

Well What Did You Expect?

Author(s): Deborah Tannen

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WELL WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?  
Deborah Tannen  
University of California, Berkeley

In recent years, linguists have been focusing on what Kuno (1976) put this way: "It is time to reexamine every major 'syntactic' process and every major 'syntactic' constraint from a functional point of view, to find semantic explanations for its existence . . ." Now we are going one step further, discovering that syntactic processes are motivated not just by overt meaning but by systems of knowledge behind the semantics, or context in its broadest sense. David Olson (1974) asserts that all conversation is a matter of understanding context and, therefore expecting meaning rather than interpreting semantics.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, all the recent talk about scripts (Schank and Abelson), frames (Minsky, Fillmore), and schemata (Rumelhart, from Bartlett), is really concerned with the notion of what Robert N. Ross (1975) calls "structures of expectation." All of this work, however, has been directed toward comprehension, that is how people understand stories. I would like to talk about some ways that structures of expectation influence production: the telling of stories.

Linde (1974) provides an elegant example of how expectation is necessary to account for choice of articles and surface subjects. She demonstrates that in descriptions of apartment layouts, people tend to introduce a new room with a definite article and in subject position if it is "a room which an apartment may be expected to have."<sup>2</sup> I am concerned with ways in which structures of expectation affect verbalization of events on the sentence level, such as Linde has shown, but also on higher levels of discourse. To give you an idea of the different levels on which I see expectation as a constraint, I will make some observations about a natural speech event: a personal narrative told by a woman in a small group about her experience fainting on the subway in New York. I will discuss three syntactic elements that mark statements which run counter to expectation, and then I will discuss how expectations about story-telling and conversation may help to explain the elusive phenomenon of conversational style.

The small group discussion began with my asking whether anyone had had any interesting experiences on the subway. (See Appendix for the text of the story).

The three sentence level elements which I will look at mark statements which run counter to expectation: but, negation, and just.<sup>3</sup>

Robin Lakoff (1971) has described the "denial of expectation but" in its role as a conjunction, where the clause following but represents the denial of an assumption implicit in the clause preceding it. Interestingly, in the fainting story, as probably in much discourse, the word but does not clearly conjoin two clauses, but rather serves as a transition marking the denial of expectations established by more than one preceding clause or of expectations about narrative coherence.

All three instances of but begin with significant pauses, which also contribute to the contrary-to-expectation effect.

- (1) 36-7 ...BUT...U--M...AFTER THAT, ...I could not ride on the subway.<sup>4</sup>
- (2) 48-9 ...but I think of the way the Jews..were herded into the cattle cars.
- (3) 62-3 ...But I was in...standing in the center of the car,

(1) is a transition from the explanation (lines 33-36) of why she fainted. She seems to be saying, "But THIS is the main point," against the expectation that what she has just been saying must be crucial since she has been spending so much time talking about it. (2) marks the fact that the comparison she is making is, as she has just admitted, not really valid, contrary to our assumptions about comparisons. (3) uses but in contrast to the expectation she has just assented to, that she would ordinarily hold onto the strap. What follows explains why she wasn't holding the strap that time: she was in the center of the car, where there are poles to hold rather than straps. In this case, but also serves to get away from her interlocutor's distracting question, back to the point she wants to make, which is in violation of the expectation that she will relate what she says to the question posed.

Another example of how expectation shapes verbalization is in negative statements. As Labov (1972) points out, "What reason would the narrator have for telling us that something did not happen since he is in the business of telling us what did happen?" Labov explains, ". . . it expresses the defeat of an expectation that something would happen." Negatives constitute one of a long list of elements in oral narrative syntax that Labov discusses as having "evaluative" force in the sense that they are "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative," or to answer in advance the question, "So what?" Since the point of a narrative is directly related to the expectations of people in the culture in which it is told,<sup>5</sup> it is not surprising that Labov's evaluative elements are closely related to my notion of evidence of expectations.

The first two of the six occurrences of negatives in the fainting story serve to block in advance, "So what?"<sup>6</sup>

- (4) 2-3 neither one of them really had..any kinds of endings or anything,
- (5) 6-7 I had DON'T<sup>7</sup> even remember FAINTing before in my life

(4) expresses her apprehension that the hearers' expectations that a tellable story has a significant resolution may not be met. Closely related to this is the device in (5) which justifies the story by assuring the audience that it fulfills the reportability expectation because it is an unusual occurrence (see Labov).

Three other negative statements go together.

- (6) 36-7 I...could not ride on the subway.  
 (7) 39 I c...I c--an't.  
 (8) 51 and I can't do it.

Here the negative statements contrast with the expectation that New Yorkers often ride the subway and must do so in order to get anywhere. As is often the case, the occurrence of one element -- the negative -- coincides with a number of other types of evidence that something special is going on; in these examples can be seen the appearance of repetition (triple, in fact), modals, hesitations, and a false start. All these elements combine to mark the emotional significance of the statement, which contributes to the impact created by the contrast to expectation.

The last instance of a negative statement is (9).

- (9) 56-7 I was...obviously not a pervert, or a deviate,  
 ..or a criminal.

This statement furthers the argument by contrast with the preceding three-part affirmative, (10).

- (10) 55-6 I was WHITE, I was a young woman, I was  
 w--ell dressed.

The negative (9) is particularly interesting because it functions somewhat differently from the other negatives. It is not the case that there is an expectation that the speaker was a pervert, or a deviate, or a criminal. However, she plays on that very aspect of negation for comic effect. The negative implies that one might expect its affirmative to be true, but that affirmative is actually very unexpected, and so the hearers laugh.

The word just marks contrast with the expectation of MORE or SOMETHING ELSE TOO. There are, strikingly, twelve instances of just in this narrative. We can first separate out (11) and (12).

- (11) 52 And it's just as dehumanizing.  
 (12) 62 ...I was just saying

(11) is a comparative in the sense of "equally," and in (12) just refers to time immediately preceding. The other ten instances of just all contrast what actually happened with the expectation that MORE might have happened. Interestingly, this single function can have opposite effects. In half the examples, the contrast of NOT MORE belittles what did occur, while in the other half it intensifies.

The five which have a belittling effect are (13)-(17).

- (13) 1 I just had...two p...particular incidents that  
I remember,  
(14) 3-4 they just happened,  
(15) 26-7 and he asked me just two questions.  
(16) 32-3 ...A--nd U--M...I just stayed in the...  
emergency room for...I guess an hour.  
(17) 24 which was just a fewminutes away

(13) contrasts with the expectation that as a New Yorker she might have many subway stories to tell. (14) follows the negative disclaimer (4) 2-3 "neither one of them really had..any kinds of engings or anything," evidencing her concern that her story may not fulfill the hearers' expectations of a tellable story. In (15) there is a contrast with the expectation that a policeman would ask many questions. (16) marks her awareness that people might expect her to have needed serious treatment, since she is telling about the event, and so she is belittling the seriousness of her stay in the hospital emergency room. (17) marks the fact that the "wait" until the next stop was not long. (15) was uttered with strikingly low pitch and amplitude, which are consonant with the belittling effect of "just," making the entire sentence a kind of throwaway; that is, she fills in the event for the sake of verisimilitude, but marks it as not significant, even though the fact that she mentions it would lead one to expect it to be important.

In examples (18)-(22), just again serves to contrast with the expectation of more, but in these cases the effect of NOT MORE or NOTHING ELSE is intensifying. It is rather like the effect of Yeats' line from "The Second Coming": "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Although we ordinarily think of "mere" as a belittling modifier, as in "a mere pittance," in Yeats' poem it means "utter" so that "utter anarchy" is more disturbing than anarchy mixed with something else. The examples from the fainting story are:

- (18) 36 it was just a whole mess.  
(19) 50 ..And I just panic.  
(20) 15 ...And I just fell down,  
(21) 63-4 and I just kind of slid down the pole.  
(22) 22 ...and everything just kind of combined.

In (18) "just a whole mess" is like "a pure mess" or "an utter mess," and in (19) to "just panic" is more intense than to panic together with other emotions which might dilute the panic. (20) and (21) are echoes of each other; in them, the just serves to make the event more stark and startling. The juxtaposition of just with "kind of" is somewhat odd since just is an intensifier and "kind of" is a hedge. This happens in (22) as well. In these examples, the just seems to counterbalance the hedge, for the statements as they stand are more impactful than they would be without just. (Imagine, for example, "Everything kind of combined" or "I kind of slid down the pole"). In these sentences, the NOT MORE also implies, "I'm not going to say anything more about it."

These are some of the ways in which expectation motivates sentence level choice. I will turn now to larger levels of discourse. Furthermore, thus far I have talked about expectations shared by speaker and hearers. There are often aspects of interaction in which expectations are not shared, and the result is a sense of dissonance or outright misunderstanding.<sup>11</sup>

The speaker of the fainting narrative follows up her story about her own experience with the conclusion that subway crowding is dehumanizing like Nazi cattle cars. Other stories told by the same speaker during this discussion show the same pattern. For example, she tells about having been a cab driver in New York needing to go to the bathroom. She carefully builds suspense and humor as she tells of trying to get a hotel clerk to give her the key to the hotel women's room. She concludes her story with comments about the injustice to women, since male cabbies can easily use hotel men's rooms, which are not customarily locked. The fact that she ended up using the men's room was mentioned in such an offhand manner that when I was listening, I missed it entirely and asked her later what she had done about finding a bathroom. Now I think that if I had been telling that story, the men's room would have been the entertaining climax to the story of my personal frustration. This speaker, however, seems to think a story is best told for the purpose of drawing a larger conclusion, such as people's callousness or injustice. The other women present apparently do not share her expectation for they go on to tell stories which merely relate their experiences.

As a result of these differing expectations, a misunderstanding arose when the speaker tried to include me in the story-telling event by saying (23).

(23) 40-1 ...I don't know if you've ever experienced

She didn't bother to complete her sentence because I rushed to assure her (24).

(24) 42 ...I haven't.

Now I expected the story to be about her personal experience, so I meant I hadn't experienced fainting, but she was apparently formulating the subways-are-dehumanizing idea, operating on her larger-conclusion expectation, and she meant<sub>12</sub> she didn't know if I had experienced rush hour on the subway.

In listening to this conversation many times and rereading the transcript, I have had the chance to find evidence for a kind of dissonance I had been vaguely aware of before. I expect a lot of overt agreement in a conversation. My paradigm for unavoidable disagreement is a statement of the degree to which agreement exists, preceding the statement of disagreement, in other words, "Yes, but...". The speaker of the fainting story seems to have a different paradigm. For example, when I comment, rather ineptly considering the point she has been making,

(25) 53 But people were pretty nice, hm?

in fact she agrees with me: people were pretty nice to her. Yet instead of saying "Yes," or "Yes, but," she simply states her disagreement:

(26) 54 ...TSK People..are..ALways nice when there's  
a crisis like that.

And she goes on to demonstrate why she does not agree with my implication that people are good at heart.

Furthermore, the two times that others interject comments and the speaker says "Yeah," she does not really deal with the interjections. The "Yeah" is a perfunctory signal that she has heard the comments, even though she will not deal with them substantively. <sup>13</sup>

(27) 45 DT: Oh, rush hour. Not fainting.

(28) 46 Yeah. The closest thing I can compare it to,

(29) 61 Third woman: Didn't you used to grab the strap  
..in the subway?

(30) 62 ...I was just saying..I..Yeah. But I was in  
...standing in the center of the car, holding  
on to the center POLE, ...and I just kind of  
slid down the pole.

The delay in the "Yeah" suggests that she was not immediately inclined to give even that assent. As soon as it is out, she proceeds with the image of herself fainting, which is not directly related to the question. Again, I would have expected the overt agreement, "Well, I usually did," and a contrastive transition, "But THAT time...".

When this speaker does say "Yes," it is to disagree, after my erroneous observation (31).

(31) 18 DT: It wasn't rush hour.

(32) 19 Yes it was.

Here again, she does not direct her attention to why I may have misunderstood but simply incorporates her new statement into her story.

It seems, then, that this speaker and I have different models of conversations, with regard to agreement and disagreement, or it may be that I was operating on a conversation model while she was operating on a story-telling model. At any rate, our expectations of how to interact verbally were different during that encounter. Generally, when I talk to people who do not verbalize agreement as I expect them to, I have a vague sense of discomfort, as though things are not quite right. I would previously have put this sense of dissonance in the elusive category of "conversational style," but it can now be seen as a function of differing

expectations about how a conversation is conducted.

I have shown a few of the ways that expectation shapes the telling of a story: by triggering but, negation, and just. In these cases, shared expectation was seen to enhance effective communication. But I have also shown how expectations about what constitutes a story and a conversation can differ among people in the "same culture" and thereby cause difficulties in interaction.

And now what you think of this paper is no doubt in part a function of what you expected it to be.

#### NOTES

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1. See Tannen & Cömert-Öztek, "Health to our Mouths," this volume, for a dramatic example of the primacy of context.
2. Pam Downing, this volume, describes another example of expectation determining choice of article. After mentioning a tree, speakers refer to "the leaves" because everyone expects a tree to have leaves.
3. Such evidence of expectation-denial must exist in (dare I say all?) languages. Nancy Menzel, this volume, notes a particle that marks contrary-to-expectation statements in Old Russian.
4. The number preceding each line refers to line numbers beside the text in the Appendix.
5. Livia Polanyi demonstrates that what is an acceptable "point" to a story differs from culture to culture. Her excellent analysis of this same fainting story appears in "So What's the Point?", which was originally written, as was this paper, for the Bay Area Story Group, and mimeographed by that group.
6. Utterance (4) blocks possible criticism in the spirit of Baker (1975), "This is Just a First Approximation, But...", CLS 11.
7. The reference to memory serves another function too. It has a distancing effect similar to a phenomenon Chafe has noted in oral narratives about a movie. That is, speakers often begin telling about the film from a movie-viewer perspective: "We see..." or "The film shows...". These devices soon drop away, and direct observation takes over: "The man goes down...". The effect is like the zooming in of a camera at the start of a film. Similarly, this speaker begins her story with a number of repetitions of "I remember," which then drop away, as she and her audience enter the time frame of her narrative.
8. Herein lies a striking example of the function of expectation on another level as well: the way in which, in conversation, hearers "understand" a speaker's intentions even if the words do not literally express that meaning. This speaker's statement, "I was obviously not a pervert, or a deviate, or a criminal," does

not further her argument logically. She has said people were nice to her only because she was perfect: white, female, and well-dressed. They wouldn't have been nice to her had she been "anything other than that." In other words, she might have been just as decent a person, only black, male, or wearing dungarees, and they would have "stepped over" her. However, if she had been "a pervert or a deviate or a criminal," and they had not helped her, it would be no surprise nor a particularly cynical observation about human nature. However this illogicality goes unnoticed, for the mention of these unlikely characterizations elicits the desired effect: laughter, and anyway, people know what she means.

9. It could also mean, "I was only saying," in which case it would group with the "belittling" examples, but I believe the interpretation given is the correct one.

10. This stark image is the core of the narrative which the speaker invokes formulaically in her thrice-repeated description of watching herself slide down the pole.

11. This is the subject of my paper, "Communication Mix and Mixup or How Linguistics Can Ruin a Marriage," San Jose State Occasional Papers in Linguistics, 1975. It focuses on misunderstandings due to differing expectations with regard to directness/indirectness.

12. Valerie Mitchell has also pointed out that since I am a New Yorker too, I would expect the speaker to assume I had ridden the subway during rush hour.

13. Gumperz (1977) shows that Indians speaking English use "Yeah" and "No" without meaning assent or dissent but simply to acknowledge another's comment, and that this leads to misunderstandings when Indians and Britons interact. However, Indians' choice of rejoinder is constrained by the syntax of the comment they are acknowledging, while this speaker's "Yeah" is constrained by her understanding of the expectation that she account for the comment.

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## APPENDIX

Speaker: I just had...two p...particular incidents that I remember, 1  
 ...and one-- UH--... [I?] neither one of them really had..any 2  
 kinds of endings or anything, that you know resolution, they just 3  
 happened, ...UM...ONE of them was-- UH--... ..back in...what 66? 4  
 ...67, ...when [I?] FAINTed on the subway. ..It was very UM...UH.. 5  
 FRIGHTening experience. ...I had DON'T even remember FAINTING before 6  
 in my life let alone on the subway. ...A--nd UH--...it was a h.. 7  
 very hot..August day, ...and I was going into the city, ...from 8  
 Queens? ...A--nd...I was standing...in a very crowded car. ...And 9  
 I remember standing..I was standing up, ...and I remember holding 10  
 on to the...center pole, ...a--nd...I remember saying to myself 11  
 ...there is a person over there that's falling to the ground. 12  
 ...And that person was me. ...And I couldn't...put together the 13  
 fact..that..there was someone fainting and that someone was me. 14  
 ...And I just fell down,...(clears throat) then all of a sudden 15  
 there was a lot of space, and..people..helped me up, and...someone 16  
 sat me down. ...A--nd then--UH--.. 17

DT: It wasn't rush hour. 18

Spkr: Yes it was. That's..partly why I fainted...UH...I was under 19  
 ...tremendous..emotional pressure at the time, ..and personal.. 20  
 pressure, ...and...the crush..of the BODIES, ..and the no<sup>21</sup>...AIR 21  
 in the CAR, ...and everything just kind of combined. ...A--nd UM-- 22  
 ...TSK it was incredibly HOT, ...a--nd UH--...we waited..until the 23  
 next stop, which was just a few minutes away ..and then...someone 24  
 took me off..the car, ...and he got a policeman, ...and..he came 25  
 over, ...and asked what was wrong, and he asked me just two 26  
 questions. Are you pregnant? ...To which I said no. I mean they 27  
 ..like he was told that I had fainted. ...A--nd UH--...UH he said 28  
 ...in a very embarrassed kind of way do you have your pIrild/ 29  
 now. ...And I said no. ...A--nd then he said okay, and he sat me 30  
 down, and they got an ambulance, ...and the ambulance ca--me, and 31  
 took me to...a nearby hospital. ...A--nd U--M...I just stayed in 32  
 the...emergency room..for...I guess an hour. ..It was it was heat 33  
 prostration. ..A lot of it. ...Having eaten..having..having not 34  
 had...not...EATen...for several DA--YS, ..and...I was job hun<sup>35</sup> 35  
 it was just..a whole mess. ...BUT...U--M...AFTER THAT, ...I... 36  
 could not..ride..on the subway. ...And to this day I have trouble 37  
 ...riding on the subway. ...If I'm with someone I feel okay. ...If 38  
 I'm alone, ...IN rush hour, ...I c...I.c--an't. ...I f...I'm very 39  
 very scared of...fainting again. ...UM...I don't know if you've 40  
 ever experienced 41

DT: I haven't. 42

Spkr: ...There is NO experience in the WORLD, ..like experiencing 43

- ..rush hour..in the subway. ...UH-- 44
- DT: Oh, rush hour. Not fainting. 45
- Spkr: Yeah. The closest thing I can compare it to, and I never 46  
 experienced THAT, ...and it's probably a FRACTION of what THAT 47  
 experience was, ...but I think..of the way the Jews..were herded 48  
 into the cattle cars. ...TSK and that's...you know...maybe..maybe 49  
 part of THAT...ties into that..kind of...thing. ..And I just panic. 50  
 ..I mean..everything in me..freezes up, and I can't do it. 51  
 ...And it's just as dehumanizing. 52
- DT: But people were pretty nice, hm? 53
- Spkr: ...TSK People..are..ALways nice when there's a crisis like 54  
 that. ...And..and the context is right. ...I was WHITE, ...I was a 55  
 young woman, ...I was w--ell dressed, I was...obviously not..a 56  
 pervert, or a deviate, ..or a criminal. ...HAD I BEEN..had I been 57  
 ..anything OTHER than that..I could've fallen, ..and they would've 58  
 stepped OVER me. ...Or perhaps ON me. ...You know cause that's the 59  
 way people in New York ARE. 60
- Third woman: Didn't you used to grab the strap..in the subway? 61
- Spkr: ...I was just saying..I..Yeah. ...But I was in...standing in 62  
 the center of the car, holding on to the center POLE, ..and I just 63  
 kind of slid down the pole. ...A--nd UH--...it was funny because 64  
 ...in my HEAD..I said...my aWAREness was such..that I said to my- 65  
 self...gee well there's a PERson over there, falling DOWN. 66  
 ...And that person was me. 67
- DT: It's weird...mm 68
- Spkr: Okay that was, that experience. ...And aNOTHer experience 69  
 (almost inaudible-----)

### Transcription Conventions

- ... is a measurable pause, more than .1 second. Precise measurements are available.
- .. is a slight break in timing.
- . indicates sentence-final intonation
- , indicates clause-final intonation ("more to come")
- indicates lengthening of the preceding phoneme or syllable.
- Syllables in caps were spoken with heightened pitch or amplitude.
- Square brackets enclose phonetic transcription.
- Parentheses below the line indicate voice quality of the speaker.
- Underline indicates false start.