

Story prefaces

In a series of lectures on storytelling in conversation, Sacks (1992, vol. 2: 222–68) began with a basic observation: 'Stories routinely take more than one turn to tell' (p. 222). By this, he meant to draw attention to the fact that in order to tell a story, the prospective teller has to engage in work to align their co-interactant as a story *recipient*. There are various reasons for this. One is that stories are designed in numerous ways 'for' their particular recipients, and the telling provides opportunities for recipients to react to, display understanding of, or otherwise become involved in the telling. We discuss some of these features as they can be found in our focus extract later.

More importantly, the telling of a story involves the teller in keeping possession of the conversational floor for longer than the basic rules of turn-taking ordinarily allow. That is, the storytelling turn consists of more than one turn-constructive unit, and there has to be some way of indicating to the recipient that such an extended turn is underway, in order for them to refrain from taking the floor themselves at what might otherwise be a legitimate transition-relevance place. The most routine way of accomplishing this is to produce a *story preface*. This is a turn in which a speaker, often indirectly, proposes to tell a story. Following the preface, the recipient can then respond by indicating whether they wish to hear the story; and finally, the story can be told with the recipient appropriately aligned. The canonical format for story prefaces is thus a three-part structure:

Teller: Story preface
Recipient: Request to hear story
Teller: Story

For example:

- (4) [Trio:2:1:1]
 (A calls B, who is an employee at 'Bullocks' department store)
 1→ A: Well I thought I'd jus' re- better report
 2 to you what's happened at Bullocks today
 3→ B: What in the world's happened?
 4 A: Did you have the day off?
 5 (.)
 6 B: Yah?
 7→ A: Well I- (.) got outta my car at five thirty ...
 ((Story continues))

By indicating that she'd 'better report what's happened', A proposes to tell a story. In line 3, B appropriately aligns herself as a story recipient by inviting A to go on and tell 'what in the world's happened', which A then proceeds to do.

Sacks makes a number of observations on this sequence in terms of how it sets up the story to follow and aligns the recipient in the appropriate way (1992, vol. 2: 157–87). For instance, 'I thought I'd jus' re- better report to you what's happened at Bullocks' displays that speaker A is designing this telling specifically 'for' her recipient. Given that Bullocks is B's place of work, but not A's, then her reporting of something that happened there on what she believes to be B's day off (note the way she checks this in line 4) is a way of doing the activity of 'showing that I had my mind on you' (p. 174). This is a common feature of recipient design in conversational storytelling. We find another, more explicit example of it towards the end of extract (3), our focus extract:

- 48 J: What'n aw:::ful ma:::in
 49 L: leh heh heh heh
 50 J: Oh::: honestly I cannot stand the man it's just
 51 (no:::r.)
 52→ L: I thought well I'm gon' tell Joyce that, eh heh

Having told her story, and gone with her recipient through an extended response sequence, Lesley makes an announcement which claims that, even at the time the events were happening, she was thinking of Joyce as a suitable and in fact necessary recipient of this story.

Returning to extract (4), there are further features of interest in the way the story preface is designed. Note that the speaker actually executes a self-repair in the course of this preface; she begins to say 'I thought I'd jus' re[port] ...', but then changes that to a formulation which brings to the forefront the urgency and importance of the story: 'I thought I'd ... *better* report to you what's happened'. This way of putting it also implicates the recipient as someone who actually has some stake in this story: she is not just any recipient, but one to whom the events had 'better' be reported. When speaker B produces the second part of the story prefacing sequence (request to hear the story), she too orients to the seemingly momentous nature of this story, thereby situating herself as a suitably awed recipient. She does this by saying, not

simply, 'What happened?', but 'What in the world's happened?', thereby focusing on the extraordinariness of these (so far undiscussed) events. (In fact it turns out that A had seen a policeman wielding a 'great big long gun' outside the store where B works, but could not discover why he was there. Subsequently the two participants engage in a series of phone calls involving a third person who also works at the store but did not, like B, have the day off, in an attempt to discover what was happening.)

Aligning recipients, then, is one of the key functions of story prefaces. But it is not the only significant function. They can also be involved in another key aspect of conversational storytelling: indicating to the recipient what *kind* of story this will be. This is important because one of the interactional tasks of a story recipient is to respond to the story in appropriate ways once it is over. Thus the recipient needs to have some idea of what it will take in order for the story to be complete: in other words, an idea of the likely payoff or punchline for this particular story. This element of story prefaces is illustrated well in the preface which occurs in our focus extract:

- 9→ L: ... You know I-I-I'm broiling about
10 something hhhhehheh. hhhh
11→ J: What:t.
12→ L: Well that sale. (0.2) Af- at (.) the vicarage ...

What is noticeable here is that the preface, in lines 9-10, gives a very clear indication not only of the kind of story this is, but also, crucially, of how Joyce, as recipient, might monitor for a suitable conclusion to the story. We can notice in particular the use of the word 'broiling' in 'I'm broiling about something'. Why might Lesley select this word to describe her state of mind? The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'broil' as 'to be in a confused state, a turmoil'; it can also mean 'to subject to high heat', as in cooking. However, given the story Lesley goes on to tell, neither of these usages would seem to be particularly appropriate. Rather, it is possible that she coins the word as an ad hoc combination of 'brewing' and 'boiling'. As Goffman (1981, ch. 5) has suggested, making a slight twist on Freud's ideas about slips of the tongue, mispronunciations or 'wrong' uses of words can frequently be closely tied to questions of interactional design. It may be that Lesley's use of the word 'broiling' is interactionally sensitive in that it neatly conveys a sense of her being about to

boil over with anger, and at the same time brewing up a desire to tell this story to Joyce.

More than that, 'I'm broiling about something' indicates to the recipient how she might monitor for an appropriate conclusion to the story. In a word, it poses a question for the recipient: 'What kinds of things might the teller legitimately be broiling about?' The kinds of things to which 'broiling', in the sense we have suggested, is a relevant reaction include having been insulted, embarrassed, made to feel foolish, belittled and so on; in other words, just the kind of social 'squelch' which Lesley's story reports Mr R inflicting on her.

Another point is that the very way in which the story is responded to on its completion links back very neatly to the way it was introduced in the preface. That is, the sharp intakes of breath and exaggerated, indignant Oooh's have an almost onomatopoeic connection to the states of 'brewing' and 'boiling'. They are sounds which are reminiscent of steam and of sudden, heated expulsions. In this way, the coordinated verbalized reactions of Lesley and Joyce can be seen as concomitant with the physical reaction ('broiling') which Lesley has described herself as undergoing as a result of the story's events.

Clearly, these last few points are speculative: there is little systematic evidence in the transcript itself which would support such an interpretation of Lesley's use of 'broiling'. However, our remarks here relate to an issue with which Sacks was concerned in his lectures on conversation: what he referred to as the 'poetics' of everyday talk (1992, vol. 2: 291-331). Often, in looking repeatedly at a particular segment of talk, Sacks noted that the analyst can begin to find certain poetic resonances and relationships between the words used. He speculated that there may be a principle of 'locally historical searches' that speakers use in coming up with their words. They may somehow rely on echoes of words produced moments earlier to cue other words or phrases. In the lectures given during the second half of his career, Sacks discussed a number of intriguing cases to support this notion.

This way of proceeding may seem to go against the rigorous reliance on the next-turn proof procedure which we have stressed in previous chapters. However, what it in fact does is to illustrate a significant benefit of single case analysis: that it provides the analyst with an entirely open opportunity to develop and explore analytic themes and ideas. As Sacks put it: 'When we start out

with a piece of data, the question of what we are going to end up with, what kind of findings it will give, should not be a consideration. We sit down with a piece of data, make a bunch of observations, and see where they will go' (1984a: 27). One implication of this is that we should not initially feel constrained in the observations we make by what common sense might suggest is possible or not. In the very first of his lectures, Sacks was at pains to point this out to his students:

When people start to analyse social phenomena ... then, if you have to make an elaborate analysis of it – that is to say, show that they did something as involved as some of the things I have proposed – then you figure that they couldn't have thought that fast. I want to suggest that you have to forget that completely. Don't worry about how fast they're thinking. First of all, don't worry about whether they're 'thinking'. Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you'll find that they can do these things. ... So just let the materials fall as they may. Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they produce. (1992, vol. 1: 11)

Recipient's actions during the storytelling

We noted earlier that the story turn itself is not a single unbroken utterance, but one which is punctuated by turns from Joyce, the recipient. However, these turns cannot be seen as utterances which 'break up' the story turn, to use our earlier words. They are sequentially organized features of the storytelling itself. Obviously, the 'What:t' in line 11 functions as the second part of the story preface sequence. Let us now turn to Joyce's next two utterances: 'Oh ye:s' in line 14, and the similar 'Oh y(h)es' in line 21.

Like the 'What:t', but in a different manner, these two turns are invited or solicited by Lesley. Recall in the last chapter that we briefly discussed some generalized, cross-cultural procedures by which speakers seek to establish mutual recognition of the identity of someone or something they are referring to. This comes under the heading of *recipient design* (Sacks and Schegloff 1979): the way in which all turns at talk are in some way designed to be understood in terms of what the speaker knows or assumes about the existing mutual knowledge between him or her and the

recipient. In chapter 4 we observed that in the following extract, speaker A makes three attempts to establish mutual reference to a couple named Ford (lines 2–3), each of them focusing on different ways that the recipient might be able to recognize who is being referred to:

(5) [Sacks and Schegloff 1979: 19]

- 1 A: ... Well I was the only one other than the uhm
- 2 tch Fords? Uh, Mrs Holmes Ford? You know
- 3 uh the the cellist?
- 4 B: Oh yes. She's she's the cellist.
- 5 A: Yes.
- 6 B: Yes
- 7 A: Well she and her husband were there ...

Having failed to establish mutual reference with the general term 'the Fords?' (line 2), the speaker then proceeds to more specific labels: 'Mrs Holmes Ford' – which again does not immediately work – and finally 'the cellist'. Note that it is this third reference which appears to be most closely designed in terms of the two participants' mutual knowledge: when B finally recognizes who is being referred to, she herself affirms that recognition (line 4) by repeating the categorization: 'she's the cellist.'

There are close similarities here with our focus extract (3):

- 12→ L: Well that sa:le. (0.2) At- at (.) the vicarage.
- 13 (0.6)
- 14 J: Oh ye:s,

And a moment later:

- 17→ L: u (.) ih Your friend 'n mi:ne was the:re
- 18 (0.2)
- 19 J: (hh hh)
- 20→ L: hmMister::, R;
- 21 J: Oh y(h)es, (hm hm)

On both these occasions Lesley makes successive attempts to get Joyce to recognize (1) the context of the story, and (2) its key protagonist. It is notable that both her first attempts are very vague: 'that sa:le' (line 12) and 'Your friend 'n mi:ne' (line 17); also, that both these attempts fail. The first, 'that sa:le', could potentially refer to any sale in any place, although clearly Lesley believes that Joyce is capable of pinpointing the precise sale in

discussed in a previous conversation (this is the first mention of it in this particular call), or some other aspect that gives it salience. Equally, Lesley's first mention of the key protagonist in the story (line 17) is extremely vague: 'Your friend 'n mine'. While this is a conventionally ironic way of referring to someone who is not a friend at all, it leaves the recipient a lot of work to do in order to establish which person exactly is being mentioned.

One other thing to notice about Lesley's turn, 'Your friend 'n mine was there', is its slight upward intonation (indicated by the underlined colon in 'there'). Sacks and Schegloff (1979) observed that one way of attempting to achieve the most economical form of reference is for speakers to use upward intonation, which they called 'try-marking' (since it is a way of marking a try at establishing mutual reference). Speaker A in extract (5) uses try-marking three times (indicated in the transcript by question marks), and a similar phenomenon is found in our focus extract.

A further thing to observe is that in our focus extract (3) a pause follows this try-marked reference (line 18). This appears to be a place in which Lesley is monitoring for a response from Joyce indicating that she has 'got' the reference. In the absence of any such indication, Lesley then produces her next attempt, which is also try-marked: 'Mister;; R;.' (line 20): note again the underlined colon. At this point, Joyce recognizes the referent (line 21), and the story subsequently proceeds.

Thus, in this case, 'interjections' into the storytelling turn can be seen to result from interactionally organized forms of invitation by means of which Lesley, rather than merely recounting the incident, is actively seeking to *involve* Joyce in the telling. Furthermore, this segment illustrates the carefully designed ways in which storytellers may display that they are designing their telling for this *particular* recipient (see Goodwin 1984). Notice, for instance, the way that both of Lesley's attempts to establish reference are designed to point up the common knowledge of the interactants. In the first case this is done by the use of pronouns: 'that sale ... at the vicarage'. Implicit here is the claim not only that Joyce knows about the sale, but also that she knows about the vicarage in question.

In the second case, Lesley twice uses euphemisms rather than a name; furthermore, each of those figurative references in turn foregrounds common knowledge: 'Your friend and mine', and

the familiarity, 'Mister R'. A final point on this is that Joyce not only recognizes the person being referred to as 'Mister R', but appears to do the correct *kind* of recognition for what turns out to be the point of this story. That is, by appending a slight laugh to her affirmation: 'Oh y(h)es, (hm hm)', Joyce exhibits that she sees Mister R in the appropriate way; that is, as someone who may be expected to have done something amusing, embarrassing or possibly insulting.

Conversation analysts, then, consider stories not just as single turn narratives, but as multiple unit turns which occur in concrete sequential contexts. One thing that is clear about storytelling sequences is that they can be relatively extended, as compared, say, to the classical adjacency pair structure. But as we have seen through this discussion of a single storytelling sequence, it is possible also to show that other structures – for instance, story preface sequences or recognition sequences – are used in specific ways in putting together a storytelling sequence. In other words, one of the main objectives of a CA approach to storytelling as a conversational phenomenon is to analyse how the various structural patterns in talk can be deployed as the 'building blocks' for other, more extended sequences.

This takes us back to an idea mentioned briefly towards the end of chapter 1: that the resources of talk-in-interaction are both context-sensitive and context-free. What we have done in this and the preceding chapter is to demonstrate how that feature of conversational resources can be seen empirically, and how it informs the analytic procedures of CA. In chapter 4 we focused on the building of collections of similar extracts which are organized using certain techniques to demonstrate the existence of patterns in interaction. This procedure relies on the idea that different conversationalists, at different times and in different situations, have available essentially similar resources for accomplishing their actions. These resources (such as the po-faced receipt of a tease, for instance), while they are not tied to the specific occasion of their use, are none the less utilized in a way which attends to the unique features of that local occasion. In this sense, talk-in-interaction can be described as an abstract, structural phenomenon, without going against the idea that participants are knowledgeable agents who are not somehow 'caused' to act by that structure but actively use it to accomplish particular communicative actions.

PART III

Applications

In a similar way, the present chapter has demonstrated how abstract structural resources such as the story preface sequence, or sequences for inviting recipient's reactions or establishing mutual reference to a third party, are used in locally situated ways to accomplish activities such as telling a story. We also demonstrated how conversation analytic studies of structural patterns themselves can be fruitfully deployed in making sense of how participants are managing interaction in single cases or extended sequences.

In conclusion, it is important to say that while these chapters have aimed to introduce some of the key 'how to' techniques in CA, it has not been our aim to provide an exhaustive account of all the possible research practices employed by conversation analysts. This is because, for one thing, there are simply too many minor variations to make such an exercise worthwhile; also, specific techniques which work well for one researcher will not necessarily work in the same way for another. Therefore, what we have done is introduce the *basic* means of beginning on a piece of CA research. For the beginning researcher, thinking in terms of systematic, formal similarities between data extracts which appear to be involved in certain classes of social action is perhaps the most useful starting point. But as we have shown in this chapter, a great deal can also be learned simply by sitting down with a transcript, and the associated tape, and trying to describe what is going on in that talk. However trivial it may appear, the lesson is that this talk is an orderly, methodic accomplishment. Approaching data in terms of 'What are the participants doing here?', 'How are they accomplishing that?' and 'How do they display the orderliness of the talk for each other?' is at the root of the conversation analytic mentality, and will virtually always yield results.

In the following chapters, we turn away from issues specifically to do with the process of analysis and towards the question of how a conversation analytic approach can be applied to some of the broader questions of social life. We begin in chapter 6 with an account of how CA approaches the nature of institutionalized and workplace interaction.