



Turn order and turn distribution in multi-party storytelling

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Abstract

In this paper we examine turntaking patterns in conversational storytelling. It has long been noted that turntaking in every-day narrative differs on a number of counts from turntaking in regular conversation. The differences, however, have, at best, been researched qualitatively based on casual observations and small datasets. Here, we base our analysis on two specialized corpora of conversational narrative, the *Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English* (SCOSE) containing American English 4- and 5-party stories and the *Narrative Corpus* (NC) containing British English 4- to 7-party narratives, as well as the conversational component of the *British National Corpus* (BNC). The analysis is decidedly quantitative and statistical in orientation. Specifically, we are concerned with turn order and turn distribution in conversational multi-party narrative. The aims are twofold. We wish to examine the validity of Sacks' description of storytelling as "an attempt to control a third slot in talk, from a first" (Sacks, 1992:18), a turn order pattern we refer to as the N-notN-N pattern. We further investigate whether individual speakers' turntaking styles have an impact on turn distribution, a measure intimately related to turn order. Moreover, given the structural differences in the data at hand (the SCOSE being raw-text, the NC being densely annotated) we employ largely different methodologies particularly in addressing turn order. The results on turntaking styles suggest that this factor cannot account for the noticeable increase in the narrator's turn share as soon as the conversational activity moves into storytelling. The results on turn order reveal the N-notN-N pattern's statistical overrepresentation in all multi-party narrative types examined. The implications of this finding are far-reaching. First, Sacks et al.'s dictum that turn order is not fixed in advance does not hold true for conversational narrative. Also, turn order in conversational narrative is not locally controlled, on a turn-by-turn basis, but globally, on the basis of the activity the conversationalists are involved in, viz. storytelling.

Second, a fundamental correlate of the N-notN-N pattern is the avoidance of double-responses, that is, of two consecutive response turns following the narrator's turn. This avoidance suggests that the turn order system underlying multi-party narrative is that of 2-party talk. Further, the double-response avoidance suggests the possibility that the source of the turn-order bias in narrative is a tacit agreement between the recipients to promote the single-recipient filling the single-response slot to a 'spokesperson' taking the turn on behalf of all other recipients. We also note the possibility of there being a recipient-subsystem for turntaking at the single-response slot interacting with the narrator-recipient turntaking organization but still, to an extent, working on its own terms.

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1. Introduction

Storytelling can be considered a fundamental mode of everyday linguistic interaction, both in terms of its social significance as the genre in which identities are formed and moral frameworks are propagated (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1993,

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Schiffrin, 1996, Bamberg, 2004a,b) and in terms of its claimed ubiquitousness in conversation (e.g., Labov, 1997, Ochs and Capps, 2001, Norrick and Neal, 2015). It has been extensively researched in discourse analysis, where it is “one of the most developed areas” (Schiffrin, 1984:314). While Labovian ‘big’ stories concerned with danger-of-death experiences elicited in socio-linguistic interviews (Labov, 1972) have long dominated the analytical scene, a “second wave of narrative analysis” (Georgakopoulou, 2006a:123) has moved ‘small’ stories center stage, that is, stories “situated in small-talk, chit-chat” (Bamberg, 2004a:368) and concerned with “under-represented narrative activities, such as telling of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to telling, deferrals of telling, and refusals to tell” (Georgakopoulou, 2006a:123; see also Bamberg, 2004a,b, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006b). Consequently, narrative research has discovered the enormous typological breadth that storytelling covers, depicting storytelling as a multi-generic activity and considering “narrative genre as a continuous cline, consisting of many sub-genres, each of which may need differential research treatment” (Ervin-Tripp and Küntay, 1997:139; see also Norrick, 2000, Rühlemann, 2013). In a “third wave” (Georgakopoulou, 2006a:125), the focus of attention has shifted to storytelling as ‘identity work’ (Bamberg, 2006:146), that is, to storytelling as a prime context in which “identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked” (Georgakopoulou, 2006a:125; see also Bamberg, 2004a,b, 2006; Thorne, 2004; Kraus, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006b, 2008; Gregg, 2011). Another strand of narrative research that has seen a surge of interest is the question of authorship. Based on the observation that “the content and direction that narrative framings take are contingent upon the narrative input of other interlocutors, who provide, elicit, criticize, refute, and draw inferences from facets of the unfolding account” (Ochs and Capps, 2001:2–3) broad agreement suggests that authorship is essentially shared between participants (see, for example, Goodwin, 1986a,b; Shuman, 1986; Norrick, 2000; Rühlemann, 2013). A large body of narrative research emphasizes the co-construction of narrative. In this, emerging, tradition, storytelling in conversation is defined as “an interactionally collaborative achievement” (Ryave and Alan, 1978:131; see also Duranti, 1986, Goodwin, 1986b, Schegloff, 1997, Holmes and Stubbe, 1997, Norrick, 2000, Ochs and Capps, 2001, Rühlemann, 2013).

Conversation Analysis, too, has been concerned a great deal with storytelling (e.g., Sacks, 1992). As regards turntaking, Conversation Analysts have long observed that turntaking in storytelling is distinct from turntaking in ordinary conversation. Goodwin and Heritage (1990:297), for example, note that storytelling requires “a suspension of the ordinary [turntaking] procedures for the duration of the story”. What these ordinary procedures consist of has most clearly been delineated in Sacks et al.’s (1974) seminal paper on turntaking. What special procedures replace the suspended ordinary procedures in storytelling has been made much less clear. In fact, Conversation Analysts have restricted themselves to a few (very useful) qualitative observations while quantitative examination has long been far off any agenda, Conversation Analytical or otherwise.

The goal of this paper is to investigate the extent and the ways that ordinary turntaking is suspended and replaced by narrative-specific turntaking in storytelling in every-day conversation. The focus of our investigation will be on turn order and turn distribution, two intimately associated turntaking measures. The methods are both statistical and corpus-linguistic. Statistical analysis is necessary to distinguish results that are due to chance (and hence merely indicative of characteristics in the sample studied) from results that are a reflection of characteristics in the ‘population’ (and hence generalizable from the sample to that population).

It is important to make clear from the outset that, given the intricacies of the corpus data exploited and the complexity of the statistical methods deployed, some of the remarkable nuance that discourse-analytical narrative research is capable of will have to be sacrificed.¹ For example, while we perfectly acknowledge the fact that the narrator-recipient relationship is far from being simply dichotomous but, at best, more adequately described as “asymmetrical, with tellers having a greater share in authorship than the recipients” (Rühlemann, 2013:2) we will retain, for the most part of the paper, a simple distinction between narrator and recipient. However, we note that this distinction is of a terminological nature introduced for practical purposes, namely to keep track of main tellers and co-tellers as they take their turns at contributing to the unfolding story. Also, we have decided against attempting to account for variation by narrative sub-genre (although the annotation of one of the corpora used, viz. the Narrative Corpus (see below), does allow sub-genres to be treated differentially) but will instead concentrate on personal-experience stories (both first-person and third-person, or vicarious experience stories). Personal-experience stories not only occur by far most frequently in our data but are also commonly seen as the prototypical narrative type.

Corpora are particularly well-suited for quantitative examination of turntaking phenomena if (but only if) they have XML (or similar) markup. XML markup typically identifies speakers’ utterances as ‘elements’ with associated attribute values including speaker IDs; these permit the assignment of utterances to particular participants and the examination of the

¹ As an anonymous reviewer argued, “the degrees of co-authorship of a story can vary dramatically across tellers and contexts and that there is systematicity in terms of how a story is introduced into a multi-party conversational context and subsequently told, on the basis of audience complexity and participation modes (e.g. knowing vs. non-knowing recipients, principal, ratified audience, etc.)”

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