

Identity construction in conversational narrative: the use of *ob* in third-person constructed dialogue



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Introduction

I examine instances of discourse marker *ob* to introduce constructed dialogue as an evaluative linguistic tool employed by varying speakers. It specifically focuses on negative alignment or distancing, when *ob* is used to introduce the speech of a third party. The evidence is used to further Trester's (2009) identification of *ob* as a signal of speaker stance toward the quoted material.

Constructed dialogue

Speaker creates the speech, making it their own (Tannen, 2007)
Representation affected by the reporting context
Representations of inner thoughts or future hypothetical events to show alignment (Sams, 2010)
Dual expression (Bakhtin, 1986) speaker is conveying ideas of an other's expression superimposed with their own ideas of said utterance

Key Concepts

Discourse marker *ob*

Main role – information management tasks (Shiffrin, 1987)
Signal of potentially argumentative stance
Can express “intentions, attitudes, assumptions and feelings of the speaker” (Goddard, 1998:165)

Identity Construction

Not a reflection of their character, the portrayal is what creates it (Bucholz & Hall, 2005)
No self without expression of self (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Abbott, 2002)
Can be unconscious but still produce an effect (Ahearn, 2001)
Narrative as argumentative device (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012)
• experiential evidence is harder to dispute
• impossible to argue with parties that are not present in the conversation

Data

KEY

Subject & verb – underlined
Constructed dialogue – **bold**
Disalignment – arrow →

(1) (Actual Blacksmithing SBC 0001 595.21-629.27)
1 LYNNE: I mean,
2 (H) .. I heard everybody saying um- --
3 you know,
4 like the people that took the class before,
5 (H) talking about,
6 ... <VOX Oh,
7 **you have to do this,**
8 **you have to do that,**
9 **there's dead horse hooves,**
10 **you know you gotta,**
11 **(H) and they stink VOX>**,
12 and all this other stuff,
13 and I was just going,
14 <Q oh my G=o=d,
15 I'm never --
16 I= don't want to take that class.
17 so maybe I'll wait till next year Q>,
18 and then I thought,
19 → no,
20 I'll get it out of the way now.
21 (H)= And then once I got into it,
22 geez,
23 I wanna take the second half of it,
24 it was just really interesting to me,
25 you know?
26 (H) .. But,
27 (Hx) .. (TSK) at first it was kind of a bummer.
28 ... But,
29 (H) I'm glad I took it.
30 ... Really glad.
31 ... (TSK) It pays off.

(6) 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 %I 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>**,

(3) (Hold My Breath SBC 0035 77.748-88.794)
1 STEPHANIE: ... %I .. I mean,
2 .. yeah,
3 people in my school when I told em my score were like,
4 .. <VOX oh,
5 **you won't need to take it again VOX>**,
6 → but then like,
7 my friends who have like thirteen fifty on their S[AT][2's2],
8 ERIKA: [Who's that].
9 PATTY: [2But2] [3~Stephanie,
10 GAIL: [3Yeah,
11 but I mean you can- you can't compare yourself3].

(2) (Raging Bureaucracy SBC 0004 913.03-947.62)
1 SHARON: [(Hx) Hey !Coop].
2 ... What I was gonna tell you about,
3 that really frustrates me is that,
4 ... uh=,
5 ... (H) that .. the people- ... principal and stuff they say to me,
6 ... (TSK) (H) <Q **Oh,**
7 **well,**
8 **.. what you do with those third-graders,**
9 **you know,**
10 **is you just like,**
11 **(H) take them,**
12 **and put them,**
13 **you know,**
14 **with one of the smarter fourth-graders,**
15 **who's very [ver]bal,**
16 CAROLYN: [uh].
17 SHARON: **and .. and well-beh=ved.**
18 **(H) And you have them work as a team,**
19 **you know,**
20 **so that the (H) fourth-grader can help the third-grader Q>**.
21 → ... (TSK) (H) But .. that's bullshit.
22 ... Because,
23 ... that just teaches the third-grader,
24 with the lesser intelligence,
25 that,
26 (H) .. that he's worthless,
27 you know,
28 that he can't learn [stuff on his own].

Analysis

In example (1) the speaker, Lynne, is a student of equine science speaking to a relatively unknown visitor, Lenore. The conversation was recorded in a rural town in Montana.

The constructed dialogue is referring to the quoted third party's attitude toward the class and conveyance of the information that she should not take the class. Lynne proceeds to explain that though she first bought into their advice (lines 13-17), she decided to take the class in spite of it (lines 19-20). She congratulates herself on this decision (lines 23-24, 29-31) by saying she wants to *take the second half*, it's *really interesting*, she's *really glad* she took it and *it pays off*. Representing what 'everyone' said as constructed dialogue introduced by *ob* is a tool to reinforce her identity as someone who is smarter than them in her dismissal of their advice.

She has been setting herself up through the conversation as an expert but continually qualifying it with the fact that she does not really know as much as some other people about horses. Lynne goes into a great deal of detail about horses and how to care for them after each time she claims to not have exert status. It is possible that this is a technique for avoiding the air of self-aggrandizement that can come with some stories. She is still showing off her knowledge but by comparing to other more knowledgeable people, she can diminish her agency. DeFina & Georgakopoulou (2012) point out that this is a common reason for using constructed dialogue as well, as a strategic way to minimize a teller's responsibility.

In example (3), high school student, Stephanie, is attempting to make the argument to a group, but mostly to her mother, that she needs to re-take the SAT exam. She has unsuccessfully tried to explain that her score is too low and that she needs to take it again.

At 29.406-33.183, her mother, Patty, tries to give the advice that she needs to study, which Stephanie refutes. While simultaneously feeling inferior for her score, Stephanie tries to present herself as the SAT expert to the other conversation participants. She asserts, at 42.346-45.634, that the SAT board itself can back up the claim she is trying to make. Stephanie is attempting to show that she is a person who knows about such matters. It seems that the hearers are dismissing her expertise and Patty attempts to be reassuring by saying the SAT is not a “whole measure of the person” (SBC 0035 55.778-58.322) and cannot “measure creativity” (SBC 0035 58.322-59.996). This completely undermines the persona Stephanie is trying to present, as someone who did not do well the first time, but is smart enough to know how to handle the next step. By the time she gets to the constructed dialogue in example (3), she has already been unsuccessful several times in getting her point across.

Stephanie presents this as bad advice that she knew better than to take. It is shown by her choice of subject that this is a representation of the basic advice they gave her and not a direct quote of any one specific person, or if it is, she chose not to attribute it to them. She chooses a generic plural subject of *people in my school*. She immediately follows the constructed dialogue with *but*, showing that she presented this claim specifically to counter it.

Conclusions

The use of *ob* at the beginning of constructed dialogue works more to create a particular identity for the speaker than as a reflection of the quoted third party, through positioning of self to other and identity construction through narrative. The dialogue that is constructed is expressly used to show that the speaker does not align with whatever is produced in the utterance.

A speaker's purpose in presenting what seems like a direct third-person quote is related more to their own identity construction rather than any sort of ill will towards the person being quoted. Indeed, the speaker often resorts to a plural third-person *they* as the subject of the quotative verb. Perhaps, this is a technique to avoid laying blame on one individual, thus saving face (Brown & Levinson, 1999).

Method

I analyzed data from the *Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English* (DuBois et al., 2000-2005), limited to face-to-face interactions of the everyday spontaneous conversation type.

Concordance

- Quotative verbs (*to say, to think, to go, to be like*)
- Various forms (*to say: saying, said, says, say*)
- Transcribed as <Q> or <VOX>
- Third-person subject

Further Study

- Co-occurrence of *ob* and *but*
- Paralinguistic indexical cues (pitch, voice quality, etc.)
- Singular vs plural subject
- Conversation participants' interpretation

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