

*Review*

## The Body of Anecdotes, the Case of Reported Speech

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The present paper takes a compilation of stories taken from chat shows and analyses their body, i.e. the medial section which is subsequent to the orientation section and preceding the coda. It argues that anecdotes in chat shows rely heavily on reported speech. In fact, reported speech frequently forms the entire body of anecdotes. My findings disclose features inherent in the body of anecdotes, namely that reported speech is always animated and involves role-playing, simulating a character or more. It is recurrently introduced with a reporting verb such as "say" or the more informal verb "go". In some cases, a reporting verb is not used at all, in which case the story tellers depend solely on "making voices".

**Key words:** Anecdote, story, storytelling, reported speech, complication, discourse analysis.

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### INTRODUCTION

Narration is the recapitulation of prior experience in two or more sequential clauses. It has been evidenced in various research, the first and most influential of which is Labov's (1972) seminal work on narratives "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax", that narratives have a particular discourse structure which involves the following: Abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation and coda (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972; Wolfson, 1982; Tannen, 1986; Polanyi, 1985; Thornborrow and Coates, 2005). To define each briefly, we can say that abstracts and orientations provide important information at the beginning of a story, as they inform the listener about what to expect. The complicating action presents the events which comprise the plot, while the evaluation incorporates opinions and judgments on those events. The coda brings the story to an end and returns the conversation to turn-by-turn interaction.

In this article, I will be using discourse analysis

(Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 2004)<sup>1</sup> as a methodological tool to examine narratives, thus following Labov's (1972) footsteps in his narrative analysis; however, instead of looking at the full narrative I will restrict myself to the body of narratives. That is to say, my analysis will focus on how discourse is managed in the section which occurs between the abstract and orientation, on the one hand, and the coda, on the other. Therefore, the analysis will include the complication, the evaluation and any orientating material which occurs in the body of anecdotes.

This article will diverge from Labov's and other

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<sup>1</sup> Discourse Analysis is a very important, rapidly expanding field in linguistics. It can be broadly defined as the study of discourse or texts as "communicative units embedded in social and cultural practices, shaping and being shaped by them" (Georgakopoulou&Goutsos, 2004, ix).

researchers' work as far as data collection is concerned since the corpus of data in this paper is collected from British television chat shows rather than from everyday occurring conversation. It will also look at a particular type of narratives, namely anecdotes which are defined in this paper as short humorous stories. It will show that reported speech<sup>2</sup> is an integral part of the anecdotes in chat shows. Reported speech essentially plays an even greater role in anecdotes from chat show programmes than in those from ordinary conversation. In fact, it will be shown that the complication action is frequently rendered in reported speech.

## Reported Speech

### Aspects of reported speech:

Conversational anecdotes, I would like to argue and show in my article, rely on reported speech, not for evaluation as Labov (1972) and Polanyi (1989) suggest, but for carrying the complication and resolution/punch line. In the case of chat shows, dialogue plays an even more important role, since it is used as a discursive strategy to bring about the climax in the anecdote.

Reported speech does not usually reiterate the exact word of the original speaker, even though the speaker who quotes reported speech presumes to give the actual utterance produced by the original speaker. It is usually a reconstruction of the meaning of the speech. For instance, in the following example, the story teller, John Cleese, relates his first encounter with his trainer, George:

1. J: .... *an emm he said okay buddy he said do some press-ups so I said emm how many do you want George he said o:h just go to muscular exhaustion*

It might be possible that the story teller is reporting the exact words of the speaker; however, it is more probable that he has reconstructed the dialogue from his memory, thus perhaps adding or leaving out other part(s) of the dialogue.

### Reported speech as a fundamental feature in anecdotes:

One striking feature that the corpus of the data I

<sup>2</sup> When the term "reported speech" is used it refers exclusively to direct reported speech. There was no instance of indirect reported speech in the present corpus of data.

collected<sup>3</sup> offers is the fact that all anecdotes, without exception, evolve around dialogue. In some cases, dialogue represents the whole body of the narrative; in other words, it is both the complicating action and the resolution/punch line. For example,

2. J: *...an she suddenly break(s) down she said to her husband she said hier soir she said j'ai fait l'amour avec le chauffeur dans le bois De Boulogne*

W: *hahahahahah .hhh*

J: *an' th' husband said I think I'll have the fish you know*

The next two examples show the same characteristic:

3. M: *...and the president came out in his kin'o' jogging suit I guess came up to me an' said y' know I really wanna (kill) the drought an' all but not tonight because we're doing the show*

4. M: *... an' they go Marvin an' I go yhaa they say listen I didn't tell them anything but the FBI called*

Aud: *hahahahahahh*

M: *w-what happened what's wrong y' know w-w'tw'tw't's happened have you done anything terrible an' I said we:ll I don't know*

The above excerpts are among the examples where the anecdote is based solely on reported speech. In fact, what can be noticed is that the examples offer no comments from the story teller's part, in this respect they take the form of:

I + reporting verb (say, go) + reported speech

Or

He/she + reporting verb + reported speech

In other words, in each case the story tellers role-play the parts of the characters in the anecdotes, introducing no description in between this role-play. It could be added that part of the speech they reproduce could be their own. They achieve this change of footing by a change in the quality of their voice, pitch, pacing, etc.

The 'change of footing' performed by speakers when they report speech is that between author and animator, i.e. reproducing, on the one hand, their own speech and, on the other, the speech of other character(s), usually through a change in voice quality. Thus, in example 4 above, Marvin, the story teller, moves from his own voice to imitating the voice of one of his friends, while in

<sup>3</sup> I collected sixteen hours and fifty minutes of chat shows.

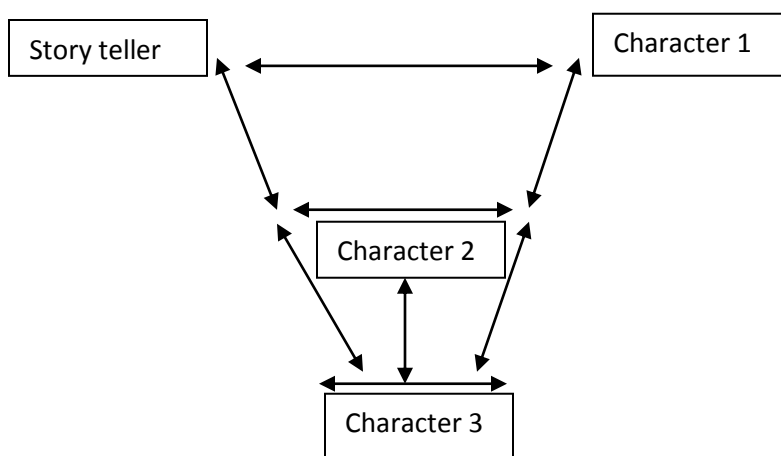
Thirty one anecdotes were isolated and transcribed. For the sake of brevity, I am including only the stories quoted in the text.

example 2 it is a move from one language, French, spoken by the wife, to another, English, spoken by the husband. Example 3 presents us merely with one quotation, reproducing what another character told the story teller, thus representing a different kind of footing: that between narrator and character rather than that between narrator and two or more characters in the story. It is possible to display the basic skeleton of the two types of change of footing thus:

Figure 1

Story teller {-----} character

Figure 2



The first figure Figure.1 refers to an anecdote where there is only one character who is quoted directly, therefore the movement is from being a narrator to role-playing a character (Example 3). The second figure Figure.2 typifies an anecdote which involves more than one character who produce some kind of speech, and the speech is reconstructed in the anecdote in a way that simulates the different characters (Examples 1, 2 and 4). Therefore, the story teller can move from the speech of one character to the other. In this case, there is no set direction as to the movement between characters; in other words, the story teller can move from the position of story teller to that of character 1, then character 2 then character 3, or to that of character 3, then 1 then 2 or any way s/he chooses or the story dictates.

#### The absence of reporting verbs:

There are a number of examples in chat shows, just as there are in casual conversation I am sure, which

reproduce speech without reporting verbs. Example 4 is a case in point:

*w-what happened what's wrong y' know w-w'tw'tw't's happened have you done anything terrible*

Another example is the following where Barry Norman tells the story of Sally Field's excitement when she won the Oscar<sup>4</sup>:

5. B: ... I said How do you feel about winning the Oscar  
→ O: they liked me they liked me...

Such an instance does not occur frequently in chat shows, even though in conversational anecdotes its occurrence is high. According to Tannen (1986:318), "the use of no lexicalized introducer accounted for a significant percentage of all the discourse types" she examined and "the percentage was larger rather than smaller in conversational narratives."

With no reporting verb to tell the listener(s) that what they are hearing is reported speech, the only remaining aspect which signals the change of footing is a change in voice quality. And because of the great versatility of the human voice, the speaker can affect a range of voices; consequently the number of characters role-played can by no means be confined to merely two. Indeed the enactment of speech, especially the use of funny voices, seems to be a generic feature of humorous anecdotes, and this is not limited to chat show anecdotes. Tolson (1985) argues that the re-enactment of characters' speech enhances the funny side of the story.

#### The use of "go" as a reporting verb:

In a number of stories the reporting verb used is "go" rather than "say", for example:

M: ...they go Marvin an' I goyhha

When the verb "go" is employed as a reporting verb, it seems to signal an intention to enact the dialogue besides simply reporting it. In fact, this aspect of reenactment which goes hand in hand with the use of the verb "go" is most obvious when what is rendered is a noise rather than actual speech:

B: ...an' you hear the metal  
goghegheghegheghehahahah  
G: ...she went EUUGHHHHH don' open the door

<sup>4</sup> The part where he reenacts Sally Field's speech is indicated by an arrow-sign.

Both examples above display the use of “go” as a reporting verb which introduces a sound (inanimate noise) in the first example, and an expressive vocalization in the second.

With reference to “go” as a reporting verb and a re-enacting verb, it can be noted that it offers a parallel with verbs such as “shout” when they are used to introduce reported speech, for example:

B: ... *she gave this amazing performance leaping up an' down an' shoutin' you like me you like me you love me I love you..*

However, there is a basic difference between the two verbs, namely that, inherent in the verb “shout”, is information about the tone the speech is given in, while the verb “go” does not give any clue about it; thus the recipient has to await the constructed speech itself to discover the manner it was delivered, or rather the manner the speaker wants the recipient to think it was delivered.

As opposed to reporting verbs such as “shout”, “go” seems to be associated with an informal register. Tannen (1986) found it to occur only in spoken narratives in her data. She asserts that 13% of reported speech in her data was introduced with the verb “go”, “but of the 18 speakers whose narratives make up the English stories examined, only 2 use ‘go’ in this way” (Tannen:1986: 317). My own findings in the chat show corpus corroborate Tannen’s assertions, since “go” is used in merely two examples in the data, twice in example 4 and once in another example,

➔ M: ... *and they go ((imitating the men’s voice)) HAHAY look at herWHHAYHHH...*

### The use of “say” as a reporting verb:

Besides the use of reporting verbs such as “go” and “shout”, the verb “say” is widely used. It is indeed used in all the other examples with the exception of three instances where the reported speech is not introduced with a reporting verb. The prevalence of the use of the reporting verb “say” underlines the fact that storytellers are not interested to be more descriptive as to the tone, intonation, etc. that the character in the anecdote is using (notice the difference between “shout” and “say”). They rely on their “voice” to exhibit this information, and to introduce this with the verb “say” is less intrusive<sup>5</sup> than

<sup>5</sup> The term “intrusive” is employed here to denote the idea the storyteller in this type of anecdote tries not to intrude in the story line, especially because 1. The story revolves around the speech between characters and 2. Virtual absence of

other reporting verbs. Along the same line, opting for the use of “say” instead of “go” signals the storyteller’s choice for a middle ground style i.e. it is neither very informal (which the verb “go” will presuppose) nor very formal (which verbs such as “state” or “admit”, etc. would presume.)

To sum up, this section argued that reported speech is commonly used in chat show anecdotes. It can be introduced by verbs such as “say” and to a lesser extent by “go”. It can also occur without being prefaced by a reporting verb, in which case, the re-enactment of the speech becomes crucial.

### Story teller’s comments within reported speech:

#### Orientating material within reported speech:

The examples discussed so far do not have any comments inserted between the speech of characters in the anecdotes. The examples to be analysed in this section do include comments which usually come in the form of a description of some character, of the manner the speech was uttered, etc. In fact, most frequently this comment is an orientation. Consider the following example,

6. T: ...*I said ra:ra:ra: me being an old man y’ know an’ the assistant director said look he said ( ) it sounds exactly like Mandy which is the –Brian’s mother in the film which was the only other part I played in the film ...*

In the example quoted above, the fragment “*me being and old man*” is part of the orientating material in the anecdote because it introduces the co-participants to the role which the actor, who is also the story teller, is playing. Therefore, it gives more information about the character and, simultaneously, about the situation as a whole. The same holds for the segment which comes after the assistant director’s speech. This segment explains the identity of Mandy, the character the assistant director is talking about.

The subsequent example runs along the same lines in that it includes orientation which occurs between the speech of the characters. This example is taken from an anecdote about an incident where the story teller, who is a corpulent woman, was mocked by some painters:

7. M: ...*an’ they saw me coming c’z I .hh ((pointing to her chest))*

narrator’s comments (in more descriptive reporting verbs) makes the impact of the speech more immediate and therefore more entertaining.

Aud: *HAHAHHAHA [HAHAHAH*

M: [( )*bosom sort of-shaking and movin' an' they go ((imitating the men's voice)) HEEY look at her WHHAYHH*

Here the story teller offers a description of herself, running along the corridor "*bosom sort of-shaking and movin'*". This orientation is important to the story because it is specifically this action which will bring about the complication in the story. Thus, in both examples 6 and 7, the orientation which gives added information about the characters and situation is inserted within the characters' dialogue.

### Evaluating material within reported speech:

Apart from the orientation, the following example displays another structural category, namely the evaluation:

G: *...an' I talked to him I said I decided to forgive him so I said in magnanimous terms hello you stinker I don't know how you Dare look at me in the eye he said I'm terribly sorry have I offended you in some way he'd already forgotten*

The orientation in the above excerpt comes as a description of how the character/story teller spoke,

*I said in magnanimous terms*

even though, with the use of the verb "said", the segment can also be taken as part of the event line. As mentioned earlier, in addition to the orientation, there is some evaluation material too, and it comes in:

*I decided to forgive him*

This utterance is not considered as part of the complication because the verb used here, "decided", is a cognitive verb and therefore it entails a mental process rather than an action. It also consists of a projection of the story teller's own thoughts and feelings at the time of the incident, hence, it evaluates what has gone before.

Likewise, in the next example, the story teller uses external evaluation when she relates an anecdote about her being nervous on the night of a performance; thus going to a foreman to "ask for a cuddle" to make her feel better:

9. M: *... I'm an actress actually an' he said oh yah yah → looking pretty disbelieving as you would if it was me an' I said I am pretty nervous bu' I wondered if you could give me just a little cuddle...*

The evaluation in this example attributes an emotional state to one of the characters in the story:

*looking pretty disbelieving as you would if it was me*

It also projects the audience into this emotional experience, and this is achieved through the use of the second person pronoun "you". In fact, the use of "you" introducing the evaluation is not restricted to this example; it is found in numerous examples in the data under the form of expressions such as "you know" or its abbreviated counterpart "y' know".

### Narrative clauses within reported speech:

In addition to the orientation and evaluation, it is sometimes a segment of the event line which separates characters' dialogue; hence, the event line in the examples discussed before is carried out by verbs of verbal process (plus the speech itself) alone, while, in the coming examples other types of narrative clauses are used in addition to verbs of saying. For instance,

10. M: *...he said well you know the first scene where Charley Sheen were asking what you're up to did you say a cosmetic company by any chance so I grabbed my wife an' ( 'e) said I knew it-I knew it all this time we're friend with Michael and now he's ruined me...*

In this example, "so I grabbed my wife" is part of the event line. Prototypically, the verb employed here, "grab", is a verb of action, and the tense it is marked in is the simple past. Similarly, example 11 below, which tells about Mrs. Thatcher is in a cabinet meeting, displays similar properties:

11. N: *... she said George you're normal what do you (think)everybody laughed and there w'z like a pause before she said O:h Men*

Even though the verb used in this case, "laugh", is not a verb of action, it carries the event line, mainly because it is the catalyst that causes the character in the story to perceive the double entendre in her utterance. As to the subsequent sentence,

*there w'z like a pause*

it cannot be taken as a part of the event line because firstly it does not represent an event or action but rather a state; secondly, it exhibits a dummy subject ("there"), not

an active one. This sentence can be taken as orientating material since it gives a clue about the contextual situation.

In the next example, the speaker is telling a story describing his father's reaction to his winning an Oscar:

12. M: ... *he called an' he said son (.) it's no good for my macho image for you to see me cry he said so I think I'll pass tonight but we had-we got to get dinner the next night an' he-he jus' says y' know you're an actor an' I'm-I'm really proud...*

Example 12 displays a feature analogous to the other examples, namely that the event line consists of another action besides reported speech. This action, which is the fact that the speaker and his father had dinner together to compensate for the one the father missed, comes in the middle of two contrasting segments of speech given by the father on two different occasions. On the one hand, the emotional speech which concentrates on the father's condition (being too emotionally involved to be able to stop himself from crying); and on the other, a speech which concentrates on the son (i.e. being successful as an actor thus being a source of pride for the father).

The speaker begins the segment of talk which occurs between reported speech by "*we had*", which is usually associated with orientation, but instead of continuing

*We had dinner*  
he stops in mid-sentence and corrects himself to  
*we got to get dinner the next night*

which carries a sense of "being able to" (as opposed to the night before when his father could not make it). Also of significance is the shift in tense from simple past to simple present immediately after the narrative clause "*we got to get dinner*".

The following example presents a fragment of the event line based not on dialogue, but on action. It bears some similarity with the above example, as it comes in mid position between talk of different characters.

13. J: *I went to my dentist only three weeks ago an' I said I do have one tooth left that's my own an' emmhe had a glance an' he said that went two years ago...*

The function of the chunk of talk "*he had a glance*", apart from filling in details about what is happening, seems to create some kind of suspense as to what the dentist will say in response to John Cleese's (the narrator) question. Even though "*had*" is normally realized as a verb of relational process, in this context it is not realised as such, because it is attached to the noun "*glance*". It

creates a sense of "a process of doing" rather than "having".

The use of "*he had a glance*" instead of "*he glanced*" should also be noted, since the latter emphasizes the idea of a quick look whereas the former makes it a slightly longer process; thus this use supports the idea of suspense being created.

## CONCLUSION

It has been clear throughout the ongoing discussion that dialogue, more specifically re-enacted dialogue, represents a major, if not *the* major part of the anecdote. It was shown that some anecdotes are constructed solely in reported speech, whereas others include some segments between reported speech of different characters, which usually carry more orientation and evaluation. The function of these segments is to create suspense as to the outcome of the situation. What ultimately transpires from the present study runs along the same lines that Bakhtin's words in the following quote suggest. "People talk most of all about what others talk about – they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information; people are upset by others' words, or agree with them, contest them, refer to them and so forth" (Bakhtin, 1981:338).

In chat shows the injunction to do so is even more imperative since direct reported speech is one of the characteristics which allows the anecdote to be more entertaining, and entertainment is *the* prime purpose of chat shows, the entertainment of the participants in the chat show, of the studio audience and of the wider audience watching them at home.

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