

**Christoph Rühlemann.** *Narrative in English conversation: A corpus analysis of storytelling.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014. 304 pp. ISBN 9-780-52119698-7. Reviewed by **Alan Partington**, Bologna University.

Conversation analysis was, at its outset, the reserve of qualitative research. This changed radically with Biber *et al.* (1999) who, understandably and very profitably, chose conversation as one of their four genres to submit to minute corpus-assisted comparative quantitative scrutiny. The present volume concentrates on the study of one particular aspect of conversation, namely, narration or storytelling in conversational settings. More specifically still, the study is an inductive compilation of evidence to shed light on the research question or area of the co-construction of conversational narrative and to corroborate the research hypothesis that, contrary to traditions which foreground the concept of a single-teller, narrative is an “interactionally collaborative achievement” (Ryave 1978: 131). Narrative co-construction has been studied before but only qualitatively and certainly never with the employment of a scrupulously annotated corpus.

In his Introduction, the author defines co-construction as encompassing both *narrator* co-construction, the (not always conscious) strategies by which storytellers ‘recipient-design’ their stories by anticipating the listeners’ knowledge, interests and needs, and also *recipient* co-construction, the set of means through which recipients influence the ‘story trajectory of a narrative’ (Norrick 2000: 68), by some sort of intervention.

Chapter 1 discusses, first of all, what precisely conversation comprises (e.g. does it include, say, service encounters, telephone calls or prayer?) and how conversational narrative is defined, whether as a single genre or discourse type or as an open-ended and potential extendable collection of types (for example, first- and third-person stories, jokes, dream reports, hypothetical events, inter alia). A second section on participant roles sets out the author’s basic argument that storytelling is not performed simply by a ‘teller’ recounting to a ‘told-to’, but is a collaborative enterprise and that, indeed ‘narrator’ and recipient’ are actually “hypernyms for a broad range of subroles” (p. 9), which a participant can move amongst. A listener, for instance, can be defined as a Responsive or a Co-con-

structive Recipient depending upon the observed feedback they provide. A second apparently simple but actually problematic notion is that of temporal sequence; for instance, how much non-temporality can be tolerated in a narrative and how is switching between characters in the story handled chronologically? Another section recounts some of the controversies in the literature surrounding how real and predictable in the actual practice of conversational narrative is the classic Labovian narrative structure of Abstract – Orientation – Complication – Evaluation – Resolution – Coda. The next section returns in greater detail to the volume's main topic of recipient design, framing it additionally in terms of narrator planning, an 'orientation and sensibility' towards recipients, taking into account story processibility, shared knowledge and interest, recipient expectation and 'streamlining', that is, designing a story for economic and therefore aesthetic effect. The final section addresses the relevance or 'sense-making' of storytelling; why a story is recounted in the first place (its 'point'), a principal aim being identity building and expression and 'propagating moral stance', to which I would add, narrator-recipient solidarity construction and affirmation.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and tools used, in particular, the main features of the Narrative Corpus (the NC, described in greater detail in Rühlemann and O'Donnell, 2012). The NC comprises selected extracts of narratives, 153 in all, for a total of around 150,000 words, taken from the demographically sampled (balanced by sex, age group, region and social class) 'casual conversations' section of the BNC (Aston and Burnard 1998: 28).

The annotation scheme and practices adopted form one of the most significant and original aspects of the book. As the first and only annotated corpus of conversational narrative in English, the scheme had to be developed from scratch and decisions made *ex novo* of what to include. TEI-conformant XML codings were developed on several levels. These include, narrative boundaries (narrative initial – narrative proper – narrative final) and narrative types, including first-person experience, first-person fantasy, third person experience, joke, and so on (p. 48). They also include reporting (or 'discourse presentation') modes such as Free Direct, Direct, Free Indirect, and so on (p. 58; adapted from McIntyre *et al.* 2004), participant status such as Primary Narrator, Ratified Co-Narrator, Responsive Recipient, and so on (p. 53), and also quotative types comprising four major verbs SAY, GO, THINK and BE LIKE.

All tags were implemented manually, and one significant aspect of the process was that an initial tagged version of a text was proposed by one researcher which was then checked and revised by another in a learning process which

allowed the researchers to “revise decisions made earlier on the basis of increased coding competence” (p. 44).

The rest of the chapter contains an outline of the methods and tools employed in the research. These include standard concordancing and keyness analysis, but there is also a discussion on the use and utility of the XPath and XQuery tools, which allow the user to navigate through the levels of superordination and subordination inherent in XML annotated documents. XQuery in particular allows the user to perform a range of quantitative analyses and to represent data visually in various ways, including calculations of dispersion measures and the display of comparative distribution among different datasets.

The following four chapters, 3 to 6, each report a case study whose cumulative purpose is to “provide quantitative evidence of the co-construction of conversational narrative” (p. 218). The chapters all follow a particular format, namely, the initial outlining of a hypothesis followed by the presentation and discussion of evidence to corroborate the hypothesis, including any problems encountered relative to this evidence.

Chapter 3 concentrates on turn-taking, a principal concern of Conversation Analysis since its inception, but never before subjected to such close quantitative scrutiny. Two turn-taking measures are examined: turn order and turn size. The main finding regarding the former is evidence to support Sacks’s (1992) observation that narrators attempt to control every third turn, and that tripartite turn patterns consisting of speaker N (narrator) – speaker not-N – speaker N account for substantially larger proportions of tripartite turn patterns than expected, a significant departure from ‘ordinary’ conversation. The main finding regarding the latter is that the fluctuation between one speaker’s long turns and other speakers’ short turns (turn size fluctuation or TSF) is considerably more marked in narrative than in non-narrative speech, though the degree of homogeneity in TSF is shown to be highly dependent upon the type of narrator – recipient interaction, which the author takes as strong evidence of co-construction of turn size. Neither of these findings is particularly surprising, but much statistical evidence uncovered in corpus linguistics research eventually supports pre-theoretical intuitions (it would be worrying were this not the case).

Chapter 4 focuses on the topic of quotation marking and reports two case studies on how ‘auditory quotation marks’, particular *oh* and *well* might shed light on narrative co-construction. Drawing on the theory of lexical priming (Hoey 2005), the author argues that these two items have different *colligational* primings, the first for utterance launch and the second for quotation launch, and that their selection alerts the recipients to sections of heightened interest and concomitant possibilities for their own greater involvement in the storytelling.

Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which narrators involve their recipients by dramatizing storytelling. There has been considerable focus in past literature on how narrators build to a climax over the whole telling of the story, but Rühlemann argues that dramatic climaxes can be observed even within an individual narrative turn (for some reason he uses the term ‘utterance’). First of all he classifies reporting modes in a cline of most to least immediate (from the more ‘animative’ to the more ‘authorial’, Goffman 1981), Direct and Free Direct being classified as the most immediate and Representations of Voice and Use being amongst the least, and tests the hypothesis, using XQuery tracking of mode sequencing, that narrators employ more immediate reporting modes as the turn itself progresses. This is interpreted as a way of drawing in the recipients’ interest and building tension within the turn. The one quibble I have on this case study is the assumption that such tension building is evidence of narrative co-construction. An alternative explanation is that it provides evidence of skilled narrator *display*, which can easily be independent of any recipient contribution to shaping the narrative. The author argues that tension building is a facet of the way the narrator makes it “their business to attend to the recipient’s interest” (p. 172) but this does not appear to necessarily imply that particular recipients are co-fashioning the discourse in a particular direction; building tension presumably attends to the interests of any audience, co-constructive or entirely passive. To demonstrate co-construction in dramatisation, we would need to have more information in the kinds of tension being sought and their appropriacy to particular recipients, as well as more information on recipient active feedback of some sort.

Chapter 6 moves on to more solid ground regarding co-construction and shifts recipients “centre stage, investigating the ways they co-author [...] narrative” (p. 225). One case study indicates that greater recipient feedback correlates with narration length: “narrator verbosity increases exponentially with increasing feedback of listeners” (p. 225). However it occurred to me that, as is frequently the case, statistical analysis alone cannot determine directionality, that is, in the current study, whether more feedback provokes narrator verbosity or vice versa. Rühlemann does also provide a degree of structural evidence, principally the finding that telling/teller related recipient responses have a greater effect on narrator wordiness than only tale-related responses suggests that the direction is feedback – narrator behavior, but the question remains largely unproven.

A second case study looks at six types of formal recipient contributions (explicit narrator-recipient dialogue), namely, questions, answers, utterance completions, evaluative comments, extensions (adding details) and recipient

additions of different types of reported discourse. The main finding was that “recipient dialogue co-occurred with what could be identified as the chapter or cycle highpoint [and it] served to echo, extend, or intensify the climax” (p. 227). Rühlemann’s overall conclusion on the research in this chapter on recipient feedback, and perhaps on all the research outlined in the volume, can be summarized as “[n]arrators too must be seen as listeners, actively attuning their telling to the feedback they receive” (p. 226).

The volume ends with a peroration, indeed a plea, in favour of greater ‘annotation-driven corpus research’ (p. 228), the general implication of these studies being ‘to recognize the benefit of working with specifically annotated corpus data’ (p. 229), ‘specifically’ implying that the most commonly known form of tagging, POS, is often not sufficient. The author points out that, although the corpus texts derive from a pre-existing source, the case studies would simply not have been possible without its detailed bespoke mark-up.

However, Rühlemann is also candid about some of the issues involved in annotation. First, the cost-benefit calculation; annotation is extremely time-consuming and potentially expensive, especially if, as here, an ad hoc system needs to be devised and tested. But second, and more interesting are the linguistic-conceptual questions. Annotation “does not tolerate uncertainty”, it requires coders to take clear decisions: “even when annotators code a token as ambiguous, this coding [paradoxically] is an unambiguous decision” (p. 231). Moreover, the annotation scheme adopted will necessarily derive from, encapsulate and impose a theoretical pre-interpretation of the linguistic data which therefore precludes and excludes “contrary or diverging conceptual schemes” (p. 231). But this, we might add, is not a problem confined to corpus annotation. It is common to all grammatical analysis and it is not generally held against such analyses that they depend upon a particular grammar, SFG say, and therefore exclude the standpoints which might be available using other grammars. My own view, for what it is worth, cleaves to the dual principles of horses for courses but also transparency. This volume is a convincing argument for detailed annotation of a corpus for a specific set of studies, but it also renders it inappropriate to most other sorts of study; as Sinclair (1991) argues ‘clean-text’ or minimally-annotated (POS) corpora, on the other hand, can be adapted for many purposes. What is important is that a clean-text version of the corpus used here be available to other researchers into narrative to replicate these studies, possibly after devising their own annotation scheme.

This volume represents a most welcome and novel contribution to two fields, to conversation/ narrative analysis, thanks to its rigorous employment of quantitative techniques to the topic in hand, and to corpus linguistics because of

the particular corpus enhancement described above. The one glaring limitation to using pre-existing transcribed texts such as these from the BNC is the paucity of information on the paralinguistics going on during storytelling, including glance, gesture, tone of voice and, since the central topic of the volume is narrative co-construction and recipient feedback, this is a significant absence.

Finally, for the present reviewer, one of the refreshing aspects of this volume is that, in contrast to some work in corpus linguistics, ‘counting’ is not unquestioningly taken for granted as a virtue in itself. The author takes care to link observations to wider linguistic theory, for instance, to Sinclair’s notion of the idiom principle, but principally to lexical priming theory, in particular, priming for textual colligation (Hoey 2005). Almost all previous research on lexical priming has been conducted on written discourse but, taking an example from the studies here, sequencing of reporting modes in a single turn (Chapter 5) provides substantial statistical corroboration that textual colligation holds in spoken discourse too.

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