints.

American stories are quite strictly structured. The events in the story must be told in the order in which they are presumed to have happened (Labov, 1972). In addition, a speaker must contextualize the events, in time and space and locate the events and situations in the story in relation to the characters; all of these story materials must also be located in time and space relative to the speaker and audience.

Of crucial importance to the reception of the story is the skillful handling of the "evaluation structure" of the story. This structure consists of devices such as repetition, reported speech and thought, build up of suspense through delaying the denouement etc. which allows the speaker to indicate the importance of key events or other story materials (Labov, 1972; Longacre, 1975; Polanyi-Bowditch, 1976; Polanyi, 1977, forthcoming a, b, c). Speakers are very sensitive to the proper functioning of evaluation in their stories and repair errors of evaluation in syntactically and semantically correct sentences (Polanyi, 1977).

In his seminal essay, "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," (1972) Labov presents a model of narrative which claims that a complete narrative has 6 sequentially arranged parts: an abstract, a short summary of the entire story is followed by an orientation section which identifies in some way the persons, places, activities and situation involved in the action. The orientation section is followed by a section of complicating action which is highly evaluated followed by a result and ending with a coda returning the speaker to the present time (Labov, 1972). (The evaluation section is placed between the complicating action and the result in Labov's model. This does not correspond well to data I have seen in which the evaluation is found throughout the story.)

A speaker often would like to develop the orientation section of stories fully before beginning the actual actions of the stories. The orientation section which details crucial "background" material about characters, place, present and past situations and historical

events is often where the actual "story" may be located. The speaker may well be telling the story as a comment on some moral or social issue which is located in the orientation material, or may wish to justify the actions of the plot in terms of important contextual information. Then, too, the desire for a more "textured" exposition may be motivated by the constraint of relevance to the conversational context, since very often the material which satisfies this constraint is found in the orientation section, and can not be expressed except in an extended storytelling manner. Unfortunately, however, story abstracts may not be compelling enough in themselves to assure the audience's sustained interest in the story the speaker is beginning. In addition, an extended orientation section may seem overly long to the audience - who are expecting a "story" with events leading to a climax justifying why the story was told.

It is important to remember that the socially preferred mode of exposition and explanation whether in science, courts of law, or over a couple of beers is straightforward and to the point - saying just enough and not too much is almost a moral virtue. Labov in recent comments on "good" storytellers claims that one of their virtues is that they tell their stories in a "straight forward" way. We all know too of the social stigma attached to being "longwinded" and telling "long drawn out stories which never get to the point." Therefore, the storyteller can be caught between needing to develop the story in a more complex and elaborate fashion - giving a great deal of weight to descriptive material rather than reciting a series of events, and yet wishing to appear to be telling the story in the most economical way possible. (Labov, 19

There is no easy way out of this predicament for the speaker. To choose to introduce the story by a series of background "observations" may well make the audience restive and they may seize the opportunity to get the floor back, assuming s/he is not, in fact, going to tell a story. What might have been an opportunity to tell a story may then be downgraded (in the frustrated narrator's view) into a normal conversational exchange. Should s/he begin the story with an abstract and then launch into an overly long orientation section, the listeners may also rebel. Having agreed to allow the speaker to tell a story (i.e. recount a series of events about a certain "thing that happened" with a minimal of contextualizing material) they had not given a free hand to take up "story time" giving them the kind of information which the captive audience might prefer to exchange in a conversation in which they have full opportunity to state their opinions about the matter in normal turntaking fashion.

Rather than appear to be taking up too much time telling their listeners things which are not furthering the action of the story and thus delay reinstatement of normal turntaking rules, the speaker may turn to the tacit true start strategy. S/he begins to tell the story, signalling that the story really underway by beginning the event structure (after an abstract perhaps and limited orientation material); then s/he interrupts the flow of speech, often in

midsentence (and often in the midst of a sentence containing an event); puts in as much contextualizing material as necessary and proper and then return to the main story line by taking up the sentence which had been broken off.

The true start signals the beginning and end of a digression and allows the speaker to satisfy two mutually exclusive constraints. In the storyline proper s/he can give a clear, logical, causally arranged and causally connected account of what went on, and yet in the digression, in the section bracketed off from the storyline by the true start markers, s/he can contextualize events as fully as s/he wants and needs to. There too the material which links the story closely with his listeners or with the preceding discourse may be presented.

It is culturally significant that "digressions" in speech are often treated as mistakes or, if carried out "knowingly" are often accompanied by apologies. We allow a fully developed, "textured" storytelling structure in conversation if the speaker apologizes for it or if the speaker seems to be making a mistake and is hurrying to correct it. These strategies may be thought of as diminishing the speaker's responsibility for taking up more time in the interaction than s/he is allowed. It is as if, within limits, only the time the speaker is recounting the main storyline "counts" in the interaction. Since the "true start" seems to be a repair of a mistake, and it is only polite to allow people who have made an error an opportunity to correct it, the speaker using this strategy has not taken up time with storytelling but only with "repair" work - therefore after the repair s/he can go back and take a "normal" or acceptable amount of time to tell the story. This is the power of the true start.

One way to categorize the functioning of the starts in stories is to think of them in terms of PUSH and POP markers - since the "background" material bracketed by the true start can be regarded as a subunit embedded within the main text of the story. We can use these terms borrowed from a similar situation in Computer Science to describe the transitions between the main text and the background. A PUSH is a move from the storyline to the embedded material, and a POP is the resumption of the originally interrupted part of the story.

Other devices besides true starts can also be employed to fulfill a similar PUSH/POP function. So, and well for example, can indicate that the speaker is PUSHING into a digression, moving from the main line of thought into a subsidiary one, and also can indicate POPPING from the digression back to the main story line. We will look briefly at so functioning as such a marker. However, both so and well lack the strategic usefulness of the true start since they are merely connectives and not an admission of an error. (An example of well functioning as a PUSH/POP together with a true start can be found in the example text found in the Appendix.)

So—rather than spend so much time on the abstract and orientation, let's get down to the story! This story was collected at a dinner party. There were five participants and the general topic of discussion was the proposed move of T and his wife K.

(3)

## Eating on the New York Thruway

- E: I mean . . . I mean . . . Did I ever tell you the story about the water . . . I mean the coke? I went i . . . I always drink coke, right (L: Right) So L is thr . . . walking around with this gallon of spring water and I can't understand why she's walking around with this gallon of spring water. And she keeps talk . . . she keeps telling me these . . . vague . . . making these vague comments about the the restaurants on the New York Thruway and at least we have this spring water. And I don . . . you know, I don't know what she's talking about. So we go to this restaurant . . . and I order a coke . . . and I ordered some sort of sandwich. Now I don't think you ordered anything.
- L: I didn't order anything. (E: Right) I sat there making faces.
- E: Well, one thing about this restaurant was that every person in it was retarded. (laughter) That's all. I mean the people who worked there. They were, I mean, . . . one after the other of the wierdest looking people I've ever seen (laughter) either they were retarded or they were let out for the day from the mental hospital. I . . . you know . . .
- L: They didn't seem to be able to distinguish between washing the floor and making a hamburger
- L: Both things were done in the same way (laughter)
- E: So this coke appears. . . I was very thirsty . . . And I went like this . . . straw in . . . took a sip of this coke and (laughing) I started in screaming "I've been poisoned!" (laughter) And L, very calmly, offered me this spring water. (laughter) I mean . . . I have never in my life tasted anything so bad. . . . (laughter) . . . it was it was
- T: Whadda they do to that
- L: You see, they also can't distinguish between making a coke . . . and wringing out the mop . . . (laughter)

We will go through the functioning of the true start in this story in some detail, with an aim to understand how the material in the "digression" is crucial to a proper understanding of the story and the fulfilling of important interpersonal constraints.

After announcing that she is going to tell a story and that it is going to be "about" water and/or coke, speaker begins immediately to launch into the action of her story. She says, I went i then stops and interpolates a section of explanatory material dealing with her coke drinking habit and that L is walking around with a gallon of spring water making odd remarks. Having stated that she did not understand the meaning of those remarks she POPS back to

the main storyline by recapitulating the true start sentence and finishing: So we go to this restaurant and I order a coke.

That the coke is important we know from the abstract, but that she is a habitual coke drinker we know from the true start. When she announces somewhat later that she felt poisoned by the coke (I started in screaming "I've been poisoned") we know that she is a competent person to judge the worth of cokes since she always drinks them. She could not have told us that she always drinks coke before she began the story since no one particularly cared about her preference in soft drinks and there were several experts present ready to comment on the wretchedness of conditions of the NY Thruway.

More important than the coke information, however, is the portentous information about the mysterious spring water and her muttering companion. That the speaker presents herself as not understanding what was going on is crucially important to the story's reception by the people at whom it is aimed - those people being warned about eating or drinking anything on the NY Thruway.

The speaker is not merely telling her audience "don't eat the food it is prepared by subhumans who can't do the most ordinary things without making a complete mess of it" - she is telling a story tracing her own education about these matters. Before this experience, she did not understand the problem with the NY Thruway much as her audience does not understand now - but she learned through bitter experience and just as they are being taught the facts of life by her, she was helped in her education and eventually saved from poisoning by a friend who had learned previously. Thus in the material in her "digression" marked by the true start markers - speaker manages to educate her listeners without elevating herself in status above them. This kind of interactional work would have been very hard to accomplish in a straightforward exposition of her story materials. The material about the spring water would have been somewhat unmotivated had it been introduced before the story was underway. However, once the story was established as a narrative by mentioning the event I went, the speaker was free to digress and do her other work.

E's resumption of her story and PUSH into the "digression" about the mentally handicapped restaurant employees is prefaced and marked by the word well. This information, opinion, judgment about the mental competence of the Thruway staff is the kind of interesting if slightly hostile and judgmental material people often build stories around. This opinion could not easily have been placed in the orientation section of the narrative preceding the action because it is the kind of remark which can easily backfire and lead to a discussion with the would-be audience instead of the receptive silence one hopes for in telling a story. This information serves to evaluate the crucial action of the story—the sipping of the near-fatal coca-cola, by delaying the event. In addition, the warning to the would-be travelers not to eat in the restaurants because the food is prepared by idiots is most innocuously placed - the message, the warning the story was meant to

convey, is located in what might easily be seen as a digression. Though this story might be taken to be about "water" or "coke" as the speaker claims - this is only an incidental detail of the plot - had an apple pie been poisoned nothing would be significantly altered about the story. The event the story is about is the poisoned sip, yet in the conversation the story as a whole functions as an illustration and a warning.

The functioning of so in this story is also of interest and very closely related to the true start. So seems to have several closely related functions here. It acts as a connective back to the story after an agreement marker or comment by another speaker which may also be thought of as a kind of POP back into the extended story turn, and thus into the story:

- (4) E I always drink coke, right  
 L right  
 E So L is thr . . . walking around etc.  
 (5) L Both things were done in the same way (laughter)  
 E So this coke appears (POP)

It may mark part of the true start, or, reinforce the true start marking both a PUSH and a POP as in example (6).

- (6) E So L is thr . . . walking around (PUSH)  
 with this gallon of spring water  
 etc.  
 So we go to this restaurant and I  
 order a coke (POP)

It may also act as a POP itself as it does in (5), where it is found independently of any true start phenomenon. I order a coke is the next action after I ordered some sort of sandwich a number of turns back. In the story found as part of the Appendix, "Red Paper Dress," there are similar examples of the functioning of well.

We can also find a few examples of the functioning of so in this story by a different speaker. This story also contains an example of a not quite true start.

- (7) J and the way we calculated . . he was due in  
 June . . . [mm . . mm] June first [mm . . mm]  
or June second . . something like that . . and  
 uh, my course was over just right almost exactly  
 the day he was due. I was taking this  
 photography course, and I thought "Well, for  
 my final project, I'll just photograph m . . my  
 birth" [laughter] "my own birth"  
 L Of course  
 J A simple kind of thing to do. I thought it'd be  
 kinda neat. And we were taking Lamaze and every-  
 body . . you know . . . in Lamaze you learn how  
 easy it all is and there's no pain at all. [soft  
 laughter] So . . I thought that would be kind of

a novel thing to do . . and uh . . so about June  
 first or second, indeed right on the dot, I  
 developed labor pains and went to the hospital . .

Although there is no interruption or overt mistake, speaker repeats the phrase about June 1st or 2nd after her discussion of the photography course and Lamaze attitudes toward childbirth, indicating that this long digression is in fact away from her main thread. Later in the story there is another example of a so which seems clearly to be functioning as a POP marker. After an interjection by another speaker saying:

(8) G You did not have a final project

L replies:

L I did not have a final project . . . (long  
 silence) So . . . they . . . Rocco was with  
 me most of the labor, etc. [POP]

So returns the discourse to a discussion of her childbearing experiences which was the general topic of the conversation. Up to this point in her story she had dealt with her pregnancy and her husband's difficulties with the draft. Thus, the so pops the discourse up 2 levels: from a repartee about a narrative to the overall story in which that narrative was embedded.

Halliday and Hasan in their book Cohesion in English (1976) list 7 different cohesive functions of so; this PUSH/POP function of so is not one of them. Because they refuse to admit the importance of units of structure above the sentence, although they do admit they exist, Halliday and Hasan have no way of identifying and dealing with such a discourse function of so. Their reliance on written data and clearly made up examples also makes it unlikely that they would ever encounter this use of so to mark the speaker's movement from one level of structure of a discourse to another.

A second serious criticism of the approach to discourse taken by Halliday and Hasan involves the nature and function of repetition. This true start phenomenon is a powerful cohesive device functioning in narrative discourse. A true start situation with some elements of a sentence repeated later in a discourse should not be analyzed as a repetition of a lexical item or group of lexical items creating cohesion in the text by virtue of the repetition. This is only a comparatively minor aspect of their functioning. Rather, these PUSH/POP markers which indicate movement from main level of structure to an embedded subunit and back again, create cohesion in text by tying together sentences into these subunits. They signal to the listeners how the speaker intends the hearer to believe one part of his discourse to be related to some other parts.

To sum up, speakers have a great deal of work to do in telling a story within an everyday conversation. There are a number of constraints which must be met if the speaker is to function competently

as a storyteller and participant in a conversation and interactant in the situational context in which that conversation takes place. Some of these constraints may conflict with one another - for instance the need to tie the story with the preceding discourse or give detailed contextualizing information may be at variance with the constraint to state the facts and get to the point of a story. The speakers have at their command some ways of resolving these conflicts, among them the strategy of "true starts" that has been described in this paper. True starts and other PUSH/POP markers in narrative may seem to be repetitions on the surface, however a somewhat closer analysis reveals that they perform text building tasks of a far more important sort than can be discovered by merely noting down the multiple occurrence of identical (or similar) lexical items. An analysis which relies on written data, or "intuited" discourse would not be able to gain access to these features of freely occurring narrative language and an analysis of text functioning which does not admit the crucial role of the discourse unit in determining linguistic surface structure will likewise be unable to cope with the challenge of real language.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Shimanoff and Brunak (1977) describe true starts, as I have called them in this paper, referring to them as "brackets". Their discussion of this phenomenon differs from mine in the very important respect that they see this only as a repair procedure and I see it as a 'PSEUDO-REPAIR.' The force of this paper is to establish such a mistake making strategy as one of the devices a speaker has in at his/her rhetorical and interactional command.

Shimanoff and Brunak do not consider the structure of stories and the information which normally goes into them. Therefore, when faced with a "repair" they take it at face value as an error because they are not looking at the kind of material inserted in light of the material which stories normally do have. It is perfectly sensible to say that a speaker forgot to do something which is more or less optional, but when speakers forget to put in the same sort of important information all the time it is a bit suspicious.

Explanations of the true start phenomenon which do not go beyond stating that the speaker "forgot" do not explain why such material is forgotten or why it is remembered so systematically. I do not deny that speakers may in fact "forget," any more than a psychoanalyst would deny that people "forget." It is very interesting, however, that they remember what they need to remember and in such an orderly way.

While it may well be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that any given instance of any phenomenon is being used strategically; it is, I think, totally impossible to prove that any strategy is being employed tacitly. However, we do have over half a century's work in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to back up the notion that people do manipulate language and situations in ways which are not consciously accessible.

<sup>2</sup>All of these remarks should be taken to apply only to American English speakers and their motivations and narrative conventions. Furthermore, for the purpose of this analysis we assume that the participants in the conversation are all more or less social equals and that the storytelling is going on in a normal social situation. For example, these remarks will not apply in formal storytelling situations such as folklorists often study. When someone is known as a storyteller, for example, or is invited to tell a story, or has a fixed story which has been told over and over, both the constraints on the production and on the form will be quite different.

<sup>3</sup>Jefferson (in press) deals with negotiating room in the conversation in which to tell a story. I had not read her paper until after delivering this paper in February, 1977 and so did not cite it during the oral presentation.

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank Bill Simpson for helping me with the phrasing for the PUSH/POP markers as well as for general help and understanding; Deborah Tannen for pushing me to write the abstract; and Henry Thompson for asking the right questions after the talk. And special thanks to my informants who tell such neat stories. Future heartfelt thanks are extended to whomever actually edits and distributes the Sacks' lecture notes. I can not be alone in having tried to get access to a copy for some years. Please whoever . . .

## APPENDIX

## RED PAPER DRESS

E My mother told me this amazing story today. In the beginning of s . . of her breakdown uh huh when she was crying all the time and when she was first going to the psychiatrist and everything . . . apparently she . there would be some days when she would get really hysterical well<sup>1</sup> . . she and my mother had cl--ean--ed out her room . . . basically of all the st . . my mother always saves everything so there were all these highschool clothes hanging in the closet [right] they cleaned out almost everything . . . [uh huh] . . but there were a couple of things left . . and one of the things that was left . . was a . . a dress made out of paper . . . [uh huh] . . that um . . Janet and one of her girlfriends had each sent for one once somewhere . . it cost a dollar . . or something [right] I mean so this was hanging in the closet . . well<sup>2</sup> apparently one morning and this was apparently the worst morning of of . . . her nervous breakdown . . . she woke up . . . something . . . there was s . . something about going to the dentist or something. I think my mother was probably nagging her which is what my mother does . . . and she . . . had h.hysterical fit as far as I could tell, screamed and cried and hit her head against the wall and did all this stuff . . . well my mother later went up into the room

This is a very difficult text to follow. However it does exemplify the unclear true start apparently she signals the beginning of the true start sentence which is then broken off and replaced with there would be some days when she would get really hysterical . . . well<sup>1</sup>. So far, this is an ordinary false start/repair. Speaker may actually be PUSHING with the well. The POP is marked by the well<sup>2</sup> and then by the rest of the sentence which picks up the apparently from the initial PUSH sentence and repeats it twice: Apparently one morning and apparently this was the worst morning of her nervous breakdown. That sentence leads to the first real event of the story she woke up however, we are still in a partial PUSH because we are given more characterological information about going to the dentist, the mother's nagging etc. That is finally finished and we POP back to the storyline proper with the re-introducing of the hysterical theme from the original PUSH situation: she . . . had h . . hysterical fit as far as I could tell. Thus we get strong, important semantic material functioning as the PUSH/POP markers, but they are not encoded in nice neat broken off and then resumed sentences.

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