

# Conversational Narration - Oral Narration

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## 1 Definition

“Oral narrative” is a term that covers a number of different types of storytelling: spontaneous conversational narrative (“natural narrative”); institutionalized oral narrative in an oral culture context; oral bardic poetry; simulations of orality in written texts by means of narrative strategies such as pseudo-orality or *skaz*. For narratology, oral narrative has been important at two different stages of the discipline. In Russian formalism (especially in the work of Propp) and during the 1960s (especially in the work of Bremond and Greimas) fairytales, which had their basis in orally transmitted storytelling, were used to analyze the deep structure of narrative and to discover functions of plot elements and typical actant structures (Jannidis → Character [1]). More recently, Herman, Fludernik and others, inspired by discourse analysis, have concentrated on conversational storytelling both as an interesting type of narrative in and by itself and as a prototype of all narration. This work has additionally had a close affinity with cognitive studies (Herman → Cognitive Narratology [2]). Institutionalized oral narrative as in the Homeric epics focuses on both the deep and the surface structure of narrative, analyzing plot-related motifs and the repetition of epitheta and formulae on the discourse level. The technique of pseudo-orality, finally, is a secondary phenomenon. It refers to the evocation of characters’ mode of utterance (especially in terms of dialect and colloquiality) in the written representation of speech.

## 2 Explication

The basic prototype of oral narrative is spontaneous conversational narrative. This covers narratives produced in face-to-face exchanges in a variety of contexts such as storytelling sequences at dinner parties, brief narratives interspersed in telephone conversations or in doctor/patient and lawyer/client exchanges. In the wake of Labov & Waletzky (1967) “natural narrative” has become the established term for this type of oral narration. In German, the *Alltagserzählung* (e.g. Ehlich ed. 1980) is current, emphasizing the fact that conversational narrative occurs in the framework of everyday interaction. Spontaneous (or *unsolicited*) conversational

narrative must be distinguished from solicited narratives told to interviewers. In the corpus of the *Survey of English Usage* (London), now the London-Lund Corpus, mealtime conversations, telephone conversations, etc. were taped in which narratives spontaneously occurred without solicitation or elicitation by the researcher. By contrast, in Labov's (1972) study, the material comes from solicited narratives in which interviewers asked African-American youths to tell stories about specific personal experiences. The same method was adopted for more extended acts of storytelling in Terkel ([1984] 1990). Unsolicited conversational storytelling takes place in very diverse circumstances, but it is also present in much informal exchange on the telephone, in social gatherings, etc. In the latter case, story sequences may emerge in which the conversation develops into a series of narratives (one joke after the other, one story after the other about one's worst experience with doctors, etc.). Spontaneously occurring natural narrative has received extensive analysis in the linguistic sub-disciplines of *discourse analysis* and *conversation analysis*. (See Brown & Yule 1983; Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998; Jaworski & Coupland eds. 1999; Johnstone [2002] 2008 for the former, and Atkinson & Heritage eds. 1984; Psathas 1995; Schegloff 2007 for the latter.)

The second and third prototypes of oral narration characterize institutionalized storytelling in an oral culture context. On the one hand, this includes oral poetry, on the other, traditional and not necessarily poetic (i.e. verse-form) storytelling. Based partly on the work of Lord (1960) and Parry (ed. 1971), Ong (1982), Foley (1990, 1995) and others have studied the emergence of traditional epic poetry and noted extensive similarities in structure and style between Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* and the oral epics of the Balkans (*guslar poetry*). Much of this research focuses on the complexity of epic poetry and on how oral production manages to create and sustain it with the help of formulaic elements. In addition, Parry's insights into the Homeric epics and Lord's analyses of contemporary *guslar poetry* raise questions regarding transformation from the oral to the written poetic tradition.

In addition to the tradition of oral poetry, where long epics in verse are performed, there are cultures in which narratives are presented by a storyteller to an audience that interacts with the narrator while the story is being told, serving as a kind of chorus or speaker of refrains. Such oral narratives can be found in various parts of the world, e.g. in Canada (Tedlock 1983), in African countries, and in India. In contrast to spontaneous conversational storytelling, this type of storytelling has an appointed bard who is a practiced performer; nor is it framed by an ongoing conversation between a small number of interlocutors in which stories are longer turns in verbal exchange. Even so, oral poetry and oral storytelling in traditional cultural contexts do have a frame: the institutional frame which gives the storyteller his exclusive "turn" as performer, providing for audience/bard interaction in

ritualized responses.

It could be argued that anecdotes, exempla, parables and similar short narrative forms introduced into sermons, speeches or lectures constitute an intermediate type of oral narration. In these contexts, narratives are inserted into ongoing oral discourse (as in spontaneous conversational narratives), but with one dominant speaker (as in oral poetry) rather than a framing conversational exchange.

The fourth type of oral narrative is “pseudo-oral discourse” (*fingierte Mündlichkeit*; cf. Goetsch 1985). Although, literally, the evocation of orality in literary narrative has nothing to do with actual conversational storytelling, this phenomenon is widespread in literary texts and therefore of crucial importance to the narratologist. Pseudo-orality occurs in two forms in literary (and sometimes in non-literary) narratives: the representation of dialect or foreign speech in written dialogue and the evocation of an oral narrator persona, as in the *skaz* (Ėjxenbaum [1918] 1975). As pointed out by Leech & Short (1981: 167–70), the transcription of oral speech in literary dialogue aims not at a phonologically precise rendering of dialect, but at accentuating typical dialect features. By orthographic means, authors thus seek to highlight the differences between standard written language and dialectal forms. Pseudo-orality should be distinguished from cases of an actual linguistic oral substrate as in the transposing of oral narrative into written (frequently verse) discourse. The question to what extent oral features in vernacular medieval texts are traces of an oral origin (as in oral poetry) or intentional superadded markers of oral delivery on the lines of *skaz*, hence signs of pseudo-orality, has been discussed controversially (Chinca & Young 2005; Vitz et al., eds. 2005; Reichl 2012).

In addition to narratives that evoke linguistic alterity by stressing stereotypical features, there are narratives that give prominence to a pseudo-oral narrative voice, a teller figure whose style suggests that the discourse has been uttered rather than written down. Such evocation of orality in narrative report can be based on the combination of several techniques. In English literature, it requires the avoidance of literate vocabulary and complex syntax. Thus, pseudo-oral narrators, such as Holden in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, are often garrulous, repetitive, contradictory and illogical; they keep interrupting themselves and tend to address a fictive listener or audience familiarly; they seem to have an intimate rapport with the fictional world, to which they apparently belong, and also do not shy away from expressing their feelings and views emphatically, thus setting themselves off from the typical authorial narrators of literary texts—aloof, bland, reliable, neutral.

Russian *skaz* (cf. Ėjxenbaum [1918] 1975; Vinogradov [1925] 1980; Schmid 2005: 156–76) often falls under this category of the pseudo-oral, but at times undermines

the mimetic quality of the represented discourse by having a naïve peasant narrator resort to inappropriately elevated (stylized) diction, e.g. the register of the legal or administrative elite. It must be noted that the evocation of orality in literary texts is just that: an evocation or stylization produced by highlighting the most striking features of oral language. What counts for narrative purposes is not a faithful copy of the “original” utterance in all its linguistic detail, but the effect of deviation from the norm through quaintness, informality, intimacy, lack of education, cultural difference, class ascription. The simplifications and exaggerations of the linguistic features of orality and/or register therefore serve the purpose of facilitating identification, stereotyping, “local color,” or *effet de réel*. The technique is also used to characterize the narrator persona, just as dialect in the dialogue of 19th-century fiction tends to underline class difference, lack of education or idiosyncrasy (cf. Dickens, Scott or Trollope).

### **3 History of the Concept and its Study**

Returning to the first category, spontaneous conversational narratives, a closer look will be taken at research results in discourse analysis and conversation analysis before going on to discuss their relevance for present-day narratology.

#### **3.1 Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis**

Discourse analysis developed as a sub-discipline of pragmatics, i.e. language in use (Levinson 1983). More immediately, it derives from the work of sociologists, in particular Sacks (1992). Sacks began by analyzing telephone exchanges at a call center and then went on to establish the basic rules of conversation, notably (in narrative sequences) “turn-taking,” “adjacency pairs,” “overlap,” “repair” and “abstracts.” His initial research (in 1972) was followed by a landmark contribution (Sacks et al. 1974) which concentrated on turn-taking. It was found that conversations are structured by turns taken and held by each speaker. In narratives, speakers are allowed longer turns, provided the interlocutors are alerted to the speaker’s intention to delve into a story. In ordinary conversation, turns often come in adjacency pairs, particularly at the beginning of exchanges: greeting/greeting; question/answer; request/agreement or compliance; command/compliance; identification/recognition (telephone); etc. Interlocutors frequently interrupt each other *and overlap* (B starts to speak while A is completing his/her turn), but they also proceed in fits and starts and may start their sentences over (*repair*): e.g. “I wanted... (pause) I was wondering... (pause) could you tell me when flight LS 03 comes in?” These frame conditions have a significant impact on how narratives are produced in spontaneous conversational narrative.

Discourse analysis has also been heavily influenced by Labov (1972) and his school of discourse study, which remains fundamental to the study of conversational narrative. Labov collected narratives elicited in interviews with young African-American males, and from this material he developed a model of the structure of natural narrative. Labov & Waletzky (1967) propose a model of episodic narrative consisting of a basic structure: abstract; orientation; narrative clauses (insert clauses of delayed orientation and evaluation); result; coda. Abstract and coda provide a link with the conversational frame, while the orientation section introduces characters and setting. The authors also introduced the terms “point” and “reportability” or “tellability”: to be effective, narratives must be “newsworthy” (reportable) and have a “point” (demonstrate something). These features play a crucial role in Fludernik’s definition of experientiality, which consists in the dialectic of tellability and point (1996: 26–30; Baroni → Tellability [3]).

Discourse analysis since Sacks and Labov has developed in great strides. Many fruitful insights into natural narrative and oral exchange have been gained by Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, Schiffrin, Chafe, Tannen, Quasthoff, etc. Besides focusing on the structure and syntactic and lexical peculiarities of natural narrative, this research has moved into elucidating the psychological and cultural functions of conversational storytelling (Bamberg ed. 1997; Ochs & Capps 2001), the construction of identity (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2004), and questions of gender (Tannen 1990) as well as the aesthetic effects of using quoted speech or thought (Schiffrin 1981).

Conversational exchanges, including narratives, come not in sentences but in discourse units (Chafe calls them “idea” or “intonation units”) which are set apart by pauses and the completion of frames (Ono & Thompson 1995). To keep an audience’s interest, natural narrative is often repetitious and interlaced with verbatim dialogue by the participants in the events and even quotations from their thoughts, thus fictionalizing and dramatizing stories in ways that are reminiscent of novels or short stories (Tannen 1984, 1989; Fludernik 1993: 398–433).

Conversational narratives also employ narrative and non-narrative “discourse markers” (Schiffrin 1987), namely particles (mostly adverbs) placed in conjunct or adjunct position of a clause but whose “meaning” remains vague. They serve primarily macro-structural discourse functions such as initiation of a new topic, return from a side remark to the main topic, capturing the interlocutors’ attention, etc. Specifically narrative discourse markers shift between the on-plot and the off-plot levels of conversational narratives, and they also mark the key points of narrative episodes (Fludernik 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1996).

More recently, conversation analysis has been established as a still more refined

research discipline for examining conversational exchange. According to Hutchby & Wooffitt (1998), discourse analysis describes the systematic, rule-governed features of natural narrative, whereas conversation analysis is concerned with the performative and interactive aspects of conversational exchange. In particular, conversation analysis studies the online production of utterances and the unfamiliar shape of oral syntax (Atkinson & Heritage eds. 1984; Longacre [1983] 1996; Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998; Schegloff 2007). However, few conversation analysts deal with narrative, Quasthoff & Becker (eds. 2005) being an exception.

Another sub-discipline, having more literary credentials, is *critical discourse analysis* (Hodge & Kress [1979] 1993; Fairclough 1995; Carter 1997; Wodak & Meyer 2001; Blommaert 2005), which studies how discourses generate, transmit and perpetuate ideologies and interpellate readers. Two handbooks of discourse analysis also discuss some aspects of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk ed. 1997; Schiffrin et al. eds. 2001).

### **3.1 Oral Poetry and Narratology**

Analyses of oral poetry have concentrated on two questions: formulaicity and motifs. The formulaic repertoire of the epic was found to employ recurring epitheta for common objects and heroes such as “the crafty Ulysses.” Whole verse lines are repeated nearly verbatim in order to facilitate oral composition and delivery. The oral epic is also characterized by a recurrence of typical motifs such as greeting between host and guest, raising of the cup, embarkation, burial of the fallen hero. More narratologically relevant are discussions of narrative episodes based on Bremond (1973), revealing the affinity between the structure of the epic and that of the fairy tale (cf. Wittig 1978). However, due to narratology’s concentration on the novel and on prose fiction, there has been little narratological analysis of epic verse narrative in English studies. However, scholars in classics have contributed immensely to the narratological study of ancient Greek and Latin narrative, including the verse epic. (See especially de Jong 2001, 2004; Grethlein & Rengakos eds. 2009).

### **3.2 Relevance of Conversational Narrative for Narratology**

While classical narratology, in the foundational work of Propp ([1928] 1968) and Bremond (1973), analyzed short forms of narrative (the fairytale), the emphasis fell on event sequences rather than on the oral delivery of such tales (in the absence of tape recordings, written transcriptions were used). Narratological models such as those of Genette and Stanzel shifted their interest to the discourse level of narratives but were primarily concerned with the novel, largely disregarding narratives prior to the 18th century and all forms of oral narration. Between the

complexity and sophistication of the novel and seemingly unstructured, syntactically misformed conversational narratives, a wide gap was perceived, felt to be unbridgeable.

However, in the 1970s discourse analysts increasingly undertook research into the structure of conversational narratives, analyzing them in their own right. In addition to studies by Labov, Tannen, Johnstone and Chafe for English, major work was carried out for German (Ehlich ed. 1980; Quasthoff 1980; Quasthoff & Becker eds. 2005; Brinker & Sager [1989] 2006) and French (Gülich 1970; Mondada ed. 1995; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1996, 2001). In the field of narratology, two researchers have drawn inspiration from conversational narrative as a major source of their own work.

Herman (1997, 1999) pleads for the relevance of natural narratives for postclassical narratology. Taking a cue from Young (1999), who examines the performative nature of spontaneous conversational narrative and the creation and maintenance of self in patient/doctor exchanges, Herman proposes a model of conversational storytelling treated as an interactive process in which the borders between ongoing conversation and story are marked. He underlines the “jointly referential and evaluating function” (1999: 231) of modal expressions and repetitions in conversational narratives and emphasizes their “interactional achievement.” Based on a cognitive model in which producers of stories and their listeners rely on cognitive action schemata and inferences drawn from the events related or from information provided by the narrator, Herman presents narratives (in his example: elicited ghost stories) as relying on “a process of negotiation between storytellers and their interlocutors” (239). His ultimate aim is to examine narrative competence in conversational narrative.

Fludernik moved into the study of conversational narrative through the problem of the historical present tense. She developed a model of episodic narrative structure (a modification of Labov) in which the historical present tense can occur at key points in a narrative episode (1991, 1992a), serving a highlighting function (in modification of Wolfson 1982). Fludernik (1996) went on to define conversational storytelling as a prototype of narrative *tout court*. She maintains that conversational narrative is basically about experientiality and that this is also true of the fictional narrative of novels and short stories (53–91), therefore providing a bridge between oral and written forms of narrative on the basis of narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [4]) and the purpose of storytelling (point and tellability). She further demonstrates that substrata of the oral pattern of narrative episodes can be traced in English medieval and early modern texts (92–128). In the history of English literature, the formal structure of the novel, which looks so very different from that of conversational narratives, developed slowly out of its oral roots in episodic

narrative.

Over the past forty years, massive material has become available to discourse analysts. Much of it was gathered in medical or therapeutic contexts (cf. Bamberg ed. 1997), but oral history has also produced extensive records (Perks & Thomson eds. [1990] 2006). One sophisticated model of conversational storytelling is provided by Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann (2004), describing conversational narrative as a process of ego construction, presentation of self, and negotiation of identities. In focusing on these performative issues, the authors come strikingly close to the kind of analysis of literary narratives undertaken by literary critics (Bamberg → Identity and Narration [5]).

## 4 Topics for Further Research

Now that so much conversational narrative is available in transcript, there is ample opportunity for narratological analysis of this material. The handling of dialogue and thought processes in conversational narratives, the management of time schemata, deictic shifts, the question of whether the concept of focalization (Niederhoff → Focalization [6]) should be used in the analysis of conversational narratives—these topics and more could well come into the scope of extensive research. Particularly with the narrative turn at the end of the 20th century, such an emphasis on naturally occurring stories could provide an increasing awareness of the affinity between natural narrative and more literary and elaborated forms of storytelling.

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