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Concurrent and Intervening Actions during Storytelling in Family "Ceremonial" Dinners

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In ordinary conversation, speakers take turns at talk that usually consist of one turn constructional unit, and then speaker exchange occurs (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). In telling a story, a speaker produces more than one turn constructional unit. To do this, a prospective storyteller (sometimes in collaboration with prospective recipients), indicates that there is a story to tell, and may be granted the conversational floor for an extended turn (Jefferson 1978; Sacks 1978). As a storytelling proceeds, the ends of turn constructional units may provide opportunities for, or make relevant, turns by recipients. As I discuss below, these recipient turns are usually minimal, and foster or support the ongoing storytelling, both in terms of reserving the conversational floor for the storyteller, and facilitating the action the teller purports to be producing through the telling (Stivers 2008). There are occasions, however, when a recipient produces turns that disrupt or intervene into an ongoing storytelling. It is these recipient responses that are the focus of this chapter.

I describe two ways in which recipients can intervene into storytellings (thereby temporarily suspending or diverting them), and address the import for family relations of the character and placement of these interventions. The first kind of intervention involves attending to local material matters. The second involves recipients producing nonaligned responses. Both practices are widespread in my data set.

This chapter draws on more than forty videotapes of family dinners, most of them holiday dinners, and approaches these data from the perspective of conversation analysis (cf., e.g., Atkinson and Heritage 1984). The data are videotapes of events that would have occurred whether or not they were videotaped. Families signed informed consent forms, and they agreed to videotape "ceremonial" dinners (e.g., Thanksgiving, Easter, or Passover dinners) by setting up a video camera before dinner in a position that included all participants in the camera's view, turning the camera on, and letting it run until the end of the dinner. The interaction preserved on these tapes was examined for possible orderly practices and sense-making processes in interaction through which participants produce actions.
For conversation analysts, once a candidate phenomenon is identified, a collection is built of multiple possible instances of the phenomenon. These are then analyzed in detail, and they are compared in order to discern regularities in the operation of the piece of action being examined that operate across multiple instances and thus constitute a stable practice for performing that action. (For further details of conversation analytic methods, see Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Pomerantz and Fehr 1997). Drawing on the database of forty videotapes, this chapter summarizes an initial examination of two kinds of recipient interventions into storytelling—attending to material, non-storytelling-related matters, and producing nonaligned recipient responses. Each was widespread in this data set, and provides an opportunity to consider the role that family relationships may play in the organization of the telling of a story.

Research has shown that storytelling can play an important role in family life (Blum-Kulka 1997; Ochs and Taylor 1995). However, conversation analysts are wary of assuming that constructs from outside of interaction—such as culture, context, gender, relationship, family or anything else—are to be taken to be relevant to the organization of the actions that are being performed in it. The burden of relevance is on the interactants. That is to say, for the analyst to take it that some construct from outside of the interaction is procedurally relevant (Schegloff 1982) to its unfolding, the analyst must show that and how interactants are demonstrably oriented to that particular construct at that particular moment. Though the majority of the interactions in my collection of Thanksgiving, Easter, and Passover dinners are fellow family members, it is not always “family” that is procedurally relevant or demonstrably oriented to in such a way as to shape the unfolding interaction.

Recipient intervention into storytelling is a well-documented phenomenon. Sacks (1978) suggested that any recipient turns in a storytelling constitute a kind of interruption of it, because storytellings involve the floor being yielded to one party for an extended turn at talk. But other work has indicated that recipient turns can either foster the ongoing storytelling or impede it. Schegloff (1982) showed how crucial recipient “continuers”—such as “mhm,” “uh huh,” and “yeah”—are to the ongoing storytelling. He demonstrated that they have a robust role as indicators that a recipient is attending to the story but is not taking up or preparing to take up the floor at the end of a unit of the telling.

Similarly, Goodwin (1986) described the precise placement of recipient continuers and assessments can provide the context for the maintenance of the ongoing storytelling. Unless they are misplaced or misaligned, continuers and assessments do not constitute interventions into storytellings, but rather can provide indications from recipients of what they take to be the current state of the storytelling, in terms of both its progress and its import. There are things that recipients can do that can intervene into, or compete with, the storytelling, however—and actions of this kind are the focus of this chapter. Goodwin (1997, 78), drawing on Goffman, described what she called “byplay”: teasing, heckling, or playfully dealing with a description or story. Mandelbaum (1989) described how recipients can produce questions during the course of a storytelling that can fundamentally redirect or reconstitute the story.

In this chapter I describe two other intervention practices, each falling on different ends of the social solidarity scale. One is “material interventions”; a recipient intervenes in a storytelling to pursue temporarily some material matter, such as asking for or about food. The other is where a recipient produces responses in such a way as to indicate a different upshot and/or trajectory for the storytelling than the one indicated by the teller. I noted above that for conversation analysis, invoking such discourse-extrinsic concepts as “family” is usually avoided unless they can be shown to be procedurally relevant. In each of the cases examined below it is possible to invoke family relationships as at least partially implicated in the interventions that occur. After laying out the practices and discussing them, I return to a discussion of the extent to which “family” can be invoked in understanding how these recipient responses unfold.

The first practice we examine involves a potential story recipient producing a first pair part request of someone at the table, seeking a material object such as food. These requests need not become the focal action of talk; they can be dealt with nonverbally, for instance by indicating an item of food to be passed, followed by the passing of it by a fellow interactant. When they do become focal actions, however, their precise placement in ongoing talk may indicate the social or relational “job” that they may be, at least in part, designed to accomplish. The second practice is the production of nonaligned recipient responses. These responses take up an element that is available in the storytelling, but they take it in a direction that differs from the one for which the storyteller appears to have built the storytelling. In the instances examined in this study, these nonaligned recipient responses are also disaffiliative.

In instance (1) there is a food solicitation and a food offer, but they are produced in ways that both intervene in between the soliciting of a storytelling and its production, and also seem oriented to “rescuing” the potential storyteller, a child, from her father’s requests for and assessment of the storytelling. That is, here the placement of alternate focal actions, the solicitation and offer of a roll, seems designed by the mother, who solicits a roll for herself and then offers a roll to the child, to provide what we might loosely call social support for the child from whom the storytelling has been solicited:

(1) [Stew Dinner]

1 DAD: [So CLnt (0.2) tell me
2 about your day.
3 (0.5)
4 CIN: Uh:uh
5 DAD: Whadt=ju\(d\) learn.
6 (1.0)
7 DAD: [\(\sim\)\(\sim\)H yeah (we) went to thuh- we went to uh: ()
8 CIN: Uh:mm-
9 CIN: Claim Jumpin.
10 DAD: Claim Jumpin\{per\} today.
11 MOM: [\(\sim\)\(\sim\)uh huh\(\sim\)
12 MOM: May I have a roll \{please,\}
13 CIN: [For uh field trip=]
14 DAD: =Sure.
15 DAD: An’ may I have thuh- butter please.
Here, Mom, Dad, and nine-year-old Cindy are beginning dinner together. In line 1 Dad solicits from Cindy an account of her day: “So Cin tell me about your day.” After a brief gap in line 3, during which Cindy leans forward, Cindy begins a turn with “Uh...:”. Simultaneously she puts a forkful of food in her mouth. Though eating does not have to substitute for talking, here it apparently does. So this is one kind of material intervention into a storytelling—the storyteller may, at least temporarily, substitute eating for talking.

In line 5 Dad produces a more specific solicitation of the telling from Cindy, “Whad’ ju learn?”. In line 6 Dad takes a roll. Next, in lines 7 and 10, Dad recalls what Cindy did: “O::: H yeah (we) went to thuh- went to uh: Claim Jumper today.” Mom offers confirmation in line 11. (As the tape proceeds, we learn that she chaperoned the field trip). At this point, Cindy could be about to produce her storytelling. In line 12, however, Mom asks for a roll. This may be prompted by Dad having just taken a roll in line 6. Next, Dad asks for the butter in line 15. Despite Cindy’s “for a field trip” in line 13, completing Dad’s turn and perhaps beginning the solicited report of her day, in line 14 Dad is fully oriented to Mom’s request, granting it with “Sure” in line 14, then passing her the bag of rolls, while issuing a related request in line 15. He builds it as related or reciprocal with the “and” that begins his turn, “An’ may I have the butter please.” He is fully involved with the material matter of food allocation then, and is not currently aligned as a recipient of Cindy’s incipient story (that he has solicited). Mom says “yes” in line 16, then passes the butter. Cindy treats the reciprocal exchange as complete here, as in line 18 she puts together her utterances from lines 9 and 13, “Went to Claim Jumper for uh field trip.” She produces this as though it is a complete turn constructional unit. In line 19, Dad solicits more from Cindy, treating this as an incomplete account: “Yiyeah, an’ - an’ - tell me about it."

At this point, Dad has clearly solicited a report of Cindy’s day. It should be produced immediately next. As Cindy straightens up in her seat though, during the (0.5) gap in line 20, in line 21, in a whisper, Mom offers Cindy a roll: “Cindy want uh roll.” Dad has taken a roll in line 6, and is currently attending to buttering it. Simultaneous with Dad’s solicitation of Cindy’s story in line 19, “Yiyeah, an’ - an’ - tell me about it.” Mom has extracted a roll for herself from the bag. Her hand immediately dips back into the bag during the (0.5) second silence in line 20, during which Cindy has not begun to respond to Dad’s solicitation, and she extracts another roll. In terms of the food allocation procedures of the meal, then, giving Cindy a roll is a possibly relevant next action, since Dad has one, Mom has just taken one, and Cindy is therefore the only one at the table who does not yet have a roll.

That Mom produces her offer sotto voce may indicate that she takes it that this action should be produced and treated as a subordinate activity—that is, there is some primary activity to which this should be subordinated. Presumably it is Dad’s strong solicitation of Cindy’s account of her day, making relevant a story from Cindy to which the offer of the roll is produced as subordinate by whispering it. However, it is important to look at the placement of the offer. It comes after Dad’s third solicitation of an account from Cindy, and at a point where Cindy could or should have started her account but has not. In producing her offer here, it is possible that Mom may be oriented to some difficulty Cindy may be having in producing the story in-
dicated by recurrent delays in starting at lines 3, 4, 6, 8, 17, and, most recently, line 20. The offer of a roll may provide a temporary alternative primary focus (produced as a temporary alternative subordinate focus via the whisper). The offer could provide for a "legitimate" delay in Cindy beginning her story.

During the one-second silence in line 22, Cindy is oriented to the roll, and she appears to be considering it. This is further indicated in line 23 in her "Mm," which could be heard to be enacting thinking or considering. At this point Cindy needs to respond to two quite different first pair part initiating actions; her father's solicitation of a story, and her mother's offer of a roll. It is possible that her "Mm" in line 23 can be heard to be responding to either initiating action by enacting "thinking." In lines 24 and 25, both parents solicit her further. In line 24, Mom provides positive assessments of the roll, "It's soft, it's good" thus renewing and upgrading the offer. In line 25, Dad prompts Cindy to tell her story with "Come on." That he says no more about what he is expecting from Cindy indicates his understanding of the force of his earlier story solicit to make relevant a story next.

In line 27, in overlap with Cindy's "Yeah" in line 26, when she takes the roll from her mother, Dad produces another more specific solicit of a story from Cindy: "Describe this thing to me." There is considerably more recipient intervention as this story proceeds, some of it from Dad quite negative, as in Dad's assessment of the story so far in line 32, "You're gonna have to do uh lot better than that!" Space considerations preclude examination of this recipient assessment of the story itself, and the storyteller's own possible diversionary tactic in line 41, inquiring about an object in the stew, "What's this."

In the practices we have examined in this instance, first pair part turns concerned with the material matter of food distribution are produced at points where the storytelling has been strongly solicited by using first pair parts that make a telling relevant immediately next. The intervening turns are positioned just at the juncture where Cindy appears to be struggling with the production of the storytelling. They may thus be seen to give Cindy a legitimate alternative activity she "should" participate in, perhaps as a way to "protect" Cindy from her father's forceful solicitation of her storytelling. In this way, these material interventions in the particular positions in which they occur may provide a way for Mom to "protect" or "support" Cindy.

In the next instance, we see interventions of a different kind. Rather than being concerned with material matters extraneous to the storytelling, a recipient produces nonaligned responses of various kinds. This extract is taken from a family Easter dinner. Participants are Tim, who is a college student home for the Easter holiday; Mangita, Tim's fellow college student girlfriend; Tim's parents, Dad and Mom; Jon, Tim's brother, who is in high school; and Bobshi, who is Mom's mother, and Tim and Jon's grandmother. Immediately before this excerpt, the family has been reminiscing about a car they had when the boys were younger:

(2) [Easter Soup - Vacation Story 19:47-23:42]  
54 TIM: (addressed aside to Mangita) That's the one the- (. ) the horses  
55 shit on the windshield.  
56 ( ) (hhh)
The family has been reminiscing about a Pontiac Bonneville that they had. In line 54, Tim has identified the car to Mangita in the following way: “That’s the one the horses shit on the windshield.” Tim’s responses to his parents’ talk resist aligning with them. When Mom, in line 65, somewhat jokingly proposes this as a “Wonderful family memory,” Tim contests it with a questioning “Yeh?” in line 68, and in line 70 he formulates an exception: “Only I don’t like the smell.” The family continues to reminisce about this occurrence, with Dad in lines 73–74 soliciting the boys’ memory with “Do you remember your mother turn the windshield wipers on?” While, in lines 75 and 76, Mangita and Dad laugh, Tim treats the matter seriously with “Didn’t work very well” in line 77.

Although much could be said about Tim’s nonaligned responses to the family’s reminiscences at this point in the interaction, here I focus on three different subsequent nonaligned responses. First, in response to his father’s reminiscence solicit (Lerner 1992) in line 79, rather than producing or coproducing the solicited reminiscence, Tim produces a slightly different one that resists Dad’s projected reminiscence and is also condemnatory of his mother. Second, in response to his father’s telling of the reminiscence, Tim offers a markedly different reaction than the one his father reports. Again, this response is hostile toward his mother. Finally, when his mother reports her traffic “violation” in a way that presents itself as self-evidently nonblameworthy (thus indicating that she was stopped unnecessarily by the trooper), Tim treats the violation as accountable, thus rejecting her claim of self-evident innocence. Each response thus intervenes in the ongoing reminiscence by resisting its projected trajectory and import.

First, Tim produces a different kind of reminiscence than his father’s reminiscence solicit projects. In line 79, Dad solicits Tim and Jon’s memory of what happened next after their mother turned on the windshield wipers: “D’ you remember ten minutes in your mother got pulled over by a Virginia trooper?” As Lerner (1992) points out, reminiscence solicits are a way to begin a storytelling about a shared event. In lines 83–84, Mom appears to be about to set the record straight, rejecting Dad’s version with “No”: “No I got pulled over by a trooper ca.-” In overlap with Mom’s turn, in line 85 Tim uses reminiscence as a pretext for introducing something related but with a quite different trajectory: “I remember her getting pulled over a lot.” So he treats Dad’s reminiscence solicit as prompting memory of a particular occa-

CONCURRENT AND INTERVENING ACTIONS DURING STORYTELLING IN FAMILY “CEREMONIAL” DINNERS
When his mother, in line 103, produces a turn that relies on recipients to collaborate with her in her claim of self-evident almost-innocence, “and I was going to sixty-two: miles an hour,” Tim treats the claim as accountable (Heritage 1984; Scott and Lyman 1968), by asking “Why?” in line 105, thus rejecting her claim of self-evident innocence. In her tone of voice, she indicates strongly that she takes this to be ridiculous, and presumably self-evidently so. In portraying the ticket as ridiculous, she also implies that she was not blameworthy. However, in line 105, Tim does not treat it as self-evidently ridiculous. Rather, he asks “Why,” indicating that he takes going at 62 miles per hour to be something that needs justification, and is thus a problem rather than self-evidently not a problem. In line 107, after a long gap in line 106, Dad provides an account for the speed, formulating it as a safety-related matter: “We were keeping up with traffic as a matter of fact.” He formulates this turn as contesting by including “as a matter of fact,” indicating that this is contrary to the expectations embodied in the “Why” in line 105.

Notice, then, that here Tim resists his mother’s apparent project of indicating that she was stopped unnecessarily by contesting by which she indicates she takes to be self-evident. This has consequences for the storytelling, because it results in further talk regarding the occurrence devoted to showing how his mother was in fact not culpable. It also has relational consequences, in that Mom proposes herself as blameless, and Tim resists this, thereby implicating her as blameworthy.

Here, then, we see a different kind of recipient intervention into a storytelling structure. The storytelling structure is a reminiscence—a format that is widespread in family dinners. Reminiscences of shared events are plausibly particularly susceptible to recipient intervention and redirection, or, to put it a little differently, are likely to involve multiple participants who could be “co-storied” and who could legitimately provide knowledgeable contributions or responses to the storytelling. So reminiscences may provide for access to the production of the storytelling in a much more liberal way than is typical of other kinds of storytelling. Likewise, they also invoke a special array of “proper” responses.

We know from years of research on storytelling in everyday conversations that recipient responses play a key role in the ongoing construction of a storytelling. For unknowing recipients (Goodwin 1981), a key part of responding to a storytelling is discerning, taking up, or resisting the “project” that the story may be designed to enact (Stivers 2008). Despite the fact that the reminiscence solicits the expectation that he is in fact a knowing recipient—one who is already privy to the events to be told, and therefore possibly aware of their import—we see this kind of resistance produced consistently by Tim. In addition to having the potential to derail or redirect the reminiscences and storytelling, Tim’s responses position him antagonistically vis-à-vis his parents. From this instance we learn something about the interactional construction of families.

In various ways, reminiscence of shared family events may provide a particularly powerful opportunity for a family to enact being a family by producing the appearance of a group with distributed roles and perspectives of particular kinds of events that form a shared history. Shared assessment and alignment on the meaning of those events is clearly optional. However, resisting parents’ interactional projects—not only by treating a projected reminiscence about a particular event as invoking recurrent instances of that occurrence (rather than a reminiscence about a particular event) but also by contesting parents’ inferences about these shared events—enacts a particular kind of disaffiliation and independence. Agreeing on the import of a particular memory may embody a family that is unified in the past and the present, and may invoke a shared, affiliative history. However, nonaligned responses of different kinds can be destructive of, or at least threatening to, social solidarity. They imply contested memories, disagreement, and even hostility.

In addition, then, to making relevant attempts to redress his apparent efforts to take reminiscing in a different direction, and thus having the potential to redirect the ongoing storytelling, Tim’s responses here introduce an additional layer of quite active disaffiliation with his mother. The practices he recruits in resisting his parents’ implications are not particular to being a mother or son but appear to form part of the collection of practices through which these roles/identities/relationships (and presumably others) are enacted. They may also have important implications for the construction and management of the “independence” that is a standard adolescent developmental phase. There is, however, something deeply family-relevant in reminiscing about the past. Tim’s resistance to his parents’ reminiscence-related projects constitutes one kind of intervention into an ongoing story or reminiscence. His divergent responses threaten to undermine their emergent interactional projects. As this instance also indicates, however, storytellers are not without resources in addressing recipient interventions of this sort, and they may provide for the ongoing interactional construction and management of the development of teenagers’ identity and independence.

In instance (1) we saw recipient interventions of a quite different kind: food solicitations and an offer. Though Mom’s requests and offer are clearly not storytelling related—and could thus be taken to be disaffiliative with the storyteller and as disruptive of Cindy’s ongoing project of telling about her day in response to her father’s solicitations—they do seem to be precisely placed to intervene at moments when Cindy is exhibiting trouble, and they are thus supportive of Cindy, and apparently sensitive to her. This is perhaps just the sort of special sensitivity a parent should be able to enlist on his or her child’s behalf.

Note that a lack of buy-in to the storytelling—through interventions attending to material matters such as understanding a referent in the storytelling or having food passed—can be interactionally neutral. But in instance (1), we saw that dealing with food distribution during the storytelling can actually be affiliative and thus can foster social solidarity by “supporting” a fellow interactant, whereas instance (2) showed that resisting aligning with a storytelling, being aligned as a story recipient, and treating the storytelling as a storytelling but pursuing a disaffiliative set of responses can all be destructive of social solidarity. Thus we see that concurrent and intervening actions during storytellings of different kinds may be affiliative or disaffiliative, and may be strongly implicated in the production and management of family roles and relationships.
Truth and Authorship in Textual Trajectories

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The Two Terms in the title of this chapter, "truth" and "authorship," have long been central topics in narrative research. They remain ineluctable because they are not only core elements of narrativity but also raise key questions about the roles of narrative in social life. The chapter seeks to show how truth and authorship are shaped by the path taken by witnesses' depictions within the institutional meanders of the justice system. It does so by focusing on the multilateral character of storytelling in institutions and the complex processes of contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization.

Historical truth and claims of veracity have been classical preoccupations in narrative studies (Barthes 1981) that have not been confined to the discourse of history or the study of historiography. White (1980), for example, establishes a link between a moral authority and the truth claims inherent in the narrativized world of any account of reality. Based on the understanding that "narrative truth" in the storystoryworld is dependent on point of view or perspective, analysts of literary narrative have distinguished between an author/storyteller's, narrator's, and character's reliability (Pfeifer and Martin 1999). Conversely, Doležel (1999) argues that truth in nonfictional narrative, as in history, is expressed in constative speech acts contingent on the historian's ability to gain evidence about the past and to make plausible conjectures that are scrutinized by the scientific community. The treatment of truth has also surfaced in studies of autobiography. Schuler (2001), for instance, ascends the lack of historical truth and the effect of mythical self-presentation in an autobiographical account, which itself constitutes a historical document with real consequences for the construction of identity. Likewise, in criminal law, the construction of a given version of the past as real and true reflects the essence of storytelling and its products— the texts.

Issues of authorship can be seen to comprise an extremely wide range of facets, from the multiplicity of voices in the text (Bakhtin 1981) to the social actor's changing footing in the production of a text (Goffman 1981; Levinson 1987). In studies of conversation, Duranti's (1986) article on the audience as coauthor is emblematic of interactional discourse analysts' long-standing awareness of the fact that the textual