7 Conclusions and implications

7.1 Introduction

The fundamental aim in this study has been to provide quantitative evidence of the co-construction of conversational narrative. In the following section, Section 7.2, I summarize the findings presented in the analytical chapters, Chapters 3 to 6, and discuss implications of the individual case studies. In Section 7.3, finally, I consider the implications the study has as a whole.

7.2 Summaries of the analytical chapters and conclusion

Chapter 3

The goal in this chapter has been to provide quantitative evidence of the co-construction of turntaking in conversational narrative. Two turntaking measures were examined: turn order (Section 3.2) and turn size (Section 3.3).

In Section 3.2, starting from Sacks's (1992) observation that narrators attempt to control every third turn, from a first, and restricting the scope of the analysis to three-party narratives, the analysis centrally aimed to establish the proportion of N-notN-N trigrams (with capital N for narrator). It was shown that the N-notN-N pattern accounts for significantly larger proportions of all trigrams than expected under the null hypothesis H_o. The N-notN-N turn order pattern is remarkable in a number of respects. First, it constitutes a significant diversion from ordinary conversation, where turn order is not fixed in advance (Sacks *et al.* 1974). In three-party narrative, turn order is specified in advance inasmuch as the narrator is granted privileged rights to every third turn, from a first. However, it was also found that the N-notN-N pattern is negatively correlated with the number of turns in stories. That is, the pattern is strong in stories involving few turns but loses in power as the number of turns in a story increases. This gradual decay of the pattern was seen as testifying to the greater degree of entrenchment of the default, varied turn order pattern. Second, the N-notN-N pattern is remarkable in that it reflects yet another diversion from ordinary conversation. There, the distribution of turns is not fixed in advance (see Sacks *et al.* 1974). In conversational three-party narrative, by contrast, turn

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distribution is very clearly tilted towards the narrator, who gets significantly greater shares in turns than any one recipient. Third, the N-notN-N pattern is remarkable in that it demonstrates that recipients fine-tune their response behavior to each other. The analysis showed that double-responses (that is, trigrams in which both the second and the third slot are taken by the recipients) were significantly underrepresented. This suggests that recipients strive to avoid double responses, and instead give preference to single responses (that is, trigrams, in which only the second slot is taken by a recipient). I referred to this striking coordination of response behavior as an 'economy of listening.' Examining the precise mode of operation of this economy was beyond the scope of the case study. Interesting questions could not be addressed, for example: What types of signal do recipients rely on to avoid both of them responding consecutively or in overlap? Are response turns in the 'notN' slot of N-notN-N trigrams equally distributed between recipients? Does the narrator's behavior play a role in deciding which of the two recipients takes the 'notN' turn (for example, by means of gaze)? These questions certainly merit future investigation.

The N-notN-N pattern is thus the result of co-construction both in terms of turn distribution and turn order. Given that this case study was restricted to three-party narrative, a worthwhile extension of this work would be to investigate turn order in more-than-three-party narrative. If, in principle, the same preferential treatment of the narrator could be observed, the co-construction of turn order would have to be seen as an even greater interactional achievement in that the turn space available for each individual recipient decreases with each additional participant to the narrative.[1]

In Section 3.3, the co-construction of turn size was taken into focus. The unit of analysis were turn bigrams, that is, pairs of immediately adjacent turns. Given observations of extended narrator turn size and the concomitant reduced recipient turn size, it was assumed that the fluctuation between long narrator turns and short recipient or Co-narrator turns, referred to as turn size fluctuation (TSF), would be sizable and homogeneous. It was shown that TSF is indeed significantly more sizable in narrative than in non-narrative conversation; however, TSF in narrative was not found to be more homogeneous than in non-narrative conversation. It was demonstrated that TSF homogeneity is decisively influenced by participant role and the interactions between the participant roles: TSF is high and homogeneous or low and heterogeneous depending on whether Primary Narrators (PNP) interact with Responsive Recipient (PRR), Co-constructive Recipient (PRC), or Ratified Co-narrator (PNC): in bigrams involving narrator and Co-narrator (PNP & PNC) and in bigrams involving narrator and Co-constructive Recipient (PNP & PRC), TSF was found to be low and heterogeneous, whereas in bigrams involving narrator and Responsive Recipient (PNP & PRR), TSF was found to be high and homogeneous. The fact that TSF is more sizable (but not more homogeneous) in narrative than in non-narrative conversation is therefore

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mainly owed to the influence of the latter interactional pattern, PNP & PRR. The reason why participant role has such a decisive influence on TSF is the fact that turn *lengths* by narrators and recipients/Co-narrators are finely attuned to one another: not only are recipient/Co-narrator turns differently sized, with sizes ranging from minimal for PRR to sizable for PNC, but also the lengths of narrator turns are correlated to the type of response that follows: while, on one end, narrator turns preceding PNC outsize their successor turn only slightly, on the other end, narrator turns preceding PRR are a multiple of the length of their successor turn.

This mutual attunement suggests a sophisticated co-construction of turn size in conversational narrative. Turn size is far from being varied in Sacks *et al.*'s (1974) sense. On the contrary, it is subtly predetermined in advance, the key determining factor being participant role: on a general level, narrators are conceded long turns, while the turns of all non-narrators are shorter. Within this general 'setting,' though, turn sizes are even more finely predetermined inasmuch as the differential size of narrators' turns was found to have an impact on the type (and length) of the immediate response. A 'chameleon effect' (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Lillian 2011) was observed: depending on the length of the preceding narrator utterance, length and type of recipient responses vary, with (very short) PRR responses matching up with very long narrator turns, and (longer) Co-narrator (PNC) and, specifically, Co-constructive Recipient (PRC) utterances correlating with narrator utterances of intermediate or short length. It was hypothesized that turn size is among the variables by which narrators can influence recipients to contribute in distinct ways. This chameleon effect makes an interesting analogue with other forms of cooperative behavior, for example, with the verbal 'duetting' noted by Holmes & Stubbe (1997), the adjusting found for the number of function words in adjacent utterances (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Lillian 2011), and the matching observed for the length of the listener-controlled turn interval preceding the stand-alone backchannel *yeah* and the length of the speaker-managed turn interval following the listener's *yeah* (Peters & Wong forthcoming) (for an up-to-date survey of work on the 'chameleon effect,' see Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Lillian 2011).

Turn size and its fluctuation were examined in two-party narrative only. However, there is no principled reason why TSF should not also be indicative, to an extent, of narrative interaction between more participants. Cursory inspection of more-than-two-party narratives suggests that sizable and homogeneous TSF may not only be characteristic of two-party conversation but also of three- and more-than-three-party conversation.[2] Future research is needed to investigate this possibility in more detail.

Further, both case studies have been based on analyses of turn n-grams, trigrams in the case of Section 3.2 and bigrams in the case of Section 3.3. Examining n-grams has grown into a key method in corpus lexical studies; to my knowledge, n-grams have not yet been examined beyond lexis. The

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present analyses have demonstrated that the notion can fruitfully be extended to aspects of turntaking, suggesting that further extensions to non-lexical patternings might be conceivable.

Finally, on a more general level, the case studies support the notion that corpus linguistics and the conversation-analytical study of turntaking can not only mutually benefit, but that "they can actually synergize" (O'Keeffe & Walsh 2012: 178). If more widespread use is made of turntaking-related annotation, as provided in the NC, this synergy may prove even more fruitful in CA-inspired corpus research in the future.

Chapter 4

This chapter has attempted, in the main, to shed light on narrator co-construction via one crucial aspect of recipient design: the marking of quotation.

The analytical sections reporting on quotation markers were preceded by Section 4.1, a largely theoretical section, introducing concepts key in understanding discourse presentation. The concepts included the notions of immediacy (the cline of degrees by which the reporting mode types make the reported discourse more or less immediate to the listener), demonstration (quotation as a selective depiction rather than verbatim reproduction), and the boundary issue (the necessity for narrators to demarcate the boundaries of demonstrated material, whose referential elements need to be processed 'in another light'). Two case studies were reported exploring the potential functioning of items as 'auditory quotation marks.'

Section 4.2 examined positioning in the use of interjections in quotes. The primary focus was on the role of interjections in first position. Two items were shown to be significantly more frequent in first position in quotes than in conversational utterances: *oh* and *well*. Two alternative interpretations were discussed. I noted the possibility that narrators preferentially pre-select for quotation *oh*- and *well*-prefaced utterances. This pre-selection may be based on the perception of *oh*- and *well*-prefaced utterances as of greater 'interest' (Brown & Levinson 1987) to the recipient given the essential functions of *oh* (as a 'change-of-state' marker indexing the receipt of new, unexpected or surprising information) and *well* (as a marker of dispreferreds indexing that the utterance does not, or not fully, satisfy social expectations). Their preselection could thus serve to increase the recipient's involvement in the storytelling. Alternatively, drawing on the theory of lexical priming and, specifically, the notion of textual colligation (Hoey 2005), it was argued that *oh* and *well* have two primings: one for utterance-launch and one for quote-launch. It was demonstrated that the two primings are clearly distinguishable, not only by means of lexical associations (for example, collocations with quotative verbs) and genre distinctions (the priming for quote-launch is associated first and foremost with conversational narrative rather than general conversation), but also, perhaps more importantly, by means of position: seen

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against the backdrop of the narrative utterance within which the quote occurs, quote-first *oh* and *well* occur significantly later than *oh* and *well* occur in conversational utterances. In this perspective, the priming for quote-first use alerts the recipient to the forthcoming quotation and signals the concomitant need to resolve references in quotation as pertaining to the reported speaker(s) rather than the reporting speaker. Both interpretations emphasize the role of *oh* and *well* in the service of recipient design: seen as components of preferentially pre-selected utterances, *oh* and *well* intensify the recipient's interest, seen as a priming for the inception of dialog, *oh* and *well* attend to the recipient's processing needs.

Section 4.3 was concerned with short silent pauses in the context of quotes. A positional analysis suggested that silent pauses frame quotes: they exhibit a significant attraction not only to initial but also final positions. Silent pauses were thus interpreted not only as choice-related speech management expressions in Allwood *et al.*'s (1990) sense serving the speaker to gain planning time but also as recipient-related processing instruction demarcating the onset and completion of quotation. Unlike interjections, which mark only the left-hand boundary, silent pauses mark both the left- and right-hand boundary of quotation, thus functioning as a quote-unquote signal.

The findings discussed in the case studies shed some light on how speakers recipient-design quotation with a view to alleviating the considerable processing constraints imposed by the switches in role, perspective, voice, and reference that are characteristic of Direct and Free Direct discourse presentation. Recipient design in the use of quotation can undoubtedly be further enlightened. First, more marking devices are conceivable. For example, mimicking voice quality is likely to "serve as an ongoing acoustic prosodic marker [of quotes]" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 447). Second, in the case studies presented above, no distinction was made between Free Direct and Direct quotation. Since Free Direct is, by definition, without preceding reporting clause (a very obvious marker of quotation), the need for alternative marking might be greater for Free Direct than for Direct quotes. Also, the means used to mark quotation might differ between the two quotation types. Third, in this chapter, interjections and pauses have been investigated separately. However, there is the possibility that different types of quotation marker interact in some way or another; for example, the use of one marker might obviate the need for some other, or the reverse, markers might typically work in unison only but lose in force as standalones. The analyses presented in this chapter are hence merely starting points for further, more fine-grained explorations into the recipient design of quotation in conversational narrative.

Finally, the two case studies have important methodological and theoretical implications. Methodologically the positional analyses of interjections and silent pauses in quotes have broken new ground in that Hoey's (2005) textual colligation claim, which has so far only been discussed with a view to

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written data, has for the first time been tested against spoken data. Also, while the statistics in much research on positioning tend to be basic, the positional analyses in this chapter have been validated using rigorous statistical examination. The findings are of theoretical importance inasmuch as this study has statistically substantiated the textual colligation claim for conversational narrative. That is, the case studies have provided quantitative evidence to suggest that speakers of English are primed (i) generally, to use interjections utterance- and quote-initially, (ii) specifically, to use *oh* and *well* in quote-first position, and (iii) to use silent pauses both in initial and final positions within quotes. What is as yet missing is psycholinguistic evidence to complement the statistical evidence. For priming is first and foremost a psychological concept and whether language users are indeed *primed* to use, for example, *oh* and *well* at the immediate onset of quotation needs yet to be confirmed by psycholinguistic research in experimental settings.

Chapter 5

In this second of two chapters dealing with discourse presentation, the focus has been on ways that narrators, following the recipient design principle, utilize discourse presentation co-constructively in the sense of designing utterances dramatically.

Section 5.2 was concerned with the notion of climactic structure at the level of the individual utterance. The focus was on sequences of report units within utterances. Building on the immediacy cline model developed in Section 4.1, a robust trend was found across all report sequences investigated ($3 \geq n \leq 8$) to increase in immediacy over the sequence. A similar significant tendency towards immediatization was found for n=2-sequences, the largest group of report sequences in the NC. Further, it was discovered that the trend towards greater immediacy is to a very large extent due to the intra-sequential increase in occurrence of the two mimetic modes Free Direct and Direct.

It was argued that, given this immediatization trend, the same 'tension' can be observed at the level of the utterance that Longacre (1983) characterized as 'plus' in narrative as a discourse type. Given that tension is the driving force behind the climacto-telic structure of storytelling, the observation of tension generated by immediatized report sequences suggests that the notion of 'climax' can be seen, not only in association with the large unit of the story, but also in association with the smaller unit of the utterance: utterances exhibit climacto-telic structure too. I noted that an open question relates to the possibility that the thus generated utterance tension could, not only reflect, but also co-*generate* the larger tension of storytelling, a possibility which merits closer attention in future research.

Immediatization in the use of report sequences at utterance level and the concomitant utterance tension are a clear expression of recipient design as the

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overarching strategy implemented in narrative discourse production. As noted, the immediatization trend is 'steered' towards constructed dialog as the intrasequential culmination point. Also, constructed dialog is designed in such a way that the illusion is created of the reported speaker's co-presence in the telling situation. This virtual co-presence turns the recipient into a virtual addressee. A situation arises like in normal turn-by-turn talk, where addressees are potential next speakers and thus attend to current speakers acutely in order to achieve smooth transitions with no gap/no overlap and to be able to respond coherently. Being the virtual addressee has the effect that the recipient's interest, as the potential next speaker, is intensified. In other words, the increase in immediacy in the use of report sequences is a design which serves to increase the recipient's intrinsic interest to attend to the narrator's telling.

This case study opens up intriguing avenues for future investigations of the patternings of discourse units. The immediacy trend in the use of report units may be initial evidence that what Sinclair (1991) referred to as the 'idiom principle' – the co-selection of lexical items – may, in a similar fashion, operate on the higher level of, not lexical, but discourse units. That is, one discourse unit (such as a report) may have a tendency to *col-locate* with a subsequent discourse unit (such as a more immediate report). Clearly, this kind of *col-location* is no less complex a type of association than the usual collocation of lexical items. Collocation requires a twofold definition both as a statistical and a psychological concept; for example, Hoey's definition is that collocation is "a psycholinguistic phenomenon, the evidence for which can be found statistically in computer corpora" (Hoey 2005: 5). While the evidence for the statistical nature of collocation is massive, only relatively few studies have explored the extent to which collocations have psychological reality (e.g., Ellis *et al.* 2009, Durrant & Doherty 2010). The statistical nature of the immediacy trend of report units has been demonstrated: within utterances, the increase in immediacy of report units is greater than is explicable in terms of random distribution. The case study has not addressed the issue of whether this trend also reflects a psychological reality in the sense of a 'mutual expectancy' (Firth 1968: 181). That is, we do not know whether there exists a 'priming' relationship in the sense of Hoey (2005) between sequence-early low-immediacy reports and sequence-late high-immediacy report units. However, Hoey too did not know for sure whether his priming theory was empirically valid; he therefore took care to present the theory in the form of hypotheses. Indeed, writing in 2005, he could not know whether his priming claims had psycholinguistic validity for the studies confirming his priming claims were conducted only later (see above). Further, I am not aware of psycholinguistic research confirming (or disconfirming) Hoey's claims regarding, not collocation, but colligation, textual collocation, and textual colligation. That is, his claims about these association types must count as claims, not facts. Therefore, the fact that as yet we have no evidence

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of the psychological reality of the *col-location* of discourse units need not be taken as evidence that no such psychological reality exists. Rather, following his example, in the absence of empirical evidence I should like to state the hypothesis that (to borrow from Hoey's (2005: 13) definition of priming for collocational use) 'every *discourse unit* is primed to occur with particular other discourse units.' Fully aware of its tentativeness, I encourage psycholinguistic research to falsify – or verify – the hypothesis.

Chapter 6

This chapter moved recipients center stage, investigating the ways they co-author and thus co-construct narrative.

Section 6.2 investigated the co-authorship gained by recipients via use of feedback *as such*. Starting from research on general conversation which suggests that increases in backchannel frequency correlate with increases in turn length (Peters & Wong forthcoming) it was hypothesized that increases in recipient responses lead to increases in the total number of words in narrator utterances per story.

Three independent subsets of data were created: stories in which the responses were only telling/teller-related (PRR), stories in which the teller received only substantial tale-related responses (PRC), and stories with both types of responses co-occurring. Based on negative binomial (NB) models it was shown for all three subsets that recipient feedback, regardless of the type of recipient response, impacts significantly on the number of words used by the narrator: narrator verbosity increases exponentially with increasing frequency of feedback by listeners.

Since the effect of stimulating narrator verbosity was found both for stories in which only telling/teller-related (PRR) and, respectively, tale-related (PRC) contributions occur, and for stories in which the response types co-occur, the observed increase in narrator verbosity is thus independent of response type. That is, whatever the type of response, narrator productivity is stimulated by recipient feedback as such. However, differences were found with regard to the strength of the influence on narrator verbosity: PRR feedback increases narrator verbosity more than PRC feedback. This difference was explained with recourse to the differential nature of the two response types. While telling/teller-related PRR responses, being semantically void and structurally non-clausal, leave the job of doing the telling entirely to the narrator, a kind of semantic and structural job sharing was observed for tale-related PRC responses: they interfere with the emergent story topically thereby providing semantic and structural material that can be economically re-used by the narrator. Finally, a negative interaction was discovered for PRR and PRC which produces a moderating effect: increases in co-occurring PRR and PRC responses slow down (but do not halt) the exponential increase in narrator verbosity. The moderating effect was

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tentatively interpreted as signaling a dynamic whereby, over the course of storytelling, role divisions are increasingly 'bleached' to the extent that participants co-construct narrative with increasingly equal co-authorial rights.

The case study highlights the difficulty of assigning the role of listener to the recipient only. Rather, the narrator's increased verbosity is a kind of response to the recipient's response. Narrators too must be seen as listeners, actively attuning their telling to the feedback they receive. We see that listenership in conversational narrative is reciprocal, that is, shared by narrator and recipient. The discovery of significant increases in narrator verbosity prompted by recipient feedback is thus very clear evidence of the co-constructedness of conversational narrative.

Section 6.3 was dedicated to Co-constructive Recipients (PRC), that is, recipients providing substantial, tale-related responses. First, an overview was given across the formal types of PRC contributions. Six such types were distinguished: questions (requests for further information, clarification, etc.), answers (provision of information requested by the narrator), comments (evaluative assessments), utterance completions (provision of material structurally dependent on the narrator's previous utterance), extensions (additions of details), and discourse presentation (additions of different types of reported discourse). I then narrowed the focus to PRC discourse presentations and, more specifically, PRC quotation. The aim in this case study was to demonstrate that by using constructed dialog recipients co-author the story's most crucial part, viz. its climax.

The methodology used in pursuing this aim was a combination of a quantitative positional analysis and a qualitative discourse-analytical analysis. For the quantitative analysis, it was hypothesized that the positions of recipient quotes distribute across stories in the same way as narrator quotes. Though no statistical inference could be made, the evidence was clearly in favor of the hypothesis: in the NC, the positions of either type of dialog follow very similar pathways across stories, reaching their global maxima in the same, very narrow, positional segment (between 0.85 and 0.95). This positional coincidence of recipient dialog and narrator dialog was taken as initial evidence indicating the possibility that recipient dialog, narrator dialog, and the story highpoint form a sequential three-way co-occurrence pattern (referred to as the QCQ trigram). To examine this possibility in closer detail, occurrences of recipient dialog were inspected in their story contexts and interpreted with regard to their relation to narrator dialog and climax. Taking account of the complex narrative structure of conversational stories, this analysis proceeded in two steps. First, those stories were taken into focus in which the recipient quote's positional value was within, or around, the positional peak range. It turned out that the majority of these stories were single-highpoint stories. The recipient dialog could be shown to sequentially co-occur with the narrator's dialog-as-climax, thus echoing, extending, or intensifying it. Second, those stories were investigated in which the positional

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value of recipient dialog was < 0.85. It turned out that the majority of these narratives were multiple-highpoint stories with chapter or cycle divisions. Again, it was found in the majority of instances that recipient dialog co-occurred with what could be identified as the chapter or cycle highpoint realized in the narrator's quote and again, like in single-highpoint stories, the recipient quote served to echo, extend, or intensify the climax.

To conclude, recipient dialog is closely related to narrator dialog and story highpoint: it follows the narrator's quote-as-climax not only sequentially but also functionally by echoing, extending, or intensifying it. Narrator quote, climax, and recipient quote form a tightly knit three-way co-occurrence pattern, the QCQ triangle. By inserting dialog at the story highpoint, recipients powerfully lay claim to the narrator role thus becoming co-authors at, not just any point in the storytelling process, but the most crucial. Given its central role, the shared authorship of the climax can, arguably, be seen as the highpoint of narrator–recipient co-construction of conversational narrative.

The case study invites further investigation in at least two respects. First, it opens a window on the climax, a seriously underresearched key element of stories. Since recipient quotes and narrator quotes sequentially co-occur with the climax and since their positional maxima coincide in the same very narrow positional range (between 0.85 and 0.95) not only in single-highpoint stories but also in multiple-highpoint stories (provided the positions of recipient quotes are re-calculated on the basis of chapter and, respectively, cycle divisions), it seems safe to conclude that the peak range identified by the positional analysis *is* the preferred positional context for the occurrence of the story climax where it is realized in narrator and recipient dialog. This positional identification has far-reaching implications for the automatic identification of the climax in future corpora of conversational narrative: the co-occurrence of narrator and recipient dialog within, or around, the range between 0.85 and 0.95 is a highly probable indication of the occurrence of the climax. Whether this range is indicative of the occurrence of the climax even where the climax is not realized either in narrator *and* recipient dialog or in narrator dialog alone is as yet an open but intriguing question. The possibility that the identified positional peak range is the climax's 'habitat' seems promising and a useful starting point for algorithms targeting the automatic retrieval of the story highpoint.

Second, seen in a wider perspective, as briefly noted by Mathis & Yule (1994: 71), recipient dialog merits further investigation in terms of speech accommodation theory (e.g., Giles *et al.* 1991). By constructing dialog, recipients perform an accommodative act: they converge with the narrator's speech style, with convergence understood as "a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours" (Giles *et al.* 1991: 7). However, the convergence is not only asymmetrical, i.e., accomplished only by the recipient (see, for example, White 1989, Schmid & Küchenhoff 2008), but also partial (see, for example, Bilous & Kraus 1988). The partialness is due

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to distinct uses of dialog in terms of evidentiality. As noted, for narrators of first- and third-person experience stories, dialog functions as an experiential or hearsay evidential with which narrators "lay claim to epistemic priority vis-à-vis recipients" (Clift 2006: 569); for recipients, conversely, who lack privileged knowledge of story events, dialog functions as an inferential evidential. That is, the source of information they draw on to construct dialog is the narrator's discourse from which they make inferences. Interestingly, this is not the only piece of evidence to suggest that recipient dialog is only partially convergent behavior. For example, partial convergence is also found with respect to *length* of quote: recipient quotes are highly significantly shorter (in terms of number of words) than narrator quotes.[3] Future more in-depth examination may reveal yet more differences or commonalities, thus sharpening the picture of exactly how recipient dialog constitutes an act of convergent and divergent behavior.

Conclusion

In sum, the quantitative evidence for the co-construction of conversational narrative presented in the case studies can be considered substantial. The evidence collected covers the most diverse research areas and related linguistic fields; these include, in Chapter 3, the conversation-analytical study of turntaking and corpus-linguistic research into n-grams; in Chapter 4, research into positioning and textual colligation; in Chapter 5, investigation of co-occurrence patterns at the level of discourse units; finally, in Chapter 6, research into narrative structure, as well as speech accommodation theory. The analyses thus provide quantitatively substantial and conceptually diverse, empirical support for the view that conversational stories constitute "interactive achievements involving all participants to varying degrees" (Holmes & Stubbe 1997: 7).

7.3 Implications and outlook: a plea for annotation-driven corpus research

> . . . there is no limit to what we can hope for, for there is no doubt that, as advances continue to be made in the field of corpus-processing software, our quest will become less of a dream and more of a reality. But that is another story. (Gilquin 2002: 207)

The overall implication of the present study, beyond the implications of the individual case studies discussed in the previous section, pertains to the study's methodological base, the NC and its annotation. The manifold insights reported in this book would not have been possible without access to the intricate discourse and pragmatic annotation implemented in the NC.

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The 'natural' implication of this study, then, is to recognize the benefit of working with specifically annotated corpus data.

Work based on the annotations of the kind implemented in the NC is a rare exception in corpus linguistic research. One reason is that influential voices have advocated a 'clean-text policy' (Sinclair 1991: 21) demanding that the text in a corpus be kept "as it is, unprocessed and clean of any other codes" (that is, free of annotations). One area in which this policy is followed by default is research on the web-as-corpus (see, for instance, Kilgarriff & Grefenstette 2003, Hundt *et al.* 2007), which comes in trillions (see Kilgarriff & Grefenstette 2003) of words but without any linguistic annotation. By contrast, most general reference corpora, such as the BNC (see Hoffmann *et al.* 2008) or the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) (see Davies 2009), are POS-tagged. However, POS annotation is still quite "limited annotation" (Leech 2007: 134) in that only a little abstraction from the actual word form is supported. A greater degree of independence from the lexical surface is facilitated by parsed corpora, such as the *International Corpus of English* (ICE) family (see Nelson *et al.* 2002). Somewhat surprisingly, though, although seemingly the perfect type of annotation for studies of grammar, parsed corpora have had, so far, little currency in corpus research on syntactic structures (see Gilquin 2002). So, corpus work has, first and foremost, tended to take the word/word form as its starting point and only a little abstraction from that surface base has been achieved. Research efforts have "consequently been limited and skewed" (Leech 2007: 133). Despite the limitation (or, maybe, because of it), corpus analyses have uncovered a wealth of surface structures, such as n-grams (e.g., Biber & Conrad 1999), concgrams (e.g., Cheng *et al.* 2006), collocation (e.g., Sinclair 1991), colligation (e.g., Hoey 2005), colligation (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), semantic preference (e.g., Partington 2004), semantic prosody (e.g., Morley & Partington 2009), and textual colligation (Hoey 2005).

Explorations of these surface-bound phenomena have been most fruitful in shedding light on what Sinclair (1991) termed the 'idiom principle.' Some linguists maintain that it is here that corpus linguistics has made its most important and most obvious contribution to the field of linguistics as a whole (e.g., Barlow 2011: 7). The reverberations are dramatic, shaking the foundations of linguistics such that "by the late 20th century lexis came to occupy the centre of language study previously dominated by syntax and grammar" (Scott & Tribble 2006: 4). However, the study of discourse, as a higher-order phenomenon over and above lexical surface form, has much less benefited from corpus-linguistic analysis. The number of corpus studies concerned with discourse which is 'higher-order' in the sense that the linguistic form is at best the vehicle for transporting the speaker's/writer's communicative intentions (see Schiffrin 1987: 6), is small. It includes, for example, uses of corpora in the study of discourse moves (Upton & Connor 2001), discourse units in research articles (Biber & Jones 2005), and so-called 'discourses'

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(Baker 2006). Word-based discourse studies in the field of computational linguistics include, for example, Youman's (1990, 1991) investigations of 'discourse breaks' in literary texts. Besides being small in number, all relevant studies I am aware of use corpora to examine discourse structure in written discourse only. That is to say that while higher-order discourse structure in writing is barely studied corpus-linguistically at all, its corpus linguistic analysis in spoken discourse is still largely *terra incognita*. Crucially, with raw text, POS-tagged, or even parsed corpora, the situation is highly unlikely to improve in the future. This is because lexical surface form and structure offers at best initial glimpses at discourse and discourse structure. If corpus linguists strive to make inroads more deeply into discourse and understand more fully its workings, the most natural option, it seems, is to break with the clean-text policy, reach out beyond POS tagging and parsing and build, around the text and the POS/parsing annotation, architectures that contain annotations targeted carefully at discourse phenomena that typify the texts/text types under investigation (see Flowerdew 1998). That this is possible has recently been proved by the creation of *SPICE Ireland*, a spoken corpus of Irish English which is annotated, inter alia, for discourse markers, quotatives, quotations, and speech acts (see Kallen & Kirk 2012). The benefits of implementing discourse annotation have hopefully been demonstrated sufficiently in this study based on the NC, a corpus fitted with a similarly rich texture of higher-order discourse markup.

While, then, the potential offered by discoursally and pragmatically annotated corpora is immense, the difficulties inherent in devising meaningful and consensual annotations are undoubtedly important (see Weisser forthcoming). At least two major problems need to be addressed. First, there is the cost-benefit problem. Erecting a comprehensive annotational architecture is a resource-intensive and, potentially, lengthy process. It will, probably always, require extensive manual annotation, at least initially. Manually implementing markup causes slow progress and decreases the size of the corpus drastically. One way to strike a better cost-benefit balance is to manually add codes to a smallish subset of the data – a training corpus – and to train software to 'learn' from the annotations it finds in the training corpus (see Nelson *et al.* 2002: 297). Once this learning has been successful, the software can be used to tackle new text, applying what it has learnt on the new data. The outcome of this initial automatic annotation will be far from perfect, requiring humans to refine the algorithms used and start anew. This recursive process from automated annotation to human intervention to automated annotation and so on may, in the end, lead to reliable and satisfactory full automation of coding (see Weisser 2010).

Second, there is the conceptual problem of defining the discourse and pragmatic units to be marked up. This is no small problem. Since discourse and pragmatic concepts are characterized by their complexity, the uncertainties surrounding their annotation in corpora will be considerable. Markup

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does not tolerate uncertainty. It requires the annotators to take clear decisions; even where annotators code a token as ambiguous, this coding is an unambiguous decision. Whatever their decisions, however, they are unlikely to be shared by everyone in the field. As a result, discourse-annotated corpora will be less useful for those who work on contrary or diverging conceptual bases than for those sharing or accepting the conceptual bases underlying the markup. However, it should not be forgotten that even straightforward-looking concepts such as what counts as a word or a word class upon closer inspection turn out to be fraught with a number of uncertainties (see Sinclair 1991) and, still, despite these uncertainties, all POS-tagged corpora heavily rely on them. So, full consensus is at best an ideal that the annotation can orient to but which will never be achieved. The grain of doubt that will inevitably surround any sophisticated annotation scheme will be compensated by the unique perspective offered by using richly annotated corpora: viz. the discovery of structures that are both innovative and quantifiable, and, hence, "otherwise impossible to ascertain" (Biber & Conrad 2001: 332).

So, corpus linguistics is at a crossroads. It can either continue focussing its resources on investigating the idiom principle and the structures that contribute to it. To achieve this end, existing corpus resources can be exploited more fully, such as the big reference corpora of recent years and the web as corpus, as well as construct new up-to-date corpora which follow the clean-text policy or which contain POS annotation or parsing. Alternatively, corpus linguistics can continue on this path, which has proven successful, while, at the same time, allocating some of its resources to investigating discourse based on specific, richly annotated corpora targeting specific pragmatic and discourse phenomena in specific genres. The outcome of this latter scenario would be a corpus linguistics that is both surface- and annotation-driven and that is capable of unraveling both lexical and grammatical structure as well as discourse structure. If this is the path followed, to adapt the quote from Scott & Tribble (2006), it may be that future observers will come to note that 'by the early 21st century *discourse* came to occupy the centre of language study previously dominated by syntax, grammar, and lexis' – but that is, indeed, another story.

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