

He said, she said: *Oh* as a distancer in third-person constructed dialogue.

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This paper explores the usage of discourse marker *oh* to introduce constructed dialogue as an evaluative linguistic tool employed by varying speakers. It specifically focuses on negative alignment or distancing, when *oh* is used to introduce the speech of a third party. This will be discussed in terms of traditional definitions of discourse markers, constructed dialogue, tense alternation and stance differentials. The data will come from the *Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English* (Du Bois et al. 2000-2005).

Keywords: discourse analysis; constructed dialogue; direct reported speech; discourse markers; stance; alignment; evaluation.

1 Introduction & Background

1.1 Introduction

In this paper, I will be looking at instances of the word *oh* at the beginning of quoted speech/constructed dialogue in conversational narrative. I will analyze the evaluative function of *oh* as an introduction to constructed dialogue. I predict that *oh* at the beginning of a representation of a third party's speech will be used to show that the speaker does not align with the speech produced, in line with Tannen's (2007) vari-directional double voicing. Alignment does not necessarily equal agreement or disagreement, though these are often displayed by the alignment. I will be using Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle model of evaluation, positioning and alignment. The evidence will be used to further Trester's (2009) identification of *oh* as a signal of speaker stance toward the quoted material.

1.2 Uses of *oh*

There are many uses for the word *oh* in English. Deborah Schiffrin (1987) states that the main role of *oh* in discourse is for information management tasks. *Oh* can be used for repair, “Oh, I gave you the wrong information, let me correct that.” or for clarification. It can also be used for recognition display, “Oh yeah, I knew that.” or acknowledgement of new information, “Oh, I didn’t know that.” This paper will focus on the shifts of subjective or expressive orientation, rather than the objective, which can be conveyed by the use of *oh*.

Intensity is one form of expressive orientation, where the speaker’s identity is conditional to the truth of their assertion, how certain they are of information. Schiffrin (1987) shows that *oh* is not just a receipt of information, but an evaluation of one’s own talk and that of others. Trester (2009) follows along this idea by examining *oh*’s evaluative functions in representing talk of others who are not necessarily present, and in fact usually are not present at the time of the quotation.

1.3 Quotative verbs

Barbieri (2010) concludes that forms of *say* are more likely in the past tense while most other quotatives, *be like*, *be all* and especially *go* are more frequent in the present. While *be like* was previously thought to introduce inner speech with first person and direct speech with third person, her findings show that *be like* can introduce direct speech with first person as well.

Denison (1999) claims that *to be like* is slightly less explicit than *to go* as a quotative. Sakita (2002) finds that past tense is used more often with first person and present with third person.

Sakita outlines a great number of purposes for tense choice in reported speech such as personal involvement and balance of power when the speaker is a participant in the story.

Wolfson (1979) outlines the alternation of historical present, present tense form of a verb to describe past events, including present progressive, with past tense specific to conversational narrative. She makes a distinction that conversational narrative is very different in its use of tenses as opposed to other forms of narrative, such as folktales. Her theory is that the alternation serves to separate events from one another. Johnstone (1979) states that speakers make their choices for a variety of reasons so a single explanation is insufficient. She does find that speakers generally use the historical present more often to quote figures of authority whereas they use the past tense for nonauthority figures.

Schiffrin (1981) examines tense variation in all aspects of narrative, not focusing on quotation. She concludes that it is the alternation of the past and historical present that contribute to the dramatic effect not the historical present in and of itself. It is not only employed for drama but also for evaluation. Schiffrin, along with most linguists, uses the Labov (1999) model of narrative, in which evaluation is often realized through quotation.

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3.3 Incompetence

The *oh* before constructed dialogue can also be used to show a general air of incompetence related to the speaker of the quoted material. Example (6) is from a task-related lawyer/client interaction, where Rickie is being prepared to testify. She is trying to defend her actions, so it makes sense that she would want to present the BART police as not knowing what they are doing.

(1) *Tell the Jury that* SBC 0008 (871.82-892.30)

1 RICKIE: I went upstairs to the BART,
2 and told them,
3 and I tried to tell them what train it was,
4 (H)= an=d I just,
5 (H) ... I was still kind of like shocked,
6 so I %l was like,
7 <Q well I have to go,
8 cause I have to make an appointment Q>,
9 → but I di=d tell someone,
10 I said I'll be back to make a report or whatever I had to do,
11 (H)= and then there was a different person down there,
12 and,
13 .. when I called the BART police,
14 they said <Q **oh no one's even said anything to us** Q>,

Rickie pre-explains in line 9 that even though she did tell someone they do not have a record of it. In showing their incompetence she is reinforcing that she did not do anything wrong, they are in the wrong.

I will include the final example (7) with this section although it could really be considered an example of all three displays of negatively evaluated stance, bad advice, dumb

opinion and incompetence. In this conversation, Julie is telling the story to Gary, whose wife just bought a horse from her.

(2) (*What is a Brand Inspection?* SBC 0056 1486.427-1496.650)

1 JULIE: (H) A=nd um,
2 he said well,
3 everything's good he=re,
4 and he drove him around,
5 put the drag on him,
6 he said oh=,
7 **this horse is ready to drive**,
8 → I said are you sure?
9 (H) I said when this horse @spooks,
10 <@ it's a pretty tremendous spook @>.

The *he* is an unnamed guy who came to her ranch to put up fence posts who she told about a horse she was trying to get on a cart. The fact that she follows his assertion immediately with a response of *are you sure?*, shows that she does not share his opinion that the horse is ready or that she wants to take his advice. This is the setup for an ensuing story that involves multiple injured horses and property damage caused by this man's incompetence. By showing her distance from his speech that she represents in the story, she is showing herself to be faultless. She thought the horse would spook, as it indeed did.

3.4 Summary

In all of these examples, it is the speaker's version of events that is represented. We have an innate human desire to present ourselves in the best light (Brown and Levinson 1999). One tool for accomplishing this is by contrasting the representation of self with some other who is in the wrong, to further highlight one's own rightness.

It is interesting that most of the examples are plural general class subjects, rather than a singular subject. Perhaps, this is a technique to avoid laying blame on one individual, thus saving

face. Using *oh* before constructed dialogue in the third person shows a stance differential (Du Bois 2007) not between speaker and hearer as many other uses of *oh* do (Schiffrin 1987), but in speaker and quoted third party, to represent it as an other's viewpoint.

I did not see any clear evidence of tense alternation serving a specific purpose in these particular examples. This is a very small sampling and perhaps these speakers have shown their viewpoint already through the use of *oh* and other ways.

4 Conclusion

The use of *oh* to introduce constructed dialogue is just one of many tools in speakers' style arsenal to show a distancing from the quoted material. Paralinguistic indexical cues such as change in pitch and voice quality often work in tandem with the *oh*, or without it, to convey the opinion of the speaker towards the dialogue that is being constructed. It would be interesting to study such phenomena in conjunction with the *oh* constructed dialogue introduction.

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