

# Discourse & Society

<http://das.sagepub.com/>

---

## The Construction of Moral Agency in the Narratives of High-School Drop-Outs

Betsy Rymes

*Discourse Society* 1995 6: 495

DOI: 10.1177/0957926595006004003

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://das.sagepub.com/content/6/4/495>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Discourse & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://das.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://das.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://das.sagepub.com/content/6/4/495.refs.html>

# The construction of moral agency in the narratives of high-school drop-outs

**Betsy Rymes**

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

---

**ABSTRACT.** Through ethnographic, discourse and grammatical analysis, this article discusses the narratives of two high-school drop-outs and describes the various resources these young people use to fashion their identities through the telling of their stories. Through analysis of both clause-level expression of grammatical agency and discursive and cultural contextualization of agentive actions, it is shown that these young people, despite their apparent limited agency in the larger society, express moral agency through their active narration of the events of their lives. It is not only the content of their narratives, but also the way these stories are told that indicate the moral agency of the speakers. A conceptualization of moral agency is developed as it relates not to static universals, but to the shared particulars among this peer group and the common language they use to talk about their experiences.

**KEY WORDS:** adolescence, at-risk youth, gangs, moral agency, narrative, peer groups

---

## I. GOALS

This study explores the realization of moral agency in the narratives of former high-school drop-outs now attending an inner-city alternative school. These are students who have been expelled from one or more public (state) high schools and have experienced a great deal of school failure. The purpose of this study is to offer insight, through a combination of narrative and ethnographic analysis, into how these students create a sense of self and agency. The language these young men and women use provides a window into the way they perceive themselves and their place in a social world. Their narratives reveal not only the way they structure the past events of their lives but also the way in which they will continue to perceive, act in and construct events in the future. Ethnographic study combined with close linguistic analysis of narrative discourse from six students is used to investigate the way in which talk among individuals in a resistant group is bound up in and creates a collective ethic. This paper explores how moral agency takes a particular form in a particular community and how such moral agency can be understood through close analy-

---

DISCOURSE & SOCIETY © 1995 SAGE, (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) VOL. 6(4): 495-516.

sis of the linguistic expression of agency and the context of this expression. The paper ultimately suggests that the implicit and group-specific nature of the expression of moral agency may create problems for these high-school drop-outs because of its non-transparency in other communities. I conclude with a call for greater attention to the quality of communication across different groups.

## II. BACKGROUND

### *Language and resistance*

Ethnographies of resistant youth peer groups and gangs in Los Angeles have shown the ties within some of these groups to be stronger than any other in the children's lives (Moore, 1978; Harris, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Alvarez, 1993). It has also been shown that apparently resistant adolescent peer groups actually contribute to the replication of class structure (Willis, 1977) and that institutions such as public (state) schools and the practices they foster further contribute to this replication of societal norms (Bourdieu, 1977; Mehan, 1993).

Language is a crucial resource for both the replication of and resistance to such norms (Cohn, 1987). Narrative form in particular is a crucial resource for ordering experience into a specific framework. Although basic story structures have been discussed as having universal underlying forms (Mandler, 1984; Stein and Policastro, 1984), the way these forms are transformed through interaction is crucial to understanding how an individual establishes a social self. Linguists and psychologists have shown that the structure of narrative is highly group specific (Labov, 1972; Sacks, 1984) and the result of immediate coparticipation (Duranti, 1986; Goodwin, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Goodwin, 1990). Within group discourse, individuals work together to shape their own identities and the identity of the group (Ochs et al., 1989).

### *Narrating moral agency*

Through narrative, individuals make sense of their lives in terms of their own orientation to a moral good. Events and their relation to meaning can only be determined in their relation to a past and a future, or in terms of a narrative or life 'quest' (MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1989; Bruner, 1990). Therefore, looking closely at narrative discourse enables an analysis which incorporates individual differences and also acknowledges the necessity of 'webs of interlocution' (Taylor, 1989: 39) for any expression of the self and orientation towards the good.

Within narrative, language and grammar are crucial resources for the expression of self and agency. Discourse, grammar and a particular lexicon describe one's picture of the world and at the same time constitute that world and an individual's orientation to it (Whorf, 1937; Silverstein, 1976; Bruner, 1990; Hanks, 1992). The grammatical and lexical choices made

within narrative provide clues to the way speakers structure their own sense of self and agency as well as to how the members of a community, in turn, perceive and reconstitute that speaker as an individual or agent.

As the above review suggests, social roles, social identity and moral agency are reconstituted collaboratively through narrative and in turn construct narrative. Narrative analysis therefore is an invaluable resource for the study of resistance and the formation of identity and moral agency within a resistant group. While discourse analyses of coconstruction and ethnographies of adolescent resistance abound, no studies have combined ethnography with narrative analysis to create a simultaneously broader and deeper picture of resistance. This study attempts to bridge the gap by looking at the ethnographic context of these students' lives and the linguistic resources they recruit in the *narration* of their lives.

### *Conveying a moral order by mitigating grammatical agency*

Through analysis of the grammatical and discursive construction of agency, this study explores the stances the young men and women take towards issues of agency in the world. The traditional grammatical notion of an agent case relation within a transitive clause can be described as the situation in which the subject is a mechanical causer of a change of state of another object (or patient). This mechanical agency addresses the question of who is technically accountable for carrying out an action. This is a clause-level notion—an explicitly marked agency that can be isolated from context and described categorically in reference grammars or linguistic textbooks. In such literature the agent is discussed as 'initiator of the event or action' (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983: 6).

However, when taking into account a larger discursive context (e.g. the narration of a story), it can be observed that speakers subtly shade the degrees of their 'initiating' by using additional linguistic markers that mitigate their grammatical agency by indicating how the audience is to understand such agency; these linguistic resources have been called 'metapragmatic signals' (Silverstein, 1993). Speakers display their own moral agency in the world not primarily through the use of grammatical case marking, but through the blending of this explicit grammatical marking with metapragmatic signals more specific to a particular community (cf. Duranti, 1994).

The speakers of these stories only infrequently narrate themselves as agents without using such meta-pragmatic mitigation of agency (e.g. 'I hit him').<sup>1</sup> Rather, they demonstrate a strategic blending of meta-pragmatic mitigators and grammatical expression of agency. Mitigating strategies include the use of grammatical limiters (e.g. 'I jus' stabbed him'), discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987) which indicate rationalization or hesitation (e.g. 'So: I hit 'im') or question tags (e.g. 'So I socked her, right?'). As these examples already indicate (and as discussed in greater detail in section IV), *how* agency is presented as well as the *content* of that agency both affect the

telling of one's story. These narratives rarely feature the speaker as an unmitigated agent in the traditional grammatical sense.

However, the mitigation of expressed grammatical agency within these narratives by no means suggests that these young men and women do not have agency in the creation of their life stories. On the contrary, when human, moral agency rather than the limited notion of agency as grammatical case is considered, these young story-tellers emerge as morally agentive precisely through their mitigation of grammatical agency. Speakers also express their own more general moral agency through strategic use of larger contexts of talk and interaction. Due to the reciprocal nature of such exchanges, speakers fashion an identity for themselves and others through language in context. Through talk, people are not creating a merely random identity; rather they are actively narrating themselves relative to a moral ideal of what it is to be a good person. In this kind of agency, a person struggles to become a good family member, a good student, a good member of the community or a good friend, according to that person's standards for goodness. This moral agency considers persons operating in a constructed (narrated) moral universe which is highly context-dependent and not necessarily universally shared in its particulars.

Any narrative analysis of a person's role as agent must account for the role of traditional grammatical agency. However, the broader notion of moral agency must incorporate discourse and ethnographic factors as well (Duranti, 1994). While the young men and women are infrequently narrated as unmitigated agents in the grammatical sense of agent case, discourse and ethnographic study reveals that they are consistently agentive in their narrative construction (and coconstruction) of a moral framework. Orientation to such a framework is crucial to a larger sense of agency, that is agency as a human being's actively narrated orientation towards a collective sense of the good (Taylor, 1989).

### *Cultural particulars of a moral framework*

Ethnographic study is crucial to the analysis of these narratives. Maintenance of dignity, respect for human life and the felt necessity to live a life which is not trivial are crucial moral issues that are reflected in the ways these students tell their stories. But these students place themselves in a very particular order. Their own agency is often justified by the context of its narration: by the necessity for self-defense, or the gang-related ethic of protecting the 'hood'. Thus, this study formulates a more inclusive model of agency, which incorporates within it semantico-grammatical elements such as clause-level agentivity, as well as discourse and ethnographic factors.

While the young men and women involved in this study communicate a sense of self and a clear ethic in their narratives, the outward facts of their lives suggest a definite lack of control over their lives and destinies. Two of the six have spent time in Juvenile Hall (prison for individuals under 18).

One of the girls is a single mother of a two-year-old baby. All have experienced rejection from public (state) schools and have been the target of violence from many other people. Three of the students are deeply bound up in an ethic of retaliatory 'kill or be killed' gang violence. All of the students have, almost by default, 'ended up' at this alternative school. For varying reasons, their lives seem to be determined by external circumstances beyond their control.

As a result, their ability to change the state of external objects or people in their world is definitely limited. What is not limited, however, is their ability to frame, through narrative, their own sense of the 'good'. A narrative can only exist with an orientation to both past and future, and to a particular ethic of the good (Taylor, 1989; Bruner, 1990; Ochs, 1994). By telling their stories, the students are forced to articulate a moral orientation which structures their past with dignity and will in turn shape their futures.

The following analysis of speaker agency examines three narratives told by two different students at an inner-city alternative school and explores the causative, clause-level expression of agency as well as a more global, inclusive expression of agency in terms of a moral ideal. Through grammatical roles and limiters the speakers narrate their own lack of agency. Through discourse contextualization, however, the speakers fluently and systematically portray themselves as moral agents making choices with regard to a shared ethic. Ethnographic study combined with an analysis of these stories may lead to development of a methodology which can illuminate the ways in which communities and the individuals within them structure their identities through narrative and, in turn, constitute their own moral agency. However, the combination of the implicit nature of moral framing and the frequently explicit nature of violence discussed may result in superficial and mistaken categorization of these young men and women. Institutional discourse, such as that of the justice system or the public (state) schools, rarely accounts for implicit meanings or ethnographic particulars but instead manufactures judgement primarily from the explicitly spoken word and the culture of those in power. The perspective outlined below, and the findings of this research, therefore, may lead to more humane attempts to understand resistance and difference.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants*

Although the following analysis focuses on only three narratives, it is part of a larger study which is based on the narratives of six adolescents (four girls and two boys) aged 16–18 years who are attending a public (state) inner-city alternative school. They are referred to by the pseudonyms Willow, Fran, Federico, Ned, Rosa and Sally. The three narratives discussed below are told primarily by Federico and Rosa. All participants are

bilingual Spanish/English speakers; they primarily use English in these conversations. During the course of the discussions other students frequently walked into the room and entered into the conversation; their contributions are not directly included in this study.

### *The corpus*

The study was conducted as part of an ethnographic and discourse-based analysis of societally defined 'at-risk' adolescents. These are young men and women whose sense of self is often in conflict with the traditional role of high-school students. They have experiences of failure in public (state) school contexts and have either dropped out of traditional high schools, or been expelled for violent behaviour, or for carrying weapons.

The alternative school provides a last chance for these students to finish their high-school education and stay 'off the streets' until they get their diplomas. Located in downtown Los Angeles, the school's self-proclaimed mission is 'reducing the social and monetary costs of early school failure'. The administration and faculty attempt to accomplish this goal by providing a very loosely structured curriculum and maintaining an open atmosphere where students do not feel they need to hide their identities from teachers. When asked how this school is different from 'regular' public (state) schools, students say they like this school much more than other public schools because there are no rules and because you can address teachers by their first name.

Although there are technically fewer rules at this alternative school, the students are very self-regulating. Rival gang members (in the words of Rodney King) 'get along' while they are at this school and, through student-to-student confrontation, even graffiti is kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, many students maintain their gang affiliations and other habits which had led to them being expelled from other schools. This school does not attempt to rapidly transform students but hopes to gradually offer them chances for school success. At the very least, the school offers a haven where these adolescents do not have to fear for their lives. The Director himself has appeared in court and talked to judges, offering his school as an option to Juvenile Hall, when students of the school have faced stiff sentences.

The narratives analyzed here are taken from 11 conversation sessions (very loosely structured discussions about school experiences) held with the students over the course of four months. Nine of these sessions were videotaped and all sessions were audiotaped. The sessions were usually held on Fridays, when school is not formally open; even though classes are not held, a small percentage of the students come to school on Fridays in order to study and talk with friends. Therefore a casual atmosphere prevails at the school on Fridays. During this research, students came in and out of the room and joined in our conversation to varying degrees. By no means were the conversational participants constant. School attendance,



even at this more relaxed alternative school, is erratic at best and the composition of the conversation group would change from week to week.

The corpus of this study consists of eight narratives, taken from four of the nine sessions, and transcribed according to the conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) (see Note 1). Because this analysis is concerned with the narrative construction of self and agency, narratives were selected which focus on the event of leaving school. Stories about fights are the most common among the conversations and since fighting is often the reason the students were expelled, narratives about leaving a school often came up naturally in the course of the conversation. However, they were also elicited through questions such as, 'How did you end up at this school?' or 'What happened at the other schools you attended that made you leave?' or 'What was the final thing that made you leave?'

The narratives, by different students, thus form a collection of stories which explicate the events which lead to leaving a school or 'getting kicked out'. Some stories about leaving school are retold in later conversation sessions or simply later in the same discussion but in greater detail. The three narratives discussed in this paper are Rosa's 'Just socked him' (2(a) 277 words) and 'So I just hit him' (1(a) 351 words) and Federico's 'They got me' (1(b) 460 words), taken from a Wednesday morning conversation with Federico and some other students. Together with the five other narratives of leaving school, these stories represent a chronological and collective unfolding of the students' presentation of leaving traditional public (state) schools.

#### *Data analysis: the interaction of grammar and discourse in narrative*

For the purposes of this report, narrative is defined as the situated, temporally ordered retelling of past events from a particular point of view (Labov, 1972; Polanyi, 1985; Bruner, 1990). As situated activities, narratives are always co-constructed and involve the interlocutors to varying degrees. Through narrative a speaker recalls a past event and simultaneously invokes a particular present and points to a future by creating a framework within which the story is experienced. Furthermore, through narrative, speakers actively display a particular point of view. The way we tell about our lives is the way we make our lives important and relevant. This includes involving the current interlocutors, creating a sense of relevant past and a meaningful future and portraying a sense of oneself as a unique human being with personal dignity. In the words of Charles Taylor (1989): 'we grasp our lives in narrative'. Thus, the discursive and grammatical analysis of narrative is crucial to understanding the way these young men and women construct a sense of self and agency in their world. The analysis in this paper focuses on speaker as agent, examining clause-level grammatical agency, its grammatical and prosodic mitigation and the discursive contextualization of grammatical agency in the narration or moral agency.



#### IV. ANALYSIS: THE SPEAKER'S DISCURSIVE AND GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AS AGENT

##### *Forms of speaker agency*

Within the eight narratives of the corpus, the speakers rarely narrate themselves in transitive agent case relation type. Out of a total of 155 references to self, the speakers narrate themselves in the grammatical role of agent in a transitive sentence only 16 times.<sup>2</sup> Any theory that identifies meaning with the statistical preponderance of tokens of certain semantic types might assume that this statistical fact implies the constructed non-volitionality of speakers. But such an inference is suspect on theoretical grounds as well as on empirical evidence within the corpus.<sup>3</sup> These speakers present themselves as agents throughout their narratives in various ways. More specifically, because of the nature of these stories (as shown later), the *content* of speaker agency is exclusively violent. The *way* the speakers mitigate this violent agency within narrative reveals the active construction of a moral framework based on their own social particulars. By framing their own violent agency within a commonly understood context, the speakers situate themselves within a moral framework and actively construct themselves as good people.

##### *Content of agency*

Across all of the narratives, the only use of agentive 'I' in a transitive sentence is in the context of confrontation with the police, school staff or members of a rival gang. Within these confrontations, factitive agency on the part of the speaker is *exclusively violent in nature* (e.g. 'I hit him', 'I just stabbed him', 'I socked him'). Despite this decided lack of positive, independent agency, the speakers struggle to portray themselves as good people who would not commit violent acts unless circumstances necessitated such action. These are extreme cases where the speakers portray themselves as having no choice but to act; anybody like them (within the frame of these narratives, any good, normal person) would do the same thing. In short, while agency is rarely assigned to the speaker, agency which is the speaker's is violent. However, by discursively and grammatically limiting or mitigating the expression of this violent agency, the speakers narrate a moral framework.

##### *Discursive mitigation: agency as self-defense*

Discursive mitigation of agency involves contextualization of the speaker's agency in a way which renders the violence understandable. Decontextualized violence violates a common concern for any human life. It runs counter to a human being's primary moral 'sense of respect for and obligation to others' (Taylor, 1989). Violence as a form of self-defense, however, is often a morally justifiable response to selfish or senseless violence against one's own person. Thus, when the students narrate themselves as

violent agents, they often embed their acts in a context of self-defense as exemplified here:

*((Rosa is describing the final confrontation she had before she left a particular high school. In order to defend her younger sister, Rosa had gotten in a fight with another girl; for that reason, a teacher started chasing her))*

1(a) Ros.: =and he started chasing me.  
 He started chasing me,  
 and I ran.  
 and he wouldn't let go of my hands  
 so:: I hit 'im.

In the above example, the speaker is clearly a grammatical agent in a transitive sentence, 'I hit him', but this utterance is linked to the preceding narration by means of the logical connector 'so', thus implying that the potentially reprehensible act is a consequence of the teacher's aggression. Rosa is in an inescapable situation and the teacher wilfully holds on to her ('he wouldn't let go'). Rosa's agency, or act of taking control, only arises through an extreme of non-control. Thus, while the speaker acts independently, she frames her action as occurring in a situation of self-defense. Furthermore, she frames this unusual event in terms of what a 'normal' person might do. Rosa is not behaving like a crazy student fighting with a teacher; she is doing what any self-respecting person might do under similar circumstances (Sacks, 1984). Thus, while Rosa is a potentially negative agent above, she frames her violent agency as self-defense and constructs herself as a person who did what any good person would do under similar circumstances.

#### *Discursive mitigation: agency as gang necessity*

By framing agency within a context of self-defense, a speaker preserves an orientation to what Taylor has described as 'our deepest moral instinct, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected' (1989: 8). In other words, these speakers never directly narrate their violence towards others as if it were 'no big deal'. On the contrary, they convey their own sense that such violent agency is potentially negative by consistently contextualizing these acts, indicating that violence occurred as a last and dispreferred resort. Violent agency is justified within these narratives as a reaction to another's basic disrespect for human life and dignity. Another way in which violent and potentially negative agency is framed in these narratives is by the rationale of gang necessity. Often these speakers must resort to violence when they are faced with several members of another gang who refuse to show respect for the individual speaker. In fact, a canonical gang-member story involves getting 'caught slipping' or 'getting hit up' and essentially involves a lone gang member defending the gang's honor against many disrespectful members of another gang.

'Getting hit up' occurs whenever there is a confrontation with members of a rival gang. Typically, a rival gang member asks 'Where are you from?' At this point, addressees have two choices: they can either tell the truth

and claim their 'hood or they can lie or say 'nowhere'. Either response will ultimately lead to violence. If gang members do the honorable thing and claim their 'hood the rival gang will attack immediately. If gang members do the cowardly thing and deny their 'hood, their 'homeboys' will eventually find out and beat them up later. This second option is not only more humiliating, but usually more violent. Therefore, when gang members get 'hit up', they usually claim their 'hood and take a beating on the spot. The following example is taken from a narrative of getting hit up:

*((Federico has been confronted by a rival gang (Eighteenth Street) while waiting for his dad to pick him up after school. After they confirm that Federico is from the opposition, 'Diamond Street', he knows they are going to beat him up. In fact, they have already begun a form of verbal antagonism when they say something disrespectful about Federico's neighborhood. Therefore, Federico immediately starts to defend his gang after hearing one of the rivals begin to say they are from Eighteenth Street.))*

1(b) Fed.: So I seen 'em,  
 so they hit me up,  
 they told me  
 where you from  
 no they told me  
 oh you're the guy from—  
 they dis' my neighborhood right?  
 So I said what the fuck are you?  
 He goes this is eighteenth street right (0.2)  
 I didn't wait until he finish once I heard the one?  
 (0.2)  
**I hit him right in the face.**  
*((makes a smacking noise with his hands))*

In cases of violent self-defense or violent defense of one's gang, while there is no grammatical mitigation inside the clause ('I hit him right in the face'), the speaker narrates a particular set of circumstances which lead to and explain the speaker's ultimate violent agentive act. Where direct agency is expressed explicitly, it is always as a violent action against forces which have escalated beyond the speaker's control. In this case, the speaker sets his own agency as the result of a loss of control in a larger frame.

Furthermore, the speaker, although committing a violent act, portrays himself as a good person acting in accord with some group ethic. While he is a mechanical agent acting violently to change the state of something else, the speaker is also a moral agent, constructing a picture of himself within a narrative as a person who had to commit acts which might otherwise be considered reprehensible, but in these cases were the only understandable option. In fact, the form of agency which is most often expressed in these narratives is also the form of agency that most clearly presupposes group membership. The very speech act of getting 'hit up' identifies Federico's actions as tied to his own group membership and the responsibilities which this membership entails.<sup>4</sup> While Federico is acting independently in the above excerpt, the interests of his group (the gang, Diamond Street) back up his every move.

These speakers, in their short tales of agency, exemplify what Taylor (1989) has described as the modern predicament: they lay claims to the role of hero as well as anti-hero. While they are committing quite extraordinary acts—hitting a teacher or fighting with rival gang members in front of their own father—these speakers portray their actions as actions anyone might take in a similar situation. The narrative possibility of heroism is tempered by what Harvey Sacks (1984) has identified as the need to be ‘normal’. Within their narratives, these young people’s actions are based on implicit moral guidelines for an implicit everyman. These narratives invoke a context suggesting the speakers did simply what they had to do and what any good and moral person would do under similar circumstances.

### *Grammatically and prosodically mitigated agency*

In each of the above cases, the narrators portray their agency as a necessity. The speakers actively limit the potential moral reprehensibility of their agency by contextualizing their action within a larger group ethic. As shown later, the speakers’ expression of agency is also systematically contextualized by their active use of grammatical forms and prosody. Such mitigation of agency is facilitated grammatically through use of the limiter ‘just’, and the discourse marker ‘so’ or prosodically through raised intonation or hesitancy. All these delivery patterns mitigate the potentially negative nature of the few cases in which the speakers narrate themselves in the traditional grammatical role of agent. Thus, in these utterances the speakers limit their *mechanical* agency by acting as *moral* agents constructing their own identities as good people. Through the use of these grammatical and prosodic resources to limit the negativity of their own agency, the speakers actively construct their behavior as something any good, normal person would do.

### *Limiting ‘just’*

In the case below, Rosa continues to narrate her story of hitting the teacher. Throughout the telling, Rosa has limited the expression of her own agency in this violent act, as exemplified below through the use of the grammatical limiter ‘just’<sup>5</sup>

- 2(a) Ros.: I was trying to get away eh-  
 an’ he was chasing me.  
 an’ then.  
 An’ so he wouldn’t let go of my hand  
 and I was tellin’ him let go let go  
 and he goes no you’re going with me  
 an’ I was go get her sh- she started it  
 and she wouldn’t let me go- he wouldn’t let me go  
 so, heh heh, I don’t know I got mad and  
**I just (0.2) hit ‘im.**  
 Bet.: uh huh.  
 Ros.: I really didn’t hit him hard,

(0.4)

Ros.: **Just socked him a little**  
 (*background conversation*)  
 Ros.: **didn't swing . . . yeah**

While the word 'just' can be used either to intensify meaning or to de-intensify meaning (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973), the utterances which follow Rosa's 'just' in this passage indicate it is being used to mitigate agency. That is, she jus socked him **a little** and she **didn't swing**. Although Rosa has narrated her agency as self-defense, she does not portray herself as a hero here, wilfully socking the teacher. Rather, she narrates herself as one who understands the value of humans, even teachers who are grabbing her and will not let go. Rosa doesn't narrate this event as a dramatic scene from a movie, where righteous youth gets his vengeance; instead, she describes how she 'really didn't hit him hard . . . **Just socked him a little**—thus maintaining her stance as a normal, good person who 'just' did what she had to do. Through grammatical resources, she actively orients her presentation of self within a moral framework where humans (even this teacher) are clearly valued.

The word 'just' is used in these narratives exclusively where the speaker occurs as agent and exclusively as a mitigator of the speakers' violent action. In the excerpt below, Federico continues to narrate his story about getting hit up by the gang from Eighteenth Street. When the violence (the content of Federico's expressed agency) escalates, the limiter 'just' occurs more frequently. Federico initially presents his own agency heroically, unmitigated and without hesitance ('I hit him'), as a response to hearing the rival gang member claim his 'hood. Here Federico is acting in defense of his own gang. His agency has the power of a group behind it. As the story continues, however, Federico's violent agency is limited by the use of 'just'.

2(b) Fed.: I didn't wait until he finish  
 once I heard the one?  
 (0.2)  
 I hit him right in the face  
 (*makes a smacking noise with his hands*)  
 and I jus'  
 (0.2)  
 I had that f- fool on the floor  
 an' I seen all these vatos coming towards me  
 I say I'm not gonna let this guy go. (0.2)  
**so I's jus' bangin' his head**  
 an' I everybody was  
 socking me hitting me  
 so my dad got of the car with the golf thing  
 an' he an' he hit the guy right?

It may be ambiguous whether 'just' is being used to intensify or de-intensify Federico's action here, but it is clear that he is 'just' acting as best he can, given the fact that 'all these vatos [guys]' are trying to fight him at the same time. Although 'just' may not be clearly a limiter, it certainly

functions to make Federico's actions more humble. Federico was '**jus' banging**' the head of one guy whom he was desperately trying not to let go. At the same time, 'everybody' was socking and hitting Federico. Although Federico acts agentively, it is only the result of external attack and he '**just**' fights back as best he can.

Later in this story, Federico commits his most violent agentive act—he stabs somebody. Although this is probably the most significant part of the story, its telling has been delayed. By being delayed, this act now occurs in a revenge context. Here Federico is not acting as an underdog, as he was the day before when he was confronted with all the 'vatos' from Eighteenth Street. Here he may actually be at an advantage, since he has come upon a lone Eighteenth Street member and takes him unawares in the school bathroom; significantly, Federico calls this his 'opportunity', for revenge; it may never happen again. Federico really has no choice but to take advantage of this opportunity, so he '**jus' stabbed 'im**.' Thus, the 'opportunity' mentioned by Federico can be understood only in terms of an actively structured narrative logic (Bruner, 1991) as displayed below:

*((Federico has returned to school with his father to talk to the principal. During the discussion, Federico asks to go to the bathroom. While he is there, he meets up with one of his rivals from Eighteenth Street—and with his chance for revenge))*

- 2(c) Fed.: While I was going to the bathroom  
 I see this other guy from Eighteenth Street.  
 (0.4)  
 He was walking  
 I was in back of him an'  
 I say  
 well this is my opportunity  
 so I jumped on top of- an'-  
**I jus' stabbed 'im,**

In the previous cases external circumstances force actions of self-defense; in this case, the external instigating circumstance comes in the form of a suddenly appearing 'perfect opportunity'. Again, agency seems to come at a time when external circumstances dictate that the speaker must act. Nevertheless, Federico's agentive act only makes sense in terms of a larger narratively and historically evolved history. It is this commonly understood history and Federico's own 'narrative logic' which construct control as outside the speaker.

#### *Limiting discourse marker 'so'*

While clause internal '**just**' effectively mitigates the expression of violent mechanical agency in the above examples, a clause external discourse marker '**so**' is frequently used to preface such narrated agency, further reinforcing the notion that this agentive behavior is not purely unilateral, but the result of external circumstances. For the discourse marker '**so**' often precedes information which is understood as the outcome of reported events (Schiffrin, 1987). The extended '**so::: I hit 'im**' in extract 1(a), for



example, further emphasizes that this was a cause of a previously inescapable situation. The discourse marker 'so' further aids in portraying this agency as an act of self-defense. In another fight story, Rosa uses 'so' to mitigate her own agency in a similar way:

((*Rosa is describing fighting with another girl who was causing trouble for Rosa's little sister*))

2(d) Ros.: she goes  
'this isn't with you so butt out'  
and I go  
'naw Ie::::'  
and then she goes  
'I'm gonna fuck her up'  
**so I socked her right?**

The same resultative function of 'so' is employed in Federico's narrative:

2(c) Fed.: an' I seen all these vatos coming towards me  
I say I'm not gonna let this guy go.  
(0.2)  
**so I's jus' banging' his head**

((*and later*))  
2(c) Fed.: this is my opportunity  
**so I jumped on top of- an'-  
I jus' stabbed 'im,**

Again, the resultative 'so' indicates that the agentive acts are the result of some other, external forces: in 2(b), the other vatos' attack; in 2(c), the occurrence of the 'opportunity'. This use of 'so' indicates that the responsibility for the attack in these examples is not the speaker's. Nevertheless, the speaker behaves in a way which is narratively logical based on the cause-effect relationship suggested by the discourse marker 'so'.

### *Mitigation through rising intonation and question tags*

In addition to the grammatical resources, the speakers use prosodic resources to elicit positive uptake (Goodwin, 1986; Jacoby and Gonzales, 1991). In the following case of rising intonation used in conjunction with the tag question 'right?', it is as if the speaker is checking whether agentive action is acceptable to the interlocutors:

2(e) Ros.: she goes  
'this isn't with you so butt out'  
and I go  
'naw Ie::::'  
'I'm gonna fuck her up'  
**so I socked her right?**

Although violent situations seem to be the one case where speakers narrate themselves in the agent role, this is also a particular agency that is in direct opposition to the fundamental moral sense of respect for other human beings. These speakers' orientation to such a moral framework is made apparent through their hesitancy to claim responsibility for such an action.

The speakers do not frame their agency in these violent situations as unilateral choice. In fact, in the above sequence the speaker represents this violent agency as if she is asking for the interlocutors' permission. She is asking the interlocutors to consider the preceding events and to agree that this was the only *narratively logical* (Bruner, 1991) option at the time. By framing their agency in terms of a question, by eliciting approval from the addressee, the speakers distribute the responsibility for their action, reframing the violent act as something that other human beings understand as the right thing to do at the time.

### *Mitigation through hesitation*

As may already have become obvious through the above examples, the speakers not only use contextualization, grammatical limiters and rising intonation to mitigate their agentive utterances, they also hesitate before narrating their own violent agency. This prosodic hesitation takes the form of extended words ('so:: I hit 'im' in extract 1(a), proportionally lengthier pauses within or preceding the agentive utterance ('I just (0.2) hit 'im' in extract 2(a) and 'so I jumped on top of- an'-/I jus' stabbed 'im' in extract 2(c) and re-starts (I jus' (0.2) I had that f-fool on the floor' in extract 2(b)):

1(a)

Ros.: =and he started chasing me.  
 he started chasing me,  
 and I ran  
 and he wouldn't let go of my hands  
**so:: I hit 'im.**

2(a)

Ros.: I was trying to get away eh-  
 an' he was chasing me.  
 an' then.  
 An' so he wouldn't let go of my hand  
 and I was tellin' him let go let go  
 and he goes no you're going with me  
 an' I was go get her sh- she started it  
 and she wouldn't let me go- he wouldn't let me go  
 so, heh heh, I don't know I got mad and  
**I just (0.2) hit 'im.**

2(b)

Fed.: I didn't wait until he finish  
 once I heard the one?  
 (0.2)  
 I hit him right in the face  
 ((*makes a smacking noise with his hands*))  
 and **I jus'**  
 (0.2)  
 I had that f- fool on the floor.

2(c)

Fed.: While I was going to the bathroom  
 I see this other guy from Eighteenth Street.

(0.6)  
 He was walking  
 I was in back of him an'  
 I say well this is my opportunity  
 so I jumped on top of- and'-  
 I jus' stabbed 'im,

In all of these examples, hesitation to state the violent agency can be seen as playing a role analogous to that of question tags and using intonation. Again, the speakers pause to elicit approval (Goodwin, 1986) and thus situate their action within a coconstructed, humanly understandable framework of moral behaviour.

*Summary: the construction of moral agency through narrative logic*

While these speakers infrequently narrate themselves as agents, they consistently frame their agency in terms of a moral stance. By using grammatical resources such as the limiter 'just' or the resultative 'so' or by using prosodic hesitation or rising intonation, the speakers frame their own violent agency not as acts of disrespect or even heroism, but as understandable acts, that anyone in a similar situation might do. Furthermore, the discursive contextualization of the content of the speaker's agency further provides narrative rationale for the speaker's potentially reprehensible actions.

These young men and women are consistently using *narrative logic* (Bruner, 1991) to make sense of themselves and their world in a way which will involve their interlocutors sympathetically. Narrative does not rely on strict cause-and-effect relationships of formal logic. Rather, it relies on the fact that listeners will attempt to interpret stories in a way that makes sense to them. Thus, while it may not make sense that a student hits a teacher who is chasing her, in the narrative context Rosa has created it comes across as the only logical alternative. Similarly, while it may not make sense to stab another student met in the bathroom, narratively Federico presents this as an opportunity he had to take. By further embedding this situation in the context of gang rivalry, the speaker frames his action within a narrative logic which has the interlocutors understanding that the revenge in the bathroom was the most logical move at that moment.

However, the speakers are not framing their stories by any random narrative logic; they are also orienting themselves by the logic of a moral framework which indicates their own struggle to be good people, despite their necessary battle against unfavorable external circumstances (Taylor, 1989). Thus, while Rosa frames her hitting of the teacher in terms of a narrative logic which suggests this was her only choice, she also hesitates in describing her violent agency and uses grammatical limiters to mitigate her own agency in the violent act. Through rising intonation, she draws in her interlocutors, asking them to understand her struggle to do the right thing.

While these speakers appeal to their interlocutors to understand their violent agency in terms of the narrative logic of a moral framework, they

are not narrating themselves in the role of hero or heroine. Rather, they systematically frame their actions in terms of a group orientation, or as actions that any average person would do. They are, in the terms of Sacks (1984) 'doing "being ordinary"'. Within narrative, these speakers are not overly good people fighting evil, nor are they bad people going down a dark path. They frame themselves as regular people like you or me, just doing what has to be done. In their situation, this may entail the punching of a teacher, the stabbing of a gang rival or hitting another student, but in the constructed narrative frame these actions make morally and narratively logical sense as part of the narrators' struggle to be good people. Thus while they rarely narrate themselves as grammatical agents, and usually limit this agency grammatically and discursively, these young men and women are acting as moral agents by narrating themselves consistently within a narrative logic which displays their orientation to the good.

#### V. IMPLICATIONS: LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION AND THE NARRATION OF A MORAL FRAMEWORK

Narrating and negotiating meaning within a shared framework provides these young men and women with stability in their outwardly unstable lives. Though narrative is universally and perhaps uniquely human, the form narratives take evolves over both narrative and historical time and develops in ways specific to a particular social group (Goodwin, 1986; Goodwin, 1990). Socialization provides growing humans with even more narrative resources for placing the acts of ones life within a meaningful framework (Bruner, 1991).

Furthermore, the stories we tell echo the narrative character of our lives. Like the events within the stories we tell, the events of our lives are temporally ordered according to our notions of a life quest. Life is not a series of value-neutral, isolated occurrences, but an evolving formation of the self. We cannot conceive of ourselves the way we are now without having a sense of where we have been and where we are going. Bakhtin (1993) describes this as unification of the 'now' with the 'after now', that is, 'life can be consciously comprehended only as an ongoing event' (p. 56). Thus all stories account for a past and a present and a 'step into the future' as well (Ochs, 1994).

Essential to this notion of a continuous narrative of life is a moral orientation. Notions of the moral good cannot be thought of as an 'optional extra' (Taylor, 1989: 41) which is added or not added—according to the situation being narrated or the stage of one's life. The moral is not a pre-packaged static notion any more than a human's sense of self is. Rather, an individual's particular sense of the good evolves along with the narrative of one's life, one's personal path to selfhood. This notion of the good, while individual, is also socially constructed, as illustrated in the narratives of this study. Through one's peers, canonical stories develop and change through the course of time. This experientially and interactionally grounded orien-

tation to a particular and changing notion of good might be called an orientation to the 'ordinary' good, a local good, the good which our peers agree is right. It is situated knowledge. Like all narratives, the narratives of this corpus communicate a particular, local sense of the good.

### *Kinds of moral orders*

While the lives of these adolescents, as any human lives, cannot be conceived of meaningfully apart from narrative and apart from an orientation to a moral good, their lies do not resemble a Renaissance epic in which the good is a static, understood notion. The idea that there is some given, pre-packaged morally superior goal does not dominate the notions of moral good communicated in these narratives. The young men and women don't portray themselves as heroes, slaying a cruel dragon or sending Mephistopheles back to hell. They portray themselves as survivors living by a code of ordinary good.

Nevertheless, local goods differ and frequently come into conflict.<sup>6</sup> Narrative provides one source for negotiation between these conflicting goods—be they inner conflicts or outer conflicts between alternative moral orientations. In such situations of conflict, narrative may be our 'principal form of peace-keeping' (Bruner, 1990: 95). Cultural conflict occurs when narrative forms are stifled, or when a particular ordinary good is dominant to such a degree that it is disguised as a hyper-good—that is, pawned off as universal. In such cases, powerful people create the 'right' story, other versions are discounted and 'distrust displaces interpretation' (Bruner, 1990: 96).

### *A polyphony of narrative perspectives*

Such may be the case today, when conflicting narratives about the lives of 'at-risk' adolescents abound. Not surprisingly, it is the narratives offered by the media which dominate and create a sense of these adolescents as the 'other', eclipsing what these young men and women have to say for themselves and allowing distrust to displace interpretation when (if ever) these young people are given a chance to tell their story (cf. Davis, 1992; Janowski, 1991).<sup>7</sup> When the young men and women are given a turn to speak, they actively narrate a moral framework within which they struggle to do their best, to be the best they can in their given circumstances. Of course, they do not portray themselves as societal problems; for them, 'they'—the authorities—are the problem. Nevertheless, these young men and women and others like them become the problem when the media's image and narratives of them are allowed to dominate.

Resolving this conflict involves allowing the students to be heard and addressing notions of a morality grounded in relationship. We cannot decide arbitrarily whose narratives to hear and trust; we need to look at both narratives and their relation to a dynamic notion of the good in order to wrestle significantly with moral perspectives. Finding a link across narra-

tives is only possible through interface and the acceptance of differences in local knowledge, or ordinary goods.

The first goal of this study was to understand the nature of this interface, the nature of moral understandings as they occur in everyday life and in the lives of young people who don't orient themselves to the dominant moral framework. The next step is to create a space for narrating and for understanding a community which has largely been narrated by many others, many more powerful, who narrate these young men and women as 'the problem'. For the students, telling their stories reveals their moral resources and gives them a chance to grow narratively. In their struggle to articulate their stories, they formulate a strong sense of their own moral good. Thus, the second goal of this study remains to be fulfilled—to provide impetus for more talk, more chances for narrative between diverse people and to work together in the struggle to evolve moral meaning through life. The alternative is working separately, creating separate notions of the 'other' and isolating versions of the good.

What can draw us together is talk. In the words of Ned:

the truth is, like,  
y- you talk to us?  
Y- you respect us?  
We'll respect you back.

The sad assumption behind this humble offer is the understanding that, generally, talk and respect from an outsider is the exception rather than the rule. Starting to take these young men and women on their own terms means starting to listen to their stories and struggling together with moral issues which we all must face.

---

BETSY RYMES is a graduate student in the inter-departmental program of Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on moralizing practices in inner city communities. ADDRESS: University of California, Los Angeles, Department of TESL and Applied Linguistics, 3300 Rolfe Hall, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA. [email: [ihw1005@mvs.oac.ucla.edu](mailto:ihw1005@mvs.oac.ucla.edu)]

---

#### NOTES

I would like to thank Elinor Ochs, Marcyliena Morgan, Asif Agha and Patricia Greenfield for their careful reading and insightful comments on various versions of this paper. I am also grateful for the thoughtful suggestions of an anonymous reviewer. Any problems that remain are, of course, my own.

1. The following transcription conventions are used in the examples given: Colons denote sound stretch (So:: I hit her); underlining denotes emphatic stress (I socked her.);

Equal signs indicate closely latched speech, for example:



Ros.: an' then, (.) he let go=  
 Sal.: =She decided to sock him.

Intervals of silence are timed in tenths of seconds and inserted within parentheses; short, untimed silences are marked by a hyphen when sound is quickly cut off (An- an' the teacher) or with a period within parentheses: (.). Rising intonation within an utterance is marked with a caret (She socked 'im); utterance final rising intonation is marked with a question mark, continued intonation with a comma, and falling intonation with a period; items written entirely in capitals are of a higher volume (OH); descriptions of the scene are italicized within double parentheses: 'I din' wanna see him ((looks at Sally)); single parentheses surround items of doubtful transcription; and boldface type indicates items of analytic focus.

2. Clause-level grammatical agency was assigned if the predicate could be transformed into an imperative form. For example, 'I' is considered agent in the utterance 'I hit him', because this sentence can form the imperative 'Hit him!'
3. See also Duranti (1994), Duranti and Ochs (1990) and Du Bois (1987), who indicate similar findings regarding agency in context.
4. Naming practices within this speech act also implicitly identify the speaker as part of a particular speech community and as a member of a gang (cf. Kreuter, 1995).
5. See Hulquist (1985) for a taxonomy of the multiple usages of 'just' in American English.
6. Recall, for example, the Los Angeles riot/uprising/rebellion in 1992.
7. For a subtler journalistic portrayal of inner-city youth, see Martinez (1992).

#### REFERENCES

- Alvarez, A. (1993) 'An Ethnographic Study of Student Resistance in a Predominantly Chicano Public School', unpublished thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Atkinson, J.M. and Heritage, J. (1984) *Structures of Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1993) *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. V. Liapunov, eds M. Holquist and V. Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1991) 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* 18: 1–21.
- Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983) *The Grammar Book*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.
- Cohn, C. (1987) 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs* 12: 687–718.
- Davis, M. (1992) *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Random.
- Du Bois, J. (1987) 'The Discourse Basis of Ergativity', *Language* 63: 805–55.
- Duranti, A. (1986) 'The Audience as Co-Author: An Introduction', *Text* 6: 239–47.
- Duranti, A. (1994) *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Duranti, A. and Ochs, E. (1990) 'Genitive Constructions and Agency in Samoan Discourse', *Studies in Language* 4: 1–24.

- Goodwin, C. (1986) 'Audience Diversity, Participation and Interpretation', *Text* 6: 283–316.
- Goodwin, M.H. (1990) *He Said She Said*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Hanks, W. (1992) 'The Indexical Ground of Deictic Reference', in S. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds) *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris, M.G. (1988) *Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs*. New York: AMS Press.
- Hulquist, M.P. (1985) 'The Adverb *Just* in American English Usage', unpublished MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Jacoby, S. and Gonzalez, R. (1991) 'The Constitution of Expert–Novice in Scientific Discourse', *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 2: 149–81.
- Jankowski, M.S. (1991) *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kreuter, B. (1995) 'Little Creeper from Diamond Street: Names, Places, and Social Identity', unpublished paper, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Labov, W. (1972) *Language in the Inter City: Studies in the Black Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984) *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mandler, J. (1984) *Stories, Scripts and Scenes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Martinez, R. (1992) *The Other Side: Fault Lines, Guerilla Saints, and the True Heart of Rock 'n Roll*. New York: Verso.
- Mehan, H. (1993) 'Beneath the Skin and Between the Ears: A Case Study in the Politics of Representation', in S. Chaiklin and J. Lave (eds) *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, J. (1978) *Homeboys: Gangs, Drugs, and Prison in the Barrios of Los Angeles*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ochs, E. (1992) 'Indexing Gender', in A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds) *Rethinking Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ochs, E. (1994) 'Stories that Step into the Future', in D. Biber and E. Finegan (eds) *Perspectives on Register*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ochs, E., Smith, R. and Taylor, C. (1989) 'Detective Stories at Dinnertime: Problem-solving through Co-narration', *Cultural Dynamics* 2: 238–57.
- Polanyi, L. (1985) *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Quirk, R. and Greenbaum, S. (1973) *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Sacks, H. (1984) 'On Doing "Being Ordinary"', in J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1987) *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, M. (1976) 'Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description', in K.H. Basso and H.A. Selby (eds) *Meaning in Anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Silverstein, M. (1993) 'Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function', in J. Lucy (ed.) *Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stein, N. and Policastro, M. (1984) 'The Concept of a Story: A Comparison of Children's Teachers' Viewpoints', in H. Mandler, N. Stein, and T. Trabasso (eds) *Learning and Comprehension of Text*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vigil, D. (1988) *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Whorf, B.L. (1937) 'Grammatical Categories', in J. Carrol (ed.) *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.