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Telling rights in storytelling and conversation

Oliver Naudorf
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1. Introduction

Storytelling in conversation is not yet a deeply situated topic in the field of linguistics. Conversational analysis itself is still a very young discipline in linguistics. In this paper I want to take a close look at an even less investigated part of the storytelling in conversation, namely the telling rights.

If we talk about telling rights we certainly cannot use the term solely for the fact that one speaker is or is not entitled to make certain statements. "You shouldn't have told anyone about that!" is an exclamation that can, but surely need not be taken as a sample statement for an instance in which a speaker has acted inadequately according to his rights in a speech act. As already indicated by the negation in the preceding sentence, such instances are not the only example for linguists referring to telling rights. They allude to talking rights out of many different points of view. To name just a few one could mention telling rights in the context of cultural differences, telling rights as participation rights (limited through age, status or knowledge) or just telling rights seen as the more or less organized turns in conversation. All of these approaches share some aspects, but nevertheless they are different approaches and use the same term to mean different things.

A basic distinction that probably can be noted this area of conversation analysis consists of the formalists, and linguists and psychologists who consider a speech act as social interaction, i.e., a process of negotiation. The formalists, like Labov and Sacks, look at the text as such and try to investigate regularities, for example, to produce a grammar of stories. On the other hand the interaction researchers like Shuman, Blum-Kulka, or Duranti see the act of storytelling or mere conversation as an act between people in

which they try to establish their opinions, or, in the case of storytelling, their knowledge of past experience.

The terminology that is used in all these different approaches is quite similar and so it is not very surprising that some terms like 'tellability', 'reportability' or 'storybility' come to mean different things. For example some authors use these terms almost interchangeably whereas others make sure that they refer to different phenomena in a speech act.

The theoretical part of this paper will consider both directions, but the main stress will be on the interactional approach. First I will show the theory of turn-taking developed by Harvey Sacks, then look at some authors who talk about co-narration and at the end of the theoretical outline I want to consider Shuman's and Blum-Kukla's ideas about telling and participation rights. I will clarify the ambivalent uses of terminology throughout the paper. Part II of the paper will demonstrate, by means of an analysis of a corpus of conversational narrative, the Sbccn, that the term telling rights can be applied to several different aspects in conversational narratives.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Tellability

Before I consider some works that are tangled up with telling rights, I want to clarify the term 'tellability'.

In the context of telling rights the terms 'tellability', 'reportability' and 'storyability' occur frequently and sometimes mean different things or are used interchangeably. The notion that a story is 'tellable' was coined by Harvey Sacks (1974). He observes that stories must be 'tellable' in order for their tellers to justify the turns they require in

conversation. Other authors, too, have used his term and sometimes used it in a different way. For example Amy Shuman (1986), as we will see later on, has used it in the sense of entitlement to tell a story. She replaced Sacks' term through the notion of reportability or storyability in the case of storytelling. In their works Shuman (1986) and Blum-Kulka (1993) focus on the fact that telling rights are very closely related to the knowledge of the related events. For them participation rights are due mainly to the knowledge of the related event. They state that the membership to a specific group is ratified through the knowledge of certain events. So, the membership to a certain group is constantly negotiated, even in a family. Tannen (1989) speaks of high-involvement when a story of a familiar event is told by several tellers that share the knowledge of the event. They all have equal rights to tell the story.

Labov and Fanshel (1977) distinguish between three relevant types of events: A-events (known only by the teller), A-B-events (known by teller and at least one person of the audience) and O-events (known by many or all members of a group or culture). Blum-Kulka and Snow (1992) further recognize F-events (events shared by the family members) which I consider superfluous because the definition of O-events also includes the group of a family.

Nevertheless the three terms ('reportability', 'tellability' or 'storyability') most often have the original Sacks meaning in linguistic literature.

Studies concerning the nature of tellability have shown that a tellable story does not necessarily have to be a newsworthy story (new information). Oft-told stories may also be tellable as the works of Norrick (1998), Blum-Kulka (1993), et al. show. For example, Blum-Kulka observed dinner table stories and noticed that children often tend to tell familiar stories as a part of the socialization process. That is to say, 'the point of a story' (Polanyi, 1979) that the teller has

to make in every story in order not to bore his audience and lose the entitlement to speak is not a new and extraordinary experience in all cases. Polanyi (1979) discovered that there are many aspects that make a story tellable. She set up a scheme that shows what is tellable and how it is told in different cultures. This observation clearly shows that a tellable story is not at all dependent only on the 'information state' (a term Erving Goffman (1974) uses) of the participants.

So far to the use of 'tellable' in the context of conversational narratives. In the following chapters I will discuss some studies that are related to telling rights.

2.2 Turn-taking in conversation

If we talk about telling rights in general turn-taking in conversation is a good place to start, because it is the basic element in the organization of conversation. In conversation every participant has to negotiate his or her right to talk, that is to say, they have to take turns and justify their right to contribute to the conversation. Harvey Sacks, together with Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), has developed some rules according to which the turn-taking operates in conversation. Their analysis of a corpus of conversational speech showed that overwhelmingly one party talks at a time in conversation (compare to Falk (1979): In the conversational duet the turns overlap quite frequently). Further, they noticed that the size and ordering of the turns can vary significantly. After their findings, they set up the following rules. A conversation starts with the turn-taking constructing component, which initially entitles the speaker to have a turn. After the initial turn has ended, there are three different possibilities. A next turn may start through the selection of the next speaker by the current speaker or through self-selection. The third possibility is that the current speaker continues, but if a next speaker is selected

no other party is entitled to speak.

This system can be regarded as the first intention to set up some rules for the investigation of telling rights in conversation. As the title "Systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation" already suggests, this approach to telling rights is rather formal and by far does not cover all aspects concerning the right to speak in conversation. In the next chapters I will contribute further details that have to be considered in relation to telling rights.

2.3 Co-narration

Co-narration is a phenomenon in conversational storytelling that is closely related to turn-taking. Co-narrating a story means that more than one author tells or retells a single story of an experience they are all familiar with, or at least have some knowledge about. They negotiate in the conversation who has the right to tell which detail or simply add what they think to be appropriate according to their knowledge when their turn has arrived.

In this field of co-narration several authors had ideas concerning the telling rights in such a speech act. The following paragraphs will show the most central ones.

2.3.1 Falk-Telling rights in the conversational Duet

Duetting is very closely related to the problem of turn-taking. As Falk (1979) claims, duetting gives both partners (they are supposed to share the same knowledge of the related event) the right to talk. Therefore initial turn-taking overlaps sometimes, but the partner never questions the talking rights of the other. The only purpose of interruptions in duetting is to follow the other's steps, not to challenge or question what the other has said. The competition in a duet is only about who is the spokesperson, not about the point of the story. Dueters are actually co-tellers who support each other.

Telling rights in conversational duets are never questioned by the dueting partner. That allows both of them to contribute to the story whatever detail they want until the story is complete. In the case of the duet it is clear that the shared knowledge gives both of the speaker equal rights to talk. They act as if they were one single speaker.

2.3.2 Goodwin-Audience participation

Goodwin (1986) claims that the alignment to a conversation is an ongoing process. The teller must take care that his audience is always attentive in order not to lose his right to speak. In everyday conversation, speakers often talk to a divided audience. Some join the speaker's topic, whereas others use the story as point of departure from the topic. Goodwin (1986) investigated a talk about motor racing between four adults (three men, one woman) during a picnic. During that conversation several problems arose for the speaker, Curt. Mike and Curt are quite familiar with the topic of motor racing and its context. They enter into a talk about a specific incident that happened after the last race. Gary and Phyllis, the two remainders, are not very interested in the topic. Gary, because he does not know much about motor racing, and Phyllis, because she does not see the point of the story (motor racing = a male domain). To make it short, Goodwin demonstrates in his paper that Curt's audience is not given equal rights to contribute to his story because of some contextual reasons and that Curt's right to tell his story is challenged by the audience. First, the participants possess different competence to contribute to the topic. For example, Gary is not accepted as equal teller because does not even know the names of the drivers. Second, Phyllis equally has the problem of acceptance because she challenges Curt's point of the story as not being tellable. Through the interpretative work of the audience the story may be led in another direction than that intended by the initial speaker. Curt really has to

make a great effort to lead the talk in his intended direction. Gary and Phyllis try to take the floor from him during the entire story¹.

The point here, in my opinion, is that telling rights have to be constantly negotiated and that they also largely depend on the knowledge about the topic, as we have already seen in chapter 2.3.1.

2.3.3 Ochs-Problem-solving through co-narration

In another work (Ochs, 1989) it becomes quite obvious that co-narration can also help solve outstanding problems of an individual. In this case social interaction is accomplished through adding missing information to another's story. That process brings up the problem of entitlement again. Can all participants add anything they want to a story? The question of involvement (see Tannen, 1989) has to be considered here again. Ochs (1989) finds that the entitlement to tell a story is not the exclusive right of the initial narrator. Even those who have not experienced the narrative can acquire entitlement through querying, expanding, correcting, or challenging existing formulations of the narrative problem. Everyone who has any knowledge about the topic in question is a potential co-author. If someone intervenes in a narrative he becomes co-owner of the story. The involvement structures and restructures relationships between the co-narrators.

Ochs comes to the conclusion that each exercise of narrative rights reconstitutes family relationships and the family itself as an activity system. Here again we see that the negotiation of the telling rights is a constant process. Ochs, as well as Goodwin, sees the necessity of the knowledge of the related events, but also takes into account that a participant can intervene on the basis of other aspects such as querying or challenging veracity. She notices that the information states of the participants are not the only

¹ For the complete story see appendix

determining factor concerning telling rights.

2.4 Entitlement and participation in a social and cultural context

If one hears the term telling rights, the association with it is probably whether or not a person is entitled to tell something. The more general view on telling rights that contains many other aspects, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, only comes after a longer consideration of the topic. Participation in a conversation is above all a matter of entitlement and in this chapter I will concentrate on this narrow sense of telling rights and for that purpose look at the works of Shuman (1986) and Blum-Kulka (1993) who investigated entitlement and participation in a social and cultural context.

2.4.1 Blum-Kulka-The cultural aspect of participation

In her study about cultural diversity in the dinner-table conversation narrative events of Jewish-American and Israeli families, Blum-Kulka (1993) discovered some interesting things concerning telling rights. In both cultures, participation rights for conversation exist, but are in some respects very different. Telling rights for children are respected in both groups but they have their difficulties to get the floor to talk. They may participate, but are nominated by their parents in most cases. That shows a kind of hierarchy with respect to telling rights. Social status or age might determine telling rights.

A further point Blum-Kulka (1993) makes in her paper is that both cultures treat the question of ownership of a story (almost equivalent to Shuman's (1986) term 'entitlement') in different ways. In American families ownership seems to be restricted to the familiarity with the story, whereas in Israeli families ownership is achievable through mere

participation. This observation shows that the involvement style, as Tannen (1989) uses it, is determined through different factors. Co-narration as regarded in chapter 2.3 occurs in both cultural groups and is treated similarly.

As a concluding point we can say that in the case of American and Israeli families cultural diversity differs in a very important aspect, namely story ownership. A further conclusion we can draw from this study is that children also have a right to participate, although it is restricted due to a hierarchy of social status and age. The problem of the social diversity with respect to telling rights becomes clearer in Shuman's (1986) study.

2.4.2 Shuman-Storytelling rights among high school children

In 1979 Amy Shuman started a three-year study of conversational interaction among school children at a mixed junior high school. She functioned as participant-observer in order to find out the communication habits of this speech community. She focused on different kinds of fight stories among the girls of the school. From this analysis of the fight stories she found some regularities. First, her study offers a proof that each speech community has rules and rights according to its own needs. Then she saw that through the telling of these stories, friendships among the participants constantly changed. This finding corresponds more or less to the negotiation of telling rights as we have seen it in chapter 2.3. The main reason for these changing relationships was the disregard of entitlement. As I have said above each group has its specific speech habits and rules, as these children did. They had a strict concept of what could be said by whom. 'Tellability' or entitlement, as Shuman (1986) calls the right to talk about someone, was a product of the relationship between teller, the listener, and the subject at hand. Although they also required knowledge of the related event in order to gain the right to talk about something, not

all people who had that knowledge were entitled to talk about it. Even hearers of stories that were not designed for their ears could be challenged for listening to them. Rules of privacy and politeness determined the entitlement apart from the relationships between the people involved in the narrative event. Talking about family affairs was a strict taboo, for example. No one would talk about another person's privacy, or otherwise, they would be challenged for interfering in someone else's business. This observation shows that the stories were highly dependent on the information states and contextual knowledge of the participants. When the pupils were relieved of this contextual pressure, as, for example, when they wrote in their diaries, their stories became more explicit and contained details that would have been unthinkable in conversation.

Apart from the findings that we have already seen in earlier chapters, such as the prerequisite of familiarity with the related story or cultural diversity, we can now add that the relationships between people, too, can determine telling rights. These relationships, or friendships in a narrower sense, are constantly exposed to challenges if one participant does not act according to the rules. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study in an adult speech community. Then the results could be compared to see whether problems of entitlement are treated differently in the adult world. Such studies in different speech groups could pave the way for some general observations with respect to entitlement.

2.5 Summary

To summarize, we can say that telling rights in conversation involve the following. A narrative event among several participants is organized in turns. The distribution of these turns functions according to a very complex system of which only some cornerstones have been investigated up to now.

Further, we can observe that in co-narration the question of telling rights is extremely relevant. In co-narration, the turns to talk have to be constantly negotiated and defended. In the special case of the conversational duet, telling rights are not challenged among the dueting partners. Competition exists only about who is going to tell which detail of the story and not about the point of the story as in other co-narrative events. In co-narration the knowledge of the related event is not necessarily a prerequisite for participation. Participants are also allowed to challenge or make comments, even if they do not share the teller's information state.

Furthermore it has become clear that a cultural diversity in relation to telling rights exists. Different cultural speech communities treat telling rights in different ways. For example, in Israeli families everyone can potentially contribute his or her comments to a story, whereas in American families only knowledge about the related events allows participation. Apart from that, we have seen in Shuman (1986) that probably every speech community has its own coherent system which determines what might be said to whom. In her study she found that entitlement was primarily determined by people's relationships.

3. Corpus Analysis

3.1 The SBCCN

In the following chapter of my paper I will examine some stories taken from the Saarbrücken Corpus of Conversational Narrative in order to find out to which extent aspects of telling rights are represented. The SBCCN is a corpus of about 15.000 words gathered and analyzed by Prof. Neal R Norrick, chair of English linguistics in Saarbrücken. My own analysis

will be a combination of the essential findings of the theory presented thus far and some of my own ideas about the topic.

The following analysis incorporates three stories. Each story will show several features that are closely related to our problem of telling rights.

3.2 'Bakery'

In the 'Bakery' story the two participants, Brianne and Addie, principally talk about the working conditions in a neighboring bakery. The conversation is built up by several partial stories. Their main concern is the treatment of the employees by their boss, Keith. The two participants seem to have a good knowledge about the social context around the bakery. Probably at least one of them might have worked in there for some time. If none of them had worked in there, the two participants and the other girls that are involved in the story at least share a very complex knowledge about the people that are in a certain relation with the bakery. So we can conclude that the story is about a topic both of them are familiar with. The difference of the information states of the two participants is that Addie knows a new story about Keith which she tells to Brianne. The telling rights are more or less equally distributed in this conversation, although Addie we have to admit that Addie talks a good deal longer. Both of them take their turns and add something to the story. At the beginning Addie dominates the conversation because she is the one who initiates the story about the working conditions in the bakery. Nevertheless, Brianne sometimes self-selects (Sacks, 1974) for the next turn because she also knows the circumstances that exist in the bakery. Although Brianne does not know the initiating story about the sickness of Sheila, she can perfectly contribute comments (e.g. "No way", "Oh, no"). and some details about the unfair boss, Keith. She is fully entitled to participate in the talk:

(1) Brianne: Judy's quit too by now. (Line 136-37)
Addie : Judy, yeah.

This short example that emerges in a talk about quitting employees who have been treated unfair by their boss Keith proves Brianne's knowledge about the setting and as we can see in line 137, it is not challenged by Addie.

When we try to get more involved in the problem of the story, we can notice further, more specific aspects concerning telling rights. Right at the beginning of the story the two participants talk about Keith's treatment of Sheila's sickness (probably a girl friend of them). Addie with the soon established support of Brianne, challenges Keith's behavior. After their consideration, he did not have the right to talk to Alison, an other employee of his, about having seen Sheila go to Monroe, but not coming to work, if he was not a hundred percent sure.

(2) Addie: And anyway, so Keith swore that it was Sheila in the car. Now Sheila heard all this through Alison. Because Alison, I guess, worked today. And, um, sh- he swore that it was her riding in the car. {Laughs}.

Brianne: {laughing} No way.

Addie: And I guess he said to Alison, cause Alison, um, he asked her, Alison, if she could stay a little later and she said "No, because I have to go to Monroe to get some things, y'know I have to run some errands." And he thought that it was a scam that Sheila was going with them.

Both of the participants are telling He said- She said stories (Shuman, 1986) all over the place, i.e., they cite what other people have said.

(3) Addie: And so he said, y'know, "I- If I find out that- that you (probably Alison) and Sheila ...

If Keith would come to know that Alison talks about him and business problems to other people, he would probably challenge her for not being loyal. That could be a thinkable variation of a challenge of telling rights from the point of view of Keith.

When the story goes on the girls talk about a similar behavior of Keith when Alison was sick. Addie comes up again with some He said-She said stories with regard to Alison's reactions to Keith's behavior.

When the story proceeds the focus gets away from Sheilas sickness and the bakery is considered in a more general way. Further He said-She said stories are told about different people. For our purpose the one about Astrid, another working mate, is quite interesting, because Astrid would very likely have challenged the, for her, offending story. If Astrid would have come to know Addie's sentence "She- she went around bitching about it. 'Yeah she had a hair appointment, I bet' or something like ..." probably a dispute between the two girls would have arisen.

All in all this conversation is about people talking about other people and challenging their behavior. The simple fact that Addie and Brianne are talking about others, gives way to the possibility that they, too, might be challenged by them. In this respect the story is similar to the stories Amy Shuman looked at. But nevertheless the present participants do not compete for turns or challenge one another for telling something wrong. At least in this story about a topic that is familiar to both, they share equal participation rights.

3.3 'Chipmunk'

With the 'Chipmunk' story we have a very good example of a collaborative telling of a familiar story. The setting for the story is a family dinner talk among the parents Pat and Ralph, and their college-age daughters Amy and Mary who are at home for a Thanksgiving break. At the beginning of the story Pat

says that she told the story about Amy and the chipmunk to somebody. Through Mary's exclamation "Oh [huhhuhhuhhuh]" it becomes clear that she remembers it quite well. Right in the following sentences there is some evidence that Ralph, the father, too, remembers the incident. For example when he adds the detail about the sunflower seeds. When we look at this story we notice that the participants of the conversation do not only share the social context of a group, in their case the family, but also the knowledge of the related experience. Some of them, apart from Amy even have been involved in it. That leads us to the question of ownership. Whose story is it? To that question there can only be the answer that belongs to all of them. Originally it has been Amy's story because she had the experience, but now as the others get involved in it through the repeated telling, it became a part of their knowledge and so they own it as well.

The present version is cooperative product. Everyone is busy to add at least some details to the story. Telling rights in this case are not a question of entitlement or participation right, but a question of managing to gain the floor to contribute something to the story and make his own point. They constantly negotiate who is allowed to tell which detail and check if nobody tells something wrong. For example Amy stresses that "it was twice", that she was scared, in lines 7 and 9, which is a detail that is not important for the others, but shows her emotional suffering. Once a participant has added a detail, the others acknowledge it by laughter or try to amplify it according to their own knowledge:

(4) Pat: All the seeds.

Ralph: All the seeds in a plastic bag.

Through this negotiation about details group membership is demonstrated. If you can add something to a story everyone in a certain group knows, it is an evidence that you have the

right to talk in this group as well. You belong to it.

The 'chipmunk' story shows that in collaborative narration the focus is on the negotiation about the point of the story. Entitlement is not questioned if the participants have knowledge about the related event. They can freely contribute and try to make their point. For example, for Amy the story is a scaring experience what she repeatedly says, whereas for Pat it is just a funny story.

3.4 'Up and over'

In this story we have almost the same setting as in the story stated above. The same family is talking about an accident that happened some time ago. There are two further participants (Jane and John) among them who also contribute something to the talk.

In this conversation the information states of the participants are not equally among the participants. Only the parents know about the accident in Flavey Road and co-tell it to their audience. Although the audience does not know about the incident they actively participate in the story, that is to say, they contribute through querying ("What do you mean the truck went over? Over what?" [line 8] or "So:o?" [line 14]) and with their comments, such as "[I think that reckless driving would be-]" in line 49, to the talk. They share the same social and cultural background with their parents. They probably know Flavey Road and are aware of what happens in accidents and how they are caused. This fact makes them legal participants in the conversation.

The tellers of they story sometimes have their problems with some details of the related event. If that occurs the other helps the partner to continue, as we can see in the following example:

- (6) Ralph: I think he burst into flames, didn't he?
Patricia: Mhm, ca- the truck ran right over.

Another interesting thing that happens quite often in this short conversation is, what Jane Falk (1979) calls 'dueting'. Ralph and Patricia seem to be very eager to tell their story. Sometimes that leads to some overlapping turns. In some instances a partner of the duet does not respond with the, by the other intended, accuracy and therefore the other adds still a further detail to the earlier said:

(7) Ralph: Ran right over him.

Patricia: Right **up** and over **and killed three young people**.

Apart from that there is an instance of dueting when they respond to a question exactly at the same time:

(8) Ralph: [A car.]

Patricia: [A car.]

At the end of the conversation the two parents drift into a private talk about a slow clock. They feel like the story is over, but the others still want to know further details about the accident. In the very last sentence of the transcript Patricia comes back to the initial topic and makes a concluding remark (coda) in the labovian sense.

For me the most interesting thing about this story is that there is no aggressive competition about turns of talk between the two main tellers. Although there are overlappings all over the place Patricia and Ralph never challenge the others competence or right to tell the story. They co-tell the story in a very effective and economic way.

4. Conclusion

First of all I think that it became clear in my paper that the

phenomenon of telling rights in conversation is not a matter can be explained in one sentence with one definition. When you look through the SBCCN you will find a lot different aspects with regard to telling rights. Already in the three stories which I selected for this paper the manifold character of telling rights becomes quite obvious. In 'bakery', for example, we find some aspects of the interactional approach of Amy Shuman. In that story we saw how gossip can form attitudes towards other people without any evidence if it correct or not what has been said about somebody.

In the 'Chipmunk' story we gained an impression of how telling rights are distributed in a fixed group. We saw that through negotiation of details of a familiar story membership to a certain group can be established. In our case, every member of the family can ratify his or her belonging through adding details to a story that is supposed to be family knowledge.

In the last story we looked at, we found that an audience of the same social and cultural background can contribute to a story, even if they do not know anything about the related event. They share contextual knowledge with the teller or tellers which entitles them to participate through querying or commenting on the topic. Further we noticed in 'Up and over' that dueting partners do not seem to have problems with the organization of their turns, even if they overlapp. They co-tell a story with equally distributed rights.

I would suggest that the thus far developed theory is applicable the many stories that emerge in conversation. Nevertheless I claim that there are a lot of aspects in conversation that are related to telling rights which still deserve a more detailed analysis.

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