

Narrative as snapshot

Glimpses into the past in Alzheimer's discourse*

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Sociolinguists and discursive psychologists interested in the construction of identity in discourse have focused their attention on how people recount their life events, arguing that narrative choices can reveal much about how narrators see themselves and how they wish to be seen by those listening to their stories. What happens, though, when severe memory loss interferes with this process? In this article, I examine the intersection of narrative, identity and memory by re-visiting five (total of 2 hours and 39 minutes) tape-recorded conversations I had over 4½ years with a woman, Elsie, in her 80s at the moderately severe stage of Alzheimer's disease (Hamilton, 1994). Focusing on a set of 204 clauses spoken by Elsie that contain past references within these conversations, I differentiate those clauses that are part of conversational narratives (56 or 27%) from independent clauses I term 'narrative traces' (148 or 73%). I then identify and examine in greater detail the linguistic construction of the storyworld within fifteen short narratives comprising the 56 narrative clauses. Special attention is given to nominal, verbal, spatial and temporal reference. I identify problems in orientation that have consequences for the coherence of the narrative as a text, as well as for

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the discursive construction of the narrator's identity. I close with thoughts about how identity construction can be understood in the (near) absence of coherent reconstructions of the past. Possible useful approaches include Bakhtin's (1981) notion of word "flavors," Agha's (2005) work on enregistered voices, and discourse strategies anchored in the interactional here-and-now, such as "small" talk and politeness work (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

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Introduction

Scholars who study everyday talk find that much of it is made up of narratives of personal experience; that is, people recount for others who will listen what has happened to them. Sometimes these recounted events are as major as finding a new job, having a baby, or winning the lottery, but usually they take on the form of "throwaway" narratives (Polanyi, 1981) about, say, a friend seen at lunch or a computer that crashed at work. Some researchers are interested in the ways in which stories¹ relate to the surrounding conversational interaction, examining how a narrative is sparked by verbal and non-verbal triggers in the immediate context (cf. what Jefferson, 1978, calls "local occasioning") as well as by cognitive connections between interlocutors (cf. Chafe, 1994), and how the narrative is made sense of in upcoming conversation (cf. what Jefferson, 1978, calls "sequential implicativeness"). Others are interested in the multiple ways in which audience members contribute linguistically and non-linguistically to the emergence of the narrative as well as the ways in which the narrator accommodates the telling to differing levels of interest and information on the part of the listeners (see Goodwin, 1986). Still others are interested in the skillful way in which narrators make clear to their audience what the points of their narratives are, not only by relatively explicit means (such as saying "That was the craziest thing that ever happened to me!") but also by deviating from "basic narrative syntax" (Labov, 1972) by, for example, contrasting what did not happen to what did happen (e.g., "The train never came, so we ended up taking the bus.") or by carefully crafting the orientation to time, space, people and activities (Labov, 1997).

1. The reader will notice an alternation between the terms "narrative" and "story" in this paper. This is purposeful. Although I personally prefer the term "narrative" and indeed most scholars in this area use this term (e.g., Labov, 1972, Schiffrin, 1996), others use the term "story" (e.g., Jefferson, 1978). I have attempted in my discussion of others' work within this paper to use the relevant scholar's preferred term.

Standing on the shoulders of this foundational work on narrative, some linguists and discursive psychologists interested in the construction of identity in discourse have focused their attention on how people recount their stories, arguing that narrative choices can reveal much about how narrators see themselves and how they wish to be seen by those listening to their stories (see especially De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006). Bamberg (1997), for example, identifies three levels of positioning within the narrative: (1) positioning of figures in the storyworld vis-à-vis each other; (2) positioning of the narrator as related to the audience of the narrative; and (3) positioning of the narrator to self in answer to the question “Who am I?” In fact, in recent work, Bamberg (2004, and Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) has made the critical point that identity work is carried out not only within what he calls “big” stories, such as autobiographical or life stories, but also within “small” stories that are triggered by what might look to be relatively inconsequential everyday life. Schiffrin (1996, p. 199) uses a powerful visual image, that of a “self-portrait,” to discuss this relationship:

“Telling a story provides a self-portrait: a linguistic lens through which to discover peoples’ own (somewhat idealized) views of themselves as situated in a social structure. The verbalization and textual structure of a story..combines with its content, and with its local and global contexts of production, to provide a view of self that can be either challenged or validated by an audience.”

Other narrative analysts have also related specific linguistic resources and choices to the construction of narrators’ identities. In their study of a woman suffering from agoraphobia, Capps and Ochs (1995) observed that a specific set of grammatical forms worked together to paint a “coherent portrait” of that individual as irrational and helpless. In my own examination of internet discussion list postings by individuals dealing with bone marrow transplantation (Hamilton, 1998), I found that linguistic choices related to represented speech tended to support either a survivor’s or a victim’s identity in the recounting of physician-patient conflicts. In their analysis of topical talk among the elderly, Boden and Bielby (1986, p. 79) found that the situated conversational identities of conversationalists under study were achieved through “reference to, and relevance of, the past: ‘I am what I am now because of what I was/did/experienced.’”

If storytelling is both so prevalent in everyday talk and integrally related to the construction of the narrator’s identity, then it makes one wonder what the situation is in cases of severe chronic memory loss, as in Alzheimer’s disease. Discussions both within the scientific and lay literature related to Alzheimer’s disease speak of identity crises, loss of self, and profound changes in personality (cf. Cohen & Eisdorfer, 1986; Kitwood, 1988; Sabat and Harré, 1992; and Shenk, 2005). A Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, George Oppen, expressed this feeling most eloquently in the

early stages of his dealings with Alzheimer's disease: "The worst is that one cannot recognize himself. There is a dead man with his name."²

Several studies over the past two decades have provided insight into personal narratives told by some individuals with Alzheimer's disease (see, for example, Obler, 1980; Ramanathan, 1994, 1995, 1997; Sabat, 2001; Leibing & Scheinkman, 2002; Davis, 2005; and Shenk, 2005). When I first began to read this work, however, my own experiences with Alzheimer's disease prevented me from relating fully to it. The narratives excerpted in these studies were relatively well formed; problems had to do with the narrator becoming distracted, being verbose, or miscalculating the status of given and new information — i.e., problems generally identified with Alzheimer discourse. In stark contrast to these forays into the past, the conversational contributions by "Elsie" (pseudonym), the elderly woman who had been my conversational partner for the 4 ½ years documented in Hamilton (1994), focused overwhelmingly on the here-and-now (see Appell, Kertesz & Fisman, 1982; Obler, 1981; Shindler, Caplan & Hier, 1984 for discussions of this characterization of Alzheimer discourse). When Elsie referred to the past during our conversations, it was nearly always in a cryptic and vague way. I could not recall any full-fledged personal experience narratives being told even during the earliest of our conversations when Elsie was at the moderately severe stage of Alzheimer's disease — neither about the distant past nor about recent events. So when I became interested in identity construction related to Alzheimer's disease, I focused my efforts on examining the non-narrative discourse of our conversations (see Hamilton, 1996), pointing to the linguistic subtlety that underlay fleeting and dynamically co-constructed shifts along a continuum from a relatively symmetrical relationship of friends to a more asymmetrical relationship of caregiver/care receiver. Ultimately, however, I could not shake the feeling that narrative, even in relatively advanced Alzheimer's disease, would be something both fascinating and potentially worthwhile to examine with a finer toothed comb. It is this challenge that I take up in this paper.³

In what follows, I provide brief background information on the interrelationships between language and Alzheimer's disease and on the five conversational interactions (total of 2 hours 39 minutes) that form the basis of my analysis; I also

2. From George Oppen's unpublished notes in the George Oppen Archive of the Mandeville Department of Special Collections, University of California, San Diego (see Hamilton, 2000, for more information).

3. In an intriguing coincidence, Vai Ramanathan (whose work on narrative and Alzheimer's disease has inspired my approach in this paper) has also just written about her experiences revisiting the interactional data that were at the heart of her earlier work (see Ramanathan, 2008).

introduce the reader to Elsie. I then focus on the relative amount of talk about the past across these conversations, drawing upon Chafe's (1994) discussion of discourse, consciousness and time. Subsequently, I distinguish clauses that are part of short narratives from what I call "narrative traces," independent clauses that (seemingly) refer to the past, but are surrounded by clauses that refer to the immediate context. Following that distinction, I focus in more closely on the linguistic construction of the storyworld within each of the short narratives found in these conversations. The examination of the storyworld centers on Elsie's use of noun phrases and pronouns to reference people and objects in the story, verbs to describe actions undertaken and states inhabited within the storyworld, as well as spatial and temporal adverbs and prepositional phrases to anchor the story in space and time. I then discuss the negative cumulative effect of deficiencies within each of these areas of reference on Elsie's identity construction, and suggest an alternative approach (drawing on Bakhtin, 1981, and Agha, 2005) to finding identity clues in the discourse. In the final section of this paper, I summarize the findings of the study and discuss implications for narrative analysis and Alzheimer's care.

But first, it is important to become acquainted with two of the short narratives told by Elsie. This familiarity will serve as a necessary backdrop for subsequent discussions and findings.

Short narrative 1: "That's why I came"

Just prior to the interaction represented in excerpt 1, Elsie and I had been looking out of the picture windows across the front of her residential center. I had pointed to a church across the road and had asked Elsie whether she had ever been there. She asked for clarification and I reformulated what I had asked (see lines 1–2).

Excerpt 1

1. Heidi: I was wondering if you had ever been there.
2. That's a Methodist church.
3. Elsie: Yes.
4. That's what ours ours is.
5. Yeah.
6. That's right.
7. **That's why I came when I..when there were groups that were making up one.**
8. Uh.
9. **I was anxious to see it and uh get it straightened out**
10. **and so..and so I did.**
11. Heidi: Mhm. And that's why you came here?
12. Elsie: **So I came here**

13. **and then I (used) different things working on them.**
14. So sometimes they go a long (road)
15. or they come down in a hurry.
16. Y'know, things like that.
17. So there's a lot of things on.
18. and uh what have they got on now today?

In the interaction represented in excerpt 1, the focus on the church appeared to serve as a trigger for a short narrative. In lines 3–6, she seemed to recognize the church or indicate that she had indeed been there before; in line 7 then, she shifted tense from present to past (“That’s why I came”), making a causal link between the church (or something it stands for) and an action of hers. She made no explicit spatial reference, although in the absence of such, it is likely that the spatial reference was to the building we were occupying at the time; temporal reference was made but in only a vague way (“when I..when there were groups that were making up one”). In line 9, she provided more information about her state of mind as well as her goals (“I was anxious to see it and uh get it straightened out”); in line 10, we learned that she carried through on those goals (“and so..and so I did”). The syntax and falling intonation contour of that line must have indicated to me that Elsie was finished with her narrative, as I took the opportunity to check my understanding of the missing spatial referent (“And that’s why you came here?”), repeating her clause from line 7 with the addition of the word “here.” Elsie’s repetition of the term “here” in line 12 seemed to indicate that my guess was correct. In line 13 then she continued with more details of that time in her life (“And then I [used] different things working on them”). In line 14, Elsie shifted tense back to the present, seeming to make general comments through line 16, although it was unclear whether those referred to the storyworld just recounted or not. After seeming to draw a conclusion in line 17 (“So there’s a lot of things on”), she turned to me and asked a question (“and uh what have they got on now today?”) about some people or objects in the present time, although its lack of specificity (“they”, “got on”, “now”) impeded my understanding and, therefore, my ability to respond in a meaningful way.

Short narrative 2: “That was the time when we were here to going down this way”

Prior to the talk in excerpt 2, I had asked Elsie “Do you have pictures.. photographs from other countries?” as I knew that she had lived abroad much of her life. Elsie asked a clarification question and we negotiated the meaning of my question. In response, she abruptly shifted her gaze from me to a group of paintings on the wall of the lounge in which we were sitting, referring initially to a single painting

with the term “dress”⁴ (line 1). Following a comment on a second painting (“And this other one is the one that has another one on it”), I provided a minimal response (line 3). Elsie followed up on this “pass” by providing what seemed to be the first move towards her storytelling — a general comment about the paintings; i.e., presumably that residents and/or staff of the center have been “kind of enjoying having some of these things” (line 5). A more definitive move into a storyworld occurred when she shifted from speaking more generally about the ongoing activity (providing orientation information within the framework of Labov, 1972) to focusing on a particular instance in line 8 (“one of the times”).

Excerpt 2

1. Elsie: My dress..my name is that one on the right..the right one.
2. And this other one is the one that has another one on it.
3. Heidi: Uhhuh.
4. Elsie: And so.
5. So they have uh been kind of enjoying having some of these things,
6. cause people were looking around and wondering what they’re going.
7. And then the first parts
8. **one of the times** oh quite a (yong) time ago over across those two houses over there
9. way over there.
10. And then then that was the time when we were here to going..down this way.
11. And so he was..quite spoiled..for trying to get those that other part to use.
12. But I think they’ve done most of it.
13. So I’m not sure.
14. I do hope it looks like we’re not going to rain..if anybody wants to rain tonight.
15. Do you think?
16. Heidi: Mhm. I don’t know. They keep saying

Elsie appeared then to provide more orientation information regarding time (“quite a [yong] time ago” in line 8 and “that was the time when..” in line 10), space (“over across those two houses over there” in line 8–9 and “here” and “down this way” in line 10), and person (“he was quite spoiled” in line 11). Elsie never actually uttered a complicating action clause (Labov, 1972) indicating what the plot of her story might be before she began to come out of the storyworld back to the ongoing conversation, as she indicated her current state of mind about some action begun

4. Interestingly, Elsie used the term “dress” six months later to refer to different paintings in her room (see Hamilton, 2003, pp. 43–44).

in the storyworld (“But I think they’ve done most of it. So I’m not sure.” in lines 12 and 13). In line 14, Elsie appeared to have switched topics completely, to her hopes about the weather (“I do hope it looks like we’re not going to rain..if anybody wants to rain tonight.”). Perhaps my lack of response prompted her direct question of me in line 15 (“Do you think?”) which then finally engaged me back into the ongoing conversation and marked the end of the storytelling event.

Based on the evidence in excerpts 1 and 2, I argue that Schiffrin’s (1996) notion of “narrative as self-portrait” needs to be recalibrated to be applicable to this kind of narrative. Instead of these narratives providing multi-dimensional access to Elsie’s view of herself “as situated in a social structure,” it seems here that they provide at best a “snapshot.” Since snapshots are usually captured fleetingly and without much forethought, we often have difficulty remembering years later where or when the picture was taken and sometimes even who the individuals are in the photo. These records of fragments of our lives — the kinds of photographs that land on the floor or are cut into smaller pieces when we put together scrapbooks — find their analogy in Bamberg’s notion of “small stories,” i.e., if memory sustains itself long enough, these small stories can stand for our lives. If Alzheimer’s disease intervenes, however, this already difficult process of recalling becomes nearly impossible.

Try to envision the snapshots that would represent the short narratives in excerpts 1 and 2. We know they contain Elsie, but how old was she “when there were groups that were making up one”? Who was “quite spoiled”? Who belonged to “the groups”? What is going on in the snapshot? When was the picture taken? How does the physical surrounding look?

Background information

All individuals with Alzheimer’s disease exhibit a progressive and apparently irreversible deterioration of their ability to communicate with others. Researchers agreed early on in investigations of language, communication and Alzheimer’s disease that problems in these areas were due less to phonological and morphosyntactic disorders than to difficulties on the semantic and pragmatic levels (Appell et al., 1982; Bayles, 1979; Baynes & Kaszniak, 1987; Hier et al., 1985; Kempler, 1984; Obler, 1981; and Schwarz et al., 1979). Because of their basically well-formed syntactic structure, many of the inappropriate or irrelevant utterances characteristic of the language used by Alzheimer’s patients — at least until severe stages of the disease — would not appear out-of-the-ordinary in isolation, but only when heard within the larger discourse context in pursuit of some interactional goal, as illustrated by Elsie’s line 3 in excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

1. Elsie: And where did you say your home was?
 2. Heidi: I'm on Walter Road.
 - 3. Elsie: You can do that. That's a good idea.
- (Hamilton 1994b, p.185)

In my earlier work (Hamilton, 1991, 1994a, 1994b), I found it useful to discuss changes in discourse-level communication that accompanied the progression of the disease in their relationship to two concepts: (1) taking the role of the other in interaction (Mead 1934) and (2) automatization of language (Whitaker, 1982), using Schiffrin's (1987) 5-component model of discourse coherence and Halliday's (1978) systemic-functional grammar to organize specific discourse phenomena. For example, Elsie's decreasing ability to take the perspective of her conversational partner was most apparent in the initial stages of our time together in terms of ideational content construction, such as in the selection of pronouns, lexical items, and topics. Problems relating to the management of interpersonal positions, roles, and faces, such as the use of politeness strategies, or the more procedural demands of discourse, such as turn-taking, became apparent later in our conversations. She was generally able until late in our interactions to use relatively more automatic language, such as linguistic formulas, more successfully than utterances she had to create anew in the situation (see also Gendouzi & Müller, 2006 for further discussion of this pattern).

As mentioned above, the observations and analyses reported in this paper are based on five tape-recorded, naturally occurring conversations I had over 4½ years with Elsie in a 121-bed private assisted living center in northern Virginia (suburban Washington, D.C. USA). At the time of these conversations, Elsie was 81–86 years old. She had earned an advanced degree and had been professionally active as a leader in the church until retiring ten years prior to the beginning of this study. According to the Global Deterioration Scale (GDS) for age-associated decline and Alzheimer's disease (Reisberg, Ferris, de Leon et al 1982) she was at stage 5, moderately severe cognitive decline, at the onset of our conversations in 1981 and had reached stage 7, very severe cognitive decline, by 1986. At the beginning of the study, Elsie could walk and eat independent of others' assistance; by 1985, she needed assistance to eat and drink. By March 1986, she was bedridden and her verbal production consisted only of her systematic use of the vocalizations "mmm," "mhm," "mm hm," "hmm?" and "uhhuh."

During the first three of these five conversations, Elsie was a very active participant. She had trouble finding words, however, and frequently dealt with this problem by providing an "empty" word (e.g., "thing" for an inanimate object), a circumlocution (e.g., "just a few uh..oh a couple of uh..not a whole day" for "hours") or a semantically-related word (e.g., "writing" for "reading"); less frequently, she

provided neologisms (e.g., “ringlim” for “circle drive”) or a word used with a completely different lexical meaning (e.g., “dress” for “painting”). At the beginning of our time together, she was generally aware of her memory problems, as evidenced by her explicit reference to them, as well as the unusualness of these problems with word-finding, reference and memory, as she often provided excuses for this unexpected behavior. She also recognized when her abilities were unexpectedly good, as she provided explicit attestations to these abilities and seemed to be proud of them. The communicative evidence for these kinds of self-awareness dropped off over the course of our time together.

In spite of these difficulties, people generally enjoyed talking with Elsie — especially during the first year or so. Contributing to this overall ease in talk seemed to be Elsie’s use of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) devices, such as compliments, expressions of appreciation to others, terms of endearment, and light-hearted jokes. Elsie had an outgoing personality and was friendly to residents, volunteers, and staff alike. She enjoyed taking part in social activities in the health care center until she became bed-ridden relatively late in our time together and was visibly pleased when she saw people she appeared to recognize at these activities.

Although the focus of this study is on Elsie’s use of language to talk about the past — and not directly on the fuller range of her communicative abilities and disabilities — this abbreviated communicative profile is provided to offer the reader a general sense for those abilities and difficulties which serve as the environment for the short personal experience narratives and narrative traces examined in this paper.

Talk about the past

Because previous work on discourse and Alzheimer’s disease (including my own) has pointed to a proclivity for talk in the here-and-now along with memory problems of a variety of sorts, I begin this study of narratives in conversational interaction by casting a wider net; i.e., I identify first how frequently Elsie seemed to refer to the past in our sample of five conversations.

But rather than starting off with a simple count of how many of Elsie’s verbs were inflected for the past tense, I place my study within Chafe’s (1994) thought-provoking work on the intersections of discourse, consciousness and time. In this work, he suggests a variety of ways of looking at how consciousness⁵ and conversational interactions are related to each other. Taking “ordinary conversation” as the

5. Chafe (1994, p. 38) regards consciousness as “the crucial interface between the conscious organism and its environment, the place where information from the environment is dealt with

baseline from which all other uses of language deviate, Chafe (1994, pp. 210–211) argues that “a fundamentally important property of human consciousness is its ability to focus, not just on the immediate environment, but also on remembered and imagined experience.” In fact, he goes on to observe that the displaced mode usually predominates over the immediate because “introverted (remembered and imagined) ideas tend to be less shared, more interesting, more extensive, and more fully processed than what is available to an extroverted (perceiving, acting, and evaluating) consciousness.” In characterizing discourse shape related to this distinction, Chafe (1994, pp. 210–211) points out that

“any differences can be attributed to differences between perceiving, acting, and evaluating on the one hand and remembering and imagining on the other. Extroverted experience has a continuous quality that contrasts with the island-like nature of introverted experience. In representing introverted experience, *speakers compensate by providing settings that locate an experiential island sufficiently to orient the listener’s consciousness* (my emphasis). Extroverted experience also has access to a wealth of detail, all of which is potentially available to focus on. In contrast, introverted experience is restricted to a coarseness of detail that is sometimes mitigated, though only partially, through recourse to generic experiences whose detail has been enhanced by rehearsal.”

With Chafe’s distinctions in mind — along with the recognition that talking about the past is a larger category than narrating (it is, after all, possible to point something out about the past without telling a story about it), I began my investigation of tense. By examining the inflected verbs used by Elsie in the transcripts of our conversations, I identified 204 clauses that contained verbal reference to the past. Because I wanted additionally to have a sense of the percentage of time-at-talk that was spent referring to the past, I also performed a word count on those 204 clauses.

The figures in Table 1 clearly show that Elsie’s contributions to our conversations contained relatively little talk directed towards the past. In fact, during our first three conversations, only approximately 15% of all lexical items were spoken within clauses containing verbs inflected for the past tense; during the fourth conversation that percentage dropped to 10%; and during the fifth conversation that percentage dropped to zero. This finding that 85% or more of Elsie’s talk was in the “immediate mode” contrasts strongly with Chafe’s claims about the consciousness within “normal” interactions and provides additional empirical evidence for the “context-boundedness” (also termed “stimulus-boundedness” by some scholars) identified in early examinations of Alzheimer’s patients (Obler, 1981; Appell, Kertesz & Fisman, 1982); such boundedness refers to an individual’s

as a basis for thought and action as well as the place where internally generated experience becomes effective — the locus of remembering, imagining, and feeling.”

Table 1. Number of lexical items in Elsie's clauses containing a verb inflected for the past tense as a percentage of total number of words used by Elsie in each of the five selected conversations (total talk-time = 159 minutes)

| Date of conversation | No. lexical items in Elsie's clauses containing a past tense verb (a) | Number of total lexical items used by Elsie (b) | Percentage a/b |
|--------------------------------|---|---|----------------|
| March 1982 (41 minutes) | 697 (52 clauses) | 4639 | 15.02% |
| September 1982 (31 minutes) | 561 (48 clauses) | 3625 | 15.48% |
| March 1984 (38 minutes) | 650 (95 clauses) | 4336 | 14.99% |
| July 1985 (26 minutes) | 49 (9 clauses) | 467 | 10.49% |
| March 1986 (23 minutes) | 0 | 91 | 0 |
| TOTALS | 1957 (204 clauses) | 13,158 | 14.87% |

reduced ability to free him- or herself cognitively from the immediate temporal and spatial context.

With regard to our general interest in this paper, an overwhelming use of the immediate mode in communication (such as that observed here) could be expected to have dire consequences for any individual's construction of identity in talk. For example, it may be that an elderly person's professional identities (e.g., teacher, attorney, minister, physician) are no longer lived out on a daily basis due to changes in employment status (e.g., such as retirement or change in profession) or physical location (e.g., moving into an assisted living center). These earlier identities may, however, be sustained within a new environment through talk (including personal experience narratives) about professional ideas, actions, and associations, but only if the individual's consciousness can shift from the immediate mode of the here-and-now to the displaced mode of earlier times and places — and when those shifts are displayed linguistically within the current conversational interaction.

In what follows, we move beyond this recognition of the difficulties related to the relative lack of talk about the past for the construction of an individual's identity. In the remainder of this paper, we focus on those portions of Elsie's discourse in which she did indeed seem to recount the past, as infrequent as that was.

Narrative traces

In the next phase of the investigation, I sorted the 204 clauses identified above into two categories: (1) narrative traces and (2) narrative clauses. A narrative trace is defined here as a clause that references the past but that is not part of a narrative; it is identified as such by its sequential placement within the discourse. The trace contains a verb inflected for the past tense but is preceded and followed by clauses that do not contain verbs inflected for the past tense (and which are not orientation clauses for a narrative).⁶ In contrast, a narrative clause is a clause that references the past but is part of a narrative; in addition to the restricted plot-advancing clauses that fall under Labov's (1972) definition, I also include free clauses that provide orientation or evaluation.⁷ Table 2 provides the numbers of each type of clause, as well as the number of lexical items used within these clauses, for each of the five conversations in the study.

Table 2. Categorization of clauses with past-tense verb into (1) narrative clauses; and (2) narrative traces

| Date of conversation | Number of narrative clauses (number of lexical items used within these clauses) | Number of narrative traces (number of lexical items used within these clauses) | Total number of clauses containing past-tense verbs (number of lexical items used within these clauses) |
|----------------------|---|--|---|
| March 1982 | 25 clauses (257) | 27 clauses (440) | 52 clauses (697) |
| September 1982 | 7 clauses (104) | 41 clauses (457) | 48 clauses (561) |
| March 1984 | 24 clauses (204) | 71 clauses (446) | 95 clauses (650) |
| July 1985 | 0 | 9 clauses (49) | 9 clauses (49) |
| March 1986 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 56 clauses (565) | 148 clauses (1392) | 204 clauses (1957) |

6. The qualification to the definition regarding orientation clauses is necessary to rule out the misidentification of a clause as a narrative trace when it actually is a narrative clause that is surrounded by orientation clauses containing verbs inflected for the present tense. This situation is illustrated by the following constructed example: (1) Chicago's the largest city in Illinois, you know; (2) I *went* to school there; (3) It's a fun city! (4) Anyway, I *studied* philosophy at the University of Chicago [narrative follows]. Without the orientation condition in the definition, clause 2 in this example would be miscategorized as a narrative trace rather than a narrative clause.

7. This is a pragmatic decision that is motivated both by the confusing language used within these narratives as well as the extreme brevity of the narratives in the first place. Rather than going for what would be potentially a 6-way distinction within the short narratives (as abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, (external) evaluation, coda (following Labov, 1972) versus the single classification of a narrative trace, I have opted for a binary distinction.

In Table 2, we observe that 73% (n=148) of the 204 clauses that referred to the past were in the form of narrative traces, whereas only 27% (n=56) were part of narratives.⁸

Excerpt 4 illustrates this predominant phenomenon within its larger discourse context. In this interaction, Elsie and I were sitting in a sun-filled lounge at the end of her residential floor that overlooked the front entrance to the building. She was cleaning her eyeglasses.

Excerpt 4

1. Elsie: So I'll have to get some off I think [blows on eyeglasses].
2. I'll see if I'm getting of it off.
3. Cause sometimes they'll go all right
4. Heidi: Yeah.
5. Elsie: and other times they won't be.
6. Heidi: Uhhuh.
7. Elsie: And then let's see.
8. Now how this is doing.
9. It looks like it's not doing it very () greasy things.
- 10. **One of the young men wanted to have..lots of fun [laughs].**
11. Yes, so..so on that one now I'll take a little more on this..
12. I'll ask this one..here. [blows on glasses]

Following the definition above, a narrative trace can be found in line 10: "One of the young men wanted to have..lots of fun." Accordingly, we observe not only that this clause contains a verb inflected for the past tense ("wanted"), but also that it is preceded and followed by clauses that do not contain verbs inflected for the past tense. The clause that immediately precedes the trace is in the present tense ("looks"); the clause that immediately follows it is in the (immediate) future tense ("I'll take").

This narrative trace seems to appear "out of the blue." What accounts for this perception? Again, as earlier, we can turn to Chafe (1994, p. 202) for insight. In his terms, while she was cleaning her glasses, Elsie was providing linguistic evidence of an extroverted consciousness that "has the quality of a continuous, uninterrupted flow. Any segment of it is experienced as part of a connected sequence flowing out of what happened just before and into what will happen just after. The familiar metaphor of stream of consciousness (James, 1890, 1, pp. 224–90) captures this quality." When she uttered the narrative trace in line 10, she was

8. The lexical analysis reveals that 29% of lexical items contained in these 204 clauses were part of narrative clauses; 71% of lexical items were part of narrative traces. This similarity indicates that narrative clauses and narrative traces do not differ in a meaningful way in terms of the number of lexical items they contain.

shifting to the voice of her introverted consciousness that was not focused on the immediately surrounding environment, but was either remembering or imagining something that was displaced. This conscious activity yielded, in Chafe's terms, "isolated segments of experience whose antecedents and consequences are inaccessible." "This memory of one of a group of young men wanting to have "lots of fun" is what Chafe calls an "experiential island" that is disconnected from its surroundings. When such disconnects occur between immediate surroundings and what is spoken about, speakers usually bridge the divide by providing information regarding the displaced surroundings, mentioning space, time, social setting, and/or ongoing events and states.⁹

And since this need for such information is equally valid for individuals who are attempting to orient themselves within real-life environments (as, for example, in Chafe's illustration of a person regaining consciousness following an accident) as well as for individuals who are attempting to orient themselves as listeners within narrated storyworlds, we can use this observation to understand our difficulties in comprehending line 10. Not only do we not know who the young men were (although Elsie's use of the definite article "the" in "the men" makes us think that she perceived this to be shared knowledge), we do not know when or where the recounted event originally took place. The only connection we can draw upon (and this turns out to be insufficient) is a storyline that could link a "young man" having "lots of fun" by playing with Elsie's eyeglasses, thereby getting fingerprints all over them. But the work that needs to go into inferring this connection (if it is indeed the connection meant by Elsie) is too much for the time a listener has. In excerpt 4, Elsie's narrative trace is disconnected from the clauses surrounding it, both in terms of surface-level cohesion as well as in terms of underlying coherence. This disconnect was found within the discourse contexts of each of Elsie's other narrative traces.

Construction of the storyworld within short narratives

In order to design a story that will be understood by the audience, the narrator needs to orient her listeners to the time and place of the storyworld and let them know something about the characters who people that world. Then, on that backdrop, the characters can act and the narrator can show her listeners — however subtly — what the point of the story is and how she feels about the characters

9. Or, as Chafe (1994) simply puts it, need for answers to the following kinds of questions: "Where am I?", "What time is it?" or "What day is it?", "Who are you?" or "Who are these people?", and "What's going on?"

Table 3. Distribution of narratives across conversations

| Date of conversation | Length of conversation | Number of narratives |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| March 1982 | 41 minutes | 5 narratives (25 clauses) |
| September 1982 | 31 minutes | 3 narratives (7 clauses) |
| March 1984 | 38 minutes | 7 narratives (24 clauses) |
| July 1985 | 26 minutes | 0 narratives |
| March 1986 | 23 minutes | 0 narratives |
| TOTALS | 159 minutes (2 hrs; 39 mins.) | 15 narratives (56 clauses) |

and their actions (see Bamberg, 1997, Chafe, 1994, Johnstone, 1990, and Schiffrin, 1996). A world needs to be created through language that is vivid enough for the conversational partners to be able to enter into together. A meeting of the minds must take place in order for the meaning and point of the narrative to be captured and understood by the listener(s).

In this section, then, we turn our attention to the 56 remaining clauses that contain verbs inflected for the past tense — to what we have identified as narrative clauses, in that they are part of conversational narratives told by Elsie. Table 3 shows the distribution of these narratives (and the clauses constructing them) across our conversations.

In what follows, we examine the anchors of the storyworld, studying the linguistic features that answer the following questions: (1) Who or what was present? (nominal reference); (2) What was happening? (reference to activities and states); (3) Where did this take place? (spatial reference); and (3) When did this place? (temporal reference).

Nominal reference

In the creation of a storyworld, nominal reference helps to answer the question “Who or what was there?” In all of Elsie’s fifteen narratives there was reference to persons or objects in some way (as opposed to spatial and temporal reference which was sometimes lacking, as we will see below). The minimal number of nominal references within a narrative was three. Table 4 provides a list of all such references to persons or objects.

As is evident from Table 4, within the fifteen narratives, Elsie made greatest use of pronouns to refer to people and objects in her stories (90 of 134 instances or 67%), usually inappropriately to refer to these referents upon first mention (e.g., “And so **he** was spoiled”). In addition to the pronouns, she also used 44 tokens of 31 different nouns; of these different nouns, four lexical items were neologisms (e.g., “lade,” “rager,” “resers,” and “chining”) as seen in the utterance “So I left the (lade) some of the (chining).” Three additional nouns were English lexical items

Table 4. Nouns and pronouns used by Elsie in fifteen short narratives (# of instances in parentheses)

| Nouns n= 31 different lexical items n= 44 tokens | Pronouns n= 10 different lexical items n= 90 tokens |
|--|---|
| time/s (6) | I (19) |
| one (3) | me (1) |
| people (2) | you (2) |
| part/s (2) | he (5) |
| church/es (2) | him (2) |
| woman (2) | she (2) |
| group/s (2) | it (22) |
| thing/s (2) | we (11) |
| all lexical items below used only one time each: | |
| back | they (19) |
| chining (neologism) | them (7) |
| clay (inappropriately used) | |
| clothes | |
| course | |
| fellow | |
| hurry | |
| kind | |
| lade (neologism) | |
| love | |
| money | |
| nose (inappropriately used) | |
| pair | |
| pay | |
| phase (inappropriately used) | |
| place | |
| playcards | |
| rager (neologism) | |
| resers (neologism) | |
| somebody | |
| talk | |
| type | |
| week | |

that were inappropriately used (e.g., “clay,” “nose,” and “phase”). Of the remaining 24 nouns, at least eight (“people,” “type,” “part,” “group,” “time,” “thing,” “one” and “place”) were arguably semantically relatively “empty”, as seen in the utterance “people were looking around.” These eight nouns accounted for nineteen tokens.

In sum, we find that at least 116 (87%) of the 134 references to people and objects in these narratives were either semantically relatively “empty” or actually

misleading or confusing (in terms of the neologisms and inappropriately used nouns). Specific, explicit answers to the important narrative question “Who or what was in the storyworld?” were, therefore, only very infrequently found, leading to few clues (other than perhaps gender or animacy) in the mind of the listener.

Reference to activities and states

In the creation of a storyworld, verbs help to answer the question “What happened?” All of Elsie’s fifteen narratives contained such reference to activities or

Table 5. Verbs used by Elsie in fifteen short narratives (# of instances in parentheses)

| State/auxiliary N=2 types N=19 tokens (18% of total tokens) | Modals N=2 types N=4 tokens (4% of total tokens) | Action N=26 types N= 67 tokens (63% of total tokens) | Speaking N=2 types N=6 tokens (6% of total tokens) | Internal state (thinking, feeling) N=6 types N=10 tokens (9% of total tokens) |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Be (10) | Can (3) | Change (1) | Ask (1) | Enjoy (1) |
| Have (9) | Supposed to (1) | Come (2) | Say (3) | Feel (1) |
| | | Do (5) | Tell (2) | Know (2) |
| | | Eat (1) | | Think (1) |
| | | Get (14) | | Want (4) |
| | | Give (1) | | Wonder (1) |
| | | Go (7) | | |
| | | Help (1) | | |
| | | Leave (3) | | |
| | | Look (3) | | |
| | | Make (3) | | |
| | | Move (1) | | |
| | | Pack (2) | | |
| | | Park (2) | | |
| | | Play (1) | | |
| | | Put (4) | | |
| | | Run (1) | | |
| | | See (1) | | |
| | | Sit (1) | | |
| | | Stop (1) | | |
| | | Straighten (1) | | |
| | | Take (4) | | |
| | | Think (1) | | |
| | | Try (2) | | |
| | | Use (2) | | |
| | | Work (2) | | |

states. The minimal number of references within a single narrative was three (and that occurred in four narratives). Table 5 provides a list of all such references.

As is evident from Table 5, Elsie used a total of 106 instances of 38 different verbs within the fifteen narratives. In order to gain greater insight into the kind of work that Elsie's verbs accomplished in the creation of the storyworld, the 38 different verbs can be placed into the following five categories: (1) verbs of state/auxiliary; (2) modal verbs; (3) action verbs; (4) verbs of speaking; and (5) internal state verbs (referencing cognitive processes and emotions). We note from Table 5 that 18% of her tokens were state or auxiliary verbs; 4% were modals; 63% were action verbs; 6% were verbs of speaking; and 9% were internal state verbs. This range of verb forms used indicates that Elsie's ability to communicate actions and states was quite robust, especially when contrasted with her relatively deficient use of language to refer to people and objects as well as times and spaces (as seen above and below).

Relative deficiencies within this overall category of verbs fell within the "action verb" subcategory that accounted for 63% (67 of 106) of the verb tokens Elsie used in these narratives; a closer examination of this subcategory revealed that 39% (26 of 67) of these tokens were of the semantically relatively "empty" type (e.g., "do," "get," "make," and "put"). As a percentage of all tokens of verbs used, this amounted to 25% (26 of 106); even when the 19 tokens of the verbs "to be" and "to have" were added in (as these may also be considered relatively devoid of meaning), the percentage rose only to 42% (45 of 106). In contrast to the 87% of nominal references that were semantically "empty" or even misleading, however, Elsie's use of verbs was comparatively well-preserved.

Spatial reference

In the creation of a storyworld, spatial references help to answer the question "Where did this take place?" Narrators can tell stories about distant locations as well as the current location but at an earlier time (e.g., telling a story about a dinner one had eaten ten years earlier at the restaurant where one is currently sitting). Sometimes this assistance from the physical surrounding helped Elsie be understood; at other times, however, it served as a source of confusion, when I could recognize only that the story was being told about an earlier time in the current location, but had no idea as to how far back. Additionally, since the scope of the spatial adverb "here" can vary widely, I also faced difficulty in identifying the spatial referent (e.g., Did "here" refer to the lounge, the unit, the healthcare center or the city, etc.?).

In thirteen of these fifteen narratives, Elsie referred in some way to spatial aspects of her story; seven of these thirteen narratives contained only a single spatial

Table 6. Spatial reference used by Elsie in thirteen short narratives (# of instances in parentheses)

| Spatial reference (n=26) |
|--|
| Preposition only (n=14) |
| Over (4) |
| On (4) |
| In (3) |
| Out (2) |
| From (1) |
| Single adverb only (n=2) |
| Here (2) |
| Phrases (n=10) |
| Clear up higher than this (1) |
| Down here (1) |
| Down this way (1) |
| On the back (1) |
| On the da dackum stuff (1) |
| On the p.ay (1) |
| Out there (1) |
| Over cross over those two houses over there way over there (1) |
| Through them (1) |
| Where it is (1) |

reference. As evidenced in Table 6, Elsie's spatial referents were only rarely specific enough to help me construct my understanding of the storyworld.

Note that of the 26 instances of spatial reference, 16 were accomplished with a single lexical item. Fourteen of these were single prepositions; two were instances of the adverb "here." Eight of the other ten instances were prepositional phrases including only pronouns ("through them"), semantically empty nouns ("down this way" or "on the da dackum stuff"), or a noun used inappropriately ("on the p.ay"). One of the other two instances was the subordinate clause "where it is." The only specific spatial reference was a prepositional phrase that included a noun and that was linked explicitly (also via nonverbal pointing gestures) to physical context within eyesight (e.g., "over those two houses over there way over there"). In this single instance, I did not need additional information to help paint the picture in my mind as a listener.

Temporal reference

In the creation of a storyworld, temporal references help to answer the question "When did this take place?" Temporal orientation in normal narratives can be, for example, to (1) calendar/clock time; (2) historical events such as wars or

Table 7. Temporal reference used by Elsie in eleven short narratives (# of instances in parentheses)

| Temporal reference (n=26) |
|-----------------------------|
| Single adverb (n=17) |
| Then (9) |
| Finally (1) |
| Sometimes (1) |
| Today (1) |
| When (5) |
| Single noun (n=2) |
| The week (1) |
| Two times (1) |
| Adverbial phrase (n=1) |
| Earlier than that (1) |
| Prepositional phrase (n=1) |
| At such and such a time (1) |
| Noun phrase (n=5) |
| One of the times (1) |
| Quite a (yong) time ago (1) |
| That long a time (1) |
| The first parts (1) |
| The time (1) |

presidential terms; (3) specific family events, such as births, deaths, or jobs, to name just a few options. In eleven of her fifteen narratives, Elsie referred to some aspect of time. In six of these eleven cases, she made only a single reference to time (e.g., using “finally,” “then,” etc.). The additional five narratives included temporal references that were not specific enough to help the audience construct their understanding of the storyworld (e.g., “When she first asked..”). Table 7 provides a list of all such references to time in the eleven narratives.

Note that of the 26 instances of temporal reference, 14 were in the form of “then” or “when,” which signal virtually nothing on the semantic level. Most of the other choices were also deictic in nature, needing the context to be understood. Note that there was not a single instance of “last week” or “last year” and only one instance of “today.” With deictic spatial references, the physical surroundings can help a listener fill in his or her understanding; time, however, is so abstract that — without additional linguistic assistance — it is nearly impossible to be able to construct this anchor of the storyworld.

Cumulative effect

In each of the sections above, we focused specifically on a single particular challenge (nominal reference, reference to activities and states, spatial reference, and temporal reference) related to the linguistic construction of storyworlds in interaction; in so doing, we deconstructed the fifteen narratives Elsie told during our conversations and examined specific evidence regarding her communicative difficulties related to each kind of reference. These are summarized in Table 8. Each category of reference is followed by the numbers of tokens and types used in the fifteen narratives, along with a notation regarding possible contributions in each category to the lack of semantic specificity.

In order to comprehend the cumulative effect of these individual challenges, we now view these pieces in action at the discourse level. To this end, we return to the short narrative that was presented initially in lines 5–13 of excerpt 2 in the introduction to this paper. In excerpt 5 I have highlighted each kind of reference in a different way: nominal references are represented with a larger than usual font size, verbal references are represented with bold font, spatial references are represented with italicized font, and temporal references are underlined.

Table 8. Summary of references types

| Category of reference | Number of tokens | Number of types | Contributions to lack of semantic specificity in these references |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Nominal | 134 | 41 (31 nouns; 10 pronouns) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 90 tokens (67% of tokens) were pronouns, often at first mention – 19 tokens were of semantically weak nouns, such as “people,” “type,” “part,” “group,” “thing,” “one,” and “place” – 4 tokens were neologisms – 3 tokens were inappropriately used lexical items |
| Verbal | 106 | 38 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 39% of the action verbs (26 of 67) were semantically relatively empty (“do,” “get,” “make,” and “put”) |
| Temporal | 26 | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 14 (54% of tokens) were of the semantically weak adverbs “then” and “when” |
| Spatial | 26 | 16 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 14 (54% of tokens) were single prepositions (from, in, on, out, and over) |

Excerpt 5

1. So they have uh been kind of just enjoying having some of these things
2. cause people were looking around and wondering what they're going.
3. And then the first parts
4. One of the times oh quite a (yong) time ago over across *those two houses over there way over there*
5. And then then that uh whe..was the time
6. when we were here to going..down *this way*.
7. And so he was..quite spoiled..for trying to get those that other part to use.
8. But I think they've done most of it.
9. So I'm not sure.

Note the challenge to the listener in trying to create in his or her mind a mental image that comes close to matching that in Elsie's mind (or the "real-life" events that provided the material for the narrative). Semantic imprecision can be found within almost every reference — nominal (e.g., "people," "some of these things"), temporal (e.g., "that was the time when we were here to going..down this way"), spatial ("e.g., "down this way"), and verbal ("they've done most of it."). As observed above, Elsie's use of verbs to describe actions within the storyworld is relatively well-preserved in contrast to the other areas, as evidenced by semantically-rich verbs such as "looking around" and "wondering." Overall, however, the deficiencies overwhelm what is spared, with the net result being a flat, confused storyworld in the mind of the listener.

And it is this flat, confused storyworld that is potentially problematic in terms of Elsie's identity construction. Because of her insufficient referential specificity at all levels, the fifteen storyworlds that she painted with the words she chose did not display important aspects of herself at earlier times. The deficient narrative accounts blocked anything approaching full understanding of agency, interests, competencies, and values that are so vital to the construction of identity in interaction.

To return to the metaphor used in the introduction, verbal accounts such as these clearly cannot act as "self-portraits," but they may indeed be worked with as "snapshots." Just as we can look closely at hairstyles and fashions displayed by photographed individuals for clues as to *when* the snapshot was taken or we can look at buildings and landscaping for clues as to *where* the snapshot was taken, we can be alert to clues hidden within the words of the spoken narrative. These clues, however, will not likely be found within Elsie's referential language, as we have just seen. Instead, such clues may be found in what Bakhtin (1981) calls the "flavors" of the words (rather than their specific meanings or functions) or what Agha (2005)

calls the “social characterization”¹⁰ of identified voicing contrasts within a single speaker’s discourse.

To illustrate, we return to excerpt 1 (reproduced below as excerpt 6), the short narrative that was used in the introduction of this paper (see lines 7–13 of excerpt 1). As mentioned earlier, Elsie’s lack of specificity hampered an understanding of what she was trying to recount from her life. In our attempt to envision the snapshot that would represent the story, we knew it contained Elsie, but we did not know how old she was. For example, we knew virtually nothing about the other people in the “photo” beyond the fact that they were part of “the groups.” We had little idea what these people were doing in the snapshot (“making up one”?). And, finally, our only clue to the physical context was the word “here.”

Excerpt 6

1. Elsie: **That’s why I came when I..when there were groups that were making up one**
2. Uh.
3. **I was anxious to see it and uh get it straightened out**
4. **and so..and so I did.**
5. Heidi: Mhm. And that’s why you came here?
6. Elsie: **So I came here**
7. **and then I (used) different things working on them.**

From the perspective of Bakhtin (1981), however, we can begin to fill in some of the snapshot. Based on his discussions of the “flavor” of words, we have a sense of a goal-directed intensity in Elsie’s face (“That’s why I came..”) and the cooperative spirit among the individuals (“groups that were making up one..”) in the photo with her. In hearing “I was anxious to see it and uh get it straightened out,” we imagine a strong-willed individual who was able to set goals based on a state of mind and then to carry them through to completion (“and so..and so I did.”). In terms of Agha’s insights, we notice a “social characterization” associated especially with line 3 (“I was anxious to see it and uh get it straightened out.”); here we realize we may be listening to the strong voice of Elsie’s leadership associated years earlier with her professional role within the church. Thus, in this way, attributes of Elsie’s

10. See Agha (2005, pp. 43–45, 54–55) for more information on his proposed process regarding segmentation and typification of voices. To illustrate briefly, imagine a speaker involved in a political discussion who integrates into his argument an utterance that was spoken by a particular politician during a televised debate. If a listener not only recognizes the voicing contrast (what he calls “contrastive individuation”), but also identifies the utterance as having been uttered by a particular biological person, that would be an example of what Agha calls “biographic identification.” If, however, the listener recognizes the voicing contrast, but does not identify the speaker, he may still assign a “social characterization” to that contrast; i.e., one that would be typical of a politician’s way of speaking.

identity can indeed come through even when we are not certain what exactly is being communicated on the semantic level.

Summary and implications

We have now re-examined the language of conversations that took place between Elsie and me over a period of 4½ years — this time through the lens of narrative. The narrative perspective was chosen because of the wealth of evidence that indicates its importance in helping to construct social identities for those voicing the narratives as well as for those characters who inhabit the social world created by the narrators/narratives. The importance of drawing on the past as an identity resource seems to be all the more important for individuals who are approaching the end of life, as many live in a maelstrom of change: some live in diminished social surroundings due to reduced mobility and/or new residence in retirement homes or assisted living centers; many are having to deal with chronic health problems ranging from arthritis to diabetes to pulmonary diseases; most are experiencing the pain of losing increasing numbers of friends and family members to death; many have retired from lifelong professions that have sustained vital aspects of their identities; still others may be suffering from loss of hearing or eyesight or even cognitive changes due to Alzheimer's disease. Such individuals still have a chance to hold onto a robust and varied sense of self through narratives that allow flight away from the challenges in the here-and-now — back to times and places that serve as the stuff of enduring personal experience narratives.¹¹ The question posed at the beginning of this paper pointed to the possible ramifications of Alzheimer's disease with its memory loss on this kind of discursive identity work.

The first step in this study followed Chafe's insights regarding displaced and immediate modes in conversation. Elsie's clauses were examined and separated into two categories: (1) those that referred to the past via the use of a past tense verb and (2) those that did not. Through this examination, we discovered that only approximately 15% of Elsie's talk referred to the past time (at least overtly through the use of the past tense). And closer examination revealed that these clauses that comprised the 15% of talk were of two types: (1) narrative traces; and (2) narrative clauses. We then found that the vast majority of Elsie's already minimal amount of talk about the past was in the form of narrative traces, not in the

11. Of course, the focus in this paper on Alzheimer's disease is not meant to eclipse the fact that many elderly individuals lead highly energetic lives full of activities; in these instances, identity work continues to be accomplished within personal experience narratives based on current life circumstances in addition to those based on the past.

form of narratives. In fact, of the 204 clauses that contained verbs inflected for the past tense, 73% were narrative traces. These traces were found in all except the last of our five conversations and seemed to appear “out of the blue” within stream-of-consciousness type discourse related to the here-and-now. Since they included neither sufficient temporal or spatial orientation nor cohesive/coherent ties to the surrounding discourse, these traces contributed to a paradox. The very type of utterance (talking about the past) that characterizes healthy speakers and that could have allowed Elsie (1) to be viewed as a more typical conversational partner (i.e., not talking only about the here-and-now but about displaced times and places) and (2) to offer glimpses of her younger self in times of better health actually contributed to the construction of a jerky discourse that was difficult to understand.

We then intensified our investigation into the set of 56 remaining clauses that made reference to the past — those that were part of fifteen short conversational narratives. These narratives took place only in the first three of the five conversations, indicating that they were perhaps more challenging communicatively than the production of independent narrative traces alone. The analysis focused on the actual linguistic construction of the anchors of the storyworld, including reference to people, objects, activities and states, time and space. Frequency lists of lexical items and phrases that were used in Elsie’s narratives provided evidence that Elsie’s abilities to use these linguistic building blocks to construct meaningful storyworlds were quite diminished. These problems began with relatively infrequent references and were exacerbated by the weak semantic nature of those references that were actually made. Vivid storyworlds simply could not be conjured up with building blocks that included overwhelming numbers of personal pronouns and lexical items such as “people,” “part,” “thing,” “place,” “do,” “get,” “make,” “put,” “then,” “when,” “in,” “on,” and “over.” Since the linguistic reference work could not be relied upon for the accomplishment of identity work, we revisited an earlier narrative with new insights from Bakhtin (1981) and Agha (2005). Being attuned to “flavors” of words used (Bakhtin) as well as voicing contrasts within the narrative identified as “social characterization” (Agha) assisted us in uncovering attributes of Elsie’s identity (after-the-fact) even though we were uncertain about the narrative’s semantic meaning or its point.

It is hoped that this study of talk about the past by a single speaker dealing with Alzheimer’s disease will contribute to the ever-expanding understanding of Alzheimer discourse in general, especially regarding narrative abilities in the middle to late stages of the disease. Despite its focus on discursive challenges, I see this study as being motivated in part by what Leibling (2006) calls the “personhood movement” in Alzheimer’s studies (cf. Kitwood 1997) which centers on “the person within — the reflexive, immaterial, communicable essence of a person that is located deep within the body, but that is sometimes veiled by symptoms” (Leibling,

2006, p. 243). My focus on Elsie's use of narrative traces may spark research into this little-examined phenomenon that seems to contribute to the jerky nature of some Alzheimer talk, even as it serves as an important reminder of a deeply-seated human "autobiographical impulse" (Rosen, 1988). In addition, my findings regarding short narratives may illuminate the myriad challenges associated with all narrative tellings, especially as related to the linguistic construction of the anchors of the storyworld. Researchers studying narratives told by speakers of other groups that face communicative challenges may find my frameworks and methodological approaches useful. Such groups include second language users, healthy elderly speakers (especially in terms of word-finding difficulties), and speakers with health problems that affect communication, such as aphasia, autism, and schizophrenia. Further, researchers interested in identity construction and narrative may be informed by the discursive and identity effects of Elsie's linguistic and memory challenges and may find that insights from Bakhtin and Agha highlight intriguing additional evidence regarding identities within their own narrative corpora.

Finally, I hope that professionals and personal caregivers working with individuals who are living with Alzheimer's disease may be better equipped through these analyses to think about the language used by those in their care. If a person with Alzheimer's disease tends to speak overwhelmingly about the here-and-now, interlocutors can support identity work by picking up on formulaic small talk ("Have a nice day!") and instances of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), such as compliments and jokes (see Hamilton, 1994, 2003). Taking the initiative to focus conversational attention on visible personal objects (such as photographs, books, artwork, and greeting cards) in the residence may evoke a sense of well-being and some positive comments, even if no narratives are forthcoming. To illustrate, upon seeing a photograph of her husband, Elsie joyfully commented to me, "That's mine..my husband..and that was when he was younger and now he's of course older." When looking over a letter she had received from a well-known politician, she glowed, "It was a very interesting time!" If, on the other hand, the person with Alzheimer's disease is still referring to the past, taking on the role of an attentive and active listener is very important (see also Fine, 2006). Listening intently for verbal clues (including the "flavors" of words and "social characterizations" of voicing contrasts) and scanning the surroundings for physical and nonverbal clues may provide the listener with resources to draw upon for important supportive turns-at-talk. Depending on the amount of shared background information, these clues may be the first step in providing scaffolding for a more extended narrative. This scaffolding can come in the form of guiding questions, cooperative overlap (Tannen, 1989), or completed utterances (see Ramanathan, 1994, 1995 for more information). In closing, short narratives told by individuals living with Alzheimer's disease may indeed not function well as "self-portraits,"

but even a narrative as “snapshot” can provide clues that help interlocutors reconstruct aspects of the individual’s identity. These clues can then be used as a springboard for further crucial, life-affirming interaction.

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