Introduction

Whether in a store, along the road, at work, play, home, or other community settings, when people are together, they are inclined to talk about events – those they have heard or read about, those they have experienced directly, and those they imagine.

Ochs & Capps (2001: 1)

Narratives, it is widely claimed, abound in conversation. Ryave (1978: 113), for example, refers to them as a "commonplace conversational activity," Schiffrin (1996: 167) views them as "a pervasive form of text," Labov (1997: 396) maintains that narratives "play a role in almost every conversation" (Labov 1997: 396), and Ochs & Capps (2001: 54) consider them "a ubiquitous feature of ordinary conversation". Moreover, it is claimed, stories serve critical functions. As Ochs & Capps (2001: 17) note: everyday conversational narrative is "a site for working through who we are and how we should be acting, thinking, and feeling as we live our lives" (see also Schiffrin 1996: 167). Bamberg (2004a: 332) sees narrative as configuring self and identity. Pang (2010: 1322) considers a person's self "a macronarrative subsuming all her life-narratives." Blum-Kulka (1993: 361) goes as far as to maintain that "the essential nature of human beings is captured by the metaphor of man as *homo narrans*."

Given their (assumed) extraordinary frequency and social significance in conversation, it is hardly surprising that a plethora of research has been dedicated to the topic. Indeed, in discourse analysis, oral narrative is "one of the most developed areas" (Schiffrin 1984: 314). Most analyses, though, have been limited in terms of numbers of narratives considered (e.g., Schiffrin 1996), or have foregrounded non-conversational genres such as professional storytelling (e.g., Leith 1995) or stories elicited in sociolinguistic interviews (e.g., Labov 1972, Gwyn 2000). By contrast, stories from everyday multi-party talk in conversation used to attract much less interest. Only recent research has moved conversational narrative center stage. Both Ochs & Capps's (2001) pathbreaking volume as well as research into 'small stories' (e.g., Bamberg 2004a, Georgakopoulou 2006a) have advanced the theory of conversational narrative considerably. Another major step ahead,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:55:58, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139026987.001

both quantitatively as well as regards the 'naturalness' of the stories, is the *Saarbruecken Corpus of Spoken English* (SCoSE) (see Norrick 2000). However, the SCoSE is a small corpus which is not sociologically balanced or representative of American English narrative[1] and not annotated so that it cannot be searched using corpus linguistic methods.

This book breaks new paths into the study of conversational narrative thanks to the synergy of three technologies: (i) a corpus compiled for this study, which is heavily annotated for narrative-specific phenomena, the Narrative Corpus (hereafter NC) (described in detail in Section 2.2), and which is, given its annotation, the first of its kind,[2] (ii) the related query languages XPath and XQuery, which allow the retrieval of highly specific and complex data structures from XML-annotated documents such as the NC, (iii) as well as the programming language R, which facilitates sophisticated statistical evaluation and graphical representation.

The central topic I am concerned with is the co-construction of conversational narrative. Contrary to narrative research in the tradition of Labov & Waletzky (1967/1997), which foregrounded the concept of the single teller, a considerable number of narrative analyses emphasize the co-constructedness of narrative as "a distinguishing feature of stories told in conversation as opposed to, for example, stories told in performance situations" (Ryave 1978: 131) and, indeed, define storytelling in conversation as "an interactionally collaborative achievement" (Ryave 1978: 131; see also, for example, Duranti 1986, Goodwin 1986b, Schegloff 1997, Holmes & Stubbe 1997, Norrick 2000, Ochs & Capps 2001). The view of narrative as an interactional achievement is based on the observation that "the content and direction that narrative framings take are contingent upon the narrative input of other interlocutors, who provide, elicit, criticize, refute, and draw inferences from facets of the unfolding account" (Ochs & Capps 2001: 2–3). Authorship of stories resides not only with narrators but also, to an extent, with the 'other interlocutors,' the recipients, and the narrator–recipient relationship is not dichotomous. The relationship is more adequately described as asymmetrical, with tellers having a greater share in authorship than the recipients (see Chapter 6 on ways recipients co-author storytellings). Thus, the view of conversational narrative as co-constructed discourse is not new. Co-construction, however, has not yet been investigated using annotated corpora and with a focus on quantification. It has so far only been researched qualitatively. What is, then, new in this book is the two-fold approach to examining co-construction using both corpus-linguistic and quantitative methods. The central aim I pursue in this book is to provide statistically valid quantitative corpus evidence of the co-construction of conversational narrative.

How is co-construction defined in this study? I define co-construction as those actions and re-actions by participants that influence the course narrative discourse is taking. In speaking of participants I include both storytellers and story recipients and suggest that each of these broad types of participant

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:55:58, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139026987.001

can contribute to the co-construction of stories. Accordingly, two basic types of co-construction need to be distinguished: narrator co-construction and recipient co-construction. The notion of narrator co-construction refers to a strategy, first noted in conversation-analytical work, of storytellers to 'recipient-design' their stories, that is, to anticipate the recipients' knowledge, interest, and needs and design stories in such a way as to exploit the recipients' knowledge, increase their interest in the telling, and respond to their needs (see, for example, Sacks *et al.* 1974, Sacks 1992, Goodwin & Heritage 1990). Given this strategy of recipient design, narrator co-construction is in operation independently of recipient co-construction (see Schegloff 1997: 102). Large parts of the empirical chapters will show that recipient design is indeed observable in narrators' discourse, although, as Sacks (1992: 238) pointed out, narrators "don't know that they do that designing." The notion of recipient co-construction, on the other hand, builds on the widespread agreement in narrative research that story recipients can influence the "story trajectory of a narrative through their differential interest and competence in the details of talk" (Norrick 2000: 68) and that recipient co-construction "can affect the in-progress unfolding of some relating of an event" (Ryave 1978: 131).

I will present evidence of the co-construction of conversational storytelling in a series of case studies, each pertaining to aspects key to narrative. Following Chapter 1, which provides a detailed working definition of conversational narrative, and Chapter 2, which describes the NC as well as major methods and tools underlying this study, the first of four analytical chapters, Chapter 3, explores the co-construction of turntaking. Chapters 4 and 5 take the narrators' recipient design in the use of discourse presentation into focus: Chapter 4 examines how narrators use interjections and pauses to flag discourse as quoted discourse, thus providing essential processing instructions for the recipient, while Chapter 5 investigates how narrators use discourse presentation to dramatize narrative performances thus increasing the recipient's interest in the telling. Chapter 6 approaches the question of how recipients co-author stories. The final chapter, Chapter 7, summarizes the main findings, considers conclusions, and suggests directions for future research into conversational narrative.

The following chapter, Chapter 1, undertakes to define essential characteristics of conversational narrative.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 09:55:58, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139026987.001