IN THE FACE OF BLINDNESS: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIP IN BLIND/SIGHTED INTERACTION

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to an interactional sociolinguistic understanding of the dynamics of interability discourse, specifically between blind and sighted interlocutors, focusing on the challenges that blindness poses for the construction of independence and involvement for the visually impaired participant and the discourse strategies she employs to surmount them. The data consist of video recordings of a 78 minute multiparty conversation between a once sighted blind woman and seven sighted friends and family members, as well as a total of 341 minutes of nine triadic blind/sighted conversational interviews. Building on the foundation of face work (Goffman 1967, Brown & Levinson 1978), framing theory (e.g. Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974, Gumperz 1982b, Tannen 1993), and conversational style (Tannen 1984), this work follows Hamilton (1994a) in analyzing not only the discourse of the participant with a disability, but that of the abled interlocutors as well and the interactional dynamic that emerges collaboratively among them. Moreover, the blind participant’s performance is assessed in terms of her interactional goals, and not merely structural aspects.

Three important challenges are examined: 1) procedural elements, 2) attributions of epistemological powerlessness, and 3) attributions of helplessness. Three types of addressivity emerge in multiparty interaction, including a marked third person strategy, which compensates for the missing mode of gaze. The blind participant also employs an array of alternate modes to successfully claim a turn that had at first failed because of visual miscues. I then show how she counters attributions of epistemological
powerlessness by using displays of knowledge of the visual world to construct a powerful identity for herself and to create connection with her sighted companions and overcome her outsider status by requesting, offering, and even evaluating visual information. Finally, I show how she resists attributions of helplessness by taking powerful affective stances at the outset, and by reframing her blindness, herself, and her sighted “helpers,” to construct a more powerful identity for herself. In sum, Dixie uses language and her knowledge of the visual world to build connection and community with her sighted associates, while simultaneously establishing an agentive, independent identity, even in the face of blindness.
To my mother, who imparted to me her faith in the power of the Holy Spirit,  
and to my father, who imparted to me his faith in the power of the human spirit. 
And to the memory of Dr. Ron Scollon, whose vision of what discourse analysis could achieve 
has helped to shape the worldviews of so many who wish to use their research to leave the world, 
as he did, a better place than they found it.

A dissertation is never written alone, and is never the product of only one mind or one heart 
or one voice. And though the process surely feels like a singular feat to its writers, in many 
ways they are written by our families and friends, our mentors and colleagues and students, 
and even complete strangers, who have written their voices and experiences into our minds 
and hearts and pushed us to think these thoughts, ask these questions and seek these 
answers. If we do our job well, we weave these voices together into something harmonious 
we can offer back in gratitude to those from whom we have received so much. That said, I 
loathe whether anyone has ever written a dissertation that was as significant to its readers 
as it was to its author. So I feel a bit ridiculous when I compare the paltry two hundred 
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General Preface

Nobody with the sense God gave a goose would write a dissertation about her mother, but it takes a special kind of moron to write a dissertation about her blind mother’s blindness. Truth be told, I cried for two weeks when I changed my dissertation topic from something less personal to what I knew would be a gut wrenching undertaking at best, and a truly traumatic experience at worst. When I sought Ron Scollon’s advice about the angst of this decision, he said, “What I worry about, Elisa, is people who are writing dissertations they are not crying about.” And that reminded me why I love Georgetown’s sociolinguistics program and why I chose to work with Heidi Hamilton, whose own dissertation was a case study of a woman suffering from Alzheimer’s whom she had come to love as a dear friend. As it is with most scholars, I suppose, this dissertation was a long interior journey, as much an examination of my own identity as that of the research subject herself, who happens to be my mother. Once I had finally sorted this out, I found it a grace, like all grace, unsought and unearned, that my mother has a wonderful sense of humor, tremendous personal strength, and a gift for using language to build identity, hope, and community. At the end of a dark journey I have found there is great light and joy here and cause for celebration. And I am grateful that I could have the privilege of telling part of a powerful story that I hope might help others to write their own narratives of hope and success.

Preface/Caveat for Blind Readers

I am afraid that blind and visually impaired people are all too accustomed to having sighted people tell them “what is wrong with them;” so understandably, there is considerable
skepticism about much of the “research” conducted by sighted people. I wish to assure you that this is not a dissertation about what is “wrong” with blind people. It is not really about what is wrong with sighted people either, nor even society itself. It is about what is complicated and difficult about the differences in the sets of social semiotics available to blind and sighted interlocutors and the various challenges that arise in their efforts to relate to one another with the same level of respect and connection they maintain with everyone else. My goal is simply to bring one more science to bear on the problem of forging better relationships between blind and sighted members of society. I am so well aware that a sighted person could never be an expert about the experience of blindness, and I would not be so foolish as to claim or even aspire to such a status. I rely on and defer to the expertise and authority of blind researchers, writers, and informants for knowledge about the blind experience whenever I can. However, as the oldest child of a blind mother, the intimacy of my experience being “her eyes” during my childhood does give me a depth of perspective of this interability sphere that I believe is useful.

In the long term it is my hope that this scholarship may help sighted people discover and rectify their lack of knowledge where it results in undesirable, unhelpful behavior, and to identify and promote the dissemination of successful strategies blind people have used to develop powerful, independent identities and forge strong connections in their sighted communities. Discourse analysis can help both sighted and blind people identify the precise behaviors that alienate, disempower, patronize/paternalize, and otherwise irritate other blind or sighted people. It is clear to me that sighted people are the weakest link in blind/sighted interaction, so my goal is not to point out what blind people cannot do, but rather what they can do in order to better achieve their social goals, and how sighted people can be more cooperative. Ultimately, however, as an interactional sociolinguist, my focus is neither on the blind nor the sighted side of the equation per se, but on the interface between them. My goal is to bring whatever resources I can to the table to help build a stronger community among the blind and sighted. Please accept this dissertation in that spirit.
Contents

Chapter 1 Blindness, Sociolinguistics, and Multimodality ..................................... 1
  1.0 Introduction.................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Theoretical Background for Interactional Sociolinguistics ........................... 5
  1.2 Introduction to Blindness ........................................................................... 12
  1.3 Review of Literature on Blindness and Interaction ................................. 21
  1.4 Relevant Work on Disability and Language in Interaction ....................... 32
  1.5 Gaze in Interaction ................................................................................... 36
  1.6 Gaps in the Research that Remain to be Filled ....................................... 39
  1.7 Overview of Chapters ............................................................................. 42

Chapter 2: Data & Methodology .......................................................................... 44
  2.0 Introduction................................................................................................ 44
  2.1 Categorizing of the Experience of Blind and Visually Impaired People ..... 45
  2.2 Methodology: Qualitative Case Study of Naturalistic Interaction ............. 52
  2.3 The Blind Subject .................................................................................... 56
  2.4 Interactions and Participants ................................................................... 68
    2.4.1 The Multiparty Conversational Data .............................................. 68
    2.4.2 The Triadic Conversational Interview Data .................................... 77
  2.5 Conclusion............................................................................................... 85

Chapter 3: Modes of Procedure & Participation ................................................. 87
  3.0 Introduction ............................................................................................. 87
  3.1 The Quantity and Quality of Dixie’s Turns ....... ..................................... 88
  3.2 Openings and Closings ............................................................................ 91
  3.3 Turn Taking: Addressivity in Other-Initiated Turns .................................. 100
  3.4 Turn Taking: Modes of Repair in Self-Initiated Turn Claims ..................... 114
  3.5 Conclusion............................................................................................. 121

Chapter 4: Envisioning Insidership: Displays of Visual Knowledge as a Powerful 
  Epistemological Stance ................................................................................. 123
  4.0 Introduction............................................................................................ 123
  4.1 Powerlessness Particular to Blindness..................................................... 126
  4.2 Avoiding the Outsider Status .................................................................. 129
  4.3 Requests for Visual Descriptions............................................................ 132
  4.4 Providing Visual Texts and Verbal Translations of Visual Texts................. 136
  4.5 Evaluating and Manipulating Visual Texts ............................................. 151
  4.6 Conclusion: Outsider/Insider Status and Visual Text.............................. 162
Chapter 5: Overcoming Attributions of Helplessness

5.0 Introduction

5.1 Avoiding the Dependency Support Script

5.2 Powerful Preemptive Presentation of Self and Situation
   5.2.1 Direct Eye Contact
   5.2.2 Powerful Facial Expressions
   5.2.3 Eye Rolling
   5.2.4 Ignoring the Visible Affect of Others
   5.2.5 Portraying Powerful Emotions and Attitudes
   5.2.6 Viewing Blindness as Temporary and Not Integral to Her Identity

5.3 Reframing Blindness: Alienable, Not Subject to Avoidance Behaviors
   5.3.1 Rejecting Avoidance Rituals
   5.3.2 Putting Blindness On Record Immediately
   5.3.3 Rejecting Commiseration
   5.3.4 Making Blindness the Target of Humor

5.4 Reframing Self When Framed as Helpless
   5.4.1 Reframing Help as Unnecessary
   5.4.2 Rejecting the Unilaterality of Teasing
   5.4.3 Framing a Request for Help as Agency
   5.4.4 Rejecting Sign Equipment With a Subtle Hint of Retaliation
   5.4.5 Substituting Olfactory Competence for Visual Competence
   5.4.6 Rejecting the Unilaterality of Teasing

5.5 Reframing Others: Would Be Helpers as Incompetent
   5.5.1 Rejecting Help From a Relative Stranger
   5.5.2 Rejecting the Help of Close Friends
   5.5.3 Rejecting the Help of a Daughter

5.6 Conclusion

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

6.1 Summary of Literature and Methodology

6.2 Summary of Findings

6.3 Implications and Applications

6.4 Directions for further research

6.5 Conclusion
Figure 30 Gaze Vectors When Esther Finally Looks Up Towards Dixie .......... 119
Figure 31 Esther Answers Dixie and Provides a Visual Gesture ................. 120
Figure 32 Gaze as Esther Looks Away As She Begins to Answer .............. 120
Figure 33 Esther Turns to Martha as She Continues to Provide Visual Gesture 120
Figure 34 Dixie in “Mutual Gaze” with Carol ........................................ 171
Figure 35 Dixie’s Facial Communication in Example 25 ............................. 174
Figure 36 More of Dixie’s Facial Communication in Example 25 .............. 175
Figure 37 Eye Roll ................................................................................. 177
Figure 38 Return ................................................................................. 177

Tables
Table 1 Four Journeys of Blindness ........................................................... 20
Table 2 Paths of Adaptation .................................................................... 46
Table 3 Participants in Multiparty Data ...................................................... 69
Table 4 Distribution of Talk in the Multiparty Data .................................. 74
Table 5 Participants in Conversational Triadic Interviews ......................... 80
Table 6 Word Contributions of Each Participant ...................................... 89
Table 7 Three Types of Addressivity in Blind/Sighted Interaction ........... 102
Table 8 Instances of Addressivity Types in Example 5 ............................ 114
Table 9 Modalities Used in the Successful Reformulated Turn Claim ........ 121
Table 10 Two Realms of Powerlessness Specific to Blindness ................... 126
Table 11 Esther’s 7 Iterations of Book’s Location from Example 15 ......... 158
Chapter 1 Blindness, Sociolinguistics, and Multimodality

1.0 Introduction

Seven women are gathered at Martha’s home for an evening of storytelling, laughter, and conversation. All are sighted save one, an extremely independent woman in her mid 50s, who has lost her sight over the course of her life through the gradual process of retinitis pigmentosa, beginning at birth. Having been partially sighted in the early part of her life and raised and educated among sighted children, Dixie views herself not so much as a blind\(^1\) woman, but as a sighted woman who has lost her sight. While she talks openly about her blindness and is very flexible in interacting with her sighted social world, she does sometimes bristle at the undesirable behaviors of sighted others and occasionally speaks out about it. She has very little tolerance for paternalism. This gathering has come about because I have asked Dixie, who is my mother, if I could videotape her in conversation with some of her friends and family (all of whom are sighted) to observe the process of blind/sighted interaction. We began by talking in Martha’s front room for half an hour or so, and then moved into the kitchen to enjoy a bowl of summer fruit. Since I am the instigator of the gathering, I facilitate the conversation’s beginning by asking questions about how various members came to be friends with Dixie. When the women have gotten settled in their seats around the table and I have gotten the camera arranged, I look Harriet straight in the eye, procure her reciprocating gaze and ask, “When did Harriet first start going to the Assembly [church]?” All eyes but two turn immediately to Harriet to attend to her answer, recognizing her as the primary addressee.

Harriet, without missing a beat, latches onto my last word as she begins her reply, demonstrating thereby that she understands herself to be the intended addressee of my

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\(^1\)I will frequently use the term “blind people/person” as it is the term that Dixie uses and because I, like her, believe that excessively indirect language inheres a greater potential threat to the identity of the referent than the direct term does. Euphemism both reinforces and acquiesces to taboo.
question. Dixie, however, the participant with the unseeing, uncooperative eyes, also responds without missing a beat, overlapping Harriet’s attempt to answer by chuckling and remarking, “Ask her.” All eyes swing to Dixie’s end of the table and her utterance briefly usurps the attention of Harriet’s audience. Almost simultaneously, Dixie’s youngest daughter, Anne, seated to her right, hits her lightly on the arm and says, “She just did,” while I (her oldest), laughingly say, “I AM asking her.” At this point all eyes but two turn back to Harriet. Dixie laughs and makes an indiscernible comment\(^2\) to Anne, while her interruption is successfully surmounted and Harriet’s elicited reply is allowed to proceed.

Although the third person form of my address to Harriet was marked, as Dixie seemed to be pointing out, there was nothing I could detect in the behavior of any of the sighted participants to indicate that they had noticed its markedness. Furthermore, it is Dixie’s two daughters, those most acquainted with her blindness and most accustomed to mediating between her and her sighted interlocutors, who are the first\(^3\) to reprimand her for not “seeing” what everyone else “saw.” This demonstrates how unconsciously and invisibly this strategy was being used even by those most experienced, and therefore, presumably most knowledgeable, about the accommodation strategies they use with her.

As Dixie’s oldest child, I interacted with her and mediated for her for much of my first 18 years of life, yet I had never noticed anyone using this third person address. I found it being used by both blind and sighted participants in my data, which led me to explore the restricted sets of channels and modes blind interlocutors have access to, within which they must achieve all the same social functions sighted interlocutors do with a considerably larger constellation of modes to draw from. It proved to be one of a within

\(^2\) Her actual words are not discernible in the video recording.
\(^3\) Hana followed right on their heels.
number of systematic, accommodative discourse strategies which appear to have emerged organically among these women as compensation for those absent modes as they have interacted with Dixie over the decades.

Blindness⁴ is a perceptual disability that is not often associated with language, but which, in fact, has major social consequences for face to face interaction (e.g., Coupland et al. 1986, Rutter 1984:168,70), both for the blind individuals themselves, and for the sighted people with whom they interact. The role of language use in constructing identity and relationship in the context of blind/sighted interaction is the focus of the present study. As a complement to the existing body of research, which has focused almost exclusively on psycholinguistic factors in the interaction of either congenitally blind children, or on blind adults in experimental situations with strangers, this dissertation examines the language used by a once-sighted blind adult in more naturally occurring interaction with sighted friends and family members with whom she shares genuine, pre-existing relationships, from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective. Here the language of her conversations with sighted others is investigated, both in terms of her involvement in interaction, and in the construction of her independent identity.

Within these pages, I will endeavor to tell a story about a woman who not only avoids being marginalized in conversation, but deeply involves herself and others in interaction and relationship, a woman who not only avoids appearing dependent on others, but who actually emerges as a leader in her sighted community. I will present a person who is both cheerful and humorous, hopeful and strong willed, clever and compassionate, knowledgeable and curious, who is well liked, and influential in her community—a woman who is thoroughly integrated into her network of sighted friends and family members, who takes agency over her disability, and who, if anything, actually

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⁴ This section very closely mirrors Hamilton’s (1994) eloquent introduction in her published dissertation and I am indebted.
uses her blindness to enhance her personality, rather than allowing her identity to be eclipsed by it. She not only compensates for her own interactional shortcomings, but accommodates her sighted co-conversants in theirs. The data presented in the chapters to come illuminate the difficulties she encounters in face to face interaction without vision, while at the same time bringing to light her ability to marshall an array of multimodal discourse strategies to overcome those difficulties. The analyses I present will show both how blindness precipitates linguistic problems, and how linguistic strategies can be employed to resolve them.

In 1.1 of this chapter, I first present the theoretical framework of this research, describing the fundamental components of interactional sociolinguistics and highlighting those most relevant to this work. In 1.2, I present an introduction to blindness for the ordinary sighted reader who may be unacquainted with the nature of blindness and its effects in interaction, and in section 1.3, I briefly review what research has been conducted to date that comes to bear on blindness in interaction, including ethnographic and sociolinguistic work. I then address the literature on disability and interaction in general in 1.4. I go on, in 1.5, to review the most relevant work on gaze in interaction in generally, mainly in sociology, social psychology, and ethnography. In 1.6, I identify some of the gaps that remain in the research and show how this dissertation fills those gaps. Finally, 1.7 concludes the chapter, and 1.8 provides a preview of the chapters to come.

Lest my enthusiasm for Dixie’s abilities be interpreted as merely the sentimentalism of a person writing about her own mother, allow me to clarify. As a child, I was, as I imagine most children of blind or otherwise disabled parents are, almost entirely unimpressed with her abilities. They were our ‘normal.’ We had nothing and no one with whom to compare. And as helpers, we were much more aware of what our parents could not do, which was therefore, incumbent upon us to do. Unexpectedly, I discovered my mother’s exceptionality (and commonality) through research. Perhaps this is the most important reason we do such research—to discover people.
1.1 Theoretical Background for Interactional Sociolinguistics

Interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz (1982b, 1992a; Tannen (1984/2005:xviff, Schiffrin 1994:97ff) is an approach to the analysis of (primarily) naturally occurring, culturally and contextually situated, face to face interaction, which identifies specific discourse strategies (Gumperz 1982a) that serve to fulfill various interactional goals. These goals are understood to be motivated by the universal needs of individuals to be simultaneously both autonomous, unimposed on by others, as well as included, accepted by others, essentially Bateson’s (1972) double bind. The inherent conflict in the double bind, and the problem it poses for every speaker and hearer in any interaction, is the fact that any step that is taken in the service of one need, necessarily takes a step away from the other.

Goffman’s (1959, 1967, 1974) concept of face has become a cornerstone in our conceptualization of the social identity that results from this delicate balance of both needs. The process of navigating such a volatile social ecology is essentially politeness work, or face work, and is driven by negative and positive face needs (Brown and Levinson 19877). Negative face corresponds, essentially, to the need to be unimposed on by others, while positive face corresponds to the need to be accepted and incorporated in community. Politeness face strategies are discursive acts that attempt to appeal to one face or the other. An act that potentially violates either face is referred to as a face threatening act (FTA), and an act that is taken to have violated one’s face is a face violation. The quandary posed by the double bind is the fact that one can only “pay out” in one face by making a “withdrawal” from the other.

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6 The term interactional sociolinguistics does not appear in this work (as Tannen explains), but its frameworks is clearly laid out in the introduction and applied in the data analysis.
7 Which also correspond to power and solidarity, as outlined by Brown and Gilman 1960).
Moreover, participants in interaction have to attend to not only their own face needs, but also those of the other participants. As a result, every culture has developed its own elaborate system of communicative behaviors according to which individuals protect the face needs of others while simultaneously guarding their own, and thus maintaining social order. In Tannen’s (1984) interactional terms, identifying and describing conversational style, these conflicting positive and negative face needs can be seen as the needs for involvement and independence, respectively.

Interactional sociolinguistics takes as given the notion that every utterance or discursive act produced by an individual is also an act of facework, whatever other propositional functions it may serve. The fact that language is both arbitrary and systematic, furthermore gives rise to the critical features of discourse identified by Lakoff and Tannen (1984) as the polysemy and ambiguity of language. That is, a given form may have a different meaning for different users, it may have different meanings for the same speakers in different contexts, and it may have more than one meaning at the same time. This duality of form and function results in the complication of pragmatic homonymy, wherein a discourse form may serve different functions for different people or cultures in different contexts. The problem of disambiguating such homonymy leads us to distinguish between the surface level, propositional content of an utterance (basically form) or act, and its “real” meaning, the metamessage (Bateson 1972) (basically function), which helps us understand the social intentions of the other’s behavior.

The process through which participants determine the metamessage is achieved through interpretive frames, a concept that emerged and converged from several fields (Goffman 1974) concurrently and means basically a definition of the situation. The polysemy and homonymy of frames is critical in interaction, and participants may differently frame a situation either because they understand it differently from other
participants or because they wish to change the frame, to reframe the situation and/or the participants involved. Davies & Harre (1990) use the term positioning to indicate, essentially, the way one participant frames another through talk. Tannen further develops the concept of framing to the process of naturally occurring spoken discourse (e.g., 1985, 1993). Gumperz (1982a:5) identifies the contextualization cue as a critical component of communication that signals to participants what frame or frames the speaker intends. Contextualization cues can be purely linguistic lexico-grammatical forms, but in face to face interaction are also very often paralinguistic or extralinguistic features such as intonation, volume, and rhythm, as well as facial expressions, gestures and proxemics, among many others, all of which are subject to the pitfalls of ambiguity and polysemy. Contextualization cues are, then, conventions agreed upon by participants who interact frequently, and are thus established within context specific communities and cultures.

Gumperz 1982b shows that when individuals from different cultural backgrounds (such as speakers of British English vs. speakers of Indian or Pakistani English) use a contextualization cue that has the same form (e.g., rising or falling intonation) without recognizing that that form has a different meaning (e.g., to signal deference or not) in the other community, miscommunication occurs, and the face needs of one or both participants are its unfortunate casualty. Even more detrimental is the cumulative effect of such unresolved misunderstandings which potentially results in stereotyping, prejudice, and the erosion of goodwill in intergroup interaction. In other words, microinteractional misunderstandings often lead to macrolevel social problems.

The body of knowledge and experience that is built in the minds of the members of a given community and enables them to recognize such cues and frames, can be referred to as shared schema (e.g., Tannen & Wallat [1987] 1993; Schank & Abelson 1977). Oller (1979), in the context of assessment and language acquisition, uses the
term *pragmatic expectancy grammar* to describe the systematic, shared knowledge of conventions that is necessary for participants to understand each others’ intended meanings within a particular cultural context. Perhaps the most critical point about schema for solving problems of interpretation, has its origins all the way back in Bartlett (1932) in his work on memory, cognition, and narrative. He explains that when we encounter new data that does not fit into our existing schema, our first instinct is not to expand our schema to include new signs and new meanings, but rather to “normalize” it in the direction of known, pre-existing schema, to treat it, in essence, as homonymous, at the risk of communicative failure.

This interactionally based account for why conversationalists behave as they do, serves as a foundation upon which Tannen has developed the concept of individual conversational styles (1984). She specifically identifies high involvement and high considerateness styles, each rooted in differing ideas about what language forms constitute polite behavior. High involvement speakers will, for example, view volubility as a show of interest in one’s conversational partners, an effort to honor the others’ positive face, but may be experienced by high considerateness speakers as pushy and rude, a violation of their negative face, an imposition. At the same time the high involvement speakers are likely to interpret the taciturnity of high considerateness speakers as disinterest, a violation of their positive face, rather than as an effort to honor their negative face.

When participants do not share schema for what constitutes polite behavior, they are likely to misunderstand the other’s efforts to be socially agreeable as exactly the opposite. In this context Tannen has adapted Bateson’s (1972) *complementary schismogenesis* to describe the phenomenon whereby one participant behaves in a manner that is undesirable to the other (e.g., a high considerateness person being more taciturn), which then provokes the other participant to behave in a mutually aggravating
way (e.g., the high involvement participant increasing volubility), a pattern that snowballs to the detriment, if not the ultimate dissolution, of the relationship. The most insidious and interactionally dysfunctional ramification of mismatched conversational style and complementary schismogenesis is that two or more people who have good intentions towards one another can accidentally use a discourse strategy that is (mis)interpreted by the other as an act of something less benevolent, which is in time likely to result in real ill will, however unfounded. Two important antidotes for the resolution of such misunderstandings Tannen (1984) identifies are developing more schema for the conversational styles of others, as well as engaging in metadiscourse, talking explicitly about differences in conversational style and checking to make sure that speaker intention and hearer interpretation match.

Every interaction between people brings together a confluence of cultural and experiential factors such as age, gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, education, ability status, and so forth, which render every interaction unique, leading to a linguistics of particularity (Becker 1984), considering all of the contextual factors that come to bear. That interaction, moreover, is further shaped and particularized by all the interactions that have preceded it, prior text (Becker 1984, Tannen 1989, 2007), which serves as another critical element of face to face interaction that can be used as a resource for current talk, provided both parties have access to that prior text. This prior text may consist of shared memories (also in our interactional schema) of specific interactions among the participants involved, but may also include the shared knowledge of larger, more public discourse such as news, arts, politics, television, and even the ubiquitous failsafe default, the weather.

In sum, the ambiguity and polysemy of language is managed through the use of interpretive frames which can be identified by contextualization cues that can only be understood when both speaker and hearer share the convention that a given semiotic
form is agreed to represent a given meaning or social function. Most critically, the role of facework in interaction is ultimately far more important to the choice of utterance form (see e.g., Lakoff 1973, 1976, 1979) than is the mere exchange of information, and all utterances are grounded in face driven interactional goals. Face, then, this impression of self relative to others, is a precious social commodity, both fluid and fragile, negotiated in interaction moment by moment, and both reflected and constructed (i.e., *mutually constitutive*, eg. Schiffrin 1994) through discourse. We find in Goffman’s work as early as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), the recognition that identity and social relationships are collaboratively constructed and negotiated by all participants, the underpinning of *social constructionism*, upon which interactional sociolinguistics and a host of other contemporary approaches to the analysis of human behavior are built.

Interactional sociolinguistics, however, takes an important departure from many critical theories which, particularly in the case of disability and physical difference, have focused almost unilaterally on the role of society in defining the identity of its members through its cultural discourse and viewing that discourse as dominance and oppression (e.g., Charlton 1998; Ingstadt & Whyte 1995; Longmore & Umansky 2001), ascribing to it not only causality, but also intentionality. Such macrosocial anlyses take a top/down perspective, viewing individual interactions as constrained by and resulting from the larger cultural context in which they are situated. Although the goal of such scholarship is undoubtedly the emancipation of those who are marginalized and not fully participating in the mainstream of society, the effect of attributing to the larger community all the responsibility for the construction and definition of the individual’s identity can be even more disempowering than allowing this asymmetry to go unacknowledged, if it denies the individual’s agency and her ability to define herself (and perhaps others who share the particular features society has determined constitute a significant difference). Thus, while many critical theories may identify grave social
prejudices and injustices, they do not often offer concrete, practical, microinteractional
strategies that individuals who wish to be egalitarian can take towards the end of
transforming those social realities as does an interactional sociolinguistic approach to
discourse.

Face to face interaction is of course achieved through many channels, modes
and modalities and these may be linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic, and in the
context of blind/sighted interaction, the visual elements often take center stage. Simmel
(1924), one of the first students of interaction to observe the vital role of gaze in
everyday communication, observed:

Of the special sense organs, the eye has a uniquely sociological function. The
union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances . . . the totality
of social relations of human beings, their self-assertions and self-abnegation,
their intimacies and estrangements, would be changed in unpredictable ways if
there occurred no glance of eye to eye.

No doubt they must have seemed unpredictable in 1924, before discourse analysis and
other methodologies (as well as the technologies for recording and analyzing visual
behavior) emerged as a means of concretely identifying the underlying system. Sighted
people, it is true, learn to negotiate interaction tacitly from infancy and are, therefore,
almost wholly unaware at the conscious level of its grammar and its significance in
ordinary sighted/sighted interaction, much less in blind/sighted interaction. They are
unlikely, therefore, to notice all of the effects of gazelessness in interaction, nor to
recognize either the need for or means of accommodation in their interactions with blind
participants, nor to notice how exquisitely systematic (and, therefore, predictable) these
processes are. An interactional sociolinguistic discourse analysis of this type of
interaction can provide the kind of explicit knowledge that is needed to improve this
interface of blind/sighted interaction in particular, and of interability discourse in general.

In recent years, with advances both in social research and in the technology for
gathering, storing, and analyzing data, both our understanding of language and our
focus of analyses have become more holistic, integrating the traditionally recognized lexicogrammatical modes expressed through speech and the written word with what were previously viewed as outside the purview of linguistics proper—paralinguistic and extralinguistic modes, nonverbal and nonvocal elements that carry considerable semiotic weight in face to face interaction. Early pioneers of this foray into multimodal analyses of interaction include the work of scholars such as Hall (1959, 1963, 1974), Bateson (1971), Birdwhistle (1970), Erickson (1982), Erickson & Schultz (1982), Scollon (1982), Kendon (1990), and McLave (1991).


Before approaching the data and analysis, however, the sighted reader first needs a basic orientation to the prevalence, spectrum, and basic features of the experience of blindness and a general sense of how various aspects might differently affect a blind or visually impaired individual’s social interaction among the sighted.

1.2 Introduction to Blindness
The World Health Organization (WHO 2010) reports the usually accepted quantitative, legal, medical definition of blindness thus: “A person is considered blind if he or she can see at a distance of 20 feet what a person with normal vision can see at a
distance of 200 feet, or has a visual field of 20 degrees or less," upon which the term “legally blind" is based. While such definitions are inevitably arbitrary and may not adequately reflect the degree to which a given individual is disabled by their vision loss, they are important because they determine the levels of accommodation, training, and assistance that might be reasonably expected from government, schools, and other institutions for a particular individual. According to the WHO (2011), approximately 285 million people in the world are visually impaired, of whom 39 million are blind and 245 million have low vision. It is predicted that without extra interventions, these numbers will nearly double by the year 2020. I wish to point out that at this rate, the combined number of blind and visually impaired people in the world will soon exceed the total population of the United States.

The WHO (Thylefors, et al. 1995:118) also reports that 96% of the world’s blind acquire their blindness later than childhood, after age 14, leaving fewer than 4% who become blind as children and an even smaller percentage of that population who were blind from birth and have never experienced any degree of vision or light perception. Of that small population of people experiencing blindness before reaching adolescence, fewer than 10% worldwide attend special schools for the blind (Gilbert & Foster 2001:229), 0.4% of the total population of blind people, and the American Printing House for the Blind reports commensurate numbers for the U.S. (APHB 2007). Moreover, by and large, even those who are educated in an institutional community with other blind children will return to their sighted communities when their schooling is finished, and

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8 It is worth noting that when vision is being assessed, generally what the person is being asked to see at a distance is printed text, as for example on the Snellen chart most Americans are familiar with in their general physician’s office. For sociolinguistic purposes, however, it is appropriate to ask whether and how well one’s ability to read printed text also correlates with one’s ability to “read" the visual semiotics of interaction.

9 Under 312 million according to the U.S. Census Population Clock January 23, 2011.
more than 99% of all blind people will have already been raised and educated alongside the sighted.

Unfortunately, the fact that 90% of blind children are educated alongside the sighted has not resulted in their integration into the fabric of mainstream society. Although the policy of mainstreaming (now referred to as inclusion) was meant to better prepare children for participation in the wider society in adulthood, it can and often does, actually increase their sense of social isolation (Sacks and Wolfe 2006; Kekelis and Sacks 1992; Hoben and Lindstrom 1980; MacCupsie 1990, 1992; McAlpine and Moore 1995). This isolation results from being the only blind student among hundreds of sighted classmates due to the low incidence of blindness, from being ignored by the sighted students, and from their own lack of social skills.

Visually impaired children lack social competence for two reasons. The first is a lack of knowledge of social norms, which sighted children ordinarily learn tacitly through visual observation and imitation (Celeste 2006; Guralnick et al. 1996). The second is an inability to perform many of those norms because they require the use of gaze, the most critical of which is negotiating the initiation of interaction (Frame 2004:128, Hatlen and Curry 1987). That asymmetry cuts both ways, as knowing how to get a blind person’s attention without eye contact is almost as great an obstacle for a sighted person as it is for the blind person, a fact that could contribute to why sighted children have been found to ignore blind classmates (Salleh and Zinal 2010:860, Guralnick et al. 1996:472, MacCuspie 1990, 1992). This function of gaze in initiating interaction obviously applies to adults as well, although those 96% or so who grew up sighted will at least have a more native understanding of its effects, even if they are hard put to find strategies for compensation.

In spite of the association most sighted people automatically make between blindness and deafness, similarities in their experiences are scarce, and one of the most
important differences is the misguided popular assumption of an ability based culture or community. Many deaf people, particularly those whose hearing loss occurred early in life, have the liberty of viewing deafness as a culture, based on a shared language, rather than as a disability (e.g., Humphries 1991, Padden 1989, Lane et al. 1996, Neisser 1983). Those who identify as members of this cultural Deaf\textsuperscript{10} community, not uncommonly report a preference for having deaf children. This is understandable since most deaf children are born to hearing parents and the children of most deaf parents are hearing, which results in a two generation double translingual, transcultural parent/child family (e.g., Singleton & Tittle 2000). This language and cultural barrier explains why, among the small number of deaf parents who have deaf children, some oppose cochlear implants (e.g. Sparrow 2005), while other Deaf parents even support genetic testing in order to assist in having a deaf child (e.g., Savalescu 2002, Middleton et al. 1998).

In contrast, I have found no reports in the literature or elsewhere of blind parents expressing any sense of advantage in having children who are also blind. Blindness does not entail the use of another language,\textsuperscript{11} and most blind people find that blindness itself is not sufficient to serve as a ground for relationship. There is even evidence to suggest that some blind people may intentionally avoid other blind people (Deshen 1992:8, Deshen 1991)\textsuperscript{12}. Moreover, due to its low incidence,\textsuperscript{13} unless one lives in an urban area (and while 9.7 million in the U.S. do, 11.8 million do not, NCHS 2010), there are few opportunities to even meet another blind person, much less develop a

\textsuperscript{10} The use of capital “D” in deaf indicates the cultural view of deafness, while the lower case “d” indicates the physical, perceptual fact of hearing impairment.

\textsuperscript{11} Occasionally, people mistake Braille for a language and think of it as analogous to sign language. Braille, however, is merely a tactile representation of the blind reader’s spoken language. Braille is no more a different language than written English is a different language from spoken English.

\textsuperscript{12} Deshen’s findings are based on blind Israelis in the 1980’s and he describes a mutual dissociative tendency on the part of blind individuals towards each other.

\textsuperscript{13} Of course, deafness is also a low incidence circumstance and it is the traumatic experience of not sharing a native language with one’s hearing parents that compels many deaf people to move to a community of other deaf people, and I do not mean to imply that there is anything easy about this process.
relationship with one. It is therefore fair to say that most blind people do not have a community of other blind people they can turn to as a sufficient resource for developing relationships and community, and that all blind people have to interact with at least some sighted people, even if they are only members of their own families. Encounters between blind and sighted participants are problematic, however, because of fear, stigma, and asymmetrical access to the channels and modes through which face to face interaction is usually achieved.

Blind/sighted interaction is hampered first, by the powerful stigmatic aversion that exists because of the degree to which sighted people fear blindness, and by extension, blind people. A poll taken by the American Foundation for the Blind (2007) found that Americans fear vision loss (and paralysis), more than they fear AIDS or cancer. Further evidence that this kind of fear is prevalent among sighted people is the relative ubiquity of the knee jerk exclamation from the unacclimated, “I would rather be dead than blind!” This sentiment is expressed again and again in informal discourse¹⁴ as well as in the literature, whether it is autobiographical, rehabilitative or research related (e.g., Deal 2003, Elliot 1931:1171, Carroll 1961:11, Parrish 1988). According to the website for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Canadians report that they would rather sacrifice years off their lives or lose the use of their legs, than lose their sight (CNIB 2003).

This violent emotional reaction in sighted people results in what Davis (1961) calls “enfeeblement,” a formidable psychological obstacle which weakens the abled participant’s ability to perform interaction smoothly. Add to this fear the fact that the sighted party has the least experience in this cross-ability interaction, and the onus of overcoming the stigma barrier falls upon the stigmatized, which is especially ironic when

¹⁴ I have personally heard it from many, including enlightened professors and a young woman I met in Virginia who had become cortically blind at the birth of her third child (due to the burden it placed on her family).
the source of stigma is disability and it is the individual with fewer resources who must accommodate the individual with more.

The sentiment that death is preferable to blindness not only inhibits blind/sighted interaction, but simultaneously sends the reflexive implication that a blind person’s life has no value. Further, this sentiment may be internalized by blind people, contributing to the high degree of low self esteem, depression (Margrain et al. 2012, Shapiro et al. 2008, Tuttle 2004, Tabrett and Latham 2009, Hahm et al. 2008, Tuttle 1986, Wuslin et al. 1991), suicidal ideation (e.g., Lam et al. 2008, Tuttle 2004:175, VanderKolk 1981:143), and in extreme cases, actual suicide (e.g., Porter 2005:22, Bolt 2005, De Leo, et al. 1999, Lester 1971\textsuperscript{15}, DeWitt 1981, Parrish 1988, Caplan 1981), (although considering the prevalence of the purported preference for death before blindness in the general population, suicide is relatively rare). All of these social circumstances have a reflexive effect that bears heavily on the \textit{identity} of the blind or visually impaired individual.

The blind or visually impaired person, who already has a steep road to climb interpersonally due to the barriers of fear and stigma, is furthermore obliged to perform the delicate task of managing positive and negative face needs with a restricted set of channels and modes, as I demonstrated in Everts (2004). In ordinary sighted/sighted interaction, gaze is central to the procedural elements of interaction. As a result, in blind/sighted interaction, where participants do not share access to gaze, the blind participant is obliged to rely on the use of alternate strategies for such functions as getting the sighted other’s attention, negotiating interaction, exchanging turns, and (if these acts are successful), potentially establishing future contact and a lasting relationship. The use of alternate strategies is problematic, both because they may not be recognized by the sighted participant, and/or because a given strategy may be

\textsuperscript{15} Lester’s article is interesting because it reports a number of suicides related to sight restoration, which shows either way the psychological and emotional impact of vision in one’s life.
reserved in ordinary sighted discourse to convey some other social significance that the blind participant does not intend (the problem of pragmatic homonymy).

For many people, when stigma, low incidence, and asymmetrical access to the typical modes of face to face interaction are combined, visual impairment constitutes a significant social handicap (Coupland et al. 1986). Many suffer from significant loneliness and alienation due to the difficulty of establishing and maintaining friendships (Zebehazy and Smith 2011, Rosenblum 1998, Sacks and Wolfe 1998, Rees et al. 2010, Pinquart and Pfeiffer 2011, Hahm et al. 2008, Deshen 1999:121) and the smaller personal networks that result (Kef 1997, Papadopoulos, et al. 2011:1088; Shapiro et al. 2008).

There are a few common misconceptions about blindness that will affect the sighted reader’s understanding of blind/sighted interaction. Most people are neither totally blind nor totally sighted; their visual ability may fall on any point of a broad continuum. Fewer than 10% have no light perception at all, and an even smaller percentage have had no light perception since birth (National Center for Health Statistics 2010). Even those who have no light perception, moreover, do not see black, as most sighted people commonly presume. Carroll (1961:30-31) explains that what a totally blind person “sees” is not black or darkness, but rather a kind of foggy gray. In fact, Carroll goes on to explain that, surprisingly to most sighted people, some people who have even had their eyes removed, “see” a kaleidoscope of light and color via the optic nerve.\(^{16}\)

The nature of what different individuals do see varies considerably, depending on the type(s) of blindness or visual impairment an individual has. One legally blind person might see only blurry shapes and light, for example, while another can only perceive certain colors, and still another can see almost nothing in his peripheral vision, but may

\(^{16}\) Dixie reports ‘seeing’ so much bright light now that it is often difficult for her to sleep at night.
have a small field of perfect vision straight in front of him. Even how well a person can see on a given day or even within a given hour may vary and thus not be a predictor of how well they can see later—factors such as fatigue, illness, different lighting, and other circumstances can affect visual acuity (Jenks 2005:147). This variability can be a great liability to blind/sighted interaction as sighted people who do not understand it may be confused about what the visually impaired person can or cannot see. Actually, the blind person herself may feel confused about the variability and the degree to which it is predictable, and may therefore be unable to offer a clear explanation to others. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to suspicion that the blind person might be exaggerating about her disability, evidenced in comments like, “She sees what she wants to see.” Of course, such interability misunderstandings are likely to be detrimental to both the identity of the blind individual involved and to that relationship.

The experience of being blind is, of course, as individual as the experience of being human. And yet, just as there are discoverable patterns of human behavior in general in social research, there are some patterns of behavior and experience among blind people that can be identified too, and patterns of behavior in interability social interaction as well. While each individual’s experience is a unique constellation of features related to blindness that will inevitably vary from the mean, I have arranged four basic journeys of blindness and their corresponding populations, depending on whether the onset of impairment was early or late in the individual’s life, and the degree of impairment, partial or total. Members of each population are likely to share a core of experiences and many of the same behavioral and attitudinal norms, as well as physical/perceptual constraints or features as I show in Table 1.
Table 1 Four Journeys of Blindness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY ONE: EARLY ONSET</th>
<th>CATEGORY TWO: LATE ONSET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those who have little or no experience of vision or memory of that experience. (Groups 1 &amp; 2)</td>
<td>Those who have experienced vision and retain some memory of that experience. (Groups 3 &amp; 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Group 1 Early Totals  
Blind from birth or infancy with no memory of the experience of vision | Group 3 Late Suddens  
Once sighted, raised with normal vision, losing sight suddenly sometime after visual maturity |
| Group 2 Early Partials  
Visually impaired from birth or infancy with some memory of the experience of vision | Group 4 Late Graduals  
Once sighted, raised with normal vision, losing sight gradually sometime after visual maturity (including age-related blindness) |

There are two overarching categories: those who have had little or no experience of vision or memory of that experience (Groups 1 and 2), and those who have experienced vision and retain some memory of it and (3 and 4). The degree of visual maturity achieved, generally considered complete by age eight or nine (Hosal, et al. 2000:1647), will affect not only the development of cognition itself, but also explicit knowledge of the visual world and the degree of mastery of the visual semiotics of face to face interaction. The most important distinction for any investigation of blind/sighted interaction is whether a blind person was once sighted, and thus privy to knowledge of the visual world and to the system of visually accessed social semiotics of face to face communication among the seeing. How extensive this knowledge is will further depend on a number of biographical factors, such as the age of the individual at the time of the onset of visual impairment, whether onset was gradual or sudden, the degree and type of impairment, and the innate personal aptitude of the individual for social interaction.

In sum, these numbers and facts about blindness are significant because they show the number of blind people in the world is increasing, that only a tiny fraction of them were blind as children, that most blind people therefore have some residual vision and/or a useful memory of the visual world, that 99% of all blind people are educated and live in predominantly sighted communities with sighted families, and that largely due
to the low incidence of blindness relative to the general population, most have few, if any, blind friends.

As for the experience of blindness, very few people are 100% blind with light perception or less, there is great variability in the visual experience of each blind person based on cause of blindness, even a totally blind person with no light perception does not see “black,” and due to problems of access and communication, many suffer from loneliness and isolation and have significantly smaller personal networks of friends and family. These facts highlight the need for improvement in our understanding of blind/sighted interaction. In the next section, I present a short summary of the research relevant to the social interaction of blind and sighted co-conversants.

1.3 Review of Literature on Blindness and Interaction

Research in the cognitive and linguistic development of congenitally blind children includes identification of the processes through which a blind infant achieves the developmental milestones that sighted infants typically achieve, largely, through vision. Such milestones include perceptual motor and cognitive skills such as object permanence, form identification, spatial relations, and perceptual-motor co-ordination (e.g., Begum 2003; Perez-Pereira & Conti-Ramsden 1999; Warren 1994; Rutter 1984, Andersen et al. 1984, 1993; Andersen & Kekelis 1986; Bigelow 1987, 1988; Bigelow & Bryan 1982; Dunlea 1984, 1989; Dunlea & Andersen 1984; Mills 1983, 1987).

In terms of communication skills, focus has been on speech production and the acquisition of vocabulary and syntactic structure, which have been found to be quite normal in blind children, while semantic development, especially for concepts that can only be perceived visually such as color, or deictic pronouns, joint attention, and intersubjectivity are more problematic. This research is important both for our understanding of the role vision plays in a sighted child’s cognitive and psycholinguistic development, as well as the role its absence plays for blind children, and it identifies
multimodal strategies for empowering the blind child to achieve the same developmental milestones necessary for all children to engage in social interaction, using alternate channels.

As we have seen, however, because the number of people blinded in childhood is so small and the number of congenitally blind is even more miniscule, at least 96% of all blind people fall outside the scope of this research. Moreover, as far as I have been able to determine, as of yet there are no follow up studies investigating the social interaction of these children after they have reached adulthood.

Social psychologists have been studying the role of vision in ordinary, adult face to face interaction within an experimental paradigm since the 1960’s. Rutter (1984) reviews the results of numerous experiments he and other scholars had conducted to date. By the 1960s, three primary functions of gaze in interaction had been identified: 1) expressing affect, 2) regulating conversation, and 3) monitoring other participants’ behavior for feedback. By the late 1970s it was found that ‘seeing’ (entailing nonverbal signals) had a greater impact on interactional outcomes such as negotiation and conflict, attitude and opinion change, transmission of information and problem-solving.

Rutter (1984:133) proposes social “cuelessness” as the primary difficulty of the blind in conducting smooth interaction with sighted others. In a research agenda focused on the study of blindness and interaction, Coupland, Giles, and Benn (1986:54), critique Rutter’s work by stating that “cuelessness can serve as a valuable explanatory concept only when it relates the absence of particular cues to particular dimensions of the non-seeing communicator’s interactive behavior.” They suggest turn taking as one such particular dimension that should be explored.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Their research agenda was based on interviews with blind individuals, but unfortunately the research did not come to fruition, largely due to the circumstance that has held blindness related research back for so many decades—the lack of funding for such a low incidence disability (Coupland PC 2002).
Kemp & Rutter (1986), in a study of the relationship between visual cues and psychological distance across blind/blind, blind/sighted, and sighted/sighted dyads, found that the blind/blind pair actually established more affiliation than the sighted/sighted pairs, even though they did not have access to the visual affective cues upon which sighted people usually rely. Their speculation was that this was caused by the blind participants being more practiced, and therefore more effective, at using language to ask for the affective information desired. They do not, unfortunately, provide transcripts or examples of the actual language strategies that were used to acquire this information, and there is no specific address of visual cues in turn taking or in other interactional goals or procedures.

The studies of congenitally blind children developing cognitively and acquiring their first language without the usual medium of vision reveal the processes of creating building blocks both for understanding the world around them and for social interaction in the child’s future, but they apply to only a tiny population of the world’s blind, and tell us very little about the interaction of blind adults. The experimental studies in social psychology reveal more about the multimodal aspects of interaction between individuals in impression development and affiliation/psychological distance. They do so, however, in the necessarily artificial context of a staged encounter between strangers that will most probably have no future ramifications for the individuals involved as they are not expected to encounter one another after the research event, a consideration which will affect the behavioral choices participants make within the research event as each context produces different motives, and therefore different behavior.

Those deficits lead us to the need for ethnographically grounded and sociolinguistic research of more naturally occurring interaction in pre-existing relationships and communities, whose outcomes will also extend into the future.
Several scholars have conducted ethnographic research into the interaction of blind and sighted people, including Deshen in anthropology, Frame in sociology, Jenks in communication, and Yerian and Everts in interactional sociolinguistics. Each researcher uses slightly different methodologies, and each approaches the data from a different perspective of varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity in relationship to the target community, all contributing to an ever triangulating body of research approaches for understanding blind/sighted interaction.

Deshen (1992, 1987, 1989, 1991, Deshen and Deshen 1989), who is sighted, presents a traditional ethnography of blind individuals in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s based on over 800 pages of field notes taken over the course of one year and a half of field work, including daily participation in a sheltered workshop, and extensive interviews and observations of nearly 60 blind individuals who had acquired their blindness no later than adolescence. While Deshen does not analyze microinteractions with transcripts and recordings as data, he does provide descriptions of the interactional behavior of blind people and their relationships with members of various subgroups in society. He observes that the blind people in his target community very much want to be in interaction with sighted people, but often fail to realize this desire.

This preference for sighted companions is highlighted particularly in marriage prospects, where Deshen maintains that blind individuals first aspire to obtain a sighted spouse, but then “settle” (usually) for a blind spouse, preferring partial rather than totally blind partners. In the context of blind Sephardic Israelis, a blind man had a better prospect of marrying a sighted woman, since women were viewed as subordinate to men, and since women were expected to care for their husbands, this was acceptable. It was much more difficult, however, for blind women to marry sighted husbands, since

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18 Individuals were considered blind if they required one of the standard mobility aids when traveling and were included only if they had no other major disability (1992:6,7).
husbands are not traditionally expected to be caregivers for their wives, and since a
blind person was assumed to require a caregiver (see also Sentumbwe 1995 and
Murphy 1987).

Deshen also presents an interesting discussion of the cultural constraints on the
use of alternate senses by blind people in the presence of sighted people, showing
some to be more socially acceptable than others. He points out that hearing (audition) is
the most acceptable, but also notes that its efficacy is impeded by noise produced by the
oblivious sighted people in one’s environment. Olfaction is useful in identifying people
(e.g., by their soap or perfume), and in orientation to one’s environment, but using
olfaction is fairly taboo in western society when the it is observable. Westerners also
strongly disprefer interpersonal touch, especially with strangers, which means that
sighted people feel uncomfortable leading blind people by the hand or arm (they will
sometimes only pull at their sleeve), which in turn, makes blind people uncomfortable
and reluctant to ask for such assistance.

Tactility, moreover, is also highly visible to others, so even exploring material
objects with one’s hands can draw considerable unwanted attention and is often viewed
with mild disdain. Thus, ironically, efforts to gain more information about one’s
environment through alternate modes may provide the individual with a little more real
epistemological power in regard to their environment, but when tactility or olfaction are
used visibly, the use of the alternate senses will result in stigma and attributions of
powerlessness. Thus the sensory norms of the dominant sighted society may constrain
the blind individual’s use of her alternate senses.

Deshen’s work recognizes the social construction of blindness, some of the
problems of establishing independent identities, attitudes of blind people towards both
sighted people and other blind people, difficulties in procuring employment, and the
undesirable ramifications of using alternate sensory channels for acquiring information sighted people normally achieve through vision.

Frame (2001, 2003), a sociologist who is herself visually impaired with low vision, conducts a multifaceted investigation of the perceptions of blind people about their experience of interaction with sighted people. Combining qualitative (autoethnography, narrative, and oral interviews) and quantitative (statistical survey) analyses, she draws upon two major sources of data: 188 surveys of visually impaired Floridians and eight conversational interviews, which she supplements with information from both her own autoethnography and the literary accounts of five authors who have written about their own experiences of blindness. Using Goffman’s (1959) stage metaphor as a framework, she treats in turn self concept, self presentation, and the management of spoiled interactions.

Frame found that individuals with more severe visual impairments tended to experience a lower self concept and more depression, and that those who perceived their stigma to be more severe and exhibited an external locus of control (i.e., a lack of agency), were more depressed than others. The linkage of depression and lack of agency is also made in medical statistical studies of persons with visual impairment such as Bernbaum et al. (1998), Szlyk et al. (2001). Happily, and somewhat surprisingly, however, she also found that visual impairment served as a source of positive self esteem for some individuals when they perceived such characteristics in themselves as determination, independence, and sensitivity towards others. Moreover, participants’ sense of competence in their jobs (which serves negative face needs) tended to correlate not only with their actual adaptive skills, but also with the accessibility of adaptive technology and assistance from others (which serve positive face/involvement needs, but potentially threaten negative face/independence needs) as central to that competence. The narrative accounts presented also suggested a positive correlation
between competence derived self esteem and the early intervention of parents and teachers in developing independence skills. Self esteem, in turn, is an important factor in developing relationships with others.

Frame thus turns next to the individual's ability to maintain symmetrical relationships with sighted others, in which one party may simultaneously seek assistance from the other when needed, while still maintaining a sense of personal control and independence in having something to offer the other, another essential for managing the tension between positive and negative face needs. As for acquiring and accepting assistance, Frame found that most of her informants simply asked for it when needed, offering humor, extra graciousness in their requests, or some kind of remuneration, whether it be a tip or a favor that they are able to do that does not require vision, in reciprocation, thus equalizing the positive and negative face balance. She found that unsolicited help, even though irritating to many, was accepted, as long as it did not actually make the situation more difficult or dangerous for the visually impaired individual. Although sighted relational partners were not surveyed or interviewed to confirm this perception, the visually impaired informants reported finding ways to balance their need for assistance with other contributions and displays of independence, and thus managing the regulation of equity, reciprocity, and power to maintain symmetrical relationships.

Finally, when the presentation of the competent self among the sighted failed, participants in Frame’s data reported using four strategies of response: escaping the scene (an independence strategy), apologizing, explaining, and using humor (primarily involvement strategies). Sometimes the successful performance of the blind individual does not fail, but is still besmirched by the response of sighted others on the scene—either by their pointing out a blindness precipitated difference, or by responding too positively to a successfully navigated task that the sighted onlooker did not expect a
blind person to be able to do. In either case, drawing attention to the difference of the visually impaired actor somewhat spoils the performance and causes a loss of (primarily negative) face, which the blind party is then obliged either to repair or be resigned to.

In sum, although she does not use the same terminology as sociolinguists, Frame’s work essentially explores the management of positive and negative face needs as exhibited in the reported experiences of blind and visually impaired individuals in interaction with sighted people, identifying a number of important factors that contribute to their healthy identities, interability relationships, and general sense of happiness.

Jenks (2002, 2003, 2005), working within the field of communication, writes about visual impairment from an ethnographic and autoethnographic perspective. Like Frame’s and my own, her work is also personal; in her case, she is the sighted mother of a visually impaired son. She now has over fifteen years of experience as a sighted participant/observer of blind/sighted interaction and of this unique community of (primarily) sighted parents and visually impaired children. Her work begins by exploring the line between the emic and the etic perspectives of visual impairment and the theoretical and methodological problems of being a sighted researcher deciding what is relevant for visually impaired people, and later moves into narrative analysis, focusing on the accounts of sighted parents about their experiences raising visually impaired children.

Using Frank’s (1995) three narrative types (restitution, chaos, and quest), she compares the narratives of managing blindness in the family as recounted to her from the lived experiences of her informants, to the “official” master narrative of “coping” espoused in the sociological literature on disability. She finds the master narrative invariably recapitulated in the published accounts she reviews—portraying all families as undergoing an initial crisis state and then learning to cope, and eventually returning to a state of “normalcy,” a pattern which corresponds to Frank’s restitution narrative. Jenks contends that in her own story and those of the parents she has interviewed, there is no
eventual “normalcy,” no final copasetic state of rest such as the official coping narrative
purports in the literature. Rather the chaos and sense of restitution are cyclical, ongoing
processes that have to be overcome again and again.

In the process of her analysis, Jenks identifies another narrative type, the
*explanatory narrative*, such as those a parent of a child with a disability is obliged to
provide for outsiders over and over again, tailored to each situation. Essentially, the
process she describes is that of the constantly emergent discursive negotiation of
identity and relationship. While Frame gives us a view of blind/sighted interaction from
the perspective of the blind participants, Jenks gives us a view from the most intimately
related sighted participants’ experience, the parents of visually impaired children.

Yerian (1993), also sighted, in an unpublished term paper written for Deborah
Tannen, is to my knowledge the first and only other scholar besides myself who has
examined the actual interaction *between* blind and sighted interlocutors. Although she
seems to have been unaware at the time that she was breaking new ground in looking at
the interaction of the blind, Yerian applies an interactional sociolinguistic framework to
the analysis of interaction between Maven, a highly educated, older, congenitally blind
woman working as a disabilities issue specialist in Washington, D.C., and her sighted
colleagues, with a primary focus on gender and communication in the workplace.
Yerian’s ethnographic grounding as a participant/observer was established by serving as
a reader for Maven for sixth months before conducting this research (Yerian PC 2012),
and the data was gathered by audio recording seven hours of workplace meetings and
interactions between Maven and six of her sighted colleagues (of both genders), four of
whom outranked her. Yerian reports that it was Maven who first voiced her suspicion

\[I \text{ have foregrounded Maven’s visual ability here because it is central to my focus, but I also}
\text{note that Yerian does not mention blindness until p. 9, when she introduces her subject. I believe}
\text{Yerian wished, as an outsider, not to give blindness more importance to her identity than was}
\text{warranted.}\]
that her gender and her blindness were stigmas which worked to marginalize her in the office.

Yerian found that Maven seemed to get along better with her male sighted colleagues than her female sighted colleagues, and that this seemed to be related to her use of a particular style of humor, which was sex-class linked (Goffman 1977) more to male characteristics than female characteristics. Humor is a powerful conversational strategy that is inherently face threatening as it challenges the listener to identify the humor frame of an utterance rather than taking it at face value, and as such, is also sex-class linked to male language styles. In particular, she notes that Edelsky (1993) has shown that using joking as a means to get the floor is more male sex class linked. It seems that Maven produced a relatively high amount of assertive humor in proportion to her female colleagues, and a higher number of face threatening acts, resulting in more involvement and solidarity with her male colleagues, but some alienation of her female colleagues. Maven seemed to use humor to mitigate the presentation of information about herself that subtly reminded her listeners of her knowledge and value in the group, as well as to mitigate the negative face threat in some criticisms Maven made of some of her colleagues’ work. Thus, Yerian shows how Maven skillfully uses the modality of humor in a more commonly male sex-class linked style to enhance her identity as valuable and worthy of respect, as well as to foster solidarity with some of her co-workers.

Finally, in Everts (2004), I present an ethnographically grounded, interactional sociolinguistic analysis of some multimodal aspects of turn taking in blind/sighted interaction, which emerge in the 74 minutes of video recorded multiparty interaction between Dixie, a once sighted blind woman, and seven sighted associates (data I present in greater detail in Chapters Two of this dissertation). I showed how asymmetrical access to the mode of gaze within the visual channel significantly affected
the success or failure of attempts at addressee designation and turn taking. Two primary compensation strategies emerged in the data, which were used either pre-emptively or as repair after a point of initial pragmatic failure.

First, both Dixie and her sighted co-conversants employed the ordinarily dispreferred strategy of third person address in blind to sighted and sighted to blind dyads, to achieve addressee designation in the absence of mutual gaze. Second, when Dixie failed to claim a turn due in part to nonverbal signals she was unintentionally giving off, and in part to having her verbal bid for a turn overlapped by another turn claimant, she was able to marshal a multimodal array of alternate strategies to reformulate her turn bid and successfully get the floor. She achieved this in two steps. She first corrected her miscuing visual signals—body position, proxemics and gaze direction, by turning and aligning herself physically with the current speaker. She then employed not only linguistic modalities including humor, complaint, and repetition of her question/bid, but also a constellation of nonlinguistic modes including gesture, facial expression, proxemics, and feigned mutual gaze, all of which capitalized on the sighted participants’ dependency on visual cues in interaction, all skills she had acquired before she lost her vision and has retained, even though she no longer has receptive access to them herself.

Deshen, Frame, and Jenks (the ethnographers) reported on the experiences, behavior, and perceptions of those within communities of blind and sighted people largely as reported in interviews by either sighted or blind informants. All of these researchers were deeply involved in these communities and had spent decades analyzing them as participant/observers. Deshen gives us an in-depth picture of the life of blind Israelis and their situation within the larger culture, while Frame and Jenks depict the perspectives of blind and sighted people (respectively) of their blind/sighted interactions in the United States.
Yerian and Everts (the sociolinguists) conducted microanalyses of recordings and transcriptions of the actual interaction between blind and sighted interlocutors, focusing on the discursive production of power and solidarity, primarily on the part of the blind individuals. All five researchers focus on some aspect of the interaction of blind and sighted people in authentic, pre-existing relationships within their own communities, and all five treat blindness as a social construct within their respective cultural contexts. While the ethnographers describe the relationships and identities of the members of their target culture, the sociolinguists complement this work by identifying some of the precise microinteractional discourse strategies used to produce those relationships within their respective target communities. I now turn to the larger research area of disability and interaction.

1.4 Relevant Work on Disability and Language in Interaction

The foundation that was first laid in applying the science of linguistics to matters of disability and language began, naturally, with a focus on those perceptual (deafness), physical, or cognitive differences which directly affect the production or processing of language. Focusing more unilaterally on the “deficit” or the “deviance” (Davis 1961) of the person affected with the disability, this research trajectory also reflected the lingering effects of the biomedical model of disability that prevailed throughout the larger part of the twentieth century, rather than the more recent social constructionist perspective. The former treats disability as a medical, physical reality, grounded in the so called “hard sciences,” decontextualized of psychosocial dynamics and assigning responsibility for adaptation to the individual with the impairment.

Social constructivism views disability as socioculturally produced by societies, and often places a critical emphasis on the dominance of the abled majority, viewing its effects on the person with a disability as acts of oppression (e.g., Hammell 2006, Charlton 1998, Ingstad & White 1995, Linton 1998, Davis 1995). To the degree that this
approach ascribes nearly all the responsibility for adaptation or accommodation to society, as opposed to the medical model ascribing it all to the individual, it can be seen as reactionary, riding the pendulum to the opposite extreme, and like many approaches to social problems, may constitute more of a wedge than a bridge between the two (socially constructed) populations.

Interactional sociolinguistics, however, provides a third approach, more comprehensive and more balanced, ascribing agency to both the abled and disabled members of society, focusing on the collaborative, dynamic, and emergent nature of interability interaction which is negotiated and co-constructed by both parties. Only from such a perspective can we acknowledge the innate equality of people on either side of the ability divide, acknowledging the role of the abled majority in creating these social realities, while at the same time acknowledging that the person with a disability is also a member of society, and as such has the power to be an agent of change in her own life, in the lives of others, and ultimately in society at large. In reality, social construction is a bilateral affair.

An interactional sociolinguistic approach has been successfully applied to the interaction of deaf participants (e.g., Lucas 1995, 1996, 1998; Lucas & Valli 1992; Mather 1996; Mather & Winston 1998), although most of the early work focused on intra-ability interaction within the deaf community rather than across ability lines \(^{20}\) (but see Roy 2000, Stern 2008, Langer 2007 for work that crosses this barrier). A sociolinguistic approach has also been extended to the investigation of the interactional dynamics of such populations as the aging (e.g., Coupland et al. 1988), aphasics (e.g., Goodwin 1995), and Alzheimer’s patients (e.g. Hamilton 1988, 1991, 1994a,b, 1996). These focus

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\(^{20}\) Within Deaf culture deafness is commonly viewed as more of a cultural difference than a “disability,” and the idea of interability discourse as distinguished from intercultural discourse may be a point of contention.
on the collaborative construction of identity, the negotiation of power and solidarity in emergent interaction, and agency in discourse.

When Hamilton (1994a) undertook the research of language and Alzheimer’s disease in the early 1980s, the field she faced was still almost exclusively medicalized and the assessment of patient ability was decontextualized of personal relationships or personally relevant contexts, so that there was no true motivation for the patient to perform well, or even at all. Alzheimer’s research had focused on the (in)abilities of the patient, as demonstrated in formal assessment events, and did not take into account other abilities the patient might possess, but might not be able (or willing) to display in the test situation. Moreover, the approach did not take into account the way the behavior of the healthy interlocutor influenced the patient’s behavior and vice versa.

Hamilton’s study was a longitudinal investigation over the course of five years of the progressive effects of Alzheimer’s on the communicative abilities of a woman she calls Elsie. Rather than examining Elsie’s language alone, Hamilton looked at the interactions between both Elsie and herself, a healthy conversational partner, acknowledging the dynamic and collaborative processes of communication between two people. Hamilton examined her own utterances and their effect on Elsie’s performance, acknowledging that sometimes healthy interlocutors produce language that looks exactly like that of the patient suffering from a degenerative disease, even though it has no pathological source. She demonstrated the importance of examining the utterances of both healthy and impaired participants by the same standard, particularly taking into account the speaker’s interactional goals and not falling into the trap of ascribing all marked language behavior to the disease when produced by the patient and to some logical source when produced by the healthy participant.

By audio recording, transcribing, and analyzing her own interactions with her subject, Hamilton showed that the healthy participant’s behavior was a very significant
factor, both in influencing the patient’s performance, and in assessing that performance in light of conversational goals, rather than solely in terms of decontextualized lexical and syntactic elements of language use, which turned out to be less critical to communicative efficacy (and less motivating for the patient to demonstrate).

By taking this approach, Hamilton also avoided the shortcoming of most work in the biomedical model, which entailed the deficit approach (e.g., Ingstadt & Whyte 1995:v), and identified competencies in her subject that would not have come to light if she had only looked at the ways Elsie deviated from the norms of healthy interlocutors and not her own discourse. Thus it was Hamilton’s work that first extended the methodology of interactional sociolinguistics to interability discourse. More recently this interactional approach has been used to analyze the discursive construction of identity and relationship in the context of mental illness, and of physical and perceptual disabilities not traditionally recognized as language related.

McNerney’s (2001) dissertation analyzes the narrative accounts that occur in her interviews with 18 amputees and polio survivors in the United States about their experience in interactions with commonly abled people, examining the contradictory positionings of agency and helplessness that informants alternately exhibit in their narratives. McNerney also provides the emic perspective of a native participant/observer of the discourse community she investigates, as she is also an amputee. After first comparing strong versus weak metaphors for the experience of disability, often taking on images of imprisonment or war (very much in keeping with the critical social constructivist view), she then shows how negation marks departures from sociocultural norms and expectations, especially when portraying the notions of “not disabled” and “not able.” Finally, she shows how informants position themselves towards others—common people, intimates, and authorities, through constructed dialogue, showing patterns of positioning that are distributed according to which category of interlocutor is
addressed. McNerney’s work ties linguistic strategies in narrative to varying degrees of agency as they are perceived and portrayed by people with a particular physical disability.

Al Zijdaly (2005, 2006, 2007, 2009) also breaks new ground in two areas of disability with her investigation of the collaborative construction of identity, agency, and relationship between Yahya, a young man coping with quadriplegia and depression in Oman, and his ordinarily abled caregivers and associates. Al Zijdaly, whose ethnographic status as a participant/observer is rooted in her longstanding friendship with Yahya and her intimate involvement in this microcommunity, explores the impact of the stigma of both physical disability and mental illness in Omani society, both public and private. There is nothing abstract or metaphorical about the oppression Yahya faces, as there are actual Omani laws controlling not only his access to public facilities, but even his access to hired help in the most intimate areas of his life such as bathing and feeding.

Al Zijdaly not only brings these harsh realities to light, but also advocates for and collaborates with Yahya to successfully change not only his personal circumstances, but even Omani public policy towards disability. By identifying specific discourse components in both public and private ableist discourse, and the discursive negotiation of a quadraplegic individual’s own identity vis-à-vis both his personal network of abled associates and the Omani government and society at large, she demonstrates how microlevel discourse processes accrue to macrolevel social realities that can be dismantled and reshaped.

1.5 Gaze in Interaction

There is a vast literature about the role of eye and gaze processing in social cognition in humans and other primates (e.g., Itier & Batty 2009, Argyle & Cook 1973, Argyle 1973, Argyle & Dean 1965, Exline et al. 1965, Kendon 1967, 1972 1977, 1990, Ellyson & Dovido 1981, Rutter 1984), and this literature is as focused on the perception
of eye behavior in others as it is on the process of perception itself. Research in both animal and human behavior (e.g., Adams & Kleck 2005, Lamb 1981, Shafton 1976:48) demonstrates the asymmetrical use of gaze by dominant and nondominant animals. The dominant animal is free to gaze at any other animal, but the nondominant animal is obliged to look away. Thus the dominant animal need not monitor the gaze of the others, while the nondominant is obliged to monitor the leader’s for its own safety (Argyle et al. 1974, Ellsworth et al. 1972).

This centrality of gaze for negotiating status and connection will have obvious ramifications for blind/sighted interaction. In fact, while there are few similarities between blindness and deafness, there are surprising similarities between blindness and autism (Itier & Batty 2009; Pring 2005; Perez-Pereira & Conti-Ramsden 1999, Rutter 1984), as well as several other social disabilities, including Asperger’s (e.g, Bogdashina 2003), because of the shared inability to perceive and interpret and/or produce eye and gaze behavior in others, or other nonverbal semiotics which are primarily perceived and assessed visually. The inability to share vision mediated joint attention with another (neurotypically developed in infancy), impedes perspective taking and the ability to take the role of the other, and thus has profound implications for successful social interaction.

Specific research on the role of gaze in interaction has also been treated by ethnomethodologists, social psychologists, and anthropologists, among others. Phillips (1984), in linguistic anthropology, presents an in depth ethnographic analysis of the gaze norms for structuring interaction between Warm Springs Indians and Anglos. The fact that Warm Springs Indians use English rather than a tribal language contributes to the invisibility of these cross-cultural differences. Specifically, means of demonstrating respect and attention through gaze differ between the two cultures, miscuing Anglos that attention was not being given, when it was according to Warm Springs norms. Unaware of the pragmatic homonymy and the resulting misunderstandings of gaze use by the two
groups, cultural stereotypes and dysfunctional intercultural communication have
developed which have profound ramifications for education (often provided by Anglos to
Warm Springs children), individual success, and harmonious intergroup relationships. In
this study, Phillips shows how microinteractional behaviors result in macrosocial realities.

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), in the subfield of sociology known as
ethnomethodology, produced the first outline of the systematic structure of turn taking in
face to face interaction. They observe that virtually no gap or overlap (less than 5%)
occur between turns, and that speaker change occurs at predictable “Transition
Relevance Places” (TRP’s) at the completion of a Turn Construction Unit. Critically, the
current speaker essentially controls who will be the next speaker, and this is negotiated
primarily through the achievement of mutual gaze. There are three options at a TRP: 1)
the current speaker can “self select” the next turn, 2) the current speaker can “other
select” another participant for the next turn, or 3) another participant can “self select,” but
only through negotiation and ratification with the current speaker. The negotiation of turn
exchange between blind and sighted participants is obviously complicated by their
asymmetrical access to gaze.

Goodwin (1980, 1981), in linguistic anthropolgy, has also conducted important
work on gaze in interaction among sighted interlocutors. Specifically, he examined
different kinds of conversational restarts—those that seem to be lexical access
disfluencies on the part of the speakers, and those that are actually perfectly systematic
attempts of the speaker to get the floor. Goodwin’s data shows that the speaker will
restart his sentence until he has the gaze of at least one listener, sometimes restarting
his utterance multiple times. Once secured, this mutual gaze is the point at which the
speaker will produce a complete utterance. The precise synchrony of this gaze
achievement and utterance production is remarkable and shows, as Goodwin points out,
not only that “participants do attend to the location of phrasal breaks with some
precision," but more importantly for our purposes, that this attention is managed chiefly via gaze.

1.6 Gaps in the Research that Remain to be Filled

The literature on blindness in children illuminates the role of vision and its absence in the cognitive and linguistic elements of early childhood development, although it does not treat the interaction of blind adults, who comprise around 96% of all blind people. The work conducted by primatologists, social psychologists, and others working in an experimental paradigm has made strides in connecting access to visual cues both to affiliation (essentially postive face work), dominance (often the substance of negative facework), and pragmatic success, as well as identifying precise norms for the exact function, nature, and length of gaze during various stages of an interaction. What this work does not do is analyze naturally occuring interaction among blind and sighted associates who already have authentic, pre-existing relationships for which the interaction under investigation would have future ramifications beyond the research encounter. The experimental work is also more quantitative and less personal, lacking the depth that an ethnographically grounded case study can bring to understanding all of the particularity of the participants and their sociocultural contexts, nor does it benefit from having a native participant/observer of the community in point as researcher.

Deshen provides a rich ethnographic description of blind people in Israel based on years of observation and interaction with them. He provides a great deal of specificity for the unique situations of various participants. Deshen is not a native insider in the community he studies, but he takes great pains to take the perspective of his informants. We have no comparable study of such depth covering such a broad span of blind and visually impaired people in the United States.

Frame, however, does provide us with the first (auto)ethnographically grounded study of blind and visually impaired people in the U.S., focusing on the reports of the
perceptions of her visually impaired informants about their interactional experiences among sighted people. Jenks provides a series of articles that are also based on ethnographically grounded observations and narratives, primarily of the sighted parents of visually impaired children, narratives of coping and explanation. What Frame and Jenks do not analyze (and which the methodologies of their respective fields do not predispose them to) are the actual interactions between blind and sighted interlocutors. Thus there is a need for microinteractional linguistic analyses of the discourse processes in blind/sighted interaction.

Yerian, in fact, does provide us with what is probably the first ethnographically grounded interactional sociolinguistic analysis of the actual interaction of a blind woman negotiating status and relationship among sighted others in the workplace, yielding insight into the use of humor as a discourse strategy for counter-constructing oneself as powerful and involved in the face of marginalization by the dominant abled majority, though she does not specifically treat the effects of blindness on interaction.

Everts (2004) is the first to focus on blind/sighted interaction within an ethnographically grounded, interactional sociolinguistic theoretical framework and to use video recorded data to examine the multimodal aspects of this particular interability context. This work demonstrates the asymmetries of channels, modes, and modalities available to the blind and sighted participants in the procedural elements of addressee designation and turn taking in conversation.

Hamilton finds, in her interactional work with the language competence of individuals affected by Alzheimer’s disease, that her subject performs much higher when she has a genuine reason to communicate, particularly in the context of a warm relationship between friends, bearing much more fruit than prior work in the biomedical paradigm which focused unilaterally on the patient’s language production as assessed in artificial test situations.
McNerney extended interactional sociolinguistics into the realm of physical disability. Her data, like Frame’s, consists of narratives about the experience of the disabled subjects in interability discourse, which she analyzes linguistically, identifying discursive features that reveal both agency and helplessness, but does not cover interability interactions themselves. Al Zidjaly, like Hamilton, extends the methodology to the actual interability interactions of a disabled person among intimate, ordinarily abled associates, in this case a quadraplegic fighting depression. Al Zidjaly also analyzes the public disability discourse of Oman and the reflexive nature of the public/private interdiscursivity that exists. Like McNerney, Al Zidjaly focuses on the negotiation of agency and identity.

In this dissertation (and to a lesser extent in Everts 2004), I extend the framework to the direct analysis of blind/sighted interaction between a once sighted blind woman and a number of her closest (sighted) family members and friends. Like the ethnographers and sociolinguists I have just mentioned, I focus on the negotiation of identity and relationship as revealed and achieved through discourse, and the study is enhanced ethnographically by my being a participant/observer (to a degree) of the community I seek to understand, most significantly my having been raised as the daughter of the blind woman in my study.

In contrast to Frame’s and Jenks’ investigations analyzing the reported experiences of either blind or sighted individuals about their interaction with the other, I directly analyze the recorded and transcribed interability interaction across ability statuses, as do Yerian, Hamilton and Al Zidjaly. Moreover, while Yerian investigates audio recorded blind/sighted interaction, she focuses on gender and humor in the workplace, rather than directly on the nature of the blind/sighted interaction itself and the affects of disability, as I do in Everts 2004 and the present study. Because it is a case study, and because I am intimately acquainted with my primary subject, I am also able to
provide a comparatively in depth understanding of the particularity of her history and personality and the ways these factors contribute to her discourse choices and the identity and relationships that are their fruit.

1.7 Overview of Chapters

In Chapter One I have reviewed the literature that has arisen from several fields and which forms the foundation for an interactional sociolinguistic treatment of blindness in interaction, briefly addressing the most relevant work and identifying the gaps left in those areas which this dissertation addresses. Chapter Two begins with a discussion of the ethnographic component in my data and the advantages and disadvantage of working with my own family and friends, and the reasons for a case study. I then provide a profile of the blind participant and the particularity of her experience and her communication style. I conclude the chapter with a description of the two data sets and of each of the sighted participants, with brief characterizations of their relationships with Dixie.

Chapter Three is the first analytical chapter and treats the challenges to the procedural elements of interaction when access to visual information is not mutually available to all participants. The problem of opening and closing interaction is presented first, as demonstrated in some narrative reports of infelicities in these contexts. This is followed by a discussion of three types of addressivity in other-initiated turn exchange in multiparty face to face interaction and the degree to which each depends upon gaze for success. The final section provides a step by step analysis of self-initiated turn taking by the blind participant, examining first the multimodal elements that contribute to a failed turn claim attempt, and then those of a successful, reformulated attempt, and the complex of multiple modes, including visual, that she employs to get the speaker’s attention and claim her turn.
Chapter Four begins by looking at the creation of outsider/insider status in interability interaction and goes on to explore the same dynamic in terms of the types of epistemological powerlessness that are precipitated by asymmetrical access to visual information between blind and sighted co-conversants. Specifically, I show how Dixie uses displays of visual knowledge to overcome outsider status by requesting, offering, and even evaluating visual information. By appropriating visual texts in this way, she not only succeeds in bolstering her independent identity and enhancing her own involvement in the group, but also draws others into interaction within the group as well.

Finally, Chapter Six, the last analytical chapter, shows how Dixie successfully resists the dependency-support script identified by Baltes and Wahl (1987) and built upon by Hamilton (1996) by constructing an identity of independence resistant to attributions of helplessness. She does so by framing herself as competent at the outset, using physical (e.g. apparent mutual gaze, eye rolling) and linguistic modes (e.g. expressions of humor, anger and optimism) to display powerful affective stances. She also does so by reframing her blindness, herself, and her sighted would-be helpers. When others frame these entities in ways that position Dixie as helpless, she reframes them so that she is the agent, rather than a passive patient dependent on others.

The final chapter summarizes the findings, discusses applications and relevance, and suggests areas for further study. This work also sheds light on the social positioning of people who have other disabilities to contend with as they interact with those of differing ability statuses. Even more generally, it provides insight into the most fundamental elements of all human interaction, the discursive construction of identity and relationship, and the achievement of the delicate balance between power and connection.
Chapter 2: Data & Methodology

2.0 Introduction

Growing up as the oldest child and primary sighted mediator of a blind mother provided me with an intuitive sense that there were features of interactions between sighted and blind participants that were qualitatively different from those of ordinary sighted/sighted interaction. When I began to investigate this arena through an autoethnographic lens of interactional sociolinguistics, I followed in that tradition in not approaching the data with a pre-determined problem or hypothesis to solve, but by gathering the data and trying to let it speak for itself by observing the patterns that emerged.

In Chapter One, I motivated the need for a sociolinguistic investigation of blind/sighted interaction that is as naturally occurring as possible and situated in authentic, pre-existing, longstanding relationships. In this chapter, I first describe, in 2.1, two important aspects of the lives of blind and visually impaired individuals that will be important to my methodology. The first concerns the age of onset, degree of visual impairment, and rate of advancement, which I classify according to four basic journeys of blindness. The second consists of some aspects of the educational experiences of people in these four groups. In 2.2, I go on to describe and motivate the methodological choices I have made in conducting a case study and in endeavoring to make it as ethnographically grounded and natural as possible, which includes the advantages and disadvantages of being a researcher/participant from the target community.

In 2.3, I introduce the blind subject, Dixie. I first discuss the nature of her blindness and socialization. Subsequently, I describe some important elements of her biography, and some important aspects of her personality, including her outspoken personality and passionate religious practice. In 2.4, I introduce the interactions and the sighted participants, beginning with the multiparty data in 2.4.1 and following with the triadic conversational interviews in 2.4.2. In each of these sections I first present the
participants, followed by the setting and the nature of the interactions. 2.5 concludes the chapter.

2.1 Categorizing of the Experience of Blind and Visually Impaired People

The two subgroups of the first category are 1) individuals who have been blind from birth or infancy and have no memory of vision, and 2) those whose visual impairment was present at birth or early childhood, thus compromising vision at some point during the time of visual development. These children will still have benefited from some residual vision for cognitive and social development, the acquisition of some knowledge of the visual world, and some exposure to the visual semiotics of social interaction. Those with the least experience of vision may be expected to view themselves as having an identity primarily as blind, which may also pose a potential barrier in interaction with people who identify primarily as sighted.

The second overarching category consists of those who have grown up as essentially sighted and then lost their sight either gradually (3), or suddenly (4), sometime after visual maturity had been achieved. Both experiences entail being socialized first as a sighted person, resulting in a perception of self as essentially sighted, an identity which is then altered by visual impairment. These categories are not meant to be rigid or absolute, but merely to highlight the disparity in access to acquiring competence in the visual elements of social semiotics. The present study focuses on an individual whose experience spans Groups 2 and 4, having been born with limited vision,

21 There is one more experience of blindness that is rare enough that I will only mention it in passing. That is the experience of a person who grew up blind, but because of advancements in science and technology was able to regain vision later in life. Most of these stories are painful to read because it is so difficult for an adult, having missed that critical age for achieving visual maturity to make sense of visual stimuli, to have to learn such basic concepts as object permanence, proprioception, etc., after having lived for years in, and developed an understanding of, a world that does not include them. In fact, many stories of such medical “miracles” do not have the happiest of endings because those who experience them are much more comfortable (and in control) continuing to operate in the ways they have learned as blind people rather than accepting the new role of being an adult with a child’s knowledge or competence in what are very basic functions for sighted people. In other words, they prefer to close their eyes and proceed as if they were still blind.
but retaining significant vision until adulthood, and therefore having achieved a degree of competence in visual social semiotics nearer that of a typical sighted person prior to her loss of sight. For the most practical purposes of this study, the significance of these distinctions in blind experience lies in how the journeys shape the individual and the interpersonal relationships they ultimately develop with sighted people in their communities.

These four journeys further subdivide into two main paths of adaptation, which also entail two theoretical paths of education and socialization, which I am calling the conventional and the organic paths. In truth, like all reality, this is really a continuum rather than a binary distinction, and may in practice be more important in describing the fuzzy mythology of blindness held by most sighted people in contemporary American society.

<table>
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<th>1 Early Totals</th>
<th>2 Early Partial</th>
<th>3 Late Sudden</th>
<th>4 Late Gradual</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Path of Conventional Adaptation</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Path of Organic Adaptation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Most likely to receive formal training in some sort of conventional blindness educational institution or program with other blind people</td>
<td>Most likely to have adapted to blindness more organically among the sighted</td>
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Table 2 Paths of Adaptation

The conventional path refers to the formal education of blind and visually impaired people, especially children. Being visually impaired from childhood has the potential advantage of early identification and the potential for a native like acquisition of adaptive skills such as mobility (e.g., cane or guide dog travel), literacy (e.g., Braille or auditory access to written material), and overall competence in access to technology. Furthermore, being immersed in a community with other blind people (and sighted people who are accustomed to interacting with them) provides the opportunity to acquire such skills through the relatively natural process of cultural transmission. Persons who experience vision loss suddenly, later in life, will also be more likely to participate in
some kind of immediate, intensive formal rehabilitation training than someone whose onset is gradual.

While early in the last century specialized schools for blind children were thought to be the best approach to their education, by the mid 1900s the general tide of opinion had shifted and parents felt that children with visual impairments should be educated in regular schools alongside sighted children, with specialized blindness related education provided on the side, as needed. All three approaches, full time schools, ancilliary blindness education, and short term rehabilitation programs are forms of the conventional path and benefit from the experience and expertise of the blind community that has preceded them and the solutions to blindness precipitated difficulties they have developed.

The organic path is probably the experience of most visually impaired people throughout history and around the world, when and where there are/were no specialized institutions, and most were the only blind person in their community. These individuals are left to their own devices and those of their family and community. Persons who lose their sight later in their lives, at least 96% of the world’s blind, perhaps at a time in their lives when it may not be practical to stop their daily life and enter a full time training program or school, are more likely to have made this transition with little or no formal training or instruction, particularly when the onset is gradual. Ironically, this is partly because they can see too much. Residual vision can be a considerable obstacle to acquiring various skills, because someone who has been dependent on her sight all her life she will continue trying to use any remaining vision (and even a mere pinhole of light can be extremely useful for navigation). Thus, she will find it difficult to learn adaptive techniques that require her to depend exclusively on another channel or mode for achievement of a desired task. In the case of Braille, for example, she will keep trying to see the raised dots rather than to identify them tactily.
The degree to which one’s path of adaptation is conventional or organic, and whether the rate of onset is sudden or gradual, can have far reaching effects on a person’s management of positive and negative face needs and the achievement of an identity that is both independent and involved.

A blind or visually impaired person’s discursive presentation of self is profoundly affected by the highly visible choice of mode of mobility adaptation, both because it is the first thing a stranger will notice at a distance, and because it is also a choice between two kinds of independence which are virtually mutually exclusive for the blind. The individual is forced to decide whether it is more important to have control over one’s material environment or over one’s social environment, identity, and information control. The two most common mobility aids used today are the long cane and guide dogs. Besides the problems of training (for the blind person in the former, and for the blind person and the dog in the latter) and expense, the choice of mobility aid is also the result of a deeply definitive decision on the part of the user—“How do I wish to present myself to the world? To whom shall I give the power of knowing what my greatest vulnerability is?” The long white cane is the most transparent and least ambiguous option, and therefore, potentially the riskiest. As Kuusisto (1998:100) writes, “The cane is an invitation to be naked in public.”

The cane is an instrument of considerable irony because successful cane travel allows a person the actual independence of getting where she is going without outside assistance, and is also a display of skill and courage, both of which should enhance her negative face. On the other hand, the cane is also a megaphone to the world that its user is blind, drawing attention to her performance and to her tapping cane—and viewed against the backdrop of the sighted people moving swiftly around her, she is likely to appear more helpless to the sighted onlooker, a considerable blow to her negative face. Although using a cane may increase one’s safety in traffic by alerting motorists of blind
pedestrians, marking oneself by using a cane also threatens one’s safety, announcing one’s vulnerability to any sinister, sighted would-be assailant who might be present. The cane is also annoying simply because it denies the individual the right to “civil inattention,” the social norm that in a transient encounter strangers give visual notice to each other and then withdraw attention (Goffman 1963:87).

The choice of a guide dog is less transparent, especially if the dog is not the stereotypical German shepherd that sighted people expect to see as guide dogs, and it is conceivable that a once sighted blind person might comport herself with her dog in a way that would not immediately reveal her blindness at least some of the time. The dog user has more opportunities to pass as sighted and thus enjoy a greater degree of civil inattention (at least until she has to go into a store or a restaurant, at which point the dog becomes a greater liability than the cane).

There is a third option for type of mobility, however, whose payoff is proportionate to its deficit, and that is being accompanied/led by a sighted companion. While this is an option as available to those with conventional travel methods as to those who do not have travel skills, it is essentially the only option for the latter. Relying on a sighted friend or family member may be the most restrictive of the three if it is relied upon exclusively for mobility outside one’s own home or office, effectively eliminating actual independence in mobility altogether. On the other hand, the surrender of independence is only to an insider, and not to the general public. A blind person bearing none of the “sign equipment” (Goffman 1963:24) of blindness can actually go unnoticed in many public contexts with her sighted companion. She then enjoys the “independence” of keeping her blindness to herself (and the “wise,” as Goffman (1963) calls those on the inside who know of the discreditable feature). The control of information about oneself can be just as significant in navigating the social world as is the control of navigation of the material world. The unjust irony is that the cane and dog users have real mobility
independence; yet it is the person who relies on another who appears the most independent to those on the outside.

Another difference that results from the degree to which one’s behavior is more conventional or organic relates to the communities with whom one comes in contact, and from which she will draw her friends. The primary reason for making this observation is the prevalence of the assumption on the part of sighted people that blind people have blind friends, which implies that it is not necessary for them to have sighted friends. Although blind people who have participated in training programs or organizations with other visually impaired members may develop friendships with them, it is critical to recognize that because of the low incidence of blindness, most blind people would not naturally come into contact with other blind people outside of such institutional contexts very often (e.g., Rosenblum 2000, McAlpine and Moore 1995), particularly if they do not live in an urban area where the incidence is higher. Moreover, even the blind friends made in those programs will more often than not go back to their sighted communities of origin, which are unlikely to be in close proximity to their own. What this means is that blind people who do have the benefits of specialized education and the community that is its byproduct, will nevertheless, not have much contact with those friends after returning home, unless they take a career in a blindness related field or organization.

Probably the most painful experience in maintaining a network of friends is that of the person whose onset was late and sudden. These people not only do not have the leisure of acquiring skills and adjusting to blindness gradually and incrementally, but they often also experience the traumatic and relatively sudden exodus of their former friends, who were most likely all sighted, but could not or would not make the transition from friend of a sighted person to friend of a blind person (e.g., Goodrich 2005, Carroll 1961). The path to acquiring a healthy network of friends for this group of blind people is further complicated in the case of late onset by the person’s own identity crisis as he or she
comes to terms with this new blind self, fighting feelings of worthlessness because of the new disability, which are greatly exacerbated by the pain of rejection by many old friends and associates.

One of the greatest assets a late gradual onset provides, however, is a fully developed ability to understand and produce the visual semiotics of face to face interaction. Another invaluable asset that the organic, gradual path affords the individual is a gradual development of relationships with sighted people who are also able to acclimate incrementally to the advancing blindness, and/or to gradually withdraw from interaction. There is no particular “moment of truth” with gradual vision loss as there is when those who choose not to remain in relationship with a newly blinded person fall away. Moreover, maintaining a network of basically the same friends over the course of one’s gradual vision loss creates a situation where those sighted friends and associates are also gradually adapting to the need to rely less and less on visual semiotics in interaction, to the types of accommodation needed and desired, and the smoothest way of providing that accommodation.

In contrast to those on the conventional path, those on the path of organic adaptation will be far less likely to meet other blind people in the course of their daily lives, and even the “professionally blind” (those with conventional support) upon completion of such programs, return to their home communities where they will share the experience of most other blind people—they live in communities of sighted people. And overwhelmingly, those sighted people also have little if any access to, and thus experience in, interacting with blind people. The burden of accommodation then falls on the blind individual to “educate” and accommodate the sighted people in their lives about blindness in general, and about their own preferences in particular.

Thus each path, the organic and the conventional, and those whose onset is early or late, sudden or gradual, have considerable advantages and disadvantages. The
conventional blind overall, and those blind from childhood in particular, are more likely to be better at many kinds of independence strategies that involve navigating and manipulating the material world (especially in mobility, literacy, and technology), while the late onset and gradual blind should be better at social interaction with sighted people, (especially in mutual eye contact, monitoring and displaying affect, proxemics, physical gestures, and so on) excelling in involvement strategies in that interability context.

2.2 Methodology: Qualitative Case Study of Naturalistic Interaction

Research into blindness and communication up to the present in social psychology and psycholinguistics has tended to focus on congenital/early onset blindness rather than later onset, on the totally blind more than those with low vision, on interaction between strangers rather than intimates, and in controlled experimental settings rather than naturally occurring interaction and on quantitative rather than qualitative results. Ethnographic treatments, on the other hand, have observed blind/sighted interaction and have studied the discursively manifested experiences of either the blind or the sighted individuals about interaction with the other, but have not studied the discourse of blind/sighted interaction in process (with the exception of Yerian’s excellent sociolinguistic treatment, though its focus was not the blind/sighted element of interaction). These methodologies have yielded many insights, but have also left broad swaths of the research terrain of blind/sighted interaction uncharted.

The goal of interactional sociolinguistic research is to study discourse to understand how humans use language to construct their social worlds—to construct identities and relationships. For many in this field, it is also about discovering discourse strategies that empower the disempowered, and those by which individuals can actively build relationships and community rather than be relegated to the margins of society. Many blind people experience marginalization and isolation and many feel relatively powerless among the sighted in their lives.
The best methodology for getting at particularity of blind/sighted interaction is an ethnographically grounded (Hymes 1972, Saville-Troike 1982), microinteractional analysis of discourse which approaches data collection with the goal of having the researcher become a participant/observer, immersed in the culture of the community, not just a passive observer looking in. This approach requires that cultural norms and participant values be integrated into the analyses. The present study is ethnographically grounded and emic in its perspective of blind/sighted interaction to the degree that I, the researcher, have been a native participant in this community for several decades, and at one time the primary mediator in Dixie’s interactional style with sighted others.

This does not give me an ingroup perspective of the blind person’s experience, but it does give me more of an ingroup perspective of the sighted interactants and a native pragmatic expectancy grammar (Oller 1979) for the unique interface between the set of modality constraints within which Dixie works. Being a native participant/observer also gives me a wealth of contextual information that would not be easily available to me otherwise. However, there are several ways that mine is still an outside perspective of the blind subject’s experience and requires careful attention to the input and playback responses by the blind subject, and attention to the insights of colleagues who bring their more objective perspectives from the outside community.

I have selected sighted participants who have authentic, pre-existing relationships with Dixie, and in most cases also with me, the researcher, so that the interactional patterns that emerge are much more likely to be organic patterns that have developed naturally over years of accommodation, and not those that arise spontaneously in artificially manipulated experimental situations. Analyzing friends and family also ensures that matters of power and solidarity, politeness and pragmatic efficiency will be more genuine, not grossly breached in the way that a one-time
interaction with strangers for the sake of a scientific study can be, such that participants’ actions have no future relational consequences.

Such authentic relationships are crucial because of the central role politeness and face work play in motivating the underlying system of modes and conversational strategies employed in blind/sighted discourse. Although the Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972) can never be completely overcome, the authenticity of the relationships between subjects and researcher helps to capture more natural dynamics than would research conducted by an outsider or with interactions between persons who were not acquainted prior to the data collection. The conversational topics are ones that engage participants in talk about matters that they are genuinely invested in, namely their personal histories, their relationships with each other, church matters generally, and the management of blindness.

This authenticity has its own inherent weaknesses as well, however, and though I have tried to compensate for those weaknesses by getting input on the data from outsiders, it is true, of course, that no single approach will capture all of the angles needed to construct a fully informed model of blind/sighted interaction. This research does, however, provide a dimension that remains largely unknown. Because I grew up among most of these people, I am an insider to the extent that I know these women and men personally, I was an active participant in the church and/or family they all belong to until I went away to college, I grew up in the same town they have all lived in for decades, and I was raised in the same working-class stratum of society. I am, of course, even more of an insider with all of the participants who are family members, sharing memories and experiences, values, faith, language habits, and conversation and humor style.

Most importantly for this study, I am an insider in terms of being a native participant of blind/sighted interaction from childhood. Some scholars have suggested that the oldest child of a parent with a disability often mediates between that parent and
the younger children and that the younger children may not acquire the same
accommodative communication strategies the oldest acquires (Lane 1996:171,
Singleton and Tittle 2011:228, Chase1999). Having such an intimate perspective of
blind/sighted interaction, I have felt to some extent the sentiment Johnstone (2000:86)
describes, of being “morally entitled to study my community in ways outsiders are not.”

There are several factors which mitigate the research benefits of my relationship
to the community. Even though I was the primary helper until I was 14, when she
remarried, Dixie’s husband took over many of the roles I had been accustomed to fill
(grocery shopping and filing our tax return, for example). When I left for college at 18, my
younger sister, then 12, took over the remaining roles I had filled, and as I have lived
outside of Kansas ever since, she has now assumed that role longer than I had. At the
time of this data collection, I am 16 years removed from the daily experience of
blind/sighted interaction.

The other critical element of this changing dynamic in my accommodative
behavior is the progression of Dixie’s blindness and its relationship to the experience of
the sighted intermediary. When I was a preschool child, Dixie had enough vision in her
better eye to read very large print with the aid of a bifocal and to walk herself anywhere
she needed to go (although not always safely). Through my elementary school years
she could see colors (although color blindness distorted them), shapes, and light, and
throughout my high school years she still had some very useful light perception. When I
went away to college, Anne, six years younger than I, stepped into the role of mediator
between Dixie and the sighted world whenever Dixie’s husband was not available.

My work follows Hamilton’s (1994a) in that it is a case study of a woman whom
the researcher knows well that extends the methodological framework of interactional
sociolinguistics to the interability discourse of a disability that had not previously been
treated as sociolinguistic in nature; it focuses on how the subject manages her disability
strategically to evade the interactional fallout of various failing competencies—i.e., a focus on what she can do, not just what she cannot do. In so doing, I hope to avoid the pitfall of the deficit approach, identify the specific linguistic strategies she uses to serve various interactional functions, and perhaps most critically, to analyze the interaction of and between both the blind and sighted participant(s) equally. Moreover, sometimes the performance of the disabled participant is actually impaired by the performance of the one who has more discursive resources at her disposal—where the abled partner may actually be impeding the other’s communicative competence, even when she is trying to support it.

2.3 The Blind Subject

The blind person in this study, Dixie Bennett, is the researcher’s mother. As mentioned in Chapter One, her loss of sight is primarily due to the congenital degenerative eye disease retinitis pigmentosa (RP), essentially the atrophying of the retinal nerves, a progressive disease present at birth, with the onset normally occurring in childhood. Dixie’s visual impairment was evident to her parents as early as the age of two. The prognosis was that she would be “completely blind” by the age of thirty. In fact, she had some usable vision through her forties and light perception into her fifties.

The vision of a person with retinitis pigmentosa has been described as an ever narrowing keyhole, creating “tunnel vision,” in which the peripheral vision diminishes first, until eventually that tiny window of light in the central vision closes altogether. The deterioration of Dixie’s sight was complicated by the presence of cataracts, night blindness, and astigmatism. Her perception of color also began to waver as the disease...
progressed. She could see well enough to read with glasses and good light until she was well into her twenties. In her thirties, she could still read letters with one eye, aided by a bifocal lens, in the best light and with maximal contrast. During her forties she lost all sight except for occasional glimpses of light and blurry forms. In her early fifties, at the time of this data, she only very rarely experiences a shadow of actual light. As I mentioned in Chapter One, the “visual” experience of a blind person is not blackness as most sighted people imagine, but may range from a foggy gray, to a kaleidoscope of color or light. In Dixie's case, she now experiences such bright “light” even in the middle of the night when there are no lights on that she often has difficulty sleeping. She has always regarded this light as a gift from God.

The progress of RP was sufficiently gradual, moreover, that she could see well enough to be educated and socialized with sighted children all the way through high school. This partial vision was fortunate also because she lived in a rural community where there were no resources for the education of blind or visually impaired children available, so being educated as a sighted child was her only option. Dixie was the oldest of three children with two younger brothers, raised first in rural Arkansas (till age five) and later in rural Kansas. Her father worked on the oil lease they lived on and her mother helped provide for the family by raising chickens. Later her mother ran a café in a neighboring town. Due to the rural environment and the era, access to resources, training, and rehabilitation opportunities for the blind were nonexistent.

Dixie went to the local public schools with her sighted neighbors and siblings, and received no special instruction in regard to managing visual impairment. On the other hand, the intimacy of her small school may have afforded her more individual attention than she might have gotten elsewhere. Her elementary school had two classrooms, one for grades 1-4 and one for 5-8. She was the
only student in her eighth grade class, and there were only a dozen or so students in her high school graduating class. She was winter basketball queen when she was a senior and she frequently recalls that she always got along better being “buddies” with the boys than the girls.

She was, she reports, overwhelmingly held to the same standards as the sighted children. She comments on this in one of the interviews,

But the best thing that my mom and dad and m—And my family is, they never let me feel sorry for myself. That was not an issue. Yeah, I had eye problems, but it wasn’t a pity thing. [Mom would say], “If you’d just look you could see.”

She recalls, too, being chastised by a home economics teacher who did not seem to understand the extent of her visual impairment for being unable to thread a needle as quickly at the other students. This was a culture that demanded conformity and competence, and disability was not acknowledged as an exception to these demands.

Born into a family of farmers who had defiantly stayed on their land and survived the Great Dust Bowl, independence was not an optional personal trait; it was demanded. Accordingly, if anyone suggested that there was anything Dixie could not or should not do because of her eyes, she would go to great lengths to achieve the supposedly impossible, just to prove that she could, she says.

There were, of course, limitations to what activities she could engage in with other children. Her vision made it virtually impossible to participate in team games, but she could run, and thus participated in track in elementary school. As her central vision was more than adequate for reading at that time (with the aid of glasses), she was an avid reader. She seems to have been able to acquire, on the whole, a sighted person’s

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22 From the interview with her step-father, Chuck.
23 Dixie could, in fact, sew well enough through her mid-twenties to mend articles of clothing in a rudimentary way, though I got the joy of threading of the needle as soon as I was about six.
understanding of the visual world (colors, shapes, communication, etc.), as well as a basic communicative competence in the visual semiotics of face to face interaction.

Just out of high school she could see well enough to waitress at a local café, but needed help getting home because of night blindness. At 19 she married George, a sighted man who used to frequent the café and would walk her home in the evenings. She had her first child at age 22, her second fifteen months later, and her third twenty one months after that, and needed little or no assistance in caring for the children or her household at that time. At 26, her second child was killed in a tragic accident at the age of three. Dixie turned to her faith during this time and became a devout Christian, which would later figure highly in how she experienced and managed her blind identity.

As her ability to read declined, Dixie relied more on her sighted husband to read for her when necessary, and eventually I became the primary reader. By the time she was 28 and had given birth to her fourth child, she could, for the most part, no longer see to read, even with the sharpest print and the strongest lenses available. At 33 she became single again through divorce, and it was during this period that she was offered the opportunity to move to another city for a six month training program in Braille and cane travel. A social worker named Rose Anne Winter, who became an invaluable friend and advocate, encouraged her to pursue a B.A. and then a Master’s degree in counseling upon completion of the rehabilitation training program. However, as the single mother of three young children who had just undergone the upheaval of divorce, she was unwilling to bring further upheaval upon them, and so declined that once in a lifetime opportunity.

Instead, a rehabilitation worker dispatched from the state capitol, over an hour’s drive away, began to make periodic visits every six weeks through which Dixie acquired a cane and a very minimal competence in cane travel. When we were in elementary school, she would walk us to school every day, taking her cane along for traffic safety,
mostly so that motorists would know that she was blind, and then she would walk home alone. I did not learn until I did this research that every one of us children had nightmares about her getting hit by a car or falling into a ditch on her way home without us. I also learned that every one of us had nightmares that we were in the front passenger seat of a car with Dixie at the wheel, and we were responsible for giving her directions.

She also acquired a rudimentary level of Braille literacy, mainly for labeling food and so forth, but which in later years she has all but forgotten. She did not and does not rely on either of these adaptive strategies (the cane or Braille) in her daily life. She does not travel or navigate outside of her home or that of her daughter, Anne, where she is familiar with the layout of the house. When she writes a letter, she uses a conventional typewriter or her own handwriting. When she wants something read, she has a friend or family member read to her. If she wants to read a book, she listens to the audio version if no one is available to read to her.

At 36, she married Leon Sr. and gained two more children. Leon is sighted and sees to it that everything she needs that normally would require sight is taken care of. They have a very efficient distribution of roles, and he has learned to let her do those things herself that she insists on doing like preparing meals, making his tea, doing laundry, and ironing his shirts. He is exceptionally adroit at helping her “invisibly,” in ways that do not draw attention to the fact that she is being helped.

Dixie’s personality has been influenced by a number of important factors and plays an important role in how she treats blindness and interacts with others. Moreover, a dramatic shift in her personality midlife shows one person as she was being socialized and learning to adapt to her blindness and the visual world during the time when she had

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24 She was able to write somewhat legibly at the time this data was collected; however, by the time this dissertation was defended, she could no longer do so and relied exclusively on the typewriter.
some usable residual vision, and a very different person in the second half of her life, coinciding with her transition into being completely blind. She used to be extremely shy, more taciturn, introverted, timid in public, barely religious, and had a very low self esteem. Today, as the data show, Dixie is cheerful, optimistic, humorous, independent, extroverted, uninhibited, garrulous, compassionate, deeply religious\textsuperscript{25}, very generous, loyal, honest to a fault, a little bit vain about her appearance, and in possession of a strong self esteem. Of course, it is also possible that she may at times be seen by some as bossy, irritable, impatient, legalistic, neurotic, pushy, insensitive, and a little bit loud. She generally has a cheerful demeanor in public, and is more likely to express anger than sadness generally, and practices a considerable amount of agency when she is unhappy about her circumstances.

The dramatic change in Dixie’s personality midlife coincided roughly with the convergence of four major life events, which are themselves interrelated and somewhat mutually constitutive: 1) becoming a Christian, and later a Pentecostal, 2) losing most of the residual sight she had been relying on for mobility and reading, and 3) becoming friends with an exceptional social worker named Rose Anne Winter. When Dixie became a devout Pentecostal Christian in her mid thirties, she underwent a transformation in the way she managed her attitude towards blindness and her interaction with others that had two important ramifications. First, as a result of her faith, Dixie believes her blindness to be temporary, which has a great impact on her cheerfulness and sense of hope; and second, she became an outspoken person who habitually defies social norms, which shapes her interactional style with others.

Pentecostals believe in and emphasize divine healing—the power of God to miraculously heal body, mind, and soul, including diseases like cancer, conditions like

\textsuperscript{25} Although Pentecostals, like other Evangelicals, would object to the use of the word “religious,” which they feel denotes external practices and routines that do not change the heart or engage interactively with God. It is common to say, “Christianity is not a \textit{religion}; it is a \textit{relationship}.”
blindness or schizophrenia, or the traumatic effects of childhood abuse—in this life, not merely in the afterlife. Consequently, Dixie has developed a deep and abiding belief that God can and will heal her eyes at any time. She has clung to this conviction for over twenty years and seems never to waver in her faith. One of her most common expressions is, “When the Lord heals my eyes, I’m going to . . .” She may finish this sentence with . . . “sit down and read the Bible from cover to cover,” “. . . go through all these boxes of mess and throw most of it away,” “. . . go back and look at all the photo albums of my children and grandchildren,” “. . . get my own motorcycle.” She makes comments like this many times a day. In situations where the blindness is especially frustrating, she says, “Lord, this would be a good time to heal my eyes.”

Dixie also talks about scenarios she imagines where the moment of receiving her sight would be particularly dramatic or amusing, such as when her husband or daughter is paying for a gift for her at the checkout line while she is present and they tell the cashier to please not say anything because “it’s for her, and she’s blind.” She imagines what a coup it would be to say, “Oh, a bright red snowman sweater,” and so forth. Such imagined moments seem to be a fantasy of reclaiming the normal interactional balance of power that any sighted individual would enjoy in a similar situation. This kind of discourse about her blindness is one that has alienated many people who do not share her religious views and who view such behavior as neurotic. It is significant that all of the friends and many of the family members in the data for this investigation happen to share her Pentecostal views and the expectation that she will be healed, and those who do not are at least acquiescent to this kind of talk. No one ever contradicts her statements of faith, and many make such statements about Dixie themselves (such as Carol does in Example 30 in Chapter Five). However unrealistic it may seem to others, this conviction that her blindness is not permanent is a major reason she does not live in a state of despair about it.
Dixie also loves to laugh and comes from a family for whom humor is central to nearly all interaction. Fortunately for her, she never ceases to be amused by the same old “blind jokes”, “I haven’t seen you in a long time; well, actually, I’ve never seen you.” When she aquacises at the local recreation center, if there are women in the pool who do not know her, she likes to say things like, “I hope I don’t get chlorine in my eyes. It might make me blind,” a strategy she refers to as an “ice breaker.” This positive outlook seems to contribute greatly to her likeability and people’s level of comfort in being around her.

Another important way that faith impinges on Dixie’s personality is her apparent lack of inhibition. Pentecostal Christians, in particular, believe that sincere faith is personal and individualized, and that the Holy Spirit leads each individual separately in the way He wants them to worship Him or otherwise conduct their lives. In a church service, for example, especially when singing worship songs, an individual may feel led by the Holy Spirit to stand up even when no one else is standing, or to kneel when no one else is kneeling, to raise her hands, or sometimes even to lie prostrate on the floor in utter submission towards God, whether or not anyone else feels so inclined (or “led,” as they would say). People who do so are admired for their courage, their faith, and their personal connection to God. Dixie regularly raises her hands or stands during worship even when she suspects that no one else is doing so.

Classic Pentecostals, such as those in the Assemblies of God, among whom Dixie worshiped for some 30 years, generally distrust formality, liturgy, and religious routine. They feel that imposing too much structure, especially long practiced structure, results in dead routines, void of any engagement between the heart of the individual and the heart of God, which is what Pentecostals most value and seek. There is an

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26 Not to be confused with groups such as United Pentecostals who do not believe in the trinity and are easy to identify because women wear long skirts and keep their hair long.
unspoken assumption among many Pentecostals that if the Holy Spirit is really active in a service, something surprising and unplanned will happen. The pastor or another member of the congregation may stand up and start singing a song during a part of the service where it is not expected and the congregation may join in. Someone may stand up in the congregation and give a message from God to the whole congregation, as the Holy Spirit leads her. The congregation will listen reverently when this happens. Such deviations from the norm are not only accepted, but highly valued.

Pentecostals also value stripping down all pretenses and being as genuine and transparent as possible. They are accustomed to standing up in a congregation and giving a testimony (there is often a time for personal testimonies built into the service), a spontaneous two or three minute narrative of how God has worked and is working in their lives—difficulties overcome, prayers answered, and spiritual lessons learned, often revealing very personal information to the entire assembly as part of their testimony.

Like other Evangelicals, Pentecostals believe it is imperative that individual believers share their faith with others no matter how painful it is or how unpopular it makes them. Love for others and a desire to see them live in eternal joy in the afterlife and not end up suffering in hell for eternity, compels them to speak up. People who share their faith are praised and admired. Pentecostals, like other Evangelicals, believe that if they are ever asked to deny their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, even if it means they will be killed, they must confess their faith in Him. Most believe that if they do not confess their faith and they get killed anyway, they will be eternally damned.

The stakes for being outgoing and defying social convention are, therefore, as high as they could possibly be among Pentecostals. This means that Pentecostals practically celebrate “deviance” and its attendant stigma—individuals are encouraged to break social norms and make themselves social pariahs for the sake of their faith, and they are praised for this behavior within the community. Stigma becomes a desirable
attribute. Blindness itself is also highly stigmatized in our society, and that might be sufficient to make Dixie and Pentecostalism a match "made in heaven."

Dixie’s transformation into an outspoken, outgoing person further coincided with her losing most of her usable sight. At about that point she was no longer able to walk home alone after walking her children to school and she could no longer read, even using her strongest bifocal with her strongest eye right up next to the text. Blindness, like Pentecostalism, is alienating because it is stigmatized in mainstream society, and blindness also causes (or at least promotes) a degree of antisocial behavior as well. Without the ability to monitor other people’s facial expressions and nonverbal messages, a blind person does not receive much feedback about how her own discourse is being received by others. This, in turn, makes it easier to ignore negative feedback, which makes it easier to actually become a little antisocial. In fact, research about facial expression and blindness suggests that fading awareness of offending people seems to lead to a fading concern about doing so (Galati et al. 2003).

Another factor that affected Dixie’s transformation was being befriended by a social worker named Rose Anne Winter, who intervened in her life in many ways, above and beyond her professional obligation. Both events contributed to her increased independence, extroversion, and self confidence. Rose Anne helped Dixie become more of a leader than a follower in several ways. She sought ways to help Dixie find a means of earning an income while staying home with her three children, and one of these was becoming a Mary Kay consultant. A Mary Kay consultant is essentially a salesperson who works out of her home and markets cosmetics through her network of friends. Mary Kay also emphasizes teaching skin care, which happens not to require vision as much as glamor does, and Dixie was adept at it. Rose Anne also got Dixie involved in volunteering in the community by taking her to nursing homes and a home for women
who were mentally retarded, to teach skin care using her Mary Kay mainly as a vehicle for engaging with residents. Dixie has always loved helping people and building community, and this helped her to establish connections within her sighted community beyond the church. She enjoys teaching and mentoring people, and is likely to correct her friends about anything from an English mistake to a flaw in their Christian doctrine. People look up to her and often request that she lead some ministry in the church, especially related to prayer. She has been the head of the prayer chain for more than twenty years.

To the uninitiated, Dixie is not immediately identifiable as blind, and there are several reasons for this. First, she does not travel outside of her home alone, so no one sees her trying to negotiate space by herself. Second, she rarely uses any of the adaptive aids or markers that are stereotypically associated with blindness in public. Her eyes are cosmetically normal and she does not wear dark glasses. She does not use a guide dog (partly because she is afraid of large dogs), and she sometimes, though rarely, carries a cane as a marker of her ability status and for safety concerns, but not as an actual mobility aid.

Another reason that Dixie has been so often able to pass for sighted is that her productive competence in gaze and gesture has been, until very recently, remarkably natural, virtually identical to that of sighted people. She appears to be looking straight into the eyes of the person she is talking to. Because she does not outwardly mark her blindness, she encounters frequent opportunities to pass as sighted in public. These

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27 Rose Anne was a Mary Kay consultant first, so she was able to train Dixie and help her use Braille to label products and so forth. Dixie continued selling Mary Kay for about fifteen years.

28 A prayer chain is an organized group of people who pray for others. When an emergency or a need arises (e.g., someone is ill, losing a job, having trouble writing a dissertation), the concerned person will call the head of the prayer chain and she will call several people, who will each call several other people so that everyone is praying about the same matter. There are many people, most often older women (I only know of one man who has been on this prayer chain), who feel that praying for others is their main calling in life. Dixie is one of them.
opportunities often benefit her in paying dividends of social independence—to the
degree that it garners her some of the civil inattention that any other individual would
enjoy in public places. However, Dixie’s competence in producing nonverbal language
that passes as sighted behavior can also be socially perilous, as when someone new to
her church attempts to interact with her, and mistakenly interprets her failure to respond
to his or her extended hand as the deliberate snub of a sighted person—exactly the kind
of predicament we would expect to be precipitated by unknown asymmetries in available
constellations of modes.

In sum, the blind subject of this study is a woman who has a knowledge of the
sighted world due to the gradual nature of her eye disease. She was socialized with
sighted children in a rural community in the midwest. She married a sighted man and
raised a sighted family. She is not proficient at Braille or cane travel, largely because
opportunities for rehabilitation were scarce and because she could get along with the
little vision she had left and the help of sighted family members through her thirties.

She divorced and remarried, her second husband also sighted. She raised two
more sighted children, provided child care to other people’s sighted children, led Girl
Scouts, taught children’s church, coordinated the prayer chain, worked as a Mary Kay
consultant teaching skincare and selling cosmetics, and volunteered in nursing homes
and in a workshop for mentally retarded adults. She has ridden a motorcycle with her
husband all over eastern Kansas and the surrounding states. Her optimism is
manifested in her sense of humor and her undying faith that her eyes will be healed. She
is an extrovert who loves to build community, and is extraordinarily well integrated into
her sighted community, due no doubt in part to her adaptability and affability, both
realized through her discourse style. All of her friends are sighted and most of them are
Pentecostal. The fact that she is so successful in her relationships with sighted people
makes her an intriguing candidate for the subject of a study of blind/sighted interaction.
2.4 Interactions and Participants

There are two basic types of data in this investigation: one multiparty conversation covering about 74 minutes, and nine triadic conversational interviews totaling a little over five hours. I first recorded the multiparty data to identify relevant features of blind/sighted interaction. After transcribing and studying this data, I identified a number of features I wanted to investigate in dyadic and triadic interaction, so I arranged the conversational interviews with two of Dixie’s closest friends and seven family members, five of whom were related by marriage and had known Dixie for varying lengths of time (4 to 37 years), and these triadic interviews comprised the second set of data. I gave all participants the option of choosing one of two possible consent agreements (See Appendix 2), one with a more restricted scope of what would be done with the data and one with fewer limitations. All of the participants opted for the latter. I have given all of the primary participants (and most persons mentioned by the participants in the data) pseudonyms, with the exception of Dixie and myself, although no one ever expressed any concern about anonymity.

2.4.1 The Multiparty Conversational Data

The primary multiparty data consists of an hour and 18 minutes of videotaped interaction between Dixie and seven sighted friends and family members. I asked Dixie if she could get some of her closest friends to come together in the evening just to talk about things they were interested in: how they all became friends, when each of them joined the church, how they had watched the churches in the community change over the years, what they liked and disliked about their current church community. Thus, a group was rather spontaneously assembled at Dixie’s initiative with less than 24 hours notice, and gathered at Martha’s home to talk and be recorded, on an evening in August of 2001. The participants were selected by Dixie (and self-selected as they agreed) and

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29 And Rose Ann Winter, who is now deceased. My mother and I decided to use her real name to honor her for the profound changes that her intervention in our lives helped precipitate.
not by me. The only criteria I asked for were that they be friends she had established relationships with for some time so that the organic nature of the relationships and accommodative strategies could be examined.

These friends have known Dixie for anywhere from seven to twenty three years, and her daughters have known her, of course, for the length of their lives. The approximate ages and length of relationship are shown in Table 3. Participants know that I am interested in blindness and conversation, but seem relatively uninterested in knowing more than that it is “a project for school” that involved my mother, which was apparently sufficient motivation for participation. Once they got together it was not difficult to get everyone having smooth conversation that felt natural and was not marked by long or awkward pauses or disfluency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Relationship to Dixie</th>
<th>Years Known</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>First child</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Third child</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Church friend</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Church friend</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriett</td>
<td>Church friend</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>Friend, Martha’s spouse</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>Church friend</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Participants in Multiparty Data at Martha’s House

Hank, who is about 75, suffers from COPD and is using an oxygen tank by his chair, which limits his freedom of movement. As he is Martha’s husband, Dixie has known him
for the 23 years she has known Martha. However, in the ten years prior to this evening, Hank had become a Christian and began attending their church, during which time he and Dixie developed a friendship of their own. Much of their interaction consists of calling each other on the phone and telling each other the most recent jokes they have heard or playfully insulting each other, as these data illustrate. Three factors threaten Hank’s full inclusion in this speech event. He is the only male present, he is a relative latecomer to the community in terms of shared faith, and his oxygen tank inhibits his mobility and his breathing (and thus to some extent his speech). Dixie’s relationship with Hank largely focuses on establishing solidarity and bringing him into the interaction and the community, which is clearly illustrated in these data. Hank passed away two years after this gathering took place and Dixie gave a moving eulogy at the funeral celebrating his love for his family, his sense of humor, and their solidary friendship.

Esther is in her mid 70s, has been single all her life, and lived with her mother until she died at about 96. She has an M.A. and still works as a librarian at the local university, though she lives in an assisted living complex and does not drive. She is treated with the most deference in the group and is the only participant who is often addressed as Title + FN or Title + LN (Brown & Ford 1964), “Sister Esther” or “Sister Rose.” Esther’s father was a minister who founded a Spanish speaking Pentecostal church in town in the 1930s and 40s, and Esther, along with the rest of the family, held ministry positions within the church. This experience, as highlighted by the stories about
local church history she tells during the course of the evening, and perhaps the effect of her education, may be the real source of the extra deference she receives.

Figure 5: Anne

Dixie’s daughter, Anne, is 28 and the youngest of her siblings, married with three young children, and runs a daycare out of her home. At this time she employs Dixie in her daycare and spends more time with her than anyone else present at Martha’s house. Anne speaks very little during the entire evening, and generally only to make a supportive comment to another participant. She quietly assists Dixie in finding a seat, getting up and going to the other room, getting seated again, finding her food, etc. She also quietly leans in and describes the activity around her for Dixie’s benefit, trying to anticipate anything that Dixie will want to know or anything that will make the audio input make more sense. Anne and Dixie frequently share jokes between themselves that are barely audible to the rest of the group, while their ensuing laughter is quite audible.

Figure 6: Martha

Martha, Hank’s wife and the group’s hostess, is in her early 70s and sits on the floor wearing shorts. She has children and grandchildren in town and in other states, and is a very active woman who has worked at Wal-Mart as a greeter for years and takes care of some of her young grandchildren. She grew up in Mississippi and still evidences traces of a southern drawl. She is voluble (indeed, I believe she is the most voluble
person any of us knows!) and supportive of others, maintaining a fairly high involvement style of interaction. Martha yields her interactional power easily, deferring to almost everyone else, and is corrected a number of times during the evening by Esther, Dixie, and Hank, for such things as her pronunciation of a word or questions she asks that others think she should already know the answers to.

![Figure 7: Harriet](image)

Harriet is in her 70s, was born and raised in Kansas, and has lived in the same town for over 40 years. She also has children and grandchildren in town and in other states who are the subject of some topics of talk. Harriet has the mildest and most high considerateness conversational style of anyone in the group. She monitors herself and the group in general about being “nice,” as when she suggests the tape be deleted at the part where someone voices their dislike for President Bill Clinton. Harriet defers to everyone and is seldom deferred to. She has a soft voice and seems to have more trouble claiming turns than anyone else in the group, as she is overlapped frequently.

![Figure 8: Hana](image)

Hana is one of the younger participants, in her early 40s, and the mother of several adult children and a small boy. She is a black South African who originally came to the U.S. to study, and met her American husband at the university. She is a regular member of the same church that the other women belong to, which is about 98% white.
She has a fairly strong South African accent, and her interactional style seems to be a little unfamiliar to her American friends at times. The other women seem to make great efforts to understand Hana, and for the most part succeed, although the greater burden of accommodation seems to be carried by Hana. At one point Martha actually asks her whether they have churches in Africa. Unruffled, Hana patiently describes the history of Christian missions in Africa and tells about how her own grandfather is a pastor. She is quite taciturn in the first half of the conversation in the front room, but participates much more later, around the kitchen table, when she is asked about her faith and replies with a very long turn, full of embedded stories.

Figure 9: Elisa

I, Elisa, am the last participant in this data, at the time of the taping, a 34 year old graduate student of linguistics in Washington, DC. I am single and the only one of five siblings who does not have any children. I am sometimes regarded as “uppity” because I have lived in cities (and countries) outside of Kansas, including Tokyo, Chicago and Washington, DC. These women, including Dixie and Anne, see me about twice a year since I graduated from high school. I am the only participant who lives away. Because all of these women are in a prayer chain together, they pray for me often (as they do for all of each other’s children), which gives me the feeling that they all may know a lot more about me than I do about them.

The first half of the evening’s conversation lasts 30 minutes and takes place in the living room of Martha and Hank’s home, and the second half lasts 48 minutes and
takes place in Martha’s kitchen. Table 4 shows the distribution of talk in the two stages of the evening’s interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Transcript Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha’s Front Room (First Half)</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>40 pages / 3,882 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha’s Kitchen (Second Half)</td>
<td>48 min</td>
<td>64 pages / 7,534 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1:18 min</td>
<td>104 pages / 11,416 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4 Distribution of Talk in the Multiparty Data**

At the very beginning of the taping in the first half, Hana and Anne are sitting against the wall opposite the sofa, but as they are out of range of the camera, I have them move closer after a few minutes, resulting in the configuration illustrated in Figure 9.

![Figure 10: Arrangement of Participants in Martha's Front Room](image)

During the first half of the conversation in the living room, Hank is sitting apart from other participants in his arm chair on the far left (from the camera’s perspective) of the room, nearer the kitchen. To his left (camera right) sit Dixie, Esther, and Harriet, on the sofa. Martha, the hostess, is sitting on the floor near the couch, as are Hana and Anne.

The second half of the multiparty data at Martha’s house takes place in the kitchen, as Martha has prepared bowls of fresh fruit for everyone and the participants seat themselves around the table as illustrated in Figure 10.
I start the kitchen segment the same way I had started the first, this time by asking how long Harriet had been at the church they all attended, and eliciting her narrative of how she became friends with Dixie. There is an interesting dynamic here as Harriet’s rather long narrative is interrupted by other participants slipping in short narratives of their own within the extended floor Harriet is trying to maintain until she finally finishes. The participants do not need any prodding to carry on the conversation throughout the evening. After Harriet’s narrative is finished, I ask about Hana’s faith experience in South Africa, and so direct the topic at least this much, though I do not think this question is especially different from the contributions of other participants.

The group data is more spontaneous than the triadic interviews, and although I think there was a vague awareness that Dixie’s blindness had some relevance to my having asked them to gather for an evening to be videotaped chatting about their friendships and their lives, we did not ever raise blindness as a topic, and no one gives evidence in the transcript of having thought that was the object. Thus, the behaviors that emerge seem to be more representative of what we would find in the everyday interaction of these women, so that when we see an identity of blindness emerge, it is normally the indirect indexing that Ochs (1992) describes. On the other hand, these
women are gathered for an event that would not otherwise have occurred; it was not a defined speech event like the celebration of a birthday or a weekly bible study, or something they were already in the habit of doing for which they would have developed specific scripts.

Both direct and indirect indices abound, and sometimes the indirect identities being indexed contradict those that are consciously described and constructed by the participants. The focus in this chapter, of course, is primarily on Dixie’s own exploitation of the resources available to her in constructing an identity of independence in spite of the fact that she is very much dependent on others for navigating the physical world, as well as those elements of the social world that rely heavily or completely on the visual modes (including written communication).

One of the things that impressed me most about this data and these participants was how much these women loved each other and how they prayed for each other’s children and families and friends as though they were their own. In fact, the feedback I received from the participants later indicated that getting together to do this was a pleasure for them, since most of them do not usually gather together outside of church to have a relaxed evening of conversation and just enjoy each other’s company. Several of them expressed a desire to “do this” again.\(^{30}\) and I believe the resulting key of the interaction was also indicative of the degree to which they were able to forget about the video camera and just enjoy talking to each other.

The conversation starts out very naturally and organically while I am setting up the camera, with Dixie telling the latest anecdotes about her baby granddaughter as Anne, her daughter and the baby’s mother, confirms and collaborates. I stand behind the camera and start by asking some questions about how long each of them has known the

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\(^{30}\) Hana even complained, “Dixie, why are you making us leave?” (The reason was that Dixie had promised Martha it would only take about an hour.)
others, just to get the conversation going, and once started, I participate much more like the other participants. There never appear to be any unnatural lulls or directionless moments.

The multiparty data thus consists of one blind participant in an open conversation with six sighted women and one sighted man with a complex and volatile turn structure that emerges as talk proceeds. Claiming turns and performing other interactional work in such a context is far more challenging for both sighted and blind participants than it is in dyadic or triadic interaction in which there is a predictable sequence of alternating turns, an ABAB\textsuperscript{31} turn structure, albeit one party may take much longer turns than the other.

\textbf{2.4.2 The Triadic Conversational Interview Data}

I am calling the interviews I conducted between Dixie and nine different sighted friends and family members “triadic conversational interviews.” I wanted to focus on dyadic interaction, but I also needed interaction to be as natural as possible. I therefore participated in the interaction by trying to guide the conversation as very informal interviews in which I asked the two participants questions about their experience with blind/sighted interaction that might be useful for other people trying to establish interability relationships that are both intimate and equitable. This proved to be an excellent motivation for participation and generated a considerable amount of fluid interaction and narrative production. My involvement as a third participant is what leads me to characterize the interactions as triadic, although the purpose of my contributions was to facilitate those of the two primary participants. Most narratives were prompted by my asking whether they had ever found themselves in a particular situation and they would respond with narratives either confirming or denying such an experience.

\textsuperscript{31} (ABAB meaning A=turn by participant #1, B=turn by participant #2)
The triadic data, on the other hand, is very directly focused on talking about blindness. While I had prepared a list of questions to ask as conversationally as possible, my primary interest in taping them in pairs—with me as a third participant/interviewer—was not in their answers to these questions, but in the way the exchange structure was managed. Were there different turn-taking norms? What were participants doing with their gaze, and so forth? It turned out to be a rich source of data for investigating the collaborative construction of identity.

The second data set consists of nine informal triadic conversational interviews between Dixie and one other participant, ranging from those who have known her the longest (her step-father and her two closest friends), to those whose acquaintance is fairly recent (her step-father’s new wife, her step-son’s girlfriend). Anne is the only participant present in both data sets. My original intention in devising these interviews was to observe turn taking norms, including gaze behaviors and other interactional processes, when Dixie was interacting in a dyad rather than in a multiparty conversation like the first set of data, but I did not want to just set them up with a recorder and ask them to talk “naturally” for 20 minutes, as that would almost certainly produce the least natural interaction.

One of my goals was to have a range of people who knew Dixie for a long time in an intimate capacity, along with others who had known for a much shorter period of time. The length of time people had been interacting with her would be important in two ways. First, people who have known her longer are likely to be more comfortable and to have established norms through a process of habituation. Second, because Dixie lost her sight gradually, there might be a difference in those who knew her when she could see a little and those who met her when she had no usable sight left and I wanted to explore the differences in their practices and perceptions accordingly.
I was also interested in participants’ awareness of their own interactional norms in this blind/sighted relationship and I wanted participants to have an authentic object to pursue in the conversation. So I prepared a list of questions (see Appendix 3) about how their relationships evolved, what kinds of accommodation they find themselves engaged in, and what advice they would give to both sighted people and blind people who wanted to be good friends with just the right level of accommodation towards each other. I wanted to get participants interacting with each other, exchanging turns, doing face work, and hopefully producing some narratives of personal experience, as well. Narratives would provide valuable insight through the indirect indexing of identity and alignments, and therefore would be more accurate than the direct reports participants provide in answering my questions according to their self-perceptions and intended self-presentation.

Table 4 is an arrangement of stills showing the physical arrangement of participants in the triadic interviews. There are two cameras set up at different angles and they are focused on the primary participants and do not include me, the interviewer/participant, except for audio. The first three stills show those conducted on the couch in Dixie’s front room. The next two show Carol and Rose’s interviews in another room in Dixie’s house which I call the plant room because that is where she keeps most of her indoor plants. The last four stills show the interviews that take place on Anne’s front porch. I let the participants arrange themselves in each case as long as they were situated in the camera’s range.

There were various limitations in the physical arrangements of the “interviews” in Dixie’s house. In the two interviews with two of Dixie’s best friends, Carol and Rose, Dixie and the friend sat in chairs placed side by side. In the interviews with Leon Sr., Leon Jr., and Marcy, Dixie sat on the couch and the person being interviewed sat on her right. In those recorded at Anne’s house, Dixie sat on the porch railing, and Chuck, Lena,
Nate, and Anne, one by one, stood or sat next to her. Interestingly, the men sat on her right, but the women sat on her left. I was, as always, behind the camera.

In all of these arrangements, participants had no difficulty looking at each other, but they did have different proxemic distances. The chairs that Carol and Rose sat in had sides, and the women were not really close enough to easily touch the other person. Those who sat on the couch, however, sat pretty close together and would often communicate physically by, for example, tapping the other person on the leg. Although these factors will cause some differences in the data that should be acknowledged, I felt they were preferable to creating a rigid environment of the exact same arrangement at the expense of losing what spontaneity I was able to achieve by getting family members in physical contexts they were comfortable with.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Relationship to DB</th>
<th>Yrs Known</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Best Friend</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Dixie's Plant Room</td>
<td>1:04:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Best Friend</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Dixie's Plant Room</td>
<td>2:17:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>Step-Father</td>
<td>37 years</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Anne's Porch</td>
<td>20:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Chuck's Wife</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Anne's Porch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leon Sr.</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Dixie's Front Room</td>
<td>20:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon Jr.</td>
<td>Step-son</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Dixie's Front Room</td>
<td>15:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcy</td>
<td>Leon Jr.'s Girlfriend</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Dixie's Front Room</td>
<td>19:33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Youngest Child</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Anne's Porch</td>
<td>22:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Anne's Husband</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Anne's Porch</td>
<td>32:20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 Participants in Conversational Triadic Interviews

Technically, this makes these interactions triads—though I am behind the cameras and my own gaze behavior and other nonverbal actions are not captured. I tried to let participants determine how long they wanted to talk without urging them in one direction or the other, so some of the transcripts are much longer than others, the shortest being under nine minutes, and the longest being over two hours.
Carol and Dixie met at the Foursquare Pentecostal church we attended until I was 11. The bedrock of their relationship is their faith, but their interactional style is strongly tied together by humor and teasing. A little younger than Dixie, Carol seems to look up to Dixie as an older sister. Her husband is a mechanic and when we were growing up she was the “stay at home” mother of two sons, about the age of my siblings. Carol has a high school education, with a noticable dialect from a part of Kansas that sounds much more Southern than Kansas is (e.g. she pronounces can’t as [keɪnʔ] rather than [kænʔ]). This has the effect of making her sound more “country” than other rural residents in the area. She dresses comfortably; in the interview she is wearing a baseball shirt and jeans. Carol knew us when our family economics were grim, and as Dixie describes in the interviews, Carol was always there to be depended on, to cut our hair, help fix our clothes, and even pitch in in other ways, from time to time.

Rose and Dixie met at a women’s Bible study and they describe their relationship as based on the two pillars of prayer and gardening. She is six years older than Dixie and is the only person I have ever seen my mother look up to like an older sister. Rose has a B.A. in music and her husband is a professor of entomology at the local university.
They have a hog farm on the edge of town. They have two daughters about the age of my younger siblings, and Rose was also a “stay at home mother” when we were children. Rose is wearing a skirt, blouse and stockings in the interview, and I later realized I cannot remember her ever not wearing a dress. As for gardening, Rose pulls up every weed she sees when she comes over to Dixie’s house and they exchange seeds, bulbs, and gardening advice. Most importantly, Rose raves over Dixie’s flowers and gives her detailed descriptions of what they look like.

After the interview with Rose when she was half way out the door and I was “seeing her out,” she said, “Your mother and I are just like this,” and crossed her fingers to illustrate. Then she spoke around me to Dixie inside and said, “Dixie, I’m holding up two fingers really close together.” I could not remember other friends ever translating a visual gesture into words for her and did not find any instances of this in the other interviews. While Carol likes to tease Dixie and play jokes about blindness and anything else handy to lighten things up, I have never seen Rose find anything humorous in blindness. The only person who could contend with Rose for empathy and devotion is Leon Sr.

Leon Sr. is Dixie’s husband of about 20 years and is one of the most empathetic men I have ever known. Like Rose, he does not make jokes about blindness. Sometimes he participates in stories about funny situations precipitated by blindness, but he does not make blind jokes (even though Dixie does so all the time). He has worked as an elevator operator at a local soybean mill for about 30 years. Leon was
raised in western Kansas, but his extended family all live in Carthage, Missouri, in the Ozarks, a community very similar to those in Arkansas and Kansas where Dixie’s father’s family lived.

Notably, Leon’s best friend in high school was deaf, and he seems to be exceptionally comfortable accommodating difference. Even more so than other family members, he is an expert at silently helping Dixie in ways that do not make it evident to anyone that he is actually helping her. In public places, like restaurants, people who later discover the truth report having assumed he was just a chivalrous husband in getting her salad from the salad bar and bringing it back with his own. He is very playful and relaxed and likes to laugh. He makes up little songs all the time that he sings as part of his communicative repertoire, usually about us or something in the immediate context like the giant pot of pinto beans eternally simmering on the kitchen stove.

Leon Jr. is Leon Sr.’s son and is about 28 and is accompanied by his girlfriend Marcy, who both live in the same town as Dixie. He was 8 when his father married Dixie and he became her step-son. He does construction work and Marcy works at the county jail. Marcy has known our family since she was in elementary school and has always gotten along well with Dixie. They also share a friendly joking relationship and Marcy sometimes also seeks gardening advice from Dixie.
The person who has known Dixie the longest is Chuck, as he has been Dixie’s step-father since she was about 19. He and his new wife, Lena, were visiting from their little town about an hour and a half away when I asked them to participate in the project. (Dixie’s mother had been deceased for about five years at the time of the interview.) Chuck was an oil field worker who met Gladys, Dixie’s mother, in a restaurant that she ran in a neighboring small town. He has worked for an oil rig most of his life. Lena is Chuck’s new wife, and she has been accepted into the family as if Chuck were related to the family by blood. She is a widow whose previous husband was paralyzed in his later years and required considerable caregiving until he passed away. She works for a company that makes RVs.

Anne is the only participant (besides Dixie and myself) who participated at both the multiparty event at Martha’s house and in one of the triadic interviews, and is described in the multiparty data. Nate is Anne’s husband. He has a B.A. in political
science, but works as a manager at a diesel engine factory\textsuperscript{32} in town. He is extremely voluble, and has an active joking relationship with Dixie like Hank’s, to the point that whenever one hears a new joke it merits a phone call to the other. Nate served in the first Gulf war and their house and family wardrobe are overwhelmingly dominated by red, white, and blue (and quite a few family members are gun owners). He is a dedicated father whose activities range from participating in church dramas, leading Cub Scouts, taking his children to the shooting range, and sewing dresses for his girls and costumes for his sons.

2.5 Conclusion

This study takes a new methodological approach to the existing literature investigating blind/sighted interaction. This choice of Dixie as the subject interacting with sighted co-participants with whom she has authentic, pre-existing relationships has three ramifications: 1) The accommodation and adaptive strategies that have developed in her community follow what I have described as the organic path, relatively unmitigated by the conventions of the more “professionally” blind, which I called conventional path. 2) Dixie’s gradual sight loss has allowed her friends and family to adjust gradually and more organically, too. 3) If discursive behavior is driven by face needs, as interactional sociolinguists hold, interaction among strangers, with whom one will have no future relationship, is fundamentally different from interaction between people who share a past and present, and who expect to share a future. Face work conducted in the context of authentic relationships will, therefore, not only reflect the face work norms that have developed in the past, but will also be driven by interactional goals that reach into the future. In other words, these participants will not make discourse choices randomly or indifferently as they might with strangers, but will be fully invested in the consequences of their behavior on these relationships, which will result in more natural and authentic

\textsuperscript{32} By the time this dissertation was submitted he worked in law enforcement.
A blind person who has a memory and knowledge of vision has a considerable advantage over those congenitally blind in the difference in schema for the visually accessed elements of face to face interaction among sighted interlocutors. I make no attempt to equate the experience of those blind from birth with her experience. However, as a case study that looks into the particularities of interaction in the context of existing relationships, it promises to shed light on discourse strategies that are either more or less successful in blind/sighted interaction and may prove helpful to both blind and sighted individuals.

In discussing problems of blindness in interaction and answering questions, narratives of personal experience naturally emerged in both sets of data, serving as more reliable windows into the perspectives and alignments that guide and govern their interaction across visual ability lines. In the conversational interviews, points of unity and disparity in the perspectives of the blind and the sighted participants emerge in the co-tellings of narratives of personal experiences shared by the two participants that would not have come to light if interviewing only one participant at a time. Such discourse allows us to see how the participants negotiate their own identities and positioning for themselves, the other, and the blindness itself.

The analyses chapters that follow address the hurdles posed by blindness for the achievement of normal social acts—managing the mechanics of conversation with openings, closings, and turntaking (Chapter Three), using epistemological stances and visual texts to construct an independent identity in spite of considerable dependence on others (Chapter 4), and negotiating accommodation in light of the the considerable threats to both independence and involvement that emerge as a product of this situation (Chapter 5).
Chapter 3: Modes of Procedure & Participation

3.0 Introduction

As I have described in Chapter Two, Dixie Bennet is no longer shy nor does she suffer from anonymity. She has a boistrous personality and knows how to involve herself in interaction. In the multiparty data at Martha’s house, Harriet comments, “Well I think that ah, almost everybody [at our church], ah, knows Dixie” <Nodding her head> “I really do.” Dixie tries to deny this with a quick, “No. . .” Elisa interjects, “It’s real hard NOT to know her.” Dixie again protests, “There’s a lot of new people that don’t know me.” Anne explains, “That’s just cause Pastor Knight used to talk to you from the pulpit.” Dixie agrees, “Yeah, and Pastor Randy doesn’t @@.” This is a person who is perfectly content to have the pastor call her out for some reason or other in front of hundreds of other parishioners and who somehow manages to elicit such interaction in spite of the limitations that blindness imposes.

Interaction is always collaboratively achieved through the cooperation of both speakers and hearers. Becoming part of a community is no less a collaborative endeavor, both on the part of the existing community and any individual who would join it. Integration further requires equitable participation, and participation is essentially involvement, the raw material out of which solidarity is built. In ordinary face to face interaction between sighted interlocutors, participation is governed largely by gaze. Indeed, in ordinary sighted/sighted interaction even the knowledge that one is being involved is governed, most often, by gaze and the ability to monitor the nonverbal cues that indicate attention.

In this chapter, I first present a discussion of the quantity and quality of talk produced by Dixie in the multiparty data, in which turn taking is most challenging. I then go on to present a brief discussion of the problem of openings and closings—namely that of initiating face to face interaction and bringing the interaction to an end without

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33 There were between 200 and 250 members in regular attendance at the time.
visual knowledge of the spatial arrangement of participants or of nonverbal cues participants might be giving (whether consciously or not). I next present the problem, for blind participants, of addressee designation in the system of turn exchanges, much of which is ordinarily managed through gaze. Here I outline three multimodal discourse strategies which emerge in the data for other-initiated addressee designation, some of which compensate for the asymmetrical access to visual modes between blind and sighted participants. The last section of the chapter focuses on the problems of self-initiated turn claims by blind interlocutors, where the achievement of mutual gaze between current and next speaker is ordinarily critical in sighted/sighted interaction.

The chapter concludes by summing up the three major problems of procedural participation that a blind interlocutor faces in blind/sighted interaction which I have addressed: restricted access to 1) visual information about the spatial arrangement of potential participants, 2) knowledge of who is being addressed in other-initiated turn changes, and 3) the current speaker's gaze for self-initiated turn claims. While these problems epitomize the special challenge to the involvement of a blind participant with sighted co-conversants and help explain why blindness is often referred to as a "social handicap," my analysis shows how these participants, both blind and sighted, are able to surmount these challenges through a variety of multimodal discourse strategies, either preventative or redressive.

3.1 The Quantity and Quality of Dixie’s Turns

This centrality of gaze to involvement in face to face interaction poses a particular challenge for the blind interlocutor and her sighted co-conversants both locally, at the level of interaction, and ultimately at the more global level of the community. As these data demonstrate, however, Dixie is up to the challenge. How does she accomplish this? The first question is whether the she has participated equitably among her sighted interlocutors. One simple measure of participation is the number of words
produced by each participant. In the multiparty data at Martha’s house there were 11,416 clearly discernible words in that evening of talk. If that number were divided equally among 8 participants, each participant would be allotted a share of 1,427 words (12.5% of the conversation). Although it might be expected that the blind participant would speak less, due to the difficulty in claiming turns, Table 6 shows that in the conversation between eight people, far from lagging behind in participation, Dixie was the second most verbose participant of the evening!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>words</th>
<th>% of talk</th>
<th>% of equal share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-Harriet</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>137.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Dixie</td>
<td>1886</td>
<td>16.52</td>
<td>132.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Martha</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>16.47</td>
<td>131.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Elisa</td>
<td>1716</td>
<td>15.03</td>
<td>120.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-Hana</td>
<td>1503</td>
<td>13.17</td>
<td>105.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Esther</td>
<td>1111</td>
<td>9.73</td>
<td>77.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Anne</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>61.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Hank</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>33.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12.5% an equal share for 8 participants = 1,427 words

Table 6 Word Contributions of Each Participant

Table 6 shows how many words were produced by each participant and what percentage of an equal share that number constitutes. The only person who out-talked Dixie was Harriet. Harriet produced 1961 words (about 17.2 %) and Dixie produced 1886 words (about 16.5% of the total talk), a difference of only 75 words. Since interactional power is at least as much about the quality of talk as it is about quantity, we should then examine and compare the quality of Harriet’s discourse production to Dixie’s.
Harriet’s longest turns include the joke\textsuperscript{34} she told at the beginning of the evening and a long narrative account of how she came to join the church. Although the turn she claimed to tell that joke was self-selected, she unfortunately could not remember the punch line, which resulted in several minutes of collaborative effort among all the participants to try to figure out what the punch line probably was, a very powerless segment of interaction for Harriet. When they finally arrive at the punch line, Harriet tries to repair and ends up retelling the joke, but this turn is not self-selected. In fact, it is other-initiated by Dixie, who is apparently inviting her to redeem herself by telling it properly the second time. The extended narrative turn\textsuperscript{35} that Harriet takes later, around the table in the second half of the evening of conversation was elicited by me, (“When did Harriet first start going to the Assembly?”). So Harriet’s first long turn is self-initiated, but infelicitous, including a second telling which is other-initiated, and Harriet’s longest turn was elicited by me. So the quality of Harriet’s turns was not only less powerful than Dixie’s, but Dixie is the one who other-initiated the retelling of the joke resulting in 75 more words. In short, this shows that Dixie played not only a more involved participant role, but also a more powerful participant role. Moreover, coincidentally, the retelling of Harriet’s joke took precisely 75 words, the exact number of words by which Harriet’s word total exceeded Dixie’s. Thus it can be argued that Dixie talked voluntarily and self-initiatingly more than any other participant.

In the first half of the data at Martha’s house, for example, Dixie takes approximately 32 turns (brief or extended). Five of those times she is answering someone’s question addressed to her. All the other times she self-selects—particularly noteworthy is the fact that all of Dixie’s extended narrative turns are self-selected. In

\textsuperscript{34} This joke appears as Example 3 in this chapter in an abridged version; the full version appears in Appendix 4.

\textsuperscript{35} An excerpt of this narrative opens Chapter One and appears in this chapter as example 4.
contrast, extended narrative turns by Harriet and Hana were explicitly elicited by me. Only one time in the second half of the data did I explicitly elicit a narrative from Dixie, which was a request for her to verify a memory of mine, which turned out to be erroneous. The fact that Dixie rejected my mistaken memory, further fortified her position of power among participants, especially because I am the researcher, which puts me in one of the most powerful participant roles, but researcher’s mother seems to trump researcher. It did trigger some related narratives from her, however, for which she self-selected (after duly denouncing my confused memory).

It is appropriate to ask to what degree her considerable verbosity is related to the fact that she and other participants are aware that she and her blindness were part of the reason for our gathering as it was central to my research concern. However, if she were not able to participate on her own, we would expect to find sighted participants creating spaces for her by addressing her directly and eliciting talk (offering her the floor out of “charity”) to account for her loquaciousness, and this we do not find.

In light of the asymmetry in access to the visual modes inherent to blind/sighted interaction, this chapter addresses the problems and processes of actually engineering the exchange structure of talk. The barest components of this structure include openings, turn exchanges, and closings, each of which relies heavily on gaze as a preferred mode in the grammar of ordinary sighted/sighted interaction. This chapter examines both successful and unsuccessful instances of several main structural elements of a conversation in the multiparty data.³⁶

3.2 Openings and closings
Interaction begins with an opening (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Someone has to initiate, but the opening must be collaboratively achieved with the cooperation of the other. Specifically, the one who wishes to initiate interaction must catch the eye of the

³⁶ With the exception of one narrative from the triadic interviews.
intended addressee. The initiator can monitor the gaze of the intended interlocutor and situate herself within that line of gaze as a prerequisite to begin negotiating interaction. The other person can either respond cooperatively or can avert her gaze as a way of staving off unwanted interaction. The would-be initiator can, in turn, also pretend that she was not trying to initiate any interaction. In short, gaze allows these bids for attention to go off record, and thus offers a decommitment option that works to save the initiator's face.

A blind person clearly does not have the luxury of surreptitiously manipulating spatial relations so that she can capture a potential co-conversant's eye. She must rely exclusively on nonvisual signals, and particularly the auditory mode to compensate for the absence of visual signals, and auditory signals are far more difficult to achieve off record. One such common strategy, the clearing of one's throat, can be ambiguous—it is often done to make one's presence known, but because it may also be a mere physical necessity without any intended social meaning, it retains the option of decommitment. Verbalizing the bid to open interaction, on the other hand, puts the speaker's intention on record, making it riskier to her face needs. An unresponded to bid for talk causes loss of positive face in not facilitating involvement, as well as a loss of negative face in having one's failure to achieve an act she had begun made visible to others.

Before a person can initiate a conversation, she needs to know 1) whether there are any potential participants within earshot and 2) whether a potential participant is available for interaction or is otherwise engaged (talking on the phone, listening to her mp3 player, etc.). It is also helpful to know the physical-spatial positioning of potential participants relative to oneself, though this is true for turn claims and closings as well. Data in later sections of this chapter will show that the blind participant here has a better chance of getting her auditory signals noticed if she is within the scope of the other person's vision, even if the blind participant cannot actually catch the other person's eye.
This knowledge about potential participants is further complicated by the fact that people naturally move from place to place in their daily activities and are not in the habit of announcing to others that they are doing so, particularly in public places and around persons with whom they have never before interacted, regardless of whether or not they can see.

Interactants need information about the presence and situation of potential interlocutors in face to face interaction, but it would be impractical and probably very irritating for both parties if the blind participant had to ask, “Are you still there?” every time there was a prolonged silence. Moreover, even in interaction between persons who regularly co-habit a given space, whether at work, at home, or elsewhere, there are not usually formal openings and closings to interactions, such as, “Well, I’m done in this room. I’m going to move to the kitchen now.” I am not able to directly analyze any spontaneous, unscripted interactional openings due to the nature of my data. Dixie does provide, however, secondary evidence of this problem of unannounced spatial rearrangement by participants in several narrative accounts throughout the data.

One such narrative, shown in Example 1, emerges in the triad with Carol, in which Dixie recounts an incident that had occurred earlier that day at Anne’s house. Dixie’s account illustrates the problems of participant spatial relocation during talk that does not have clear openings and closings the way a phone call or even a chance meeting on the street would. Ironically, the reportable event that generated this narrative was caused when I, both researcher and daughter, unintentionally failed to announce my own brief departure from the living room to the kitchen, where I was situating the camera that was supposed to be recording incidents exactly like the one I thereby simultaneously both precipitated and obviated.
Example 1

Dixie 1 I was off in Blind La-La land
2 Not knowing that anybody was around
3 Ya know
Elisa 4 Yeah
Dixie 5 And that’s really bad
6 And today
7 At Anne’s
8 Hmm!
9 I was talking to Elisa
10 And she got up and she left
11 I was telling her this big long story
12 I didn’t know she w—
Elisa 13 I was—
Dixie 14 No I—
Elisa 15 I was videotaping the kids and stuff
16 And I walked in the other room
17 And [started the video camera
Dixie 18 No [And I star—
19 And so pretty soon Kyle Lee, ya know
20 Came a
Elisa 21 He was sitting over on the other couch.
Dixie 22 And he’s such a sweet kid, see
23 And he would never do anything to embarrass me or—
24 Or um—
25 Ridicule
26 He would not
27 But he said uh
28 Grandma, she’s in the kitchen
29 And I started laughing
30 And then, so he laughed but not very
31 I—I could te—
Elisa 32 Very loud
Dixie 33 Yeah I could tell it tickled him
34 But he di—
35 He didn’t want ya know
36 To be ornery to Grandma
37 @@
38 Because that’s his personality
39 He would not do that
40 UNLIKE some other people <touches Carol’s arm>
Carol 41 Ah! Who would you be talking about?
Dixie's teenage grandson, Kyle, is sitting with her in the front room and has seen me move to the kitchen. However, he may not have noticed right away that Dixie does not know I have left because she goes on talking for a bit before he quietly informs her that her addressee is no longer available. In this case, Kyle is the sighted mediator and he fills in the missing schema on site, without taking any other action himself. This allows Dixie to exercise her own agency, and she uses the incident that is inherently fraught with threat to her own negative face, to create involvement with her grandson in the story world, and later with her daughter and best friend in the story telling world.

Furthermore, the narrative presents a perspective on her preference of accommodation strategies. Dixie praises Kyle's considerate nature in comments such as, (“And he’s such a sweet kid, see, And he would never do anything to embarrass me or—,” lines 22, 23), but she also suggests that Kyle need not worry about being quite so careful because she is not that easily embarrassed. However, by explicitly mentioning that Kyle is too sensitive and considerate to intentionally embarrass his grandmother, she acknowledges the inherent potential for face loss involved in the situation.

By laughing about not realizing that her addressee had left the room, both in the story world and in the storytelling world, Dixie also deflects the potential face loss and makes it ok for Kyle, in the story world, to chuckle about the incongruence, and for us to laugh about it with her later in the storytelling world. In this way, she reframes a situation that could potentially have violated her own negative face and made Kyle the chief agent of that FTA, creating distance between herself and Kyle. She reframes the situation as more humorous than embarrassing, and uses it instead as an opportunity to create involvement and build solidarity with her grandson.

Describing Kyle's gentle accommodation style also allows Dixie to draw a connection between this narrative and those that Carol has told earlier in the conversation about her own accommodation style. In that strip of talk, Carol explains
how she had apologized to Dixie about a year prior to this conversation for all the
“ornerness” she had done to her, even though it was always playful. She is referring to
the ways she would engage Dixie in activities that blindness renders challenging, such
as making her walk across a stream on the rocks without assistance at the park.

During that discussion, Carol uses the word “ornery” four times in describing her
own behavior, Dixie uses it twice to describe Carol’s past behavior, and I use it once,
also in reference to Carol. “Orneriness” is generally treated as a positive characteristic in
Dixie’s family, and evidently from the data, by Carol as well. In the midst of that
discussion propelled by Carols’s apology, Dixie demonstrates this view of the quality
“ornery”: (“Oh it wasn’t mean, [it was ornery / [But I—/ It was fun / It was ornery,” lines 2-
4). (This excerpt is used in Example 36 of Chapter Six).

The narrative in Example 1 occurs about 10 topics after Carol’s earlier confession
of orneriness, and Dixie takes the opportunity as she closes the narrative, to tease Carol
about her habit of "making fun" of Dixie’s blindness-related infelicities (some of which
Carol actually precipitated, if playfully). Dixie returns to that earlier discussion by using
the word orner in line 36, and making an oblique reference to Carol and Carol’s
accommodation style in line 40.

Example 1b⁴

Dixie 35 He didn’t want, ya know
  36 To be ornery to Grandma
  37 @@
  38 Because that’s his personality
  39 He would not do that
  40 Unlike some other people <touches Carol’s arm>
Carol 41 Ah! Who would you be talking about?

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⁴ When I repeat a smaller part of a larger transcript segment, I will add “a” to indicate an excerpt
from the beginning of the segment and “b” to indicate an excerpt from the end of the segment. I
will also use “B” to indicate that an excerpt is a direct continuation of the preceding numbered
example.
First, by using the word “ornery,” (“He didn’t want, ya know to be ornery to Grandma,” lines 35-36) to describe what Kyle's behavior was not, Dixie makes an intertextual remark alluding to the earlier talk about Carol's “orneriness.” And as a finishing flourish, she adds, (“UNLIKE some other people,” line 40) and touches Carol’s arm. By touching Carol as she delivers this line, Dixie reinforces the contrastive allusion, dispelling any ambiguity about which “other people” she was referring to. It is likely that the way she uses touch here would commonly be achieved through a "meaningful" glance between sighted friends. Telling this story to Carol in the first place is an involvement strategy—she is letting Carol in on an interaction that she and I had shared earlier in the day. Tying the story about Kyle back to Carol's talk earlier in the conversation is another way of involving Carol by alluding to prior text. It is, after all, Carol's interview, and talk has strayed to other people, but Dixie gets us back on track with this comment.

The narrative in Example 1 illustrates the problem of the spatial rearrangement of participants and the potential for negative face loss for blind participants, and at the same time, demonstrates that Dixie is not easily embarrassed or offended either by such incidents themselves, or by having them put on record by someone else. She even recounts them to others later, putting them on record herself. Moreover, by providing a narrative in which she positively evaluates the use of blindness related infelicities as sources of humor and involvement, Dixie does more rapport work and indirectly sanctions Carol's earlier admissions of having done the same with tales of blindness related infelicities.

While Dixie’s missing the changing participation structure in her daughter’s home among family was a little amusing, the social consequences can be even more disastrous in a public situation, where participants do not know one another’s names and where the blind participant may not be aware of another’s presence, and cannot
achieve mutual gaze for initiating interaction at all. One such incident, in which there is complete communicative failure due to the lack of gaze, occurs in a narrative collaboratively told by Dixie and her husband, Leon, in Example 2, about an encounter between Dixie and a sighted stranger at a grocery store. While Leon has briefly left Dixie with the cart to go get something, she decides to investigate the contents of a cart which she believes to be filled with discounted items, but which, in fact, is the personal cart of another shopper.

Example 2
Leon 1 We@ll, One time w@@e were at Safeway shop@
     2 Shopping and
     3 We had a cart
     4 And I went to go get something
     5 and I come back
     6 And your mom was@
     7 Feeling this lady’s gro@@ceries in her cart.

Dixie 8 Y--You know why?
Elisa   9 @@@@
Dixie 10 You remember at Dillon’s they always had the—
Elisa   11 Yeah, basket full of—low—
Dixie 12 ]Mm-hm. And that’s what I thought, where I w--was at
Dixie 14 ]Discounted merchandise.
Elisa  16 ]I’m not impressed.
Dixie 17 So did the woman come back?
Dixie 18 <PAUSE 1 second>
      19 [I think she was there!
Elisa 20 @@@@
Leon 21 Yeah, she was there.
       22 Oh yeah--
Elisa 23 ]@@www@
      24 ]Did she really--?
Dixie 25 ]It’s best for blind people to just
       26 Keep their hands <Slaps one hand on top of the other>
Elisa 27 ]@@www@
Dixie 28 To themselves.
      29 @@@@
Leon 30 And then--
Elisa 31 ]Did you realize--?
       32 No.
       33 Did she realize that you couldn’t see?
Dixie  34  No, I don’t think so.
  ➤35  I think she just thought I was **weird**.
Elisa  36  Did you guys tell her?
Dixie  37  jXX
Leon  38  N@o:: we didn’t know her.
  39  She just like[
Dixie  40  ]Did you tell her I couldn’t see?
Leon  41  No, we just kinda shuffled on down the a@@@isle
  42  @@@@@
Leon  43  You know—
Dixie  44  Whooo.
Elisa  45  Just let them think you’re weird and go around
  46  Feeling other pe@ople’s groceries
Dixie  47  Hm, I just wanna see what you’re buying.
  48  @@@@@
Dixie  49  If it felt fresh enough.
  50  @

While in Example 1 with her grandson, Kyle, Dixie was addressing a participant who was no longer present, in Example 2, she fails to address a participant who is present, but whose presence she is unaware of. Dixie’s blindness causes her to break the norms of public interactions—she imposes on a stranger by touching the stranger’s belongings without the owner’s consent. Her blindness also prevents her from administering the usual social repair, giving an account and an apology. In this case, Leon is the sighted mediator, and instead of filling in the missing schema on site as Kyle had in the private context, he takes action himself, which precludes Dixie taking any agency of her own in the situation. Leon made the decision not to repair, probably because he wanted to save Dixie’s face and was not overly concerned about the sighted stranger’s negative face. There was, therefore, no on site negative face loss for Dixie, although she probably felt some face loss later when he described the incident to her.

In lines 38-39, Leon provides an account to me for not giving an account to the innocent bystander victimized by a nosey blind woman nonchalantly rifling through her cart, disclosing the unwritten rule of passing/disclosure system that Leon and Dixie have developed over the years (or at least his rule; there is evidence to suggest that Dixie
would have provided an account). So in this encounter, there is no opening, no repair, and no closing, all because mutual gaze is not available for managing the basic exchange structure. Dixie does not take any action at the time of the incident, however, she suggests in the retelling of the incident at the time of our interview that she would have pursued redress if she had been aware of the situation.

By telling the story in a humorous key, Dixie takes the powerful stance of laughing at herself and her circumstances. Furthermore, when she says, “It’s best for blind people to just keep their hands to themselves,” lines 25-28, she is framing herself as an advisor of other blind people, also a powerful stance. A few lines later she pretends that she had been evaluating the other shopper’s choice of merchandise and its quality, (Hm, I just wanna see what you’re buying, If it felt fresh enough, lines 47-49). So although she neither prevents nor redresses the blindness precipitated infelicity at the time of the incident (where Leon manages the facework), she does a fair amount of facework in the retelling, framing herself as an advisor of blind people and an evaluator of a stranger’s shopping prowess, while at the same time using the incident as a resource for involvement and solidarity with her husband and daughter.

3.3 Turn Taking: Addressivity in Other-Initiated Turns

Within an interaction the floor is taken and relinquished through taking and ceding turns, which are a little like mini openings and closings within the conversation. When another participant allocates a turn to others, it may be generally addressed, so that any one of several participants may accept the turn, or it may be addressed to a single participant. In either case, all participants need to know who is being addressed so they can perform their conversational roles, either as listener or as turn claimant and next speaker. The next two sections first illustrate the problems that blindness causes for other-initiated turns in addressivity and the strategies used to surmount them, and then
for self-initiated turns, where the turn claimant must negotiate her turn with the current speaker.

An important precondition to claiming a turn is identifying who may be seen as potential addressees or turn contenders at the next *transitional relevance place* (places, as identified by Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974), where a speaker's turn may come to an end and another participant might reasonably take the next turn). In this section I focus on the forms used for *addressivity* to designate an *addressee* (essentially turn allocation). There are three forms of addressivity used in this data, one of which seems to be the default form in ordinary sighted interaction, and two of which are marked and are used by both blind and sighted participants, effectively circumventing the problem of not having mutual gaze available to all as a mode within which to achieve addressivity.

The systematic nature of turn taking in face to face interaction where there are three or more participants is as elegant as it is complex, and as Sacks et al. (1974) show, is usually achieved with less than 5% gap or overlap between turns. There are two main types of turns: Other-initiated turns are those allocated by one participant (usually the current speaker) to another, and self-initiated turns are those engineered by the next would be speaker herself. Even self-initiated turns, however, require negotiation with the current speaker through gaze.

Participants in a conversation draw on a number of modes for cues as to who is being addressed at any given point. These may be linguistic (conveyed in speech), paralinguistic (conveyed in the manner of speech), or extralinguistic (conveyed in nonverbal semiotics). Pragmatically, one critical factor is “information state” (Schiffrin 1994); a participant needs to know when a current speaker expects her to possess information that she may be able and expected to share. Although there may be some linguistic evidence of such expectations, they are often not evidenced at all, so that inaccurate assumptions about information state are among the most common causes of
communication breakdown even in sighted/sighted interaction. While paralinguistic and
extralinguistic modes can be redundant with linguistic features in an interaction,
sometimes even in sighted/sighted interaction the linguistic form alone fails to inform a
participant that she is the intended addressee and that, as such, she is expected to take
the next turn, in which case, the extralinguistic modes become critical.

These data show that in some forms of addressivity the extralinguistic modes,
most critically gaze, are essential to full comprehension of an utterance or a
conversational move. Consider the role of gaze in three types of addressivity I have
identified in my data and outlined in the table below that occur in face to face interaction,
and the effects that gazelessness will produce in an interability exchange where one (or
more) participant(s) is blind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address Type</th>
<th>Name &amp; Pronoun</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Gaze</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) You/Gaze</td>
<td>(none), you</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Gaze</td>
<td><em>Would you like coffee?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) You/Name</td>
<td>Harriet, you</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>[gaze]</td>
<td><em>Harriet, would you like coffee?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Name/Gaze</td>
<td>Harriet, (none)</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Gaze</td>
<td><em>Would Harriet like coffee?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 Three Types of Addressivity in Blind/Sighted Interaction

Type 1, *You/Gaze Addressivity*, is the unmarked form of address in sighted/sighted interaction (e.g., Goodwin 1980, Kendon 1990). In Type 1, the addressee is cued through the use of the pronoun “you,” without the name of the addressee (e.g., “Would you like coffee?” *<gazing at addressee>*). The polysemy of this form is its chief limitation: in multiparty interactions it can refer to an individual, several individuals, or a generalized “you” (meaning “one/somebody/anybody”). If unaccompanied by a name or unique title, the use of the strictly linguistic pronoun “you” cannot signal an intended addressee without “mode coupling.” In this case, the linguistic mode of the pronoun “you” is coupled with the extralinguistic gesture of mutual gaze between speaker and addressee.
In other words, the pronoun “you” does not accomplish the function of address without gaze, such that the extralinguistic mode of gaze is inextricable from this form. When the intended addressee is a single individual, the speaker normally disambiguates “you” by achieving mutual gaze with that individual. If gaze is not available, other modes will need to be drawn on for addressee identification or the cue will be missed. Thus, gaze is integral to this form of addressee designation, not peripheral or redundant. To compensate for gazelessness when this strategy is employed, non-seeing participants must attend more vigilantly, both in interpreting auditory or other nonvisual cues, and in anticipating speaker expectations about hearer information state.

In Type 2, *You/Name Addressivity*, the addressee is cued linguistically through use of the intended addressee’s name coupled with the pronoun “you” (e.g., “Harriet, would you like coffee?”), as Werry (1996) shows is also normative in internet chat interaction. In this form, gaze is optional, but redundant. Moreover, where gaze is available in face to face interaction among sighted interlocutors, this device is relatively uncommon. In this data, however, it is used with frequency as a gaze compensation strategy to alert the blind participant that she is being addressed.

The third and most marked type of addressee designation strategy in this data is Type 3, *(Third person) Name/Gaze Addressivity*. This strategy involves naming the addressee and achieving mutual gaze with him or her, but uses third person verb inflection, which precludes the use of the pronoun “you” (e.g., “Would Harriet like coffee?” <gazing at Harriet>). The advantage of this strategy is that a sighted interlocutor can use mutual gaze to indicate to a participant that she is being addressed, and through the use of name, can simultaneously convey this information to the blind participant.

There are, ironically, two disadvantages of this potential strategy. The first is that it is highly dispreferred in English to talk about a present party in third person because it suggests that the person being referenced is incapable of, or undesirable for, direct
address. The second is its linguistic polysemy. At the surface structure the sentence can be interpreted literally, as third-person reference clarifies who the topic of conversation is, but not necessarily who the addressee is. It can also be used, however, to single out a participant and indirectly allocate a turn to her. The fact that this addressivity type includes the achievement of mutual gaze would serve to clearly alert the addressee that she is expected to speak, and at the same time, convey the information to the blind participant. Without the use of gaze to single out a participant, based on auditory cues alone, it could be interpreted as an invitation for any participant to answer, plausibly in an effort to decrease the imposition on the addressee who is also the proposed topic and to increase involvement among other participants.

Not only do participants need to know who is being addressed, but speakers also need to know who is available as a potential addressee. If a participant does not appear to be attending to the speaker, the speaker may either address someone else or may use an alternate mode to address the nonattending participant (such as that participant’s name, as a vocative, or through a touch gesture), and wait for mutual gaze before proceeding. The data presented here show that Dixie, as a person socialized in the norms of sighted interaction before losing her sight, can produce convincing gaze behaviors despite the fact that she cannot receive them. She is particularly adept at using gaze to convey the sense that her interlocutor is being attended to when she knows herself to be the primary addressee, which is visible in Figure 20.
One distinctive aspect that emerges in Dixie’s productive gaze behavior is that which I call a neutral “resting gaze” (Everts 2004), which she often uses when she is not the primary addressee, illustrated above in Figure 21. This gaze, not focused on the speaker or any other participant, is likely to give sighted interlocutors the impression that she has disengaged from the conversation, even when she may still be actively listening. This apparent inattention will affect the turn management behaviors of the sighted participants, particularly in regard to who will be seen as available as a potential addressee or turn contender. It should, of course, be noted that although sighted interlocutors may sometimes exhibit behavior similar to the blind resting gaze, the duration and frequency of its production by blind participants is quite marked. Moreover, sometimes the ability to produce a convincing attention gaze may also be a liability when, for example, it miscues to the speaker that information has been successfully transmitted when it has not.

Although the failure to claim a turn, a productive aspect of turn taking, is the most obvious obstacle to active participation in a conversation without gaze, receptive participation should be considered first. While failure to identify the primary addressee of an utterance can be an impediment to a coherent understanding of the emerging discourse, such receptive failures may often remain covert, without either causing a loss of face to the blind participant or observably affecting the interaction. When a participant
fails to identify that she herself is the intended addressee, however, the failure will be observable, preventing her from fulfilling the role of active participant by responding on cue, and inhering a greater risk of face loss.

Although Type 1 addressivity, which couples the modes of gaze and speech, using only gaze and either the pronoun "you" (explicit or implicit) is the default form in sighted interaction, using mutual gaze is not sufficient to ensure that a blind participant knows who is being addressed. A Type 1 failure occurs in example 2, when Dixie fails to recognize herself as the primary addressee of a request for help with the punch line of a joke that Harriet is trying to tell. Not having access to gaze is not the only factor that causes confusion in this interchange, as Harriet herself seems to be confused about who she got the joke from, but it is probably responsible for the length of time it takes to identify and clear up a misunderstanding.

Harriet is sitting on the (camera’s) right end of the couch and Dixie is on the left end, with Esther between them. Dixie has just finished telling a joke when Harriet turns her body at least 45 degrees toward Dixie and looks exclusively at her. Although it would be natural for her to claim her turn by first getting Dixie’s gaze since Dixie is the current speaker when Harriet takes the floor, her use of gaze and the pronoun "you" suggest that, not only does she want to take the floor after Dixie, but that Dixie might be the primary addressee. This turns out to be important when Dixie is expected to help with the joke. Because the telling, retelling, and evaluation of the joke take more than 130 intonation units, I have omitted all but the essential parts, excerpting primarily the skeleton and meta-discourse about who knows the joke and might help with the punch line, but the entire transcript of the segment about Harriet’s joke appears in Appendix 4.
Harriet  Did ah— Did you hear that one
about the lady that come home from church <gazes at Dixie, past Esther >
and she bumped into, ah, this person that’d broke into her house
And she said—

**5 Now help me,**

6 I might get it all wrong— <gazes into the air, not at any specific participant>
7 She said— Acts 4, Acts 4 ...
8 Xx Help me, what would it be
9 She said Acts, Acts 4, anyway it was Acts four uh and 2 umm . . .
10 Acts 2, Acts 2, Acts 2:4 ...
11 Darn it, I had it and it was real cute, And I liked—

**12 YOU gave it to me.** <gazes at Dixie and points to her>

Dixie  **WHO did?** <producing convincing receptive gaze to Harriet>

Harriet  **YOU did.**

Dixie **I did? No, I didn’t. I never heard this joke before.** [Omit 3 IUs]

Harriet  Well she came home and quoted this scripture [Omit 1 IU]
17 And the guy was so scared
18 and he ran out of the house but he was caught
19 And so the police officer said, “Well why did you try to get away?”
20 Well he said “she said she had an axe and two . . .” [Omit 6 IUs]
21 No, Acts 2 and then it was guns... [Omit 25 IUs]

Others  <everybody tries to help>

Harriet  And he was scared because it was like guns [Omit 1 IU]
24 Two forty-fives! [Omit 25 IUs]

Elisa  That’s excellent.

Dixie  That’s pretty cute.

Harriet  SOMEmone gave me that.

Dixie  Nahh, it wasn’t me. I never heard that one but xx [Omit 3 IUs]

Harriet  I can’t tell jokes, I really can’t.

The punch line of the joke is centered on the fact that each part of the scripture reference, book, chapter and verse (Acts 2:45) could also be homophones for “axe,” and “two 45s” (rifles), as though the woman whose home is being invaded is announcing to the invader the weapons with which she is armed. Harriet begins with the classic opening, (“Did you hear that one…,” line 1), an opening that assumes that the listener has not heard the joke and that if she has, she will say so as soon as she recognizes it.

---

38 IU=Intonation Unit, Chafe 1994.
Harriet looks only at Dixie (and briefly the floor) while she delivers the first three lines, the opening bid and orientation of the joke. (“Did ah— Did you hear that one about the lady that come home from church, And she bumped into, ah, this person that’d broke into her house …,” lines 1-2). We can infer from her gaze behavior and the use of Type 1 addressivity that Harriet believes (at the moment she is delivering these lines) that Dixie has not heard the joke. As she finishes these lines, however, she takes her gaze away from Dixie and looks more in the general direction of the group, shifting her face and body orientation to the left (Dixie is at her right, on the other side of Esther).

At this point she produces an unfocused upward gaze and seems to address the group generally as she requests assistance in remembering the joke, (“Now help me, I might get it all wrong,” line 8). This is like the Type 1, You/Gaze addressivity, as it is in the imperative, with an implicit “you”; however, the unfocused gaze leaves the actual addressee/s unspecified. The polysemy of this form, that it could refer either to a single participant or to several participants, combined with Harriet’s unfocused gaze, suggests that she is addressing the group generally.

Her second request, however, is made directly to Dixie, when, after about five seconds of unsuccessful attempts to recall the punch line, Harriet leans around Esther and gazes at Dixie (who appears to be gazing back), and says, (“Help me, what would it be?” lines 18-19). This is a true Type 1 strategy with the “you” implicit in the imperative, and this time it is disambiguated for the sighted participants by the use of gaze, directed only at Dixie. As Dixie does not have access to Harriet’s nonverbal cues of posture, proxemics, and gaze, she cannot know that this request is directed to her specifically, and she does not reply. Moreover, the sighted participants may remember that Harriet opened the joke by addressing Dixie as if she has not heard the joke, so they may be a little confused too, at this point about who Harriet expects to be able to help with the punchline.
A few seconds later, Harriet turns to Dixie again and says, (“YOU gave it to me,” line 18), looking at Dixie and pointing to her. The gesture clarifies who she means for the sighted observers, but the pointing is obviously pointless for the blind participant. Clarifying this for the sighted participants, however, may be partly responsible for their nonresponse. Since there is silence following both the first and second tokens of attribution (“You gave it to me, YOU did,” lines 10,12), the repetition and the failure of other participants to respond provide a cue for Dixie that she might be the addressee. Apparently beginning to suspect this, Dixie replies with apparent surprise, (“Who did?” line 19). Only then does Harriet disambiguate her intended addressee by answering (YOU did, line 20), putting stress on the pronoun “you.” Of course the reason the pronoun disambiguates this time when it had not before is because Harriet is supplying the second pair part (Schegloff 1973:295-6) to Dixie’s first pair part question, which makes it clear that she is the referent. Dixie demonstrates that she now understands herself to be the addressee by flatly denying the proposition (“No, I didn’t, I never heard this joke beFORE,” lines 23-24). When the joke is finished, several minutes later, Dixie returns to this point in the conversation, putting on record that she had not initially known who was being addressed.

In Example 3b (a continuation of Example 3), she reports some of her information processing, apparently by way of apology. The complex of modes Harriet employs to indicate Dixie as the intended addressee includes the linguistic mode of the pronoun “you,” the paralinguistic mode of voice direction, and the extralinguistic mode of posture, proxemics, gesture, and gaze.

Example 3B

Dixie
1 When you were saying,
2 “Help me”
3 I’m thinking,
4 I thought you were talking to Esther or somebody
All of these extralinguistic modes are available to the sighted participants, but having no receptive gaze, Dixie has no access to them, which turns out to be key. Since Dixie does not know the joke, as she purports (“I never heard this joke beFORE,” line 17), and does not initially realize that Harriet believes her to know it, it takes her longer to put the linguistic and paralinguistic auditory cues together to determine that she was the intended addressee.

That Dixie had imagined Esther, seated to her left between Harriet and herself, to be the probable addressee (“I thought you were talking to Esther or somebody,” line 4), however, and not someone on the other side of the room, demonstrates that the paralinguistic cue of voice direction probably made her aware that Harriet’s voice was directed toward her end of the couch, though it was not sufficient to specify whether it was to her or to Esther. Had Dixie been privy to Harriet’s assumption that she knew the joke, this knowledge would have helped compensate for missing the visual cues, and she might have guessed earlier that she was the intended addressee. Thus this was also a failure in the estimation of the amount of shared schema between speaker and addressee.

An alternative addressee-designation strategy, Type 3, is to use the mode coupling of the addressee’s name with gaze, but without the pronoun “you” in third person. This is the strategy I highlighted in the transcript segment in the introduction to Chapter One. In that segment I use this strategy when I raise a new topic of conversation by asking Harriet when she started going to the church they all now attend, (“When did Harriet start going to the Assembly?” line 1). Linguistically, this third person reference clarifies who the topic of conversation is, but not necessarily who the addressee is.
Example 4

Elisa ➔ 1 **When did Harriet** start going out to Assembly?
Dixie ➔ 2 **Ask** her
Elisa ➔ 3 **I AM** asking her. @@
Anne ➔ 4 **She is.** <Anne hits Dixie>
Dixie 5 **XX** <giggles and smiles at Anne>
Harriet 6 I don’t—
7 When it was still on Trailridge,
8 I don’t know what year it was,
9 It was so long ago
Martha 10 **Yeah, I just barely started on Trailridge too.**
Harriet 11 **Had you just barely—**
12 **Started going?**
Martha 13 I had been going **XX**
14 **XX**
Elisa 15 **Is that when you met my mom?**
Harriet 16 **Or did you not meet her until—**
17 I didn’t meet your mom until
18 It was at the Assembly
19 Out there and,
20 I was ah,
21 I was having,
22 I didn’t know that she knew it
23 But I needed prayer a lot,
24 And ah,
25 **[[So Dixie one time called me over to sit by her**
26 **And that was the beginning of**
27 **Really, of our friendship**

The video tape shows, however, that in spite of the polysemy of this Type 3 form, the visual cue of my gazing at Harriet to signal that she was the intended designee resolved the ambiguity for the sighted participants. Harriet responds to this cue by returning my gaze and beginning to speak immediately upon the completion of my utterance. Moreover, the video shows that the other sighted participants also understood Harriet to be the designee, as they all automatically turned their gaze to her upon my finishing the question (“When did HARRIET start going to the Assembly?” line 1). Dixie, however, draws attention to the markedness of the Type 3 strategy by saying (“Ask her,” line 3), and giggling. She gets reproved both verbally and through a touch-gesture by Anne (“She IS—” <smiling and hitting her lightly on the arm>, line 6), and verbally by
Elisa (“I AM asking her @@,” line 5), indicating that her daughters understand the addressee to be Harriet, and they expect Dixie to understand that, too. Since Anne and Elisa are the two participants most familiar with Dixie’s limitations and logically the most attuned to her communication style, their responses to Dixie’s utterance suggest that they do not realize that this misunderstanding could be sight-related, and moreover, suggest a tacit acceptance of Type 3 addressivity as a valid addressee designation strategy.

Evidence that both Type 2 (you/name coupling) and Type 3 (name/gaze coupling) addressivity are actually normative in this group of blind and sighted participants is their use by Elisa, Martha, Esther, and Dixie herself at a point earlier in the conversation while they are still in the living room, as shown in Example 5. Esther and Dixie are the current topic of conversation, and at least four participants are collaboratively trying to arrive at a consensus on whether Esther and Dixie might have attended the Foursquare Church at the same time.

Example 5

Elisa  1 When did, like—
       ✤ 2 Sister Rose might have met my mom before
Esther  3 Oh, m—met <touches Dixie’s arm, gazes at Elisa>
       4 Your mom
       5 Probably over there at Trailridge
Martha ✤ 6 Did you [go to Foursquare?]  
       ✤ 7 [At the old] [church building]
Elisa  8 [Esther, did you go] to Foursquare?
Martha ✤ 9 Well, I went to Foursquare but did— <gazes, points to Dixie>  
       ✤10 Dix[ie?] <gazes at Dixie, turns to Martha when Martha speaks>
Esther 11 Dixie—
       ✤12 Wasn’t that where you went, Dixie?
       ✤13 Wasn’t that where you came from?
Elisa  14 Yeah, we went to Foursquare
Dixie  15 Ye:::ah, but –
Elisa  16 How many years ago? <gazes at Dixie, looks away on completion>
Dixie  17 Well, yeah
       ✤18 Esther has been at Assembly how long? <unfocused gaze>
Esther  19  Well, I’d been at Assembly . . . <unfocused gaze, not at Dixie>
       20  We moved here in 1931. Were you born then?
       21  Was I born then? No! @@

I, trying to determine when Dixie met Sister Esther Rose, open this sequence with addressivity Type 3, asking (“When did, like—Sister Rose might have met my mom earlier,” line 1). This question is asked in third person through the use of Sister Rose’s name without the pronoun “you.” In Martha’s subsequent reiteration of the question (“Did you go to Foursquare?” line 6), she addresses Esther with Type 1, without using her name, indicating whom she means to address via the pronoun “you,” coupled with the act of gazing at Esther and achieving mutual gaze. However, when Esther answers this question, she uses Type 3, Dixie’s name in a third-person question, (“Well, I went to Foursquare, but did—Dixie?” line 9).

As observed in Table 8, Type 3 addressivity, which uses the person’s name in third person syntax, is ambiguous in that participants cannot tell with certainty whether Esther means to address Martha, whose question she has just answered, or Dixie, who is most able to answer the question. No reply from Dixie is forthcoming, however, and evidence that other participants view Dixie as the addressee is Martha’s stepping in with a Type 2 address, using the pronoun “you” and her first name: (“Wasn’t that where you went, Dixie?” line 12). She then provides a Type 1 address in a second token of the question after the name, (“Wasn’t that where you came from?” line 13). The second token may be in anticipation that Dixie might not be fully attending until after she hears her name. Dixie uses Esther’s name in third person, the Type 3 strategy, in her reply, (“Esther has been at Assembly how long?” line 18).
Example 5 illustrates addressee designation strategy Types 1-3. Type 1, the most common strategy in sighted/sighted interaction, relies on the pronoun “you” with the coupling of gaze to indicate addressee, and often fails in this blind/sighted interaction. Type 2, the use of the pronoun you and the explicit name of the addressee, which is sometimes used in sighted/sighted interaction, occurs more frequently here and is successful in letting Dixie know that she is being addressed. Type 3, third person reference with the addressee’s name and gaze, a form of addressivity in multiparty interaction that can have the effect of simultaneously addressing the intended party and alerting the unaddressed non-seeing participant as to whom the addressee is, seems to have emerged as an accommodative discursive practice in the habitus of both the blind and the sighted participants in compensation for Dixie’s lack of access to the mode of gaze.

3.4 Turn Taking: Modes of Repair in Self-Initiated Turn Claims

In Example 6, in which Dixie is a topic of conversation, she takes turns that speakers allocate to her in the form of questions with addressivity Types 2 and 3. Such other-initiated turn allocations appeal to positive face and involvement of the addressee, but are, of course, qualitatively distinct from self-initiated turn claims that do more to serve negative face needs simultaneously with the positive face involvement. So while she has occupied turns of the first type, there are several noticeable instances in this evening of conversation where Dixie attempts to initiate turn claims of her own, but fails. Though she is not the only person who sometimes fails to claim turns in this data, there
is evidence that her failures are either caused or complicated by her having no access to
the mode of gaze, as I illustrate in the following section.

At several points there is evidence of frustration on Dixie’s part about her inability
to get the group’s attention. One striking turn claim struggle of this nature takes place in
Example 6. In this instance, however, after her first attempt fails, Dixie assesses the
situation, reformulates her approach, and through the employment of no fewer than nine
different modes and modalities, finally manages to get the floor, claim her turn, and elicit
the information she desires.

Martha, the hostess for the gathering, is sitting on the floor by the couch in her
front room, as shown in Figures 23 and 24. After half an hour or so of conversation, she
indicates that she is ready for everyone to move to the kitchen for refreshments;
however, no one moves to act on her suggestion. In the awkward space of non-
response to her request, Martha then assures Esther of her interest in Esther's stories,
apparently by way of mitigating the potential threat to Esther's negative face by imposing
an end to this conversation, and to her positive face by inhibiting the involvement the
conversation is effecting, focused on Esther's experience. This act of politeness,
however, actually sabotages Martha’s efforts to get everyone to go to the other room because it initiates another strip of conversation.

Dixie becomes very involved in this discussion about church history, but when the topic seems to come to a close, she stops talking and assumes a posture facing more toward the kitchen and away from the rest of the group, apparently in readiness to comply with Martha’s wishes. She also assumes an extreme “resting gaze,” as illustrated in Figures 23 and 24, which gives her the appearance of being disengaged from the conversation. Figure 24 is an aerial representation of the participants’ relative location to each other and the vectors of gaze each participant is producing towards other participants, chiefly to Esther, the current speaker. That Dixie is still listening, however, becomes evident when Esther raises a new topic by mentioning the marimba that a pastor’s daughter used to play, to which Dixie immediately asks, “What’s a marimba?”

Example 6

|        | 1             | Fredericksons– |
|        | 2             | They used t– |
|        | 3             | They were musical, |
|        | 4             | And they had a marimba |
|        | 5             | The girl played– |
|        | 6             | XXX |
| Martha | 7             | [Fredericksons?] |
| Dixie  | 8             | [What’s a marimba?] |
| Esther | 9             | Fredericksons, |
|        | 10            | They were second pastors. |
| Dixie  | 11            | <looks to Anne, makes face and gesture> |
|        | 12            | <mouths> I know THAT, |
|        | 13            | **That’s in HERE** <pointing to her head> |
| Anne   | 14            | <laughs> |
|        | 15            | Oh, XX |
|        | 16            | <turns to Esther, “gazes” at her, “patty-cake” gesture> |
|        | 17            | **What’s a marimba?** <increases volume slightly> |
|        | 18            | **What’s it look like?** |
| Esther | 19            | Well, it’s <extends hands about 2.5 feet> A kinda keyboard |
| Dixie  | 20            | Oh. |
| Esther | 21            | That you use some sticks that you– |
|        | 22            | <animated gesture: hitting the marimba w/ sticks> |
|        | 23            | Play it with– |
Since Dixie does not change her posture or the direction of her own gaze, she is not in a position to catch Esther's eye or anyone else's when she asks this.

In Example 6B, however, she turns towards Anne, and thus towards the group, and mouths something like ("I know THAT; I have that in HERE," lines 12-13), and points to her head (seen in Figure 25), eliciting laughter from Anne. It appears that her gesture was meant to indicate that she was already privy to the information about the name of the family in point, that Sister Rose should have known that this was shared schema between them, and that she therefore should not have misunderstood that to be her question. Although Dixie’s gesture is directed to Anne, Figures 25 and 26 show that the byproduct of this side response to a ratified but unparticipating participant is catching the peripheral gaze of Martha and Harriet, who are currently the only two listeners with a direct line of access to the speaker’s gaze.

This has the happy effect of causing them to turn their gaze toward Dixie. The shift of gaze vectors from Esther to Dixie in Figures 27 and 28 illustrates the net effect of
Dixie’s animated side complaint to Anne such that now five of six participants are looking at Dixie rather than at Esther (the speaker), who is, for a brief moment, the only participant not gazing at Dixie.

Anne’s laughter has surely contributed to getting their attention too, but it is interesting to note that the laugh directs their attention to Dixie, the stimulus of Anne’s laughter, and not to Anne. Thus, Dixie’s humor is a discourse strategy that allows her to voice a mitigated but on-record complaint, which is a strategy to ask for redressive action, and both contribute to the end of gaining fellow participant (hearer) attention and then speaker attention as a precondition for claiming a short, supportive turn. Dixie then turns more directly toward Esther (about 15 degrees), and raising her voice slightly, asks again (“What’s a marimba? What’s it look like?” lines 17-18), thus making her second turn claim attempt, and buttressing it with two strategies she did not use in the original, failed turn claim attempt: repetition and gesture.
First, she repeats the original question verbatim in line 16 of Example 6C, “What’s a marimba?” Then she repeats that question by paraphrasing it (“What’s it look like?” line 17). Not only does she thereby make her question twice as noticeable through the auditory means of repetition (taking up twice as much audible “space”), but she also makes it more noticeable by verbally appealing to the sighted participants’ visual imagination. She then reinforces this verbal appeal to the visual with an animated gesture which is reminiscent to the rolling part of the actions to the popular children’s rhyme, patty-cake-roll-it-in-the-pan. In doing so, she combines auditory and visual channels to procure the attention of her sighted co-conversants. The result is that, at this point, Esther raises her face towards Dixie and attends to her question shown in Figures 28 and 29.

Finally, in Figures 29 and 30, Esther answers the question, using a visual gesture to satisfy Dixie’s explicit request for a visual description in the question (“What’s it look like?” lines 18). When Dixie is satisfied, Esther turns towards Martha, who has asked for more visual description about the marimba. Dixie now turns her gaze towards Mary as she speaks, as shown in Figure 31.
In sum, this interaction exhibits a robust constellation of modes that Dixie exploits in claiming a turn when in the challenging situation where she has neither the current speaker's eye nor most of the other listeners.' Table 9 shows the modes and channels Dixie uses in her reformulated bid for a question turn.
Dixie employs the linguistic forms of questions (“What's a marimba? What's it look like?” lines 17-18), displays of knowledge (“I know that, I have that in here,” lines 12-13), complaint, humor, and repetition, as well as a surprising request for visual information in spite of the fact that she cannot now see. Paralinguistically, she uses volume, intonation, stress, rhythm and pace, and extralinguistically, gesture, posture, proxemics, facial expression, and productive gaze to attract the attention of the speaker and other listeners.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The findings of this chapter suggest that identifying the functions of gaze in ordinary sighted/sighted interaction is a critical foundation for further research into the alternative modes that might be substituted for it in blind/sighted interaction. The similarity between openings and closings in face to face interaction and in telephone conversations is acknowledged, although I observe that in phone exchanges the modal restrictions are typically mutual, unlike face to face blind/sighted interaction, where each participant is likely to be unaware of the modal constraints of the other.

There are also problems in identifying the available participants in face to face interaction. Addressee designation and turn claims are shown to be challenging for blind
participants, but compensatory strategies seem to have emerged organically among the participants in this data, not only on the part of the blind participant, but on the part of her sighted friends and family over the course of the last 25 years as Dixie passed from legal blindness to complete blindness. The data also show that Dixie is able to use a constellation of modes and modalities that appeal to the visuality of her co-conversants in order to get their attention and claim a turn in spite of her inability to procure the gaze of the current speaker through the usual process of achieving mutual gaze via one’s own receptive gaze, the normal precondition for doing so.

The absence of gaze for initiating, maintaining, and closing interactions, all inherently bound up in turn-taking, is one of the critical obstacles that must be surmounted in order for a blind person to gain both equitable involvement and independence in interaction among sighted participants. Of course, involvement, by definition, cannot be unilateral and can be initiated or maintained by either party. I have presented some successful strategies that Dixie and her sighted companions use to achieve involvement through these conversational acts. Moreover, I have shown how Dixie creates involvement not only for herself, but for others in ways that focus on them and not on her. In the following chapter, I show how Dixie uses her knowledge of the visual world to counter attributions of epistemological powerlessness and to build solidarity with and among her sighted co-conversants.
Chapter 4: Envisioning Insidership: Displays of Visual Knowledge as a Powerful Epistemological Stance

4.0 Introduction

What terrifies people the most about blindness? Most sighted people associate blindness with darkness (though, as I wrote in Chapter One, most visually impaired and/or blind people do not “see” darkness), so we might connect blindness to a more universal fear of the dark. However, I doubt that anyone is really afraid of darkness itself. Rather, they are afraid of what is in the dark—or what might be there. They are afraid of not knowing what is there, of not being able to prepare to protect themselves from dangers resulting from not knowing what is in the dark. They are afraid of not having eyes to know with.

“Blindness leads to ignorance.” That is the bemused, sarcastic observation of once sighted blind philosopher, John Hull, in his autobiographical account of blindness (Hull 1997:25). Knowing is intimately connected with seeing, a linkage he notes is borne out in the enormous corpus of linguistic metaphor of vision and blindness that exists for describing various aspects of epistemology, both in popular parlance and in technical philosophical jargon, as well. In the paragraphs below I illustrate just a few of these nearly ubiquitous metaphors of sight and light we use to refer to knowledge.

Hull insightfully observes that a survey of expressions of epistemology reveal a predominance of metaphors of sight and light, which, in his view, reflect at a more or less unconscious level on the image of a blind person’s epistemological competence—both her existing knowledge, and her means of acquiring it. Look at the way sentence after sentence illustrates his point. Careful scrutiny shows that sighted people do tend to perceive knowledge and thought in the binary terms of sight and blindness, and of light and darkness, (the primary substance of vision). A person who lacks understanding is blind or, perhaps less damningly, dull, dimwitted—not the brightest bulb in the box, while a person who has great intelligence or understanding is seen as bright or brilliant. A man
who can *speculate* or project into the future, *taking the long view*, is a man of *vision*; one who can think only of the immediate is *short sighted*, and one whose *focus* is too narrow suffers from *tunnel vision*. A *shady* person who wishes to withhold or *obscure* knowledge may *daze*, *bedazzle*, or *pull the wool over someone's eyes*, resulting in a state of confusion or ignorance. The wise individual, *lucid* and *clear minded*, sees through such *opaque* discourse, preferring the *transparency* of one who releases information freely. If the truth suddenly *dawns on* the deceived person, it is often said that she has *come to see the light* or has had an *eye opening* experience. *Clearly*, from the 40 different words and phrases in these two paragraphs that pair the experience of vision and light with epistemological states and stances, the reader can see what Hull means. From the *perspective* of the sighted, it appears that *seeing* is not just believing, it is *knowing*.

Persons with any disability are prone to being treated as if they were intellectually deficient even when their disability is physical or perceptual, and not mental. Due to the intimate pairing of knowledge and vision in the prevailing worldview of the sighted, there is a particular problem of epistemological powerlessness, both real and attributed, in the case of blindness. At issue are the quantity, speed, and reliability of the acquisition of knowledge without sight. The sheer quantity of information that the average sighted individual takes in through the visual channel today defies description via any mode in any other channel.

The time it would take to translate all of the information in a single scene (a visual text) into a verbal description would be exponentially greater than the time it takes to acquire the same information via vision. A description requires the viewer to select from a potentially infinite number of details and put those into a potentially infinite number of words and utterances. On top of this, as presented in Chapter Two, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) reference this privileging of sight over hearing with the observation that, "... we regard the sense of sight as more reliable than our sense of hearing, 'I saw it with
my own eyes,’ as more reliable evidence than ‘I heard it with my own ears’” (1996:159). Chafe (1994:53) also comments that consciousness is like vision, pointing out that the similarities are probably not accidental, since the eye is anatomically an extension of the brain. This reality that the visual channel provides access to such an overwhelming quantity of knowledge, at literally the speed of light, and that the highest level of validity and evidentiality is ascribed to it (as opposed to knowledge gained through other channels) by the sighted world, contributes to a relatively unconscious corresponding attribution of epistemological deficiency to the blind.

In this chapter I first address, in 4.1, several realms of powerlessness that are particular to blindness, pointing out that epistemological powerlessness has been underaddressed in the literature about blindness. I then explain how epistemological stances (Ochs 1992) can be used to counterconstruct oneself as independent in the face of assumed or attributed epistemological powerlessness. In 4.2, I discuss Dillon’s (1992) notion of insider/outsider status which results from a mismatch in the texts available to two interlocutors as a resource for interaction. In that case, as in Hamilton’s application in interability Alzheimer’s discourse, the text that is not mutually available to both the healthy interlocutor and the Alzheimer’s patient, who may not remember previous conversations, is prior text (Becker 1995), text that is temporally distal (Chafe 1994).

In this chapter, the text that is not mutually available between blind and sighted interlocutors is “visual text,” which I am calling “modally distal,” and which can be translated (if rather imprecisely) into “verbal texts” that can be accessed auditorily. I then proceed to show how Dixie uses visuality, a mode that is now only distally available to her, to take powerful epistemological stances by displaying (and disseminating) visual knowledge using visual texts and verbal translations of visual texts to accommodate her sighted interlocutors. She does this, as I show in 4.3, by requesting visual descriptions, in 4.4, by providing visual texts and verbal translations of visual texts, and in 4.5, by
evaluating and manipulating visual texts. 4.6 concludes the chapter by summing up the strategies Dixie uses to resist being positioned as an “outsider” and to position herself instead as an “insider.”

**4.1 Powerlessness Particular to Blindness**

Inherent in disability in general are several layers of powerlessness. These include 1) that of stigma itself and the attitudes of society, which the individual is powerless to change, 2) that of incompetence (a social perspective/problem of negative face image when alternate means are used to achieve the same end), 3) that of helplessness (where assistance by another person actually is needed), and 4) that of falsely attributed incapacities based on prejudice and stereotype, including that which is perhaps the most insidious and pervasive, the presumption that intellectual deficiencies accompany physical or perceptual disabilities. These four layers of powerlessness affect those with any disability, but there are two other realms of powerlessness that are very particular to blindness which constitute the reasons blindness is one of the most interactionally disabling of all physical and perceptual disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Navigational (Given)</th>
<th>Epistemological (New)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The material, visible world</td>
<td>The material, visible world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social world</td>
<td>The social world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10 Two Realms of Powerlessness Specific to Blindness**

The first, as shown in Table 10, is navigational powerlessness, which can be subdivided into physical mobility through and manipulation of both the material world and the social world. Some of the challenges to navigational competence in the material world include such mundane tasks as finding one’s shoes, making breakfast, getting to work, using a public bathroom, or making a deposit at the bank. Challenges to navigational competence in the social world include such freedoms as being able to greet someone in the hall, knowing who you are talking to, determining who is being
addressed by another person’s utterance and responding appropriately, and looking at
the right person when addressing an individual among a group of people. Because
 navigational powerlessness is far more adequately acknowledged and addressed in the
literature, I will focus more on epistemological powerlessness, which has been scarcely
acknowledged at all.

Navigational powerlessness is, however, inextricably related to the rarely
articulated arena of epistemological powerlessness, which is almost completely
unaddressed in the literature, but which I believe is also critical to understanding
problems of blind/sighted interaction. Blind people suffer from epistemological
powerlessness both because of the actual lack of knowledge based on limited access to
all kinds of visual information, as well as a great deal of ignorance that is falsely
attributed to them on the basis of mistaken assumptions held by uninformed sighted
people.

In this section, I have first identified several types of powerlessness endemic to
disability in general, namely, society’s prejudicial stigmatization and treatment, society’s
negative evaluation of the necessity of using alternate, dispreferred means to achieve
the same end an “ordinary” person would use, genuine helplessness that arises in some
situations where assistance by an abled other is actually needed, and the social
powerlessness of having people wrongly attribute other disabilities to the individual,
particularly that of intellectual deficiency. I have gone beyond this, however, to identify
the layers of powerlessness unique to blindness, not only those obvious navigational
limitations, but also those that are epistemological and have been largely overlooked.
Navigational and epistemological limitations apply to the management of both the social
and the material world. Moreover, uncommon powerlessness calls for uncommon
strategies for managing interaction, identity, and relationship, so it may be expected that
analysis of blind/sighted interaction will yield some interesting discourse processes.
Naturally, the best antidote for ascribed powerlessness is the counter-construction of oneself as powerful through displays and reports of competence in the area of supposed deficiency, as well as in other areas that may help counterbalance one’s perceived competence overall. In particular, displays of knowledge are the obvious antidote to attributions of epistemological deficiency, and (as Ochs 1992 shows) are far more effective in their indirect form than direct claims of intelligence or knowledge. An even more indirect (and I would argue more powerful) strategy is to simply perform interactional work that is difficult or impossible to achieve without the knowledge that is evidenced in it.

While there are many kinds of knowledge that Dixie displays throughout the data, the most surprising, and perhaps the most powerful, is the way she draws on her visual knowledge and on “visual texts” which she can only access indirectly, not only to claim a more powerful identity and interactional style for herself, but also to create involvement with and for her sighted co-conversants. In the case of blindness, the secret weapon of the once sighted blind person is her knowledge of the visual world.

Moreover, interactional power yields both involvement and independence. An important aspect of involvement is that it can work in at least three directions which I list here, from what I argue is least to most powerful: 1) one can involve herself with the active participants in a discussion already underway, 2) she can involve herself and others by initiating interaction with others, and 3) she can involve a nonparticipating person by bringing that person into an interaction in which others are already participating. The ability to help oneself (in this case, in achieving involvement) constitutes independence, but the ability to help others does even more so. Dixie uses visual texts to achieve both independence and all three of these levels of involvement.

Epistemological stances are one of the important discursive resources for constructing a more powerful, independent identity that Ochs (1992) identifies in her
work with sighted interlocutors. As I have argued above, epistemological stances are an
even more critical resource for the blind interlocutor. In this chapter, I first present the
critical concepts from the literature about epistemological powerlessness and blindness,
particularly as they relate to the establishment of an insider/outsider status based on the
asymmetry in access to the “visual texts” both in the immediate visual context of the
interactions, and in a distal mode (Chafe 1994) such as past or hypothetical mode. I then
provide examples of ways that Dixie uses various types of displays of knowledge to
overcome epistemological deficiencies, both real and attributed.

Dixie uses visuality to demonstrate her awareness of the visual world, firmly
establishing her own negative face, while at the same time attending to the positive face
needs of both herself and her sighted interlocutors. Even though she does not have
direct, immediate access to them, by combining her knowledge of the visual world with
that which she is able to obtain about it through translations in other modes, she is able
to use visual texts as a resource for interaction and identity construction among sighted
interlocutors by 1) making requests for visual descriptions, 2) providing visual
descriptions, and even 3) evaluating visual texts. She then uses both the visual texts and
the knowledge she has acquired through nonvisual modes as a means of offsetting the
inherent epistemological powerlessness that blindness precipitates, while simultaneously
creating involvement and solidarity with and among her sighted interlocutors. Moreover,
she not only works to convert her own outsider status into an insider status, but she also
works to bring (sighted) others into the insider status as well.

4.2 Avoiding the Outsider Status
In Hamilton’s (1996) work on the construction of the identity of an Alzheimer’s
patient, she draws on the distinction, put forward by Dillon (1992), of insider/outsider
status among participants in an interaction, particularly in interability interaction. Dillon
describes the intertextual nature of interaction whereby previous experiences,
information, or conversations, all types of prior text (Becker 1995), when shared by two
or more co-present participants, may serve as the main resources for current talk
between them. When one participant does not share the experiences or conversations
being built upon by others, a situation of insider/outsider status emerges because of the
lack of access to those prior resources, and renders that party almost entirely unable to
participate in the talk as long as that topic prevails.

Not having shared the experience that another participant is trying to use as a
resource for the current interaction is one type of asymmetry in access to prior texts.
Hamilton (1996) observes that Dillon’s outsider/insider distinction can be correlated with
Goffman’s (1967:34) ratified/unratified participant (addressees and over-hearers)
dichotomy. As her work shows, even when both the healthy family member and the
Alzheimer’s patient herself are ratified participants in the interaction and do, in fact,
share some past experience which the former is trying to summon as a resource for
interaction, there may still be an asymmetry in access because the Alzheimer’s patient
may not recall the shared prior text. Two other conditions, then, for effective exploitation
of prior text as a resource for conversation are having the memory capacity to access
that text, and the ability to recognize a text as being shared.

Chafe’s (1994) distinction between immediate and displaced modes of
consciousness are useful in considering the process of recognizing texts as shared. The
immediate mode refers to the here and now, while the displaced mode refers to
sometime other than “now,” and/or some place other than here, relative to the speakers’
current situation. Of course a mode of talk may be both temporally and locatively distal
at the same time. In Dillon’s discussion the prior text is in a displaced mode not only
because of its grounding in a time other than the conversational present and in a place
other than that in which the current conversation occurs, but also in some kind of
cognitive displacement; this is yet another hurdle for the achievement of coherence and
intersubjectivity in interaction, and another potential source of alienation.

When differences in perceptive ability exist among participants, the various
channels that function as the mediums of those texts may be a source of displacement
as well. All texts, whether shared or not, are experienced in one or more channels—such
as auditory, visual, haptic, and commonly simultaneously. Seeing and hearing are
arguably the primary perceptions that ground the ordinary individual in the here and now,
and if one of these channels is blocked to a participant, that party is obviously denied
access to whatever text (or part of a text) is encoded in that channel.

Thus while the visual text may serve as a resource for current talk among sighted
interlocutors (e.g., a picture of someone’s grandchild, a pair of earrings, a painting on the
wall) and exists for them in an immediate mode of consciousness, it is in a displaced
mode for the blind interlocutor, regardless of the fact that it is in the “here and now.”
Being denied access to the current (or even past) material scene creates an asymmetry
that has the potential to position the blind participant as an outsider among the sighted
interlocutors, threatening both her positive face in being left out of the visual experience
shared by the other participants, and her negative face in not having the same
independent freedom to use the immediate environment as a resource for conversation
and knowledge. The attribution of some more generalized epistemological deficiency
can be countered by displays of general knowledge. One way the attribution of
epistemological deficiency due to lack of access to visual knowledge ordinarily gained
through the medium of vision can be countered is by demonstrating some more general
knowledge of the visual world based on prior visual experience.

In this analysis, I focus on the way Dixie, having once been sighted, uses her
knowledge of the visual world as a means of connecting with her sighted co-conversants.
She achieves this involvement not only by using the various linguistic means conveyed
through the auditory modes on which the blind might be expected to rely, but also through the skillful exploitation of those visual modes which we might have thought altogether inaccessible to her. Moreover, in these data, the blind participant not only requests and provides verbal translations of visual texts, she also produces visual texts (mainly gesture) for her sighted hearers, which she may or may not pair with a verbal translation. In doing so, she ignores the asymmetry of perceptive access to gesture and accommodates the sighted participants by using a visual mode that is even more immediate to them than the verbal mode she actually does share with them.

Dixie uses visual texts in at least three ways: making requests for visual information through verbal translations of visual texts, providing visual texts, and evaluating and manipulating visual texts. In doing so, she counter-constructs herself as a person who has visual knowledge, offsetting the perception that she is completely powerless in the visual realm, even if she is completely blind. She also takes the visual information that she has, either from her memory or from the information about the current visual text she gleans from what people say to and around her (as well as that which she accesses via other channels—e.g. nonverbal, auditory, kinesic, haptic), and she uses it to create both an identity of epistemological competence, and involvement, not only for herself, but for sighted participants as well.

4.3 Requests for Visual Descriptions
To begin with, Dixie shows her continuing interest in the visual world by asking for verbal translations of visual texts about the material world around her. Doing so is an involvement strategy that appeals to the high importance of the visual world to sighted people. Such inquiries serve to remind others that she is not ignorant of the visual world even though she does not have direct access to it, and thus serve to counter attributions of epistemological deficiency. More telling than her questions about the visual world itself, however, is what she does with the information she gleans from what people say about it.
to and around her. This information allows her to share the “visual text” of the immediate environment that is being shared by all the sighted participants and which she can then use as a resource for creating involvement, alignments, and other discourse work.

Example 7 is taken from the multiparty data at Martha’s house, after the women have moved from the front room to the kitchen and are still getting situated. As soon as Dixie has been seated at Martha’s kitchen table, she gives a verbal request for a visual description of the tablecloth in front of her (which she first experiences haptically). Such a description might be considered a translation of the visual text to verbal text.

Example 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>Martha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 What color is your tablecloth? &lt;running fingers over it&gt;</td>
<td>2 White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 With flowers on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 It’s just a plastic one.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Running her fingers lightly over the surface, she asks, (“What color is your tablecloth?” line 1), Martha’s initial response, (“White,” line 2), is a direct answer to a direct question about color. She then adds the visual detail, however, that there is a floral pattern in the cloth, (“with flowers on it,” line 3). Though it is not discernible in the video, the floral print was textured onto the material. Thus, Martha might have been trying to resolve the apparent contradiction that the tablecloth had only one color, but also had flowers, and perhaps, too, was responding to Dixie’s tactile investigation of the tablecloth. By asking a question about Martha’s kitchen, Dixie is creating involvement with Martha by addressing her and creating a slot for a reply, and also by showing an interest in Mary’s home and her tastes. She is also showing an interest in the visual world around her more generally, which serves as a shared visual text for all the other participants, and displays her general schema for the visual text of a kitchen.
While Example 7 shows Dixie using a verbal mode in the auditory channel to request a verbal description, essentially an auditory translation, of something in the visual environment, Example 8 (also presented in Chapter Four) shows her supporting her verbal request with a visual gesture. In the talk leading up to the excerpt in Example 8, Dixie had tried to get the floor to ask a question about the topic of conversation, a marimba, but had failed because another participant made a turn claim bid at the same moment and that participant, unlike Dixie, had procured the speaker’s gaze, and therefore got the turn. Now, in Example 8, Dixie is making a second bid for that turn by getting the sighted participants’ attention in order to involve herself in the conversation already underway, by asking again about the marimba.

**Example 8** (Also appeared as part of Example 6)

Dixie 1 **What’s a marimba?** *<increases volume slightly>*

Dixie 2 **What’s it LOOK like?** *<rolling gesture with her hands>*

Esther 3 Well, it’s *<extends hands about 2.5 feet>*

Esther 4 A kinda keyboard

Dixie 5 Oh.

Esther 6 That you use some sticks that you—

*<animated gesture: hitting the marimba w/ sticks>*

In line 1, she uses exactly the same phrasing she had used earlier when her turn claim had failed, (“What’s a marimba?” lines 1); however, it is significant that she reinforces it this time by actually asking for a visual description of a marimba, (“What’s it LOOK like?” line 2), and coupling the request with an inquisitive (visual) gesture. While Dixie can produce a visual text in the form of a gesture that others can see and interpret, she does not, of course, have receptive access to gesture. She thus accommodates the sighted hearers by making both a verbal appeal to visuality in asking, (“What’s it LOOK like?” line 2), and an inquisitive gesture (a forward, rolling motion) to engage them even more directly, in spite of the fact that it requires her to operate in a displaced mode for herself, accommodating to her co-participants’ greater dependence on the visual.
Unfortunately, when Dixie’s gesture-supported inquiry is responded to, some of the important information about what a marimba looks like, namely size and the motion of the hands playing it, is encoded exclusively in the visual gesture that accompanies the verbal reply. As Esther begins to answer the question, she stretches her arms out to show the size of a marimba and perhaps its general horizontal orientation, but nothing in her verbal description mentions its size, (“Well, it’s … A kinda keyboard … That you use some sticks that you— … Play it with—,” lines 3-7). Esther’s gestured representation of the process of playing the marimba is also a visual text that is not translated or replicated in her accompanying verbal description, the only part Dixie has receptive access to. If Dixie has visual schema for a xylophone, she can probably get a general idea of what a marimba looks like from Esther’s mention of keys and sticks. She misses out, however, on the information about its size and the motion of playing it because that information is given as an untranslated visual text, the gesture. Moreover, Dixie has arguably helped to precipitate the untranslated visual text, however unwittingly, by providing a visual text herself (a gesture of size) when she asked the question about the marimba in the first place.

Requests for visual information constitute an involvement strategy that appeals to the sighted participants’ visual experience of the world, arguably their most powerful sense of perception. Because such appeals remind the sighted other that she has schema for the visual world and is still interested in it, and that she does not want to be treated as if she cannot appreciate it, these requests serve an independence strategy as well. She is, in a way, aligning herself with the sighted, declaring her identity not as a blind person, but as a sighted person who has lost her sight. Ironically, when Dixie exhibits this one-sided visual competence and so invisibly accommodates her sighted hearers, she also obfuscates her own need for accommodation. In the case of visual micro-texts such as gesture, she may not provide a verbal translation when she is
producing the gesture for the sighted, and in turn, they may be less likely to provide such a translation for her when she is on the receiving end.

4.4 Providing Visual Texts and Verbal Translations of Visual Texts

Dixie also offers visual descriptions for her sighted co-conversants. She seems to mention color more than other features, but she also mentions size, style, arrangement, and kinesic information, all of which are primarily perceived by the sighted through vision, as we actually touch very little of all that we see. She also uses not only verbal description in the auditory channel, but gestural descriptions in the visual channel, which she has productive but not receptive access to.

One example of a visual description Dixie uses is provided in Example 9, taken from the multiparty data at Martha’s house while we are still in the front room talking about the Foursquare Pentecostal church that Dixie (and her children) and Esther attended decades earlier, though not at the same time. Dixie offers a visual characteristic of a particular woman that she herself remembers from that church, apparently with the hope that Esther would remember who she was trying to describe. This would have been a fine solidarity strategy since they did not attend the church during the same decades, but might have both known someone who was there throughout.

Example 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>Hank</th>
<th>Dixie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One little lady wore—</td>
<td>She always wore a what?</td>
<td>How do YOU know this dress— you said—</td>
<td>I could SEE then!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| ➤2 | 5 | ➤12 | <feisty sing songy play yard voice>
| Always wore a pink dress. | A PINK dress. | | |
| 3 | ➤6 | 8 | |
| When I could see. <barely audible> | She always had a pink dress on. | <Silence> | |
| 7 | MOST of the time. | 9 | Probably nobody you know |
| 8 | | | }

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>Hank</th>
<th>Dixie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think you probably dreamed it.</td>
<td>How do YOU know this dress— you said—</td>
<td>I could SEE then!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

136
In two separate utterances, ("One little lady wore— Always wore a pink dress. She always had a pink dress on—MOST of the time," lines 2-4, 6-7). Dixie appeals to the visual details of color and clothing—pink dress. Although the form of the utterance is a statement, she seems to be inquiring about whether Esther remembers her. She appeals to Esther’s own visual memories, as well, by offering that the woman “always” wore pink. By contributing to the topic and appealing to visual experience as well as social, Dixie uses visual texts as involvement strategies to build solidarity with the other women, while at the same time demonstrating some of her own knowledge about the topic at hand, helping to maintain her negative face.

Apparently in anticipation of a challenge to this claim about her visual knowledge, she adds the explanation, ("When I could see," line 3). A few lines later, Hank, with whom she has a longstanding customary joking relationship (Norrick 1993), does indeed tease her about the validity of her description, ("How do YOU know this dress—you said—.") To which Dixie responds in kind, “I could SEE then!  <Feisty sing songy play yard voice>, I could SEE then, lines 11-13), thus defending her visual memories and the validity of her visual description, and reminding us that she knows the visual world, she is still one of us, even if she has lost her sight.

Example 10 comes from the triadic interview with Dixie’s stepfather, Chuck, at a point where they are trying to explain when they first met, which turns out to have been even before he had met Dixie’s mother. Although this narrative is told principally by her stepfather, Dixie collaborates in the telling by adding details here and there in an effort to connect to the story world, which is a shared prior text, temporally and locatively distal to them both. In attempting to co-construct the past world of the café in which Dixie
waitressed in her teens (when she could see well enough to do so), she offers the color of the work hats Chuck and his co-workers wore.

**Example 10**

Dixie 1 [And you wore the red and white caps.
Chuck 2 Hm.
Dixie 3 Didn’t you have a...?
Chuck 4 I don’t remember <shakes head>

Dixie adds a detail to Chuck’s story, ("And you wore the red and white caps," line 1), as an involvement strategy demonstrating that she too remembers that time. Although the strategy does not have its intended effect, as Chuck does not corroborate this detail, it is an example of the way she takes a little visual detail as a positive face politeness strategy and attempts to build solidarity by noticing something about the other, or in this case, giving evidence of past noticing. The fact that Chuck denies the validity of her visual memory shows that her attempt at a positive face strategy has failed, however, resulting instead in a mild violation of Dixie’s own negative face.

Even though Dixie’s attempt to connect with Chuck in their reminiscing of the past by identifying and mentioning some shared details fails in Example 10, Example 11, taken from further on in the same narrative, more than compensates for it with her gestural descriptions of a fellow waitress who was so unsanitary that Chuck would rather have eaten somewhere else if the company would have paid for it.

**Example 11**

Dixie 1 She was very dirty
Elisa 2 @@
Chuck 3 Very, very dirty
Dixie 4 And when she picked up the coffee cups
   ➔ 5 She picked them up “like this.”
   ➔ 6 I mean she put her hands
Chuck ➔ 7 Stuck her fingers in ‘em
Elisa 8 <groan of disgust>
Dixie demonstrates how the woman picked up the cups in an unsanitary way, (“And when she picked up the coffee cups, She picked them up like this <gesture>,” lines 1-2). “Like this” is obviously not going to mean anything without an accompanying gesture or demonstration, which she tries to provide with her fingers pinched together in the air, but without a cup it is not clear whether the fingers are meant to be pinching the handle or the rim of the imaginary cup. She seems to realize that this is ambiguous because she starts to clarify (“I mean she put [her hands—,” line 3). Noticing this ambiguity, Chuck collaborates in the description by adding the verbal “translation” to help clarify, for my sake, the visual gesture Dixie is providing, (“stuck her finger in ‘em,” line 4).

By using the otherwise oblique deictic pronoun “this,” coupled with a visual gesture, she is giving a description that would be most appreciable by a sighted person, and least helpful to a blind person, as all the key propositional content of the utterance is in the visual gesture, not in her verbal account. Moreover, it is the sighted co-conversant, Chuck, who shares the memory she is describing, who also fills in verbally what is missing from the coupling of the verbal and the visual texts Dixie has just produced. Thus he is further translating Dixie’s visual text into verbal, not for a blind participant, but for me, a sighted third party.

In some outside audio data that I have of Dixie and her adult children celebrating her son’s birthday in 1999 which I presented in (Everts 2003), the conversation turns to stuffed animals with family histories.
Example 12

Dixie 1 And the prize was a little purple Scotty dog.
2 Stuffed one.
3 ‘N’ I wanted it so bad.
4 I didn’t get it.
5 So Mother bought me that monkey for Christmas. @@@
6 To replace the Scotty Dog.

Elisa 7 I can see the connection between the Scotty dog and the white monkey.
<sarcastic>

Her description of the coveted prize in (“a little purple scotty dog,” line 1), includes size (“little”), color (“purple”), style (“Scotty”), and animal type (“dog”). Although size could have been determined by handling the toy, color, style, and type are features primarily perceived through vision by the nonblind, and are often simply not available to the blind at all in the absence of a verbal translation. In contrast, when she describes the monkey that her mother bought her for Christmas in consolation for not winning the stuffed dog, the line here contains only the type of animal (monkey).

The discussion of the white monkey is one of intimacy and involvement for Dixie and me. I have a connection to the monkey that the others do not, having taken it to show and tell in first grade, and since Dixie and I both remember it, we can share some past experience with it that Scott and Anne cannot share. Building solidarity or alignments with one member from among a group of people is necessarily alienating to the others, however, and Dixie remedies this situation with a turn of topic to another toy that had belonged to Scott when he was a child, offering a visual description of its size in a gesture shown in Example 12B.

Example 12B

Dixie 1 And I have Scott’s monk—ah, elephant.
2 Scott 2 My what?
3 Dixie 3 Oh, it’s a—elephant
     4 that you had when you were a baby. . .
     5 and I wouldn’t let any of the grandkids play with it
     6 because it makes so: stinkin’ much noise
     7 It’s about this big. <gestures by stretching her hands>
Whereas the white monkey is an item she has had since her childhood, the period when she had the most vision, her visual memory of it is likely far more complete than her memory of Scott’s toy, which she would have “seen” and handled in her late twenties, when she had almost no remaining vision. When Scott indicates that he does not recognize the toy by her reference to it merely as an elephant (“my what?” line 2), she tells him how long he had it (“when you were a baby,” line 4), that it was really noisy (“it makes so: stinkin ‘much noise,” line 6), and its approximate size (“about this big,” line 7), stretching her hands out in a gesture to provide a visual text to indicate its size). The gesture in line 7 is another case of the production of a visual text that is integral to the meaning of the utterance and is not accompanied by a verbal translation—if she leaves it out, no one knows how big “this” is. It is probably significant that her description of this toy, which she has less visual experience of, provides the auditory properties, and some recent history, perhaps, because these facts are easier for her to experience and carry more validity with her sighted audience.

Another example of Dixie giving a visual description occurs in the triadic interview with her stepfather, Chuck, which took place one Memorial Day weekend, when Dixie tells him about decorating her mother’s grave the day before. They have just been talking about the kinds of things her mother (his late wife) found pretty, so she describes for him how she honored her mother by selecting colors and items she loved.

**Example 13**

Dixie ➔1 I put a red bird out on the grave
 ➔2 ‘s on a stick with one of those
 ➔3 spiny things for the yard
 ➔4 along with the flowers

Her mother’s love for red, for birds, and for yard ornaments are all included in Dixie’s description of the decorations. At the start, she describes how the bird is
arranged, (“on a stick with one of those spiny things,” lines 2-3), and how it is arranged relative to the flowers, (“along with,” line 4), not separately. Except for color, it would be possible to perceive the features she describes by touch, but they are more easily and more commonly experienced visually. I argue that her description is creating, not a haptic representation of experience such as she must have had working with the materials, but a visual mental picture for Chuck, a verbal translation of a visual text that Dixie has in her imaginative memory. Moreover, this visual image would appeal to the visual tastes of her mother, were she living and able to appreciate it. Thus she is actually accommodating both the living and the deceased.

Example 13 comes from the orientation excerpted from a narrative Dixie tells Carol (and me) in Carol’s triadic interview about an encounter in public with a mutual acquaintance that irritated Dixie because of the manner in which the woman treated Dixie’s blindness. Dixie first demonstrates her knowledge of the visual world around her by locating the store (in which the event took place) within the community, and then by locating the participants spatially within that store.

Example 14

| Dixie | 1 Well . . . 39 Let’s see,  
|       | 2 We were at that little, um,  
|       | 3 Yogurt place that Jones had  
|       | 4 Out over there on 6th St.  
| Carol | 5 Yeah, I know where that’s at.  
| Dixie | 6 And we were standing there where you order,

To begin, Dixie gives the location of the store, (“out over there on 6th street,” line 4). Details of spatial, locative orientation are not mandatory to the narrative orientation—

39 Dixie herself uses a metaphor of sight for knowledge here. I believe I have never talked to a sighted person about blindness who was not interested in metaphors of sight (as a potential faux pas) and I have never met a blind person who was. I always get the sense they find the suggestion irritating and they certainly, in my observation, use such terms in the same way just as much as sighted people do.
she could, for example, have simply given the name of the store (Jones’ Yogurt) and the activity that was interrupted when the narrative event occurred (waiting to order). The spatial information about where the yogurt shop is in relation to the rest of the town, has no bearing on the point of the story, it simply provides the narrative structural expectation for orientation, which could as easily have focused on temporal elements as locative. The temporal elements, however, would not have provided the same opportunity in this story to connect with her hearers. She could have said, “we were waiting in line somewhere,” and sufficiently described the activity that was underway when the reportable event occurred.

Dixie merely needs to explain that they were in public where they were subject to chance encounters with strangers and acquaintances, without giving specific details about where they were. By providing those details, however, she allows her hearers to visualize the place she means and its location within the town, drawing her hearers in, and in a sense, allowing them to become viewers too, as they recognize and establish shared knowledge and visual experience. The information also serves as a display of knowledge about the visual environment that she and her sighted co-conversants share, situating the shop within the town and the place they where they were standing within the store. It successfully connects Carol to the narrative as well, as she responds affirmatively (“Yeah, I know where that’s at,” line 5). Thus Dixie is using these locative details partly to identify shared schema with Carol as she brings Carol into the story world she is creating and partly to display knowledge of the visual world.

Example 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Martha</th>
<th>Dixie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ah,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Did you ever find the book,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Up in the prayer room,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dixie,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Did you ever find that one,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It’s there cause Esther and I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wrote in it— <Turns to face Esther>

ESTHER wrote in it,

[What book?]

Our prayer book.

Is it still there?

Oh, you're talking about

It used to be up in the prayer room

But the last few times I been up there

I couldn't find it.

Well, it was in those slots, those shelves on the

Outside the prayer room,

It's in those slots

O::h,

I didn't look out there,

I looked all over them shelves in there,

The library*

Part

It's not in the library,*

It's—

Outside the door,

Okay

It's in the slots

I didn't even think about that.

In the slots,

That's where it is.

And see, I didn't have the gooda sense enough to—

I knew—

I didn't even think about it

The vicinity—

Being there

But I didn't know

How to tell you where it was

In the multiparty data at Martha's house, there is a discussion about whether the prayer book that belongs in the church prayer room is lost or not (the women write the items they are praying about in the book, and later the answers to those prayers that are reported or observed). Because of Dixie's position of leadership as chairman of the prayer chain for decades, she has some leadership responsibility over the prayer room and the other women in the prayer chain, which includes Martha. As I have described in Chapter Three, Dixie and Esther have the most interactional power in this group (besides me), while Martha and Anne seem to have the least. This dynamic is significant in this stretch of talk in which Martha, Dixie, and Esther are the main participants. Martha
believes the prayer book to be lost and Dixie and Esther maintain that it is where it is supposed to be.

Martha asks Dixie, (“Ah, Did you ever find the book, Up in the prayer room, Dixie, Did you ever find that one—” lines 1-5), and in so doing, initiates a rather lengthy strip of talk in which Martha, Dixie, and Esther negotiate the location of the prayer book that goes in the prayer room at church. That Martha, who can see perfectly well, is asking whether Dixie found the prayer book, demonstrates an expectation of epistemological competence and suggests that there is a history of such competence that might have set up such an expectation. By asserting that the book is “there” in line 6, Dixie basically contradicts Martha’s assumption that it is lost. In making this contradiction, Dixie is also tossing the ball back to Martha’s court, appealing to Martha’s competence for finding it, which could, of course, potentially violate Martha’s negative face.

As evidence that she knows it is there, Dixie reports her recent concrete experience with the book when she and Esther used it together. (“It’s there cause Esther and I, wrote in it—” lines 6-7). Her compound agent/subject in line 6, “Esther and I,” is interesting because obviously only one person can write in it at time, and although Dixie can still write, she seldom does because her handwriting has become so difficult to read, and she cannot know whether she is writing over something that has already been written, or whether her pen is even working, and such. She repairs her subject by saying, (“ESTHER wrote in it,” line 8), to say that Esther did the actual writing, adding (“I didn’t,” line 9) though this last is overlapped by Anne’s question, (“What book?” Line10). Nevertheless, it is clear that she considers herself an agent in the activity, and that she considers her participation to be authoritative evidence of her knowledge of the book’s general location— that it is “there.”

Martha twice uses the word “look,” (“didn’t look out there and I looked all over them shelves in there,” lines 20-21) in putting on record that she used her vision to
search for the knowledge of the book’s location and her visual competence seems to have failed her. When Esther and Martha’s exchange in lines 10-31 reveals the misunderstanding about where “there” was, Dixie does not blame her own visual competence, but her epistemological competence, for not being able to answer Martha’s question herself. She explains, (notably using the word “see” in its common use as an epistemological metaphor of knowing), (“And see, I didn’t have gooda sense enough—I knew, the vicinity—, But I didn’t know how to tell you where it was,” lines 33-35). Her contention is not that she did not know where it was, but simply that she did not know how to communicate that knowledge. Still, she does not claim any kind of indemnity due to blindness.

Example 15b

Martha ➔29 I didn’t even think about that.
Dixie ➔32 And see, I didn’t have a gooda sense enough to—
            ➔33 I knew—
Martha ➔34 I didn’t even think about it
Dixie ➔35 The vicinity—
Martha ➔36 Being there
Dixie ➔37 But I didn’t know
            ➔38 How to tell you where it was

Although Martha at first references her own visual ability in lines 21-22, once Esther identifies the problem of the outside of the door being part of the prayer room, Martha then attributes her breach of competence in finding the book to her own cognitive or epistemological failure, (“I didn’t even think about it, being there,” lines 34,37). Dixie and Esther are aligned as they have both contradicted Martha and displayed their own knowledge of the book’s location in lines 6-32. Dixie has said just once, (“it’s there,” line 6) and given evidentiary support to her claim, while Esther has said seven times (as shown in Table 11) where the book is, without any evidentiary support, as presumably she does not need any since she can see and will not be doubted.
Table 11 Esther’s 7 Iterations of Book’s Location from Example 15

The only mitigation of face threat that Esther offers in her replies may be the discourse marker “well” at the beginning of the first utterance, which Schiffrin (1987) shows often serves to mark dispreferred answers. The dispreference here, presumably, is displaying knowledge when another person has just displayed her lack of it. Throughout this data, Esther delivers more unmitigated utterances than anyone else present. Moreover, Martha is other-repaired by Esther and others several times during the course of the evening. In this segment, Martha has asked this one question and gets seven iterations of the answer in reply, each displaying the knowledge Esther and Dixie have that Martha does not, accruing to a fair bit of negative face threat to her.

It is after Esther’s seventh iteration of this knowledge, that Dixie puts her own epistemological deficiency on record. In fact, Dixie’s four clauses explaining this failing on her part (33,4,36, 38-9) each overlap and dovetail with Martha’s three (30,35,37) iterations of hers.

15C Excerpt from Example 15

Dixie  ➔33 And see, I didn’t have the gooda sense enough to—
       ➔34 I knew—
Martha  ➔35 I didn’t even think about it
Dixie  ➔36 The vicinity—
Martha  ➔37 Being there
Dixie  ➔38 But I didn’t know
       ➔39 How to tell you where it was
Dixie’s account for her own part in the misunderstanding appears to be about re-aligning with Martha by offering parallel claims of epistemological incompetence to mitigate the negative face threat to Martha that the last seven displays of counter knowledge have accrued, by offering to share the responsibility for the misunderstanding through the solidarity building move of claiming a similar shortcoming. In this Example (15, with the prayer room), as in the previous example (14, with the yogurt shop), it is clear that Dixie holds herself responsible for knowledge of the visual world; in this case, in terms of locating things in space and geography, and being able to report that information to others who can see, which she achieves by producing displays of visual, locative knowledge to demonstrate this competence.

Dixie offers descriptions of the visual world to her sighted interlocutors. She gives both verbal and gestural structures to describe such features as size, color, type, style, arrangement and kinesic behavior. She also gives and holds herself responsible for information about where things are in space, all information which sighted people overwhelmingly rely on their vision to determine. In Example 13, her offer of visual information in the orientation of the narrative serves primarily as an involvement strategy, while in the case of the prayer book in Example 14, her knowledge is used to establish some authority in a domain over which she has an official leadership responsibility, she claims a little more power than even her sighted friend (and in this context “subordinate”) in displaying that she has knowledge that Martha does not.

Dixie also offers visual descriptions in this data which display knowledge of both the material world, the social world, and their intersection, as in Example 16. Hana is the black, South African woman at the table who has been close friends with Dixie for about 10 years. Example 16A is an excerpt from a much longer story about Hana’s quest to find a church in the community when she had first moved to town. This conversation
yields a comparison of the all-black Baptist church in town to some of the predominantly white churches she had visited.

Example 16

| 1 | I went there, |
| 2 | People were so cold. @@
| 3 | People were just |
| 4 | So cold. |
| 5 | I said, |
| 6 | “Goodness! This is the coldest church I’ve been to.” |
| 7 | People are just— |

Martha 8 It was that way when you [came to Assembly?]

Hana 9 [Oh, yeah, First Assembly—
10 1990,
11 I don’t know people were just—

Elisa 12 It was colder than the other white churches that you went to?

Hana 13 The other white churches were warm.
14 Some were even OVER warm
15 . . . .

Dixie 16 Louise White—the black Louise White.
17 The first time she came,
18 She said she thought about getting up and leaving.
19 Everybody had their arms up in the air ... 
20 Now we have another Louise White—

Anne 21 Louise White.

Dixie 22 And she’s white. @@

Hana says that the first time she visited First Assembly, the church she and the other women all attend now [at the time of the interview], the people were “so cold,” (“People were so cold. @@. So cold, This is the coldest church I’ve been to,” lines 2,4,6) that she wrote it off her list for quite some time, noting that the other white churches she had attended were warm (lines 13-14). All of the other participants in the conversation are white and were all a part of this church at the time that Hana had first visited. They obviously cannot align with her based on the solidarity of sharing the experience of being black in a predominantly white church or community. They do agree that there is much they would like to change about their church, and some of the conversation is an effort to problem solve about what exactly happened when Hana had visited.
In the course of this topic it is noted, in a humorous tone, that there was once a Louise White in the church who was black, and a Louise Brown, who was white. Dixie first establishes her authority on the black Louise White, as it was she who had invited her to her church in the first place. She then gives a minimal narrative describing how this Louise responded the first time she had visited Dixie’s Pentecostal church, [First Assembly]. Even though she cannot tell a story about a similar experience of her own, she can tell a story of a friend of hers who is black and who also had a very negative experience, as Hana had at the same church, although for different reasons.

In this story, Dixie gives a visual description of the activity that seems to have made Louise uncomfortable: “Everybody had their arms up in the air,” line 19. (Raising hands in worship is a normal part of the Pentecostal worship style). Even though the off-putting behaviors cited for Hana and for Louise are not the same (coldness vs. strange, unfamiliar behavior), Dixie’s story ends with its protagonist wanting to leave in the middle of the service, not just deciding not to visit again. As Hana does not indicate that she too had wanted to leave mid-service, Dixie’s story may even be positioning Hana as more patient or gracious than Louise, another positive face offering.

Whether or not that is the case, Dixie has responded to Hana’s story with a parallel story demonstrating sympathy for Hana’s negative experience by telling what had happened to a close friend of hers at the same church. Even though she cannot offer a more direct bid for solidarity based on her own personal experience, particularly because she is white, the story is sympathetic to Louise’s experience and thus creates an alignment with Hana as well. Dixie segues back out of the story in lines 16-22, adding the information that now there is another Louise White in the church (“And she’s white,” line 22), displaying a knowledge of visual information that is also very significant social
The net effect of this contribution is to involve herself in the topic at hand, to align with Hana in an expression sympathy if not direct solidarity, and to display her knowledge of some very important visual elements of her social world.

In this discussion that touches on the sensitive matter of race relations and cultural disparities between “white” and “black” churches these women attend, Dixie positions herself as one who is aware of these dynamics in spite of the fact that she can no longer see the “color” of the people around her. Offering socially loaded visual information in her narrative and incorporating that information in the interactional work of creating involvement and alignment with Hana, are ways that Dixie displays knowledge, both directly and indirectly, and so buttresses her construction of an epistemologically competent identity.

4.5 Evaluating and Manipulating Visual Texts

Finally, and perhaps most markedly, Dixie even gives evaluations of the visual world as yet another way of demonstrating her epistemological competence, particularly of visual knowledge, and of creating involvement with her sighted companions.

In some family data Dixie evaluates the visual properties of gifts with her grandchildren. In Example 17, Dixie uses interrogative forms to indirectly evaluate a gift her granddaughter has just opened.

**Example 17**

Dixie

1. Aren’t you *pretty*?
2. Are you *pretty*?
3. Isn’t that *neat*?

When her three-year-old granddaughter Madelynne opens a ballerina costume Christmas morning, Dixie’s daughter Anne tells Madelynne, “Go show Grandma,” which Madelynne does by going over to Dixie’s chair and allowing her to touch the dress. Anne, Madelynne and Dixie are all collaborating in the script of Christmas morning with Grandma. As Dixie *feels* the dress, she leans towards Madelynne, looks her straight in

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40 And of a lot of Louises. ☺
the eye, and with an exaggerated smile on her face— (“Aren’t you pretty? Are you pretty? Isn’t that neat?” Lines 1-3). Having felt the dress, Dixie twice pronounces the child in it “pretty” (definitely visual) and the costume itself as “neat” (ambiguous, not necessarily visual). Thus Dixie is fulfilling the role of admiring grandmother by praising the appearance of the child in the costume, despite her having to rely on touch and the verbal descriptions of others and her own visual imagination to make her evaluation.

While one may satisfy the expectations of a small child, as in Example 11, by pretending that your evaluation is based on visual assessment, it is more difficult to provide a convincing appraisal of the visual in conversation with adults. Returning to Example 7 (now 18), after Dixie asks Martha about her tablecloth and gets the information that it is white with flowers and is “just plastic,” Anne offers a positive, but visually ambiguous evaluation to Martha, in line 6, with the adjective “neat.”

Example 18 (Lines 1-4 also presented earlier as Example 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>1 What color is your tablecloth?  &lt;running fingers over it&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>2 White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 With flowers on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>4 Oh, ok.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 It’s just a plastic one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>6 I think it’s neat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>7 Feels pre—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>8 XX (It’s easy to?) wipe it off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>9 That’s the kind to have.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dixie starts to make a supportive evaluation of her own, but aborts the attempt mid-adjective: (“It feels pre—” line 7). Presumably the adjective was “pretty,” but she apparently decides that it will not pass for a genuine evaluation in this company (in the way it might with her grandchildren, for example). Fortuitously, Martha overlaps her utterance in line 9, by explaining that she likes it because she can wipe it off, which provides Dixie with another angle from which she can evaluate it more credibly with, (“That’s the kind to have,” line 9).
Returning to the conversation about the stuffed toy monkey from Dixie’s childhood, Dixie displays her knowledge of the visual world and the visible deterioration of things with the passing of time. She evaluates the past appearance of the white monkey and comments on what she imagines to be the case about its appearance now.

Example 19

Dixie 1 [@@@
2 It’s a stuffed animal,
3 it’ll work.@@
4 \textbf{It’z\ real cute--}

Elisa 5 [It was super cute, I loved it.

Dixie 6 [ it had a little red

Anne 7 [ I can’t believe she bought you a monkey instead of a dog

Dixie 8 \textbf{But I’ont think it’s so cute—}
9 You might be able to wash it—
10 \textbf{And then get a little—or have somebody or make a little red vest}
11 cause that’s what it had, it’s gone.

She says, (“It’z real cute—” line 4), but follows with the caveat a few lines later, that it might not be so cute now, (“But I’ont think it’s so cute—”, line 8). She then actually suggests a course of action to restore its appearance. (“You might be able to wash it— And then get a little—or have somebody or make a little red vest. ’Cause that’s what it had, it’s gone. An’ it had a little red hat on it.” Lines 9-12). By describing “the little red hat” and the “little red vest ” that it used to have, she suggests that these are the features that made him “cute,” (primarily a visual assessment) and thus prescribes their restoration for the restoration of “cuteness.” In so doing, she not only displays her knowledge about the item, but also of the process of deteriorating appearances with the passing of time, and her knowledge of some actions that might improve its probable current appearance.

Making suggestions, moreover, goes beyond describing to prescribing or advising, which puts her momentarily in a position of power over her hearers, all demonstrations of epistemological competence focused on the appearance of things.
Although many people, including members of her own family, prefer to give Dixie gifts that appeal more to the other senses—sound (e.g., chimes, music boxes, CDs), touch (e.g., soft sweaters) smell (e.g., perfume, roses), or taste (e.g., chocolate, herbal tea), assuming that there is no point to giving her something that has the primary virtue of a beautiful appearance, Dixie denies this assumption and often actually requests things like pictures of her grandchildren, flowers, nature, and things like that. There are probably two lines of logic underlying these requests, one being that she likes for other people to be able to enjoy them and to hear their descriptions of them, and the other being her expectation that she will one day see again, at which time she will want to look at all these things she could not see for so many years. Dixie loves to give and receive gifts that are pretty, and evaluating something as pretty is central to this process.

In Example 20, she is talking to her step-father, Chuck, about her mother (who had passed away about three years earlier) who loved colorful clothing, flowers, nature, and decorations, particularly red things. She goes from evaluating descriptions of shirts by deciding that “Mom would love that” to selecting flowers and decorations for her grave based on their appeal to her mother’s visual tastes.

Example 20

Dixie 1 And I’m sure everybody else in the family does it too
2 But when I
3 There are certain shirts and
4 Just different things that either the kids or Gail describe to me
5 And I’m thinking
6 “Oh Mom would love that”

In this case, Dixie is telling about a habitual evaluative response to a hypothetical scenario in which her mother was still alive and could see and evaluate the pretty things for herself. In aligning with her deceased mother by displaying her knowledge of what kinds of visual things her mother appreciated, she is also aligning with Chuck, who was
married to Dixie’s mother for so many years before she died, and with me, as her granddaughter.

Sometimes a visual text constitutes the current topic of conversation and Dixie has to find creative angles from which to participate in the conversation. Example 21 comes from the data from Martha’s house and is excerpted from a long discussion about how hard it is to remember the names of people one sees at church, and the virtues of having a photo directory of church members as a memory aid (three of the women are in their seventies or eighties). Someone suggests that a new directory should be made since the last one was made a decade or longer ago, to which Dixie responds with a prediction about the viewer’s evaluative response to the updated directory.

**Example 21**

| Martha   | 1 | I’ve still got both them books. |
| ---      |   |                                |
| Esther   | 2 | I wish they’d do that again.   |
| Anne     | 3 | Me too. They got a lot of new people. |
| Dixie    | 4 | They’ll look at that— 
|          | 5 | “Oh yeah. |
|          | 6 | They’ve aged. |
|          | 7 | Mm hmm.” |

This strip of conversation poses a participation challenge for Dixie since she can no longer benefit from a visual directory. Nevertheless, she cleverly gets a turn in by using the humor mode to construct the hypothetical reaction of a critical viewer, changing her voice slightly and saying (“Oh yeah. They’ve aged. Mm hmm,” lines 5-7). By making this contribution, Dixie displays her awareness that the appearances of those in the church have changed even though she has not been able to see that change. Thus, she is drawing on the resource of the epistemological stance of knowing that people change visually as they age and that this will be visible in photos of them. She is also gaining participation in a discussion she would not otherwise be able to contribute much to since the visual directory is of no use to her memory.
By making a joke about what might happen, she is using a humorous hypothetical frame as a resource for displaying knowledge and as a tool for creating an angle at which she can enter the conversation—she makes herself more of an insider than an outsider, in Dillon’s (1992) terms. She is demonstrating epistemological competence in the realm of the visual and she is using that competence to build solidarity through involvement as she can use the visual as a resource for interacting with the sighted participants as well. Thus, while the ability to acquire new visual information is lost, the potential for drawing on her past memory of the visual world remains and proves to be invaluable.

When focus of a conversation underway is on the visual evaluation of something in the present environment, which might arguably be regarded as a kind of intermodal intertextuality, if Dixie does not share this visual experience, she cannot participate in the conversation unless she finds another angle from which to respond. This is the outsider position Dillon [1992] identifies (cited in Hamilton 1996:64).

Intratextuality from conversation to conversation builds solidarity and continuity when all participants share the knowledge of the prior text in point. A participant who does not share the memory of that experience is an outsider and the effect of the allusion, the intertextual reference, is alienation, distance rather than solidarity. In Alzheimer’s, the person with the disease can become the “outsider” about even her own history and experience when the prior texts being drawn upon for conversation have become inaccessible due to fading memory function, an experience which constitutes epistemological powerlessness.

Example 22 comes from the multiparty data in Martha’s kitchen, and actually follows right after the segment where Dixie is asking about the tablecloth as soon as she has been seated. While Dixie and Martha are talking about the tablecloth, however, Harriet and Hana are having a separate conversation, over the din of everyone else’s
voices. As both of those concurrent conversations come to a pause and everyone has settled around the table, Harriet notices Martha’s new appliances and begins to admire them aloud. (Martha’s son had just recently come to visit from California and while he was there he got the kitchen remodeled a bit and bought all new appliances for her.)

**Example 22**

| Harriet | 1 Oh! I gotta look at that.                          |
| Martha  | 2 Oh Martha, that’s a beauty.                     |
| Harriet  | 3 Oh yeah                                         |
|         | 4 They cut this                                   |
| Harriet  | 5 And *look!*                                     |
| Martha  | 6 Cut the kitchen cabinets down                   |
| Harriet  | 7 *She* gets ice—                                 |
|         | 8 *You* can get ice outta there                   |
|         | 9 and COLD water outta there                      |
| Martha  | 10 *ice and water*                                |
| Harriet  | 11 It’s got the kind you push <gesture of putting glass,  |
|         | 12 Xx glass You push *under spigot and pushing>   |
|         | 13 I LIKE that!                                   |
| Martha  | 14 XX Elisa too                                   |
|         | 15 And she can sit over here                      |
|         | 16 And I’ll sit over there                        |
| Harriet  | 17 Now let me *see* your beautiful dishwasher.    |
|         | 18 *Right there beside it*                        |
| Dixie   | 19 You know what?                                 |
|         | 20 *She didn’t even SEE that wash—*               |
|         | 21 Dish washer when she bought it.                |
|         | 22 She just took it *sight unseen.*               |
| Martha  | 23 No::! I just bought it *unseen.*               |
| Harriet  | 24 It *looks* pretty nice to me.                  |
| Dixie   | 25 *Well, she said she likes it.*                 |
|         | 26 Yeah.                                          |
|         | 27 *Pret-ty nifty.*                               |

Although there are no indications in the data that there was even the faintest degree of competition or irritation between Dixie and Harriet, Dixie has intimated to me personally that Harriet, who is used to caring for her very elderly mother, is the one among all her other sighted friends that Dixie feels most over accommodated by. While the tone of this interchange is as kind and sincere as I can imagine, an interesting pattern emerges in this strip of talk as Harriet translates visual information into verbal,
evaluating the appearance of the refrigerator and enumerating its virtues one by one. Each point underscores Dixie’s outsidership and eventually Dixie displays some knowledge about the appliances that none of the participants (besides Martha) are privy to.

Although Harriet initially addresses her comments to Martha (“Oh! I gotta look at that. Oh Martha, that’s a beauty—,” lines 1-2), and Martha acknowledges her in lines 3-4, (Martha is kind of a moving target as an addressee at this point as she moves around the kitchen), she almost immediately shifts to third person in the following line, (“And look!” Line 5). Her choice to put “look” in the imperative suggests that she is now addressing someone other than Martha, possibly the whole group. In the next breath she switches person, (“She gets ice—,” line 6), using the third person pronoun “she” to refer to Martha, so Harriet is definitely not addressing Martha now, at least not structurally. She now appears to be pointing out its virtues for the other participants, as all but one of them is appreciating the visual text, along with her verbal translation.

Such a narration is a common way of admiring something belonging to another, even when all parties can see, which makes it pragmatically ambiguous in a context in which one of them cannot. We narrate, or translate visual texts into verbal texts all the time. However, Harriet might also be trying to accommodate Dixie, bringing her into a near insider status, as near as she can be without actually being able to see the shared text. While both possibilities (which also need not be mutually exclusive) constitute involvement strategies, they also highlight the fact that Dixie cannot experience the visual text of her immediate environment directly. Accommodation always inheres the risk of othering. Harriet also uses the word “look” twice right at the beginning (“I gotta look at that. And look!” Lines 4-5). Of course, there is a difference between the literal usage of the word “look” and the more metaphorical use of it as a verb referring to a directive to attend to some piece of information. In this case there is an overlap in the
function of “look,” as it is both literal and metaphorical, but it might be heard as alienating by a blind participant when the others are literally looking.

There are nine relatively uninterrupted lines of appreciative description from Harriet, Martha makes some collaborative and some unrelated logistical comments, and then Harriet shifts the topic from the refrigerator to the dishwasher. She again uses a verb of seeing, (“Let me see your beautiful dishwasher,” line 17), and then adds (“right there beside it,” line 18). These 11 utterances of Harriet’s that display knowledge about something in the immediate environment everyone but Dixie has direct access to, can also have the (presumably unintended) effect of other-ing her by underscoring her outsider-ship, the unfortunate pragmatic pitfall of all accommodation.

At this point, Dixie utters three short lines that achieve three conversational moves at once. First, she displays some knowledge of her own, knowledge which is also asymmetrical, but in her favor—not just knowledge that Harriet shares with her, but knowledge that Harriet is not privy to, thus turning the tables (apt since they are each sitting at opposite ends of the one in front of them—iconic if not ironic). Dixie begins with a phrase commonly used to introduce an epistemological revelation (“You know what? line 19). She then explains, “She didn’t even SEE that wash—dishwasher when she bought it. She just took it sight unseen,” lines 20-22). Her knowledge about the history of the appliance is integrally related to the history of the friend, so she is also demonstrating a closer tie with Martha, the hostess. This makes her relationally more of an insider than Harriet, or any of the other guests who do not know the story.

Second, by selecting a meta-visual detail of the back story to present (no doubt, she knew more about the negotiation between Martha and her son about receiving the new appliances which she could also have reported but did not)—the fact regarding whether or not Martha had seen the refrigerator before buying it, Dixie demonstrates that she understands the importance of what one’s appliances look like visually, and that
even she realizes that it is odd for a sighted person to order an appliance without having
looked at it first. So Dixie is also sending the meta-message, “I’m not a complete
outsider, I do have knowledge and experience of the visual world.”

Finally, the piece of information Dixie shares about the refrigerator is about how
Martha did not see then what Dixie does not see now. She is thus bringing Martha into
her own little “insidership” of nonseeing ones, two people who, at different points, did not
have access to the visual text—the refrigerator. Her comment is nicely dovetailed by an
enthusiastic confirmation from Martha, (“No:::! I just bought it unseen,” line 23), further
cementing and validating the alignment between them. Her description of how she
bought the appliance, verbally and without visual inspection, moreover, mirrors Dixie’s
everyday experience, as well.

Harriet has underscored Dixie’s “outsider-ness,” whether intentionally or not, and
Dixie has counter-positioned herself as an insider by demonstrating that she possesses
information about the dishwasher, its appearance, the significance of its appearance,
and the visual behavior and experience of its owner. Moreover, while Harriet has
evaluated the appliance on its visual merits, based on knowledge available to all but
Dixie, Dixie reports information that neither Harriet nor any of the others have, which she
has come by through the auditory mode of speech about the history of the appliance and
the visual (or non-visual as it turns out) behavior and experience of the refrigerator
owner herself, Martha. Thus, with her three short lines, she has displayed knowledge
that trumps that displayed in Harriet’s 11 lines. This she has achieved through displays
of visual and social knowledge presented verbally, in the auditory mode of speech,
facilitated by her residual knowledge of the visual world, by verbal translations of visual
texts, and by her knowledge of her social world.

After Dixie’s revelations and Martha’s confirmation, Harriet sums up her approval
of its visual merits with, (“It looks pretty nice to me,” line 24), again using an explicit verb
of seeing. Dixie also makes an evaluation, but not having access to the visual, returns to what she knows directly from Martha, which has the effect of giving her more insider status, (“Well, she said she likes it,” line 25). She then affirms this with (“yeah,” line 26) and an approving evaluation of her own, again visually neutral, (“Pretty nifty,” line 27). Moreover, these moves have also served to create involvement between herself and Harriet, indirectly between Martha and Harriet (as Dixie provides knowledge about Martha), and between herself and Martha (as Martha collaboratively confirms the point of Dixie’s revelation).

Dixie also engages with the visual text in a way that creates involvement, not only between herself and the sighted women in the room, but also between them and Hank, in the other room. Dixie is seated closest to the kitchen door, and Hank is just around the doorway in the front room, seated in his chair (which faces away from the kitchen), where he is somewhat tied down because of his oxygen tank. His breathing difficulty has created a disability of his own, one of mobility, and consequently of visibility and audibility, as long as everyone else is in the other room. Because of these circumstances, the whole commotion going on in the kitchen is somewhat displaced for him as well.

Example 23 comes a little after the discussion of appliances in Example 21. Martha is preparing a large bowl of fruit for her husband, Hank, but Harriet seems to mistakenly assume the bowl to be for one of the women and voices a protest about its size, probably as a positive face politeness strategy, suggesting that Martha is being too generous. A happy but unintended side effect of Harriet’s protest is that she creates a partial verbal translation of the visual text, which gives Dixie access to that part of the visual text (the size of the bowl), that she would not otherwise have had—information which she then uses as a resource for involving Hank in conversation.
Harriet's comment to Martha (“Do you expect us to eat that much?” Line 2), indirectly conveys information about the quantity of fruit Martha is preparing in the bowl before her. Harriet is taking information directly available to her in the visual mode and encoding it verbally, which conveniently serves as a verbal translation of a visual text for Dixie. Dixie then appropriates this visual information and reports it to Hank, (“Hank, you’re getting the biggest!” Line 7). By teasing him about “getting the most,” Dixie builds on Harriet’s contribution to accomplish two conversational acts simultaneously, a display of knowledge about what is going on around her in the visual text, and an involvement strategy with Hank. And, presumably, there is positive face value in knowing that he is getting more than everyone else, which Dixie is probably intending to suggest that it makes him a little special. Dixie thus takes something from what is a displaced mode for herself and transforms it into a more immediate mode for him. She thus uses discursive resources that are not even directly available to her in this situation to create a bridge of involvement with Hank.

4.6 Conclusion: Outsider/Insider Status and Visual Text

So much of the knowledge sighted people have of the world is acquired visually, it is not really surprising that the meanings of knowing and seeing converge so tacitly and invisibly in their minds that blindness may come to be seen not merely symbolically, but literally, as a state of epistemological deficiency. Thus, the blind interlocutor enters
into interaction among the sighted with a bias that poses a considerable threat to her negative face and independent identity. Moreover, whenever visual texts are the subject of conversation, there is a risk of positioning the blind participant as an outsider, constituting a considerable threat to her positive face needs and her sense of belonging in the community.

As I have shown, my data demonstrate how this once sighted blind participant, Dixie, uses displays of, not only general knowledge, but even specifically visual knowledge, to take strong epistemological stances which help to construct a self that is interactionally powerful. Furthermore, she also actively uses visual texts as resources for involvement with sighted others. She does this by requesting visual information, by providing visual descriptions both verbally and through gesture, by evaluating visual texts, and by taking this information and using it to engage her sighted co-conversants, weaving herself and others into the interaction, and ultimately into the fabric of the community.

In using visual knowledge the way she does, Dixie is effectively accommodating the sighted. She knows both sides: what it is like to be sighted, and what it is like to be blind. They can know only one side, which makes her the expert in blind/sighted interaction. Most blind people have far more involvement in the form of “help” from sighted individuals than they need or desire, and often that help is in the form of knowledge. Their challenge is to demonstrate that they have as much to give epistemologically as they have to receive, and so to use this resource, among others, to achieve an equitable share of interactional power among the sighted.

The data further reveal the importance of redundancy in content between gesture, as a visual text, and speech, as a verbal text, which may either support or serve as a direct verbal translation of visual text. Not only do sighted participants unwittingly encode some of their message in gesture which is not available to Dixie, while leaving it
out of their verbal text, Dixie sometimes does the same to them (e.g., Example 11, in
describing the unsanitary waitress: “She picked them up **like this**.” <gesture showing her
finger in a customer’s coffee cup>, line 2, and Example 11B, about a toy elephant: “It’s
about this big. <gesture of hands stretched out to show length>” line 7).

In fact, Dixie’s ability to produce visual texts, both in asking for and providing
visual information, sends a mixed signal that may even precipitate answers encoded
visually in gesture from the sighted. If they are following her cues and mirroring her
behavior, the problem of these invisible asymmetrical constellations of modes available
to each is obscured. In telephone interaction, not getting visual cues from the other is a
constant reminder that the other party cannot receive them either. In face to face
interaction with a blind person who **does** send visual cues, there is no such reminder. So
while Dixie makes it easier for sighted people to engage with her, she does so at the risk
of actually limiting her access to information by promoting less accommodation.

In sum, in Hamilton’s work with Alzheimer’s, the person with the disease can be
the “outsider” about present conversation when past conversation (i.e., prior text), is
used as a resource for the present, but the patient does not remember or recognize the
prior text, and thus an involvement strategy actually becomes a source of alienation. In
other words, an attempt to bring her “inside” has the unintended effect of positioning her
as being on the “outside.” In blind/sighted interaction, the blind person can be the
outsider when the visual surroundings or something else in the visual world is the topic
of conversation. In all three cases of Dillon’s (1992), Hamilton’s (1996), and my data,
what makes an individual an outsider in interaction is her access to information,
specifically being texts that are presumed to be mutually shared. In contrast to
diachronic intertextuality that is based on prior text, however, in cases of a perceptual
disability, the intertextuality is synchronic but the texts are produced and received intra-
modally, in different channels and modes for each party.

164
In the original sense with Dillon’s work, it refers to shared prior experience, and in Hamilton’s data it refers to shared memory of shared prior experience, which is an intertextuality of shared consciousness in a mode temporally distal for both. In my data, it is an intertextuality of mode, visually immediate to the sighted, visually distal to the blind but once sighted blind person, and alien to the person blind from birth. When the blind participant has a knowledge of the visual world, she can still manipulate visual texts in ways that connect with her sighted co-conversants. Doing so increasing the sense that she is an insider rather than an outsider vis-à-vis visual texts and those with immediate access to them, creating involvement within the blind/sighted group and, at the same time, displaying her knowledge of the visual world in a way that helps her surmount the effects of the “othering” of epistemological powerlessness, resulting in a relatively powerful personal identity of independence.
Chapter 5: Overcoming Attributions of Helplessness
5.0 Introduction
“Ever since I’ve known her [40 years]—anything she wanted to do, she just done [sic],” Dixie’s stepfather, Chuck, says about her in our conversational interview. Her best friend says, “She just doesn’t let a whole lot of things get in her way. Hhh. She doesn’t let anything get in her way. No, she really doesn’t. She just charges right on.” A son’s girlfriend says, “I mean, she can do everything; puts me to shame.” Carol says, “Uh I just see her as someone that can ‘complish anything and she does a fantastic job at it.”

This is the line that all of Dixie’s friends and family members take on her competence in spite of blindness. She cooks, cleans, launders, irons, and has raised four children with everything that entails. As mentioned in Chapter Two, she has had roles of leadership that suggest independence: Girl Scout leader, children’s church leader, Sunday school teacher, Mary Kay cosmetics consultant, nursing home volunteer, chair of the church prayer chain, nursery coordinator, civic affairs committee member, and daycare worker. Everyone in her sighted network of friends and family proudly proclaims that she does more than many sighted people do.

In fact, Dixie has not been able to see to read for over thirty years now—she cannot read her own letters (neither those she types nor those she receives). She cannot look up phone numbers or addresses or read the information on a medicine bottle or a can of food. Not only can she not drive, but she does not have proficient cane travel skills or a guide dog. In fact, now that she is totally blind, as of the last decade or so, without that last pinhole of light to guide her, she cannot even leave the house to go out in the yard and hang clothes on the clothesline, or to garden without staying, literally, within arm’s reach of the house. Few would consider that independence. And yet Dixie’s identity of “independence” is almost legendary, as evidenced in the selection of quotes I have provided above. The quest of this chapter is to identify the source of this paradoxical image.
In Chapters Four and Five, I have shown how Dixie manages to construct an independent identity through the procedural elements of interaction that she manages and the epistemological stances she takes up, both of which are among the discursive resources Ochs (1992) identifies as important in the indirect indexing of a powerful, independent identity. Ochs also identifies “affective stances” as one such resource, and these data show Dixie taking liberal advantage of this resource. In this chapter, I focus on the affective stances, footing shifts and alignments that Dixie uses to build a powerful, independent identity for herself among her sighted companions. Namely, she takes up alignments that involve: 1) preemptively framing herself as independent in interaction, 2) reframing blindness itself when it is treated as taboo, 3) reframing herself as agentive when others position her as powerless, and 4) reframing the sighted people who try to help her as less competent than herself.

In my analysis, I demonstrate the resources Dixie uses to construct her independent identity. I have identified these discourse strategies by analyzing three types of evidence in my recorded data: 1) direct demonstrations of the independence strategies as participants produce naturally and relatively unconsciously in interaction in the data collection, 2) as participants consciously report them through direct metadiscourse about their views and preferences of various strategies, and 3) as participants reveal them less consciously and more indirectly in their narrative reports, typically about prior demonstrations of such strategies.

In the first analytic section, 6.2, I begin by identifying some powerful affective stances Dixie takes to construct an independent identity preemptively, some of which are conveyed in paralinguistic and extralinguistic modes in direct demonstrations. In section 6.3, I show how she presents a demeanor of competence in her general self presentation through the production of powerful visual cues and through the display of powerful attitudes and emotions (and the omission of those associated with
powerlessness). Using those resources she presents a frame of the situation that provides a way for her hearers to view herself, her blindness, and her relationships to others that enhances the agency in her identity. These strategies are supported both in direct demonstrations of the behaviors in the data, as well as in reports by Dixie and the sighted participants.

I then show, in 6.4, how Dixie aligns herself towards blindness by treating it as an alienable part of her identity, very explicitly reframing it when others treat it as taboo. The next section, 6.5, demonstrates how Dixie rejects frames that incline towards a dependency-support script in which she is portrayed as helpless, reframing herself and her situations in terms of her own agency—claiming power and denying attributions of helplessness. Finally, in 6.6, I show how she negatively evaluates not all offers of help, but those that she feels position her as less competent, by actually counter framing the would-be helpers as incompetent in their accommodation strategies, sharply contrasting them with her own competence in the situation.

5.1 Avoiding the Dependency Support Script

Hamilton (1996) addresses the problem of independence and identity in disability in her work on the interactional norms of people with Alzheimer’s disease and their healthy associates. Citing Baltes and Wahl’s (1987) notion of a dependency-support script, she describes how healthy individuals understand their role in these interactivity interactions to be that of helper, ascribing the reciprocal role to the other as recipient of help. This script promotes a tendency for healthy interlocutors to ratify almost exclusively that identity of patient in need of help, to the neglect and even the eventual eradication of that individual’s other identities.

In the case of Alzheimer’s, a disease of cognition, as the patient’s abilities decline so does her agency, leaving much of the maintenance of face and identity for the other interlocutor to manage. As she remembers less and less about her own history,
the healthy interlocutors around her could help her by actively evoking her nonpatient identities as a resource for interaction and, in so doing, enhance her negative face. When those healthy interlocutors succumb to the dependency-support script, however, the identity of helplessness prevails and other identities are allowed, essentially, to die, a tragic state which has been called the loss of self. The Alzheimer’s patient thus loses control of her environment, her interactions, her independence, and her own individual identity. Carroll (1961:18) also writes of the loss of one’s vision as a death of self.

She does, however, face various renditions of the dependency-support script and attributions of helplessness by sighted people which can be truly debilitating to her own interactional power and independent identity. While identity and independence will always be collaboratively negotiated between healthy interactants, a blind person who has full control over her mental faculties has access to considerable agency in constructing, and when necessary, counterconstructing, her own identity with a desirable balance of independence and involvement, in spite of the very real limitations blindness poses.

Dixie’s sighted companions are very much involved in the collaborative construction of her independent identity; however, the data show that it is Dixie who drives this meta-narrative about herself, and others get onboard as she redirects anyone who wanders astray in telling the story in a way that frames her as helpless, needy, or incompetent. As an American whose family heritage is rooted in the agrarian pioneer era characterized by an especially potent intolerance for a failure of independence, Dixie seems to tap into a family legacy of determination to prevail against any and all hardship, resulting in a powerful individualism she invokes to surmount the threat of powerlessness posed by blindness. In this spirit, she guides the discursive construction of her independent identity against the odds.
5.2 Powerful Preemptive Presentation of Self and Situation

In this section I show how Dixie denies an identity of helplessness by proactively presenting a powerful self in interaction through affective stances and alignments produced via several modes including some that are extralinguistic. She employs such visually relevant conventions as 1) direct eye contact, 2) evaluative facial expressions (including eye rolling), and 3) a demeanor of purported unconcern about other people’s evaluative facial expressions as feedback. She also manages the display of affect by 4) avoiding powerless emotions, and 5) presenting emotions and attitudes that are powerful, including humor, anger, hope and confidence, and a perspective of her blindness as temporary.

5.2.1 Direct Eye Contact

Direct eye contact is an especially important element of face to face interaction in American culture, as it conveys the ideal affective stance of confidence and competence. People who do not give the impression of mutual eye contact are often thought to be either disengaged, dishonest, or disrespectful. Furthermore, failure to maintain eye contact is also associated in American society with a low self esteem, which may give rise to suspicion about the individual’s actual competence, a considerable liability in terms of negative face and interactional power. Moreover, as observed in Chapter One, direct eye contact is the right of the dominant animal in nature. Through the impression of mutual gaze, Dixie produces a message of confidence, attention, and interpersonal awareness, all aspects of independence, as well as a sense of connection with others.

Example 24A and Figure 33 are taken from Carol’s interview at a point when we have just been talking about how Dixie does not “look” blind, and how most people do not realize that she is until someone tells them. Carol explains that she usually forgets that Dixie is blind, citing Dixie’s convincing production of the appearance of mutual gaze as one reason for this.
Example 24A
Carol

1. When we go out together
2. When we are sitting here
3. She looks at me
4. It’s like we are responding
5. It’s like she looks at me like she can see me
6. I mean, you know
7. “Well I can’t see anyway, so I’ll stand here
8. and talk straight forward, ya know”

Dixie, who had been looking away, turns to Carol and smiles with a conveniently illustrative gaze precisely on the word “see,” when Carol utters, (“It’s like she looks at me and she can see me,” line 5), as shown in the frame in Figure 34. By doing so, Dixie also demonstrates the interactive quality that Carol is describing, (“It’s like we are responding,” line 4). Thus her gaze behavior has the effect of making sighted people feel like they are connecting with her, while at the same time, suggesting the gaze competence and attention of a sighted person, offsetting the sense of powerlessness that an unfocused gaze may convey. In other words, she is using productive gaze to create both involvement and independence.

In light of the comments Carol has just made in example 24A above, admiring Dixie’s convincing gaze behavior, Dixie offers a matching anecdote about what another friend, to whom the three of us would attribute more status and authority than to ourselves, had observed about Dixie’s gaze years prior. As I described in Chapter Two, Rose Anne was a social worker trying to help Dixie find employment that she could do in spite of her blindness, and without leaving her three young children to work away from home. She was also a Mary Kay cosmetics consultant and was coaching Dixie in becoming one, too.
Example 24B
Dixie  9  Well, I did it but
10  I mean I've always done it
11  but when I did the Mary Kay
12  Rose Anne Winter said
13  You have a way of looking people right straight in the eye
14  You keep doing it because it's a good
15  Ya know it was a good thing to do in Mary Kay

In 24B, Dixie embeds Rose Anne’s affirmation of her gaze behavior in what Tannen ([1989]2007) calls “constructed dialogue,” an evaluative strategy which makes a stronger point than would simply reporting that someone else admired her gaze behavior. (“Rose Anne Winter said, you have a way of looking people right straight in the eye. You keep doing it,” lines 12-14). Rose Anne was speaking of gaze as a sales tactic that would be beneficial to Dixie. By adding this minimal narrative that appeals to the perspective of a more powerful person, and by putting her point (praise for Dixie) in constructed dialogue for the more powerful person, Dixie further demonstrates her awareness that she is adept at producing the powerful impression of seeing, and even watching her sighted co-participants.

5.2.2 Powerful Facial Expressions
Another means of producing a powerful affective stance is through the extralinguistic modes of facial expression and gesture, and paralinguistic modes such as volume and pitch, and such elements as affective interjections that are not exactly linguistic (e.g. “Woo!”). The visual aspects of these modes constitute an asymmetrical venue for Dixie since she has productive, but not receptive, access to it. While this asymmetry may be a liability to her involvement and her ability to recipient design because she loses an important resource for monitoring affective displays in others, it can also be an asset to the construction of independence in interaction. Dixie uses animated gestural and facial expression in interaction that can be virtually indistinguishable from that of a sighted person and are very successful in garnering
multilateral involvement in interaction, as well as in establishing powerful, evaluative affective stances.

**Example 25A**

| Hank | 1 They sold--or bought-- a place--
| Martha | 2 They're in Arkansas.
| Dixie | 3 They're in ARKANSAS?!
| Hank | 4 They're in Arkansas,  
      | 5 Give the horses,  
      | 6 Give the horses away to somebody,  
      | 7 Didn't even SEE the place, Dixie turns completely toward Hank  
      | 8 Bought it sight . . . unseen,  
      | 9 And moved somewhere's down to Arkansas
| Dixie | 10 They're in ARKANSAS?! <Very high pitch and volume>
      | 11 Well, why?!
| Martha | 12 That's what Brenda, their daughter, tell us  
      | 13 Wher-- What place?
| Dixie | 14 Well, where AT in Arkansas?  
      | . . . [Elided lines about negotiating location]
| Dixie | 15 I wouldn't move to Arkansas unless God said do it. <to Martha>
| Martha | 16 No, I wouldn't either, Dixie.
| Dixie | 17 Woo! <sharply shakes her head once to the right and back>
      | 18 Couldn't give it to me on a silver platter!
| Elisa | 19 Tell us how you really feel, Mom.
| Martha | 20 Mississippi's just as bad, Dixie,  
      | Dixie | 21 Well, it may be perty, but it's PO.

Example 25A is taken from the multiparty data at Martha’s house and Hank has just divulged shocking news about some dear, upper middle class friends of ours, Peggy and Wayne. We knew that Peggy was suffering from Alzheimer's, but Hank has learned that they left their retirement home in Colorado, gave away all their horses, and moved to Arkansas, where Dixie spent her early childhood and which she associates with extreme poverty.
Extralinguistic modes such as facial expression and gesture are always integrated with the linguistic and paralinguistic semiotics being employed in face to face interaction, but it is the far greater proportion of these elements that Dixie uses relative to other participants that produces an equally greater proportion of both involvement and independence in interaction. In Dixie’s reaction to Hank’s news, she combines facial expression, gesture, proxemics, gaze, pitch, volume, intonation and repetition to display, in no uncertain terms, her dismay and surprise. In a shrill voice she repeats the shocking news, (“They’re in ARKANSAS?” Lines 3 and 10). In line 11, she has turned towards Hank, as shown in Figure 35A, and asks, (“Well, why?” Line 11), in the same tone of disbelief, slightly less shrilly, but buttressed by her facial expression of disgust. Her disapproval is even more direct in line 14, where she has turned back toward the other women in Figure 35B, and vows that only a direct order from God Himself would persuade her to move to Arkansas. Moreover, by implying that no less powerful person than God Himself could prevail upon her to do so, she stops just short of declaring herself second in command, agency writ large indeed.

With a wrinkled nose, she then reinforces these expressions with more shrillness, (“Woo! Couldn’t give it to me on a silver platter!” Line 16), punctuated with a sharp headshake to the left and then back towards Martha. Figure 35C shows her mid-head
shake. “Woo” is very high pitched, loud, and expressive. Hank talks a little bit more about Arkansas and Dixie returns to almost the same facial expression (35D) she had used with him earlier (35A) when she says, (“It may be perty, but it's PO,” line 21, using “perty” for “pretty” and “po” for “poor,” in an imitation of a poor Arkansan, an affective stance often used by this family when talking about economic hardship).

The facial expressions in Figures 36A-C are in direct response to Hank’s statement in line 23 that Arkansas is cheaper than Kansas. The face she makes in 36B is one I have called a “pre-sarcastic smirk,” and she produces it here just as Hank has finished his utterance and as she turns back towards Martha and the other women. She now makes a very “loud” visual gesture by leaning all the way forward on the couch where she actually lifts herself briefly off the couch as if to get up, and as she does so, as illustrated in 36D,E, delivers, (“I'll be-nice,” line 24). As she finishes the line, she flops back onto the couch and looks down at her lap, as shown in 36F, still smiling impishly as if she really wants to say something she is holding back. This display and utterance evoke a lot of laughter from the other participants, partly because, I think, everybody knows there is very little chance that she will be able to keep her promise.
When Hank continues making his point that the cost of living is higher in their part of Kansas than it is in Arkansas, she turns back toward him and says (“Yeah, I know it is, Expensive, but I lived in Arkansas with my family-- With my Mom and Dad when I was little. And we ALMOST starved to death!” lines 27-30). She delivers this line very emphatically. As the only person present who has actually lived in Arkansas, she has an expert status backing up her evaluation of Arkansas. At any rate, there can be no doubt in the minds of any hearer how Dixie feels about Arkansas or her surprise at the idea that anyone could live well there, and no one else contradicts her. So she has taken up an enormous percentage of the “visual space” in this interaction, capturing everyone else’s gaze, and with it their auditory attention to her words, which are uttered in such a way (loudly, in a high pitch, etc.) as to take up an sizeable amount of the “auditory space” during the interaction as well. She will not be invisible and her conversational style appears to be designed to ensure that she is not, blindness or no blindness. She has used this whole constellation of modes to produce a powerful evaluative stance for her sighted hearers (and viewers), which is, in the end, allowed to stand.
5.2.3 Eye Rolling

One common facial expression which is usually not acceptable for an adult to display in a public setting due to its inherent high risk of face violation, but which Dixie produces prolifically, is eye rolling. Eye rolling is a gesture of negative evaluation or assessment of a person, utterance or circumstance, and constitutes a bald negative face FTA. However, it sometimes works to Dixie’s advantage that a person who breaks the rules may be seen as (or may see herself as) above the rules, positioning herself as more powerful than other participants. Moreover, while eye rolling appears on the surface to be indisputably an independence strategy, and therefore a patent violation of negative face, Dixie demonstrates this behavior and its usefulness for involvement in the following examples. In one she actually produces the gesture in the interview with Anne’s husband Nate, and in the other she tells a little story that centers around a noteworthy instance of her use of this gesture in the past.

Figures 36 and 37 illustrate Dixie actually rolling her eyes in the triadic interview with Anne’s husband, Nate, who has just said his relationship with Dixie was founded on brownies, as he describes baking her some the first time he met her as he was getting to know her before marrying Anne and becoming Dixie’s son-in-law.

![Figure 37 Eye Roll](image1) ![Figure 38 Return](image2)

Dixie’s eye rolling here seems to be a reaction to Nate’s reference to the centrality of food in their relationship, which suggests a preexisting centrality of food in her own life to which he was trying to appeal, which her gesture suggests was taken as indirect criticism.
Example 26 comes from the multiparty data in Martha’s kitchen. We have been talking about how Dixie’s various pastors like to use her blindness as a sermon illustration and how one of them used to call her out of the audience. In this context Dixie gives a narrative that provides a little metadiscourse on her own habit of eye rolling.

Example 26

Dixie 1 But Pastor R—Knight, he used to look at me
そうだ 2 And he’d say,
そうだ 3 “Don’t roll your eyes at me, Dixie!”

Anne 4 @@@

Elisa 5 From the pulpit?

Dixie 6 Oh, my Lord, Pastor Knight xx
7 I think that was a Sunday School,
8 I mean a Bible Study
9 But he would say so—
10 Things to me
11 I mean, I’d just be sitting there mindin’ my own business.
12 Dixie? <sits up straighter with look of surprise>

As evidenced in Dixie’s account of her own behavior (“Pastor Knight, he used to look at me and he’d say, Don’t roll your eyes at me, Dixie!” Lines 1-3), the first feature of eye rolling that lends itself to a public setting is that, it is a highly visible gesture that can often be seen across a room full of people. In Dixie’s report of the pastor’s on-record objection, it is evident that a second benefit of eye rolling is that it is provocative enough to get a response, even from the front of the church, even to the point of provoking the speaker to break the normal frame of unilateral address to a multiparty audience and inserting a little private-public dyad. And third, here it creates an opportunity for involvement, not just between Dixie and her pastor, but also with the whole assembly, which then achieves a fourth function, raising her personal profile in the community as well. Eye rolling is thus a powerful gesture which helps convey a powerful, independent stance, but the payoff in involvement helps offset, if not outweigh, the alienation that it may engender.
In addition to Dixie’s independence, her faith, and her outspoken nature, her sense of humor is another defining characteristic. Dixie’s blindness and humor style seem to have a reflexive relationship in that not seeing nonverbal takes away a sense of spontaneity. The inability to read nonverbal communication is sex class linked and more likely to be found in male discourse than female discourse. As Yerian (1993) shows, this can mean that a blind woman’s discourse is more similar in some ways to sighted male discourse than sighted female discourse. This may help account for why Dixie reports being so well liked by the boys in high school with whom she reports she was “everybody’s buddy,” and also sheds light on some of her relationships with men in the data, including her stepfather, son-in-law, and the husband of one of her older friends.

In this data it is clear that some participants have what Norrick (1993) describes as “customary joking relationships,” while others do not. While Harriet, Esther, and Martha engage in almost no teasing at all, Hana and Dixie have a joking relationship that is a little aggressive on the surface as they tease each other, but really has connection at the heart (e.g., Tannen 1994, 2007, Schiffrin 1984). Dixie and Hank have developed a ritual of ribbing one another in the manner that in one instance, when Harriet is apparently confused by their exchanges, Martha tries to explain by saying, “They fuss all the time.”

An example of the asymmetry of humor styles in the mix occurs when Hank and Dixie tease each other about a joke that has a punch line that is particularly face-threatening to the primary listener. When I ask whether Esther has heard the joke, Dixie then tells it to Esther, the most revered, if not the oldest participant present, who issues no jokes of her own during the evening, face-threatening or otherwise, and the consequences of Dixie’s telling are infelicitous. Harriet then tells a joke that has no face threat in it for the hearer, but because she has so much difficulty remembering and telling the joke, it has plenty of face threat in it for her.
Not surprisingly, having been raised by Dixie, Anne and Elisa also have joking relationships with Dixie that are more aggressive than those of the other participants, as when Dixie says, “Shall we go have a snack?” and I chuckle and add, “Dixie’s all about snacks.” The fact that Hana is the only other woman in the this multiparty data who engages in this kind of humor with Dixie could be because she is from South Africa and has different cultural norms for conversation and possibly does not pick up on nonverbal messages as well as the native speakers of American English in the room—rendering her discourse style slightly more male sex class linked (Goffman 1977), and thus more similar to Dixie’s.

5.2.4 Ignoring the Visible Affect of Others

Of course, the downside of this asymmetry in access to visual cues is that Dixie cannot adjust the intensity or manner of her own facial expressions or her linguistic production based on the moment by moment information about how her own talk and physical expression are being received by others. On the one hand, this leaves her with fewer means of detecting hearer affect, which she might use to recalibrate her own message and potentially mitigate any face loss she might be causing the other parties, ultimately better serving her interactional goals. On the other hand, however, not attending to other participants’ face needs can be interpreted as an uncompromising attitude; it is a threat to her listener’s negative face, yes, but at the same time a powerful affective stance of independence, unaffected by the evaluative looks of others.

Example 27 comes from the triadic interview with Rose, in response to my question about whether she notices any blindness related differences in Dixie’s interactional style in comparison to her sighted friends. Rose immediately identifies not having receptive access to other participants’ facial expressions as an important asymmetry, but Dixie responds with a joke that converts the liability to an asset by

41 Although Anne, as I have described in Everts (2003), has a humor style significantly less aggressive than the other family members in both quality and quantity.
suggesting that not seeing people’s faces actually gives her the upper hand.

Example 27

Elisa 1 Do you think that Dixie communicates differently with you from the way sighted people communicate with you?
Rose 2 Well, I imagine she—
→ 3 Would just love to see the expression on people’s faces, but—
→ 4 But, she’s not inhibited by not being able to see them.
→ 5 She just carries on. <smiles> @@@
Elisa 6 @@@
Dixie → 7 <smiling> I pretend that you’re looking the way I WANT you to look.
Rose 8 You’ve got it made, don’t you?
Elisa 9 Does that ever cause you any problems for you, Mom?
Dixie 10 What?
Elisa 11 When you don’t see the expression
  12 [on somebody’s face and you—
Dixie 13 [Oh yeah, sometimes
  14 I mean, not when really with my close friends but so—
  15 other people, yeah
Elisa 16 with people that—
Dixie 17 You’re being introduced to somebody or something like that,
  18 It does, sure it does,
  19 Cause you’re not sure what their reaction is to something
Elisa 20 They haven’t quite figured you out yet.
Dixie → 21 But I really figure it’s probably more their problem than it is mine.
  → 22 Cause I just have to go on

Rose says, ("Well, I imagine she—Would just love to see the expression on people’s faces, but—But, she’s not inhibited by not being able to see them. She just—carries on," lines 2-5). Although Rose says this in an admiring tone which supports Dixie’s negative face, my question and her response have nevertheless positioned Dixie as helpless in this element of interaction. Here she takes a humorous angle to deflect the charge, Dixie smiles and gives the semi-facetious reply, ("I pretend that you’re looking the way I WANT you to look," line 6). This line is funny, but it is also another way for Dixie to reframe the situation as one in which she has agency, the ability to superimpose her own wishes on the reactions of others, even if only in her imagination. And Rose reinforces this little sally into the irrealis, ("You’ve got it made, don’t you?" Line 8). These lines of interaction also show Dixie and Rose collaboratively displaying one of
their primary strategies for maintaining a cheerful key in the face of adversity: reframing a liability as an asset.

When I probe a little further, Dixie acknowledges that not seeing people’s expressions can be problematic, particularly with new acquaintances; but is resigned to the reality that there really is not much she can do about it, as in (“But I really figure it’s probably more their problem than it is mine, ‘Cause I just have to go on,” lines 21-22, noticeably echoing Rose’s observation from line 5, *She just carries on*. Her sighted interlocutors, after all, have more communicative resources at their disposal with their larger constellations of modes, even if they do not have the experience Dixie has about how blindness constrains interaction. She uses two seemingly contradictory lines of logic, 1) “I have the power to make up a response for you and thus to ignore your affect,” and 2) “This is not my job since I am the blind participant and you have more resources to draw from than I do in conveying and monitoring affect.

Displays of emotion and key may be categorized as essentially powerful or powerless. Cheerfulness can be seen as more powerful than sadness or depression, anger over remorse, courage and self-confidence over fear and helplessness, humor over dismay, and hope over fear and dread. Dixie seems to carefully manage these affective displays by selecting from those that are powerful and omitting those that are powerless. One reason humor is interactationally powerful as a discourse mode is because it poses, in effect, a “test” for the hearers, to be passed or failed, based on their ability to recognize and appreciate the intended humor. However, it is also an invitation to the play frame, and thus an involvement strategy.

Moreover, having the power to laugh about something distressing or difficult also shows a display of affective power over those circumstances. Dixie exploits blindness itself as a resource for interaction through humor in at least two forms: 1) by highlighting vision related puns, as well as 2) pointing out practical ironies. In Example 28, Carol,
Dixie, and I have been talking about the fact that many people assume that if my mother is blind my father must be blind too, which led to a discussion of the difficulties of two blind people being married to each other, and to an opportunity for Dixie to highlight a sight related pun.

Example 28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>1 I don’t think Mom ever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 considered marrying a blind person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 @ did you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>4 @</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>5 Well I certainly wasn’t looking f—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 I [wasn’t LOOKING for one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line 5, Dixie finds a pun, “Well I certainly wasn’t looking f—”, She uses “look f[or]” to mean “pursue,” and then repeats the line when she notices the visual pun, (“I wasn’t LOOKING for one,” line 6), emphasizing the word in the repetition to make sure we notice it too. This kind of repetition is one that Dixie seems to use as a compensation strategy for not being able to verify by seeing people’s faces that they have noticed the pun too.

Another example of Dixie using humor in a way that takes a stance of competence over circumstances by making light of blindness occurs in Example 29, also from the Carol triad. We have been talking about guide dogs and other blind people, and I have observed that having a blind mother does not seem to help me much in interacting with other blind people, as I had thought it might.

Example 29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>1 You’re used to a blind person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>2 To a blind person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Exactly, Not to general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 blind people at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>5 We’re at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 The blind people are at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 WATCH for us</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dixie is clarifying the point that knowing one blind person is not so generalizable and I am agreeing when, I awkwardly refer to “blind people in general” as “blind people at large.” Dixie appreciates the ambiguous connotation of this phrase as it is often used to describe someone who has escaped from confinement and may be dangerous to the public, such as a prison convict. She provides a savoring repetition (Tannen 2007:26) and elaboration in lines 5-7, “We’re at large. The blind people are at large. WATCH for us.” Identifying herself as a member of the category blind people, Dixie names the category again in 6, and issues a mock warning with an ironic visual pun, “Watch for us.” The pun is ironic of course because they cannot “watch” even for themselves, and the comparison to escaped convicts suggests that blind people might be predatory and dangerous, converting a powerless category into a powerful one, even if it is in the irrealis modality.

Knowing that self pity and depression do not promote positive interaction, limiting displays of such feelings and promoting others are very practical strategies Dixie uses to foster involvement with others, ameliorating the sense of alienation from them that can naturally emerge. Early in the interview with Carol, she begins to observe this characteristic of Dixie’s personality and interactional style in Example 30, when Dixie finishes a sentence for her at the beginning.

**Example 30**

| Carol | 1 I have ne— |
|       | ➤2 And also Dixie is not one |
|       | ➤3 that ever pities herself. |
|       | 4 I—I mean she might— |
| Dixie | ➤5 Get mad! |
| Carol | 6 Yeah, but I mean— |
|       | 7 I mean some people that have, |
|       | 8 you know, |
|       | 9 Problems or something like that. |
|       | 10 They’re always, you know, |
|       | ➤11 like, “Woe is me,” |
Carol begins by naming an affective stance she has never seen in Dixie: self pity. After Carol begins to explain, “Dixie is not one that ever pities herself,” line 1, she hesitates as if searching for the words to describe the affect that Dixie does display, (“I—I mean she might—,” line 4), Dixie finishes the sentence for her in line 5, “Get mad!” Of course, finishing someone else’s sentence is pragmatically polysemous, as it is an act of exerting power over the other speaker, but it is also an involvement strategy, as it is an act of participating in the other person’s talk, particularly when that person seems to need help completing her thought, and is a strategy often interpreted as a sign of closeness between friends (“We’re so close we finish each others sentences”). Dixie delivers this line with a smile, suggesting that she means for it to be understood, at least partly, in the humor frame. By supplying “anger” rather than “self-pity” to finish the sentence she ascribes a more powerful affective display to herself. Moreover, she is also speaking for herself when someone else was speaking for her, an act which in itself rejects a passive role and assumes a more powerful stance of agency.

Although Carol supports Dixie’s contribution with, “yeah,” line 6, her next 15 lines are not about Dixie’s use of anger as a powerful resource, but about her faith in God and her focus not on the present and its trials, but on the future when she will be free of them. Carol articulates Dixie’s perspective, (“She’s always looking to the day she will have sight, whether it is here, or whether it’s when she gets to heaven or whenever it will be, but she looks FORward to it,” lines 14-20). What Carol is impressed by is Dixie’s
portrayal of hope rather than self-pity or despair, which collaboratively contributes to Dixie’s identity as a victor rather than a victim.

5.2.5 Portraying Powerful Emotions and Attitudes

Stoicism is another affective stance with which Dixie staves off the stance of helplessness that many associate with blindness. She presents this perspective directly and in no uncertain terms, with the added force of an advisory stance, in a strip of metadiscourse in Example 31, which comes from the triadic interview with Rose.

Example 31

Well, I told Elisa earlier,
my idea about this blind stuff is:

If you’re blind, you’re blind.
You do what you gotta do,
And you go on with your life.
And you p—
Hope and pray
that God’s gonna heal you,
But you go on with your life
and do what you gotta do. \(<\text{Gesture of hands with palms facing up, lips pursed}>\)
But that’s life,
whether it’s blind or not.

Mm hm. <softly, nodding>
That’s that in a nutshell.
Pretty healthy attitude @@@
Yeah

But it’s the only way to do it.
What else you gonna do,
sit in the corner and eat worms?
You know. I don’t like ‘em.

There are at least four layers of powerful stances Dixie displays in Example 30. First, by using the second person pronoun, (“If you’re blind you’re blind. You do what you gotta do, and you go on with your life,” lines 3-4). Dixie refers to a general situation of blindness, to all blind people, not just her own blindness in particular, and thereby takes a powerful stance, by positioning herself as one who is advising other blind people. Second, by following that line with, (“But that’s life whether it’s blind or not,” line 11, she
takes an even more powerful stance by positioning herself as advising everyone, both blind and sighted.

Third, the proposition within her advice itself is also powerful, claiming the moral high ground, basically saying, “Do not use blindness as an excuse for passivity or negligence; do not rely on other people to do whatever blindness or any other hardship renders difficult.” Fourth and finally, Dixie’s overall conversational style is uncompromising and unmitigated, another very powerful discourse strategy she uses in declaring her independence. This strategy is epitomized in the statement, (“That is the only way to do it,” line 17). She does not often hedge, mitigate, or otherwise provide the option of disagreeing with her when expressing opinions. She has a black and white, take it or leave it attitude that makes it very difficult for hearers to contradict her, thus leaving her in the powerful position.

She follows her uncompromising declaration with a rhetorical question that challenges the hearer to provide any other alternative, (“What else you gonna do? Sit in the corner and eat worms? You know, I don't like 'em,” lines 18-20). She thus invokes the words to a popular children’s song that makes fun of people who give up after a little adversity, “everybody hates me nobody likes me, I think I’ll go eat worms.” The song describes a person who abandons her agency to improve her own circumstances and resigns herself to (creating even) a more horrid circumstance—eating worms. This reference takes up an affective stance of stoicism that is more powerful than the adversity of blindness, as well as serving Dixie in aligning (less directly) against people who give up.

5.2.6 Viewing Blindness as Temporary and Not Integral to Her Identity

Finally, Dixie maintains a constant attitude of hope and a refusal to surrender to despair based on her conviction that her blindness is temporary, as she believes God is going to heal her at any time. In so doing, she also manages to treat blindness as an
alienable part of her identity. Returning to an excerpt of Example 30, which I presented earlier to illustrate Dixie’s interjected reference to anger as a substitute for self pity, Carol explains that Dixie focuses on a hopeful future rather than bemoaning the current difficulties blindness causes her.

Example 30b Carol

14 She’s always looking to
15 the day she will have sight.
16 Uh, whether it is here,
17 or whether it’s
18 when she gets to heaven,
19 Or whenever it will be.
20 But she looks FORward to it.
21 But I don’t ever hear her
22 doing the pity party about—

That Carol can clearly and confidently articulate Dixie’s philosophy of blindness and hope as in, (“She’s always looking to the day she will have sight,” lines 14-15), is testament both to their closeness of their friendship and to Dixie’s clear articulation of her faith and her view of blindness. She does not deny blindness, but she denies it permanence and many of its limitations. Somewhere between them the line between denial and hope is negotiated.

This idea that her blindness is temporary and can be faced with the expectation that it will end at some point is a powerful affective stance that Dixie puts on record herself in a meta-discursive comment in the triadic interview with Rose as shown in the following excerpt from Example 31, (presented earlier).

Example 31b

3 If you’re blind, you’re blind.
4 You do what you gotta do,
5 And you go @ on with your life.
6 And you p—
7 Hope and pray
8 that God’s gonna heal you,
9 But you go on with your life
10 and do what you gotta do.
In this example Dixie denies two things: the permanence of her blindness, and its centrality to her identity. She first verbalizes this view of the temporariness of her blindness, (“Hope and pray that God’s gonna heal you, but you go on with your life,” line 7). This underlying conviction seems to buttress her cache of coping strategies and, moreover, further alienates blindness from her core identity. Previously I noted that, as a once sighted blind person, Dixie is able to take up an identity not as a blind person, per se, but as a sighted person who has lost her sight, which helps her in connecting with her sighted companions. The conviction that her blindness is temporary alienates it even further from her core identity. Not only is it not who she has always been, but it is also not who she will always be.

Dixie displays powerful evaluative stances through such means as the visual, nonverbal venues of gaze and facial expression and through displays of powerful emotions and attitudes to the exclusion of those that are powerless. By using these strategies, Dixie presents an image of independence at the outset, without reference to any attributions of powerlessness or power from others. Dixie presents herself as a force to be contended with. If the best defense is a good offense, she has both in the bag. Not only does she preemptively frame circumstances in ways that put her in an independent light, but she also rejects the frames others construct that do not uphold that image of competence, and reframes the situation in a way that does.

5.3 Reframing Blindness: Alienable, Not Subject to Avoidance Behaviors

Another critical component of Dixie’s Independent identity in the face of blindness is how she treats blindness itself. Not only does she view it as temporary and separate from her personal identity, she also rejects the treatment of blindness as taboo. Because taboo has the effect of “spoiling” one’s identity, in Goffman’s (1963) terms, it calls for euphemism and special avoidance rituals (Goffman 1967:49-95), which are intended, ostensibly, to protect the face of the person affected. However, as basic Gricean (1957)
pragmatics shows, diverging from the norm is a message in itself, and the message of euphemism and avoidance ritual is to make the declaration, “This person is tainted by stigma.”

Dixie rejects the social treatment of blindness as so taboo as to be unspeakable, talking about it in a way that presents it as alienable from herself by 1) objecting to avoidance rituals, 2) by talking about blindness immediately with a new acquaintance, 3) by rejecting commiseration, and 4) by making it the target of humor—and moreover, taking every opportunity to turn the potential alienation of blindness on its head and make of it a resource for creating laughter and connection instead. These strategies come to light through narrative reports Dixie tells as well as those others tell about her, and also by direct statements and humorous remarks in the storytelling world of the multiparty and triadic data.

5.3.1 Rejecting Avoidance Rituals

Example 32A takes place late in the conversational interview with Carol, after there have been a lot of laughter, storytelling, apologies, and gratitude—in short, a lot of good face work has been done on all sides. However, this face equilibrium is somewhat jeopardized when Carol tells a story that involves her performing an avoidance ritual that Dixie objects to. The narrative emerges in response to my question about whether Carol feels the need to let people in public know that Dixie is blind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Do you feel like you have to tell the people at the restaurant when you come in that she’s blind?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>3 No:::!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>4 No...I don’t tell ANYone. 5 I only M told one M other person because M—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 This person was someone that was with me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 And they had their hand stuck out for Dixie to shake it,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>8 Oh yeah,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 Then we got to do that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>10 And then I go,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

190
“She’s blind,
Just grab her hand” <Whispering>
You know M, @@
But you know what M?
You don’t even M have M to whisper.
You can M just M say,
“She’s blind.”
Yeah, I was wondering M about that—
If you felt M like—
Yeah, I really M don’t like M that whispering,

The question is clearly addressed to Carol, because I used the third person
pronoun “she” to refer to Dixie in the question, but Dixie is the one who interjects her
own emphatic answer, (No::! Line 3), into Carol’s turn. If Carol had been about to give
another answer, she is unlikely to do so after such a strident response to the contrary
from Dixie. Carol shadows (Tannen 2007) Dixie’s “no,” with a “no” of her own, in line 4,
and paraphrased repetition, “I don’t tell anyone,” but then provides one caveat, “I only M
told one M other person because M—” (lines 4-5). Carol uses three mitigators: “only” and
“one,” minimizing incidence, and “because,” offering an explanation. She then supports
her caveat with a brief narrative account.

The circumstance that called for the disclosure of blindness was a chance
encounter with Dixie in public by Carol and a sighted friend of hers, and Carol’s social
obligation to introduce the two. Carol’s orientation alone, (“This person was someone
that was with me,” line 6) identifies the contingency for disclosure. And, upon hearing the
reason, Dixie emphatically supports Carol’s assessment with her response, (“Oh yeah,
then we got to do that,” lines 8-9). To this point, Carol has supported Dixie’s negative
face by agreeing that they do not tell strangers, and Dixie has supported Carol’s
negative face by aligning with her in acknowledging the rightness of Carol’s choice to
disclose.

Keenly aware of this function of whispering, no doubt having experienced it many
times in her life, Dixie objects to the form of Carol’s disclosure because the
metamessage is that blindness is a stigmatized condition worthy of shame. Initially her objection is gentle, (“But you know what? You don’t even have to whisper, you can just say, She’s blind,” lines 14-17) with several layers of mitigation. When I make a further inquiry about whispering, (“Yeah, I was wondering about that—if you felt like—” lines 18-19) providing a truncated sentence stem that effectively gives Dixie a sanctioned slot to be even more direct in putting her preference on record. She takes the slot, (“Yeah, I really don’t like that whispering,” line 20), is presented in both 32A and 32B). Using “really” as an indirectness strategy and “don’t like” rather than “hate,” she makes her position clear, but not without seeking to lightly mitigate the face threat to Carol.

However, Dixie goes on to tell what is really a parallel story about somebody else’s whispering, but in this narrative Dixie’s reported thoughts (constructed inner dialogue) baldly ridicule the whisperer, making virtually no attempt to mitigate her disdain for whispering as an avoidance ritual. (32B is a continuation of the strip of talk in 32A.) In this narrative, Dixie and a friend are together in public waiting in line, when they encounter a sighted person to whom Mandy feels the need to disclose Dixie’s blindness.

**Example 32B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>Yeah, I really don’t like that whispering,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ah, XXX &lt;disfluency&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Do you remember, Mandy Fields,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Married, ah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Robert Meyer for awhile?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Oh yeah. Yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Well . . . Let’s see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>We were at that little, um,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Yogurt place that Jones had</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Out over there on 6th St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Yeah, I know where that’s at.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>And we were standing there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>where you order,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>And I don’t know what the deal was,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>I don’t remember why,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>But she’s—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“She’s blind:::;” <Whispers hissily>
And I’m thinking,
“But I’m NOT DEAF!!!” <shouts>

First Dixie establishes several points of narrative orientation with Carol, which I would argue allows Dixie to establish some solidarity with Carol before getting to its point about how insensitive and obnoxious people are when they whisper, as Carol has just admitting to doing herself. The complicating action, from Dixie’s point of view, is the form of this act of disclosure, the whispering, which this woman elected to use. Dixie presents it in constructed dialogue which she animates for us, whispering hissily, (“But she’s—She’s blind:::;;” lines 35-36, with considerable expressive phonology leading up to her climactic punch line, which she shouts, “But I’m NOT DEAF!!!” Line 37).

Carol laughs just as much as I do at this climax before Dixie goes on to underscore her point, (“And all you have to do is say, She’s blind,” lines 38-39, a nice bookend to her prefacing lines 16,17 in 32A (“You can M just say, She’s blind”). With (“I’m not ashamed of it,” line 43), she clearly rejects the notion that she should feel embarrassed about blindness, and by making herself the agent who can evaluate the blindness for herself, she separates it from her self, “I don’t like it but—There is no point to whispering about it,” lines 44-45. It is almost as if people think they are going to embarrass her by reminding her that she is blind; Dixie assures them, they will not.
5.3.2 Putting Blindness On Record Immediately

One way to deflate the inhibitions that naturally befall a potential interactant encountering blindness for the first time is to put the blindness on record immediately, speaking of it directly as kind of a preemptive strike. Such an approach sharply contrasts with the undesirable form of disclosure portrayed in Example 32B with the avoidance ritual of whispering. Evidence that this direct approach really is the line she takes in first encounters with potential friends can be found in the multiparty data that actually took place two years prior to Carol’s interview and is presented in Example 33.

We are gathered around Martha’s kitchen table having fruit and Harriet has just told an extended narrative about how she came to be friends with Dixie. Hana then jumps in with the story of how she first met Dixie years earlier when Dixie and a friend had visited Hana at her home, bringing her a gift of home made bread as a welcoming gesture from their church, which Hana had recently visited. In Example 33 she begins her story as abruptly as the events it recounts transpired.

Example 33

Hana 1 The first time I met Dixie
     ➔ 2 She just—
         3 Knocked at my door
Dixie 4 I did?
Hana 5 I was sitting there
     ➔ 6 Minding my own business,
All 7 @@@@@
Dixie ➔ 8 That’s ROTten, thing Hana@@
Hana 9 That’s—
     10 I opened the door
     11 There was a blind woman standing there with a—
     ➔ 12 And she says,
         ➔ 13 Hi I’m blind,
         14 I said,
         15 <pause>
         ➔ 16 I’m black.
All 17 @@@@@

Lines 1-3, (“The first time I met Dixie, She just, knocked at my door”), set the hearers up for this narrative about how Hana met Dixie, (which follows Harriet’s narrative
of how she met Dixie in the sequencing of their conversation), but does so in a way that portrays Dixie as the initiator, attributing more agency to Dixie than the other stories had. Hana escalates the degree of agency ascribed to Dixie even further by positioning Dixie as the aggressor and herself as the victim: (“I was sitting there, Minding my own business,” lines 5-6). Hana’s orientation provokes laughter because “minding my own business” is an expression of innocence, and such expressions are only needed where there is a threat of some punishment or harm. It is funny to imagine a blind person assailing a sighted person, as it would be very difficult to pull off. Hana is also claiming an asymmetrical power relation in Dixie’s favor in story world, and all of these strategies in the orientation have the effect of collaboratively contributing to her independent identity in the story telling world.

The fact that Hana is positioning Dixie as the antagonist, however, provokes a (slightly disfluent) joking retaliatory remark from Dixie, (“That’s ROTten thing Hana @@,” line 8, which ironically is making her something of an antagonist in the story telling world too. Hana then presents the climax and her surprise (“I opened the door. There was a blind woman standing there with a—And she says, Hi, I’m blind …” lines 10-12). The incident is reportable because Dixie (according to Hana’s account) violates the usual script for a visiting stranger at someone’s door (Greeting + Self Identification), by blithely skipping over the “self-identification slot,” and going straight from “greeting” to “disability disclosure”: “Hi, I’m blind,” line 13.

How does one respond to an opening gambit like, “Hi, I’m blind?” What is the second pair part (Schegloff 1973:295-6) to this conversational act? Hana strategically pauses in the narrative, reenacting her wit gathering pause in the story world, and then delivers the exquisite reply, the perfect parallel second pair part, without greeting or self-identification, “I said, <pause> I’m black,” lines 14-16, resulting in peals of laughter from all. Blindness and blackness—perfect rhythm, perfect complex alliteration, and perfect
symmetry of stigma, as unfortunately, they are two highly stigmatized minority statuses in American society. Thus an unpredicted solidarity was forged that day and the two became fast friends. Dixie advocates candidness about stigma, a strategy which is then illustrated and affirmed in Example 33, by someone else’s report (Hana’s) of Dixie using it with a high degree of success.

5.3.3 Rejecting Commiseration

In introducing herself as she did to Hana that day, Dixie put her own stigmatizeable circumstance on the table and thus potentially violated, primarily, her own negative face. Since she initiated the interaction, this was an act of agency on her part. Sometimes when she is meeting people for the first time and tells them that she is blind, they are “enfeebled” as Davis (1961) describes, and they respond inappropriately, as Dixie describes in Examples 34A and 34B.

```
Example 34A
Dixie 1 What is really funny is
2 When I tell people that I’m blind and they say
 3 “Oh that’s okay”
 4 @@
Elisa 5 Yeah
Dixie 6 Simply because they don’t know what else to say
 7 It takes them off guard
 8 And sometimes if I’m feeling really ornery I’ll say
 9 “No it’s not”
10 “I really don’t like it a lot”
 11 @@
Carol 12 @@
Dixie 13 That’s what I would say
 14 Ya know
```

This utterance in line 3, “That’s ok,” is problematic on three fronts. First, it positions the speaker as one who has the power to evaluate a characteristic or act of someone else’s, creating an asymmetrical alignment of interactional power over the hearer. Second, it suggests that the act or characteristic is inherently undesirable, otherwise it would not require “permission” or “acceptance.” It is the kind of response
used to accept an apology for a wrong another has done to the speaker. To use the phrase in response to a disability is just short of suggesting that the recipient has wronged the speaker, that the condition is something to be ashamed of and forgiven for.

And third, it suggests that the recipient of the phrase has some responsibility for the characteristic. If a person is responsible for a given circumstance, then it might be argued that the circumstance is more inherently attached to her identity. “That’s ok” frames the role of blindness here as an undesirable condition the speaker must bear, if not as an outright inherent personal flaw. In doing so the sighted speaker seems to be aligning herself against the blind person and her blindness, even if the sighted speaker does deign “to let it pass,” as evidenced by the permissive phrase, “That’s ok.”

When Dixie offers an explanation for the people, (“Simply because they don’t know what else to say, It takes them off guard,” lines 6-7, she acknowledges the discomfort sighted people feel when encountering a blind person for the first time, and their need to reach into a cache of prefabricated discourse phrases for managing unfamiliar social situations when they are confused or uneasy. Sometimes she is more acquiescent than others in her response to inappropriate formulaic replies, and never does she accept the proposition that her blindness can be framed as being her core identity as some kind of deficiency. In lines 15 and 16 of Example 34B, a direct continuation from 34A, Dixie presents another common response, one of commiseration rather than permission, I’m sorry.

Example 34B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>Or they’ll say “Oh I’m sorry”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>And I say, “No, not as sorry as I am”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>I just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>It just shows how ornery she is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>I just can’t help it &lt;hits hand against chair arm&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>It’s just in me it’s gotta come out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While commiseration is, on the surface, a move towards solidarity, aligning with the blind person against the blindness, it is still an overly grave response. Moreover, commiseration can only build solidarity when both parties believe there is misery to be shared. Misery is a powerless state. Invoking it with commiseration is tantamount to ascribing the powerless state, which sets up an asymmetrical power relation based on the premise that the speaker is in possession of some good that the hearer is not, and thus inheres a higher status. Thus, besides the unflattering characterization of blindness as “miserable,” such expressions of “sympathy” can be experienced as condescending. By not cooperating with the commiserative script, Dixie refuses to allow this condescending framing of the situation to stand and reframes it as one in which she is aligned against her blindness.

5.3.4 Making Blindness the Target of Humor

Earlier in this chapter, I observed that Dixie makes jokes about blindness at the outset of new relationships, especially using sight-related metaphors; however, she also tells stories about embarrassing blindness precipitated mishaps—events many would perhaps be too chagrinned to retell, especially when making her own behavior the target of the joke. Yet, one of the best ways to take the stigma out of a situation is to cast the circumstance in a humorous light. Dixie usually leads the way in stories like this.

Example 35 comes from the Rose triad, and shows Dixie recounting a blindness related incident for its entertainment value. We have just been talking about gardening, a favorite pastime shared by Dixie and Rose, so the conversational context in which the story arose was not focused on blindness. At this point in the conversation we are talking about what kinds of flowers cannot be planted with seeds or bulbs, but require cutting from an existing plant, but we then shift to transplantation more generally, when Dixie recounts a little blindness precipitated gardening mishap which provokes a lot of laughter from all of us. The larger narrative is about one of Anne’s high school boyfriends who
was a pastor’s son and stole some flowers from a public park and brought them to Dixie, an inherently funny context to begin with.

Example 35

Dixie  1  But yeah he
       2  Ya know umm
       3  that little park thing they had downtown
       4  they had all these little flowers and
       5  He brought me some
       6  I don’t remember what they were but
       7  I had never felt any like that.
       8  And @@@ I planted ‘em and
  ➤ 9  He says, “Ah, you planted those upside down”.
  ➤10  I says “[well we better turn those around”

Elisa  11  @@@
Rose   12  @@@
Dixie  13  @@@
       14  I did not know.

Elisa  22  So he—
Dixie  23  But USUally I can tell the difference
Elisa  24  So he caught it be—right after you planted ‘em?
Dixie ➤25  MM yeah but I think it mighta been a day.
Rose   26  @@@, @@@
Dixie  27  I don’t remember that they did real well.
       28  I don’t remember.
       29  I kinda think that they did.
       30  But I don’t remember for sure.
       31  I might tell a big lie.
  ➤32  But I did plant them upside down

Planting flowers upside down is pretty funny, even if the gardener is blind. Telling stories that jeopardize one’s own negative face could seem to undermine one’s independent identity, but Dixie tells it for its virtue as a positive face involvement strategy with us. Moreover, by choosing to talk and laugh about the experience she shows that she is not afraid that we will think less of her competence, and at the same time, demonstrates her perspective that blindness is something that happens to her, but which is alienable from her core self and her self esteem and she has the power to laugh about it.
I have demonstrated four strategies Dixie uses to reframe blindness as alienable from her core identity and to reject the treatment of her blindness as taboo. She does this by rejecting avoidance rituals such as whispering, by disclosing the blindness immediately in personal introductions, by rejecting expressions of commiseration, and by making blindness precipitated mishaps and her own resulting behavior the target of humorous stories.

5.4 Reframing Self When Framed as Helpless
   Another way Dixie avoids being put in a dependency-support script is by reframing situations when someone tries to position her as helpless, whether intentionally or not. There are a variety of strategies she uses in my data to do this, including 1) reframing help as an unnecessary luxury, 2) alluding to her history of competence and the bilateral nature of her relationships with sighted people, 3) framing a request for help as an act of agency, 4) rejecting assistive devices and suggestions about them on the basis of expert knowledge, 5) observing that she may be more competent than sighted others in alternate modes, and 6) physical demonstrations of competence that deflect attributions of helplessness. Ultimately, Dixie usually manages to ensure that the last word on her abilities in a given exchange comes out in favor of her agency and competence.

5.4.1 Reframing Help as Unnecessary
   One clever interactional strategy for resisting an image of helplessness is to reframe help as a luxury, which Dixie does in Example 36. In the context of Carol’s interview, I have directly observed that Dixie always has a sighted intermediary to help her navigate interaction with sighted outsiders in public places, thus positioning Dixie as being dependent on that resource.
Example 36

Elisa  1 And one reason I think [My mom is so successful
Dixie  2    [ Well we have a bus
Elisa  3 is one she has—
   ➤ 4 she always had sighted children or a sighted husband
Dixie  5 That’s right
Elisa  ➤ 6 that is an intermediary
Carol  7 Yeah
Dixie  ➤ 8 I'm pretty well spoiled.
Elisa  9 And if you don’t HAVE that,
      10 Or ya know when she’s sitting by herself
      11 and Leon’s not by her or something

I make the comment in lines 4, 6, and 9 (“she always had sighted children or a sighted husband . . . that is an intermediary. And if you don’t HAVE that . . .”). She takes this assertion, however, and reframes the consistent presence and intervention of sighted intermediaries in her life as an unnecessary luxury that she could really do without. To describe someone as “spoiled” is to suggest that they have more than they need, that they are being pampered, so describing herself as “spoiled” in this context denies that she requires such assistance, without denying that she does avail herself of it.

5.4.2 Rejecting the Unilaterality of Teasing

Example 37 comes after a strip of talk in which various anecdotes have presented Carol as the agent and Dixie as the patient in teasing encounters, after which Carol explains to me that a few years prior she had “formally” apologized to Dixie for teasing her so much in the past. The pattern of positioning across these anecdotes consistently framed Dixie as relatively helpless vis-à-vis Carol, and Carol’s reported apology suggests that Carol should feel a little guilty about this pattern.

Example 37

Carol  ➤ 1 None of the picking I ever did was ever harmful
Dixie  2 Oh it wasn’t mean, [it was ORNERY
      3 [But I—It was fun
      4 It was ORNERY
   ➤ 5 I like to irri—I like to pick on @ her@@
Elisa  6 XxX oughtta be or some—
Dixie  ➤ 7 It was fine—I been known to do a few things
There is considerable pragmatic polysemy in this exchange, beginning with Carol defending her behavior towards Dixie, (“None of the picking I ever did was ever harmful,” line 1). Entailed in her defensive assertion are two claims that appeal to Carol’s own negative face, 1) she was morally upright in her behavior and 2) this moral uprightness derived from the fact that she had the power to harm Dixie, and chose not to. Because she is in a conciliatory frame, such a statement calls for acceptance by the other party, which Dixie provides, (“Oh it wasn't mean, [it was ornery. [But I—It was fun. It was ornery,” lines 2-4). "Mean" of course has evil intent, and "ornery" (pronounced ar-nry), as used in this community, indicates playful camaraderie, so Dixie is declaring Carol’s behavior harmless, thus supporting Carol’s claim that she had acted in solidarity, and upholding Carol’s positive face.

At the same time, however, she adds, (“I like to irri—I like to pick on @ her@@. It was fine—I been known to do a few things,” lines 5,7), implying that this is not a unilateral relationship where only one person can pick on the other. Continuing to follow the ritual constraints of apology and acceptance, her response makes the contrary statements that 1) Dixie is also “guilty” of such behavior, but also that 2) Dixie is capable of such retaliatory behavior (even though she does not provide any concrete examples). Thus she guards Carol’s positive face and maintains her own negative face at the same time.

5.4.3 Framing a Request for Help as Agency
At two different points in the Carol interview the topic of conversation positions Dixie as “strandable” in public and on both occasions Dixie uses the same strategy to humorously, but strongly counter frame the situation as one in which she has retaliatory agency. Example 38 occurs after Carol has just explained how she helps Dixie get in the car, which Dixie follows with an anecdote about other friends who help her too much. As she finishes this complaint, Carol turns to Dixie and asks her directly if she ever fails to
be accommodative enough in mediating between Dixie and the physical world.

Example 38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dixie</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>Elisa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. NO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do I ever just leave you stranded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. No!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Well you haven’t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Besides—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. You can’t think of a time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. when Carol has stranded you somewhere</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Only on purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I probably did</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. But you see I have this</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. sweet quiet voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. @@</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. @@</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. But I would YELL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Blind abuse!”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “This woman has left me”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Somebody help!”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. @@</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. @@</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. @@</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. No you’ve not</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dixie’s reply to Carol’s question, (“Do I ever just leave you stranded?” line 2) is a vigorous denial, (“No!” line 4). The vigor in that denial, however, is a little peculiar. Carol is really asking for an assessment of her own behavior, so one might well expect that Dixie’s reply to the question would also be about Carol’s behavior. The force behind Dixie’s reply suggests that she is reacting to something else in the question, which I believe, is the attribute entailed in the question: strandability. After her forceful “no!,” she backs up with a (“Well,” line 5), which is often used to preface a dispreferred answer or to distance oneself from something that has just been said or suggested (Schiffrin 1987), and then quickly confirms, (“you haven’t—“, line 5), which is likeliest to be the answer Carol sought, thus saving Carol’s face, and I would argue, restoring the power/solidarity equilibrium between the two.
In Dixie’s next utterance, (“Besides—,” line 6), she seems to be trying to return to the objection she had begun in line 4, before she stopped to affirm Carol. However, I interrupt her in line 7 to ask her to confirm that Carol really has never stranded her, which puts Dixie in the position of assessor of Carol’s behavior again, and unbalances the equilibrium again by once more putting Carol in the more powerless position in terms of interactional moves. Being “one downed,” however, gives Carol license to vie for the power again, shifting back into the more powerful footing of humorous camaraderie with, (“Only on purpose,” line 9) which can be seen as a teasing threat and suggests that Carol has power over Dixie in a more permanent sense than mere alignments and participant roles in the current interaction.

Thus Dixie’s reply becomes more of a counter threat, though prefaced with a stroke of one-downing self deprecation, (“But you see, I have this sweet quiet voice,” lines 11-12), a response which evokes a lot of laughter from both Carol and me because no one who knows Dixie would describe her as quiet. She then animates for herself in the hypothetical story world, (“But I would YELL Blind abuse! This woman has left me Somebody help!” Lines 15-18). This interactional move is very successful as it provokes a lot of laughter, but also repositions Dixie as having a great deal of agency, not only to get out of her predicament, but also to retaliate by shaming her companion. More importantly, it ensures that the last word in this strip of talk presents Dixie’s identity as powerful and independent, not “strandable.”

In Example 39, about 30 minutes after Example 38 in Carol’s interview, this hypothetical scenario of someone stranding Dixie in public re-emerges, but this time the hypothetical perpetrator is her husband, Leon. Carol is talking about how easy it is to forget that Dixie is blind as she gives the appearance of the competence of a sighted person in most contexts. Carol then describes a situation where this is not true, a situation where Dixie is helpless.
Example 39

Carol 1 But you see the only
2 time I ever NOTICE that you’re blind
3 Is like if I would meet
4 you and Leon at a store
5 Walmart or XX like that
6 And he would walk off
7 and you stand there —
8 with the cart and you will look a little lost

Dixie 9 Well I AM a little lost

Carol 10 Look around and stuff, But—
11 But that is the only time

Elisa 12 Do you feel scared

Dixie 13 Heck no! I got a big mouth
14 Go off and leave me I’ll yell

Carol 15 But you see [other people that’s blind

Dixie 16 [wife abuse!

Carol observes that there are times when Dixie does look blind to her, though they are rare, and they usually occur in a public setting such as Wal-Mart, when Leon has left her with the cart for a moment to go get something quickly and come back. (Naturally getting through a crowded store when one party is blind is not a speedy process.) Carol directs her description of these moments directly to Dixie, (“stand there with the cart and you will look a little lost,” lines 7-8). In keeping with her stance that Dixie seems just like everybody else to her, the language Carol uses is muted, “you will look a little lost.” By using “look,” she allows for the possibility that the appearance is deceiving and she really is not “lost,” and she further minimizes the description with “a little.” One might even describe a sighted person as looking “a little lost” without too much risk to their negative face. And yet it forces us all to focus, just for a second, on the real, sobering vulnerability of such a moment for Dixie.

But lest we linger in such deep waters, Dixie swiftly converts Carol’s assessment of the situation into humor by echoing Carol’s words, but with a slight modification, (“Well, I AM a little lost,” line 9), not denying the helplessness of blindness on the surface, but showing her preference for straight talk when others reach for euphemism.
Perhaps this rare moment of transparency about helplessness is what prompts my highly face threatening question, (“Do you feel scared?” Line 12). This question may be the single most face threatening potential assault to her identity of independence in all of my data, positioning her as more helpless than does any other participant.

She responds to my serious query with a powerful contradiction couched in humor, (“Heck no! I got a big mouth. Go off and leave me I'll yell [wife abuse!” Lines 13-16). First of all, the humor mode alone is a powerful strategy for deflecting attributions of vulnerability without jeopardizing too much of the face equilibrium in the group. The proposition in the humor is even more powerful. The course of action Dixie proposes in both Examples 14 and 15 is completely within her power to take in a public place, and would most certainly work because other people would come to her aid. Her appeal would be to the better moral nature of those around her, shaming Carol or Leon and appealing to other good citizens to help her. In essence, the bold act of agency she threatens to take really amounts to simply asking someone else for help. The way Dixie paints this scenario, however, gives the strong impression that she would be the triumphant agent. She has managed to reframe the hypothetical situation in which she would be completely at the mercy of strangers, as one in which, by taking the relatively powerful action of yelling in public, she has become the agent, not the helpless patient of other people’s agency.

5.4.4 Rejecting Sign Equipment With a Subtle Hint of Retaliation

In Example 40, also from the Carol triad, Dixie has been talking about some of the things she can do better than sighted people, such as getting the key into the keyhole to unlock the door at night. In this light, where her competence has been the theme, she points out that some supposed blindness aids actually hinder more than they help. In the past, some have suggested that she wear dark glasses as an item of sign equipment (Goffman 1963) because it would mark her as blind and possibly facilitate
interaction with uninitiated sighted people who will not otherwise know that
accommodation is called for. She dismisses this advice by explaining that when she had
some residual vision, even though miniscule, she could still derive some orientation from
it, but that dark glasses would actually sabotage that last vestige of sight she still had.

Example 40

Dixie 1 I don’t wear dark gl—
2 Dark glasses because I have a little bit of sight
3 and it just throws me totally off because
4 the glasses
5 I mean the
6 little bit of sight that I can see
7 with the light
8 helps me to have an idea as to where I’m at
9 and how to get around
10 and if I have those dark glasses and different ones
11 <high whiney voice> “Why don’t you wear dark glasses?”
12 “Then they’ll know you’re blind”
13 Well yeah
14 and they’ll know too when I fall all over myself
15 or kick somebody
16 or knock somebody out

In her constructed dialogue for those making the suggestion, she presents their
well meaning explanation in a mocking tone, (“Then they’ll know you’re blind,” line 12).
She then repeats part of the utterance she has attributed to them (“they’ll know too. . .,”
line 14). The repetition not only provides cohesion in her narrative, but the parallelism
facilitates her sarcastic but humorous refutation by way of two hypothetical counter
“predictions” of her own, some of which sound a lot like threats, an even more powerful
stance. (“Well, yeah, they’ll know too when I fall all over myself, or kick somebody, or
knock somebody out,” lines 13-16). By taking a mocking stance towards this
accommodative suggestion, on the basis of expert knowledge she possesses and her
well meaning “advisors” do not; dark glasses, she warns, can be dangerous.
Marking oneself with such sign equipment, moreover, is tantamount to announcing one’s helplessness, which Dixie is highly invested in denying. In her rejection of this suggestion she underlines her own agency on two levels: first, by demonstrating she is more competent than her advisors in the metadiscursive realm of advice and accommodation, and second, by claiming the competence of having some residual vision, in the hypothetical world where she would have taken their advice, which the dark glasses would sabotage. On this level she also suggests some agency over the sighted people around her by making humorous predictions about what might befall not only herself, but also the sighted people around her if she were to have worn dark glasses back when she had a little bit of light perception left.

5.4.5 Substituting Olfactory Competence for Visual Competence

In Example 41, when the topic of conversation in Carol’s interview shifts to how Dixie maintains awareness of who is around her in a public setting, she is again positioned as being helpless. She takes the opportunity, however, to name a competence she does have in an alternate channel—she can identify at least one friend by her perfume.

Example 41

Dixie

1 And ya know Martha Swan can’t sneak up on me
2 Cause she is one of the few people I know
3 that wears Ginji, from Mary Kay
4 Ohh
5 And I always smell her
6 She doesn’t always wear it but I know who she is

Gingi is made by Mary Kay and Dixie recognizes it from having been a Mary Kay consultant for 15 years. Although, this single compensation strategy is miniscule in light of the greater predicament in which she so often finds herself in public of not knowing who is around her, it does counter an attribution of dependency with an example of
some competence on her behalf. In short, she gets the last word and the last word positions her as agent, proportionate or not.

5.4.6 Rejecting the Unilaterality of Teasing

Another channel Dixie avails herself of in taking a stance of competence and even the ability to challenge another is the haptic/kinesic (haptic for touch and kinesic for movement). In the following example, we have been talking about the politeness norms for the use of touch in the U.S., which is far more restricted than in many cultures, and how that restriction conflicts with the need to use touch as an alternate channel and mode with blind people. The charge that Dixie’s family is “not real touchy” is repeated about five times.

### Example 42

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>And my family is NOT a touchy family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I don’t know if you’ve observed that or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>But we don’t—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>[We’re not real touchy]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>[We’re just not real touchy]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>We’re not REAL touchy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I touch her all the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>She can’t do anything about it <em>&lt;grabbing Dixie’s shoulder&gt;</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Touch touch touch <em>&lt;pinching Sharon’s upper arm&gt;</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Carol says in the same teasing manner that much of her interview takes, (“I touch her all the time, she can’t do anything about it,” lines 7-8), physically demonstrating her claim by grabbing Dixie’s shoulder as she says so. Anyone might make this teasing reply to a friend, but here it is pragmatically ambiguous as it may refer to Dixie’s inability to resist being touched because she cannot see touch coming, framing her as literally helpless. Two aspects of the physical context of this exchange facilitate Dixie’s response. Because Dixie and Carol are sitting in chairs side by side, their relative positions are fixed, and because Carol has just touched Dixie on the shoulder, Dixie has a clear idea of Carol’s location and position relative to her own, which she would not have if she were
standing with a number of participants who might be moving around. In that context, if she had not managed to touch Carol where she intended to, her counterdemonstration would have been completely undermined.

Having access to this information through the alternate channels of touch and sound, (she has felt the chair, she hears Carol’s voice, and Carol has just touched her), Dixie is able to contradict Carol’s claim and take a retaliatory stance of her own by successfully reaching over and actually pinching Carol’s arm several times (a little more aggressive than Carol grabbing her shoulder). She syncopates each pinch with the word “touch” (“Touch touch touch, line 9), which might as well have been touché, touché, touché, as she has successfully disproven Carol’s claim of unilaterality in touch and teasing. Pinching is a fairly aggressive display of haptic/kinesic competence, very much in line with the tone of schoolchildren at play which reverberates throughout the interview Carol, and might be said to trump the more affectionate touch of Carol’s that had preceded it. Thus Dixie has successfully deflected Carol’s attribution of helplessness, reframing herself again as competent, agentive and capable of retaliation.

In this section I have shown several strategies Dixie uses to claim power and reject a dependency-support script, all of which involve the reframing of situations and thus of her role within them, whenever someone tries to position her as helpless, whether intentionally or not. She claims that help is not necessary, alludes to past demonstrations of competence, offers competence she does possess when confronted by that which she does not, frames a request for help as an act of agency, rejects blindness related advice on the basis of her expert knowledge, puts on record things she can do better than sighted people, and by actually demonstrating physically that a charge of helplessness about being touched by others is false. Ultimately, Dixie usually manages to ensure that the last word on her abilities in a given exchange comes out in favor of her agency and competence.
5.5 Reframing Others: Would Be Helpers as Incompetent
5.5.1 Rejecting Help From a Relative Stranger

Dixie objects, in Example 43, to the help of a neighbor she does not really know who came over from time to time to help her with Anne’s day care. This woman did not know how much help Dixie needed or how to convey it as Dixie wanted it conveyed, nor did she share Dixie’s expectations for proxemics.

Example 43

Dixie
1 Oh what she does
2 Is she gets right up in my face
3 And I don’t LIKE it
4 And I don’t want her in my face
5 And she would say— I’ve ellipted several restarts
6 “Dixie I put this glass a certain certain place”
7 Well somebody else can say that to me
8 And I’d probably say okay
9 But she did it continually
10 “Okay just put the glass on the drain board
11 I will find it when I get ready to do the dishes okay?
12 If I break it, I break it and I’ll just maybe replace it”
13 Unless xxx me to worry about it
14 And I’ll say “fine”
15 Probably brought the stupid glass over to begin with
16 So then what else did she do
17 She’d follow me around
18 And she’d get really close to me
19 Like I said
20 She wasn’t my friend
21 She didn’t—
22 Wasn’t Carol Murph
23 That I’d known forever
24 She was the lady cross the street
25 That was supposed to be helping me
26 And she wasn’t helping me
27 She was making me nuts!

Dixie first complains that her personal space was being violated, (“And I don’t want her in my face,” line 1). She then constructs dialogue for the woman, in line 7, which she delivers in a high pitched voice that suggests mocking, (“Dixie, I put this glass a certain, certain place”) by way of complaining that she was being given unnecessary, or unnecessarily detailed, information. In 11-12, she constructs dialogue for herself responding to the woman’s purported utterance as she has constructed it in line 7,
(“Okay just put the glass on the drain board. I will find it when I get ready to do the dishes okay?” Lines 11-12). These lines are delivered in an exasperated voice with pointed syncopation.

Dixie objects to both the quantity (how much detail) and quality (what items she really wants to know the location of and how the information is conveyed) of help of this relative stranger, as well as the manner in which the help is offered (direct, explicit information). So she shows that she views the would be helper as imposing on her both physically and verbally. Because she inaccurately underasses Dixie’s abilities and calibrates her accommodation on that misjudgment, she becomes more of an impediment than an aide. By presenting the woman this way, Dixie highlights her own competence and reframes the helper as the incompetent party.

5.5.2 Rejecting the Help of Close Friends

Example 44 comes from the same conversation with Carol and illustrates Dixie’s frustration with close friends who have known her for years and who should know, she maintains, what she can and cannot do, and what she does and does not need help with, but who still try to help her with simple things she is perfectly capable of doing herself. I have just asked Carol about helping Dixie get in the car, and after she answers, Dixie confirms Carol’s answer and then adds that some people do a lot of simple things for her. Naturally, the simpler the task performed on her behalf, the more incompetent she may appear. She gives the example of one friend who always insists on putting her seatbelt on her when she gets in the car.

Example 44

Carol  6  I just take her arm and we just get near the door
      7  And I open it and she just gets right in
      8  Not a problem

Dixie  9  I can open the door
      10  I can put my own seatbelt on
      11  It’s kind of funny too because some people
      12  Most people should know that—
      13  That I’m with
      14  That I can because I’m usually
have them walk off
But I do have some friends
that keep trying to put the seatbelt ON me
And I’m going
“I can do this you know”
and if I can’t do it
I’ll tell ya
But um ... Blind people can do that.

After declaring that she can put her own seatbelt on she complains about people who fail to realize that. She then starts a segue that she does not fully explain. She often comments (with a little pride I think) that a lot of her friends forget that she is blind (because she does not “act” blind) and walk off and leave her before realizing what they have done. She is saying this a little disfluently in lines 12-15, “most people should know that ... because I’m—usually have them walk off.” Her logic is “if I am independent enough for you to forget that I’m blind, then do you not think I can take care of simple little things like my seatbelt?” She puts her inward protestations about this situation in constructed dialogue, (“And I’m going, ‘I can do this you know. And if I can’t do it, I’ll tell ya,’” lines 18-21). She would like to be presumed competent unless and until proven otherwise. In the case of the seatbelt, eventually the seatbelt gets fastened and stays fastened and the only danger is the overexuberant helper getting smacked by Dixie for being condescending.

However, in some cases the person who thinks she is helping Dixie is not only irritating her by being too helpful, but is actually doing more harm than good, as Example 45 illustrates. When the topic of accommodation is raised in the interview with Rose, Dixie provides another example of this happening with another friend, this time in regard to locking the car door.

**Example 45**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>1 Have I ever smothered you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>2 No, you know me, I’d just kinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>3 She’d probably tell me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 if she felt like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 I was going to smother her.

Dixie 6 No, Rose has not done this,
< further discussion on seatbelts omitted>

26 but she was forever—

27 and locking my door.

28 And so she would lock the door

29 and I would think that I was locking it

30 well, I was unlocking it because

31 I didn’t realize that she had locked it

32 I mean because it was one of those

33 little things on the side that, you know

34 Yeah, Yeah.

35 one way locks it and one way unlocks it.

36 And so I would think

37 that I had to lock the door,

38 and she had already locked it

39 so I had unlocked it

40 and there we were,

41 going down the street.

Rose understands Dixie well enough to know that if she needs something or is not happy about something, Dixie will tell her, as she says, “She’d probably tell me,” line 3. Thinking about how Rose does not smother her apparently brings to mind a friend who does, and thus she describes the door locking/unlocking debacle. In this case, the source of Dixie’s indignation is not just the feeling of being patronized, but the reality that her safety is also being compromised. As she explains, not only are they not helping her, but by locking the door for her without her knowledge, they set her up to unlock the door, making her less safe. They are literally doing more harm than good and thereby showing themselves to be incompetent helpers because they have not determined what she actually needs and have put her at greater risk instead of making her safe.

5.5.3 Rejecting the Help of a Daughter

In the final example of Dixie reacting to unwanted help it is from me, her first born, the one person who was socialized by Dixie herself in helping behaviors virtually from birth, the one person, if anyone, who should have a “native competence” in helping her.
Of course this is greatly mitigated by the fact that she has gone completely blind since I lived at home and her youngest daughter, Anne, has now been her second most frequently relied upon helper, after Leon, Dixie’s husband. I have probably become far less attuned to what kind of help she needs and when she wants it. Moreover,

When I visit my mother, I notice with some degree of sadness how much more difficult daily living skills have become since she has become completely blind. The week of Rose’s interview I watched Dixie dutifully carry an aluminum can or some other recyclable item from the kitchen, through the dining room and into the spare room where she puts it in a recycling bag. There were many obstacles from point A to point B, including two different sets of tables and chairs and anything that someone (like me) might have left lying around, forgetting that she might trip over it. This process took several minutes one way. This observation is what occasioned example 46A. I thought I could simplify the recycling process with a bin divided into sections in the kitchen.

There were, however, two critical contextual factors the evening of this interview. Dixie’s father-in-law, who was in his 80’s and in poor health, had just been rushed back to the emergency room right before we started taping, which is likely to have caused a considerable increase in the degree of helplessness Dixie was experiencing throughout the evening. The result, unfortunately, was a classic case of complementary schismogenesis, where I am trying to make her life easier and she hears it as criticism, as an implicit charge of inadequacy.

**Example 46A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>Dixie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You know what, I was thinking, ah,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I don’t know whose house I was at,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>but somebody’s house I was at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>in the last in the last two weeks of travels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>has a-- <strong>trash receptacle that’s three</strong>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>oh Anne does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is it Anne?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>And it has three compartments?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dixie begins by cutting me off, (“Oh Anne does,” line 6), thinking she knows what item I mean, but she is thinking of a street trash container for the sanitation workers to recognize as recyclable. She continues, (“Yeah and she pays seven:: dollars . . .,” line 7), implying that she cannot afford the cost of having recyclables picked up by the city, which suggests that she believes me to be urging her to do more than she does, which would constitute criticism of what she does already (or does not do). It takes another 20 lines of circumlocution for us to negotiate until we are all thinking of the same apparatus, and she still seems to believe that I am suggesting that she do more than she does, calling some aspect of her competence into question. In fact, in line 45, I do say, “we could do more——,” but what I was trying to say was the time and energy spent carrying the trash to the other room might be better spent by simply sorting the trash in the receptacles in the kitchen. However, I do not manage to make that distinction and she definitely hears criticism in my words and responds with irritation in Example 46B.
Example 46 B

Dixie 49 I am doing quite well at this point in time to
→ 50 GET. IT . IN. the plastic bag <Raises eyebrows emphatically on “get it in”>

Elisa 51 I just thought it would be EA::SIER
52 Not—Not more work, but less work
53 You wouldn’t have to like
→ 54 Go to the other room
55 Would all be right there

Dixie 56 I so [hate to go to the other room. <looking at Rose>
Elisa 57 [You don’t need my help] < Rose cracks a smile in the middle of this>
58 <Dixie covers her mouth as she laughs, Rose & Elisa join her>

Dixie 61 I can hardly[ BEAR] to go [to the other room]

Elisa 62 [Ok fine]

Rose 63 <shakes head, claps hands>[to the other room] <laughs, gazes at Dixie>

Elisa 64 I never liked you and I STILL don’t

Dixie 65 <Dixie laughing, Rose laughs for several seconds>
66 That’s ok, @@
67 You’ll like me when you get rich off my blindness.
   <Barely containing laughter as she says this>

Elisa 68 @@@@@@@@@@<Raucous laughter from me, laughter from
Rose 69 laughter from Rose as she wipes tears from her eyes>

Dixie 70 You’ll like me then42. @@

Elisa 71 All my royalties will go to your house and your big garden.

Dixie 72 And my recycling bin, <pauses before recycling for emphasis>
73 So I don’t have to go to the other room.

Rose 74 <Rose doubles over then throws her head back in laughter>

Elisa 75 How did I get stuck in this family?
76 That’s [all I want to know

Rose 77 [You’re Blessed, you’re blessed, you’re blessed!

She reacts with, (“I am doing quite well at this point in time to get it . in. the plastic bag,” lines 49-50). She is very irritated at this point with clenched jaw, lowered voice, and hyper syncopated words towards the end of the sentence. I then try to repair and clarify that I want to make things easier, not more difficult, by explaining, (“I just thought it would be EA::SIER. Not—Not more work, but less work. You wouldn’t have to like—go to the other room. Would all be right there,” lines 51-55). At this point Dixie responds to the tension and switches to the humor frame, turning her face towards Rose and saying sarcastically, (“I so [hate to go to the other room,” line 56). She then begins to laugh, and as Rose and I join her, she says it again, intensifying the mocking stance towards the suggestion that taking a piece of trash to the other side of the house is an

42 Because everybody gets rich writing a dissertation. ☺
inconvenience and escalating from “so hate” to “can hardly bear.” (“I can hardly [BEAR] to go [to the other room],” line 61). She is looking at Rose as she slowly delivers this line, and Rose joins in the chorus in perfect synchronous overlap on the last phrase (“[to the other room],” line 63).

Thus she has recruited Rose to her team, aligning against me for making a ridiculous suggestion. In fact, I think Rose and I both know that I have wandered into a mine field full of defense strategies Dixie uses to deflect attributions of helplessness (real or felt). The fact is that it is a considerable inconvenience for her to have to expend that much effort for a single piece of trash, but pointing it out comes too close to a painful truth, putting on record that she has come to this degree of helplessness and hassle. Using mocking humor to deflect the reasonableness of my concern reframes Dixie as the competent, practical expert (backed by Rose), and me as the incompetent would-be helper.

Estimating what kind of help another person might welcome is never easy, regardless of their ability status. Nor is it easy to estimate what offers of help might be viewed by the potential recipient as an insinuation that they are not competent enough to perform alone whatever the task at hand might be. With any disability there is likely to be an explosive history of unwarranted attributions of helplessness piled onto those that are actually valid, and so the process of negotiating collaboration in a given task calls for far more sensitivity and skill than that between people of more symmetrical ability statuses. One way that Dixie counter constructs herself as competent in the face of helplessness, both real and attributed, is to either demonstrate or discursively delineate her own competence and point out the incompetence of her would-be helpers, as Examples 43-46 demonstrate.
5.6 Conclusion

Dixie draws on a large cache of resources at her disposal to thwart the dependency-support script that so often emerges as dominant in interaction between disabled and abled people. In the first section, 5.3, I built on the idea of the dependency-support script identified by Baltes and Wahl (1987), further built upon by Hamilton (1996), in which healthy others, often in institutional settings, however unwittingly, collaborate in constructing even more powerless identities for the people with illness or disabilities with whom they work and interact, by ratifying only those discursive acts which support that script. Thus they systematically disempower the patient by erasing all identities outside that of “patient” or “disabled person.” When Dixie gets positioned as a helpless blind person, she rejects attributions of helplessness by drawing on a considerable cache of multimodal discourse strategies she has developed over the years. Here I focus on her use of affective and epistemological stances in reframing herself, her blindness, offers of or attempts at help, and the helpers or would be helpers themselves, in ways that claim power and deny a dependent identity for herself.

I first showed how Dixie presents herself as powerful by employing linguistic, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic semiotics to express powerful affective and epistemological stances in order to present an independent identity at the outset. Dixie’s discourse style is also powerful because of her strategy of choosing to portray only the array of emotions and attitudes that reinforce her positive, powerful identity. She has a general demeanor of cheerfulness, not depression. She expresses anger far more often than self-pity or regret. She displays courage and confidence rather than fear or helplessness. She speaks of hope rather than despair, especially when she talks about God healing her eyes in the future. She also uses a lot of humor, which helps bolster the optimistic, cheerful key that she chooses to convey, obviously more powerful than dismay. Humor is powerful not only for its affective value, but also because it poses a
kind of test for the hearers, putting them in a temporary ‘student’ frame, as they first have to identify the utterance as humor, and then to understand the punchline or rationale behind it. Humor is also an excellent source of involvement and solidarity, as it is an invitation to enter the “play frame.” It thus serves both positive and negative face goals in interaction. All of those affective stances she choose to display contribute to her powerful identity.

Dixie uses an array of powerful paralinguistic semiotics as well, spread across and integrated with all of her extralinguistic and linguistic strategies. She uses volume and pitch to get people’s attention, talking louder and sometimes more shrilly than other participants. She uses intonation and stress to express strong opinions and stances. She sharply syncopates words or uses a sing-songy intonation to further draw attention to her utterances. In sum, Dixie uses gaze, facial expression, ignoring the visible affect of others, a selective display of powerful emotions, and a pattern of using paralinguistic semiotics to take powerful, uncompromising stances to pre-emptively present a powerful independent identity for herself.

In 5.4 I presented another strategy Dixie uses for rejecting attributions of powerlessness, that of reframing blindness in a way that alienates it from her core identity and rejects the degree of stigma that others are inclined to attribute to it. In this data Dixie uses primarily negative face strategies to demonstrate this view of blindness. She identifies two negative discourse strategies in sighted people that she does not approve of, and two positive strategies of her own which she uses to treat the subject of blindness head on. 1) She negatively sanctions avoidance rituals such as whispering about blindness in her presence. Avoidance rituals suggest that the topic people are so reluctant to put on record really is stigmatic. 2) She rejects expressions of sympathy, which frame blindness as an “affliction” and thus put the “afflicted” in a one down position. 3) She expresses her preference for straight talk, announcing her blindness
very directly when making a new acquaintance with whom she is likely to interact again in the future, putting it on record immediately. 4) She also tells jokes and humorous stories to make blindness the target of humor, one critical effect of which is the treatment of blindness as alienable to her core identity. 5) One last strategy she uses to separate blindness from herself is her continual expression of the conviction that it is a temporary condition because God is going to heal her. This means that she identifies essentially as a sighted person who temporarily cannot see, and by doing so, she is also aligning herself with her sighted companions. Thus she alienates blindness instead of allowing it to alienate her.

In 5.5 Dixie also rejects the dependency frame and instead counter frames herself in a way that highlights her own agency and competence. The discourse strategies she uses to achieve this counterpositioning include 1) reframing help as a luxury and not a necessity, 2) rejecting the attributed unilaterality of teasing—asserting and demonstrating her ability to retaliate, 3) reframing a request for help as agency, 4) rejecting advice about suggested sign equipment like dark glasses (and doing so with a hint of threatened retaliation), and 5) substituting competence in alternate modes (such as the olfactory) for visual competence, and mentioning that competence to draw attention to what she can do and way from that which she cannot.

Finally, in section 5.6, I showed how Dixie rejects the dependency support script and the helplessness frame, and turning the tables, reframes her would be helpers as incompetent in their helping behaviors, and perhaps even, in need of help themselves. Dixie complains about the following areas of incompetence of those who try to help her: 1) They invade her physical, personal space. 2) They give too much information. 3) Her long time friends do not always estimate the right amount of help needed and desired, even though they have had more than adequate time to learn this. 4) They seem to be unaware of what she can do for herself, which again, she feels that years of association
should have made them aware of. 5) They provide “help” that is counterproductive, such as locking the door so that when Dixie then locks it herself she is actually unlocking it and thus making herself less safe. 6) And finally, they do not ask or wait for her to tell them when she wants help or what kind of help she wants. Each one of these criticisms effectively reframes Dixie herself as competent, and the would-be helpers as incompetent. 7) Finally, an offer of help or accommodation begins with a preliminary assessment of whether an inconvenience is a hardship or not. Every act of help is polysemous and can be interpreted as an indirect criticism of the competence of the helpee.

As an offer of help inherently implies some degree of incapacity or incompetence on the part of the purported helpee, Dixie resists being the helpee in this dependency-support frame and actually reframes each situation I have described such that she is the competent participant, and the would-be helpers are actually the incompetent ones. Essentially, turning the dependency-support script on its head, Dixie frequently refuses to ratify the helpless self that others construct for her and instead counterconstructs the independent self she now enjoys, while at the same time positioning her sighted associates as less powerful.

In sum, I have shown that Dixie uses visual modes such as gaze and facial expression as means of demonstrating interactional power. And she uses linguistic strategies to reframe her blindness, herself, and those who help her, in ways that ensure that the last word standing will be hers, and it will be one that stands up for her independence, bringing her competence and agency to the fore and leaving undesirable attributions behind.
Chapter 6 Conclusion
6.0 Introduction

In this study, the blind participant, Dixie, uses language to take considerable agency and control over the management of both her identity and her relationships with others. She manages, in Tannen’s (1984) terms, both the independence/power dimension of interaction, as well the involvement/connection dimensions. She does this both by conducting her own discourse according to her interactional goals from the outset, as well as by actively rejecting the unwanted framing and positioning of herself by others in their discourse to her and about her. She positions herself as she wishes to be seen, and she counterpositions herself when others threaten either the independent identity she claims or other aspects of her relationships. Critically, she is not content to be the passive recipient of the interactional benevolence of others.

In the early biomedical approach to disability, the focus of research and social responsibility was on changing the individual so that she better conformed to the norms and expectations of the abled majority. A blind person, then, had to find her own way to fit into a sighted world, changing herself in order to accommodate society. On the other hand, according to social constructivists, differences such as physical, perceptual and cognitive impairments are transformed into “disability” through discourse by societies and their cultures, thus the limitations and means of surmounting such conditions are the responsibility of the “abled.” In this way, as Deshen (1992:1,2) describes, sightlessness is transformed into blindness, which typically results in severe marginalization and limited social capacity in contemporary society. According to this model, the onus of accommodation is on the group, rather than the individual; society must change to suit the needs of its disabled members.

In reality, both entities, individuals and society, are distinguished from the rest of the natural world by the possession of human agency, and where two or more entities possess agency, there exists the potential for a multilateral dynamic of change. This is
interaction. It is the bilateral negotiation of identity and relationship between both/all sides, abled, disabled, and everything in between, and by both communities and individuals. Interactional sociolinguistics not only recognizes this reflexive interplay between the individual and society, and the degree to which identity and relationship are themselves mutually constitutive, but also the collaborative, emergent nature of these social dynamics as they are negotiated by individual members of various subgroups within society (such as blind people and sighted people). In this way, macrosocial realities are seen as the cumulative result of millions of microinteractions among individuals. If, therefore, we can identify the discrete components of microinteraction that either enhance or diminish desirable outcomes and the specific social consequences that result, we can uncover the most important tools of social change.

In this chapter I first present, in section 6.1, a summary of the theoretical approach and basic information about blindness. In 6.2, I review the findings of my analysis. In 6.3, I discuss the implications of those findings for linguistics, sociolinguistics, and society/disability studies. Subsequently, in 6.4, I identify directions for further research. Finally, in 6.5, I conclude the dissertation.

Blindness and visual impairment have far reaching ramifications both for the identity of the individual and the nature of her relationships with sighted people, achieved through interaction. Face to face interaction between sighted interlocutors is largely and unconsciously governed by gaze, and when that mode is compromised, either alternate forms will be used to achieve the functions that gaze normally does, or some aspects of that communication will not be successful. There are also numerous complications due to the physical limitations precipitated by visual impairment, which also impinge on blind/sighted interaction. The greatest problem for the visually impaired participant is establishing relationships that are symmetrical in both power and solidarity because blindness is often viewed as the antithesis of independence and a source of alienation,
and thus poses a significant threat to both. Blindness is a threat to solidarity and involvement because of the usual, default reliance on gaze for conducting interaction procedurally inhibits participation among sighted interlocutors. Blindness is a threat to independence and power to the degree that the person with the visual impairment is dependent on others in not being able to initiate her own conversational acts, as well as to the degree that she requires assistance in conducting everyday living skills beyond the conversation.

Ultimately, the nature of an individual’s identity and of her relationships with others are the cumulative results of individual interactions as they accrue over time, and they are collaborative in that both she and her co-participants contribute to the social construction of these entities. In general, neither blind people nor sighted people are conscious of the specific, concrete behaviors they produce which result in empowering or disempowering, involving or alienating one another. Interactional sociolinguistics provides a framework through which we can better identify those discrete discourse strategies that result in particular social consequences and thus equip people on either side of the ability divide to collaboratively construct the identities and relationships they desire.

6.1 Summary of Literature and Methodology

sighted co-workers, though the effects of blindness on interaction are not a direct focus. Everts (2004) is the first interactional sociolinguistic study of blind/sighted interaction that does focus on the interability interaction and its multimodality.

There is also a growing body of interactional sociolinguistic research into interability discourse, led by Hamilton’s (e.g., 1991, 1994a,b) case study of an Alzheimer’s patient in which she is herself the other participant under analysis. Al Zidjaly (e.g., 2005, 2006, 2007) also expands interactional sociolinguistics to both quadraplegia and mental illness in a case study in which she is one of the participants being analyzed. McNerney (2001) applies this sociolinguistic approach to, primarily, the narratives of a number of women with visible ambulatory disabilities, a community of which she is also a member. And as a precursor to the current dissertation, Everts (2004) provides the first examination of blind/sighted interaction in a case study in which she is also one of the participants under analysis.

This is the first interactional sociolinguistic dissertation focused on blind/sighted interaction itself as it emerges naturally among participants who already share relationships with one another. As, in many ways, a native participant of the community under investigation, particularly in being the oldest child of the blind informant, I am able to present a more indepth, ethnographically grounded perspective than would a researcher from the outside. This is also the first multimodal sociolinguistic study of blind/sighted interaction based on video recorded data and incorporating extralinguistic phenomena in the analysis.

6.2 Summary of Findings

The first analytic chapter focused on the procedural elements of face to face interaction and the problems that blindness poses for participation. I identified three major procedural challenges for a blind interlocutor interacting with sighted others: 1) restricted access to information about the spatial arrangement of potential participants,
including whether they are present or absent and whether they are otherwise occupied (turned away, on the phone, asleep) or available for talk; 2) restricted information about who is the intended addressee of other-initiated turn changes, particularly when she is the intended addressee and is expected to fulfill her participant role as speaker; and 3) having no access to current speaker’s gaze in order to self-initiate a turn claim.

I found, first of all, that in the multiparty data, Dixie produces far more than her equal share of talk and that she self-initiates more than she is other-selected. I did, however, identify several procedural problems which compromise a blind participant’s ability to initiate and manage openings and closings, which affects the degree to which she can control whether interaction happens at all, and when it does, how long it should endure. At points of pragmatic failure, I found that Dixie uses humor to repair failed closings and also turns potential negative face violations into a resource for solidarity (both in the story world and in the story telling world). I also found that both Dixie and her sighted co-participants use a relatively rare third person addressee strategy that includes the addressee’s name a vocative, which keeps Dixie informed of the participation structure (and the other participants when she is the speaker).

Additonally, I also identified an instance where Dixie produces what I call a “resting gaze,” not turned toward the current speaker, and thereby miscues the speaker and other participants that she is not engaged in the conversation, so they do not “hear” her when she asks a question about the topic at hand, and thus she fails to claim a turn. I also found, however, that she is capable of reformulating her approach to accommodate her sighted interlocutors and uses an array of alternate modes and modalities to get their attention and claim her turn, including a number of visual semiotics that she can produce even though she cannot receive them. In this way, Dixie accommodates her sighted co-conversants and uses their “language” (talk that is heavily
mediated by visual semiotics) to involve herself in their interaction when they have failed to accommodate her.

In Chapter Four I presented the problem of epistemological powerlessness inherent to blindness and the strategies that Dixie uses to counterconstruct herself as one who is in fact, very much, if not fully, “in the know.” I first illustrated the powerful metaphor of blindness and ignorance/sight and knowledge in English, pointing out the inevitable reflexive relationship between this association and the way sighted people perceive people with visual impairments (and often how they perceive themselves)—with assumptions and attributions of ignorance. However, as Ochs (1992) identified, epistemological stances are a resource for claiming power in interaction and therefore can be used to counterposition oneself when framed as unknowing. Furthermore, Hamilton (1996) and Dillon (1992) identified the detrimental dynamic of insider/outsider status that comes into play when some participants share or possess knowledge that other participants do not. While in Hamilton’s data the outsider status was achieved through a lack of access to temporarily distal text, in my data I found outsider status is achieved through what I am calling modally distal text—when sighted participants use visual texts to which blind participants do not have direct access, but which can be overcome when the blind participant has a knowledge of the visual world.

The data further demonstrate, however, that displays of knowledge as epistemological stances are an effective antidote for attributions of epistemological powerlessness, and Dixie uses this resource to counterconstruct herself as epistemologically powerful, in spite of her blindness. Although she uses many different kinds of knowledge in the data to this effect, I focused on her visual knowledge as a particularly distinct counter strategy. She draws on two wells of visual knowledge available to her: 1) her own memory of the experience of the visual world, and 2) the information about the visual topic which she can access either directly from the
environment through nonvisual channels, or more indirectly from the sighted participants as they translate visual texts into verbal texts, (whether they are intentionally doing so for her benefit or not).

Dixie’s demonstration of her visual knowledge achieves two interactional goals simultaneously: 1) serving her own negative face needs by showing epistemological power, and 2) serving both her own positive face needs and those of her co-participants by creating involvement and solidarity based on shared knowledge, and her own positive face needs by resisting being framed as an outsider. The three main strategies that she uses to demonstrate her knowledge of and interest in the visual world are 1) requesting visual information via verbal translations of visual texts (essentially descriptions), 2) providing visual descriptions via verbal translations of visual texts, and 3) evaluating visual texts (via verbal translation).

Moreover, she not only uses visual knowledge as a bridge between herself and others, but also as a bridge between other sighted participants. In this way, she not only demonstrates her own awareness of her surroundings, but uses her knowledge to draw another participant into interaction, thus building not only herself, but others into the community (another display of interactional power). Thus Dixie uses her knowledge of the visual world to strike an epistemological stance that serves as a powerful resource for resisting attributions of ignorance and being positioned as an outsider.

In the final analytical chapter, Chapter Five, I focused on the problem of rejecting attributions of helplessness, and constructing an independent identity instead, even when one actually does have to be more dependent on others due to real limitations precipitated by disability. I first showed how Dixie uses a number of preemptive or proactive interactional strategies at the outset to construct her image of independence without reference to anything being attributed to her by sighted others. She displays affective stances such as interpersonal awareness, interest in the other, and evaluation...
of participants and their propositions through such visual means as the portrayal of mutual gaze and evaluative facial expressions, (including the very risky display of eye rolling). Moreover, her lack of access to other participants’ visual displays of affect sets up an asymmetrical situation that ironically turns in her favor; as she can make her own affective stances known, and having no access to others’, is at liberty to essentially ignore them.

Out of the array of personal attitudes and emotions Dixie might display about her own circumstances, she selects those that are powerful over those that are more helpless. She shows anger rather than sadness, cheerfulness and hope over gloom or depression, courage and self confidence over fear and helplessness, and humor over dismay. Moreover, Dixie views her blindness as a temporary condition that she will be released from soon, and this perspective fuels the other more agentive stances she takes. These strategies accrue to an identity of interactional power.

I further showed how Dixie uses a number of linguistic means to alienate blindness from her own core identity and to reject the intensity of taboo that sighted others are inclined to attribute to it. She rejects avoidance rituals such as whispering, denies taboo by addressing blindness directly in interaction, both through direct metadiscourse, as well as through narratives in which an offending sighted other is made to look ridiculous. She makes it clear that blindness is something to be disliked, but not something to be ashamed of, and thus does not generally accept expressions of “permission” or commiseration.

Dixie sets the standard for treatment of blindness at the outset of relationships that are likely to continue by putting blindness on record immediately in her introduction. She also freely makes blindness the target of humor, which further alienates it from her core identity and deflates its potential for taboo and social awkwardness. Through these strategies she reframes blindness as something that she has to work around, but not
something to be ashamed of, not a characteristic that “spoils her identity.” In fact, she turns blindness around and uses it as a resource for demonstrating her own personal strength and resourcefulness.

I also showed how, when framed or positioned as helpless, Dixie deftly reframes her situation and counter positions herself within it in terms of her own agency and competence. She reframes the need for help as an unnecessary “luxury.” When narratives consistently make Dixie the patient rather than the agent, she protests by alluding to a history of agency on her part. When she is positioned as helpless in hypothetical scenarios in public, she adamantly denies her helplessness, ironically, by framing a cry for help as an act of agency. Even though this strategy relies on the help of other sighted people, by focusing on her own action (yelling), she positions herself in these hypothetical threats as the agent, not the patient. In a discussion about sign equipment, Dixie makes herself the expert, rejecting the indirect advice of sighted people. When positioned as helpless because of something she cannot see, she puts her competence in alternate channels, such as the olfactory, on record. When someone suggests that she cannot retaliate when touched against her will, she physically demonstrates her ability to do so.

Finally, in 5.6, Dixie resists the dependency-support script by resisting unwanted help and the attribution of some incompetence that it implies by reframing the helpers as incompetent themselves. As an offer of help implies some degree of incapacity or incompetence on the part of the helpee, Dixie resists being the helpee in this dependency-support frame and actually reframes each situation I have described such that she is the competent participant, and the would-be helpers are actually the incompetent ones. In so doing, she shows that she has not only the power to define her own identity, but to define those of others as well. In the end, she not only establishes herself as equally powerful and in symmetrical relationships with her sighted associates,
but even claims power over them, positioning them in some respects as subordinate to herself and emerging as a leader among her friends and family.

6.3 Implications and Applications

In regard to linguistics, this study further explores the integration of paralinguistic and extralinguistic semiotics embodied in various channels and modes. Specifically, it demonstrates how “you” as a deictic pronoun requires an accompanying gaze in order to be understood, as otherwise it fails to mean. For disability studies, this study moves beyond vague characterizations of social discourse about disability and identifies an array of concrete discourse strategies that can be used by both abled and disabled interlocutors to either increase power or diminish it, and to alienate or to build solidarity. Most importantly, it demonstrates how the ambiguity and polysemy of language can be used to transform interactions and relationships when participants practice their agency and avail themselves of the many discourse strategies they have at their disposal for doing so.

The primary focus of education for blind and visually impaired individuals for the last century have been employment and literacy, and in recent years literacy has been extended to include a range of technological competence. However, while social skills are increasingly being named as program objectives, they are seldom given the same weight as literacy and employment, and this seems to be the greatest gap in the education of visually impaired people across the board. The research that does exist in this area has focused on children and adolescents who lost their sight early in life and on elderly people who have lost their sight late in life. Much more research is needed about the adult population in between and their adjustments in identity, communication style, and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, I have found no evidence of programs for teaching social skills that are based on the systematic microanalysis of successful and unsuccessful outcomes in
real, naturally occurring blind/sighted interaction. The discourse strategies identified in this dissertation comprise a preliminary index that can both be directly applied to such curricula and built upon and modified by the findings of future studies. First, we can use these strategies as part of a preliminary guide for assessing the student’s existing interactional ability. The assessment needs to be conducted in an interactional context that is as naturally occurring as possible. Criteria would include such items as: how many turns did the subject successfully claim, how many claims did she attempt but fail to claim? How much did she talk relative to other participants? Were her turns supportive or primary (was it her floor or someone else’s?). What strategies seem to be working best for a given individual? When do other participants perceive the visually impaired person as rude (e.g., if she has to raise her voice and overlap another speaker to claim a turn)? When positioned as powerless, does the participant have the discourse skills to counterposition herself as more powerful? Does she have the skills to initiate interaction and relationships? How does she balance the need for help with some equivalent offering to sighted others?

Second, assessment should lead to an educational program based on empirical research, on scripts taken from successful, naturally occurring discourse. Of course, an approach to enhancing the interface of blind/sighted interaction should also investigate and treat the language performance of the sighted interlocutors of blind and visually impaired participants as well. Programs for educating those who interact with blind people need to be developed such that the student understands exactly what kinds of discourse strategies are most likely to result in empowering or disempowering, connecting or condescending, helping or hindering. In this way, blind/sighted relationships can develop that are more egalitarian and satisfying to all participants.

As I observed in Chapter One, while the similarities between blindness and deafness are scarce, the similarities between blindness and autism are quite striking and
relate most to problems of taking the role of the other, as well as reading the verbal and nonverbal social messages of one’s interlocutors. There are many cognitive and emotional disabilities that result in poor social skills and, consequently, in alienation and isolation for those people. Successful and unsuccessful strategies in blind/sighted interaction can be built upon and adapted in the development of both assessment instruments and interventionist programs focused on the strengthening of interactional skills.

6.4 Directions for further research

The multidisciplinary fields of study that focus on visual impairment in particular, and disability in general, are ripe for interactional sociolinguistic analyses of naturally occurring interability discourse. Ethnographically grounded video and audio recorded data of the procedural aspects of interaction between other visually impaired individuals and their sighted co-conversants need to be taken up in order to determine what norms prevail and which are more or less successful in accomplishing the interactional goals of participants and how these vary according to a vast array of contextual variables.

Future studies should include subjects who are male, those who are congenitally blind, those whose visual impairment was sudden rather than gradual, those who were mainstreamed as well as those who were educated in schools for the blind, and those who seem to be more marginalized and alienated from sighted people as well as those who are highly connected. Studies need to be conducted that are more naturally occurring in both private and public sites such as malls, supermarkets, churches, sports events, workplaces, and family gatherings.

In terms of the procedural elements of face to face interaction, how do sighted strangers and visually impaired people engage or avoid engaging in a public setting? How often and to what extent do blind participants get marginalized in a conversation? Do they get fewer turns than sighted participants, do they claim their own terms most of
the time or do others specifically address them to accommodate their lack of access to the mode of gaze for claiming their own turns? What differences in the structural nature of their conversation exist—do visually impaired participants ask more questions than sighted participants?

I have presented some norms for addressee designation and recognition in one individual social network. How often are vocatives used in other blind/sighted communities as an addressee strategy? Are other strategies more common? Do these norms differ between blind/blind and blind/sighted dyadic or multiparty interaction? How often is touch used as a substitute for gaze? What relational fallout might we identify as the cost of using alternative strategies from those of the mainstream?

In terms of epistemology and attributions of ignorance, how often and what kinds of displays of knowledge are successfully used on the part of the participant being positioned as powerless to counterposition herself as one who knows rather than one who does not? Is there a difference in the type or number of evidentials used by the blind person or on her behalf in presenting knowledge? Do congenitally blind interlocutors inquire about or relay visual descriptions to sighted others in interaction?

6.5 Conclusion

Blindness is often viewed by sighted members of society as nearly synonymous with powerlessness. Furthermore, whether intentionally or not, society also marginalizes those who are visually impaired, reifying that powerlessness which is attributed and reinforcing that which is real. Deshen (1992) distinguishes between sightlessness and blindness, identifying the first as a physical condition, and the second as a social construction. In the same vein, it is often repeated in the visual impairment literature that more people are blinded by definition than by any other cause. As Gal (1992:160) observes (and Yerian 1993 applies to the circumstance of her subject being both female and blind), using what is, in the context of blind/sighted interaction, the deliciously ironic
metaphor of vision, “The notions of domination and resistance alert us to the idea that the strongest form of power may well be the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world. Such visions are inscribed in language and, most importantly, enacted in interaction.”

Interaction, moreover, is constrained by Bateson’s double bind, the quandary of the individual to maintain both positive and negative face needs not only for herself, but also for her co-conversants, when any attempt to “pay out” in one face requires a “withdrawal” from the other. As Lakoff & Tannen (1984) show, every discourse form is both ambiguous and polysemous in its function. While this dynamic can be a liability in interaction, as the speaker depends upon the hearer attributing the same meaning to the form that the speaker intended, it can equally be an invaluable resource for negotiating interaction and identity. The hearer can choose to interpret an utterance in the way that is most favorable for her own interactional goals regardless of speaker intention. In other words, she has the option of rejecting the frame that has been set forth and replacing it with one more to her liking, one that better suits her interactional goals. Thus, for example, a positive face offering that results in a negative face violation can still be transformed into a resource for independence, and a violation of negative face can be transformed into a resource for solidarity.

A blind man and his sighted wife, for example, board a busy public bus. A sighted passenger gets up to give the blind passenger his seat. The blind passenger, however, chooses to give the seat to his sighted wife. The sighted passenger intended the gesture as a positive face offering to the blind man (and probably as a negative face strategy for himself, presenting the public image of a helpful “good Samaritan”), but it is experienced by the blind man as a violation of his negative face, drawing attention to his disability. The blind man then transforms the gesture into one of independence by

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43 This example comes from Deshen (1992).
showing that he now has the power to give the seat to someone else and chooses to
exercise that power, which happens to highlight his own chivalry, and not his disability.

A blind woman speaks to someone who has left the room. A sighted participant
informs her that she is talking to no one. Instead of responding with embarrassment and
irritation, she chooses to laugh at the incident and invites the other participant to laugh
about it too, thus using humor to transform a self inflicted negative face violation into a
positive face strategy for interaction with another participant. She retells the story later to
another sighted associate, sharing a weakness as an offering of intimacy, but at the
same time framing blindness not as part of herself, but as something that happens to her,
and to those with whom she interacts. She alienates the condition from herself, rather
than allowing it to alienate her from others.

Herein is the beauty of the the polysemy and ambiguity of every language form—
each can be used both/either to serve negative or positive face needs. Any utterance
can be responded to in a way that turns the face in the direction the agent wants it to.
Social constructivism is an approach to difference that focuses on the fact that identity
and relationship are created and maintained through the discourse choices of a society
and can, therefore, be changed. Where there is choice, there is also accountability, and
thus social constructivist rightly appeal to the moral responsibility of society to alter its
discourse in a way that affords its individual members equal respect and equal
involvement in the community.

There are two major weaknesses to this approach as it has been applied in
research to this point, however. The first is the top/down approach that treats the
microinteractional experience of individuals as the result of macro level social discourses
without recognizing the reflexive nature of these two arenas. As interactional

44 This example comes from my data and is presented in Chapter 3.
sociolinguists have shown, public discourse is very much the cumulative effect of what goes on in the microinteractions of that society’s members.

In the case of disability, the second weakness of the social constructivist view is that focusing exclusively on the behavior of the mainstream majority in society denies the agency of the individuals within that minority. In the case of disability, the abled majority is urged to accommodate and empower the disabled individual. Ironically, its very efforts to empower the individual may be sabotaging the independence of that person by denying that she has the individual agency to determine her own destiny—to construct for herself the identities and relationships she desires. Interactional sociolinguistics ascribes agency to the individual without denying the responsibility of society, and investigates the collaborative and reflexive negotiation of social realities between individuals and between the micro and macro levels of society.

Blindness is a considerable challenge to both involvement and independence. While there are many things that Dixie cannot do, she has many friends and she not only involves herself in community, but creates community for others as well. She not only conducts herself in a way that gives her equal interactional power among her sighted associates, she actually claims more power than nearly all of them, establishing herself as a leader in her network of friends and family. She makes use of her corporeal resources—her body and alternate channels and senses, and her language behavior in all its modes and modalities, as resources that obscure her incapacities, highlight her abilities, and effectively achieve her interactional goals.

As Dixie’s successful construction of a highly independent and highly involved identity shows, blind people are not merely the passive patients of society’s accommodation, benevolent or otherwise. Blind people are agents who can define their own realities. Moreover, as individual members of society, they also have the power to use their own discourse to help construct and shape that society, constructing not only
their own identities, but also the identities of others and the relationships among them. Thus, in the realm of social reality, the successful elements of Dixie’s discourse demonstrate that blind people (like all people) have the power to alter the vision of both the sighted and the blind.
### Appendix 1: Transcription Conventions

<table>
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<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word</strong></td>
<td>Indicates portion of utterance under discussion in text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAPS</strong></td>
<td>Emphatic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Rising intonation, not necessarily indicating an interrogative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>Ellipsis of lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[</td>
<td>Beginning of overlapping utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>]</td>
<td>End of overlapping utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@</td>
<td>Pulse of laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( )</td>
<td>An indiscernible utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>An indiscernible syllable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; &gt;</td>
<td>Paralinguistic or extralinguistic behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: IRB Consent Forms  
Interability Discourse in Blind/Sighted Interaction (Form 1A)  
Georgetown University Department of Linguistics  

Participant’s Name: _____________________

Consent to Participate in Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction

I consent to participate in the Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction conducted by Elisa L. Everts by audio/video recording myself at home, by being interviewed by the principal investigator, and by allowing the principal investigator to use existing video and audiotape recordings (of family and friend gatherings) that I approve. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that, while I am audio/video recorded or being interviewed, I may turn the video or tape-recorder off at my discretion and delete anything from the audio/video recordings without explanation. I may also refuse to answer any questions I find inappropriate. I understand that the principal investigator will keep these audio/video recordings and audio/video recorded interviews because they may be valuable in their original form for future research. However, I understand that the principal investigator will follow procedures to maintain confidentiality. All materials will be accessible only to Elisa L. Everts and to researchers whom she designates who will follow the same procedures of confidentiality.

I understand that excerpts from the audio/video recordings may be used in publications by Elisa L. Everts with the stipulation that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me, the participant, for excerpts used in non-academic publications.

I consent to waive my right to anonymity in academic presentations in which very detailed descriptions of facial expressions and nonverbal behavior are essential to the study to the extent that video recordings of myself are not distorted since such distortion may compromise the integrity of the research. I understand that I have the right to require that a pseudonym be used instead of my real name. I understand that I have the right to insist on anonymity for non-academic presentations and that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me for excerpts used in non-academic presentations.

My signature below is verification that I have been informed about my participation and have received a copy of this document.

___________________________________  _________________
Participant Signature  Date
Interability Discourse in Blind/Sighted Interaction (Form 1B)
Georgetown University Department of Linguistics

Participant’s Name: ________________________

Parent or Guardian’s Name: _________________________

Consent to Participate in Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction
I consent to allow my _______________ to participate in the Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction conducted by Elisa L. Everts by allowing the principal investigator to use existing video and audiotape recordings (of family and friend gatherings) that I approve. I understand that my _______________’s participation is voluntary and that he/she may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that, while my _______________ is being audio/video recorded or interviewed, I may turn the video or tape-recorder off at my discretion and delete anything from the audio/video recordings without explanation. I may also not allow my _______________ to answer any questions I or he/she finds inappropriate. I understand that the principal investigator will keep these audio/video recordings and audio/video recorded interviews because they may be valuable in their original form for future research. However, I understand that the principal investigator will follow procedures to maintain confidentiality. All materials will be accessible only to Elisa L. Everts and to researchers whom she designates who will follow the same procedures of confidentiality.

I understand that excerpts from the audio/video recordings may be used in publications by Elisa L. Everts with the stipulation that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me, the participant’s _______________, for excerpts used in non-academic publications.

I consent to waive my ______’s right to anonymity in academic presentations in which very detailed descriptions of facial expressions and nonverbal behavior are essential to the study to the extent that video recordings of myself are not distorted since such distortion may compromise the integrity of the research. I understand that I have the right to require that a pseudonym be used instead of ______’s real name. I understand that I have the right to insist on anonymity for non-academic presentations and that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me for excerpts used in non-academic presentations.

My signature below is verification that I have been informed about my ____________’s participation in the project and have received a copy of this document.

___________________________________  ______________ ___
Signature  Date
Interability Discourse in Blind/Sighted Interaction (Form 2A)
Georgetown University Department of Linguistics

Participant’s Name: _____________________

Consent to Participate in Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction
I consent to participate in the Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction conducted by Elisa L. Everts by allowing the principal investigator to use existing video and audiotape recordings (of family and friend gatherings) that I approve. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that, while I am audio/video recorded or being interviewed, I may turn the video or tape-recorder off at my discretion and delete anything from the audio/video recordings without explanation. I may also refuse to answer any questions I find inappropriate. I understand that the principal investigator will keep these audio/video recordings and audio/video recorded interviews because they may be valuable in their original form for future research. However, I understand that the principal investigator will follow procedures to maintain confidentiality. All materials will be accessible only to Elisa L. Everts and to researchers whom she designates who will follow the same procedures of confidentiality.

I understand that excerpts from the audio/video recordings may be used in publications by Elisa L. Everts with the stipulation that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me, the participant, for excerpts used in non-academic publications.

My signature below is verification that I have been informed about my participation and have received a copy of this document.

_________________________________  ______________ ___
Participant Signature  Date
Interability Discourse in Blind/Sighted Interaction (Form 2B)
Georgetown University Department of Linguistics

Participant’s Name: _____________________

Parent or Guardian’s Name _______________________

Consent to Participate in Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction

I consent to allow my _______________ to participate in the Investigation of Blind/Sighted Interaction conducted by Elisa L. Everts by allowing the principal investigator to use existing video and audiotape recordings (of family and friend gatherings) that I approve. I understand that my _______________'s participation is voluntary and that he/she may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that, while my _______________ is being audio/video recorded or interviewed, I may turn the video or tape-recorder off at my discretion and delete anything from the audio/video recordings without explanation. I may also not allow my _______________ to answer any questions I or he/she finds inappropriate. I understand that the principal investigator will keep these audio/video recordings and audio/video recorded interviews because they may be valuable in their original form for future research. However, I understand that the principal investigator will follow procedures to maintain confidentiality. All materials will be accessible only to Elisa L. Everts and to researchers whom she designates who will follow the same procedures of confidentiality.

I understand that excerpts from the audio/video recordings may be used in publications by Elisa L. Everts with the stipulation that Elisa L. Everts will gain approval from me, the participant’s _______________, for excerpts used in non-academic publications.

My signature below is verification that I have been informed about my _______________'s participation in the project and have received a copy of this document.

___________________________________  ______________ ___
Signature                                       Date
Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Can you remember when and how you first met Dixie?
Do you remember if you knew she was blind before you met her?
Did you know any blind people before?
If so, can you tell me how your impressions of her differed from what you expected a blind person to be like?
Were you uncomfortable talking to her at first?
If so, at what point did you start feeling comfortable?

Dixie talks or communicates differently with you than sighted people?
Do you think that over the years you’ve developed any accommodative habits, do you describe things a lot more than you did?
When you go places with Dixie in the car, what kinds of things do you do differently?

Have you had any interesting incidents when walking with Dixie in public? Poles? Holes?
Do you ever go to Wal-Mart or a restaurant together, somewhere in public where others don’t know that she’s blind?
Are you ever in church with her when a stranger tries to interact with her and you need to intervene?
How has your understanding of how much help she needs changed over time? Did you used to be too helpful or not helpful enough?
Have you ever been in a situation where you’ve left the room; if so, do you inform her that you’re leaving the room or that you’ve changed your position yet?

Did you feel there were things you needed to tell her?
Do you notice yourself using your hands with Dixie?
Do you find yourself describing a lot of things to Dixie?
Do you wonder if you are giving too much or too little information?
Do you feel like you need to let people know she is blind when you are out in public?
Do you feel like you need to tell people she is blind when you are talking about her?
Do you think Dixie’s personality would be different if she could see?
Do you think your friendship/relationship would be different if she could see?
What kind of advice would you give to someone who wanted to be friends with a blind person?
Appendix 4: Harriet’s Joke

246

And, ah, did you—

Did you hear that one about the lady that came home from church.

And they were—

And she bumped into ah, this person.

That’d broke into her house.

And she said—

Now help me.

I might get it all wrong.

She said—

Act 1.

Acts 4.

Acts 4.

Anyway it was it was

Act 1.

Act 2.

Was it Ma—

M 22

Acts 2.


Darrett.

26-58 I had it and it was real cute.

26-63 And I liked—

You gave it to me.

26-68 You did?

26-73 You did.

No I didn’t.

(never heard this joke before)

26-89 @@@

Well the police officer said—

Well why did you try to get away—

Well, he said she said she had an axe and two.

26-107

Two weapons?

Two weapons?

Well two um

An axe and [it probably had] the [size of the axe]

[two eight?]

26-117 [No] Acts

26-127 [2 and then it was guns]

H= Harriet, M= Martha, A= Anne, e= Han

E= Esther, D= Dixie, e = Elisa

[No, Acts, in the Bible] M 57

Acts H 58

Acts, Acts in the—

M 59

7.25-27 Two

H 60

7.25-26 yeah, the BOOK of Acts is what—she’s—

7.28-31 I know.

7.28-34 And four, um

D 64

< Dixie puts her head back and laughs @@@

7.25-33 Something something


H 66

7.25-37 Anyway it would be like [two guns]

19-49 Give it to her Lord.

Give it to her.

26-61 I’m— won’t work—

< Laughs loudly >

D 71

21-44 It’s— speechless, fingers on temples

H 72

17-49 Diffuse laughter from everyone esp Dixie

a 73

26-46 It won’t work

H 74

26-49 [Acts 2:4] ...

75

19-51 I never try to] repeat ‘em Harriet

76

Cause I can’t remember ‘em.

XXX read the 25 59 [scriptures] N 78

[Because] he said she said she had an axe and 19-50 two.

78

26-59 Something

H 79

And he was scared because it was 26-51 like guns.

80

[Two forty-five]

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