

Multiparty Talk in the Novel: The Distribution of Tea and Talk in a Scene from Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*

Bronwen E. Thomas

Linguistics and Literature, Bournemouth University

Abstract This article argues that studies of fictional dialogue have hitherto neglected the specific dynamics of multiparty talk. I will contend that this neglect contributes to the perpetuation of an “ideal” of conversation that allows no space for either the frustrations and inequalities of such encounters or the unique pleasures they may bring to the reader. I urge the importance of distinguishing between group talk, in which there is some element of cohesion and shared goals, and multiparty talk, in which the representation foregrounds fragmentation and explores the often subtle power games played by the participants. Focusing on a scene from Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* (1986 [1932]), I argue that Waugh is sensitive to the dynamics of multiparty talk while orchestrating the representation for comic effect. I propose that analyzing such scenes of multiparty talk must make us reassess not only how we theorize fictional dialogue, but how far our models of everyday speech serve to privilege and universalize certain conversational practices and mechanisms based almost exclusively on the duologue.

Multiparty Talk: Some Preliminaries

The study of literary representations of speech has been largely preoccupied with what Andrew Kennedy (1983) has called the “duologue of personal encounter.” This has meant that little attention has been given to

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the specific challenges and techniques involved in attempting to represent groups of people interacting with one another. Where such scenes are discussed at all, literary critics have tended to make do with general comments about their effectiveness or their realism. For example, in his study of Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Stopp (1958: 181) makes the claim that group talk is Waugh's forte but offers no analysis or even examples of the technique. As we shall see, some insights have been offered by stylisticians concerned to examine the ways in which novelists experiment with the dynamics of group talk. But the tendency has been to evaluate the naturalism of the depiction rather than explore the wider implications of such scenes for our understanding of the representation of speech in the novel. Instead of subsuming all forms of talk under the generalized categories of "direct speech" or "dialogue" in this way, we need to examine how far the privileging of certain organizational and polite norms, almost exclusively based on the duologue, comes to make them seem inevitable and "natural."

It has to be allowed that duologues are much more common in the novel than representations of speech involving three or more parties. This is especially true of direct forms of representation, where narrative framing, for example speech tags, is at a minimum. With the duologue, as long as speakers are identified at the outset, we can usually work out who is saying what by the sequencing of the utterances, but with multiparty talk, this is much more difficult and can result in confusion. However, my research (Thomas 1995) has shown that the comic novel of the 1920s and 1930s provides a rich source of experimentation with multiparty talk, perhaps because the reader is more prepared to put up with seeming chaos and confusion, since so much of the humor derives from misunderstandings. Another reason is that we may be more concerned with the characters as an ensemble, rather than empathizing with specific individuals, and are prepared to laugh at everyone in turn. In particular, I will be arguing that Evelyn Waugh goes some way toward capturing the complex dynamics of multiparty talk but also displays considerable artistry in the way in which he shapes and molds that talk to comic effect.

Another reason for the concentration on "duologues of personal encounter" is that they may appear to be more fruitful sources of highly charged and intense interactions, especially where the focus is on a verbal duel or on the dynamics of an interpersonal relationship. As I shall argue later, it is possible for scenes of group interaction to offer a similar kind of intensity, for example, where participants debate with one another in a cohesive exchange. However, I will use the term *multiparty talk* (in preference to group talk) to allow for the sense of fragmentation and chaos that

such representations may provide.¹ With multiparty talk, the attention of the reader may shift from person to person, so that the movement is more spatial than linear, as we wander among topics and speakers rather than follow a specific thread of talk toward some kind of goal or outcome. In her study of dramatic dialogue, Vimala Herman (1995: 150) found that this has implications for our understanding not just of literary dialogue but of everyday conversation, as we need to allow for the possibility that “interactions need not develop into anything. They need not have a linear, developmental path, a teleology, or result in outcomes of any kind.”² Thus it seems that focusing on multiparty talk necessarily involves reevaluating much that we have come to take for granted about orderliness and cooperation in conversation.³

In order to begin this reevaluation, we need to examine further what distinguishes multiparty talk from the duologue. In his study of rituals in everyday interaction, Erving Goffman (1967: 131) offers some insights into the differences between the two and notes how multiparty talk may provide participants with a kind of cover or shield: “Participants . . . in large-scale interaction can have a license in regard to involvement that could not be afforded them in two- or three-person talk, perhaps because the more participants there are to sustain the proceedings, the less dependent the occasion will be on any one participant.” In this article I will be drawing on the work of linguists and ethnographers of communication in order to explore how far literary representations of multiparty talk capture the complex dynamics of this form of talk and shift the focus of attention from the individual to the group or ensemble. The merits and limitations of employing such models for the analysis of fictional dialogue have been debated elsewhere (for example, Toolan 1989). I hope to show that focusing on a scene of multi-

1. I use the term *multiparty talk* in an attempt to capture the sense that talk may be fragmentary, faltering, and made up of parties who may have radically different views not only of what they are discussing but also of the very form in which ideas and views are to be exchanged. In this regard, I draw upon the way in which the term has been used in the recent politics of Northern Ireland, as a means of providing an alternative to the impression of collaboration and consensus implicit in the notion of dialogue in the political arena.

2. Vimala Herman (1995: 111–12) offers some interesting insights into multiparty talk in her discussion of the play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill. Churchill’s use of overlapping speech in the first act of the play creates the effect of a “babble of voices,” in which participants display both competitive and collaborative traits. In the theater, the effect of this “babble” may be much more immediate and intense for the audience. But the physical presence of the actors also means that the audience has at least some visual and aural focus for the different voices.

3. One of the cornerstones of modern pragmatic theory, Grice’s Co-operative Principle (1975 [1963]: 45), assumes that participants in conversation have “a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.” Toolan (1985: 205), among others, has argued that it is also important to take into account the ways in which participants in conversation may adopt antagonistic, submissive, directive, or other principles.

party talk will expose some of the limitations in previous studies of fictional dialogue and may, in turn, prompt us to reevaluate some of the assumptions about conversational interaction (for example, that participants get an equal hearing) that underlie the theories and models we apply.

Discourse analysis has provided a framework for the analysis of scenes of multiparty talk wherein the roles of participants are clearly demarcated and one character figures as a moderator or “chair” for the talk. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short (1981: 304–5) analyze one such scene from Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* involving a therapy session run by the formidable Nurse Duckett. Drawing on the work of discourse analysts on doctor/patient, teacher/pupil interactions, Leech and Short argue that the scene represents a hybrid of these kinds of talk and explore the ways in which the “normal” rules of operation for these discourses are subverted to ensure the maximum humiliation for the patients. This becomes evident when they analyze the turn-taking mechanisms in the scene and focus on the characters’ speech acts, in particular the ways in which Nurse Duckett dominates the conversational floor by using questions that function in this context as threats. The analysis offers an interesting example of the insights linguistic models may offer into the management of multiparty talk and how seemingly formal situations may mask a struggle for control among the participants. However, little is said about the role of the narrator in orienting the reader, and there is insufficient exploration of those features that distinguish the talk in this scene from other kinds of “conversation” in the novel, especially the “duologue of personal encounter.”

In a more extended analysis of a group interaction from James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Michael Toolan (1989) also draws on the work of discourse and conversational analysts. Toolan focuses on the Christmas dinner scene, with its three main contributors and three virtually silent onlookers, one of whom is the main focalizer, Stephen Dedalus, as a young boy. Toolan demonstrates how the distribution of turns in the scene reflects the growing tension among those present and how this tension is enacted not only in *what* the characters say but in *how, when, and where* they say it. One of the more fascinating aspects of Toolan’s analysis is his argument that “topic suppression” is an important structuring element in the talk, as participants work to steer the conversation away from contentious matters and display a sensitivity to those present, especially the young Stephen. This demonstrates the importance, when interpreting scenes of multiparty talk, of considering the roles played by *all* those present, including those who may remain silent but whose presence nevertheless has an influence on the direction and management of the talk.

Toolan also analyzes the ways in which the characters' utterances display "recipient design," defined by conversational analysts as talk that is "constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants" (Sacks et al. 1978: 43). But Toolan (1989: 207) shows how this "sensitivity," far from always being reflective of harmony or mutual respect, may be "skilfully harnessed to antagonistic, anti-collaborative purposes." In the scene from Joyce, this is most evident where participants match one another's language during the course of the debate, so that the aggression of the utterances increases incrementally.

Toolan's analysis demonstrates the importance of exploring dialogue as *interaction* and of considering utterances in sequences rather than in isolation. It also highlights how, in group situations, participants often match their contributions both in terms of the linguistic tokens used and in terms of the management of the talk, for example, the length of turns. However, although Toolan does recognize the role Joyce's narrator plays in orchestrating the utterances, he does not analyze in any depth how far these interventions influence our interpretation of the talk. Similarly, while changes of tempo and tone in the scene are noted, there is insufficient discussion of how this is carefully crafted by the narrator through the reporting of silences and pauses and descriptions of the verbal and nonverbal responses of those present. The danger is, therefore, that the dialogue is approached as naturalistic and the complexities of the interface between the dialogue and the framing work of the narrator are overlooked. Furthermore, the impression created is of the scene existing in isolation, as very little reference is made to what precedes or follows it.

Moreover, the scenes of multiparty talk analyzed by Toolan and by Leech and Short are relatively orderly and coherent. The application of terms and models derived from conversation analysis proves more problematic when it comes to scenes where the talk is sporadic or fragmentary. According to the conversational analysts' "formal apparatus" (Sacks et al. 1978: 10) for turn-taking in conversation, "overwhelmingly" one party talks at a time, and transitions between turns are orderly and smooth. In addition, it is assumed that multiparty talk will become subject to "schism" (ibid.: 24), breaking up into duologues or three-way conversations. The term *schism* is itself suggestive of an absolute and irrevocable break, but in multiparty talk, the alliances formed, and the topics pursued, may be much more temporary than this seems to allow. Thus, it is important to consider the extent to which the models we employ may be loaded toward a particular view of what conversation is and should be.

In this regard, one of the challenges for any theorist of conversation is

maintaining the balance between formulating the rules necessary for its operation and remaining sensitive to the ways in which participants improvise and display creativity in their talk. For example, Goffman (1967: 40) has noted that, “when a set of persons are on familiar terms and feel that they need not stand on ceremony with one another, then inattentiveness and interruptions are likely to become rife and talk may degenerate into a happy babble of disorganised sound.” Thus, while he recognizes the exhilaration that can come from engaging in multiparty talk (“happy babble”), Goffman as a theorist seems frustrated by its messiness, rueing the fact that the talk may “degenerate” in this way. One of the reasons for this frustration is that models developed from data taken primarily from dyadic conversations are often applied automatically, without any allowance for the specific dynamics of multiparty talk.

It is important, therefore, that we continue to refine and redefine the terms and categories that we employ, especially those of speaker and hearer. As Goffman (1981: 9) has allowed, we need to distinguish between participants who are “ratified” to take part in the interaction and those who are not, especially in multiparty talk, where the role of silent onlookers may be important. Herbert H. Clark (1992) analyzes further the role of the hearer in conversation and demonstrates how important it is to acknowledge the role played by overhearers, who are not necessarily the intended addressees or expected to “take part” but who may nevertheless have some influence over the direction of the talk. In addition, Clark argues that it may not always be the speaker’s aim to get the addressee to recognize his or her intentions, as the purpose may be to conceal rather than reveal those intentions. When analyzing fictional representations of multiparty talk where we have to rely solely on the utterances of the characters to deduce their intentions, it is important to explore how those intentions emerge from the talk and are modified by the responses of others and to remember that the verbal contributions of the characters may not necessarily be a mirror to their underlying intentions. Additionally, it is important to examine who the recipients of the talk may be, as opposed to who the speaker may have intended to address, and to consider the role that those who are silent or on the sidelines may play in influencing the ongoing talk.

Another aspect of theories of conversation that has been subject to some reexamination is the concept of the conversational “floor.” Most notably, Carole Edelsky (1993 [1981]: 201) has argued that “one-at-a-time is . . . not a conversational universal, nor is it essential for the communication of messages” and puts forward an alternative to this “universal” whereby the floor is a “free for all.” As Edelsky (*ibid.*: 195) points out, the problem is that the act of transcription itself is “inhospitable” when it comes to the free-for-

all, as it is difficult to convey in linear form the simultaneity of overlapping speech. What this means is that the concept of “floor” is limited by the very methods and tools the analysts employ.

These difficulties are clearly pertinent to fictional representations, especially those that try to capture the quality of the free-for-all. Techniques developed for indicating interruptions or overlaps, such as dashes or brackets, often appear clumsy, and so the tendency has been to rely on indirect speech or a narrative report. But this means that a particular idea of talk has come to dominate at the expense of others. What has been sidelined or overlooked is part of our everyday experience of simply being in the midst of talk—what Andrew Kennedy (1983: 3) calls “a flexible state of being-with-others through speech”—or of being marginalized, talked over or overcome by the sheer volume of others.

Edelsky (1993 [1981]: 198) chooses the analogy of the fugue to suggest how we might begin to account for conversational floors where a variety of different voices collide. A fugue is defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as a “polyphonic composition in which [a] short melodic theme (‘subject’) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts.” The idea of the fugue is important in indicating the ways in which participants match their utterances, often unconsciously, in terms of rhythm, length, or intonation, so that, below any surface appearance of conflict or tension, there may be some degree of mutual orientation. However, it is also important to examine how far the “interweaving” is harmonious and melodious and to consider, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has done, the ways in which the concept of polyphony allows for an unfinished dialogue, in which no party has the final word.

What happens when a novelist chooses to immerse the reader in a scene of multiparty talk, and how far may such scenes be described as polyphonic in Bakhtin’s terms? I will be arguing that this kind of representation can offer the reader fascinating insights into the dynamics of the group and a heightened sensitivity to the management and patterning of the talk by both the participants themselves and the narrator.

My other concern is to show how the very forms of representing speech in literature carry ideological meanings. Cultural histories of conversation (Burke 1993; Davis 1987) have shown that literary representations do not just reflect contemporary practices or norms but in fact help create and determine those norms.⁴ Thus, while it may be rewarding to employ terms and

4. Vimala Herman (1995: 124) argues that the role and place of dialogue as an element of drama has changed over time. In Renaissance drama, she claims, the emphasis is on dialogue as the expression of will or the disclosure of personality, whereas in modern drama dialogue is more likely to be employed to convey the inarticulacy and alienation of the characters.

models derived from linguistics for the analysis of literary dialogues, it is also important to remember that these dialogues in turn force us “to reflect on our canons for conversational coherence” (Herman 1994: 219).

Seeking to turn us into “resisting” readers, Lennard Davis (1987) focuses on conversation in the novel as an area where the work of ideology is at its most insidious. He claims (*ibid.*: 179) that “dialogues in novels are controlled, manageable units, lacking the wild card nature of conversations in which there is no overall plan or design” and that over time this perpetuates a certain idea of what a “dialogue” should be and how participants should conduct themselves. Davis also contends that literary dialogues privilege the individual and relegate the voice of community to a controlled representation in the form of indirect reports of rumor, gossip, and the like. One of the effects of this has been that “novel reading . . . can offer the reader, as silent conversationalist, the illusion of a social relation without the attendant anxiety and responsibility of that relation” (*ibid.*: 180). What I wish to consider in my analysis is whether, in representing multiparty talk, novelists may choose to confront the reader with these anxieties and responsibilities, rather than offer “protection” from them, so that the reader has to take a full and active role in trying to negotiate the seeming chaos.

Before doing so, however, it is important to try to identify different types of multiparty talk within the novel.⁵ Perhaps the most common variant represents the kind of cohesive group encounter described by Goffman (1981: 70–71), where “individuals come together and sustain matters having a ratified, joint, current and running claim upon attention, a claim which lodges them together in some sort of intersubjective, mental world.” Whether this ideal is often achieved in everyday conversation is questionable, as the attention of participants is liable to wander, and participants are also likely to pursue their own individual agendas. This variant of multiparty talk is typified by the social gathering, where contributions appear to dovetail neatly with one another even if the participants are disagreeing vociferously, as in the example from Toolan discussed earlier. The sense of cohesion here is often dependent on the interventions of the narrator, identifying speakers, glossing their contributions, and indirectly reporting any disruptions to the smooth running of the talk, such as interruptions or overlaps. It is this form of representation that contributes most to the perpetuation of an “ideal” of

5. The sense of a “group” may be one that is created solely by the intervention of the narrator, who places together utterances from different sources to give the impression of different views on a particular topic or event. For example, prior to Basil’s departure for Azania in Evelyn Waugh’s *Black Mischief* (1986 [1932]: 65–66), the narrator offers us snippets of the reactions of Londoners to news from the region, ranging from total lack of interest to mild curiosity, in order to satirize their insularity and arrogance (“Only niggers”).

conversation, because any sense of disruption to that ideal is minimized or relegated to the background.

However, the variant of multiparty talk with which I am primarily concerned involves scenes of seemingly chaotic or fragmentary talk, so that the immediate effect on the reader is one of bemusement or confusion. The novelist Ronald Firbank perfected this technique and coined the term “babel of voices” to refer to his attempts to re-create for the reader the sense of overhearing tantalizing fragments of other people’s conversations.⁶ Some of these fragments may relate to the plots of the novels, but often we are left perplexed both about the meaning of the utterances and about their sources and recipients. In the fictional worlds created by Firbank, though, this confusion is an inevitable consequence of the game of eavesdropping that proves so compelling. His characters rarely offer their undivided attention to any one topic but listen in on other people’s conversations and break off without warning to start new conversations when they get bored. While in other contexts this kind of behavior would be deemed unacceptably rude, in Firbank’s novels, the characters appear free from such social and moral restraints because they are so preoccupied with the superficial and the trivial.

Evelyn Waugh (1977 [1929]) was the first of many critics to draw an analogy with film in an attempt to account for Firbank’s innovations (see also Merritt 1969). The “babel of voices” technique may be compared to scenes in film where the camera dips in and out of various conversations without dwelling long on any one conversation or where the characters’ talk provides a kind of background babble. Firbank is able to produce some startling effects in his experimentation with this technique but always runs the risk of alienating the reader, who might still cling to the expectation that some kind of focus or meaning will emerge.

In his 1929 article on Firbank, the young Evelyn Waugh praised him for showing that dialogue need not just be about the exchange of opinion, as in the often stilted novel of conversation. Waugh acknowledges his debt to Firbank in the article and often draws on the technique of the babel in his comic novels. Firbank’s influence on Waugh’s writing has been recognized by many critics, but rarely do they consider Waugh’s refinement of

6. Ronald Firbank (1886–1926) has enjoyed a cult following as a writer of camp fiction. The term “Firbankian” has even been coined to refer to his distinctive style and humor, and his experimentation with narrative form and especially dialogue has been compared to that of the modernists. In her “critical biography” of Firbank, Brophy (1973: 433) argues that the novel *Vainglory* (1915) gives literary expression to the musical form of the fugue. *Vainglory* also contains one of the most interesting examples of the “babel of voices,” in the scene where the people of Ashringford gather for the unveiling of Mrs. Shamefoot’s memorial window (chap. 22), analyzed in Thomas 1995: 60–72.

Firbank's techniques. In Waugh's novels, I will argue, the seeming triviality and inconsequentiality of the talk often masks the power games being played by the characters and their strategic pursuit of their own hidden agendas. Furthermore, to the sense of confusion and chaos Waugh adds stylized forms of patterning to make his scenes highly wrought self-contained wholes.

This stylization has often been taken as indicative of the distance existing between Waugh's narrator and the fictional world the narrator represents. Comparing Waugh's technique to Firbank's, Humphrey Carpenter (1990: 234) maintains that, whereas in Firbank "it is the reader who feels excluded" because the narrator and the characters share the jokes, in Waugh's novels the assumption is that it is only the narrator—or the narrator and a handful of others—who has a sense of humor. To a degree, Waugh may be said to satirize his characters, as the idle chatter and sheer noise they create are represented as symptomatic of the fragmentation and emptiness at the heart of modern life.⁷ Indeed, in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), the central character is pushed to the brink of madness as he is bombarded by disembodied voices. However, in the early novels, Waugh, like Firbank, does not merely hold up the "vapid and interminable chatter" (Waugh 1977 [1929]) of his characters for ridicule; he also shows how it is possible to turn it into art. Moreover, Waugh's narrator is sensitive to the ways in which multiparty talk may be a profoundly uncomfortable, frustrating experience for some of his characters, while others are able to discover their own identities only under the guise of trivial or inconsequential talk. In Waugh's novels, therefore, we are invited both to celebrate the creativity and invention of the characters' talk and to recognize that, for some, the party masks conceal their insecurities.

Black Mischief

As was said earlier, despite Stopp's (1958) claim that group talk is Waugh's forte, this aspect of his technique has received little analysis. But as I shall argue, such scenes are crucial to understanding the complexity of Waugh's humor and how he is able to combine satire at the expense of his characters with celebration of their absurdities, so that far from simply condemning their foibles and excesses, we are immersed in their worlds. The analysis will focus on a scene from *Black Mischief*, first published in 1932. The novel is set in the fictional kingdom of Azania (based on Waugh's experiences in Abyss-

7. In his study of Waugh, McCartney (1987: 155) has argued that noise is always associated with barbarism but allows for the fact that Waugh is also fascinated by the energy and "confused roaring" of his characters.

sinia), as the country lurches from one upheaval to another. The novel has primarily been read as a grim satire on Western ideals of Progress (Greenblatt 1965) and on the futility of the West's attempts to "civilise" the savages (Stopp 1958). As in so many of his novels, Waugh exposes the fragility of the binary opposition between barbarism and civilization and shows how, once the trappings of civilization are removed, people resort to the most atavistic behavior. The novel provoked much controversy and was denounced in the Catholic press as morally degenerate, primarily for its portrayal of casual sex and for the scene where one of the central characters, Basil Seal, unwittingly partakes in a cannibalistic feast, at which his girlfriend Prudence is eaten.⁸ But the barbarism can also take more subtle forms, extending even to the most seemingly genteel of conversational encounters. This is the case in the scene to be analyzed (from Waugh 1986 [1932]: 55–57):

The Legges and the Anstruthers came across to tea: cucumber sandwiches, gentleman's relish, hot scones and seed-cake.

"How's Betty after her fall?" (1)

"Rather shaken, poor mite. Arthur wants her to start riding again as soon as she can. He's afraid she may lose her nerve permanently." (2)

"But not on Majesty." (3)

"No, we hope Percy will lend her Jumbo for a bit. She can't really manage Majesty yet, you know." (4)

"More tea, Bishop? How is everyone at the Mission?" (5)

"Oh dear, how bare the garden is looking. It really is heart-breaking. This is just the time it should be at its best. But all the antirrhinums are in the bag, heaven know where." (6)

"This war is too exasperating. I've been expecting the wool for baby's jacket for six weeks. I can't get on with it at all and there are only the sleeves to finish. Do you think it would look too absurd if I put in the sleeves in another colour?" (7)

"It might look rather sweet." (8)

"More tea, Bishop? I want to hear *all* about the infant school some time." (9)

"I've found the cipher book, sir." (10)

"Good boy, where was it?" (11)

"In my collar drawer. I'd been decoding some telegrams in bed last week." (12)

"Splendid. It doesn't matter as long as it's safe, but you know how particular the F.O. are about things like that." (13)

8. *The Tablet* (7 January 1933: 10; quoted in Stannard 1986: 336) pronounced that "his latest novel would be a disgrace to anybody professing the Catholic name," leading to an exchange of letters in which Waugh's irony was once again totally misunderstood.

“Poor Monsieur Ballon. He’s been trying to get an aeroplane from Algiers.”
(14)

“Mrs Schonbaum told me that the reason we’re all so short of supplies is that the French Legation have been buying up everything and storing it in their cellars.”
(15)

“I wonder if they’d like to buy my marmalade. It’s been rather a failure this year.”
(16)

“More tea, Bishop? I want to talk to you some time about David’s confirmation. He’s getting such an independent mind, I’m sometimes quite frightened by what he’ll say next.” (17)

“I wonder if you know anything about this cable. I can’t make head or tail of it. It isn’t in any of the usual codes: *Kt to QR₃CH*.” (18)

“Yes, they’re all right. It’s a move in a chess game Percy’s playing with Babbit at the F.O. He was wondering what had become of it.” (19)

“Poor Mrs Walsh. Looking quite done up. I’m sure the altitude isn’t good for her.” (20)

“I’m sure Uppingham is just the place for David.” (21)

“More tea, Bishop? I’m sure you must be tired after your ride.” (22)

The scene centers on a tea party organized by the British Legation, which at first seems to represent a highly civilized encounter: the talk is as ritualized and as conventional as the fare (cucumber sandwiches, gentleman’s relish). But, as I shall argue, the surface harmony of the talk and its seeming triviality mask the petty antagonisms and brewing discontent among at least some of the participants. In addition, at least one member of the party appears to be excluded from the talk. Accordingly, while novelistic dialogue may seem to provide us with a “display of education and civilization” (Davis 1987: 182), this does not preclude the possibility that the flimsiness and emptiness of this display may be exposed.

Given that a central character in *Black Mischief*, Basil Seal, does not even make an appearance until about a quarter of the way through the novel, the focus is more on the characters as an ensemble than on any individual. The members of the British Legation constitute a major target of Waugh’s satire, as their obsessions with croquet, bagatelle, and knitting mean that they have little time to attend to the small matter of the civil war taking place around them. Indeed, Carpenter (1990: 234) regards the characters in this novel as “uniformly deplorable.” However, Waugh seems to delight in the dogged determination of the Legation members to pursue their own pleasures and in their total refusal to adapt to their surroundings. Indeed, much scorn is poured on the efforts of those who attempt to keep abreast of,

or interfere with, local politics, for example, Dame Mildred and Miss Tin, whose mission is completely misinterpreted by the Azanians as advocating rather than berating cruelty to animals.

The members of the British Legation have an uneasy relationship with outsiders, especially the French, but also have their own internal divisions: for example, the Walshes are on the outskirts of the group because he “maintained certain reserves” (51). The Legation members do seem to share a sense of priorities (or lack of them) and have a common interest in matters affecting them as a group. As we shall see, this is reflected in the way they conduct their conversations, as they steer the talk away from anything too “serious.” However, any cohesion that may exist within the group is fairly fragile, because most of the participants seem preoccupied with airing their own anxieties and pursuing their own conversational lines rather than engaging with or responding to others.

Part of the humor of Waugh’s characterization of the group comes from the impression that they would behave in exactly the same way wherever they found themselves posted. But there is also a sense of ennui among the characters, as they are forced to fall back upon a fairly small clique for entertainment and constantly strive to “find new things to say somehow sometimes” (44). This bears out Martin Stannard’s (1986: 203) claim that, beneath the seemingly chummy familiarity of Waugh’s dialogue, we may glimpse the isolation and self-interest of his characters. The tea party scene offers us a snapshot of the routine at the Legation, in all its seeming banality. But we soon see how, under the guise of interacting with others or fulfilling a social obligation, participants may be more concerned with petty point scoring or with pursuing their own goals.

The Legation is led (however ineffectually) by Sir Samson Courteney, mockingly dubbed the “Envoy Extraordinary,” and includes his daughter Prudence and her sometime lover, the honorary attaché William Bland. Social events, such as the tea party, come under the provenance of Lady Courteney and bring together the rest of the staff, including the Legges and the Anstruthers. Any “incursions from the outside world” (52) at these events are resented, especially the increasingly frequent visits of the Anglican Bishop. As will emerge, the Bishop is a key figure in the tea party scene despite apparently not contributing much to the ongoing talk. In the sections immediately prior to the scene under analysis, we learn of the Legation members’ bafflement and contempt for the Bishop’s insistence on talking about the war. Ann Pasternak Slater (1982) has shown how Waugh often employs the figure of the innocent or bemused bystander to highlight the eccentricities of his main characters. In *Black Mischief* the efforts of the Legation members to ostracize the Bishop become a running joke for both

the characters and the reader, with his mere presence being enough to provoke them, reminding them as it does of their neglect of their duties.

With regard to the Legation members themselves, their utterances are by no means easy to identify. The narrative technique in *Black Mischief* involves many changes of pace, ranging from long descriptive passages to short scenes sectioned off as virtually self-contained. The talk at the tea party is represented almost totally unmediated by the narrator, so the reader is left to deduce what is going on and who is saying what to whom. In part, we can do this by referring back to what has happened before, but we also have to revise our reading in the light of what follows. Indeed, merely identifying the speakers proves a hazardous activity, and in the process of preparing this article, I have had to revise my attribution of the utterances many times.

The narrator's only contribution occurs at the beginning, where he sets the scene. However, his use of proximal deictics ("came across") draws us into the characters' world rather than distancing us from them. Indeed, it appears as though we are put in the position of overhearing (perhaps imperfectly) the conversations. What follows is a direct representation of the tea-time talk, with no identification of speakers, no speech tags, and no reference to the nonverbal behavior of the participants. (For ease of reference, I have numbered the contributions made by individual speakers.) Due to the narrator's framing of the scene and our earlier initiation into the rituals of the Legation, we have some degree of orientation vis-à-vis the situation and who is likely to be present. Nevertheless, the immediate effect is rather dizzying, as the succession of "topic jumps" seems unrelenting (Levinson 1983: 313).⁹ However, as Vimala Herman (1995: 90) has argued, such jumps need not lead to dislocation in the ongoing talk, as the transitions between topics proceed in what she calls a "stepwise" manner. Indeed, it could be argued that the number of topic jumps in this short scene demonstrates the desire of the characters to keep the conversation ticking along and to avoid embarrassing silences. Similarly, while on one level the absence of identifying markers distances us from the speakers and sharpens our impression of them as mere pawns in the colonial game, we are still inevitably drawn into their world, as we work at trying to place the utterances and so join in the game.

Some of the utterances are easier to place than others, because of the information we can glean about the participants elsewhere. It is also possible to identify different topics taken up by the various participants. How-

9. In this short scene, there are seven topic jumps in all: Topic 1 (1-4), Topic 2 (6-8), Topic 3 (10-13), Topic 4 (14-16), Topic 5 (18-19), Topic 6 (20), Topic 7 (21). The amount of narrative time allowed is roughly equivalent for each topic, though there is some acceleration toward the end of the scene, perhaps to offset the possibility of the talk breaking down.

ever, it is by no means clear whether these represent different strands of conversations going on simultaneously, or whether the topic jumps merely reflect the tendency of the Legation members to get easily bored and to move from the banal to the politically sensitive without any apparent change in tone. One of the intriguing aspects of the scene is the fact that the talk seems to be conducted against a backdrop where several people (including children) are present without directly contributing but whose presence has some influence on the direction and tone of the talk. As I shall argue, this is brought into sharp focus by the treatment of the Bishop and adds a darker undertone to the seemingly innocuous chitchat. Another fascinating aspect of the scene is the fact that we cannot be certain that the narrator is playing by the rules when it comes to observing literary conventions for the representation of speech, such as that a new line denotes a new speaker.

The impression that the talk is sporadic seems in keeping with the “speech activity” (Gumperz 1982: 166) of the tea party, where the chatter accompanies but does not disrupt the rituals of the table. This ritual is performed under the auspices of a host or hostess who offers tea, initiates topics, and steers the talk in particular directions. Goffman (1967: 119–20) has outlined how such a role demands a form of “interaction consciousness” whereby the participant’s responsibility for the talk “going well” takes precedence over his or her ability to spontaneously respond to the ongoing talk. In his analysis of the scene from Joyce, Toolan notes how Mr. Dedalus performs this role and how it affords him greater speaking rights as both master of ceremonies *and* master of the talk. In the scene from *Black Mischief*, however, much of the humor derives from the seemingly perfunctory way in which the hostess carries out her duties and from the fact that no one speaker seems able to fully establish any control over the direction of the talk. The obvious candidate for this role is Lady Courteney, whom we elsewhere see performing, however reluctantly, her duties as the Envoy’s wife. But there is some ambiguity as to whether this role is carried out solely by Lady Courteney or is taken on by one of the other ladies (Mrs. Legge or Mrs. Anstruther) or is shared among them.

The ritualistic nature of the tea party makes it perfect for exposing the tensions underlying the surface bonhomie at the Legation, since, against the delicate clinking of cups and nibbling of cucumber sandwiches, the merest hint of irritation or antagonism strikes a jarring note. Waugh also uses the scene to suggest that, although the characters may be inclined as much as obliged to come together for these social occasions, they appear to find it impossible to completely hold their egocentricity in check.

Multiparty Talk in Action

The opening utterance in the scene may be assumed to take place near the beginning of the tea party: this is where inquiries about the welfare of family members would typically occur, reestablishing the bond between the participants as they come together again. The utterance is one of the easiest to locate in terms of its subject matter, as we know from a conversation between Sir Samson and the Bishop immediately prior to the scene that Betty Anstruther has been involved in a riding accident. We can also assume that the inquiry is directed at one or other of Betty's parents. However, it is more difficult to pinpoint the speaker. We might expect that the hostess would initiate the talk and that the speaker is, therefore, most likely to be Lady Courteney. However, given Sir Samson's keen interest in Betty's exploits, it is possible to attribute the utterance to him.

The response to this inquiry ("Rather shaken") is uttered in the elliptical, clipped style that is so typical of Waugh's characters. This can be interpreted in a number of ways, suggesting eagerness to reassure the questioner or, as elsewhere in Waugh, a nonchalant or detached tone. Despite the speaker's apparent solicitude for Betty ("poor mite"), the contribution seems more like an impersonal bulletin than the response of a devoted parent. Indeed, it could even be argued that the speaker is eager to preempt any undue display of concern over Betty's welfare.

The reference to Arthur that follows suggests he is someone who has authority over both Betty and the speaker, who defers to his "wants," so we can assume that the speaker is Betty's mother and "Arthur" her husband. From the very beginning, therefore, the ways in which the characters refer to other people tell us as much about them as about those whom they discuss. This means that it is possible to deduce from the terms of reference used in this scene the social status of the characters and the hierarchies operating within the Legation. For example, children (Betty and David) are referred to by first name only, while the reference to Mr. Anstruther as Arthur seems to imply an assumption of intimacy. However, this could also be illustrative of Mr. Anstruther's subordinate position at the Legation if we take it that the right to speak on first-name terms is nonreciprocal. Later on in the scene, outsiders are referred to more distantly (Mrs. Schonbaum, Mrs. Walsh), and the Bishop is referred to by his title, a token of respect but also an indication of his peripheral status.

Another interesting aspect of this opening exchange is how much of the talk is made up of people speaking for others. We know that both Betty and Mr. Anstruther are present at the tea party, but it is left to Mrs. Anstruther to speak for them. The contribution as a whole reinforces the impression

of the warped values of the Legation members conveyed in earlier scenes, as their main concern appears to be that Betty should not lose her “nerve” rather than that she must have been hurt by “her fall.”

The third contribution continues the conversational line of Betty’s equestrian exploits, with the speaker displaying inside knowledge about the unsuitability of “Majesty.” The tone of the utterance is once again ambiguous. It seems to offer support for the idea of getting Betty back into the saddle. But given Sir Samson’s previously expressed concern that the pony “was too strong for the child” (54), it also carries a hint of rebuke. It seems likely that, if Sir Samson is the speaker here, he may also have initiated the topic at the start of the scene. However, it could equally be the case that the speakers of the first and third contributions are different or even that it is Lady Courteney who has picked up on her husband’s concerns.

It is evident from the beginning, therefore, that no matter how much deductive work we might invest in this scene, we cannot be certain that the narrator is not deliberately thwarting our efforts. He offers us tantalizing clues to the identity of the speakers but never provides any kind of confirmation. One consequence of this technique is that we have to pay heed to the sequencing, as well as the phrasing, of utterances. But even here it seems that the narrator is teasing us, so that, as soon as we begin to feel we can recognize patterns in the talk, the patterning is disrupted and our assumptions undermined. For example, we might expect that, if there is a “schism” in the talk, this would be along the lines of the gender of the participants. So when Betty’s welfare is discussed, and we can identify at least one of the speakers as Mrs. Anstruther, we might suppose that this is a conversation between mothers, leading us to identify Lady Courteney as her interlocutor. However, in previous scenes, Sir Samson is depicted as someone who is much absorbed by gossip and domestic affairs and who takes more than a passing interest in the welfare of other people’s children; therefore, we cannot discount the possibility of his involvement.

The fourth contribution appears to bring discussion of Betty to a close, confirming that the concerns about Majesty are shared by her parents. Yet the fact that Betty’s next mount is known as “Jumbo” again suggests a rather cavalier attitude toward her welfare. We know from previous sections that the Percy who is referred to is part of Sir Samson’s staff and a member of the Legge family. Once again, instead of addressing Percy directly, the appeal to his good nature is made indirectly, and we do not know whether this is in the hearing of the Legges or is addressed to a third party. This adds to the impression that there is a division in the scene between those who are ratified participants and those who do not contribute directly but whose views or feelings are ventriloquized by others.

Also, the admission that Betty “can’t really manage Majesty yet” seems rather redundant, given that she has already suffered a fall and that the previous speaker had expressed concern over the mount’s suitability. It may be that Mrs. Anstruther is trying to reassert her parental authority, choosing to take the previous speaker’s utterance more as a suggestion than as an expression of concern or fear, and appearing to inform the previous speaker (“you know”) rather than merely follow his or her lead. This shows again the importance of approaching the contributions in sequence, so that we can see the gap between the illocutionary force of an utterance and its perlocutionary effect on the addressee.¹⁰ It also demonstrates how there may be tension underlying even this seemingly fairly innocuous topic, hinting at the claustrophobia of the Legation and the mutual distrust of its members.

Perhaps to defuse this tension, or perhaps to indicate impatience with Betty’s mother, the utterance that follows returns us to the ritual of the tea party and appears to attempt to include the Bishop. However, as the scene unfolds, we see that this recourse to the Bishop takes place at regular intervals, so that it takes on the status of a refrain amid the ongoing talk.¹¹ The inquiry about “everyone at the Mission” is sufficiently general to appear more a token expression of interest than an attempt to open up a new avenue of discussion. This impression is reinforced by the fact that we see no response from the Bishop, and the talk seems to move swiftly on. The speaker does appear to be concerned about the Bishop’s welfare, employing positive politeness strategies to “anoint” (Brown and Levinson 1978: 75) the hearer by reassuring him that his wants and views are being attended to. But the impression we are left with is that this is purely superficial, a tactic whereby to preclude the possibility that the Bishop might disrupt the flow of idle chatter by talking about the war. This bears out Toolan’s (1989: 206) claim that topic suppression can be an important aspect of the management of group interactions. Moreover, if it is the case that “once a pattern of not listening to the other has been established, it may be very difficult to break”

10. Definitions taken from Levinson 1983: 237. Illocutionary “is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accordance with a conventional procedure, and is consequently determinate (in principle at least).” Perlocutionary act “is specific to the circumstances of issuance and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering that particular utterance, and includes all those effects, intended or unintended, often indeterminate, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause.”

11. In a 1930 review of W. R. Burnett’s *Iron Man* (*Graphic*, 12 July 1930: 75; quoted in Stannard 1986: 209), Waugh wrote admiringly of the technique of having “numerous recurring phrases running through [the dialogue] as a refrain.” In the scene from *Black Mischiefs*, the refrain punctuates the ongoing talk at relatively regular intervals (5, 9, 17, 22).

(Wardaugh 1985: 54), the likelihood of the Bishop being allowed into the conversation seems more and more remote as the scene progresses.

Of course it is important not to overstate the apparent mistreatment of the Bishop and to recognize the humor of the repeated efforts to drown him in tea—four times in a short scene. It is also important to recognize the function of the refrain in the management of the talk, operating as an “aside” that allows the speaker to regroup and redirect the talk. Nevertheless, what this underlines is that not everyone at the tea party has the same rights or opportunities when it comes to participating in the talk. Such inequality reflects the process, identified by Patricia Spacks (1986: 6), whereby “Gossip declares [participants’] status inside, outside, indeterminate, or struggling to get or stay in.” It also highlights the extent to which seemingly banal conversation may mask tensions and power struggles among those involved and the importance of being attuned to the patterns and rhythms of the talk as well as to its subject matter: “Finding a way into a conversation is like joining a line of dancers. It is not enough to know where the other dancers have been; one must also know where they are headed: To bring one’s feet into coordination with theirs, one must grasp the pattern in order to foresee where their feet will come down next” (Tannen 1989: 18).

But who speaks the refrain? Since its speaker is clearly adopting the role of hostess, the most obvious candidate is Lady Courteney. However, if this is the case, the narrator is breaking here with the convention that a new line denotes a new speaker, for the next utterance is easily attributable to Lady Courteney, whose passion for horticulture is often alluded to in the novel. It is possible to argue that, once she has offered a sop to the Bishop, Lady Courteney returns to her ongoing conversation with the Legges and the Anstruthers. Alternatively, given the later (17) reference to David Anstruther alongside the refrain, it could be that Mrs. Anstruther usurps the role of hostess, perhaps because she feels that this role is neglected by Lady Courteney. But this would mean that Mrs. Anstruther’s contributions are also recorded in succession (4 and 5), equally breaking with convention. It could even be that the ladies take it in turn to try to appease the Bishop, which perhaps explains how it happens that he is offered tea so many times in such a short space of time. This would suggest some collusion on their part, indicating that, despite the tensions that may exist between them, they maintain a united front in the face of outsiders.

We do not know whether the Bishop makes any attempt to respond to the offer of tea. It is highly unlikely that he keeps silent, as it is because of his very persistence in having his say that the Legation members find him so trying. Instead, the impression is that the next speaker moves swiftly to forestall his involvement. If Lady Courteney is the speaker of both utterances

(4 and 5), she is clearly breaking all the rules. Having selected the Bishop as next speaker, she then self selects and completely changes the topic.¹² Moreover, she does not seem to direct her remarks at anyone in particular but appears happy just to declare the state of the garden “heart breaking.”

The next speaker also seems to self select but at least matches Lady Courteney’s mood by expressing concern about “the wool for baby’s jacket,” for the contribution offers an interpretation of Lady Courteney’s words as an indirect complaint about the war. This demonstrates a degree of mutual orientation among the participants, but one that may still be manipulated in the interests of one party. As Charles Goodwin and Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1982: 1) claim, “rather than presenting a naked analysis of the prior talk, next utterances characteristically transform that talk in some fashion and deal with it not in its own terms but rather in the way in which it is relevant to the projects of the subsequent speaker.” Here the next speaker assumes that the war is only significant in so far as it impinges upon their day-to-day preoccupations, and the assumption of shared values illustrates both the intimacy of the group and the confidence this gives them to voice their own eccentric concerns.

Soon after the tea party we discover that it is Sir Samson who is knitting baby’s jacket (58), again challenging gender stereotypes. Like Lady Courteney, Sir Samson seems preoccupied with his own worries, but he does end with a question (“Do you think . . . ?”) in which he seeks advice. However, we cannot tell whether this question is directed at anyone in particular and so whether Sir Samson selects the next speaker or if it is thrown out generally to the group. The response this question prompts seems to represent a supporting move, offering Sir Samson reassurance about his color scheme. Nonetheless, the speaker is hesitant (“It *might* look *rather* sweet” [my emphasis]), and the utterance is immediately followed by the repetition of the refrain. It appears, therefore, that the group might be trying to humor Sir Samson, and as the novel progresses, we discover that his remarks are often greeted with indulgence. It is difficult to say with any certainty who expresses an interest in baby’s jacket, but in the next scene it is Prudence whom Sir Samson attempts to engage in further discussion of the sleeves. The use of the word “sweet” also points to Prudence, who uses the expres-

12. The two main options for turn allocation are “current speaker selects next” and “speaker self selects” (see Sacks et al. 1978: 13). A speaker usually self selects when the designated next speaker fails to take up his or her turn, but in this scene it is by no means clear that the Bishop is given this option. The organization of talk in this scene appears fairly loose, allowing for speakers to self select seemingly at will. This occurs in all of the following contributions—1, 6, 7, 10, 14, 18, 20, 21—which would make the talk seem very stilted or dislocated. In addition, not all of the topics are taken up by other speakers, and on occasion the talk is actively diverted away from some of the topics initiated.

sion in an earlier scene (44), suggesting that the narrator is perhaps expecting the reader to develop an acute sensitivity to the speech patterns of his characters.

Once again, the refrain can be seen to mark a topic boundary, indicating that the speaker feels enough has been said about Sir Samson's knitting but is anxious to avoid any embarrassing lulls. The speaker of the refrain again seems to self select, and there is no obvious link between this contribution and what precedes or follows it (unless we take babies and infants to be tangentially linked). As before, the refrain is accompanied by an expression of interest in the Bishop's duties, but despite the emphatic tone ("I want to hear *all* about"), any response seems to be put off to an unspecific "some time." Each time the refrain is used, more humor is extracted at the Bishop's expense, as we imagine him getting more and more frustrated or constantly trying to find a way into the talk. Each time, too, the offer becomes more tokenistic, so that its sincerity (does the speaker really care whether the Bishop wants tea or not?) becomes much less important than the mere fact of its being voiced. This repetition is crucial to the sense of patterning in the scene, parceling out the talk into roughly equal units and building up to the comic climax at the end.

The exchange concerning the cipher book that follows can be identified as involving Sir Samson and William Bland, his attaché. This leaves open the possibility that the previous speaker and the Bishop carry on talking while the cipher-book conversation takes place to one side. However, we see elsewhere in the novel that Sir Samson feels no qualms about discussing official matters publicly, especially if this means that he does not have to be diverted from trivialities for too long. It is William who initiates the exchange, addressing Sir Samson formally as "sir." We know from a previous scene that William is eager to placate Sir Samson, who has been putting on a show of concern about the cipher book for the Bishop's benefit. Thus, Sir Samson's seemingly enthusiastic response to the news ("Good boy . . . Splendid") and his show of interest in getting to the bottom of the matter ("where was it") may be designed to impress the Bishop. William's admission that he has been "decoding some telegrams in bed" hardly seems adequate as an excuse, but Sir Samson is unperturbed ("It doesn't matter . . ."). In referring to William as a "boy" he could be seen to be pulling rank, but the term of address can equally be interpreted as fond. Although Sir Samson does appear to heighten the drama of the incident by mentioning the F.O. (Foreign Office), the use of abbreviation, combined with the reference to shared knowledge ("you know"), implies a bond with his subordinate. Indeed, it is almost as though he feels he has to apologize to William for quizzing him in this way, blaming the F.O. for having to do so.

The next contribution marks another topic jump to discussion of the other foreign representatives in Azania. This reinforces the impression that the exchange between Sir Samson and William may constitute a schism, but one that takes place within the hearing of the others, especially the Bishop. Thus, although the speaker seems to self select, it may be that this speech, too, is part of an ongoing exchange. The expression of concern for “Poor Monsieur Ballon” is echoed both within the scene (“Poor Mrs Walsh” [20]) and later in the novel.¹³ It is difficult to pinpoint the speaker, but in the section immediately prior to the tea party, we do see Prudence referring to Sir Samson as “Poor sweet” (55). The apparent concern for Monsieur Ballon and the revelation that “he’s been trying to get an aeroplane from Algiers” contributes to the running joke that, unlike Sir Samson, he takes his role far too seriously, almost to the point of paranoia.

The next speaker’s contribution continues this conversational line, reporting a snippet of gossip received from Mrs. Schonbaum, the wife of the American representative. It acts as a supporting move,¹⁴ providing further evidence of Ballon’s paranoia (“buying up everything and storing it in their cellars”). The report may also be seen as an instance of what Gary Alan Fine (1985: 224) calls a “wedge-driving rumour,” depending for its effect on the reinforcement of prejudice and thereby cementing the solidarity of those who disseminate it. The rift between the French and the English is already well established, and it widens during the course of the novel, fueled by rumors that have little basis other than in mutual hostility and suspicion. If we take the speaker to be female, because of the suggestion of intimacy with Mrs. Schonbaum, then there would seem to be a network for passing information operating among the female members of the Legations.

The speaker of the next utterance takes the talk back once more to domestic concerns, displaying once again a rather self-absorbed attitude, perhaps suggesting that the speaker is Lady Courteney. The utterance is linked to what has gone before both in subject matter (the provision of “supplies”) and referents (“they” referring to the French Legation). The contribution also echoes the anti-French sentiment in the previous two contributions,

13. As the Legation members prepare to flee Azania, sympathy is repeatedly expressed for “Poor Mr Raith” (199), one of the curates lodged with the Anstruthers. As Lady Courteney has yet to appear, and Sir Samson is thoroughly irritated by the intrusion, the speaker is most likely to be either their daughter Prudence or Mrs. Anstruther. However, the narrator uses this technique of echoing not to clarify what is going on, but seemingly to compound the ambiguity.

14. The “supporting move,” whereby the speaker develops the previous speaker’s topic or shows some alignment with the previous turn, is one of the five Conversational Moves outlined by Burton (1980: 149–50).

since the speaker is keen to off-load the marmalade only because it has been a failure.

The third occurrence of the refrain brings this topic to a close and, as before (4–5), could be interpreted as a rebuke to the previous speaker and her avowed intention to take advantage of the French. This time it seems to be Mrs. Anstruther who acts as hostess, given that we have already learned from Sir Samson that the Anstruthers are thinking of sending their son David to Uppingham (54). Despite the fact that Mrs. Anstruther has a specific topic to discuss with the Bishop, once more the discussion is deferred to an unspecified “some time,” perhaps because the tea party is not the appropriate forum for such matters. In a manner reminiscent of Firbank, Waugh tantalizes us with a suggestion of scandal—why is the speaker “frightened” by David, and what does she mean by his “independent mind”?—but offers no elaboration either here or elsewhere as to David’s possible misdeeds.

As before, the repetition of the refrain acts as a bridge between topics, as the utterance that follows (with its reference to a “cable” and “codes”) takes us back to William and Sir Samson. Again, this could suggest a schism in the talk, whereby their conversation has been continuing alongside the discussion of the French. However, this sounds like an opening move¹⁵ introducing a new topic (“I wonder if you know anything about this cable”). As is so often the case in this scene, this brief fragment of talk illuminates the relations between the characters. The fact that Sir Samson has to ask his subordinate for clarification means a loss of face, which he tries to mitigate by stressing the strangeness of the cable: “I can’t make head nor tail of it. It isn’t in any of the usual codes.” William’s response underlines the realignment in their roles, as he casually confirms “Yes, they’re all right” before cracking the code for his superior. William’s matter-of-fact tone suggests no hint of apology for the fact that official resources and time are being used in this way, illustrating yet again the nonchalance of the Legation members with regard to their duties. He also echoes Sir Samson’s reference to the “F.O.” earlier in the scene, reinforcing the impression of a close bond between them.

The opening of the utterance that follows (“Poor Mrs Walsh”) echoes the earlier reference to “Poor Monsieur Ballon.” Again, there remains an ambiguity as to why exactly Mrs. Walsh is “done up”: despite the speaker’s theory about the altitude, we learned earlier in the novel that Captain Walsh is “known to ill-treat his wife” (51). Once more, therefore, a sensitive subject is tentatively dropped into the ongoing talk, suggesting that perhaps

15. Opening moves (Burton 1980: 148) are “topic-carrying items which are recognisably ‘new’ in terms of the immediately preceding talk.”

this is the only way in which anything “serious” can be introduced. The utterance appears to invite further discussion of the state of Mrs. Walsh’s health. However, this is thwarted by the intervention of the next speaker, most likely the Bishop, who reopens¹⁶ the topic of David’s future but offers no misplacement markers¹⁷ to minimize the sense of disruption. It could be that the narrator is taking us back to a conversation that has been going on in the meantime between Mrs. Anstruther and the Bishop and that it is Mrs. Anstruther who attempts to reopen the topic. But the humor of the scene rests on the impression that, when the Bishop does finally have this say, he is hopelessly out of step with the others. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that he is immediately offered tea again. For the third time in the scene, the refrain appears to be used to put down the previous speaker and to deflect the talk away from certain topics. The speaker does appear to display sympathy for the Bishop, suggesting (perhaps euphemistically) that he is “tired.” But the comment is also heavily ironic, given the distinct lack of any visible/audible exertion by the Bishop. Indeed, the impression is that the speaker is determined to restrain the Bishop, so that while seeming to sympathize with him, her words have the illocutionary force of directing him to remain silent (“I’m *sure* you *must* be tired” [my emphasis]).¹⁸

Throughout the scene, the offers of tea come to seem increasingly hollow or even impatient in tone. The final repetition of the refrain acts as a kind of punch line to the scene, sealing it off as a self-contained whole. This is reinforced by the repetition of “I’m sure” three times at the end of the scene. In part, the pattern reflects how speakers echo one another and pick up on each other’s words, which can be an important way to align oneself with one’s interlocutor where there is tension. But the patterning and repetition are also deliberately stylized by the narrator to allow him to manage his comic effects.

This scene from *Black Mischief* presents a memorable pastiche of the English abroad, reveling in as much as ridiculing their excesses. But it is also a stylistic tour de force in which the narrator flaunts his ability to sculpt and mold

16. Reopening moves (Burton 1980: 153) reinstate a topic after a preceding opening move has been challenged.

17. Misplacement markers “display an orientation by their user to the proper sequential-organisation character of a particular place in a conversation, and a recognition that an utterance that is thereby prefaced may not fit” (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 319). For example, the Bishop could have prefaced his remark by saying “To go back to David . . .”

18. This remark is also echoed in the scene where the Legation members prepare to leave, when Lady Courteney deals rather abruptly with Mr. Raith by telling him “I’m sure you’re tired after your ride” (201). The impression is that the characters employ stock phrases in their dealings with one another, perhaps suggesting here some impatience on Lady Courteney’s part with the obligations placed upon her as hostess.

this seemingly empty chatter. The sequencing of utterances and the economy of style offer valuable insights into how, in multiparty talk, temporary alliances may be forged and minor victories achieved. This is evident in the ways in which the members of the Legation draw together when talking to or about outsiders. But we also see that many of the participants are intent on pursuing their own agendas and petty obsessions. Though this might be seen as a display of ego, in another sense the Legation members seem entirely innocent in exposing their concerns to others.

The narrator enjoys a final joke at the reader's expense when, shortly afterward (59), he recounts the responses of the French to the inside information they obtain about the tea party from the Legation butler. Interpreting the Bishop's presence as a disturbing example of "clericalism," they are wary of "the old fox," Sir Samson, and prepare to spend all night trying to crack the code used in the Legation cables. In addition to offering yet another demonstration of the paranoia of the French, this seems to undercut any efforts we might make to decipher the scene and unearth its deeper significance. But this is done not so much in the spirit of mocking the reader as of alerting us to the fact that we have been taking part in a kind of elaborate parlor game overseen by the narrator. As so often in Waugh's novels, the narrator never lets us forget the artifice of his representations or the absurdity of investing the "shadows" he parades before us with any kind of presence.¹⁹ Nevertheless, like the game of Consequences played by the characters at the Victory Ball, we find that, despite the evident dangers of reading too much into the fragments we are offered, there is something compelling and exhilarating about the wild possibilities they suggest.

The talk is deliberately foregrounded by the narrator to invite close attention. However, this attention is not so much focused on the topics that are discussed, as these appear fairly inconsequential on the whole. Instead, we focus on the ways in which the talk is managed and patterned, both by the participants themselves and by the narrator. As was suggested earlier, it is possible to see the scene as representing the narrator's overview of the teatime talk and, thus, to argue that, in fact, what we see is a series of dialogues with the refrain acting as a kind of boundary marker. But this would be to overlook the energy created by the kaleidoscopic array of speakers and topics and the feeling that, despite the apparent triviality and surface politeness of the talk, the characters are capable of dealing fairly brutally with one another by not attending to others or deliberately excluding them. It could be argued that the rather stultifying atmosphere of the Legation is

19. In Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1983 [1928]: 122), the narrator addresses the reader directly to undercut any emotional attachment we may have formed toward "the shadow that has flitted about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather."

presented as a microcosm of a world in which people no longer have anything to stimulate them in their interactions with others. Yet the talk at the Legation at least displays some curiosity and zest for life and contrasts favorably with London, where people feel that “it’s far too much effort to meet new people, and if it’s just all the ordinary people one knows already one might just as well stay at home and ring them up” (91).

More generally, what this passage from *Black Mischief* highlights is the need to explore further how multiparty talk has been represented in the novel and how novelistic practice might affect existing theories of the representation of speech. Rather than focus exclusively on the content of such scenes, or even on the power dynamics within them, I hope to have shown that it is also important to examine how the very forms of representation used may carry ideological meaning. In turn, this must lead us to rethink how such scenes affect what we assume to be the “norm” or “ideal” in conversational interaction and to confront more directly the extent to which randomness and fragmentation, a sense of being excluded or misunderstood, may be an important part of our experience of attempting to communicate with others.

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