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ABSTRACT

Several types of narrative errors are discussed that were found in the course of an analysis of stories collected in casual settings from a number of American speakers in undirected conversation. The approach to the question of error correction is sociocultural; the emphasis is on the motivation for the error correction. This paper explores the reason why some sorts of lexicalizations, ordering of sentences and "false starts" are viewed as errors. The thesis here is that the correction of errors is actually used strategically in talk, so the correction of errors in talk is not random but must be learned, like other aspects of language use. Errors in event structuring and descriptive structuring are examined first, then errors of evaluation are investigated. Examples of dialogue and stories accompany the discussion.
 (Author/AMH)

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Not So False Starts

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RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Polanyi's paper is an analysis of one aspect of discourse, or talk, in American culture--the way that errors in narration are corrected. Polanyi's point is that the correction of errors is actually used strategically in talk, so the correction of errors in talk is not in any way random but must be learned, like other aspects of language use. Educators need to be aware that not all children are equally adept at correcting errors in their speech, since error correction is part of larger discourse abilities.

NOT SO FALSE STARTS¹

Livia Polanyi

In this paper, I will examine several types of narrative errors which I have found in the course of analyzing a number of stories collected in casual settings from a number of American speakers in the course of undirected conversation. These stories were not 'elicited,' in other words, they were merely overheard and recorded by a tape recorder.

My approach to the question of error correction in stories is sociocultural. Unlike much of the work in error correction which has focused on cognitive aspects of the phenomenon (Fromkin, 1973; Linde, 1975), my emphasis will be on the motivation for error correction. The only previous work I know of which deals specifically with error correction in discourse is Charlotte Linde's 1975 N-WAVE IV paper entitled "Speech Errors, Error Correction, and the Construction of Discourse." Her work attempts to "discover some of the ways in which speakers monitor their own speech, and to draw some inferences from them about the processes used by speakers in constructing discourse" (Linde, 1975, p.1).

I, on the other hand, am primarily interested in why some sorts of lexicalizations, ordering of sentences, and "false starts" (sentences which are begun, dropped in the middle, and then picked up again and finished later in the story) are viewed as errors. We can assume they are errors, because they are 'corrected' -- new material is inserted in the slot formerly filled by what we can take to be the 'error.' The question which I am asking is what are these 'errors' errors of? Why do speakers consider certain types of linguistic phenomena and consistently correct them? As I see it, these 'linguistic phenomena' (as I'll call

them for want of a better term) which occur as a story is being told are generally speaking errors of narrative structure or strategy.

Error correction has a social function in storytelling which derives from the social nature of telling a story -- we use stories to share events and experiences with one another. Stories, whether of a formal genre (ghost stories, for example) or garden variety descriptions of aspects of our lives, are not mere chains of sentences which can be interrupted at normal syntactic junctures like ordinary conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). But rather, stories are discourse units which once underway will almost always be finished eventually (Linde, forthcoming).

One impetus for undertaking this investigation, was a comment made by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson in their most recent paper in Language, "The Preference for Self-Correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation" (Language, 53 (2), 1977). I will quote one entire section of their paper:

2.12 It is a notable fact that the occurrence or distribution of repair/correction is not well ordered by reference to the occurrences of 'error.' Repair/correction is sometimes found where there is no hearable error, mistake, or fault:

[s] (3) Bernice: Dean came up en 'e said 'I'd like-' 'Bernice?' he said 'I'd like t' take you over tuh Shakey's en buy you a beer.

[s] (4) Ken: Sure enough ten minutes later the bell r- the doorbell rang ...

[s] (5) L: Is his one dollar all right or should he send more than that for the p- tuh cover the postage.

Furthermore, hearable error does not necessarily yield the occurrence of repair/correction:

[s] (6) Avon Lady: And for ninety-nine cents uh especially in Rapture, and the Au Coeur which is the newest fragrances, uh that is a very good value.

Customer: Uh huh

[s] (7) Bernice: ..en I think if more parents of kids these age c'd participate in this kind of an atmosphere, hhh it would certainly help develop a lot of understanding. A'n' Mister Warden said that was certainly one of the things that he hed been considering...

(p. 363)

An examination of examples (6) and (7) shows that speakers certainly do make "hearable errors" without any attempt at self or other correction. Thus, it seems clear, that Sacks et al. are saying that repair does not necessarily occur when there is error. I assume therefore that by "Repair/correction is sometimes found where there is no hearable error, mistake or fault," they mean that speakers correct mistakes that aren't there -- perhaps out of some sort of perversity! Actually, a cursory examination of their examples, (3) and (4) gives the distinct feeling that these sentences are not ordinary conversational ones, but are, in fact, taken out of their normal context of sentences within narratives within conversations. Although it is possible to understand sentence level errors by looking only at the sentence in question, a discourse level error must be examined in light of the discourse unit of which it is a part. These errors in s(3) and s(4) are probably errors of evaluation of important events in the stories of which they are a part. We will look at such errors a little later in this paper in some more detail.

Speakers can make errors in structuring any one of three types of information. They may tell events out of order, fail to give sufficient descriptive material to adequately contextualize the point they are making,

or they may evaluate incorrectly or too weakly so that it is not easy to ascertain exactly which points are being made by the presentation of events and description. Any of these error-types may be caught and self-corrected by the speaker (and often are); alternatively, they may be caught by the auditors, who normally ask for clarification of whatever has been poorly presented. We will examine errors in event structuring and descriptive structuring first, and then go on to examining errors of evaluation. Evaluative errors are the most common, and perhaps the most interesting for investigators of discourse since all of the devices which occur in storytelling may occur in "normal," unstructured discourse also and act similarly -- evaluating what the speaker feels is most important in what he is saying.

There are at least three kinds of difficulties narrators have with event structuring: they may order events incorrectly with respect to each other; they may state the wrong events and then correct the information by substituting new and more accurate events; or they may select events with the wrong degree of specificity. In addition, when a small story is embedded within a larger one, additional complications arise as one tries to analyze what is going on in the error correction, since an event or ongoing state in the embedded story may have a temporal relationship to events in the outer embedding story. We will look at an example which presents these sorts of difficulties somewhat later in this paper.

Example (1) is a straightforward example of incorrect ordering.

(1) B What do you do when you are on acid?

G Well..well..what we..we did it about three times since I met Jim..uh..in fact we did it the day after we met.
..[laughter]..um..we dropped acid..we woke up at four o'clock in the morning..we dropped acid and right after we took the pills we started walking to the park.

G states that they dropped acid; backtracks in time to state that they got up at four o'clock in the morning; and repeats the important action of taking acid. We woke up at four o'clock in the morning is quite properly an event and most certainly serves to keep time in the story since it is the first event of the time line of the story. We dropped acid is the key event in the story, it is, in fact, what the story is all about; to have started the story baldly with the key event would have tended to detract from the "storyness" of the story and to prepare the way for a one or two sentence description of what happened the three times they took acid. Instead, G has the intention of telling a story -- describing their feelings and reactions in an extended form, one which will give her the space and time in which to illustrate her point stated earlier in the conversation that she really enjoys taking acid, has always had pleasant experiences and would like to do so again. The move from a naked statement of "we dropped acid" to a contextualized statement of "having gotten up at four o'clock in the morning in order to take acid" signals to the hearers that what will follow is a story and not a mere recital of events and facts.

G continues her story of her experiences on acid and eventually commits and corrects the second type of event error: She states something which is not true and then interrupts herself and gives some different information:

(2) G We'd sit on the big hill and watch the sun come up...
and there's..you know, usually about three or four
other people tripping on acid
[laughter]

L Watching the sun come up

G Watching the sun come up on the big hill in the park...
and then we'd just walk around and...see we were
different..cause I always liked to look at the clouds

and Jim liked to look at like a blade of grass for two hours or something [laugh] and I'd run around in the field..you know..and I just had all this boundless energy.....

No, it was not true that they would just walk around. Her acid experience was one of running and observing large natural phenomena and Jim's a much more introverted experience. In point of fact, neither of them just walked around. By backing off from this conventional one sentence description of "what happens when you're on acid," G once again commits herself to a more extended and stage-center type of discourse.

The descriptive structure in stories is very important, since it often contains the details necessary to understand the meaning of the events: that x did y to z is not interesting without an understanding of who x is, and what is important about z. I will present two examples of error correction involving the descriptive structure. In example (3) one correction, failing to complete the word stuff, inserts information sufficient to understand the importance of the object destroyed during the girl's hysterical fit.

- (3) E My mother told me this amazing story today. In the beginning of s..of her breakdown.[uh huh].when she was crying all the time and when she was first going to the psychiatrist and everything..apparently she.. there would be some days when she would get really hysterical..well..she and my mother had cl--ean--ed ou-t her room...basically of all the st...my mother always saves everything so there were all these high school clothes hanging in the closet [right] they cleaned out almost everything..[uh huh] but there were a couple of things left..and one of the things that was left..was a..a dress made out of paper... [uh huh]..that um..Janet and one of her girlfriends had each sent for one once somewhere..it cost a dollar..or something [right] I mean so this was hanging in the closet..well apparently one morning and this was apparently the worst morning of of... her nervous breakdown...she woke up...something... there was s..something about going to the dentist or something. I think my mother was probably nagging

her which is what my mother does...and she...had a hysterical fit as far as I could tell, screamed and cried and hit her head against the wall and did all this stuff...well my mother later went up into the room

L Hit her head against what?

E The wall.

L Oh, the wall (laugh)

E Yes, (giggle) you know. Real hysterical fit, right? and my mother later apparently went up into her room and found this...um...this little red paper dress.. like torn to shreds on the hanger...you know?...and my mother was so freaked out. God. She she just (laugh)..she she was terrified. I mean..she had no idea wh(laugh) what more to expect..you know. Called my uncle and (uh) my uncle who who fancies himself you know an amateur psychiatrist said..uh...."Well, the object probably has some meaning for her." (laughter) I thought that was so funny. He's such a pain in the ass. (both laughing)

's mother saved the little red dress along with all of the other high school clothes that were stored in the closet. When E interrupts herself to explain that the st. which her mother and sister cleaned out of the closet included high school clothes and that they were there because her mother saves everything, it becomes clear that the little red dress, which was saved initially from the clean-up and then destroyed by her sister in her hysterical fit, was an object of some importance since it has been spared from the original purge. Furthermore, by giving the history of the saving of the little red dress, E could indicate that her mother's relations with her sister were not all tumultuous, which helps the audience understand her mother's getting so freaked out by the destruction of the dress, and the hysterical fit which preceded it. Repair was made to give the hearers enough information about E's sister and mother as well as the dress itself, to understand and appreciate the climactic events when they occurred by providing characterological and situational context. We will return to this story a bit later.

are at work in the following example, (5), in which L is struggling to explain why she did not know how long she was in the final stage of labor. Fully competent adult Americans know how long important events last, especially if there is a clock in the room with them for the entire experience. This question of how long her labor lasted and the fact that she did not know how long her first labor took is of crucial importance to understanding the next story she is planning to tell -- a story about the birth of her second child who was delivered at home in Africa by a midwife who would not have agreed to do a home delivery had she known how long the first labor lasted. Thus, by dwelling on details of the clock and why it was there and what kind of time it told and why she could not figure out the elapsed time, L is actually telling us important things about herself -- for example, that she knows one ought to know these things, that she tried to figure them out, that she would not have risked her life and her baby's life with a home delivery had she known the extent of the difficulties she had had with the original delivery, etc.

- (5) L ..they were, they were going to get the anesthetist because it was going on so long, the last stage..and I kept saying "No, no, I don't want him, I don't want him"..and um..Well, I guess it..I had lost sense of time because for some reason in the delivery room they had everything by Eastern Standard Time, or something (laughter) I mean th..the clock was s..so that they could regor..record the exact moment of birth..they had a..the clocks were all screwed up, so I think I was really in there about an hour and a half...there was no way to tell

There are two types of errors which occur in evaluation: either the speaker may evaluate the wrong thing and try to correct the impression that he thought the originally presented and evaluated material was the point of his story; or, he can evaluate important material too weakly and fear that his listeners will not understand what he thinks the point is.

This latter case is perhaps the most common error which occurs in the course of narration. A speaker uses a word, or phrase, realizes that it is not "strong" enough and hurries back to correct it. Alternatively, he may add more details to bring out crucial material, or make use of any other devices at his disposal. For example, he might step out of the story and evaluate from outside of it, making comments about what he feels is most central. Should normal internal or external evaluation fail to convince the audience of what the "point" of the story really is, Speaker and audience may interrupt the storytelling and enter a period of negotiation, in which all parties offer proposals and counter-proposals suggesting what the story is about, or even questioning that it is a story at all. Negotiations are resolved when Speaker and hearers agree on what the story should be considered to be about or move on in the conversation beyond the story (Polanyi, forthcoming).

A need to "negotiate" the point of the story can result from a failure on the speaker's part to evaluate story materials in such a way as to make his point. Alternatively, if Speaker and audience disagree on what point the story actually illustrated there may be a period of negotiation.

- (6) I remember (chuckle) saying to myself...there is a person over there that's falling to the ground. ...And that person was me. ...And I couldn't...(B: Oh wow) ... put together the fact..that..there was someone fainting and that someone was me. ...And I just fell down,... (clears throat) then all of a sudden there was a lot of space, and..people..helped me up, and...someone sat me down..A--nd then--uh--...(B: It wasn't rush hour.) Yes it was. ...(B: Yeah?) That's..partly why I fainted... (B: Mm) Uh...I was under...tremendous..emotional pressure at the time,..(B: Mm) and personal..pressure,..and...the crush..of the BODIES,..and the no[?].AIR in the CAR,... and everything just kind of combined. ..(B: Mm) A--nd um-- ...it was incredibly HOT,...a--nd uh--...we waited..until the next stop, (low pitch and amplitude - - - - -)

- - - - -) which was just a few minutes
 away..and then...someone took me off..the car,...and
 (sighs - - - - -)
 he got a policeman,...and..he came over,...and asked what
 was wrong, and he asked me just two questions. Are you
 pregnant?..To which I said no. I mean they..like he was
 told that I had fainted. ... (B: chuckle) A--nd uh--...
 uh he said...in a very embarrassed kind of way do you have
 your period now. ... (B: laugh) And I said no. ...
 A--nd then he said OK, and he sat me down, and they got
 an ambulance,...and the ambulance ca--me, and took me to
 ...a nearby hospital. ...A--nd u--m...I just stayed in
 the...emergency room..for...I guess an hour. ...It was
 it was heat prostration. ..A lot of it. ... (B: Mn) Having
 eaten...having..having not had...not...EATen...for
 several DA--YS,.. (B: uh) and...I was job hun [?] it was
 just..a whole mess. ...BUT...u--m...AFTER THAT,...I..
 could not..ride..on the subway. ...And to this day I have
 trouble..riding on the subway. ...If I'm with someone I
 feel OK. ...If I'm alone,... IN rush hour,...I c...I..
 c--an't. If..I'm very very scared of...fainting again.
 ...Um...I don't know if you've ever (B: Mm) experienced
 ... (B: I haven't.) ...There is NO experience in the
 WORLD,..like experiencing..rush hour..in the subway. ...
 Uh--... (B: Oh, rush hour. Not fainting.) Yeah. The
 closest thing I can compare it to, and I never experi-
 enced THAT,...and it's probably a FRACTica of what THAT
 experience was,... but I think.. (B: Mm) of the way the
 Jews..were herded (B: Mm) into the cattle cars. ...Tsk
 and that's ...you know...maybe..maybe part of THAT...
 ties into that..kind of... (B: Yeah) thing. ..And I just
 panic. ..I mean..everything in me..freezes up, and I can't
 do it. ... (B: Mm) And it's just as dehumanizing. ...
 (B: But people were pretty nice, hm?) People.,are..Always
 nice when there's a crisis like that. ...And..and the
 context was right. ...I was WHITE,..I was a young woman,...
 I was w-ell dressed, I was..obviously not..a pervert, or
 a deviate,..or a criminal. ... (B: laugh) HAD I BEEN...
 had I been..anything OTHER than that..I could've fallen..
 and they would've stepped OVER me. ...Or perhaps ON me. ...
 (B: laugh- - - - -)
 You know cause that's the way people in New York ARE.

In this story (6), Speaker presents a tale of fainting and being helped
 by strangers, she then comments on the dehumanizing aspects of the subway
 during rush hour, comparing conditions those in the Nazi cattle cars.
 When B fails to accept this interpretation by saying But people were
 pretty nice, hm?, the fight is on (Polanyi, forthcoming).

Evaluative problems normally do not end in such serious problems. Speaker and audience are able to resolve their differences easily with Speaker merely hurrying back to do a bit of repair work. Example (7) is a good example of this sort of repair situation.

(7) B We climbed up in the hayloft and there was all this nice hay and everything (laugh) and I kept saying "John, I'm going to get pregnant. I know it. I'm going to get pregnant." And he said "Nonsense." ... Here we are up in this hayloft

I Why did he say "nonsense?" (laughter)

B Because he didn't want me to...to desist..on the grounds of getting pregnant. And I kept s.. I was like this [very softly] "I'm getting pregnant. I'm getting pregnant." And I was..getting pregnant.

G Wow, you really had a lot of intuitions.

P That's what I was thinking.

B That's just the way it turned out.

B originally evaluates her intuition about getting pregnant with three evaluative devices: repetition, direct discourse, and, in the original I kept saying, a virtual repetition of the direct discourse. After I's question, B interrupts a simple iteration of I kept saying (I kept s..) and goes on to act out the utterance while deictically evaluating that she is acting it out (I'm like this) and maintaining both the repetitions and direct discourse. Simultaneously, she has substituted the wording I'm going to get pregnant with the much more immediate I'm getting pregnant thereby bringing the audience into the hayloft at the moment of conception. Interestingly, no one fails to get the point of that story, as the final comments indicate!

In the continuation of the story about E's sister and mother and the destruction of the red paper dress, Example (8), we see a simpler example of substitution for increased evaluative effect:

- (8) E But uh..but then..so my mother says:... "Well, I went into the room another time and I saw it was on the floor, but she hadn't thrown it away...I pushed it under..it's still there but I pushed it under some clothes." (laugh) She's in there (laugh) meddling around, right? [Right] She can't control herself.. It was so funny.

Here E increases the power of her evaluation of her mother's meddling, by inserting it's still there into the middle of her mother's speech. Her mother seems to be insisting that her behavior is not intrusive by saying that she left the ripped garment more or less where it was while pushing it out of sight. E, however, comments on her mother's character from outside the story, leaving no room for doubt in the hearers' mind that she intended this vignette to demonstrate something about her mother's character.

Children, too, understand the need to evaluate their stories. I remember one little boy, a child of perhaps four, insisting to his mother that a given point in the story was the funny part. "Hey, Mom, this is the funny part" he would say over and over as he struggled to place all of the events in the right order. This following example (9) was taken from a tape of a six-year-old boy who was, very self-consciously, "telling stories" into the tape recorder.

- (9) A I was brushing my teeth
L Uh huh
A and..I spitted out the toothpaste and walked out of my..No, and there was this strange bump in the sink
L Uh huh
A and..I went out..and showed my mom..my tooth. I went like this (demonstrates) and she said "Hey, your tooth fell out!" And then
L (laugh)
A I said "So that's what that strange bump was." And that's the end.

A begins his story with the two events I spitted out the toothpaste and I walked out of my when he chooses to interrupt himself and insert the information about the strange bump in the sink, which will, of course, prove to be his lost tooth. A increases the evaluative force of the strange bump by setting up the conditions which would allow for that phrase to be repeated. In addition, the presence of the odd object in the sink serves to heighten the story's suspense. Normally, the fact that data is self-conscious argues against it's being "pure" and service-able. But, in this case, since we are dealing with conscious (or at least semi-conscious), controlled behavior on the part of storytellers, it is very suggestive that A chose to correct his evaluation when he know he was being taped telling a story. Trying to "do his best story-telling," he chose to alter the evaluation to make the story more interesting by putting the crucial information more in focus.

After this discussion, we can look once again at examples s(3) and s(4) in the paper by Sacks, et al.:

s(3) Bernice: Dean came up en 'e said 'I'd like-'
'Bernice?' he said 'i'd like t' take
you over tuh Shakey's en buy you a beer."

s(4) Ken: Sure enough ten minutes later the bell
r- the doorbell rang....

Bernice's change from Dean came up 'en 'e said 'I'd like- to the more complete and formal 'Bernice? he said 'I'd like tuh take you over tuh Shakey's and buy you a beer' probably increases the spotlighting of this event within the discourse from which it was taken. Without the surrounding text, we can, of course, say very little. However, we do know that Dean is now presented as someone who has made Bernice a rather formal invitation out for beer and that we can assume that this is a meaningful date for her and not just the run-of-the-mill informal get-together

which might happen to her everyday. Likewise, by substituting the more formal and complete doorbell for bell, Ken has heightened the evaluation of that event by using a lexicalization which probably stands out from the rest of the discourse both because it is the formal and not informal way of stating the fact, and also because bell was treated as an error and repaired. Repairs themselves may function evaluatively in very complex ways in stories, and probably in other texts as well -- we will return to this point a bit later in the paper.

The difficulties Sacks et al. encounter in trying to understand a discourse error from a sentence perspective are not unique. In the following example (10) it is very difficult to understand the false start (Well he..the process continued..He didn't help us at all.) if one takes into account only this small vignette in which it occurs:

- (10) L ...plus I claimed I was blind.
- I And they believed that?
- L Well, they had somebody come to the house and check it out, you know.
- P Oh, no!
- L And he was sort of young and nice so I..um,..finally.. I just leveled with him and said.."This is sort of," "You can help us out, can't you?" "Oh, sure sure".. Well, he..The process continued..He didn't help us at all he probably...turned us in

(10) is a small story unit within a larger story of the attempts L and her husband made to get him out of the draft. That story, in turn, is embedded within the still more embracing story of her childbirth experiences. (The decision to have a baby in order to get her husband out of the draft is the first event in her saga of pregnancy and childbirth.) In this small vignette she is describing another strategem they employed, pretending to the draft board that she was blind, so that her husband could qualify for an exemption.

Looking at only a small discourse unit embedded within other more embracing units may give an inaccurate, or even misleading, interpretation of phenomena which occur within the smaller unit. In this case, I first attempted to analyze this false start as an error in event sequencing within the small vignette. The difficulty is, that the process continued is not an event and does not play a very important role in the vignette, while information about the outer draft story kept intruding itself on my analysis. I know, from the outer story, that this phrase contained important information and therefore could not simply be functioning as background information in this vignette. When I finally realized that I had to analyze the process continued as functioning in both the vignette and the outer story I could allow it to be behaving in a seemingly paradoxical fashion -- simultaneously functioning as background and foreground information.

Within the context of the vignette, the interspersed information the process continued serves as background information for her hypothetical reconstruction of the young man's behavior: He didn't help us at all. He probably turned us in. Within the context of the embedding story of the fight with the draft board, however, the entire vignette contextualizes and gives support to the notion that their fight with the draft board was a very serious business -- one which they fought with every resource at their disposal, including lying and having a child (both actions no American "should" undertake lightly). The statement, the process continued, serves to link the time line of the vignette to that of the embedding story. This signals the audience that their time is not being taken up with a story extraneous to the childbirth story, but that this vignette is part of the story they had agreed to hear earlier in ceding the floor.

What is actually contextualizing what, what should be considered foreground and what background, are very difficult to ascertain in multiply embedded stories and therefore error correction is very difficult to analyze. If one is to deal with error correction adequately, it is necessary to figure out what possible levels of structure are present before attempting to understand what error is being corrected at which level of structure. Once this has been done, it is possible to attempt to understand what informational, structural, or strategic function the error correction plays. In this example there are six levels of structure present and all are affected by the error correction:

The error occurs at sentence level.

The sentence is part of a vignette which must be tied to the embedding story of the draft.

The draft story is, in turn, one unit in the childbirth story which the audience had agreed to allow L to tell.

The childbirth story is, in itself, one turn in a conversation functioning as a storytelling round.

The storytelling round and the conversation are structural units in a social interaction. To abuse one's prerogatives at any level of structure can strain the seams of the social interaction somewhat or even "ruin an evening" for all participants.

Although it is very difficult to prove that any given action was done for any particular strategic purpose, there are two types of phenomena which appear to be error correction but which may actually be skillful types of linguistic manipulation. The first type is quite straightforward. A speaker uses hesitation, hunting for words, or backtracking to express some sort of emotion which he is experiencing in the story. This may be considered a type of "acting out" the effect of that particular aspect of the story on the narrator and thus functions to evaluate it as important to the listeners. In the story about fainting on the subway, for example,

which we have seen an excerpt from, Example (6), continues with the Speaker discussing the permanent effects of her fainting experience.

- (11) ...AFTER THAT,...I..could' not..ride..on the subway
...And to this day I have trouble..riding on the subway.
...If I'm with someone I feel OK. ...If I'm alone,...
IN rush hour. ...I c...I..c--an't. If..I'm very very
scared of...fainting again. ..

The effect of gasping for air is quite dramatic. (Unfortunately, one limitation of written transcripts of oral texts is that one misses all the paralinguistic information.) Similarly, L's comments about the clock in Example (12) are presented in such a confused and jumbled fashion that a hearer can easily imagine her confusion and upset at the time.

- (12) I had lost sense of time because for some reason in the delivery room they had everything by Eastern Standard Time, or something (laughter) I mean th.. the clock was s.. so that they could regor..record the exact moment of birth..they had a..the clocks were all screwed up, so I think I was really in there about an hour and a half...there was no way to tell

False starts, too, if properly managed, can be a highly successful storytelling device. Whether intentionally or not, speakers often begin a story; get to a key event or observation; state enough of the sentence encoding the important information so that hearers get a glimpse of what is going on; and then interrupt themselves in mid-sentence, put in background material or a digression which might be quite lengthy; catch up with themselves, as it were: restate and complete the unfinished sentence; and then go on with the story. Earlier in this paper, example (3) was analyzed as a simple type of error correction -- the narrator had not put in enough descriptive material to make the story coherent and, realizing that, had backtracked and put in a good deal of background information. This would jibe with Linde's conclusions that suggest that false starts

are the result of processing errors which occur as speakers "jump ahead to utter the portion of the discourse which is at that moment being planned" (Linde, 1975, p.8). But let us backtrack ourselves and re-examine the text in example (3) which contains a more important set of false starts. I think a case can be made that such false starts allow the speaker to 'buy time' in the conversation and thus can be an important narrative strategy regardless of the etiology of the phenomenon.

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

In example (13) E begins her story by beginning to tell the hearers some of what went on at the beginning of her sister's breakdown. The progress of the exposition appears fairly clear: she was crying all of the time; she was first going to the psychiatrist; sometimes she would get really hysterical. Apparently she appears and trails off before the important information that she would get really hysterical. Then E begins to fill in background information in earnest. We are told that mother and

sister had cleaned out sister's room of the stuff which mother had saved for years, and we are also told the history of the little red dress. Neither of these mini-stories are of much interest in themselves. Surely, neither of them would warrant being introduced by an opener such as E's My mother told me this amazing story today. which is the kind of comment which often signals the beginning of a story. By stating apparently she, filling in with the crucially important she would get really hysterical and then interrupting her story development to fill the audience in on the background, E has effectively tantalized the hearers with enough information about what will happen in the future of the story to maintain their interest in the expanded digressive rendition. Having finished with her digressions, she returns to the story line, and picking up the apparently twice in one sentence, well apparently one morning and this was apparently the worst morning of her nervous breakdown, proceeds to say that her sister had h. hysterical fit. That her sister had a hysterical fit is, up to this point, the crucial item in the story and was already stated by the third or fourth sentence of the story. By giving the audience that information early, however, she was able to take up the time to tell a slew of less important and time consuming details and sub-stories knowing all understood something "interesting" was going to happen. Later on in the story the red dress does figure again, but it could have been presented simply when it first plays an important role in the action of the story. However, to have done so would have made a much shorter story, and one which was not half as rich in the information about her family which E really wanted to present.

This is, then, a complex view of evaluation in which it is possible to state that more important material can evaluate less important aspects of the story. And this makes sense. Just as the important material is

highlighted by evaluative devices, it is contextualized by all of the less important material. The crucial material, in its turn, evaluates the less important material by informing the hearers why that less important material was ever presented. Giving a glimpse of the "point," if you will, allows the listeners to share the narrator's knowledge that something important is coming up and therefore to give the narrator time in the conversation free from normal turntaking in which to develop his story. That these sentences are not finished is crucial, since if the sentence were finished, it would be much harder to backtrack and give a mass of other detail. The speaker would have gone so far, that it would be difficult to justify going back and putting in the rest of the material. Significantly, these false starts often occur toward the beginnings of stories or at the start of what might be thought of as digressions (story extenders), both points at which the speaker is sensitive to his audience's possible restiveness and desires that he tell his story efficiently.

I think it is probably impossible to prove this sort of theory. One can merely offer it as a possible way to look at data and see if it feels right. Once the speaker has gotten the floor and made a solid beginning on a story he has a great deal of leeway in presenting his story. However, should he go on too long or seem to be leading in ways which the audience had not bargained on allowing him to go by assenting to listen to his story, the audience may become impatient or feel itself duped and begin to lose interest. Some American storytellers with whom I've discussed this way of looking at false starts have agreed that some such strategy seems likely to be going on -- that they experience themselves considering how much detail they are allowed to give when they are telling a story, beginning to tell a skeletal story, and later relaxing and allowing

themselves to backtrack and fill in other material. In any case, I submit these arguments for your consideration.

One reader of this paper felt that I had not given enough weight to 'psychological factors' in describing these story errors. The fact that there are such errors, that they are recognized as errors and corrected in systematic ways by speakers is a sociological and cultural fact. That a false start, for example, can be used for narrative strategic ends, is a possible fact of the ethnography of American storytelling. Why any given individual makes an error or corrects it in a given fashion is a psychological fact. That such errors are made and can be corrected is not. Naturally, a mode of argumentation which is text-based always raises the issue of whether one is dealing with individual, idiosyncratic facts or facts with some generality and systemic importance. In my own mind, there is no doubt that these errors occur pervasively in storytelling as I have suggested and that repair of these errors has the sort of general effects which I have detailed as occurring in the specific examples presented here.

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NOTES

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