Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women

Mariko Karatsu

STUDIES IN NARRATIVE 16

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women

Conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories

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常州大学山书馆
藏书章

John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam / Philadelphia

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Conversational storytelling among Japanese women : conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories / Mariko Karatsu.
p. cm. (Studies in Narrative, ISSN 1568-2706 ; v. 16)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Storytelling--Social aspects--Japan. 2. Women storytellers--Japan. 3. Japanese language--Prosodic analysis. 4. Japanese language--Spoken Japanese. I. Title.
P96.S782J36 2012
808.5'430820952--dc23 2012030709
ISBN 978 90 272 2656 3 (Hb ; alk. paper)
ISBN 978 90 272 7312 3 (Eb)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

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Acknowledgements

While a book may be written by one person there are many who help along the way. This project began when I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. In that period of my life I was very fortunate to have Polly Szatrowski as my adviser and several other faculty on campus who served as teachers and dissertation committee members. We also had a lively and interesting group of graduate students. While a Ph.D. student I spent six months at UCLA where the faculty graciously introduced me to conversation analysis. After graduation Professor Szatrowski continued to give me her support and encouragement for which I am very grateful. Some storytellings were presented at professional meetings. I appreciate comments that people gave me. I also want to thank Michael Bamberg who gave valuable feedback on my initial outline and recommended the publication of this monograph as series editor.

For the last seven years I have been on the faculty in the department of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona. The heads and faculty have been very supportive of me, and my thinking about language benefited from teaching classes to our M.A. and Ph.D. students. I am grateful to the university for a leave of absence which allowed me to make progress on my book project.

I also want to thank my family, former teachers, and friends in Japan who have supported me over the years. I would especially like to acknowledge my mother, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew who always encouraged me and my deceased father whom I greatly respect. I am also grateful to my husband who was supportive and encouraged me to continue my work on this monograph.

Finally, it is very important to thank the women who participated in my research. They freely gave of their time, and their conversations were the source of my analysis. Without them the research would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview

This book investigates storytelling in face-to-face everyday conversations among Japanese women examining the participants' verbal and nonverbal behavior. The research is primarily concerned with (a) how conversational participants bring past experiences into the present moment (the ongoing conversation), (b) what significance a person's past experiences have in the present and future, and (c) what participants do and accomplish through the storytelling. The present study analyzes various kinds of storytelling and the overall process of storytelling in Japanese conversations, focusing on how a story becomes worth telling and is shared among the participants. It attempts to identify the participants' patterned uses of language. It also attempts to identify elements that make a story worth telling for the participants. It pays special attention to conversational circumstances under which a story is told, the "social circumstances" (Sacks, 1992, p. 15) under which conversational participants live, and the participants' orientation toward the tellability of a story. Finally, the study shows how it is important to analyze the overall process of storytelling in the particular context of the participants' everyday lives, for example, school, family, or work, utilizing patterns and elements identified in previous chapters. The book also shows how the participants' concerns about the social circumstances can influence the process of storytelling.

The conversational data were collected at a lunch or tea time, a school, a work place, and a house party. The women in the conversation are friends from school, close coworkers at a work place, or members of a cohort in graduate school. They tell many small episodes that they experienced or heard about in their everyday lives, for example, episodes in their community such as at school or work and episodes within their families. The participants are often amused at what the story teller has experienced, give an account of their thoughts, and share information in relation to the story during the storytelling.

Storytelling and the social and conversational circumstances

Building on Jefferson (1978), I refer to "storytelling" as "an event of conversational interaction in which any of its participants can show an orientation toward a story

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before the story is told, and the story is methodically and sequentially occasioned in the conversation through the participants' interaction" (Karatsu, 2010, p. 121). In other words, the way a story is told is a part of the storytelling, and it emerges from the conversation in progress and is produced through the interaction among the participants. A story is a product of interaction that consists of temporally sequenced events told from a particular perspective.

Figure 1.1 shows the relationship between the process of storytelling and the participants' verbal and nonverbal behavior, and introduces the concepts of conversational circumstances and social circumstances (which I elaborate on below). Specifically, I analyze the storytelling, which includes a story about the teller's past experience. The process of storytelling includes the conversational interaction in which the story teller departs from previous talk and introduces and tells her story, the participants discuss it, the teller completes the story, and, finally, the participants' orientation shifts from the story to something else. The story teller and other participants typically work together through negotiation or collaboration, showing how they are engaged in the storytelling through their verbal and nonverbal behavior.

The *conversational circumstances* are the circumstances under which the ongoing conversational interaction among the participants is carried out and they practice their verbal and nonverbal behavior. I expect that a story is introduced under particular conversational circumstances, and these circumstances influence how the story is told and shared.

> The observable relationship between a story and prior turn-by-turn talk is a product of methodic displays, fitted to the talk so far and to the story to be told. Further, it appears that the particular circumstances under which a story is entered can have consequences for the structure of the actually told story, which itself is fitted to the manner of its introduction. (Jefferson, 1978, p. 224)

My analysis explores what aspects of conversational circumstances the participants are concerned with (e.g., the topic of the conversation, an activity which the participants are engaged in, or information that the participants have) when a story is told in the conversation.

The *social circumstances* encompass the conversational participants' everyday lives and include the conversational circumstances. Sacks (1992) has claimed that the form of the story – for example, what words are selected and how the scenes are described – is not a "matter of style," but a matter of "what knowledge of the world is there." This includes the "social circumstances," for example, to whom the story is told and who are the story recipients (p. 15). Under the rubric of social circumstances, I am concerned with the social and cultural aspects of the participants, specifically the participants' positions and roles in a particular community, family or organization (e.g., professor-student; manager-worker; wife-husband) as well as

their informal or interpersonal relationships with one another and those outside the conversational circle (e.g., friendships and rivalries), which closely relate to the participants' self identification – who they are. My analysis explores how such social and cultural aspects of the participants influence the process of storytelling.

My analysis focuses on the tellability of the conversational story. As shown in Figure 1.2, this relates to "four elements": (a) the embeddedness of the story in the conversation, (b) the participants' views of past events in the story, (c) the participants' knowledge in relation to the content or elements of the story, and (d) the participants' concern about social circumstances. I expect that both the story teller and the other participants are sensitive to these "four elements" and the tellability of a story is built through the participants' interaction in the storytelling. My examination of the conversational circumstances under which the story is introduced and told shows how the story teller's orientation is embodied in these "four elements." It also demonstrates how the "four elements" are important to get other recipients involved in the story, making the story worth telling and sharing. Subsequently this affects the telling and completion of the story. The goal of this book is to further the sociolinguistic analysis of a conversational story by demonstrating ways of analyzing a personal story in Japanese everyday conversation, focusing on its tellability both within the ongoing conversational interaction as well as in the context of the participants' everyday lives.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are important in communicating what the book is about. While I have only briefly introduced the concepts here, I will discuss them at more length in this chapter. The final chapter following my analyses will return to both figures and show how they help to interpret and give meaning to my results.

1.2 Previous research

The research in this book builds on previous sociolinguistic and conversation analytic research on conversational storytellings and narratives. While telling a story may appear to the casual observer and to the participants themselves as a spontaneous or a unique event, research from conversation analysis that focuses on "action sequences" has shown that the story teller's act of telling her story is located in a sequence of participants' actions.

> Examining stories within their sequential context permits the explication of how stories are articulated with what has preceded them, how that relationship to what has preceded enters into the constitution of the story itself, how the passage from the story to what follows it is managed, and how the exigencies of that transition enter into the shaping of the story, and (as it happens) into the initiation of the story as well. (Schegloff, 1992, p. 201)

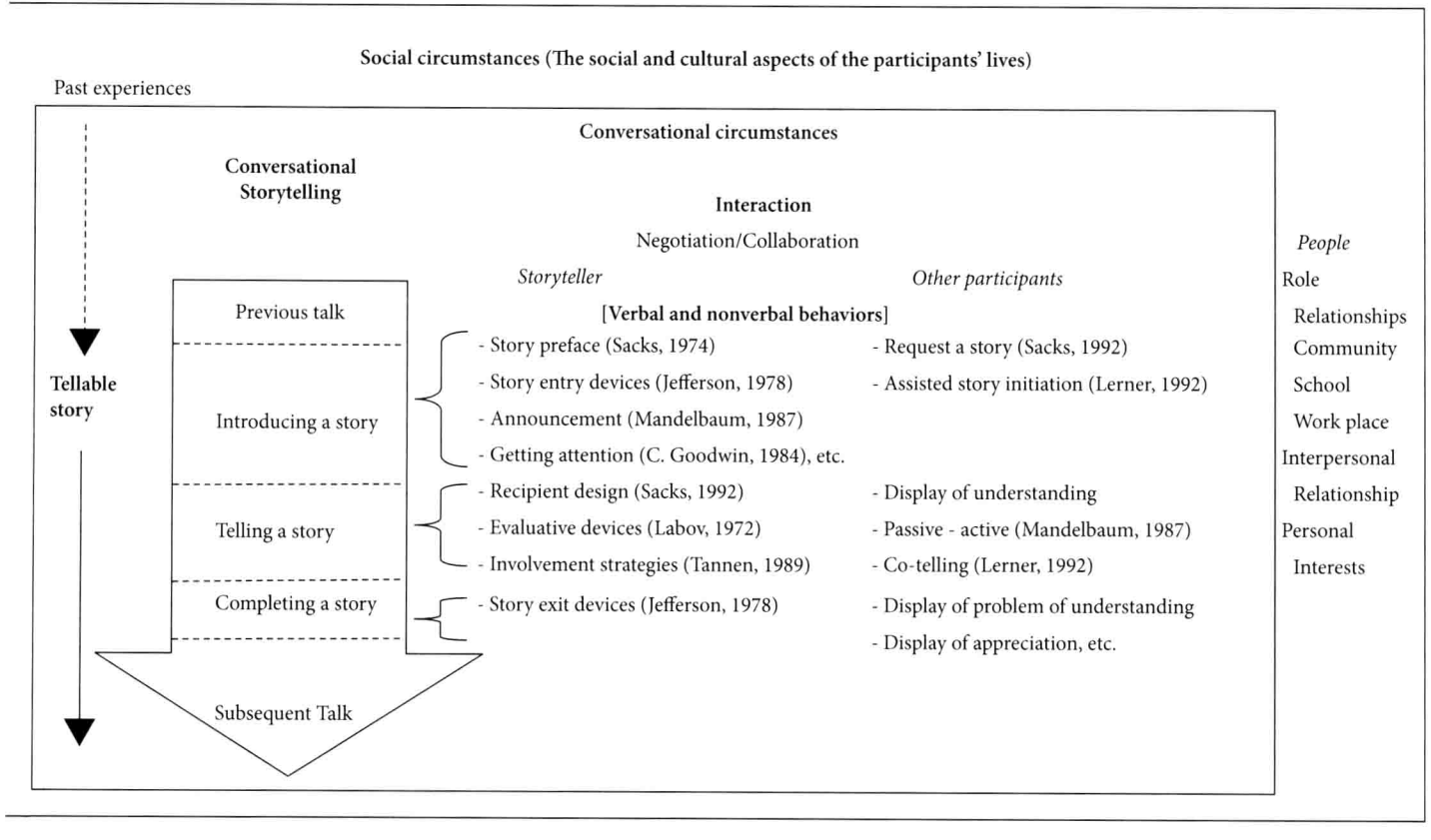

Figure 1.1. The Process of Storytelling and Key Concepts

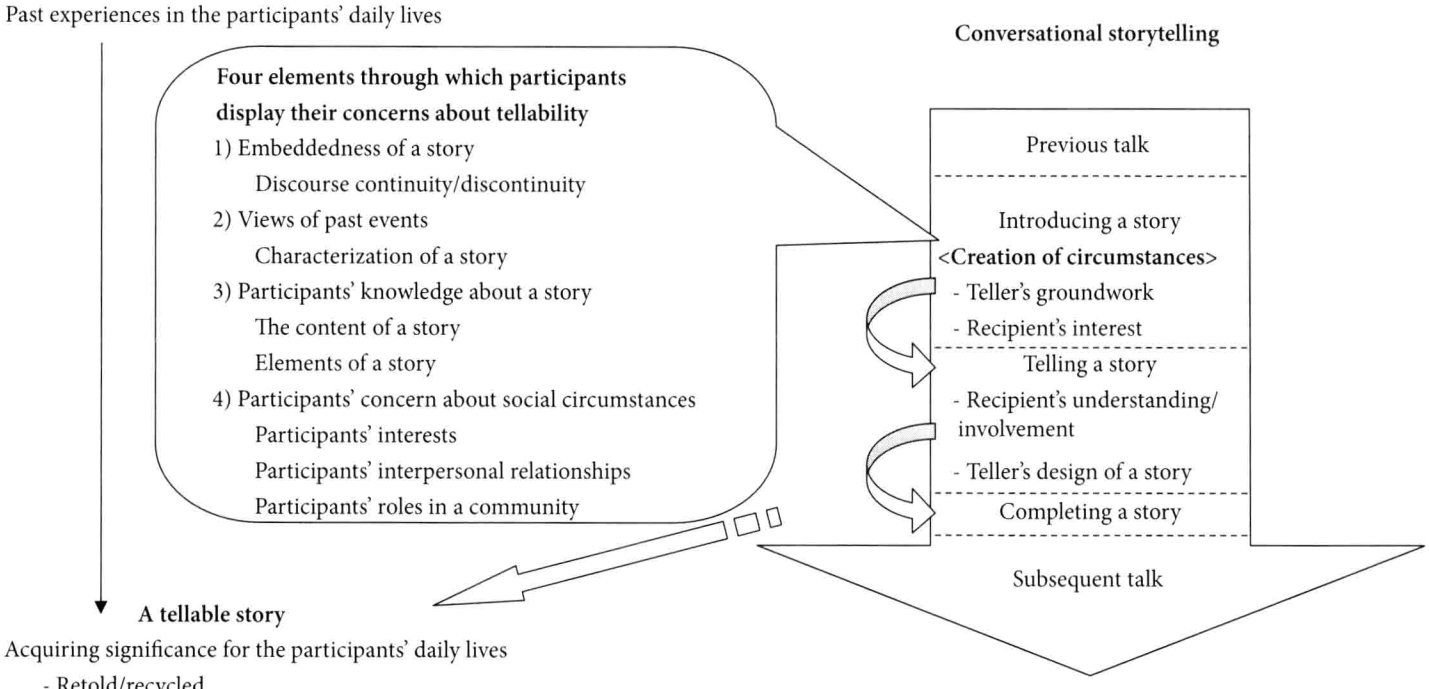

Figure 1.2. Storytelling and the Participants' Concerns about the Tellability of a Story

Conversation analysis also showed how the story teller uses techniques such as a "story preface" (Sacks, 1974, 1992) and "story entry devices" (Jefferson, 1978) to locate their stories in the ongoing conversation and methodically introduce and achieve their stories in the conversation (C. Goodwin, 1984; Jefferson, 1978; Mandelbaum, 1987; Sacks, 1974, 1992). Researchers of Japanese conversation demonstrated how Japanese story tellers also use techniques similar to story prefaces and story entry devices (Lee, 2000; Maynard, 1989).

While telling a story may also appear to be a story teller's solo action – that is, told autonomously by the story teller – research on conversational storytelling has shown that telling a story involves all of the participants, and is a product of negotiation and collaboration (Coates, 1996; C. Goodwin, 1984, 1986a; Hayashi, et al., 2002; Karatsu, 2004b, 2010; Jefferson, 1978; Koike, 2001, 2010; Nishikawa, 2005; Ochs, et al., 1992; Ochs, 1997; Polanyi, 1985a; Sacks, 1974, 1992; Tannen, 1984, 1989). Researchers showed that participants in the storytelling engage in many interpersonal and social tasks, such as mitigating conflict, mitigating responsibility, aligning oneself with others (Coates, 1996; M. H. Goodwin,1990; Mayes, 1996; Norrick, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Ochs, et al.,1992; Sacks, 1992; Schiffrin, 1990; Tannen, 1984; Thornborrow & Coates, 2005), and displaying their social identities and selves (Bamberg, et al., 2007; Georgakopoulou, 2007; Schiffrin, 1996).

The sociolinguistic study of stories in spontaneous conversation provides an excellent opportunity to examine the participants' use of language (for example, linguistic devices) as well as nonverbal behavior as resources to display their view of past events, situations and other people. Developing Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic studies of evaluation and evaluative devices, researchers have demonstrated how the story teller uses forms of language and laughter as well as nonverbal behavior to make stories tellable through interaction with the other participants (M. H. Goodwin, 1990, 1997; Karatsu, 2004b; Norrick, 2000; Polanyi, 1979, 1985a; Szatrowski, 2010; Tannen, 1984, 1989). In recent works, researchers paid close attention to various kinds of stories, for example, shared stories (Norrick, 2000) and hypothetical stories (Ochs & Capps, 2001), as well as stories that are negotiable/collaborative in nature. Going beyond the analysis of evaluation and evaluative devices, they pointed out that unlike a story in a monologue or in a written text, tellability of a story in everyday conversation does not necessarily rest on the "sensational nature of events" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 34) or the teller's skill in rhetorical composition. The tellability of a story also rests on how the story is introduced, on "interactional dynamics" (Norrick, 2000), and on the participants' common interests and values in their daily lives (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Sacks, 1992). Ochs and Capps (2001) suggested that "tellability" interrelates to other aspects of narrative,

such as "tellership," "embeddedness," "linearity," and "moral stance." This book draws heavily on all of these traditions, but especially the latter, to explore tellability in Japanese women's casual conversations.

1.3 Three tasks of this book

This book will undertake three tasks. The first task is to identify patterns in the participants' verbal and nonverbal behavior and to examine the story in relation to these patterns. The second is to analyze these patterns in terms of the concept of tellability of a story. The third is to interpret the participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors in terms of the social and cultural situation or characteristics of the participants. I engage these three tasks in each stage of storytelling; that is, the transition from the previous talk to introducing a story, telling a story, and the transition from completing a story to subsequent talk (see Figure 1.2).

1.3.1 Task 1: Examining the conversational circumstances

The first task is to examine the conversational circumstances under which a story is introduced and told, to identify behavioral patterns and linguistic devices that the participants use, and examine the shape of the story (how the story is told) in relation to these patterns. I draw on the analytic work of conversation analysis, which examines a story within its sequential context; that is, a storytelling. Conversation analysis contributed to studies of storytelling by demonstrating how a story is introduced methodically into conversation using techniques such as a story preface. Because it was primarily interested in how the teller holds the floor to tell a story (which consists of a long stretch of talk), suspending turn-by-turn talk, researchers have paid more attention to the teller's techniques within the immediate conversational context than examining stories within their sequential context. Georgakopoulou (2007, p. 4) pointed out that conversation analysis has paid attention to the entry and exit of a story, but "there is still much scope for research, particularly with regard to the part that comes between a story's opening and a story's ending." Research on Japanese storytelling has paid little attention to the relationship between the sequential context and how the introduction of the story is consequential for the development of the story (for exceptions, see Hayashi et al., 2002; Karatsu, 2004a, 2004b; Szatrowski, 2010). While research that uses interactional perspectives has been emerging, it has been limited to single-case studies (Hayashi, et al., 2002; Karatsu, 2004b, 2010; Koike, 2001, 2010; Mayes, 1996; Nishikawa, 2005; Szatrowski, 2010).

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