

The Same Old Story? – Prosodic Features in Narratives of Old Age as Cues for Genre Description

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Résumé

Le genre du récit autobiographique, et surtout ses réalisations dans des variantes de récits « identiques » enregistrés deux (ou plusieurs) fois, nous permettent de mieux comprendre les fonctions discursives de la structuration prosodique et l'emploi qu'en font les locuteurs. Les exemples analysés sont extraits d'un sous-corpus du corpus LangAge, composé de récits autobiographiques oraux enregistrés en 2005 et 2012.

Keywords: genre, prosody, narrative

1. Introduction

Every generation uses narrative content as an important interactional resource in conversation. This is also true for storytelling in old age, often a period of intensive autobiographical reflection, and its negotiation in intra and inter-generational exchange. These conditions are favourable to the routinisation of storytelling. Our corpus of biographical interviews (LangAge) held with French speakers in their later life can be considered as composed by *big stories* (i.e., the whole-life story). In the larger context of these big stories, we found a large number of narrative units that can be identified as *small stories* (cf. Bamberg 2008). In many cases, these narratives were repeated in the two series of the corpus (2005/2012). Such pairs of narratives will be the basis of LangAge_réc, a corpus that will be annotated in order to allow detailed analysis of the interplay between prosodic and narrative structures. Put in a broader context, we want to approach the question: are there common traits that can be considered as generational features in storytelling? In the following exemplary analysis, we take our starting point from two pairs of oral narratives, where the beginning and ending of the narratives are lexically marked (which is not always the case). We want to show two important functions of prosody in the constitution of genre features in these narratives: (1) Where and how prosodic features support narrative structures. (2) How prosody makes two versions of the same story similar or different.

2. Research context

Storytelling in spoken language is a well-known subject of sociolinguistic research. We adopt the scheme of narrative structures as described by Labov and Waletzky (see the detailed description in Labov 2013). Narrative structures are divided into sections; an introduction, the orientation, the complication action, an evaluation, the resolution and a coda. In its application, ruptures of the linear progression along these phases must be considered. This sociolinguistic framework of narrative analysis can be fruitfully combined with a prosodic analysis. For example Ferré (2008, §4) observes an acceleration of speech rate before the complicating action and an increasing F_0 (fundamental frequency) and intensity in the utterances reporting the complication action. For re-told stories, it has been shown that prosodic features can present a clear stability, but that they also contribute to a very different *mise en place* of the reported event (Barth-Weingarten & Schumann & Wohlfahrt 2013).

In the prosodic analysis of LangAge_réc we adopted a scheme, which does not require *a priori* prosodic segmentation, but starts from a phonetic analysis, which is as objective as possible. Such a model is the *période intonative* (from now on: PI; Lacheret-Dujour & Victorri 2002). A PI is defined by the presence of a clear falling (>4 semitones, st) or rising (>3 st) contour before a pause of >300 ms., not followed by *eah*. We also took into consideration speech rate (syllables per second) and pitch accents within the PI.

3. Data

The corpus LangAge is composed of biographical interviews with a mainly monological structure (cf. Gerstenberg 2011 for the description of methods and participants). In the following sections, we analyse two stories that we called *La gifle* (*The Slap*, GIFLE) and *Le pain au chocolat* (*The Chocolate Cake*, PAIN) in two versions. The storyteller of *La gifle* is a 78 (2012: 85) year-old man, living with his wife in his own house in the city of Orléans. The storyteller of *Le pain au chocolat* is an 85 (2012: 92) year-old woman who lives in a retirement home in Orléans.

Based on an orthographic transcription, segmentation, phonetic transcription and the syllabic segmentation were supported by EASYALIGN. Segmentation was done for the most neutral prosodic unit, units before pauses («[l]'unité la plus objective» Simon 2004, 55). In the next step, we measured for each UDP the phonetic features of F_0 , duration of prosodic units and pauses >200 ms. in PRAAT, and counted the number of syllables in each unit. On the basis of these values, we tested if UDPs fitted the traits of a PI in a rising or falling form. The

qualification as PI was done with auditive control and with the help of PROSOGRAM.

4. Analysis

It is the son of a teacher who tells the story of GIFLE. In the larger context of the story, he is reporting some difficulties in the period that his own father taught him. The reported event of the story GIFLE is the slap that the father once gave the storyteller in the classroom because he wanted to prove that he did not privilege his own son (as his predecessor had done). The first version of GIFLE (2005) consists of 19 UDP in 0'44 min (132 tokens); the second version (2012) consists of 23 UDP in 0'52 min (147 tokens). In the story *Le pain au chocolat* (PAIN) an old lady remembers how, in her childhood, she took a cookie without paying, announcing that her grandmother would pay later. As her grandmother was not informed, the little girl received a punishment for her actions. The first version of PAIN (2005) consists of 23 UDP in 1'03 min (214 tokens) and the second version (2012) consists of 18 UDP in 0'52 min (154 tokens). The summary of both stories could be that they are about punishment in childhood. We will have a closer look on prosodic features constructing important differences in the pairs of (not really) the same stories. Formally, three of the stories have a point in common; they are explicitly introduced (1; 3; 5) and concluded (2; 4; 6).

- (1) par contre je peux vous [dire]_f que j'ai (GIFLE_2005, 01, Intro)
- (2) voilà un souvenir de jeunesse (GIFLE_2005, 19, Coda)
- (3) un souvenir aussi que je peux vous [raconter]_f c'est que (GIFLE_2012, 01, Intro)
- (4) ça m'a bien aidé aussi (GIFLE_2012, 23, Coda)
- (5) et un jour il m'arrivait une [drôle d'histoire]_f alors euh (PAIN_2005, 01, Intro)
- (6) enfin ça c'est une histoire rigolote (PAIN_2005, 23, Coda)
- (7) ah oui / comme j'étais au patronage (PAIN_2012, 01 / 02, Intro)
- (8) je m'en rappelle (PAIN_2012, 18, Coda)

In these introductions, the focus on the keywords *dire* (tell, 1), *raconter* (tell, 3) and *histoire* (story, 5) is marked by a pitch accent. It is followed by a post-focal sequence of two to three syllables (*c'est que*, *c'est que / that is*; *alors euh / so ...*) with an appendix intonation. In the orientation of GIFLE_2005 and GIFLE_2012 we find falling contours (not completely corresponding to what is required for a PI).

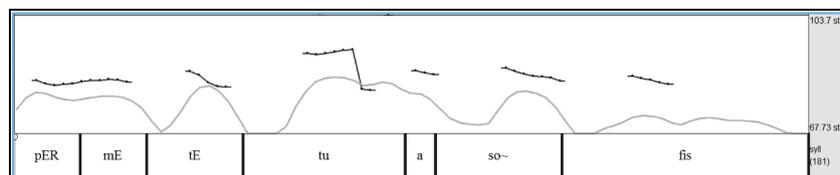


Figure 1: *permettait [tout]_F à son fils / allowed everything to his son*
(GIFLE_2005, 05, Orientation, 1.38 sec.)

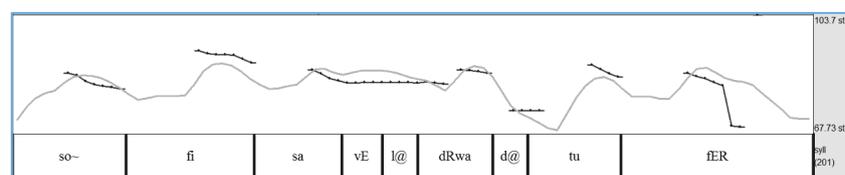


Figure 2: *son [fils]_F avait le droit de tout faire / his son was allowed to do everything*
(GIFLE_2012, 08, Orientation, 1.32 sec.)

In this central unit of the orientation, word order and some parts of the vocabulary have changed. The focus accent is not on the same word (*tout* vs. *fils*), but it is in a similar position, and the interval between *tout* – *fils* (2005) resp. *fils* – *faire* (2012) is 10 st each. These features create a characteristic prosodic figure with a precise narrative function.

The comparison of PAIN_2005 and PAIN_2012 has to consider the fact that the second version is the result of the interviewer's question if there was not a story with a baker; so the story starts with the answer *ah oui* (*oh, yes*, 7). This marks a difference to the other stories that are introduced by the interviewees through choice following their spontaneous associations. Still, although the prosodic structures of the first and second versions are different, the content of the story remains stable up to the choice of a very similar vocabulary and the extensive use of reported speech. In PAIN_2005 many units fit the criteria of PI with both rising and falling contours, especially in the orientation and the complicating action. In contrast, in PAIN_2012 we find PI with rising contours, but no PI with falling contours. In the orientation (Fig. 3 and 4), we find strong resemblances of content, vocabulary and even word order. In both versions, there are two pitch accents, on *heures* (9, 10) and on the negation *tintin* (*nothing*, 9) and *pas* (*nothing*, 10). The differences between the two are remarkable: both pitch accents in PAIN_2005 are falling (Fig. 1) while both pitch accents in PAIN_2012 are rising (Fig. 2).

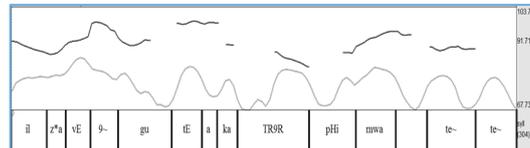


Figure 3: *ils avaient un goûter à quatre heures puis moi [tintin]_F*
they had a snack at four o'clock, me nothing [fam.]
 (PAIN_2005, 06, Orientation, 2.00 sec)

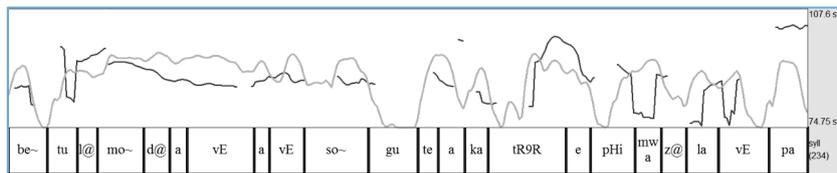


Figure 4: *beh tout le monde avait avait son goûter à quatre heures et puis moi je l'avais [pas]_F*
everybody had a snack at four o'clock and me, I didn't
 (PAIN_2012, 08, Orientation; 3.17 sec)

These examples show how the use of PI makes the difference in the two versions of the story PAIN. The same principle applies in the reported speech of the complicating action; where in PAIN_2005 there are PI with falling contours, while in PAIN_2012 there is no such caesura.

5. Concluding remarks

We have seen that the content of the re-told stories is quite stable up to and including phenomena like word order and lexical choices. On the other hand, we have observed a completely different realisation of PAIN in the second version with the remarkable absence of falling contours. The effect of this overall structure is that the story as a whole can be received as one speech act, as if saying «yes, I remember it» (8).

In the phonetic-prosodic description, we have found similarities in the marking of narrative units. This is especially so in both the introduction and the orientation. The prosodic features of these narrative units have common traits that can be the same, not only in both versions of the same story, but also from one set of stories to another. Further exploration of the corpus aims to describe more occurrences of prosodic figures fulfilling precise narrative functions. The challenge consists of formalising such pairs of (prosodic) form and (narrative) meaning in a constructional approach.

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