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Positioning the interviewer: Strategic uses of embedded orientation in interview narratives

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ABSTRACT

The structure and function of a sociolinguistic interview sets up a context that affords informants the opportunity to achieve their own goals. We examine how an informant manipulates the reception format of the speech event, using embedded orientation to characterize information as alternately given or new, and the interviewer consequently as an insider or outsider. Whereas previous analyses have examined how embedded orientation highlights or sheds light on information in complicating action clauses, we posit that the content of embedded orientation clauses is important in and of itself. Rather than serving as simply background information, embedded orientation can do important ideological work. In the case here, embedded orientation introduces into the narrative traces of a local story—the history of local Fascism, a topic that is rarely discussed in the teller's community. (Embedded orientation, narrative, sociolinguistic interview)

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the position of the sociolinguistic interviewer, whether as outsider collector, sympathetic insider, witness to trauma narrative (Caruth 1995, Bohmer & Shuman 2007), or neutral researcher. When ethically possible, ethnographers tend to position themselves as sympathetic to the ideological positions of the people they study (Ginsburg 1989). Sociolinguistic interviewers often seek to position themselves as community insiders, already familiar with the topic under discussion.

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Whereas interviewers seek to lessen the gap between themselves and their informants, this is not always what informants do. Just as Schiffrin (1984) shows that tellers of narratives in sociolinguistic interviews manipulate the production format (in Goffman's 1974 terms)—"speaking for another" to achieve interactional goals—tellers also manipulate the reception format—the listener status—to further their own ends.

In some reflections on fieldwork, researchers have discussed inequalities in researcher-informant relationships and the social demands or obligations that fieldwork entails (El-Or 1992, Behar 2003; see also Wortham et al. in this issue). Within this framework, discussions of sociolinguistic interviews tend to focus on how sociolinguistic interviews benefit or hinder the goals of researchers (Wolfson 1976, Labov 1984, Briggs 1986). It is equally important, however, to consider informants' goals.

In this article, we argue that, rather than a liability, the gap between researcher and informant is a potentially valuable site for analysis. Whereas researchers often consider sociolinguistic interviews inferior to spontaneous situated interaction, in the following discussion we show that the interactional relationships inherent in sociolinguistic interviews, as well as the opportunities that such interviews afford for informants to speak at length while taking on an expert status, can in fact provide critical insight into issues or topics that may be taboo, taken for granted, or otherwise silenced in everyday discourse in an informant's community. In other words, interviews afford tellability that may be otherwise restricted (Shuman 1986).

Because gaps between interviewer and informant knowledge are made discursively salient through information provided in narrative orientation, orientation structures are particularly well-suited for constructing, diminishing, or highlighting such gaps. We argue further that EMBEDDED orientation is key in this regard. Embedded orientation serves the dual function of orientation and—through its function of suspending the complicating action—evaluation. Because of this dual function, orienting information that is articulated through embedded orientation is highlighted (through evaluation) in a way that such information would not be if it were provided in an opening orientation segment. Using the interviewer-informant gap to their advantage, informants use embedded orientation to explain, describe, highlight, or otherwise evaluate orienting information that might otherwise be untellable. Thus, the highlighted nature of embedded orientation makes this structure a useful site for informants to do ideological work.

In addition to the benefits that sociolinguistic interviews provide for the research endeavor, researchers—especially those concerned with the impact of their research on members of the community being studied—should also attend to the benefits that a sociolinguistic interview may provide an informant. This is especially the case in situations, like ours, where other community members are present during the interview.

We frame the sociolinguistic interview as a genre that affords opportunities for informants' agendas. Specifically, we examine how a teller uses embedded

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orientation to reposition the interviewer as an insider or outsider, in the interests of introducing into the narrative at hand traces of a particular local story—the history of local Fascism, a topic that is rarely discussed in the teller's community.

INTERVIEWER POSITIONALITIES

Discourse-analytic work has shown that the positions that two interlocutors take up in interaction cannot adequately be divided into a static, dyadic relationship between speaker and hearer (Erickson 1986). Goffman (1974) proposed expanding both the PRODUCTION (speaker) and RECEPTION (listener) formats into more nuanced roles (see also Mishler 1986, Levinson 1988). Irvine (1996) showed that a more complex participant framework could illuminate how participants manipulate the production format in order to negotiate the politics of authority and responsibility. We advocate similarly expanding the notion of participant framework in sociolinguistic interviews in order to understand the workings of power and ideology in such speech events.

Briggs (1986) suggests that breaking frame is one of the main means informants have for taking control of an interview. This is not the only option for gaining discursive power, however. Because the goal of sociolinguistic interviews is to encourage informants to tell narratives, and because interviewers consequently background themselves in such interactions to enable informants to narrate unimpeded, narratives told in sociolinguistic interviews present myriad possibilities for informants to wield control of the interaction, manipulating the narrative structure to serve their own interests.

In the data we analyze, we focus on two roles that emerge in the reception format—INSIDER and OUTSIDER. These are realized through the informant's strategies regarding what orienting information to provide and how to embed that orienting information into narrative accounts. It is the context of the sociolinguistic interview itself that enables these strategies. Sociolinguistic interviews generally exist as a component of participant-observation fieldwork, in which researchers position themselves sometimes as community insiders (hence, participants), and sometimes as outsiders in search of community knowledge (hence, the need to conduct interviews about various aspects of local life.) The tacking between these two poles makes both insider and outsider positions available among various other positions that community members can assign to researchers.

EMBEDDED ORIENTATION

De Fina discusses orientations as "occasions for narrators and audience to negotiate and build shared understandings of experiences" (2003:372). Thus, orientation does more than set the scene; as Georgakopoulou (2003) points out, it is an interactional resource. We argue that orientation serves not only to create shared knowledge, however, and that it is not necessarily related to a narrator's assumptions about what a listener knows. Rather, the presence, absence, and placement of

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orienting detail can serve as a strategy to include or exclude the listener in sociolinguistic interviews as an in-group member.

Labov (1972:374) refers to embedded orientation as orientation "that suspend[s] the complicating action of a narrative," thereby functioning as an evaluative device that heightens the narrative tension (see also Butters 2001, Schiffrin 2006). We elaborate on this understanding of embedded orientation as evaluation by considering how it positions the listener with regard to others in the community. The example we discuss also demonstrates how embedded orientations work for positioning narrators, interviewers, and others in the community in relation to larger historical events.

The strategic use of embedded orientation can frame knowledge as either shared or unshared in order to achieve an ideological goal. As we will see, narrators provide orientation for information that it is clear the listener knows, and they do not provide orientation at points at which the listener's information state (Goffman 1974) is unclear, or in cases where it is more likely than not that the listener does not know.

Embedded orientation can be effective in a number of ways. First, narrators withhold orienting information to be strategically placed later in the story, for example, to create suspense (Stewart 1982). Second, as mentioned above, embedded orientation can provide evaluation for the complicating action that is being suspended, calling attention to its importance (see also Rickford & Rafal 1996). Third, embedded orientation can provide details to allow for better understanding of an evaluative comment. Fourth, embedded orientation can provide information that is already known. (As our data will show, embedded orientation is often not needed in order to understand the complicating action. Sometimes the orientation has in fact already been included elsewhere in the narrative itself.)

Finally, whereas previous analyses have examined how embedded orientation sheds light on information contained in complicating action clauses, we posit that the content of embedded orientation clauses is important in and of itself. In the case we analyze, embedded orientation tells an important historical narrative. Thus the use of embedded orientations can be an ideological move.

In addition to positioning INTERVIEWERS as insiders or outsiders, orienting information also casts KNOWLEDGE as insider or outsider knowledge. Embedded orientations can construe some facts as widely known, others as vague, and others as off-record. How orienting detail is framed can be more important than whether or not it is familiar information. Furthermore, narrative orientations do not merely locate events in places; they can also morally differentiate among different characters in those places, and set up a range of possible morally imbued alignments among characters and between characters and events.

ARTISAN NARRATIVES

Our data is taken from interviews conducted by Amy Shuman in her longterm study of a community of artisan stonecarvers in Pietrasanta, Italy. Pietrasanta is located at

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the base of Tuscany's Carrara Mountains where marble has been quarried for centuries. In the early 1800s, artisans in Pietrasanta also began to work marble, and for many years there were studios employing hundreds of artisans who made saints and copies of Classical, Renaissance, and Romantic sculpture for the cathedrals of the New World.

Amy[1] positioned herself as a person documenting the artisans' history. Over a period of twenty-seven years, she interviewed sixty artisans, all but one male, most over fifty. Amy interviewed artisans about their workplace practices, including how they learned their skills, how they passed them on, how they understood the past and present configuration of workers, and how they positioned themselves within the political/historical/economic/social contexts of the stonecarving community. The artisans as well as local historians recognized the role that historical events played in changing the community.

A prevalent topic in the interview corpus is the onyx boom, a brief episode in the early 1960s when the Second Vatican Council abruptly ended the Catholic Church's practice of commissioning marble saint sculptures, and many artisans found themselves out of work. Onyx had been imported by Pietrasanta stone companies for architectural use along with marble and granite. While Pietrasanta artisans traditionally made large figurative marble sculpture, in the 1960s, several small shops began to make small decorative onyx objects such as telephones, fruit, napkin holders, and ashtrays.[2] This shift towards small-scale carving came to be known as the onyx boom. Amy was interested in how the artisans described the boom and how they positioned themselves in regard to it. The artisans Amy interviewed (including a few who made onyx objects in the 1960s) overwhelmingly disparaged the onyx production as kitsch.

The artisans were alternately more or less aware of Amy's knowledge about the community. She was by all counts an outsider. For all of her interviews, Amy was accompanied by an insider, usually a young artisan, and occasionally an artist who had been working in the community for many years. The purpose of this was to create the possibility for a dialogue in which the interlocutors felt responsibility to each other in their accounts and which, in keeping with prevailing sociolinguistic interview ideology at the time, would encourage interviews that approximated conversation as much as possible.

Despite the reflexive ethnography movement, as sociolinguists we still tend to want to background our outgroup status in sociolinguistic interviews as much as possible. But as our data shows, out-groupness can be an asset and resource, not only for us, but also for tellers. Although at the time Amy found it disconcerting when tellers oriented to her and away from the accompanying artisans, further analysis reveals this strategy as an empowering move on the informant's part, which enables him to insert a different story into the interview—a story, incidentally, that was difficult for Amy to get at directly in interviews, because it was a relatively taboo topic in the community. The larger point here is that tellers strategically

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manipulate interviewers' status as ingroup or outgroup members in order to achieve interactional goals.

In the interview we discuss, Amy, accompanied by Massimo, a young artisan, interviewed Ennio, Massimo's father. Ennio recounts the past and takes account of what he considers to be the current decline of their cultural traditions. The excerpt below is Ennio's response to a question Amy asked about "when things changed in Pietrasanta." To answer this question Ennio tells a short narrative, a disparaging treatise on the onyx boom. This narrative serves as orientation to a subsequent narrative about how various stonecarvers dealt with the onyx boom.[3]

(1) E: Ennio, M: Massimo, A: Amy

E: Then the onyx boom happened
for 5 or 6 years they ruined Pietrasanta
not only Pietrasanta
but the artistic center
M: But also we can say that onyx contributed in some way to-
E: To the economy of Pietrasanta, yes
M: No, no-
E: But it's known
M: Was being destroyed-
E: What's truly art was being destroyed, because the marble
Onyx- they were- hang them all - for their work
Incapable people, useless
Tu tu tu (gesturing with hands slapping things together)
No
Make something and tu tu
They would just slap things together,
and eh,
Pietrasanta went on
But it was a step backwards and,
in the art and sculpture of Pietrasanta
It was an artisanry
Our artisanry was a specialty of those artisans
They wanted it to be destroyed
First the Fascists,
because there was Vallerini
who had the quarries
and the sawmills.
A: Hm.
E: They wanted to create industry.
They salvaged,
In short-
there was the same pollution with the sawmills in Alto Versilia
it got polluted
But. making industries like in Avensa
between Massa and Avensa, there
Versilia would have disappeared.
In short these Fascists kept it an agricultural zone,
because if they had made it an industrial zone,

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if they had made one or two industries
all of their workers would disappear
because they earn more in industry.
You see, Vallerini, Montanari,
They were big Fascists
They had sawmills, workers, and quarries.
Have you understood the discussion?
This is the true story.
First the fascists in short, saved Versilia a bit from ecological destruction.
But, they ruined the economic thing,
you see.
It remained like this.
It was an agricultural zone, Pietrasanta,
you see?
That was the first blow.
Then the story of all those others.
They fended for themselves.

What interested us about this orienting narrative was the relative lack of complicating action, coupled by extensive use of orientation. Orientation is used for virtually every kind of narrative structure: abstract, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, even other orientation clauses.

Also noteworthy is the vagueness throughout the narrative, in every type of narrative structure. This is due in part to Ennio's omitting key information as well as using presupposition. The lack of explicit reference requires the listeners to provide a significant amount of in-group knowledge as the cohesive glue to make sense of the narrative. But despite the overall vagueness, some information in the narrative IS articulated explicitly. These moments of explicitness are often accompanied by comprehension checks. Through such strategies, Ennio takes the authority to direct his narrative toward Amy rather than Massimo and positions himself as having insider knowledge that neither Amy nor his son have. It is the structure of the sociolinguistic interview—with its backgrounding of the interviewer while the informant narrates and its exploitation of the insider-outsider fluidity inherent in participant observation-research—that enables Ennio's strategies.

DERATIFYING AND REPOSITIONING PARTICIPANTS

At the narrative's beginning, Massimo interjects an opinion, and Ennio talks over and silences him, then directs his narrative toward Amy. At the conclusion, Massimo rejoins the dialogue. By directing the story to Amy, Ennio strategically deratifies his son as an authority and therefore as a speaker. Ennio uses the opportunity of the sociolinguistic interview to position himself as an authority addressing an outsider, the interviewer. His son, positioned as a deratified listener, is entitled to

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listen but not to offer an opinion. In this configuration, Ennio indirectly conveys to his son his explanation of what happened.

Ennio's vague orientation casts Amy as an in-group member (since it assumes she knows the information needed to make sense of the narrative), but explicit orientation and comprehension checks cast her as an out-group member (who ostensibly does not know or understand). But the POINT is not to characterize her as an out-group member. Rather, within the narrative framework enabled by the sociolinguistic interview, Ennio manipulates Amy's group membership status to highlight information that is key to his version of the onyx-boom story.

The narrative starts with two abstracts, the second co-constructed by Ennio and Massimo: "We can say that onyx contributed in some way to … to the economy of Pietrasanta, yes. What's truly art was being destroyed." This is followed by an evaluation and an orientation to that evaluation.

The first complicating action clause, "Pietrasanta went on," is followed by orienting information that contrasts carving onyx with carving marble: "it [carving onyx] was a step backwards, and in the art and sculpture of Pietrasanta, it [carving marble] was an artisanry, our artisanry was a specialty of those artisans." Here, the orientation is explicit, and it is cast syntactically as new information. However, Ennio has reason to assume that the clause "It was a step backwards in the art and sculpture of Pietrasanta" represents given information for his audience, since it reiterates the abstract about onyx ruining Pietrasanta and contributing to the destruction of what is truly art. Similarly, Ennio has reason to assume that both listeners know that "our artisanry was a specialty of those artisans"—since Massimo is a Pietrasanta artisan himself, and Amy has told Ennio she is studying the style of stonecarving for which the town is known. Explicit orientation must have another function, then, namely that of evaluation (of the onyx boom). Its evaluative function is heightened by the fact that it is a repetition of previous evaluation; as Tannen (1989) notes, repetition is itself an evaluative device.

The next complicating action clauses are "They wanted it [the marble carving studios] to be destroyed, first the Fascists." "First the Fascists" sets up a sequence in which the Fascists (between the wars) precede the onyx workers (in the 1960s) as destructive. This complicating action precedes orientating information about the Fascists: "Because there was Vallerini who had the quarries and the sawmills."[4] This orientation casts the listeners as sharing in-group knowledge, since the narrative presupposes who Vallerini was as well as the fact that there were quarries and sawmills. Critically, the implication of having quarries and sawmills is left off-record. There is some orientation that is framed as new information—"They wanted to create industry"—but the referent of "they" is left implicit, and Ennio does not explain the difference between quarries and sawmills, on the one hand, and industry, on the other. (As we see, "they" is not the Fascists; the Fascists wanted Pietrasanta and its surroundings to be an agricultural area).

The complicating action continues with "they salvaged," but the action is again halted by orientation. The first line of orientation—"there was the same

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pollution"—is explicit, and as was the case with the previous explicit orientation, it is repeated. According to the incipient pattern we have seen so far this would suggest that "there was the same pollution" is important, but the narrator has not yet explained why. In the next orientation clause, "making industries", Ennio does not specify who wanted to create these industries. Also, it is discursively assumed that the listeners know the difference between the neighborhoods mentioned (Massa and Avensa) and their histories. Thus the overall effect of this orienting section is casting the listener/interviewer as sharing in-group knowledge.

The listener/interviewer's status shifts from in-group to out-group in the next section of the narrative: the complicating action clause "In short these Fascists kept it an agricultural zone" is followed by the longest section of orientation. This section is the most explicit and fleshed out of the entire narrative: "because if they had made it an industrial zone, if they had made one or two industries, all of their workers would disappear because they earn more in industry. You see, Vallerini, Montanari, they were big Fascists. They had sawmills, workers, and quarries." Again in this section, Ennio repeats information he has already reported, and, in fact, information that he has previously framed as presupposed knowledge. In this repetition, however, Ennio structurally casts Vallerini's status as a Fascist and his ownership of sawmills and quarries as new information, and he casts the actions of keeping Pietrasanta an agricultural zone as Fascist actions. This information is highlighted in a number of ways—through repetition, framing as new information and as a negative comparative, use of a comprehension check ("Have you understood the discussion?") and finally, through evaluation of this whole orientation as "This is the true story."

Next comes a mini-story that is a recapitulation of some key points of the narrative: "First the Fascists in short, saved Versilia a bit from ecological destruction." This complicating action clause reveals what was so important about the orientation phrase "there was pollution." Saving Versilia from the pollution was good, but it ultimately led to the complicating action "they ruined the economic thing." This proposition is highlighted through the evaluative discourse marker "you see." After the resolution "it remained like this," Ennio uses orientation to explain what "like this" means: "It was an agricultural zone, Pietrasanta, you see?" Again, the orientation is information that has been stated before, but that is now presented as new information. In other words, it is presented as information that the listener/interviewer does not know. The importance of this utterance is highlighted by a comprehension check "you see?" In addition, the content of this utterance is highlighted by the next utterance, "It was the first blow"—an orientation to the orientation. It explains that Pietrasanta's status as an agricultural zone is key to understanding the whole onyx situation (although it still leaves vague exactly why being an agricultural zone is a problem).

Finally, this embedded narrative comes to a close: "Then the story of all those others. They fended for themselves." Here is an abstract to the main story, the story of how people dealt with the onyx boom. This utterance retrospectively

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casts the whole preceding narrative as an embedded orientation in the story of "all those others."

In the ensuing main narrative, Ennio goes on to talk about people who chose to work with onyx and people who resisted that trend. (This topic receives much discussion among Pietrasantans.) But Ennio's main story lacks any reference to local Fascists. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the larger historical narrative about local Fascism is a story that people in Pietrasanta do not tend to narrate. In her study of German Fascist atrocities committed in Alto Versilia towns, Cappelletto (2003) similarly encountered great resistance to discussing the possible collaboration of local Fascists. Cappelletto attributes this resistance to what Rosaldo (1986:92) calls CULTURAL SILENCE. Perhaps in the context of the Nazi massacre of innocent villagers, the idea of local Fascists (the idea that Italians collaborated in these atrocities), is so horrendous, that people are silent about local Fascism.

Orientation—the seemingly background information that gets thrown into the interstices of stories—is useful for understanding how tellers navigate cultural silences. Our analysis shows that it is through switches between orientation as given vs. new information, as well as through the content of what is repeated and what is framed as new information, that a larger historical story gets told: the Fascists are mentioned not in the main story of how people dealt with the onyx boom in Pietrasanta, but rather in a narrative orientation to that story. Furthermore, in that narrative orientation, most of the information about the Fascists appears not in complicating action clauses, but in orientation clauses—orientation within orientation. These orientation clauses tell us that there were Fascists IN PIETRASANTA, that they controlled the regional economy, and that they wanted to keep their quarries and sawmills going. They consequently fought industrialization of the area, which played a role in the economic collapse in marble that led to onyx.[5]

Ennio's account attributes more consequence to the Fascist interests than to the onyx boom. What he calls the "true story" asserts that the Fascists "ruined the economic thing … That was the first blow." Thus, "the story of all of those others" who "fended for themselves" by venturing into the production of onyx trinkets is placed in a larger historical context. Most artisans consider the onyx production to be a travesty in which workers "would just slap things together," but that is not the whole story according to Ennio. By directing his attention solely to Amy at a key moment, Ennio is able to redirect the narrative to offer a different explanation from the one commonly given; he recasts the onyx boom as a result of history of Fascism in damaging the economy of Pietrasanta.

CONCLUSION

In the interstices of narrative action, we see how people construct history, how they assess the complex and multiple explanations for what was "destroyed" and who was responsible for it. For example, Ennio narrates how a small group of self-

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interested people can have a huge but rarely explicitly articulated impact on a community.

From the community's retrospective perspective, phenomena like Vatican II or the onyx boom take a larger place in the communal historical narrative than do the Fascists. The local Fascists have faded from public discourse because there is a cost to the local public face in remembering them. They are not forgotten, but they need the right context to resurface. An out-group audience and a novel event like a sociolinguistic interview are the kind of interaction that can provide these conditions. It is certainly not the case that no one knows about or cares about past local Fascist elements in the town. However, in in-group situations, such information is often individualized into a story about a single person, rather than about a subset of the community.

Tellers who personally experienced historical events assess those events from the perspective of personal interest and investment. The possibility of both in-group and out-group status for sociolinguistic interviewers affords informants strategic manipulation of the information status of embedded orientation (i.e. given vs. new information). Embedded orientation, in turn, affords the possibility for assessing the complex causes of difficult historical events—causes that people are hesitant to discuss directly.

In this article we have complicated the reception framework of the sociolinguistic interview by demonstrating that the roles of interviewer and informant are not static but rather larger categories for fluctuating positionalities. Informants can manipulate these positionalities strategically for their own purposes. In the case we have analyzed, the researcher's ambiguous identity as an outsider with insider knowledge becomes a vehicle by means of which the informant can manipulate the status of information. Furthermore, the sociolinguistic interview's privileging of narrative provides informants with opportunities to take control of the speech event. Narratives within sociolinguistic interviews provide informants with a warrant to withhold, repeat, and insert information through embedded orientation. Rather than regard sociolinguistic interviews as inferior to naturally occurring conversation, we can identify how they provide informants with tools (narratives and, specifically, embedded orientation) to strategically frame or embed information in order to do ideological work.

Through embedded orientation, difficult or taboo topics can leak through discursive barriers, affording narrators the possibility of making connections, broaching cultural silences, or accounting for or explaining contested events in unexpected ways. Rather than dismiss sociolinguistic interviews as inferior to spontaneous interaction, we suggest attending to the possibilities that they afford informants.

NOTES

[1]We use first names for both interviewees and interviewer to avoid creating hierarchies.

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[2]Also in the 1960s, the marble-carving business was reinvigorated when sculptors such as Henry Moore, Isamo Noguchi, Jean Arps, and Jacques Lipschitz came to Pietrasanta to have their models carved.

[3]Due to length limitations we provide the narrative only in its translated version from Italian into English.

[4]This refers to stonecutting sawmills.

[5]It is unclear here how exactly these zoning choices led to the collapse of the marble business. Many narrators in Pietrasanta attributed the onyx boom to Vatican II's edict to eliminate the proliferation of saint sculptures in Catholic churches. Vatican II's role is recounted more explicitly in narratives of a more canonical form.

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