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Constructing Narratives for Inquiry

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

—W. B. Yeats, “Among School Children”

Before turning to methods of analysis in subsequent chapters, I devote some space here to the production of texts for inquiry, a task all investigators face even before formal analysis begins. It is generally acknowledged in the human sciences that “the researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation.”¹ This process occurs in particularly complex ways when data are written and visual, but the complexity is graphically apparent with research interviews. If, as Chapter 1 argued, the narrative impulse is universal, how can we facilitate storytelling in interviews? If audio recordings are made, how do we transform the spoken word into narrative text—a written representation—that conveys the dynamic process of storytelling? What about working with translated materials, particularly interviews that are mediated by a translator and varied in meanings across languages? This chapter focuses primarily on interviewing and transcription and the interplay between them (transcription and interpretation are often mistakenly viewed as two distinct stages of a project²). Following a general

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introduction relevant to all kinds of data (oral, written, and visual), I turn to interviewing and transcription by showing how I constructed two different transcripts based on the same interview segment. I look finally at interpreting a translated interview. Although the research examples in the chapter come from my research experience in India, similar issues arise in narrative projects that examine spoken discourse.

Investigators don't have access to the "real thing," only the speaker's (or writer's or artist's) imitation (*mimesis*). Cheryl Mattingly notes that the mimetic position involves both action and experience. Narratives are event-centered—depicting human action—and they are experience-centered at several levels:

They do not merely describe what someone does in the world but what the world does to that someone. They allow us to infer something about what it feels like to be in that story world. Narratives also recount those events that happen unwilled, unpredicted, and often unwished for by the actors, even if those very actors set the events in motion in the first place. . . . Narratives do not merely refer to past experience but create experiences for their audiences.³

A few examples illustrate the persistence of the mimetic position across various kinds of data. In historical research, an investigator may begin with witness accounts and/or archival documents that recount a sequence of incidents. In clinical settings, investigators may begin with notes entered into a medical chart and/or audio or video recordings of office visits. In projects that include art, investigators may begin with a series of photographs. Most commonly, investigators conduct interviews (single or, ideally, multiple interviews with the same person) to learn about a process—identity construction among a group of artists, for example. Although substantively different, in all of these examples the investigator's access to knowledge about the prior—"real"—events and experience is mediated, at least one step removed.⁴ We need, consequently, to think consciously and critically about how we as interpreters constitute the narrative texts that we then analyze.

Documents, of course, are already organized and "packaged," that is, cast in recognizable written forms (e.g., government reports, letters, or diaries in archives). They have a material existence before an investigator encounters them, unlike memories recollected in interview conversations—spoken first, and then transformed into text by an investigator. Interpretive issues arise, nevertheless, for those working with historical documents and autobiographies, as several exemplars in later chapters reveal, including imagined audience and other contexts implicated in production. Documents do not speak for themselves; decisions by the author and/or archivist have already shaped

the texts an investigator encounters. Decisions, too, have shaped organizational documents, such as the narratives of causality constructed by social workers and physicians in case notes and team conferences about, for example, a case of suspected child neglect.⁵ Artists' decisions have shaped photographs and other images that we work with. In sum, all investigators, no matter the kind of data—oral, written, and/or visual—lack access to another's unmediated experience; we have instead materials that were constructed by socially situated individuals from a perspective and for an audience, issues made vivid in interview situations. Unlike written documents and visual data, however, oral data require transformation into a textual form. And, if narratives of experience are desired, storytelling must be allowed.

Interviews as Narrative Occasions

Most narrative projects in the human sciences today are based on interviews of some kind. Generating oral narrative requires substantial change in customary practices. While survey and some qualitative researchers implicitly apply a stimulus/response model during interviews, Mishler suggests the alternative:

Looking at how interviewees connect their responses into a sustained account, that is, a story, brings out problems and possibilities of interviewing that are not visible when attention is restricted to question-answer exchanges.⁶

In his (now classic) book, Mishler reconceptualizes research interviewing as a discursive accomplishment: the standardized protocol (where question order is invariant) gives way to conversation where interviewees can develop narrative accounts; speaker and listener/questioner render events and experiences meaningful—collaboratively. The model of a “facilitating” interviewer who asks questions, and a vessel-like “respondent” who gives answers, is replaced by two active *participants* who jointly construct narrative and meaning.⁷ Narrative interviewing has more in common with ethnographic practice than with mainstream social science interviewing practice, which typically relies on discrete open questions and/or closed (fixed response) questions. The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements. As argued in Chapter 1, narratives come in many forms and sizes, ranging from brief, tightly bounded stories told in answer to a single question, to long narratives that build over the course of several interviews and traverse temporal and geographical space—biographical accounts that refer to entire lives or careers. Establishing a climate that allows for storytelling in all its forms requires substantial changes in practice.

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When the research interview is viewed as a conversation—a discourse between speakers—rules of everyday conversation will apply: turn-taking, relevance, and entrance and exit talk (where a speaker transitions into, and returns from, the past time story world). Generating narrative requires longer turns at talk than are customary in ordinary conversations, and certainly in research interviews of the survey variety. One story can lead to another, as narrator and questioner/listener negotiate openings for extended turns and associative shifts in topic. When shifts occur, it is useful to explore, with the participant, associations and meanings that might connect several stories. If we want to learn about an experience in all its complexity, details count. These details include specific incidents and turning points, not simply general evaluations. Susan Chase, for instance, relates how her sociologically worded questions in the early phase of a study of women school superintendents generated terse “reports” of work histories. Changing the wording of initial questions to simple, more open and straightforward ones elicited long narratives that recounted women’s daily experiences in a white male-dominated profession—specific incidents and particular moments in careers.⁸

Creating possibilities in research interviews for extended narration requires investigators to give up control, which can generate anxiety. Although we have particular paths we want to cover related to the substantive and theoretical foci of our studies, narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails. Giving up the control of a fixed interview format—“methods” designed for “efficiency”⁹—encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation. Encouraging participants to speak in their own ways can, at times, shift power in interviews; although relations of power are never equal, the disparity can be diminished. Genuine discoveries about a phenomenon can come from power-sharing (vividly illustrated in photovoice, and other collaborative projects discussed in Chapters 6 and 7).

Storytelling in interviews can occur at the most unexpected times, even in answer to fixed-response questions (I present an example below), demonstrating the ubiquity of the narrative impulse. Especially when there has been major disruption in a life—in the normative social biography—I have learned through many interview studies that individuals often want to develop long accounts, and will do so at unexpected times.

Traditional survey interviewing practices offer little guidance for such moments (they are defined as “digressions”), but feminist researchers who attend to the research relationship provide insight.¹⁰ The specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer’s emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation. But it is also true that certain kinds of open-ended questions are more likely than others to provide narrative opportunities. It is preferable, in general, to ask questions

that open up topics, and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful. For example, in my infertility study, I asked, "How did you first become aware that you were having difficulties with childbearing?" The question encouraged women to begin at the beginning (in South India it was often during the first year of marriage), to relate in a chronological sequence how they came to suspect fertility problems, and how understandings changed over time with new events, such as medical examinations and miscarriages. But, not all women began at the beginning, and some moved back and forth in time. There are many ways to organize a narrative account; investigators and interviewers can suppress the narrative impulse, or encourage diverse forms of storytelling. Confusion and misunderstanding can occur when participants in a conversation do not share the convention of temporal ordering of a plot ("and then what happened?")—a process I analyzed long ago in a conversation between an Anglo interviewer and a Latina.¹¹ (Chapter 3 takes up nontemporal forms of storytelling.)

Compare "When did X happen?" that requests a discrete piece of information, with "Tell me what happened?" that invites an extended account. However, some participants may not want to develop lengthy accounts of experiences with a stranger; the assumption that there is a story wanting to be told can put pressure on participants. Some investigators, after an introduction, have asked a participant to "tell me your story." In some of these cases, experience may exceed possibilities for narrativization; events may be fleetingly summarized, given little significance. With time and further questioning participants may recall details, turning points, and shifts in cognition, emotion, and action—that is, narrate—but others may choose not to, and summarize. To meet these challenges, investigators studying the life course have developed life history grids together with participants during the initial interview that are filled in over the course of subsequent conversations. Jane Elliott underscores the conversational utility of grids, stating, "Respondents are likely to find it easier to talk about specific times and places rather than being asked about a very wide time frame."¹²

In my interviewing practice, I sometimes followed up a participant's general description with a question: "Can you remember a particular time when . . . ?" I might have then probed further: "Tell me why that particular moment stands out?" While this is often effective, Cortazzi and colleagues, studying the education of health professionals, asked a direct question that could have been answered with a yes/no response: "Have you had a breakthrough in your learning recently?" "Oh yes" typically followed and (because participants weren't interrupted) the narrator proceeded with an outpouring of emotion and metaphor about a particular moment—"a clap of thunder," one student said.¹³ Narration, in other words, depends on expectations.

If extended accounts are welcomed, some participants and interviewers collaboratively develop them, but if brief answers to discrete questions are expected, participants learn to keep their answers brief (or, if they don't, their long accounts are typically disregarded by transcriber or analyst, and seen as "digressions").

Sometimes it is next to impossible for participants to narrate experience in spoken language alone. Wendy Luttrell, working as an ethnographer in a classroom for pregnant teens (mostly African American), expected "stories" from each girl about key events such as learning of pregnancy, telling mothers and boyfriends, making the decision to keep the baby, and other moments. Luttrell confronted silence instead, only to discover a world of narrative as she encouraged the girls' artistic productions and role plays. When invited to make art, the girls performed the key moments for each other, creating group storytelling situations (see Chapter 6).¹⁴ Investigators studying severely traumatic experiences in the lives of participants confront even greater interviewing challenges. Words do not come easily for victims, as Veena Das remarks: "Even the most articulate among us face difficulties when we try to put ambiguous and jumbled thoughts and images into words. This is even truer of someone who has suffered traumatic loss."¹⁵ Attentive listening in these situations is difficult as our vulnerabilities become exposed.

In sum, although I emphasize the importance of careful transcription in the examples from my research below, it is limiting to rely only on the texts we have constructed from single interviews, and we must not reify our "holy transcripts" of these conversations. In later chapters, I discuss how scholars combine observation, ongoing relationships, and conversations over time with participants; some projects also incorporate their images. Interviews, though important and the most widely used method of data collection in the human sciences, represent only one source of knowledge about a phenomenon or group. Narrative interviewing is not a set of "techniques," nor is it necessarily "natural." If sensitively practiced, it can offer a way, in many research situations, for investigators to forge dialogic relationships and greater communicative equality. Toward these ends, it is preferable to have repeated conversations rather than the typical one-shot interview, especially when studying biographical experience.¹⁶ Working ethnographically with participants in their settings over time offers the best conditions for storytelling. I also recommend that, whenever possible, the investigator also serve as interviewer, because the interpretive process begins during conversation (evidenced in the subtle give and take between speaker and listener in transcripts below). We must also learn to listen attentively. Despite the significance of listening, Molly Andrews notes that the complex process is rarely included in social scientists' professional training. Yet when we learn to listen in an emotionally attentive and engaged way, we

expose ourselves and enter the unknown with “new possibilities and frameworks of meaning.” It is “hard work, demanding as it does an abandonment of the self in a quest to enter the world of another; and it takes time.”¹⁷ The listener’s identities and preconceptions come into play, particularly when interviewing across the divides of geographical, religious, class/race, and age difference—a process illustrated below.

Transcription as Interpretation: Research Examples

I referred earlier to my research in South India, where I interviewed (usually with a research assistant, Liza) childless women in towns and villages, and where I observed an infertility clinic in operation at a government hospital.¹⁸ Briefly as context, I was drawn to the topic and setting because of the institutional importance of motherhood in India. Although family life is undergoing rapid change, the normative social biography for an Indian woman mandates childbearing after marriage; culturally, it is a master narrative. Motherhood is a woman’s sacred duty—a value enshrined in religious laws for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians alike. Bearing and rearing children is central to a woman’s power and well-being, and reproduction brings in its stead concrete benefits over the life course. A child solidifies a wife’s often fragile bond with a spouse in an arranged marriage, and improves her status in the joint family and larger community; with a child, she can eventually become a mother-in-law, and this is a position of considerable power and influence in Indian families. Additionally, in old age, women depend on children (particularly sons) for economic security in a country with few governmental social welfare programs and, upon death, a son makes possible essential rituals for Hindus. Even further, for families with significant property or wealth, sexual reproduction allows for social reproduction, or the orderly transfer of privilege through inheritance to the next generation of kin. Motherhood, in sum, serves critical cultural functions in India’s hierarchical society (stratified by gender, caste, and class) that are masked by psychological or sentimental discourses (e.g., it is “natural” for a woman to want to bear a child). Indian women are keenly aware that their reproductive capacities are an important source of power, especially when they lack it from other sources.¹⁹

Given this context (rapidly changing as I write), I wondered what happens when the normative biography is ruptured and a woman does not conceive. How is the situation defined and managed? How do differently situated women account for being childless, and what explanatory interpretations are possible? How does the local culture influence the actions women can take in their families and communities?

I struggled with how to represent what I heard in conversations with childless women. Remembering *mimesis*, I could never “know” their experiences. All I had were imitations, memories of past events recalled in the present and folded into “messy talk” that I had to transform into text suitable for narrative analysis. Because there is no universal form of transcription suitable for all research situations, investigators make decisions, Mishler argues, based on theoretical concerns and practical constraints, including an investigator’s perspective about relations between meaning and speech, the specific aims of a project and relevant aspects of speech, and available resources.²⁰ In constructing a transcript, we do not stand outside in a neutral objective position, merely presenting “what was said.” Rather, investigators are implicated at every step along the way in constituting the narratives we then analyze. Perhaps an example will help.

The study of infertility in South India was designed to explore the relationship between meaning and action: the sense women made of their situations and the actions they took in families and communities. Given my research on other biographical disruptions, I fully expected narrative accounts to emerge in the infertility project. But they appeared sometimes when I least expected them. For example, I had questions at the beginning of interviews that elicited factual and demographic information. But some participants answered at length. Sunita (a pseudonym) represents a case in point. I asked her early in an interview what I thought was a yes/no question, but she shifted the terms of conversation and responded with a long account of her relationship with her mother-in-law and a miscarriage almost twenty years earlier.

A Conversation in English: Two Contrasting Transcriptions

Sunita was a forty-two-year-old Hindu woman from an advantaged caste who had been married for twenty years. Having an advanced degree, she is economically advantaged (her husband runs a successful business), and she works professionally, mostly in English. I interviewed her in English in her home, audiotaping a conversation that lasted more than two hours. By consenting to be a participant in a study of infertility, Sunita had implicitly agreed to look back on her life, particularly when she was younger and trying to conceive. From the totality of her lived experience—a demanding career, a long marriage, as well as other important relationships and accomplishments—the research required that she attend to one specific component of her biography. My research interest constrained to a large degree which of her many identities would be relevant.

About ten minutes into the conversation, I asked Sunita a factual question about her reproductive history. On my interview schedule, there were two possible responses (yes/no). Sunita, however, thought otherwise and seized

the question (“have you ever been pregnant?”) as an opening for a long account that ends with a miscarriage. I learned later that she never became pregnant again. Some readers might wonder why Sunita engaged in storytelling at that point. I can only speculate that she knew the topic of my research, understood I was a sociologist with an interest in Indian families, and she was accustomed in the workplace to exercising authority in conversations. Perhaps the miscarriage long ago continued to hold meanings she wanted to express. Whatever the reasons, Sunita took control of the interview to insert a long story that recounted painful days and weeks—a sequence of events that had occurred eighteen years previously. Like all stories, it is selective and perspectival, reflecting the power of memory to remember, forget, neglect, and amplify moments in the stream of experience.

From the taped conversation, I constructed a written record that, like all transcripts, straddles a border between speech and writing. I transformed a complex verbal exchange into an object that would serve as a representation—my imitation on a two-dimensional page of what had been said between us. An audio recording is more selective than a video would have been, of course, but in neither case can the fluid and dynamic movement of words and gestures be captured. Much is lost, and key features slip away. Sunita’s clipped Indo/British speech and the linguistic markers of her social position disappear in the transcript. Some of the qualities she expresses visually become invisible, and the particular cadence of her speech is flattened. Translating dynamic talk into linear written language, then, is never easy or straightforward (it is also time consuming, requiring three to four hours for every hour of interview). Some mistakenly think the task is technical, and delegate it. However, transcription is deeply interpretive as the process is inseparable from language theory.²¹ The “same” stretch of talk can be transcribed very differently, depending on the investigator’s theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest.

There are several ways my conversation with Sunita could be represented. I present two here, based on contrasting perspectives about language and communication. Incidentally, each also assumes a different theory about “the self.” Simply stated: (1) the act of storytelling in dialogue *constitutes* the autobiographical self, that is, how the speaker wants to be known in the interaction; vs. (2) autobiographical narrative *reflects* a preexisting self; there is constancy across speaking situations because the self exists independently of social interaction.²² The first requires a transcription that includes the interactional context, while the second privileges the narrator’s speech—the way to “know” the person. Later, I will complicate this simple binary, but now it serves to contrast two transcriptions. The first is based on the theory of a co-constructed “self” produced dialogically, and the second transcription is based on the idea of a reflected “self.”

Transcript 2.1

01 C: And have you ever been pregnant?

02 S: Yes (p) I think it was second or third year of marriage. (I—Aha)
03 that I was pregnant and then in the third month I started spotting
04 (I—Mmm). I think I was overworking (I—Mmm). Since it was a
05 choice marriage, I had a lot of—(p) We were trying to get my in
06 laws to be more amenable to the whole situation (I—Mmm). In
07 laws were against the marriage (I—Mmm) and so I used to work
08 the whole day, then go to their place to cook in the evening for a
09 family of seven (I—Mmm). Then pack the food for two of us and
10 bring it home (I—Mmm).

11 C: So you were living separately from them?

12 S: We were living here, my in-laws were staying in [city], some
13 distance away.

14 C: But you went there to cook everyday—

15 S: We—I went there to cook everyday and not everyday could he
16 come (I—Yes) you know, to pick me up or to come, so that we
17 could come together. (I—Mmm). And whenever my father-in-law
18 was at home, he used to see to it that the driver came to drop me
19 home. (I—Mmm) But when he wasn't at home, I had to, you
20 know, come on my own (I—Mmm). I think that was overdoing it,
21 (I—Mmm) and then I carried some of the food stuff you know, the
22 grains and things (p) the monthly stuff, groceries (p) from that
23 place, because my mother-in-law insisted that I carry it back
24 that day and the next day I started spotting and I was so frightened
25 (I—Mmm) because, you know, I didn't know really what to do.
26 So I rang up my doctor and told her and she said, "You just lie
27 down, you are okay but only thing is you need to rest." You know,
28 "don't move around and things like that." So then I went over to
29 my mother's (p) and stayed there for a month and doctor said,
30 "You are okay." But in the next (p) examination she said, "No, I
31 don't think the foetus is growing so (p) we should take a second
32 opinion." So we went to see another gynecologist and she—he said
33 that "definitely, you know, there's a problem, and foetus is stopped
34 growing, we'll wait for another 15 days (I—Mmm).

35 If there is (p) if you abort naturally, fine otherwise we'll have to
 36 have a abortion," you know "it'll have to be with—, you'll have to
 37 remove it." So that was very traumatic. Because (p) though (p) we
 38 weren't totally prepared for it at that point, you know we weren't
 39 using any contraceptives, but (p) I don't know, we weren't totally
 40 prepared for the baby (I—Mmm) but when we realised that I was
 41 pregnant, we were quite (p) ready for it, quite excited about it. So
 42 (p) it was quite traumatic at that point. But the doctor, in fact I was
 43 very thin. I weighed under 100 pounds (I—Mmm). So the doctor
 44 said, "Look you have to put on weight before you— (p) decide to
 45 get pregnant again" and (p) everybody agreed and after that I
 46 stopped going everyday to my in-laws because my husband said
 47 "this is ridiculous," I mean, you know . . .

Transcript 2.1 is detailed, for Sunita's and my utterances appear on the page as the primary speaker and listener/questioner. Sunita constructs herself in the context of a miscarriage and family expectations. Readers can see my initial question, later ones that ask for clarification, my "back-channel" nonlexical expressions (Mmm, uh huh), the break-offs (marked "—", when one of us begins to articulate an idea and stops midstream), and even long pauses (marked "p" on the transcript). This transcript reveals how a "personal" narrative is social at many levels. At the local level, it is composed jointly, crafted in a collaborative conversational interaction. Psychologist Phil Salmon reminds us of the widespread acceptance now of this feature of communication:

All narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-constructed. The audience, whether physically present or not, exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on. We now recognize that the personal account, in research interviews, which has traditionally been seen as the expression of a single subjectivity, is in fact always a co-construction.²³

Investigators who take co-construction seriously struggle with decisions about how to represent physically present and absent ("ghostly"²⁴) audiences. There is no simple rule for how to display a speaker and listener/questioner constructing narrative and meaning together.

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My representation in Transcript 2.1, one attempt, is not nearly as detailed as some analysts work with,²⁵ but it was informed by decades of research on micro features of language use. It displays the co-construction process, or as some might put it, a story that is recipient-designed; Sunita developed her account (and her “self”) for a particular listener, me, a white Western woman who needed to be educated about the Indian family context, and expectations mothers-in-law have for new daughters-in-law. If she had been talking with friends around a dinner table, or with an Indian interviewer, she would have assumed some knowledge was shared, and developed the account (and the “self” constructed in it) differently. Instead, Sunita cast her experience in terms a Western woman could understand. It was a “choice” (love) marriage, not arranged, and her in-laws “were against the marriage.”

Looking briefly at Transcript 2.1 with co-construction in mind, my puzzlement is clear. I interrupt to ask about the couple’s living arrangements (line 11). They were living separately from his parents, Sunita says, not in the joint family as would have been the custom. She went nevertheless to their home to cook every day. Interpreting Sunita’s narrative as we constructed it together, I sensed a young woman going to great lengths to please a demanding mother-in-law, supported by a husband who seemed to want a degree of separation from his parents. Note here that my listening is already saturated with concepts, such as gender and generational hierarchies in India. Prior concepts, in other words, shaped my listening and questioning, allowing me to selectively see what I then described—a component of all observation (“the priority of the signifier over the signified”²⁶). Prior texts constituted what I saw in the transcript even as I was composing it. There was an inevitable gap between Sunita’s experience and her talk about it. Telling another about something that happened depends on language that, as Nietzsche wrote, is a “prison house”²⁷ because there is no way to break through to the ideas and events to which words refer. Language is “uncommunicative of anything other than itself.”²⁸

Much could be said about the narrative represented in Transcript 2.1, yet I draw attention to a few significant points. It displays tension between an “I” narrative and one about family and community expectations. Readers can also see two subjectivities at work as Sunita and I attuned our responses to the other (note my encouraging signs of involvement in the back-channel utterances, as well as my interruptions as I try to understand obligations in her Indian family). There are medicalized discourses taken for granted in the language community we shared (e.g., a miscarriage is “traumatic”). Sunita was an active research participant, not responding in scripted ways to discrete questions. She reworked questions so as to be able to tell me what she

thought was important. Infertility, though the centerpiece of my research, was only a small part of her “self”—a difference she made clear to me in a letter written after the interview (discussed below).

The topic of pleasing a mother-in-law hovered over our two-hour conversation, which I can only summarize due to space considerations. When Sunita spoke moments later about the first year of her marriage (dialogue not included in Transcript 2.1), I returned to my puzzlement: “So you went there everyday as a—as a way of getting them to agree, and to like you? Is that—?” However awkwardly expressed, I was trying to understand the nature of Sunita’s relationship with the woman who (I knew from reading) was immensely powerful in Indian families. Sunita responded by educating me about her culture (“I was very clear that I had somehow to get her to like me. My husband is very fond of his mother.”). She continued by appealing to cultural knowledge we shared about regional foods in India (“My mother-in-law wanted me to learn uh their ways of cooking, you know . . .”). She briefly introduced emotions and blame (“I think my mother-in-law also was uh fairly uh shocked when uh I had this mis—abortion. . . . And she’s never blamed me, otherwise, you know, for not having children”). For whatever reason, I interrupted Sunita as she introduced the topic of blame and returned to the question that initiated our conversation (“So, did you ever get pregnant again after that?”). Perhaps I wanted to take back control of the interview and finish getting basic demographic information so we could move on. My interruption here does not illustrate good narrative interviewing, because I did not follow Sunita down *her* trails, but instead returned to my agenda. The theme of blame was left hanging, only to return again as we ended our conversation (presented below).

Transcript 2.2 displays a second transcription of the miscarriage narrative, which excludes my participation in the conversation (for heuristic purposes here²⁹). It subtly implies that the “self” Sunita presents is independent of interaction. The mode of transcription is informed by the work of James Gee, a social linguist whose theory of narrative discourse is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4. His structural method requires that the transcriber/investigator listen to oral features—how a narrative is actually spoken with pauses and “pitch glides” (subtle falls in the pitch of voice). Listening carefully to intonation results in parsing a narrative into units consisting of lines (a single sequence of words comprising an “idea unit”) that form stanzas (groups of lines with similar content that are separated by pauses and shifts in pitch) and, in very long narratives, parts and strophes. As Chapter 4 demonstrates with several interview texts, investigators have fruitfully adapted Gee’s method of transcription to different research situations.

Transcript 2.2

Timing of pregnancy and spotting Stanza 1

01 I think it was the second or third year of marriage
 02 that I was pregnant
 03 then in the third month
 04 I started spotting

Overwork Coda

05 I think I was overworking

In-laws response to marriage Stanza 2

06 Since it was a choice marriage
 07 we were trying to get my in-laws
 08 to be more amenable to the whole situation
 09 in-laws were against the marriage

Overwork Stanza 3

10 And so I used to work the whole day
 11 then go to their place to cook in the evening
 12 for a family of seven
 13 then pack the food for two of us and bring it home

Help from husband Stanza 4

14 I went there to cook everyday
 15 and not everyday could he come
 16 to pick me up
 17 so that we could come together

Help from father-in-law Stanza 5

18 And whenever my father-in-law was at home
 19 he used to see to it that the driver came to drop me home
 20 but when he wasn't at home
 21 I had to come on my own

Overwork Coda

22 I think that was overdoing it

Mother-in-law's demand one day Stanza 6

23 And then I carried some of the food stuff
 24 the grains and things
 25 from that place
 26 because my mother-in-law insisted that I carry it back that day

Fear of miscarriage **Stanza 7**

27 And the next day
 28 I started spotting
 29 and I was so frightened
 30 because I didn't know really what to do

Getting medical advice **Stanza 8**

31 So I rang up my doctor and told her
 32 and she said, "You just lie down
 33 you are okay but only thing I think you need to rest
 34 don't move around and things like that."

Going to her mother's and doctor's evaluation **Stanza 9**

35 So then I went over to my mother's and stayed there for a month
 36 and the doctor said "you're O.K."
 37 but in the next examination she said
 38 "No, I don't think the fetus is growing so we should take a
 39 second opinion"
 40 [text about visiting another gynecologist, his advice,
 41 waiting, and a miscarriage that was "very traumatic"]

End of overwork **Coda**

42 And after that I stopped going everyday to my in-laws
 43 because my husband said "this is ridiculous"

Source: Riessman, C. K. (2000a). "Even if we don't have children [we] can live": Stigma and infertility in South India. In C. C. Mattingly & L. C. Garro (Eds.), *Narrative and cultural construction of illness and healing* (pp. 128–152). Berkeley: University of California Press. Reprinted with permission.

Note how in this version, Sunita's speech is organized into a series of thematic stanzas, or meaning units. Following Gee, I have given titles to each stanza (the thematic point), "cleaned" speech of disfluencies, and deleted my presence in the conversation. Some readers may find this written representation more accessible than the earlier version, while others will find it sorely incomplete because it excludes audience participation. The representation is compact and compelling, but it is also highly interpretive, carrying serious implications for how a reader will understand the narrative. Most obviously, it erases the entire process of co-construction and presents the narrative as if it arose, full blown, from within "the self" of the speaker.

The theme of overwork, however, does come sharply into focus. “Overworking” and “overdoing it” become codas that interrupt and comment on the unfolding sequences of action. The meaning of the final stanza—where Sunita gives a speaking role to her husband (“this is ridiculous”)—is contingent on overworking, which Sunita did because of his mother, she said earlier. Readers usually make causal links when one event follows another, and Transcript 2.2. suggests overwork (and, implicitly the mother-in-law) caused the miscarriage. The precise sequence that points to this outcome is more difficult to discern from Transcript 2.1, which generates other knowledge.

With this brief exercise, I have shown how two transcriptions of the “same” segment of an interview are deeply interpretive; each points readers (and narrative analysts) in a different direction. The first one (2.1) leads readers into the conversational context; it is an exchange between two women from different cultures about a major event in the life of one. Jointly, they produce a narrative about a miscarriage that might, for example, initiate inquiry into how women speak across difference about difficult reproductive experiences. The second representation (2.2) leads the reader/analyst into the experience of one woman—Sunita—caught in a web of a job, a new marriage, and the demands of a mother-in-law; she connects themes into a causal narrative about a miscarriage. I have used the second representation (together with other narrative accounts) to study thematically Indian women’s explanatory accounts of infertility—precisely how older women story themselves and their situations in ways that deflect blame and minimize stigma.³⁰ Each line of inquiry is productive; one does not necessarily lead to “better” analysis. Each can answer a research question and provide valid insights supported by textual evidence. In the first, we see how a complex narrative gets jointly produced in a storytelling context and, in the second, how a narrator structures her tale to shift responsibility for a reproductive failure. My simple point is that different theoretical assumptions about language, communication, and “the self” are embedded in each transcript.

Before moving to a later section of the interview with Sunita, some historical context is needed for the simple binary I set up earlier about “the self”—as constructed or reflected. The belief that a person could be known by examining her speech (excluding the interactional context that produced it) has a long history in the social sciences, exemplified in survey research, early Chicago School ethnography, and even some contemporary qualitative research. Case studies in the psychoanalytic literature, for the most part, also observe the custom of excluding the interviewer. Focus is on the patient/respondent/subject and underlying concepts contained in the talk. The practice continues in some grounded theory research and in the thematic narrative tradition displayed in Chapter 4. But with the “turn to language” in mid-twentieth century theory, a major shift began to take place in the

research practice of some narrative researchers. The local context had to be taken into consideration, including *who* is asking the questions, *how*, and *why*? Dialogic and visual analytic approaches extend this line of inquiry further, as Chapters 5 and 6 show).

Mishler argues that methodological shifts in transcription practices led to the theoretical discovery of the “dialogic” or narrativized self.³¹ If constructing the self is an ongoing project of daily living that happens through storytelling, attention moves away from “*who* I am” to questions of “*when, where, and how* I am.”³² In Mishler’s view, methodological innovation led to this theoretical revision. To be sure, the change happened alongside other shifts in theory: for example, how gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality to produce (and maintain) discursively constituted identities. All these developments challenge ideas about a unitary and stable self that is simply *reflected* in language. This is the implication when we present a narrative account and erase the interviewer’s role in producing it.

The two transcriptions open up issues that are often glossed in qualitative analysis. Investigators need to interrogate the decisions they make as they construct written representations of oral narrative. Transcripts contain invisible taken-for-granted theories of language and the “self.”

I turn now to an issue that Chapter 7 takes up in earnest—the “truths” of our interpretations of oral narrative, drawing again on my interview with Sunita. I noted earlier that the topic of blame for the miscarriage returned in full force as she and I were ending the interview. We had been talking for almost two hours about a range of topics (some initiated by her, others by me). I then asked a question on my interview schedule about the reaction of others to her childlessness. The conversation that unfolded is presented in Transcript 2.3—my attempt to constitute in written form a moving conversation among women about a miscarriage.

Transcript 2.3

01 C: And your husband’s family? (reaction to childlessness)

02 S: No, in fact I think uhh my mother-in-law (p) has felt (p) has
03 always felt guilty. (p) Because she was always felt that she has
04 been the cause of that miscarriage, you know. And because of
05 it she— it’s its its something—

06 C: Because of the travelling and the bringing all the food and
07 so on?

(Continued)

(Continued)

08 S: Yeah, yeah. She insisted that day. And she said it to the extent,
09 uhh, “I’ve had 5 children and I’ve done all this work and I’ve
10 carried all these things” and things like that. And uhh I was
11 told by my doctor that “you don’t—you are very anaemic, no,
12 you are not—you don’t do such stupid things.” And then
13 because she went on and on, and for that whole hour and a
14 half that I was at their place. (p) So finally I just dragged it
15 [food stuffs] towards the lift, to the elevator, just brought it
16 down towards the gate, you know.

17 [talks about security man who helped load a cab, elevator at
18 her flat not working]

19 So I just dragged it and—(p).

20 Now it may or may not be the reason

21 but (p) I think she feels- And that is why she has never ever
22 questioned me (p). Only (p) you know, 2 years—a year
23 ago when (p) her brother expired, youngest brother expired.

24 [talks about going to distant city on train with her mother-in-
25 law for ceremony, who stayed for 13 days, then returning to
26 pick her up because she is not in good health and brother’s
27 death was hard]

28 So I went to pick her up and that time uhh, after so many years,
29 she actually asked me that—you know, “I have never had the
30 courage to ask you,” but uhh, you know (p) “what has been
31 happening? I’m sure you’ve taken treatment and all
32 that, knowing you.”

33 [talks about how she has worked outside home with her
34 husband’s support, despite his family’s objections, and about their
35 early struggles to be financially independent from his family]

36 C: So your mother-in-law asked after all these years? How many
37 years was that?

38 S: Almost 20 years.

39 C: Twenty years later she asked!

40 S: She asked me uhh—18 years that means after the miscarriage—
41 she asked me—

42 C: She knew about your miscarriage?

43 S: Yeah, yeah, she came at that time and all that. Uhh but uhh and
44 she said it also like that, "I've never had the courage to ask you
45 uhh but 'What?' you know 'Why?'" So then I (p) told her that
46 "No, well since you've never asked me, that's why I never said
47 anything." But uhh I explained to her, you know, what we have
48 done and uhh, the treatment we have taken and everything and
49 it hasn't worked so we've left it at that. (p) And uh well, she also
50 left it at that (p) and she didn't say anything more.

51 C: And you said before you think she feels guilty. How do you—?

52 S: Because she said that, you know uhh (p) "How did it happen
53 that—" you know, "you had conceived so why couldn't you
54 conceive again" (p) and uhh, "it shouldn't have happened that
55 way" (p) and uh you know uhh, "I suppose this generation is
56 different from my generation" and things like that, you know.
57 It's round round thing [gestures]. And I tried to tell her "I
58 don't blame you," (p) you know. Since she went round and
59 round I also had to go round and round. But I tried to tell her
60 that "I don't blame you." Because I don't think you know—

61 C: But you think that you were both talking about that moment?

62 S: Yeah, we were both talking about that moment. Uhm and I'm
63 glad that we could talk about it, we were talking in the train
64 as we were coming back from [distant city]. [voice lowers] Just
65 the 2 of us.

66 C: (p) Those conversations are very important when they happen.

67 S: Yeah, they are very important, yeah. [Long pause and sigh]

A great deal could be said about the long segment, yet again I emphasize only a few elements, leaving it to readers to grapple with the many meanings suggested in the text (readings, of course, will vary with one's interpretive framework). First and thematically, the topic of blame become explicit—responsibility for the miscarriage. A changed (and enduring) relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law permits the topic to surface after eighteen years, albeit obliquely, on a long train ride after the death of a family member. Sunita indicates, through her choice of language, the conversational rules that both parties observed: they went "round and round" (lines 57–59),

circling questions about the cause of the miscarriage. Still the dutiful daughter, Sunita followed her mother-in-law's lead about how to conduct herself ("since she went round and round I also had to go round and round"), just as twenty years earlier she had followed her mother-in-law's directive to drag foodstuffs "that day." Generational tensions about a woman's place in modern India cannot be addressed directly in the conversation on the train. Instead, political and institutional issues remain private—cast as an interpersonal conflict between women.

Second, notice the interviewer/questioner's *very* active presence in the conversation; any transcript that excluded her would be false. I repeatedly encouraged Sunita to expand on her relationship with a central character in the earlier miscarriage story ("So your mother-in-law asked after *all* these years? . . . Twenty years later she asked! . . . She knew about your miscarriage? . . . And you said before she feels guilty . . ."). Without my curiosity about the place of the mother-in-law, Sunita probably would not have expanded the miscarriage story (lines 8–20) or developed a new story about a conversation on a train many years later with her mother-in-law about the miscarriage (lines 22–65). The transcript shows co-construction vividly at work; topics and meanings are negotiated in dialogue between teller and listener (and new meanings, in turn, can be produced in the dialogue between text and reader—a topic I take up in Chapter 5).

Third, the transcript opens up issues of emotion in interviews, and how to present them.³³ Although many years have passed, I vividly remember the moment in the conversation with Sunita. Looking at the written representation, I still sense the muted unspeakable emotions in the depiction of the conversation on the train between two women from different generations that went "round and round" (the narrated event). Emotions also hang in the interview conversation between two women from different cultures about the past conversation (the narrative event). I am reminded of Aristotle's wisdom and Cheryl Mattingly's comment: "Narratives do not merely refer to past experience but create experiences for their audiences."³⁴ Sunita's description of a conversation between two women on a train created an experience for me, the audience. Thinking back, I remember feeling some discomfort when, after a long sigh (mine, not hers, on line 67), I returned to the next question on my interview schedule. I had attempted after a long pause to provide a kind of "resolution" for the narrative in the comment ("those conversations are very important when they happen"). Perhaps I was recalling difficult conversations in my own family. But there was no resolution for the strong emotions that the narrative tries to contain.

About five minutes later, after I had gone on to ask about the reaction of Sunita's natal family to her childlessness (a topic she did not find too meaningful), she broke into tears. We simply sat together for many minutes.

No words were needed. All I could do was bear witness and be with her. All a transcript could do is note her sobbing (although narrative analysts, of course, could inquire about the power of the feelings and possible sources of her tears).

Finally, the transcript opens up questions about determining the boundaries of a narrative—an issue all investigators face. This is one of the many ways that we participate in the creation of narratives, rather than “finding” them in interviews. Looking at the transcripts as a group that I presented from the interview with Sunita, an investigator could compose boundaries in several ways. The texts could be treated as discrete stories; the first segment (2.2) about the miscarriage, for example, could be analyzed alongside miscarriage stories from other women. Or, the texts could be combined to form a case study composed of linked stories that explored a theoretical issue of general interest to narrative scholars. Or even further, the texts could form the basis for an exploration of a single life story or biographical study. Some narratives that develop in research interviews are clearly bounded, with clear beginnings and endings, almost like the boundaries of folktales (“once upon a time . . .” and “they lived happily ever after”). Most personal narratives, however, like most lives, are more complex. In these cases, there are no clear rules for determining boundaries, but the analytic decision is important, for it shapes interpretation and illustrates once again how we participate in the construction of the narrative that we analyze.

If I had presented only the first transcript (2.1), inference would be different than when all the segments are included. Is it the story of a miscarriage, or a broad tale of family conflict, especially mother/daughter-in-law relations in a changing India? Is it a story about “getting her to like me”? Is it ultimately a moral tale about blame and forgiveness?

As our long meeting was ending, Sunita and I agreed to stay in contact. I wrote her when I had a draft of a paper completed and asked for reactions.³⁵ (I was seeking two kinds of reaction: her agreement to let me use the long segments from the interview in a disguised version, or a second chance at informed consent, and her reactions to my interpretations of the stories.) I did not hear from Sunita for over a year, when she wrote (on her company’s letterhead) to apologize, explaining that she and her husband had moved to a larger flat, and my letter and draft had gotten buried in a box. She liked the paper, she wrote, and had no problems with my using her words. But, she wondered about my interpretation, because it was not how she thought about her life. I had developed the paper around my interest in infertility and its management in families. For Sunita, infertility was but a small part of her biography. She wrote about a recent job promotion and the many children in her life (neighbors’ and servants’ children whom she had mentioned repeatedly during our conversation), her husband’s work, and their worries about

aging parents. She was a “complete woman,” not a childless woman as I had described her in the paper.³⁶ In Chapter 7, I return to Sunita’s letter to interrogate different “truths” contained in our varying interpretations.

A Translated Conversation

Constructing a transcript from a translated interview involves difficult interpretive decisions. The conversation with Sunita occurred in English—a marker of her class advantage—but most women in the infertility study were interviewed in Malayalam, the local South Indian language. Interviews were translated later by Liza (my Malayalee assistant) who spoke both languages fluently, and who conducted most interviews; she introduced me alongside her as “Dr. Catherine.” How to represent narratives from these conversations? How to present the English spoken word and not lose the Indian conversational context?

Many investigators present transcripts of translated interviews, but the politics of translation are rarely acknowledged. Given hierarchies of language power, scholars from non-English speaking countries are pressured to publish in U.S. or U.K. journals. Even aside from cultural imperialism when English is considered the language of science, there are other issues. Authors, for example, typically erase translation problems, assuming questions about equivalence of meaning are irrelevant. Like transcription, translation is often treated as a technical task, assigned to assistants, although anthropologists have long known the folly of such decisions. They are expected to speak the language of the group they are studying and, if they hire translators, they work closely with them.³⁷

Bogusia Temple has brought the translator from behind the shadows for qualitative investigators not accustomed to thinking critically about the issues; she builds on work in feminist theory and literary studies about difference.³⁸ If meaning is constructed rather than expressed by language, “the relationships between languages and researchers, translators and the people they seek to represent are as crucial as issues of which word is best in a sentence in a language.”³⁹

To illustrate these complexities, I return to the infertility study, presenting narrative segments from an interview with Celine (a pseudonym), a Christian woman educated through the tenth grade, who was married to a Hindu fisherman. Twenty-six-years-old and married eight years, she had expected to conceive right after marriage but had not, and she was deeply sad. A visit to her village from “Dr. Catherine” may have carried hopes of a cure, despite the introduction that made explicit I was a sociologist studying childless women, not a gynecologist. Liza conducted the interview in Malayalam, translating periodically for me. It was difficult to find privacy in

the small house (neighbors and family members watched and listened), and when we found a separate room her sisters brought a tray of tea and sweets. Elsewhere, I explore ethical issues in the interview⁴⁰; here I focus primarily on relations between translation and interpretation.

Liza's initial transcript of the taped interview was literal—a “word for word” translation that was difficult for me to interpret. (She had, of course, already engaged in interpretation to find equivalent words in English for referential content—never easy in any translation.) We discussed her sense as a culture member of Celine's language, the equivalence in English of particular phrases, and the missing pronouns I noted in speech (characteristic of Malayalam).⁴¹ Our conversations led to a revised transcript; sections were revised again to achieve greater clarity in English after discussion about syntax with South India specialists in the United States. I won't belabor the point: the interview excerpts presented below have been transformed several times over.

In contrast to Sunita's experience, a conversation about infertility was extremely relevant to Celine's life situation. At twenty-six, childbearing was still expected of her; in her small village she could not selectively disclose her situation or “pass as normal”—strategies available to women (such as Sunita) living in some more Westernized contexts.⁴² It was common knowledge in her village, for example, that she cannot conceive, and (even though the fault may be her husband's) she was constantly reminded of her spoiled identity:⁴³ “Neighbors, they ridicule me. When I go out and all they call me ‘fool without a child,’ like that.” As I worked interpretively with the translated interview and several others where managing a stigmatized identity was a central theme, I developed a new research question: what do women's stories reveal about how they contest stigma in words and action?

Transcript 2.4

Story 1

- 01 Liza: Has being childless affected your married life?
- 02 Celine: (lowers voice almost to whisper)
- 03 Initially very much.
- 04 because of not having children
- 05 he has beaten me.

(Continued)

(Continued)

06 Liza: During the initial years, I see.

07 Celine: Since 5 years

08 when we started going to hospitals

09 and even then didn't have children.

10 Initially, for 6 months after marriage,

11 I stayed with my husband's family.

12 Then for them—

13 what they are saying is because I don't have children

14 I should be sent away.

15 My husband's father, mother and siblings

16 they won't talk to me and all that.

17 Since I don't have children, they asked him to leave me.

18 His father and mother said that he should again marry.

19 (lowers voice). After that I quarreled with them

20 am living in this house [her family's home].

21 Liza: How long have you been here?

22 Celine: After marriage I stayed there for only six months.

Story 2

01 CR: [in English] But now her husband is with her. Is that right?

02 Lisa: I'll ask her.

03 [in Malayalam] Is your husband here always?

04 Celine: Yes

05 Lisa: For the past 8 years?

06 Celine: When they scolded him

07 told him he should marry another girl

08 their son used to hurt me a lot at first

09 [unclear] now he won't abuse me

- 10 Lisa: So your husband is staying here always?
- 11 Celine: Yes, yes, he is staying here.
- 12 Lisa: He doesn't go to his house?
- 13 Celine: No.
- 14 Lisa: What is your husband's reaction about remarrying?
- 15 Celine: I told him
- 16 since we don't have children
- 17 "remarry"
- 18 then when he remarries he will get children.
- 19 Lisa: You said to your husband?
- 20 Celine: So that it won't be so hard for him,
- 21 he will get children when he remarries, Right?
- 22 So he asked me, "Will you stay like this?"
- 23 I told him, "Yes, it's no problem for me.
- 24 I'll stay here,
- 25 you marry again and I'll stay."
- 26 But then he doesn't leave.
- 27 Even if we don't have children, can live.
- 28 Lisa: [in English] She tells her husband that he should marry again.
So that he may have children, but he doesn't want to do that.

Source: Riessman, C. K. (2002). Positioning gender identity in narratives of infertility: South Indian women's lives in context. In M. C. Inhorn & F. van Balen (Eds.), *Infertility around the globe: New thinking on childlessness, gender, and reproductive technologies* (pp. 152-170). Berkeley: University of California Press. Reprinted with permission.

Buried in pages of translated interview transcript was a brief story (Story 1) where Celine relates that she was beaten by her husband and shunned by his parents when she didn't conceive after six months of marriage, and also included was an elaboration almost an hour later (Story 2). The stigma Celine faced because of infertility was the harshest and most punishing tale that Liza and I had encountered during the fieldwork. We were disturbed by the stories for different reasons (described below). I knew I had to present them, but

was not sure how to do it—translations of two stories, separated by many pages of transcript, that involved a conversation among three speakers (Celine, Liza, and me [CR]) communicating in different languages.

Transcript 2.4 displays the text I ultimately constructed, which is two linked stories⁴⁴—sparse (like the spoken version) and full of ambiguity. Because the materials were translated, readers and analysts can't interrogate particular words and other lexical choices (the meaning of a word is not always equivalent across languages). It is, however, possible to examine sequence, contexts in which topics appear, and participants' contributions to the evolving narrative. I have created structures to convey the sense I've made of the two stories by grouping lines into units on the page. As a kind of textual experimentation, I constructed poetic stanzas (groups of lines about a single topic) that make my reading of the organization of the brief stories clear for the reader.⁴⁵ The translated materials (which initially seemed daunting) opened up the text to shifting meanings.

Liza and I participated differently in the two stories, complicating the idea of co-construction: three speakers participating across two languages and several cultural divides. Looking first at Story 1, Liza begins with a question about whether childlessness had affected “married life,” and Celine positions the infertility in the context of her arranged marriage and the joint family. Although lines 4 and 5 could have become an abstract for a story to follow—about beatings because of infertility—the story does not get developed that way.

The topic of physical abuse does not surface again until Story 2 (an hour later). There are several ways to make sense of the shift. Perhaps because the topic was so unexpected, Liza backs away from the beatings and comments on their timing (“during the initial years”), which, in turn, prompts Celine to give a chronology of the initial years of the marriage and to end with her decisive action to leave the joint family. Embedded in the tight temporal sequence are several stanzas that recount the family's response to her. Liza does not respond specifically to the family drama that the stanzas describe, but instead responds after a coda to ask again about time (“How long have you been here?”). The construction of a story gets shaped in this small instance by audience. Liza mediates how the story begins and ends, how it gets located in time and place, and what themes get developed. In this co-constructed narrative, the audience permits certain facts to come to the fore and get included in the drama, while others remain outside—momentary visitors who leave the stage when they are not given a part. Celine's husband, for example, has no role after the beginning because Liza does not respond to him as a major character in the drama. Like all narrative interviewers, Liza tries to make sense of what she is hearing, and locating the events in time and space aids her meaning-making process.

Perhaps a story of wife abuse is more than Liza can hear. She is a twenty-six-year-old woman (the same age as Celine, but with a master's degree) whose own marriage is about to be arranged. Liza asks about the marriage and, in this context, Celine and Liza collaborate to develop a theme salient to both of them—the evolution of an arranged marriage from inauspicious beginnings.⁴⁶ The ensuing story they craft presupposes shared cultural knowledge about gender and generational hierarchies in South India.

Returning to what researchers can and cannot do with translated texts, note that I have included in Transcript 2.4 certain performance features that intensify the narrative event (the present conversation about past events). Celine alters markedly the volume of her voice at two key places in Story 1: as she opens the story and as she moved to close it (lines 2 and 19). Lowering her voice almost to a whisper signals meaning and importance, as these are unspeakable events, unknown perhaps to her family in the next room. Given the privacy of the setting and the many topics that have been touched on in the hour interview, she decides to reveal the abuse and her actions against it—between women. Talk about family problems to strangers is not customary in India. Speaking out to Liza and me challenges social conventions, just as Celine's "quarrel" with her in-laws, and departure from their home, defied conventions in the Indian joint family.

Shortly after Story 1, our interview was interrupted by Celine's sister, who brought us tea and snacks, and then by Rajiv (Celine's husband). He came into the room to tell Celine he was going out and when he would be back. I watched their solicitous interaction. After he left, we ate food the family provided as people wandered into the room and asked more questions of Liza (Since she was twenty-six, why isn't she married?) and of me (Why did Madam come to India? Had she diagnosed Celine's problem yet?). We answered all questions, and I said again I was not a gynecologist.⁴⁷ While we had tea, Liza used the break from the formal interview to inquire about how the marriage was arranged, given religious differences between the families, which was a topic of obvious personal interest (she, like Celine, is Christian). She learned (and told me later) the marriage was held in Celine's village, "since they [his family] are Hindus." After she moved to their village, religious harassment began. They would not let her go to church and pressured her to attend their temple, which she refused to do. Meanwhile, her family had difficulty amassing the dowry promised, so they gave property instead of gold. Liza listened intently to Celine's descriptions and, as the tea things were collected, moved to complete the formal interview. She quickly summarized the preceding conversation for me ("She had a problem with not giving adequate dowry. After six months she's come back and stayed here.")

I was puzzled about the husband's place in the narrated events, specifically his reaction to his parents' directive to abandon Celine and marry

again. Contradictions in Story 1 further puzzled me, for instance, he beat Celine but accompanied her after she quarreled with his family. His behavior to her during our visit was kind and attentive. (Earlier, I had asked Liza to clarify the structure of the household, and found that the couple was living permanently with her family, not his as is more common, and Celine refused to visit her in-laws.) I now sensed something further, and very unusual for a South Indian family; he is distant from his natal family and allied with his wife. My puzzlement stimulated a question-and-answer exchange, and then Story 2, linked to and expanding Story 1.

The narrated events in the second story raise questions about meanings in the first story—interpretive issues that arose with Sunita’s narrative as well. Some uncertainties regarding Celine’s situation are resolved in Story 2, but others remain. It is clear that Rajiv has distanced himself from his parents physically, and from their “scolding.” Related to this, perhaps, he has stopped beating Celine.⁴⁸ But why does he resist her urging to remarry (lines 14–27)? I leave it to readers to work further with the stories, bearing in mind Temple’s cautions: there are “constraints placed on the reading of a text by the need to make sense of it on its own terms, and thus while there may be many versions of the ‘truth’ of a text, each must be made possible by something within the text, by its logic, syntax and structuring resources.”⁴⁹

Returning to transcription practices, notice in Story 2 how I chose to represent the three participants in a “trialogue” consisting of a narrator (Celine), translator (Liza), and investigator/interpreter (CR), who, working together as narrator and audience, shape the performance of the story, including the events, plot, and characters allowed onstage. Rajiv, a shadow figure in the first story, returns as a central character in the second, prompted by audience puzzlement⁵⁰ and my explicit instruction to Liza to inquire about him. Similarly, Rajiv’s response to his parents’ directive to remarry (central to the plot of the first story, and introduced again in the second) is resolved because Liza explicitly asks about it (line 14). Whatever a reader might think about remarriage as a “solution” to infertility, Celine voices the recommendation here, not her in-law’s to get rid of her. Is she taking back some power?

Yet, Rajiv does not leave. Many ambiguities remain, particularly in the last line made more so by translation: “Even if we don’t have children, can live.” I have presented the line exactly as translated, and a key pronoun is missing (not uncommon in Malayalam). Celine’s wording in the final clause suggests two possibilities, “I can live” or “we can live”—statements that carry very different meanings. In relation to this, it is not clear who is speaking the last line of the story. Is remaining childless (the solution suggested) voiced by Celine or Rajiv? If it is her line, she is again challenging stigma and social convention, implying that life is possible even for a South Indian village woman

who does not have children. If it is his line, the message carries other meanings, one being that perhaps he views their life together as important, even without progeny. He is willing to face stigma himself by permanently remaining with a wife who cannot conceive. Elsewhere, I bring observational data to bear—a tender interchange I witnessed between Rajiv and Celine—to suggest another provisional reading related to their their loving sexual relationship.⁵¹ As in all stories, there are ambiguities and relative indeterminacies. The texts are sparse, there are gaps leaving considerable room for reader response. I eventually combined Celine's account with those of other women speaking about stigma to generate a theoretical framework about childless women's resistance practices in India to challenge stereotypes about women's victimization. Celine was certainly victimized, but she fought against it by leaving the joint family where she had become an object of scorn. Her marriage was surviving childlessness, an outcome I witnessed with others in the sample (including Sunita).

Liza was upset by the interview with Celine. As we were walking away from the house afterward, she said it was “the saddest case she had heard so far,” and in her translation of the interview, and our discussion of it, she repeatedly returned to the “abuse”—her word. In our many discussions about this and other interviews (and related conversations about women's position in a changing India), she often recalled the “sad case.” Her reading of the narrative differs from mine, a consequence no doubt of our contrasting positions, biographies, nationalities, and gender ideologies. Any text an investigator creates is “plurivocal, open to several readings and to several constructions.”⁵²

I have presented some of the difficulties of working with translated narratives, hoping to stimulate future investigators to bring the translator from behind the shadows. Investigators can include themselves and the translators as active participants in knowledge production. As Temple and Young write, the text any investigator constructs is “the researcher's view of what the translator has produced rather than any attempt to show that she knows their ‘actual’ meaning.”⁵³ Multiple readings are potential in all narrative research, and the problem becomes highly visible when investigators work with narratives in another language and those that appear “strange” in other ways. Translation can open up ambiguities that get hidden in “same-language” texts. When we have a common language with our informants, we tend to easily assume that we know what they are saying, and alternative readings tend to get obscured, or even ignored, because of the methodological and theoretical assumptions we bring to our work. Temple summarizes key points:

The use of translators and interpreters is not merely a technical matter that has little bearing on the outcome. It is of epistemological consequence as it influences

what is “found.” Translators are active in the process of constructing accounts and an examination of their intellectual [and personal] autobiographies, that is, an analytic engagement with how they come to know what to do, is an important component in understanding the nature and status of the findings. When the translator and the researcher are different people the process of knowledge construction involves another layer.⁵⁴

Conclusion

By our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major part in constituting the narrative data that we then analyze. Through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell. The process of infiltration continues with transcription, for language is not a “perfectly transparent medium of representation.”⁵⁵ Mishler⁵⁶ makes the analogy between a transcript and a photograph, which seemingly “pictures reality.” Yet the technology of lenses, films, printing papers, and darkroom practices (even before the digital age) has made possible an extraordinary diversity of possible images of the same object. An image reflects the artist’s views and conceptions—values about what is important. Photographers, like interviewers, transcribers, and translators, fix the essence of a figure. I return to these issues in Chapter 6 and discuss how visual narrative analysts have dealt with them.

Transcribing discourse, like photography, is an interpretive practice. Representing “what happened” in an interview is a “fixation” of action⁵⁷ into written form. Transcriptions are by definition incomplete, partial, and selective—constructed by an investigator (who may or not also be the transcriber). Each transcript prepared is “a partial representation of speech . . . a transformation . . . each includes some and excludes other features of speech and rearranges the flow . . . into lines of text within the limits of a page.”⁵⁸ Decisions about how to display speech reflect theoretical commitments (and practical constraints); they are not simply technical decisions. By displaying text in particular ways and by making decisions about the boundaries of narrative segments, we provide grounds for our arguments, just as a photographer guides the viewer’s eye with lenses and cropping. Different transcription conventions lead to and support different interpretations and theoretical positions, and they ultimately create different narratives. Meaning is constituted in very different ways with alternative transcriptions of the same stretch of talk.⁵⁹

I turn in the next four chapters to specific forms of analysis. Readers will see investigators constructing transcripts that represent speech in ways that suit their particular theoretical aims, including the interviewer/questioner to

varying degrees. The four approaches to narrative analysis are broad groupings with boundaries that are not always distinct, for they often overlap and blur. Within each chapter, I present candidate exemplars (sometimes it is my own work, more often it is the research of others) that serve as models of the approach, electing to write about method by focusing on how different investigators actually carried out analytic work. Exemplars illustrate the general pattern and the diversity within each approach. I hope the candidate exemplars inspire students to formulate their own projects, and determine the kind of analysis that suits their questions.

