

The display and management of affectivity in climaxes of amusing stories

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Abstract

This paper reports on work on the accomplishment and negotiation of affectivity in everyday interaction. It analyzes climaxes of amusing stories as a locus for the display and management of affectivity, here predominantly on the basis of data from German interaction. The empirical investigation of participants' verbal, vocal, and visible practices and resources in managing affectivity in climaxes of amusing stories has revealed a normatively oriented-to 'Affect Display Sequence', in which affiliation is the preferred response. The discussion of trajectories with non-understanding and non-affiliating responses in the second part of the paper, in turn, shows how the 'Affect Display Sequence' is expanded and dealt with in more complicated and dispreferred cases. Thereby the paper contributes to the description and understanding of affectivity in interaction as an orderly and normatively oriented-to phenomenon that is displayed and managed with multimodal practices and resources and co-constructed by the participants in the interaction.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes participants' display and management of affectivity in one particular sequential environment in talk-in-interaction, the construction of climaxes in conversational storytelling.

The classical investigations of storytelling in Conversation Analysis (CA) have described the sequential organization and embedding of stories in natural turn-by-turn talk (Sacks, 1971, 1974, 1986; Jefferson, 1978; Ryave, 1978; cf. also Quasthoff, 2001; Quasthoff and Becker, 2005; Mandelbaum, 2013), laying the foundation for conceptualizing narratives as an interactional achievement. Most of these studies are exclusively concerned with verbal aspects of storytelling. But especially Goodwin (1980, 1997), Goodwin (1984), Goodwin and Goodwin (1987, 1992, 2000), Heath (1986), and more recently Stivers (2008), Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä (2009), and Ford and Fox (2010), have shown that multimodal resources such as gaze, facial expression, gesture, etc. play an important role as well. This paper will look into the accomplishment and negotiation of affectivity in storytelling, incorporating facial and gestural communication between participants.

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The telling of a story is a complex ‘big-package action’. Storytellers construct and make interpretable for their recipient(s) different component parts of that action. Sacks (1974) describes the sequential organization of stories, including jokes told in the form of a story, as consisting of three serially ordered types of sequences: the *preface*, the *telling*, and the *response* sequences. The precise structure of these sequences is dependent on, among others, the recipient design of the story being told as well as the particular affect being managed through the story. In many cases, the relating of successive events in the story world is presented as culminating in the climax of the story, through which recipients’ responses are made relevant. Sacks (1974: esp. 340ff.) details that the storyteller’s story preface projects for the recipients what the story will be about and what it will take for the story to reach completion, and thus what kind of response will be relevant from the recipient(s). In other words, the preface projects a particular kind of story, e.g., a complaint story or an amusing story, and a climax corresponding to this projection. Recipients need to align as story recipients for the story to proceed. In particular, they co-construct the preface sequence by ratifying the telling, they respond as locally made relevant by the storyteller in the telling sequence and they wait for the projected climax as a component part of the big-package action of storytelling. Furthermore, recipients can interrupt the telling (see Sacks, 1974) or even derail it (see Mandelbaum, 1989), “knowing” recipients can actively participate in the telling, co-constructing it (see Goodwin, 1984).¹ Storytelling is thus a collaborative accomplishment.

Storytelling may of course proceed in a more or less neutral stance, without orienting to and making recognizable displays of affectivity, and hence without making relevant responses to such orientations and displays. As a matter of fact, however, especially in private everyday interactions between friends or relatives, storytelling is often the locus of displaying and sharing affectivity in interaction.² People tell stories for some purpose, such as the sharing of experiences in order to define and maintain their social relationship. The term ‘affectivity’ is used here to refer to displayed emotive involvement and its management in interaction. Following Ochs and Schieffelin (1989:7), I use the term ‘affect’ as a broader, superordinate term comprising everything related to emotive involvement in the broader sense, i.e., ‘emotions’ – including ‘basic emotions’, ‘feelings’, ‘moods’, ‘dispositions’, and ‘attitudes’ (cf. Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989:7). Much of this has recently also been subsumed under the term ‘stance’ (cf. Stivers, 2008; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000, for instance).

The specific affective interpretation of a verbal report and/or prosodic-gestural (re-)enactment in storytelling may be proposed by the teller but will ultimately be locally negotiated and accomplished collaboratively by the teller and recipient(s) (cf., for instance, Selting, 2010). Interlocutors use verbal (i.e., rhetorical, lexical, syntactic), vocal (prosodic, voice quality-related), and visible (i.e., gestural, facial, and other body-related) practices and resources in order to suggest ‘reconstructed’ affective stances for the story world, as well as ‘in-situ’ affective stances for the here-and-now of the storytelling situation (cf. Günthner, 2000). Moreover, storytellers ‘manage’ affect both by “staging”, i.e., demonstrably (re-)enacting, or even “performing”, the reconstruction of heightened emotive involvement in recipient-designed ways (Günthner, 2000:365), as well as by treating the interlocutors’ affective responses in particular ways (see also Selting, 2010:231).³

One particular locus of affect display is the climax of the story. The climax of the story is conceived of in this paper as a displayed point of higher emotive involvement, a “high point” of the story, which makes relevant the recipients’ affiliative responses. It thus needs to be constructed and made recognizable by the storyteller through his or her conduct towards the recipient(s). Its specific meaning and import for the story and the interaction seems to be interpretable by the recipients due to the practices and resources deployed to construct it, in conjunction with shared sociocultural knowledge. One of the tasks to be carried out in storytelling is thus for the storyteller to make recognizable the climax of the story in order to enable the recipients to infer when to respond as made relevant and thus co-construct the climax and hence the story.

In this paper, it will be shown both that climaxes of amusing stories are multimodally displayed and responded to and that they initiate what I will call the ‘Affect Display Sequence’, a sequence of turns which serves the collaborative construction and treatment of story climaxes by the storyteller and recipient(s). This Affect

¹ On further practices of storytelling see, e.g., Jefferson (1978), Goodwin (1984), Schegloff (2007:41f.), and Sidnell (2010:178ff.).

² On the interactional, social constructionist approach to affectivity in interaction in general see also Hochschild (1979, 1983) and Harré (1986).

³ Amusing stories or humorous narratives in conversation have only seldomly been the focus of attention in pragmatics, conversation or discourse analysis. For some previous studies see, e.g., Kotthoff (1995, 2006, 2007) and Norrick (2005). Although the stories investigated here are designed as amusing, entertaining, or funny, they seem to share features with other humorous actions, even teasing and jocular mockery. For an overview of design features of and responses to jocular mockery see Haugh (2014:esp. 78–82).

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