

Language as literature: Characters in everyday spoken discourse

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Abstract. There are several linguistic phenomena that, when examined closely, give evidence that people speak through characters, much like authors of literary works do, in everyday discourse. However, most approaches in linguistics and in the philosophy of language leave little theoretical room for the appearance of characters in discourse. In particular, there is no linguistic criterion found to date, which can mark precisely what stretch of discourse within an utterance belongs to a character, and to which character. And yet, without at least tentatively marking the division of labor between the different characters in an utterance, it is absolutely impossible to arrive at an acceptable interpretation of it. As an alternative, I propose to take character use seriously, as an essential feature of discourse in general, a feature speakers and listeners actively seek out in utterances. I offer a simple typology of actions in discourse that draws on this understanding, and demonstrate its usefulness for the analysis of a conversation transcript.

Keywords: action; dialogue; literariness; meaning; polyphony.

If there is one feature that is the hallmark of literature, or rather of fiction, it is the use of *characters*. Literary works tell us about the lives, words, and actions of these fictional individuals. Moreover, we are not only told *about* what characters say and do, but actually *hear* them speak. But character use is not limited to literary works. Indeed, it is ubiquitous in all forms of discourse. There are several linguistic phenomena that, when examined closely, give evidence that people speak through characters, much like authors of literary works do, in everyday talk.

One example is mimicry. Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen (1996), examining the prosodic differences between quotation and mimicry in conversation, found that in mimicry, the quoted words are not prosodically integrated into the speaker's utterance, because the speaker tries to retain the absolute

pitch of the quoted words. Thus the person being mimicked becomes a *character* which appears in the speaker's talk.

Next, in their analysis of privative adjectives, such as “fake”, Seana Coulson and Gilles Fauconier (1999) found that understanding them requires implicitly postulating a character. To call some object “a fake gun” (their example), is, on the one hand, to claim that it is not really a gun, but on the other hand, to envision *somebody* who is fooled to believe it is.

Or consider the analysis of (sentential) negation proposed by Arie Verhagen (2005). According to Verhagen, a sentence such as “Mary is not happy” negates not merely a proposition, but an actual view attributed to a character (or to an “onstage conceptualizer”, as cognitive linguists sometimes call it). We actually entertain and consider the negated claim as something somebody thinks. To illustrate the point (Verhagen 2005: 31), in the sentence: “Mary is not happy. On the contrary, she's depressed”, the connector “on the contrary” denies not the proposition that Mary is *not* happy, but the view that she *is* happy.

It would be weird for me to say something like: “Mary is sad. On the contrary, she's depressed”, just as it would be weird if I said: “Mary is happy. On the contrary, she's depressed”. But if *someone else* says: “Mary is happy”, then it makes perfect sense for me to *reply* by saying “On the contrary, she's depressed”. Thus the negation in “Mary is not happy” denies a claim attributed to a character.

Of course, the use of characters in everyday discourse does not necessarily require sophisticated analysis to notice. It often appears right on the surface. A broad category of such linguistic phenomena was described and analyzed by Esther Pascual (2002; 2006; 2009) under the heading of “fictive interaction”. Fictive interaction happens when a speaker quotes a fictive, imagined, utterance. This happens all the time in mundane discourse, and serves a broad variety of discourse functions. For example, fictive interaction is used by speakers to refer to entities that are not immediately accessible in their environment (Sandler, forthcoming).

Thus, in Transcript 1, you see Patty and Gail using fictive interaction to refer to various emotional states: “hey, I like this place”, “I think I can belong”, “hey, there's something about this

place”, or “I don’t feel comfortable here” – these are all emotional reactions *attributed to Stephanie as a character*. Fictive Interaction here makes it possible for Patty and Gail to pinpoint the exact emotional states they have in mind, with far greater precision than our usual vocabulary of emotion labels would allow.

Transcript 1 (SBC035: 193.319–210.246)¹

GAIL: Yeah you have to go,
[you have to go <X out and visit and then X>].
PATTY: [you feel like, .. hey I] like this place
I think I could belong,
or you think,
(H) .. I don't I don't feel [comfortable here.
GAIL: [I don't feel comfortable here].
PATTY: (H)] And that's what has to be your final goal.
STEPHANIE: Oh yeah,
I know [that].
PATTY: [A place] that has what you want,
but you feel good a[bout it].
STEPHANIE: [But],
PATTY: You walk on campus and you think,
hey there's something about this [place,
MAUREEN: [<X I'll X> dump this outside],
PATTY: (H) that,
.. that] speaks to me,

To use one final example, characters also appear in ordinary discourse through impersonation and appeal to social stereotypes. Transcript 2 is of a conversation² I recorded a few years ago between my mother-in-law and me, right before the beginning of a family dinner at her house. Note how we both are using the social stereotype known around the world as “the Jewish mother” to play out this little scene. Such phrases as “the food is getting cold”, or the explicit (though humorous)

¹ All transcripts (except for Transcript 2) are taken from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois and Englebretson 2004; 2005). The transcription conventions are as used in the corpus (and described in its annotations file), with slight simplification. Lines in the transcript correspond to intonation units (Chafe 1993). Other common symbols are: “@” (laughter), “=” (prolonged syllable), “(H)”, and “(Hx)” (audible inhaling and exhaling respectively). Several dots indicate a pause, proportional in length to the number of dots. Square brackets indicate overlapping talk and angular brackets indicate voice quality (e.g. <@ ... @> for laughing while speaking). The heading includes the filename and the location of the cited segment in the audio file.

² The original conversation was conducted in Hebrew. For my present purposes, a simple English gloss of the conversation is sufficient.

references to the mother's loneliness are a staple of this stereotype, which my mother-in-law literally impersonates in this talk.

Transcript 2

R: Tell them to come cuz the food is getting cold it's cold today.
(17.2) ((R sets the table))
S: Can we help with anything?
R: No but it's time to sit down cause the food is getting cold it's cold today.
S: Oy [@@@ [if we don't eat we won't grow tall?
R: [the [the good thing's that
(0.5)
R: Exactly. the good thing's that I'm sitting alone. @@@

So, to sum up, we all regularly and prolifically use characters when we speak. But this fact raises some theoretical issues. Most approaches in linguistics and in the philosophy of language leave little theoretical room for the appearance of characters in discourse. Thus, philosophical semantics tells us that the meaning of an utterance is grounded in the literal meanings of the words and sentences that were uttered, and that various pragmatic factors, affecting our actual understanding of it, only come into play once the literal meaning has been calculated (Stanley 2000 and Bach 2005 are two typical representatives of this attitude). These pragmatic factors, presumably, would include some sort of treatment of talk attributed to characters.

But, of course, as a minimum, such an approach would require some kind of clear marking in the “text” of the utterance, telling us when each character is speaking, so that we know when to apply these pragmatic add-ons. Indeed, such marking *can* often be found in actual conversational discourse. For example, in Transcript 3 (part of the conversation segment that appears in the appendix), Fran uses the verb “say” in her story to mark what, technically, are direct quotations, and some of the quotations themselves are even prosodically marked. Of course, those are not *really* quotations, and Fran brings them not in order to report what she and Larry said – they most likely never pronounced the exact words Fran uses – but rather to explain what motivated their traveling in search of a new house, and their subsequent return to New York. But at least we see where the extra pragmatic mechanisms, whatever they are, are supposed to kick in.

Transcript 3 (SBC051: 461.297–494.152)

FRAN: But,

w=e didn't like it.
 At all.
 And so,
 → that's when we said,
 .. well let's not do anything precipitous,
 like we did moving down here,
 (H) before we race back to New York,
 ... let's look around a little bit.
 ... So we= hit the road.
 And we stayed out for a couple [years,
 SEAN: [Two years they'd been looking].
 FRAN: looking all over].
 SEAN: ... [for other places].
 ALICE: [Looking .. round],
 ... Really?
 And --
 FRAN: Unhunh?
 ... Round the US=.
 ALICE: ... Wow=.
 FRAN: .. And we,
 .. kept finding these nice places.
 → FRAN: And we'd say,
 (H) <VOX isn't this place nice VOX>?
 And,
 → ... Larry would say,
 <VOX yes,
 it's lovely.
 Look at these beautiful homes.
 Isn't that nice?
 %Yes?
 Isn't that nice?
 Isn't that nice VOX>?
 ... <VOX<P Yeah,
 but it's not New York P>VOX>.

However, this is not always the case. In Transcript 4 (which follows shortly after Transcript 3 in the same conversation and in the appendix), when Alice pleads: “let me outa New York”, “Gotta get outa this place”, she devotes her full turn of talk to this. She does not announce what she’s saying as a quote in any way (and prosodically, unless you count laughter as a quotation marker, these utterances are not marked as belonging to a character either). And yet, she does not in fact express a desire to get out of New York. Rather, these words belong to the character she herself names as “the New-York-a-holic”.

Transcript 4 (SBC051: 508.078–525.381)

ALICE: [Do they have New York AA?
 FRAN: ... to ludicrous rents],
 ALICE: .. <X You know X>,
 @@
 (H) or maybe] they've been to New Y[ork,
 BERNARD: [well,
 ALICE: @]
 BERNARD: they] do.
 ALICE: .. (H)

BERNARD: Don't they.
 They have their own ver- --
 .. They- --
 → ALICE: [@(Hx) <@ Get me outa] New York @>.
 BERNARD: [They do].
 → ALICE: <@ Got- .. [gotta get] outa this place @>.
 FRAN: [We have so-] --
 ... We- --
 .. What --
 ALICE: ... I'm a New [York-a .. holic].
 FRAN: [<X Weren't we saying X>],
 BERNARD: [No she's s-] --
 She's asking if they have,
 th=ey should have an addiction to New York.
 SEAN: Or --
 FRAN: Oh,
 New Yorkers Anonymous.

Another option could be to propose, following Paul Grice (1989), that we first try to understand utterances literally, and then, if something doesn't work out, we go back to reinterpret the utterance. To be sure, initially misunderstanding utterances, realizing you've got it wrong, and reinterpreting them is something we all do sometimes, but not all that often. Usually we understand character use straight away, without experiencing initial difficulties. Moreover, often there's no clear violation of Grice's maxims involved.³

Some of the Cognitive Linguists, who described and discussed the phenomena I listed earlier, appeal in their work to Gilles Fauconnier's Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier 1994; Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Characters use in discourse, under this construal, involves attributing a mental space to each character. Now, as a *descriptive* device this is a great step forward, and the connection to cognitive linguistic theory is important, but we are still left with the question of how to assign what part of the utterance to which mental space. Despite some valuable observations about particular words (such as "fake") and constructions (such as sentential negation), this question remains, in general, unanswered. So, in explaining the interpretation of utterances that use characters, referring

³ This can be said to be the case with R's first utterances in Transcript 2, although they can also be analyzed as providing superfluous information, from the point she utters "the food is getting cold" on. Nevertheless, such an analysis already presumes the utterance is in need of additional explication, and it is by no means clear that a violation of Grice's maxim of quantity would be apparent to a listener who does not already recognize the Jewish Mother character in R's words.

to the different characters' positions as "mental spaces" doesn't add much to simply noting that characters are used. Plus, mental spaces, *qua* theoretical abstractions, and unlike characters, don't have perspectives, goals, beliefs, motives. They don't *do* things.

So, what do I propose? Well, instead of trying to explain the phenomena of character use in discourse by reducing them to something else, my suggestion is that we should recognize character use as a *basic* feature of all discourse. To be more precise, I suggest that the use of characters is a straightforward extension of the dialogic nature of language itself. This is, essentially, a restatement of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981; 1984) notion of inner dialogicity.

The initial premise of such an approach is that action speaks louder than words, i.e., that action is inherently meaningful. I got a good reminder of this fact on my way to this conference, on the bus to Turku from the Helsinki airport. At one of the stops along the way, a lady with a child got off. The driver came out with them. He opened one of the luggage compartments of the bus. Both he and the woman looked inside. Then closed it. Then opened another compartment. Then the third. The expressions on their faces grew perplexed. Then the driver opened the first compartment again, looked at a different spot in it, and took out a bag, laughing. Now, all that time they spoke to each other in Finnish – a language I literally don't know a single word in – but I didn't need to understand any words at all. What was going on was perfectly clear.

Getting into finer detail, I would like to distinguish between three different kinds of action going on when people speak: the actions *performed*, the actions *reenacted*, and the actions *described*. Performed actions are the communicative actions that make up the interaction itself. Reenacted and described actions belong to the *plot* of utterances; described actions are actions performed by characters that we only hear *about*, while reenacted actions we *witness* performed, as it were. Described actions answer the question, "What's going on", reenacted actions also answer the question, "Who's talking", and performed actions – the question, "What are you trying to say by this". Thus, going back to Transcript 3, one of the actions Fran *performs* is that of telling a story, she

reenacts the way Larry and she reacted to various houses they saw, and she *describes* how the two of them traveled around looking for a new home.

The boundaries between the three types of action should not be viewed as very sharp. When a speaker uses negation, is the negated claim reenacted or described? When my mother-in-law asked me, in the voice of the Jewish Mother, to call all the other family members to the dinner table, was this an action she performed or reenacted, or both? There needs not be one clear answer to these questions.

Be that as it may, my claim is that *we understand character use in discourse because we actively look for it, and we actively look for it because we understand what people say in the same manner that we understand action in general*. Rather than looking first at the particular words uttered and trying to move from there, as speakers we begin from perceiving our conversation with our interlocutors as a sequence of performed actions, seeking an answer to the question, “What are you trying to say by this”, and we then go on to specify this in greater detail by answering the other two other questions mentioned above: “Who is speaking” and “What’s going on”.

Let me finish by applying this approach to the analysis of the conversation segment in the appendix. I only have time for a rather superficial analysis; in principle you can go on with this approach all the way to the level of grammar, as functional and cognitive linguists understand it (see: Sandler forthcoming).

Transcript 5 (SBC051: 373.472–406.048)

FRAN: .. Yeah.
 ... (H) And the new buildings are=,
 ... I don't like the new buildings.

→ ALICE: Do you like living in New York?

→ FRAN: ... Yeah.
 I love it.
 ... (H) We traveled all over.
 We looked around.
 We thought,
 (H) my husband and I stayed out on the road,
 ... fo=r two years.
 ... And we went all over the United States,
 and we d-,
 ... we didn't find any place we liked [better].

ALICE: [So you] went from New Orleans to
New York?

FRAN: ... Yeah.
 Oh that I did years ago.

... That I did,
 ALICE: ... But it's the new.
 That ... part [XXXX].
 FRAN: [God knows, s-] nineteen si- sixty something.
 .. Sixty-three.
 ... Thirty [years ago].
 ALICE: [So you've lived] in New York all this time?
 FRAN: Mhm?
 .. Thirty years.
 Except,
 (H) I did take [five years off].

First of all, a few words about the overall setting: We have here a middle-aged couple, Sean and Bernard, hosting two friends for dinner. One of the friends, Fran, is a New Yorker. She and the other friend, Alice, have not met each other before. The segment of the conversation we're looking at may be said to begin with Alice asking Fran: "Do you like living in New York?" (Transcript 5) – a question that itself makes good sense in this sort of setting, when the two new acquaintances are trying to get to know each other.

Fran replies that she *loves* it, and then launches a story sequence. The story sequence illustrates how much she loves living in New York. By extension, it also serves the purpose of telling Alice about herself. This is a somewhat simplistic statement of the actions she *performs*: telling a story, introducing herself, and specifically as a proud New Yorker.

The story itself unfolds mostly through described actions, the characters performing which are Fran and her husband. They are more or less explicitly introduced, and while there are some interesting things to tell about exactly how the story unfolds, I'll skip these turns to save on time. The only thing I want to stress, is that we follow the story by following what the characters are *doing*, and that the *point* of the story is *demonstrated* by those actions: Saying that she loves living in New York is one thing; describing how her husband and she spent outstanding efforts – years of traveling all over the United States – to find another place to live, and they couldn't find any better place than New York – that's another thing altogether. The described action is what really drives the point of the story home.

Transcript 6 (SBC051: 408.945–494.152; includes Transcript 3)

FRAN: ... I did take five years off.
 .. I went to= uh=,

... Florida,
which was a terrible mistake.
... We needed a vacation,
and we accidentally moved instead.

ALICE: Oh=.

FRAN: .. And then,
we realized that,
... @Well,
<@ The first year we were there,
we visited New York six times,
and we looked at each other and said @>,

BERNARD: @@@

→ FRAN: .. <VOX God,
we certainly do go back up there a lot,
what do you think that's about VOX>.
You know,
and we were just getting increasingly bored down there and,
(H) you know,
.. you- .. get .. occupied .. fixing up a house,
and that's kinda fu=n,
and the[n],

ALICE: [Wh]ere in Florida were you.

FRAN: ... On the Gulf Coast,
Fort Myers Beach.
We had a nice house,

((segment omitted))

FRAN: But,
w=e didn't like it.
At all.
And so,

→ that's when we said,
.. well let's not do anything precipitous,
like we did moving down here,
(H) before we race back to New York,
... let's look around a little bit.
... So we= hit the road.
And we stayed out for a couple [years,

SEAN: [Two years they'd been looking].

FRAN: looking all over].

SEAN: ... [for other places].

ALICE: [Looking .. round],
... Really?
And --

FRAN: Unhunh?
... Round the US=.

ALICE: ... Wow=.

FRAN: .. And we,
.. kept finding these nice places.

→ FRAN: And we'd say,
(H) <VOX isn't this place nice VOX>?
And,
... Larry would say,
<VOX yes,
it's lovely.
Look at these beautiful homes.
Isn't that nice?
%Yes?
Isn't that nice?
Isn't that nice VOX>?
... <VOX<P Yeah,
but it's not New York P>VOX>.

But let's skip forward. At several points in her story, Fran shifts from merely describing their actions to reenacting them. First we see it shortly before the omitted segment, when she says: "We looked at each other and said: God, we certainly do go back up there a lot, what do you think that's about?", and then after the omitted segment, in the other arrowed turns of Transcript 6 (already familiar from Transcript 3 above).

The shifts themselves are explicitly marked, but again, the interesting point to note is *why* and *when* Fran shifts to reenacted action, and what she achieves by this. Reenactment here serves her to introduce the three major turns in the plot of the story: first the couple's realization that they really don't like their house in Florida, then the decision to go traveling in search of another home, and finally their decision to go back to New York. In all three cases, instead of just stating their motives, Fran *dramatizes* them, as it were, making the turn in the plot both more vivid, and more clearly understandable.

Note that at some point the explicit marking of reenactment is gone: "Isn't that nice? Yes. Isn't *that* nice? Isn't *that* nice? Yeah, but it's not New York". Fran no longer explicitly marks where Larry's words end and her responses begin, or what utterances are made after seeing which house. Her listeners don't need any such cues, because they can follow the logic of the reenacted actions themselves (in this case, of turn-taking in the reenacted conversation).

Transcript 4 (repeated)

→ ALICE: [Do they have New York AA?
FRAN: ... to ludicrous rents],
ALICE: .. <X You know X>,
@@
BERNARD: (H) or maybe] they've been to New Y[ork,
[well,
ALICE: @]
BERNARD: they] do.
ALICE: .. (H)
BERNARD: Don't they.
They have their own ver- --
.. They- --
→ ALICE: [@(Hx) <@ Get me outa] New York @>.
BERNARD: [They do].
→ ALICE: <@ Got- .. [gotta get] outa this place @>.
FRAN: [We have so-] --
... We- --
.. What --
→ ALICE: ... I'm a New [York-a .. holic].
FRAN: [<X Weren't we saying X>],

BERNARD: [No she's s-] --
 She's asking if they have,
 th=ey should have an addiction to New York.
 SEAN: Or --
 FRAN: Oh,
 New Yorkers Anonymous.

Last, Alice's response. After Bernard and Fran jointly reframe the story as one of addiction (I should note that addiction and the Alcoholics Anonymous program are a central topic in earlier parts of this talk), Alice intensifies and develops this comparison by suggesting a "New York AA", which creates a misunderstanding – Bernard and Fran first think she's changing the topic and asking about a New York chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous.

So to clear the misunderstanding, Alice *impersonates* a desperate New York addict. And the reenactment she does here, despite its explicative aim, makes no use of explicit marking. Alice relies on her listeners actively seeking an answer to the question, "Who's talking" in making sense of her utterances (and since, thrown off the lead by their initial misunderstanding, their uptake is slow, she just answers this question for them directly, by saying "I'm a New-York-a-holic", which eventually gets the desired result).

Thus, action, plot, characters and their motives, are not just features of literary texts. They are the stuff discourse in general is made of.

Appendix

Excerpt from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois and Englebretson 2005), conversation no. 051:

FRAN: .. Yeah.
 ... (H) And the new buildings are=,
 ... I don't like the new buildings.
 ALICE: Do you like living in New York?
 FRAN: ... Yeah.
 I love it.
 ... (H) We traveled all over.
 We looked around.
 We thought,
 (H) my husband and I stayed out on the road,
 ... fo=r two years.
 ... And we went all over the United States,
 and we d-,
 ... we didn't find any place we liked [better].
 ALICE: [So you] went from New Orleans to New
 York?
 FRAN: ... Yeah.
 Oh that I did years ago.
 ... That I did,

ALICE: ... But it's the new.
That ... part [XXXX].
FRAN: [God knows, s-] nineteen si- sixty something.
.. Sixty-three.
... Thirty [years ago].
ALICE: [So you've lived] in New York all this time?
FRAN: Mhm?
.. Thirty years.
Except,
(H) I did take [five years off].
BERNARD: [@@ .. @@]@@
ALICE: †Thirty years [in New] York†?
BERNARD: [@(H)]
FRAN: Yeah.
ALICE: Wow.
FRAN: ... I did take five years off.
.. I went to= uh=,
... Florida,
which was a terrible mistake.
... We needed a vacation,
and we accidentally moved instead.
ALICE: Oh=.
FRAN: .. And then,
we realized that,
... @well,
<@ The first year we were there,
we visited New York six times,
and we looked at each other and said @>,
BERNARD: @@@
FRAN: .. <VOX God,
we certainly do go back up there a lot,
what do you think that's about VOX>.
You know,
and we were just getting increasingly bored down there and,
(H) you know,
.. you- .. get .. occupied .. fixing up a house,
and that's kinda fu=n,
and the[n],
ALICE: [Wh]ere in Florida were you.
FRAN: ... On the Gulf Coast,
Fort Myers Beach.
We had a nice house,

((segment omitted))
FRAN: But,
we didn't like it.
At all.
And so,
that's when we said,
.. well let's not do anything precipitous,
like we did moving down here,
(H) before we race back to New York,
... let's look around a little bit.
... So we= hit the road.
And we stayed out for a couple [years,
SEAN: [Two years they'd been looking].
FRAN: looking all over].
SEAN: ... [for other places].
ALICE: [Looking .. round],
... Really?
And --
FRAN: Unhunh?
... Round the US=.
ALICE: ... Wow=.
FRAN: .. And we,
.. kept finding these nice places.
FRAN: And we'd say,
(H) <VOX isn't this place nice VOX>?

And,
... Larry would say,
<VOX yes,
it's lovely.
Look at these beautiful homes.
Isn't that nice?
%Yes?
Isn't that nice?
Isn't that nice VOX>?
... <VOX<P Yeah,
but it's not New York P>VOX>.
BERNARD: [It's] --
FRAN: [@]@@@ [@(H)=]
ALICE: [You w-] --
.. Wow.
FRAN: And so we'd ... drive on.
.. We found lots of places that we like to sp[end] --
BERNARD: [Oh,
if] New York's under your skin,
watch out.
FRAN: % Yeah,
[it's like a drug].
BERNARD: [You can't get out].
... It --
.. It [i=s.
FRAN: [You're finished].
BERNARD: .. It] ... i=s a drug.
FRAN: ... That's it.
.. You're consigned,
the r[est of your life,
ALICE: [Do they have New York AA?
FRAN: ... to ludicrous rents],
ALICE: .. <X You know X>,
@@
(H) or maybe] they've been to New Y[ork,
BERNARD: [well,
ALICE: @]
BERNARD: they] do.
ALICE: .. (H)
BERNARD: Don't they.
They have their own ver- --
.. They- --
ALICE: [@(Hx) <@ Get me outa] New York @>.
BERNARD: [They do].
ALICE: <@ Got- .. [gotta get] outa this place @>.
FRAN: [We have so-] --
... We- --
.. What --
ALICE: ... I'm a New [York-a .. holic].
FRAN: [<X Weren't we saying X>],
BERNARD: [No she's s-] --
She's asking if they have,
th=ey should have an addiction to New York.
SEAN: Or --
FRAN: Oh,
New Yorkers Anonymous.

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