### The flashback constraint and the egocentric principle.

It was pointed out above that the past perfect moves the temporal location of the event backward in time, reversing the order of events in normal narrative narration. This is relatively rare in oral narrative of personal experience, and never occurs in sequences of more than one. However, we are all familiar with techniques of narration that move the scene to some earlier point in time, introduced by such traditional phrases, as “Meanwhile, back at the farm. . .” It is profoundly interesting to note the absolute constraint on such techniques in oral narratives of personal experience. In the many thousands reviewed in our studies of such narratives, there is not a single flashback. As common as they may be in film and fiction, flashbacks simply do not occur in oral narrative.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The flashback constraint assumes central importance when we couple it with the fundamental strategy of oral narratives of personal experience, the egocentric principle.

The egocenrtric principle: *Oral narratives of personal experience present information to the audience in the same order that it was originally presented to the protagonist*.

The egocentric principle explains the flashback constraint, but it does not have the same exceptionless character. We will encounter occasional cases of narrators beginning a story with facts that they learned later, but they deliver these facts as if they had been present, rather than use the past perfect or the “meanwhile” construction.

The operation of the egocentric principle appears quite clearly in a narrative cited by Ochs and Capps, as told by a teacher.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. One little boy—little girl came up to me . . . uh yesterday you know
2. and this has been my only incident
3. Miss Ek is. . sh—little black girl came up,
4. She said, “Would you please tell that boy to stop calling me a nigger (Mhm)
5. So I said—and it was somebody from my *class*
6. So I was like “oh my gosh”
7. So I asked him—I said, you know, “Why would you call her that?
8. So. . . d-do you talk about *me* like that when you get home?
9. And this kind of thing (Mm hm)
10. He said, “No no no!
11. Well I said it to her because she’s been saying ‘f- you’ .. to *me* all the time (Oh)
12. So she had a part in it (Mm hm)
13. He had a part in it.
14. He admitted that had done it.
15. She admitted her part
16. and today I saw them playing together.

Here the crucial information that explains (and resolves) the situation is delivered to the listener at just the time that the narrator acquired it. One could imagine a story told in this way:

1 Well one time this little black girl was saying “f- you” to a little boy all the time

2 and he was calling her a nigger all the time

3 so one day she said, “Would you please tell that boy to stop calling me a nigger?”

or

1 Well one time this boy was calling a little black girl a nigger

2 and I found out later on

that she had been saying “f- you” to him all the time

3 so one day she said to me, “Would you please tell that boy

to stop calling me a nigger?”

These are perfectly rational and well ordered ways of recounting the event but they are not found in oral narratives of personal experience. Instead, we learn about each of these behaviors in the same order that the narrator learned about them.

1. The flashback constraint seems to apply equally to the legitimate stage, as far as I know, though there must be examples in experimental theater. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Och and Capps 2001: 136-7. Interviewer’s back channel feedback in parentheses. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)