

Co-narration in French conversation storytelling: A quantitative insight



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Received 3 March 2016; received in revised form 16 December 2016; accepted 7 February 2017

Available online 8 March 2017

Abstract

This study addresses the issue of the interactional achievement of storytelling in French face-to-face conversations. Previous studies have described storytelling as a *joint activity* in which together, narrator and listener actively collaborate for a successful achievement. The main findings were either based on qualitative studies (*Conversational Analysis*) or established in experimental conditions that did not really fit the conversational context. Using the *Corpus of Interactional Data*, we argue that conversational storytelling can now be described in a more quantitative perspective in the scope of the emergent corpus-pragmatics approach. Turn, morpho-syntactic information and laughter are investigated. We test to what extent the temporal evolution of these components within speech production of each speaker throughout narratives provides evidence in favor of *joint activity*, i.e. *co-narration* systematically performed by both participants and resulting in a specific turn-taking organization.

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Keywords: Conversational storytelling; Co-narration; Listening responses; Turn-taking; Morpho-syntactic category; French

1. Introduction

Since Sacks' pioneering works (1992, Lecture 2) in the *Conversation Analysis* framework (henceforth CA), different authors have shown that telling stories is a frequent activity in various interactional situations, among them ordinary and familiar conversations. Norrick (2007: 127) goes further saying that "storytelling is a fundamental mode of everyday conversation" which fulfills crucial functions including "sharing personal news, entertaining listeners, revealing attitudes, constructing identity, inviting counter-disclosure, and so on". More formally, the author defines storytelling as a shared activity resulting in a transfer of information from narrator to listener. However, despite its asymmetrical nature, narrative displays a co-construction involving all the participants. By a co-construction we mean "an interactionally collaborative achievement" as initially defined by Schegloff (1982) (see also Rühlemann and Gries, 2015 for a review). How this co-construction is achieved and more specifically how the listener's activity unfolds throughout the narrative is the focus of this study. Whatever the terminology used, the notion of co-construction has been fruitfully analyzed from the CA perspective (Sacks et al., 1974; Jefferson, 1978; Goodwin, 1979, 1981, 1984; Schegloff, 1982, 1997; Norrick, 2007, 2010, 2012; and so on). Furthermore, it is the core of the *collaborative model* (Clark, 1996) in which dialog is considered a *joint activity* involving a mutual and constant coordination between participants. Sharing this assumption, Bavelas et al. (2000) have for the first time experimentally investigated listening responses and showed that *appropriate responses*, in other

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words expected responses depending on the current activity (as detailed in Section 2.2) are required for successful storytelling. Our perspective is not one of analyzing the success of stories, but rather of showing that the speech production of both participants and more particularly the responses provided by listeners are indeed appropriate. Findings concerning appropriate responses in earlier works have been established either in experimental conditions or with natural data mainly involving qualitative data. We argue that storytelling can now be systematically described in a more quantitative way. Using the *Corpus of Interactional Data* (CID) (Bertrand et al., 2008) involving French face-to-face conversations, we aim to extend previous experimental results to a *conversational-style* corpus. Our approach subscribes to the emergent corpus-pragmatic research as presented in the first Handbook dedicated to this new perspective combining both *pragmatics* and *corpus linguistics* (Aijmer and Rühlemann, 2015). Indeed this approach provides quantitative and statistical analysis (usually addressed by *corpus linguistics*) while taking into account the context-dependence of pragmatic phenomena (usually addressed by *pragmatics*). *Corpus pragmatics* also combines both a horizontal and a vertical methodology: “Given the dependence on context, pragmatic research has methodologically relied on the analysis of small numbers of texts where careful ‘horizontal’ reading is manageable, that is, where large and often whole texts are received and interpreted in the same temporal order in which they were produced and received – a methodology which, (. . .), contrasts sharply with the ‘vertical’ methodology prevalent in corpus linguistics” (Aijmer and Rühlemann, 2015: 9), mainly consisting on frequencies analysis. Also, the different annotations performed on corpus make this type of analysis possible at each of the different linguistic levels annotated. For example, part-of-speech tags (POS) provide the morpho-syntactic information for each token that can be easily extracted (vertical reading). In the present study, turns, morpho-syntactic information and laughter are investigated. This vertical reading relates a horizontal one insofar as our work deals with listening responses and knowledge about their functions established in previous pragmatic analysis. More specifically, we test to what extent the temporal evolution of the components investigated within the speech production of each speaker throughout narrative provides evidence in favor of *joint activity*, i.e. *co-narration* systematically performed by both participants and resulting in a specific turn-taking organization.

2. Background

2.1. Expectations and rights in asymmetrical activity

Storytelling is seen as *asymmetrical activity* involving different discursive roles of the storyteller/narrator and listener. Both participants however actively participate and work together to construct the story (Jefferson, 1978; Goodwin, 1984; Norrick, 2010, 2012; Bavelas et al., 2000; Guardiola and Bertrand, 2013). While conversing, participants must respect the expectations that they have for the activity in which they are involved. Within the scope of these expectations, the storyteller must ensure that he/she can begin to tell the story and will not be limited in speaking time given that he/she needs several turns (or *Turn-Constructional Units*) to achieve what is called a *large project* (Selting, 2000). Also the storyteller has to ensure the *tellability* of the story. Norrick (2007: 136) notes that “storytellers may worry about the scathing ‘so what?’” which may be the response to a story with no clear purpose or significance. Beyond the content level of narratives, the author also highlights the importance of context in which narratives have to be produced. The relevance of stories indeed depends on, among other things, the circumstances or goal (informing, making people laugh) or, the relationship between the participants. Thus, while some familiar stories may be unoriginal because they are precisely shared by several family members who take delight in telling and retelling the same events, stories involving unfamiliar speakers have to present new or unexpected events in order to be appropriate. Boundaries of tellability are therefore subject to change and within their scope of expectations, speakers have also to define these boundaries. So, this question of tellability can still be viewed as a “joint construct” on behalf of both participants (Norrick, 2007).

Like the storyteller, the listener is expected to adopt typical behavior. By accepting and becoming the receiver, the listener could be viewed either as “mute or invisible” or as “a speaker-in-waiting” (see Schober and Clark, 1989 for a review of different models which aimed at describing storytelling from a monological perspective). Unlike this autonomous view of conversation, it is fairly well-known by now that listeners as the story-recipient are actively involved and expected to provide appropriate responses (Jefferson, 1978; Norrick, 2008).

2.2. Listening responses in a joint activity

Storytelling is a *joint activity* in which the listener's role is just as important as the narrator's role in order that the storytelling is successful. Since 1970, Yngve has distinguished a parallel and subordinate channel by which the participant who is not speaking gives brief messages (such as *mh*, *uh*) to the main speaker without interrupting him/her. The author has suggested an interpretation consisting of a reciprocal effect by which backchannel is crucial in the regulation of dialog and more globally in the success of the communication. In this vein, Bavelas et al. (2000) have shown experimentally that expected responses in storytelling can be affected when listeners were distracted, and simultaneously

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