Story formulations in talk-in-interaction

Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards
Loughborough University

This article contrasts ‘mainstream’ narrative analysis, and the study of researcher-elicited narrative accounts, with conversation analysis and the study of naturally occurring narratives-in-interaction. Our analysis extends previous conversation analytic and discursive psychological work on storytelling (i.e., how stories get embedded in sequences of talk; the actions storytelling does), by focusing on the location and function of speakers’ story formulations and orientations to narrative (e.g. “I think we should start at the beginning”, “You want the full story, or…?” , “there’s always two sides to every story”). Rather than treating such ‘meta-formulations’ as partial expressions of a general folk theory of narrative, we examine their action-orientation and the way they are shaped for the occasions of their production; how members’ commonsense notions of stories are displayed in the interactional contexts in which they are put to use. The argument is illustrated by a range of brief examples from mundane conversation, police interrogation, and neighbour dispute mediation. (Story Formulations, Conversation Analysis, Discursive Psychology, Meta-Communication, Police Interrogation, Neighbour Mediation)

In the decade since this journal dedicated a special issue to the celebration and examination of Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) pioneering work on the structure of oral narrative, the field of ‘narrative analysis’ has burgeoned exponentially. In addition to studies of narrative structure and constituent components (e.g., ‘abstract’, ‘complicating action’, ‘temporal junctures’), a large subset of work has focused on understanding ‘narrative’ as the primordial organizing and sense-making framework of social life. Many writers argue that it is through storytelling that people’s lives are experienced and made meaningful, and their identities constructed: “Through life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they come, they are their stories” (Cortazzi, 2001, p. 388).

Requests for further information should be directed to Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11, 3TU, UK. E-Mail: e.h.stokoe@lboro.ac.uk & d.edwards@lboro.ac.uk
Although a variety of data sources are used for analyses, Nygren and Blom (2001) observe that the majority of narrative research examines researcher-elicited accounts obtained in interviews. Specialist techniques for eliciting narratives have been developed, partly in response to criticisms that ‘semi-structured’ interviews overly determine what participants can say, and treat their anecdotes as irrelevancies (Jones, 2003). In contrast, ‘life history’ or ‘biographic’ interview methods are designed to produce extended, uninterrupted narratives about ‘the life story’ and life’s stories. One example is Wengraf’s (2004) Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM), which requires passivity on the part of the interviewer whose contributions are restricted to “minimalist-passive” ‘back channel responses’ (Wengraf, 2004, p. 10).

The aim of the BNIM, and similar approaches (e.g., Hollway & Jefferson, 2004), is to produce stories unhindered by the norms of social interaction relevant to their production. Research participants engage in a contrived situation based on the assumption that their ‘life stories’ and experiences are readily available to ‘dump’ from memory (an expression we borrow from cognitive psychology), with minimum prompting, and with minimum attention to how stories are shaped by and for their interactional contingencies. Instead, stories are treated as providing access to life beyond the interview, or as “surrogates for the observation of actual behaviour” (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984, p. 2). Thus ‘biographic’ approaches like the BNIM do not take into account as part of the analysis (that is, notwithstanding whatever caveats the researcher may offer) the situated, artifactual nature of researcher-elicited accounts, but treat interviews as ‘resource’ rather than ‘topic’ (cf. Wieder, 1988). Although not all analysts treat narrative interview data this way (e.g., Baker & Johnson, 2001), and not all use interview materials (e.g., Bülow, 2004), studies of interviewer-prompted narratives make it difficult to see what, in their daily lives, people are doing when they tell stories and, therefore, what stories are designed to do. As Schegloff (1997, pp. 99–100) argues, the interview situation “plays havoc with the motive force of the telling — the action and interactional precipitant of the telling — by making the elicitation itself the invariant occasion for telling the story”.

In contrast to what we might call ‘mainstream’ narrative analytic work, an alternative research tradition based in conversation analysis and discursive psychology examines narratives (i.e., stories and story-elements) as productions tailored for the sequentially organized occasions of their telling (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Jefferson, 1978; Ryave, 1978). The interest is therefore in how stories are told — how they get embedded and are managed, turn-by-turn, in interaction — and what conversational actions are accomplished in their telling (e.g. complaining, justifying, flirting, testifying, etc.). Previous work on everyday and institutional narratives-in-interaction focuses on themes such as what makes stories ‘tellable’ (e.g., Norrick, 2005); how stories function in the pursuit of intimacy (Jefferson, Sacks & Schegloff, 1987); the actions done by storytelling such as complaining and confessing (e.g., Edwards, 1995; 2005; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005; Watson, 1990); how ‘proposals’ and other features (prefaces, invitations, pre-announcements) function to launch a story-telling; the preference organization of story ‘punchlines’ (Kjærbeck & Asmussen, 2005), and the organization and function of telling ‘second stories’ (Landvogt, 2002; Sacks, 1992).
The brief analysis reported in this paper contributes to this literature. However, our focus is on a particular feature of talk-in-interaction that we have observed across a variety of contexts: that of speakers’ formulations of, and orientations to, narratives or stories as such. As well as the sequential organization of such formulations — their occasioning, action-orientation and uptake — we examine members’ displayed understandings that stories are told accountably, have component features, are told in accordance with local contextual and institutional norms, and have a proper or ‘natural’ beginning or end. Rather than treating these formulations as partial expressions of a consistent folk theory of narrative, we illustrate how their situated production is shaped in and for the accomplishment of interactional business.

Some interactional uses of ‘story’ formulations

The first extract comes from a dinnertime conversation between a mother and father and their nine year-old daughter, Cindy. Cindy has been telling a story about an expensive lunch bill given in error during a school trip.

#1. Stew dinner, 14: 4–22
1 MOM: [So Cindy and her family here’s thuh bill].
2 CIN: [ ]((handing her plate over as done))
3   (1.0)
4 MOM: °Come on now you gotta try uh little bit [more than that.]
5 CIN: [I hate it.
6   (I don’t [like)
7 MOM: [Cindy it’s [like VEGetable SOUp.
8 CIN: [hguh! (No) I wanna tell Daddy thuh rest of thuh story.
9   rest of thuh story.
10 MOM: (Well) Put your plate back on your plate, [and eat some more.
11 DAD: [Yeah eat uh little-
12   Eat uh little [mo:re.
13 CIN: [(eh:: )((whining))

At the start of the fragment, as Mom formulates the upshot of Cindy’s story, Cindy hands her plate to Mom indicating that she has finished her dinner. The issue of Cindy not wanting to finish her dinner, but being cajoled to, has already cropped up several times since the start of the meal: Mom’s further cajoling (line 4) rejects Cindy’s plate-passing (line 2) as an ‘eating-ending’ action. Following further exchanges between Mom and Cindy, Cindy produces our target utterance: “hguh! (No) I wanna tell Daddy thuh rest of thuh story.” The interesting feature of this invocation of story-telling is its usability, at just this point, as a device for formulating another interrupted activity-in-progress alternative to eating her dinner. Cindy cannot continue eating, because she is in the middle of story-telling, where the story has something called “the rest” of it that is yet to be told.

So Cindy invokes the notion that stories have a trajectory, with an end point that should properly be reached, as a device for not eating any more food. Her turn is an example of what cognitive and narrative psychologists have called metacommmunication,
or “going meta” (e.g., Olson & Bruner, 1996), as she invokes the category ‘story’ for what she is saying. However, what is of interest is that, and how, a ‘storied sense of everyday life’ (e.g., Denzin, 2000) is embedded within conversation, produced not in a vacuum of thought and reflection, but within a particular context where it is used to do something — to “perform social actions in-the-telling” (Edwards, 1997, p. 266).

Extract 2 comes from near the start of a telephone call to a neighbourhood mediation centre. The caller (C) has given a capsule description of the problem: his new neighbour submitted planning proposals to put a window in their house extension, which would overlook the caller’s property. The caller objected, and his neighbour has (reportedly) been verbally abusive ever since. M is the mediator taking the call.

#2. DC–64

Calls to mediation centres, like calls to other ‘helplines’ and institutions, are full of storytelling episodes. Here, our interest is not just in how, within the sequential organization of the speakers’ turns, a story gets told, or that the telling of a story is doing the action of ‘complaining’. Our focus is on the way C uses the sense that stories have a ‘proper’ beginning, which he has not yet recounted, as grounds for re-starting his description of events between himself and his neighbour (lines 10–12). M’s response (lines 2–5) to C’s initial complaint, with its perturbed start (line 2) and epistemic hedging (“y’thjnkn” and “might”, lines 2–3), provides no clear acceptance of C’s complaint as a suitable basis for proceeding with mediation. At this point C re-starts the story.

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1. The mediation and police-suspect interrogation data used in this article come from a large corpus collected in the UK as part of ESRC grant RES-148-25-0010, ‘Identities in neighbour discourse: Community, conflict and exclusion,’ held by Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards.
("What happened-", line 8), offering further details not previously included, but appears to struggle with the appropriate place to start; note the pauses, cut-offs, re-starts and repair initiators littering his turn between lines 8–12, whereupon C proposes another re-start via “well I’ll start wi-start from the beginning.” C’s appeal that his story has a proper ‘beginning’ accounts for making a further effort to re-start it. Also interesting is the implication, picked up by M, that C is thereby proposing to tell an extended narrative, rather than just give additional details, at which point M intervenes to prevent it (line 13). M’s proposal, as to what kind of detail is appropriate, invokes not the principles of narrative structure, but the contingencies of this particular interaction — only some basic details are required at this point, the full story being postponed until embarking on mediation proper (lines 19–21).

Extract 3 is from a police-suspect interrogation. The suspect (S) has been arrested by the police officer (P) on suspicion of ‘actual bodily harm’ to the mother of ‘Chanteelle’, a friend of S’s daughter, following an incident at S’s daughter’s sleepover party. This segment comes from the start of the suspect’s third interview, which occurs three weeks after the first one.

#3. PN–111c

P starts by asking S to recount the incident, which is the topic of the current interview. The turn increment “again” (line 3) accounts for P’s request, and acknowledges that S has told her story several times before. After P’s request a gap develops, indicating possible trouble with it, and this is borne out in S’s first turn in this sequence, in which she asks “From the beginni- what-” (line 8). Here, unlike Extract 2, S checks for the ‘proper’ starting place for her story before she launches into it, reformulating her question before P provides S with a starting point: “Um:: (2.0) go from:hh (1.9) when: Sally turned- um Chantelle’s mum turned up.” P’s instruction orients S to the part of the night’s events relevant to P’s current line of questioning: given that S has been arrested
for assaulting 'Chantelle's mum', details previous to that are not relevant to the business at hand (although it is interesting that in the first interview, S's proposal to start at an earlier point in time "Well (0.3) um: (1.3) right from when: people started arrivin' or (0.5) like" is accepted by P: “Yeh.”). So here, the story segment, and where it should begin, is tailored to the current, specific business of the interaction.

Extract 4 also comes from the police interrogation data corpus. The suspect has been arrested on suspicion of criminal damage to her neighbour's window, after he allegedly hit her son. S has recounted events in response to P's question to “give me your: account (0.5) of what happened.” L is the suspect's lawyer.

#4. PN–04

1  S:  And um: (0.6) tried to calm down the situation an'
2  then I was arRE:sted.
3  (1.1)
4  P:  M'kay.
5  (1.1)
6  P:  (Yeh)
7  (0.5)
8  S:  Can I [ask- ]
9  P:  [Just-] yeh
10  (0.2)
11  P:  Yeh >carry on.<
12  (0.5)
13  S:  >Sort'f-< is it th- (. ) miti- MITi:gatin'
14  circvm[stan ]ces surrou:n[din' this::: ]
15  L:  [†Yeh.]  [Yeh certainly.]
16  (0.4)
17  S:  C'n I- I add all that [yeh,
18  P:  [Add whatever you want yeh,
19  (0.2)
20  S:  <Basically:> um (0.3) I'll start from the
21  →  Ebe(h)gin(h)nig which is always a good place to
22  [s t a ħ r t . ħ]
23  P:  [.hh heh heh heh]
24  (0.2)
25  S:  Um: †I gave up smokin' t- tida:y,
26  (0.3)
27  P:  Right,
28  S:  I went t'bed last ni:ght with a: nicotine patch
29  on, ((continues with story))

We join the interview as S comes to the end of her account of the day’s events, which ended with her being arrested by P. P’s receipts of this account are followed by S’s tentative request to tell another narrative, checking out its relevance with her lawyer and orienting to P as someone who normatively sets the agenda (“C’n I- I add all that yeh,”). S’s subsequent story (following the extract) concerns her attempt to give up smoking, her lack of sleep due to her nicotine patch, and the fact that she is currently menstruating — made relevant to the current interaction as “MITi:gatin’ cīrcumstanc-es”. Again, in addition to noticing the way this story unfolds amongst, and in regard
to, series of questions and answers, and its action-orientation as ‘doing mitigation’, S’s story preface is another instance of the way speakers may formulate the activity of story-telling at key points before (or during) the actual event narrative: “I’ll start from the £be(h)gin(h)ning which is always a good place to start,£” Here, the relevance of starting “from the £be(h)gin(h)ning”, for a suspect in a police interrogation, is crucial: it is a way for the suspect to include details about events that the police have not yet taken into account. The laughed-through production of this story preface, and P’s laughter in response, treats the content of this preface as almost idiomatic; that is, as the kind of cultural knowledge about stories — with their ‘proper’ beginnings (middles and ends) — that narrative analysts write about. However, what is so interesting about this extract is that we can see how such notions get put to use in everyday life.

Extract 5 is an example cited in one of Sacks’s (1992) early lectures, in which B is a caller to a suicide helpline, and A is the call-taker.

#5 (Sacks, 1992, vol. 1, p.113, line numbers added)

1 B: … Well, she ((wife of B)) stepped between me and the child, I got up to walk out the door. When she stepped between me and the child, I went to move her out of the way. And then about that time her sister had called the police. I don’t know how she… what she…
2 A: Didn’t you smack her one?
3 B: No.
4 A: → You’re not telling me the story, Mr B.
5 B: Well, you see when you say smack you mean hit.
6 A: Yeah, you shoved her. Is that it?
7 B: Yeah, I shoved her.

The relevance of the extract for narrative analysis, and Sacks’s own use of it, is discussed in some detail in Edwards (1997a). Here, our interest is in line 8, “You’re not telling me the story, Mr B.” As Sacks noted, this draws on a members’ sense of what might be understood as a sufficient or insufficient reason for calling the police. Note that Mr B himself starts to indicate some kind of problem with his story at that point: “I don’t know how she… what she…” prior to A then picking up on it. Following A’s intervention at line 8, the reported action “move her out of the way” (line 3) undergoes a series of repairs, or re-formulations (“smack her one”, “smack”, “hit”), before A and B agree upon the description “shoved her”. “Shoved her” is a formulation nicely fitted to these interactional contingencies. It provides for B’s denial of having committed any kind of police-worthy violence against his wife, while also allowing for how her sister might (mistakenly) have seen enough to warrant calling the police. “The story” starts to make better sense.

The category “the story” (line 8), and particularly the use of it as a device for initiating the repaired action descriptions, invokes “story” as a members’ category of talk, for which there are criteria of adequacy. The participants themselves display a sensitivity to what might count as a proper instance of a story. But this is not merely an occasion for members to do meta-comment, and thereby reveal some kind of folk theory of narrative. Rather, ‘A’ uses the notion of “the story” to do some interactional work,
initiating a succession of specific, repaired action-formulations of what B reportedly did to his wife. We do not need a theory of narrative to analyse this — a matter such as ‘adequate grounds for calling the police’ does not depend on the special conventions of literary or discourse genres. Instead, the very possibility of such genres, and of full-blown narratives, depends on the sense of understandable events, plausible actions and credible tellings that we find here. It is not so much that, in ordinary talk, we find fragments of ‘narratives’. Rather, it is that narratives and their analysis build upon the everyday kinds of accountability that are the pervasive concern of ordinary talk. Further, within talk’s ordinary practices, we find orientations to, and interactional uses of, what makes for a coherent sequence of recountable events, relevantly to the occasion of their telling.

One final theme, that we just have space for here, is participants’ invocation of another notion of stories as versions, or as expressions of the teller’s point of view (cf. Simpson, 1993). In Extract 6 we return to the mealtime interaction introduced in Extract 1. Here, Dad is commenting on Mom’s use of cheese in her cooking. Extract 7 is from another police interrogation, in which the suspect is a teenage girl, Chantelle, (the same ‘Chantelle’ mentioned in Extract 3, but a separate incident). She has been arrested for assaulting another teenager and has denied ‘slapping’ the alleged victim throughout the interview.

#6. Stew Dinner, 5, pp. 20–23

1 DAD: [You an’ chee:se. Everything’[s gotta=have chese.
2 MOM: [hh=huu huu
3 MOM: °You (c’n) never have too much cheese.°
4 DAD: °Yeah.° Well [that’s) yur story.

#7. PN–115

1 (7.7) ((papers rustling))
2 P: ↑It does seem very str\:ange,
3 (1.3)
4 P: To m:e,
5 (1.0)
6 P: .hhh that an awful lot of people,
7 (0.7)
8 S: (Why)
9 (0.5)
10 P: Tell me one side of a sto:ry.
11 (2.8)
12 P: All adults: (0.9) a lot of people have
13 witnessed: certain things that [you’ve do:ne,]
14 S: [ Yeah: but ]
15 all the witnesses (. ) is her fam’ly.
16 (1.8)
17 S: So obviously the fam’ly’s gonna stick up for
18 each other.

In Extract 6, the principle of never having too much cheese does not look like a story as such, by any analytic definition of narrative. But Dad’s expression “that’s your story” invokes the notion of ‘story’ as perspectival viewpoint, relativizing or subjectivizing
Mom’s opinion as expressing only her side of things, when from another position things look quite different. In Extract 7, P challenges S’s denial by recruiting the ‘other side of the story’ based in “a lot” of witnesses’ statements. Not only are there “an awful lot of people” telling a different “story” to S, but these people are “all adults.”. The relevance of P’s reformulated category choice, from “people” to “adults”, implies that “adults” may make more reliable witnesses than ‘children’ (the contrast category to “adult”) such as S. S counters P’s challenge to her testimony by claiming that the witness are biased by stake or interest (cf. Edwards & Potter, 1992); they are all “her fam’ly” and, as such are “obviously …gonna stick up for each other”. In both extracts, we find a particular notion of ‘story’ deployed in opposition to ‘truth’ or ‘objectivity’, where ‘stories’ are one-sided, motivated accounts, produced by speakers in making dubious complaints, or in response to accusations or challenges.

Concluding remarks

This article has examined an under-explored aspect of everyday storytelling: that of the location, uptake and function of speakers’ story formulations. It adds to previous conversation analytic and discursive psychological work on storytelling and provides a contrast to the numerous studies of researcher-elicited narrative accounts. What we have done is to ‘respecify’ (Button, 1991) narrative researchers’ focus on identifying common story structures and components and instead produce an ethnomethodological study of how members’ sense of ‘stories’ is displayed in and for the interactional contexts in which they are put to use.

References


