

REPORTED DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

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1. FORMS

There are some very clear differences in English between the basic forms of direct (or quoted) speech and indirect (or reported) speech. The major differences are usually presented in grammar texts through sentence pairs such as those shown in [1] and [2], where the direct speech forms within quotation marks in (a) are converted to the indirect speech forms in (b).

- [1] a. «I am waiting here for you.»
b. He said that he was waiting there for her.

- [2] a. «Can we finish this project next week?»
b. She asked if they could finish that project the following week.

The indirect forms are introduced by a quotative frame which consists of a verb of saying (*said, asked*) and an attributed speaker (*he, she*), followed by a conjunction (*that, if*). Within the reported clause, a number of distinct shifts can be found, involving tense (*am - was*), person (*I - he*), demonstratives (*this - that*), adverbials (*here - there*) and word order (*can we - they could*). There are a number of possible variations within this general pattern, such as the optional omission of *that* in reported statements, but the examples shown above are typical of the kind presented and practiced via conversion exercises in most basic grammar texts (cf. Alexander, 1988; Azar, 1985; Guth, 1982; Maclin, 1981; Murphy, 1989).

2. FUNCTIONS

The emphasis in the preceding description is on structural differences between two ways of reporting what was said, with little attention typically paid to their functions. One obvious effect of many of the changes in form is to make the indirect speech report more distant from the speaking event being reported. The

direct speech forms are clearly tied to the moment of utterance, with references to the participants, the time and the place in the 'here-and-now'. The indirect speech forms push the reported speaking event into the past and overtly mark that there is some distance between the time of the report and the time of the speech being reported. This effect makes the indirect speech forms more like a narrative account of an event and distinct from the dramatic presentation of the event encoded in the direct speech forms. Indirect speech functions like narrative and direct speech functions like drama.

This functional distinction is made more extreme when the structure associated with indirect speech is used to summarize a speaking event as a way of reporting it, as illustrated in [3].

- [3] a. «I am waiting here for you. Where are you?
You're never on time!»
b. He complained that she was late.

The summarized report in [3b] creates an even greater distance between the speaking event and the report. It also results in much greater control being taken by the reporter for the interpretation of the speaking event. There is, then, a functional distinction between three types of reporting formats in English, as summarized in [4].

- [4] <--- More distance, greater reporter control -----
- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Summarized Report</i> | <i>Indirect Speech</i> | <i>Direct Speech</i> |
| Lara called me
on the phone
about the project. | She asked if they
could finish that
project the
following week. | «Oh, Dan, can we
please finish this
project next week.» |

Indeed, the structural sequence from left to right in [4] will often be found, in that order, in spoken reports of previous conversations. Example [5] is from a taperecorded conversation and begins with a summary, continues with an indirect speech report and finally presents direct speech.

- [5] He told her about what happened –he said that he'd been tired– he was, «I'm sorry –I didn't mean to forget the meeting– I was so tired I just didn't keep track of everything.»

3. MIXED STRUCTURES IN WRITTEN REPORTS

For students who have mastered the basic differences in sentence structure between indirect and direct speech reports, there are several other discourse patterns in both written and spoken English which have to be recognised.

In extract [6], from a newspaper report on a protest at the University of Minnesota against investment in South Africa, there is a strong preference shown for placing the quotative frame after the quoted material.

[6] The vote will «add to a growing mandate from all members of the University community for total divestment,» said Clare Woodward, a biochemistry professor and one of the protesters who occupied University President Ken Keller's outer office last week. The regents cannot ignore the overwhelming opinion of students and faculty on this issue, she said after the meeting.

«The vote was impressive,» said Ron Edwards, president of the Minneapolis Urban League, who sat in on the Senate meeting. «It will give an upbeat message to students, faculty and their supporters.» The vote was significant, but only advisory, Edwards said. The regents will take the final action in June, he said.

Edwards said he thinks only five regents will vote for divestment in June, and is only sure of the vote of Regent Wenda Moore for divestment.

A number of observations can be made on this type of discourse.

(1) The speech directly reported within quotation marks may be only part of the sentence in which it occurs.

(2) Notice also how difficult it is on some occasions to decide whether the speech reported without quotation marks is in fact direct or indirect speech.

(3) When no quotation marks are used, one assumes initially that an indirect speech format is being used. However, at the end of the first paragraph, the reported speech occurs without quotes, yet shows no shift of the verb form (*cannot*) or of the demonstrative (*this*). This is, in fact, direct speech being reported without quotation marks.

The pattern in the first two paragraphs of [6] seems to be one in which a speaker's words are reported as direct speech in quotation marks, followed by a quotative frame identifying the speaker by name and status, then continuing with further remarks from that speaker without quotation marks. When there is descriptive material identifying the speaker, the typical sequence of constituents in the quotative frame is reversed. In the final paragraph of [6], there is a more standard format used for indirect speech, with the quotative frame first and a shift to a third person pronoun. However, the verb tenses are not backshifted to the past.

The mixture of direct and indirect forms within single sentences is not uncommon in newspaper reporting. Extracts [7] and [8] are brief examples of the style and show how the topic character, called 'MacLaine' in [7] and 'Kennedy' in [8], can be the referent of both third person and first person pronouns within the same sentence.

[7] MacLaine concedes that one of the reasons she has had no major romantic involvement «for a while» is that she «would have to find a man who shared my spiritual beliefs.»

[8] Kennedy has toned down the punk look and vows «not to blurt out exactly what I think.»

The quotation marks in both examples [7] and [8] represent major shifts of perspective for the reader. The reader is expected to recognize that the non-quoted parts represent the reporter's perspective whereas the parts in quotation marks are a direct presentation of the speaker's perspective. Quotation marks as an indication of changed perspective, or even different speaker, are not always present, however, as we can see in extract [9], from a travel article (*Esquire*, October, 1991), where the

sentence beginning with ‘*Why ...*’ seems to take the reader into a fragment from a personal conversation in the middle of a description. Although it is unmarked as separate, this sentence marks a substantial genre shift within the text.

- [9] The predictable configurations of the rooms and corridors, the presence of modern conveniences bearing well-known brand names created the cozy impression that one was in a place where the people and events were also familiar and predictable, as easily understood as a room-service menu. Why, this country isn’t so different from home, Ethel, and these folks are just like us. That fallacy was safe enough in Brussels.

4. FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE

Another mixture of features from direct and indirect speech can occur in texts, particularly in narrative, and is described as free indirect discourse. This style of reporting combines the shifted tenses and third person pronouns of indirect speech with the direct speech versions of non-shifted expressions of time and place, inverted questions, vocatives and interjections. These features are illustrated in extract [10] from a version of the Little Red Riding Hood story (Yule, Mathis and Hopkins, 1992). Although this extract reports a conversation between two speakers, there are no quotative frames to introduce and attribute the turns as indirect speech, nor any quotation marks to indicate if some parts are direct speech.

- [10] Little Red Riding Hood objected to her mother’s advice. Why should she always take the same path from here to Granma’s? She might see something different if she could cut through the woods.

Her mother was unmoved. She might get lost too. She might meet someone who would hurt her, or heaven forbid, even kidnap her.

But goodness how could she learn about the world if she never did anything new or different?

She would learn in plenty of time. She was too young now.

For readers unfamiliar with this style of reporting, there is the possibility of some misunderstanding. The reference of ‘*she*’ throughout example [10] is Little Red Riding Hood, but unless the reader realizes that, in the second paragraph, it is the mother’s speech to her daughter that is being reported, then the ‘*she*’ (*who might get lost*) could easily and mistakenly be interpreted as the mother.

Complete stories can be written in this style, with characters’ speech being represented with neither the quotative frames of indirect speech nor the punctuation marks of direct speech. In extract [11], from a short story called *Rope*, by Katherine Anne Porter (1958), a young married couple are having a disagreement.

- [11] She looked so forlorn, so lost and despairing he couldn’t believe it was only a piece of rope that was causing all the racket. What was the matter, for God’s sake?

Oh, would he please hush and go away and stay away, if he could, for five minutes? By all means, yes, he would. He'd stay away indefinitely if she wished. Lord, yes, there was nothing he'd like better than to clear out and never come back. She couldn't for the life of her see what was holding him, then.

The first sentence in [11] appears to be a reported thought of the man, followed by a representation, in the second sentence, of what he said to the woman. The first sentence of the second paragraph is the woman's response, followed by three sentences attributable to the man. The final sentence is the woman's response. Although the referential devices (pronouns and tenses) are consistently in the form associated with indirect speech, the idiomatic expressions (*for God's sake*), the interjections (*Oh; yes; Lord, yes*), the inverted word order of the questions and the total absence of quotative frames give a direct speech flavor to the reported interaction. Yet there are no quotation marks or separate lines used to guide the reader in interpreting where one speaker ends and another begins.

The mixture of direct and indirect speech forms can appear in less literary contexts. Extract [12] is from the published minutes of a university faculty meeting and extract [13] from the official record of a town council meeting.

[12] Professor G. asked further about the mechanics; specifically, how many nominations the committee typically received and were they automatically carried over.

[13] Mr. H. asked didn't the town get 2% of sales from the company and wasn't it a 15 year contract with a 10 year option.

In [12], the report puts the first question into the word order of indirect speech, but presents the second question in direct speech. In [13], both questions are in the direct speech form though unmarked by punctuation (cf. Yule, 1993, for fuller discussion of this type of data).

5. CONVERSATIONS ABOUT OTHER CONVERSATIONS

Having considered some of the uses of direct and indirect speech forms in written discourse, we will now look at some aspects of speech reports in spoken discourse. Quite a lot of ordinary conversation is devoted to reporting what was said in other conversations. Some of those reports follow the patterns described earlier in terms of the basic forms of direct and indirect speech. There are, however, a number of other formats used in contemporary spoken English to represent what was said in a reported conversation. In considering how those reports are presented, it is important to keep in mind that people are not normally able to recall exact word-for-word or verbatim accounts of what they hear. Consequently, when people are reporting previous conversations and quoting what was said, there is a strong possibility that those reports are «constructed» by the reporter rather than recalled verbatim.

The term ‘constructed dialogue’ (Tannen, 1989) is designed to capture the fact that, on many occasions in English conversation, speakers do not actually present verbatim reports of what they and others have said in previous interactions. Although direct speech forms are used in these reports, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that speakers create or construct the dialogue they report. On many occasions they also report thoughts or attitudes (that they and others may have had) in a form which looks as if they had given voice, in direct speech, to those thoughts and attitudes during the reported interaction. These direct speech forms are often introduced by a range of quotative verbs which, in addition to *say*, include forms of the verbs *to be*, *to go* and *be like*. The ‘constructed’ aspect of these reports may be most obvious on those occasions when the participants in the dialogue are credited with using direct speech even although they can’t talk. In example [14], a woman is describing an occasion when she saw some caterpillars on the back of her friend’s shirt. These caterpillars appear to have voices.

[14] she turned around and she had four of them clung to the back of her shirt
 –they were hanging all over and I was like, «Ahh –what are those?» And I
 went to brush them off and they’re like, «No –don’t touch me.»

Occasionally, constructed dialogue is presented in written reports, as in extract [15] from a newspaper (*The Herald Tribune*, July 1st., 1992).

[15] «In the list of things you really don’t want to hear,» notes David Streitfeld in the Washington Post, are the garage mechanic’s «I’m afraid there’s some trouble,» the doctor’s «I’d like you to come back for another test,» the spouse’s «we really need to talk» and the boss’s «are you sure you’re happy here?»

6. NEW QUOTATIVES

The direct speech forms in [14] are introduced by quotative frames containing versions of the verb *be like*. Forms of *be like* have become particularly common in contemporary American English for introducing direct speech that conveys a person’s attitude (cf. Romaine & Lange, 1991). In the second speaker’s contribution in [16], there is the appearance of a previous conversation being reported, but the general effect is one in which the reported character’s attitude to her dog is being portrayed through her own words. The final quotation is unlikely to have been uttered by the character and seems to summarize the reporting speaker’s assessment of the reported character’s attitude.

[16]
 S: I know a lot of people who just gas their animals because they’re inconvenient
 T: Well that’s why Wendy –that’s why Wendy did it– she was just like –she was like, «I can’t take care of this dog. I can’t take it with me. It’s you know –it was a bad choice. I think I’m gonna put it to sleep.» And I’m like, «Well it’s

your dog you know. It's your choice.» And I didn't think it was especially bad of her and she's like, «Well if it has –if it's healthy then I know somebody who'll take it but if it's not I'm just gonna gas it because it's gonna cost money.» And eh so I mean it was the fact that the dog was inconvenient. She was just like, «This dog's annoying me.»

Versions of *be like* are also often found in the introductory quotative frame when the reporter doesn't actually quote all of a reported speaker's talk, but acts as if the content is totally predictable and consequently doesn't have to be spelled out. Extracts [17], concerning a person who complains a lot, and [18], about someone apologizing a lot, are illustrations of this phenomenon.

[17] Karen does that a lot too –she's like, «Every little thing da da da da.»

[18] He started crying and he's like, «I just blah blah blah blah.»

Another common means of introducing reported speech and other expressions is through the use of the verb *go*. In some contexts it is clear that the speaker is not reporting something that was actually said, as in example [19].

[19] I'm too busy making an ass of myself to stop and go, «Hey you're doing something stupid.»

In other examples it is less clear whether some direct speech, as reported in [20], or an interjection, as in [21], was in fact uttered in the circumstances described.

[20] (The speaker is describing a time when she felt her life was not going anywhere.)

I don't mind when other people do it though –unless they're ignoring things on purpose– if they're just going, «Yeah this is okay.»

[21] Every once in a while something out of the blue will trigger the thought that I am going to die some day and then I start to go, «Whaaaa!»

When quotative *go* occurs in written reports, it does seem to introduce potential reactions in direct speech form rather than actual quotations. In extract [22], from a magazine (*Vanity Fair*, September, 1992), a talk-show host Jay Leno is talking about the benefits of having an entertaining guest such as actress Geena Davis. Double quotation marks are used for Leno's speech and single quotation marks are used, following the two occurrences of *go*, to mark the potential reactions of the audience.

[22] «Whenever Geena's on, she always brings something to the show. It's always a comedy bit ... either a story or an invention. It makes the show more show-and-tell. So if you came from another country and you'd never seen her before and you didn't know who she was, you'd go, 'Oh, she's funny!' A lot of times,

you have movie stars on, and if you'd never heard of them before, you go, 'Why is this person famous in America?'

Some direct speech forms in contemporary English conversational speech occur without any quotative frame. Once the identities of the speakers have been established, their speech can often be reported without attribution. Extract [23] is one woman's report of a conversation she had with her mother one Saturday morning.

[23] She's like, «So what time did you get in?» We got in at two thirty. «Well I got home around a little after one» cause they sleep like the dead –they don't hear us come in anyway and eh so, «Did you all have a nice time?» «Yeah.»

In the final line of extract [23], notice that there are no quotative frames such as *My mother asked me* and *I answered* accompanying the lines of dialogue from this reported interaction. The term 'zero quotative' (cf. Yule & Mathis, 1992) has come to be used in describing this type of unintroduced direct quotation. One of the problematic aspects of zero quotatives is that there is no attributed speaker indicated. If a direct speech form is used in the first person, and no other speaker is indicated, then the quote would normally be attributed to the person speaking. In extract [24], such an attribution would result in a mistaken interpretation. Just before this extract, the two women speakers have been discussing the relationship between Karen and her boyfriend Mark and the fact that Mark says he prays for Karen when they're apart.

[24]
 S: Are you serious? Who told you that?
 T: Karen
 S: Karen said that he prayed every night?
 T: Uh-hm –prayed for peace– well it's a good line anyway
 S: oh really
 T: «I prayed about you every night.»
 S: «I prayed about you.» «Hey! I'll talk to you.»
 T: «Put a ring on me hey! Ooh I'm yours!»

In extract [24], lines 6-8 represent constructed dialogue in which a conversation between Mark and Karen is created. Notice in line 7 that first the male voice speaks and then the female voice responds, yet there are no quotative frames (*he said/she said*) to make those attributions explicit. Making sense of this reported interaction is clearly not dependent on knowing the conventions of marking direct versus indirect speech as presented in most grammar textbooks. The key to understanding in this case is recognizing that a dramatic scenario has been created with characters who have assigned roles and lines of dialogue within the scenario.

What we should also recognize in extract [24] is the extent to which the two speakers jointly create the scenario for their own entertainment. This is not the prosaic reporting of another's words, but the active construction, by two close friends, of a dramatic interlude in which each builds upon the contributions of the other thereby indicating how much they have in common, not only in how they view the world, but also in how they go about representing it in words.

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