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Tellability

Raphaël Baroni
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1 Definition

Tellability is a notion that was first developed in conversational storytelling analysis but which then proved extensible to all kinds of narrative, referring to features that make a story worth telling, its “noteworthiness.” Tellability (sometimes designated “narratibility” or “reportability”) is dependent on the nature of specific incidents judged by storytellers to be significant or surprising and worthy of being reported in specific contexts, thus conferring a “point” on the story. The breaching of a canonical development tends to transform a mere incident into a tellable event, but the tellability of a story can also rely on purely contextual parameters (e.g. the newsworthiness of an event); in conversation it is often negotiated and progressively co-constructed through discursive interaction. Tellability may also be dependent on discourse features, i.e. on the way in which a sequence of incidents is rendered in a narrative.

2 Explication

Publications devoted to tellability differ according to the importance given to: (a) the concept of narrativity; (b) the nature of the story told and its connection with narrative interest; (c) the discourse features of tellability; and (d) the contextual parameters determining the “point” of a narrative.

2.1 Relation to Narrativity

Scholars generally distinguish tellability from narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [1]) because, firstly, tellability is perceived independently from its textualization (e.g. tellability is involved when a potential narrator wonders whether his or her story—lived or invented—is worth telling) and secondly, because stories that meet formal criteria of narrativity may remain pointless and simply fail to raise the interest of the audience (cf. Ryan 2005: 589; Herman 2002: esp. 100–09). However, some scholars bring tellability and narrativity closer together by adding to the various formal criteria defining narrativity its “value” in specific contexts (e.g. Bruner 1991; Prince 2008: 23–5).

2.2 Interest of the Story

In light of the story/discourse distinction, it is generally assumed that tellability pertains only to the story level and that it should thus be dissociated from the broader concept of narrative interest as comprising both story and discourse features. Since a good story poorly told can be ruined or, conversely, the most insignificant incident can become captivating when told by a skillful narrator, some critics find it difficult to consider any aspect of narrative (sequence, plot, tellability, point, interest, etc.) independently from its discursive or textual manifestation. Consequently, narrative interest might be proposed as a term for tellability when dealing with the interconnection between story and discourse.

Semantic and cognitive studies have provided interesting insights into how salient events can transform a mere occurrence or a "something happens" (type I event) into a "tellable" or "reportable" one (type II event) (Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [2]; cf. Hühn 2007). Bruner has insisted on the fact that "to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from" (1991: 11). Such a "precepting event" can be linked to dynamic conceptions of plot, and in particular to its complication phase (see Baroni 2007: 167–224). At this level, it is assumed that there is a general human interest for stories reporting events that have a certain degree of unpredictability or mystery. In Ryan's (1991: 148–74) possible worlds semantics approach, the more complex virtual outcomes are, the more tellable the story is.

2.2 Discourse Structures of Tellability

According to Sacks, "the sheer telling of a story is something in which one makes a claim for its tellability" (1992: 12). By combining formal and functional descriptions, sociolinguistic approaches to conversational storytelling have shown that the tellability and point of a narrative are reflected in specific features of discourse structure. Thus evaluation devices, for instance, form "part of the narrative which reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units" (Labov & Waletzky 1967: 37). In a functionalist interpretation of those formal attributes of tellability, evaluation devices are described as a way to avoid a "so what?" reaction from the audience. Nevertheless, a number of recent studies have argued that evaluation devices are quite difficult to pinpoint as actual narrative structures, especially in cases of non-conversational or literary stories, and that they are not sufficient to guarantee the tellability of a story. As Prince puts it: "after all, claiming that (sequences of) events are unusual, extraordinary, bizarre, unfortunately does not suffice to make them so" (Prince 2008: 24).

2.3

Contextual Parameters of Tellability

General features of tellability remain on a level of description aimed at singling out the universals of narrative. However, contextual approaches tend to insist on the importance of genre, historical or culture-specific constraints and, for conversational storytelling, on the role of the interaction in which storytelling takes place. Sacks associates tellability with “local news” because stories generally begin with some reference to a new or unexpected event for the audience. Thus, the tellability of the same event might change according to the knowledge of the audience: we don’t tell the same stories to someone we see everyday as compared to someone we see once in a while. As summarized by Norrick, “the sort of news that makes a story salient today will no longer make it salient tomorrow” (2004: 80). For Polanyi, describing the violation of a norm necessarily involves giving a minimal account of the canonicity that has been breached. Bruner has pointed out that even breaches “are often highly conventional and are strongly influenced by narrative traditions” (1991: 12). Polanyi further maintains that tellable materials can stimulate interest culturally, socially, personally or with some combination thereof. In a different vein, Hühn stresses the fact that eventfulness, which confers a “point” on a story, is “context-sensitive and consequently culturally as well as generically specific and historically variable” (2008: 143). Moreover, genre, as Ryan points out, can also come into play: “whereas popular literature invests heavily in the tellability of plots, high literature often prefers to make art out of the not-tellable” (2005: 590). Other researchers (e.g. Norrick 2000, 2005; Ochs & Capps 2001) insist more on the negotiation and co-construction of tellability in oral storytelling performance and have also extended the concept to include “low tellable” and “untellable” stories.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

A forerunner to functionalist approaches of tellability can be found in Aristotle’s discussion on what kind of events a drama should imitate. Aristotle recommends portraying events that produce emotions such as pity or fear (1449b); events with the greatest “cathartic” effect are those whose development, even though causally connected, are unexpected by the audience (1452a). However, such considerations are related only to a specific genre of dramatic representation and cannot be incorporated as such into a general theory of tellability.

In their pioneering article published in 1967, Labov & Waletzky stated that the formal properties of narrative should always be related to the functions they fulfill in narrative communication. “Labov’s great credit,” notes Bruner, “is to have recognized that narrative structures have two components: ‘what happened and why it is worth telling’” (1991: 12). By stressing narrative performance (Berns

→ Performativity

[3]), they addressed questions left out of account by the structuralists, showing that narratives which serve only to recapitulate experience “may be considered empty or pointless,” but that they also serve “an additional function of personal interest determined by a stimulus in the social context in which the narrative occurs” (Labov & Waletzky 1967: 13). The authors showed that “most narratives are so designed as to emphasize the strange and unusual character of the situation” because a “simple sequence of complication and result” does not necessarily suffice to indicate the relative importance of the events told or the “point” of the story (34). This led them to single out phrases and words that contribute to fulfilling this contextual function, those parts of narrative being named “evaluation devices” (37; cf. Labov 1972: 366−75). They showed that evaluations can appear in various forms, such as direct statements bearing on the unusual nature or significance of certain incidents, lexical intensifiers, suspensions, repetitions, judgments, etc.

Sacks is another pioneer in the study of tellability. He has emphasized the contextual parameters of tellability and the dynamics of its co-construction in the discursive interaction. As summarized by Karatsu: “In contrast to researchers who relate tellability to the unexpectedness or extraordinariness of events, Sacks (1992) discussed how ordinary events that people experience in their daily life become worth telling as a story (“storyable”) in everyday conversation, and how their orientation to tell their experiences as something worth telling affects their way of telling. Sacks pointed out that a person learns what is tellable by virtue of its “total currency,” for example, gossip value, or by virtue of other people’s interests, and that a person learns to treat some items as tellable because relating a story that is tellable is requested by others” (Karatsu 2012: 32). Along the same line, Karatsu has deepened the analysis of conversational storytelling by singling out four parameters affecting tellability: “(a) the embeddedness of the story in the conversation, (b) the participants’ view of past events in the story, (c) the participants’ knowledge in relation to the content or elements of the story, and (d) the participants’ concern about the social circumstances” (Karatsu 2012: 36).

Although the study of tellability has its roots in the analysis of conversational storytelling (Fludernik → Conversational Narration – Oral Narration [4]), the concept was quickly broadened to include all kinds of narratives. Pratt (1977; see also van Dijk 1975) played a significant role in expanding the pragmatic approach developed by Labov and Waletzky to literary narratives. Stressing the context-dependency of narrative left out of account by the structuralists, she demonstrates the pertinence of point for “artificial” narratives. Furthermore, in applying Grice’s *Cooperative Principle* to literary discourse, she showed that the maxim of “relevance” can be associated with the notions of “evaluation” and “point” (the unusual, the amusing, the terrifying, etc.).

Given the importance of situation of discourse, context, and cultural conventions in the degree of tellability a story might possess, Polanyi emphasized that “stories, whether fictional or non-fictional, formal and oft-told, or spontaneously generated, can have as their *point* only culturally salient material generally agreed upon by members of the producer’s culture to be self-evidently important and true” (1979: 207). For Polanyi, instead of “how” people structure their stories in order to make them interesting, tellability raises the more basic question of “What is worth telling, to whom and under what circumstances?” (1979: 207). She further contended that the point of a story “may change in the course of the narration” and that it is subject to negotiation. She developed a simple methodology for “identifying and investigating beliefs about the world held by members of a particular culture” (213) by analyzing the negotiation between participants “about what is to be taken as the point of the story” (214; cf. Prince 1983; Rigney 1992).

Ryan (1991) postulates that in addition to the features focused on by traditional pragmatic studies on tellability (evaluation devices, unusualness of facts placed in the speech situation, newsworthiness), it is possible to articulate a purely semantic and formal conceptualization of tellability. For her, the *fabula* is a network of embedded narratives that can be both actual and virtual. A character’s goal might be actualized as successful, but its tellability depends on the fact that, virtually, it might have been unsuccessful. Ryan concludes that “some events make better stories than others because they project a wider variety of forking paths on the narrative map” (2005: 590; cf. Ryan 1986).

Recently, the connection between narrativity and tellability has received more attention. Herman has linked the degree of narrativity to the degree to which expectations regarding the storyline are violated, the former aspect being closely related to tellability (2002: 90–2). More extreme is the position of Fludernik, who grounds her conception of narrativity in “experientiality”: “For the narrator the experientiality of the story resides not merely in the events themselves but in their emotional significance and exemplary nature. The events become tellable precisely because they have started to mean something to the narrator on an emotional level. It is this conjunction of experience reviewed, reorganized, and evaluated (‘point’) that constitutes narrativity” (Fludernik 2003: 245; cf. Fludernik 1996: 70). On the other hand, Sternberg has grounded his conception of narrativity in suspense, curiosity, and surprise, which contribute to “the three universal narrative effects/interests/dynamics,” asserting that they necessarily rely on the interplay between the temporalities of actional and discursive sequences (2001: 117). Following his position, narrative interest may well be an appropriate term for tellability when the concept embraces both story and discourse instead of focusing

only the discourse-independent features of tellability.

Ochs and Capps (2001) distinguished two different poles in conversational narratives. The first is identified with highly tellable accounts and generally involves a single active teller with a passive audience. This corresponds to the prototypical narrative studied by Labov and Waletzky that involves, for example, a near-death experience. In such cases, the story conveys a clear point and is more or less detachable from its context of realization. The second pole can be exemplified by a moderately tellable story which is embedded in surrounding discourse and activity, is co-constructed by several active co-tellers, and conveys an uncertain fluid moral stance (Ochs & Capps 2001: 18–24). This approach draws attention to conversational narratives with a low degree of tellability in which "partners are grilled about their day's activity and reel out what happened reluctantly, without bothering to dress up the events as particularly important" (34). The authors insist on the fact that conversation "creates an opportunity to launch a personal narrative whose storyline is not resolved" (35). They argue that the point of a story and its relative tellability are not always characteristics found by the narrator in the potential story before it is performed, but rather variables that must be factored in during the process of narrating, involving several co-narrators cooperating in construction of the storyline.

Another interesting feature of the notion developed by Ochs and Capps is the reflection on "untold stories." Here, tellability serves to explain negatively what cannot be narrated due to a selective memory that filters experience, childhood amnesia or trauma, i.e. events that "remain inaccessible for narration because they are too painful" (2001: 257). However, in this case, it might be more appropriate to distinguish strictly between what is worthy of being narrated and what is accessible to narration. Both phenomena are highly context-sensitive, the latter depending specifically on psychological and cultural conditions (such as psychic resistance or taboos). Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) have highlighted another kind of "untold stories." In the course of a conversation, some narrators may claim that they could tell a noteworthy story but that for some reason they won't because, for example, they promised to someone they wouldn't. In this case, "alluding to the potential of a story and rhetorically foreshadowing its potential content as relevant and highly reportable, without even mentioning any event—let alone event sequence—moves [the narrator] into the role of having the potential to contribute to the topic under discussion in a relevant way. Thus, while traditional narrative analysis relies heavily on the story's content (e.g. reportability of events and the breaching of expectations) to reason for its tellability, [these] interactive moves show tellability as something that is interactively achieved" (2008: 387–88).

In a related development, Norrick has defined what he calls the "dark side of

tellability," exploring stories that are too personal, for instance, or too embarrassing or obscene to be told. He concludes that tellability is "a two-sided notion: Some events bear too little significance to reach the lower-bounding threshold of tellability, while others are so intimate (or frightening) that they lie on the dark side of tellability" (2007: 136). Being situated on the dark side of tellability does not mean that those stories are not told. Smith and Sparkes have studied how a narrator, who became disabled after an accident, moved from a narrative "both tellable and acceptable in terms of plot and structure" toward a "chaos narrative that currently frames his daily experience" but that is located on Norrick's upper-bounding side of tellability. "Due to its transgressive, unwelcome, and frightening nature, this is a narrative that people prefer not to hear and find it very difficult to listen to on those occasions when it confronts them" (Smith & Sparkes 2008: 230–31).

Norrick has also drawn attention to situations where the rule "don't tell what the others know" is lifted, as in humor, where "the enjoyment of group conarration and laughing together more than make up for a lack of news in the story itself." He concludes that "We might go on to ask where else the general rule is lifted. Certainly, there are other occasions where we tell stories with little or no claim to reportability, and it would be of interest to identify such occasions and to investigate the kinds of stories told in them" (Norrick 2004: 104).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

Based on studies such as Ochs and Capps (2001), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) and Norrick (2000, 2004, 2005, 2007), topics calling for additional research are descriptions of interactional dynamics related to specific kinds of narratives, ranging from "stories with little or no claim to reportability" to untold, untellable, or hardly tellable narratives, those situated on the dark side of tellability. As advocated by Karatsu, "in recent works, researchers paid close attention to various kind of stories, e.g. shared stories (Norrick 2000) and hypothetical stories (Ochs & Capps 2001) as well as stories that are negotiable/collaborative in nature. Going beyond the analysis of evaluation and evaluative devices, they pointed out that unlike a story in a monologue or in a written text, the tellability of a story in everyday conversation does not necessarily rest on the 'sensational nature of events' (Ochs & Capps 2001: 34) or on the teller's skill in rhetorical composition. The tellability of a story also rests on how the story is introduced, on 'interactional dynamics' (Norrick 2000), and on the participants' common interests and values in their daily lives (Georgakopoulou 2007; Ochs & Capps 2001; Sacks 1992)" (Karatsu 2012: 6).

As Norrick has shown when dealing with "humor" (2004), tellability must be explored

in close connection with generic conventions, especially when the concept is used beyond conversational analysis. It is clear that parameters defining tellability differ completely when a story is told to captivate the audience, explain a fact, justify a behavior, reflect on a life trajectory, or assert one's identity. The breach of a canonical order is more relevant in popular fiction or in personal anecdotes told to amuse than in experimental literature or in testimony before a judge (cf. Baroni 2009 : 66–71). On the other hand, despite Sternberg's (2003) reservations, there is a need to further clarify the relation between tellability and narrative interest. Finally, due to its connection with experienciality (Fludernik 1996), tellability could become a key concept for exploring the interface between life experience and its narrativisation, because it addresses directly the question of how and why some incidents become the object of a narration and others do not.

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