On prosody and humour in Greek conversational narratives

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1 Introduction

Given that the analysis of the organization of talk in ordinary interaction constitutes the main objective of Conversation Analysis (CA), Sacks *et al*. (1974) have shown that conversation is organized in and through a turn-taking mechanism that consists of two components: (i) the *turn-allocation component* specifying the rules for speakers' change; (ii) the *turn-constructional component* identifying the units available to speakers for turn construction. The aim of the present paper is to contribute to the study of the turn-constructional component by examining the internal organization of turns, in particular those which are included in conversational narratives and are intended as humorous.

Focusing on the 'building blocks' used for the construction of a turn, turns represent someone's right to speak on the basis of turn constructional units (henceforth TCUs), such as single words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. By performing a syntactic and prosodic analysis of the TCUs, listeners can tell when to anticipate the upcoming possible completion point and seize the opportunity to become the next speaker (Sacks *et al*. 1974: 702, 710, 720–721; see also Zimmerman and West 1975: 107).

Several studies have investigated how speakers handle the TCUs so as to indicate transition relevance points to their listeners (cf. Duncan and Fiske 1977, Ford and Thompson 1996, Schegloff, 1996), as well as how they segment extended turns containing narrative or argumentative constituents via the use of pragmatic cues such as discourse markers (cf. Schiffrin 1987, Norrick 2000). However, the internal segmentation of extended turns achieved by *prosodic means* remains a quite unexplored area of study.

In this context, the aim of our study is to examine the prosodic framing of TCUs by: (i) investigating which prosodic means are used by speakers in order to distinguish TCUs intended as humorous from the surrounding non humorous narrative utterances and (ii) discussing their conversational and pragmatic function. Our data comes from conversational narratives, i.e. stories built mostly upon extended conversational turns. To this end, we have isolated the humorous stories

from a corpus of interactions among intimates (see section 3), i.e. stories containing units with incongruous content (Attardo 2001)[1].

2 Key concepts
2.1 Conversational narratives
Labov (1972: 360) defines narratives as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred". However, in ordinary conversational narratives, far from simply recapitulating past events, narrators often seem to relive, re-evaluate, and reconstruct remembered experience. Moreover, conversational narratives are often co-determined by the current audience and emerge in 'atypical' forms as *interactional achievements* between the speaker and the listener(s). Narrators always try to secure listeners' interest by relating or even performing, tellable events. On the other hand, listeners quite often respond to the tellability of the story by casting evaluation comments, whether verbal or non verbal (e.g. laughter). If they share common experience with the narrator, they may even become co-narrators by contributing to the story's construction in a high-involvement manner (Norrick 2000, Georgakopoulou 2007).

2.2 Humor and laughter
Since the data of this study consists of humorous conversational narratives, we need to clarify under which conditions an utterance, and more specifically a (narrative) turn, can be characterized as humorous.

Humor is based on incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens (Attardo 2001). In other words, it is based on the deviation from what is considered to be the norm, i.e. a widespread assumption or a valid convention inside a group. Therefore, the main criterion for the characterization of an utterance as humorous is its incongruous content. According to the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, the incongruous content is included in *jab lines*, i.e. words, phrases, or sentences corresponding to TCUs, which are spread throughout an utterance or, in the present case, a turn. Jab lines are basic structural constituents of humorous narratives, being fully integrated in them and indispensable to the development of their plot (Attardo 2001: 82–83, Archakis and Tsakona 2005, 2006).

Laughter constitutes a secondary criterion in order to characterize a piece of discourse as humorous (Mulkay 1988: 93–119, Archakis and Tsakona 2005, 2006). It may come from a speaker while producing his/her own utterance, or from the audience as a reaction to what is being said. In Kotthoff's words, laughter is "the contextualization cue for humor *par excellence*" (Kotthoff 2000: 64). Therefore, we suggest that the combination of incongruity and laughter can establish a humorous

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[1] For a more detailed account of the present research, see Archakis *et al*. (2010).

frame of interpretation for a particular utterance: the presence of laughter reveals the interlocutors' intention to adopt a humorous attitude towards incongruity.

To sum up, among the TCUs used to build a conversational narrative, there are some jab lines which bear the incongruous content and cause, and/or are framed with, laughter. In what follows by investigating whether, how, and why jab lines are prosodically framed, we intend to contribute to the understanding of how the segmentation of jab lines is achieved in conversational narratives.

2.3 Prosody in (humorous) conversation

Prosody is one of the orderly details in interaction. Selting (1992) and Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (1996) suggest that prosodic features function as part of a signalling system, which is used to construct, delimit, and interpret whole turns or TCUs. Thus, within a humorous conversational narrative turn, jab lines are expected to be delimited by specific prosodic features. Although research on the relation between jab lines and prosody is limited, there are a few findings suggesting that humorous turns can be identified on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic, and discoursal clues, which play an important role in the transmission of the speakers' humorous intent (Holmes 2000, Hay 2001, Holmes and Marra 2002, Purandare and Litman 2006, Mischler 2008).

For the purposes of the present study, we investigate the role of (a) *pauses*, (b) *speech rate*, and (c) *intensity* in the delimitation of jab lines in our corpus. The choice of those features is due to their multiple functions in discourse and their attested significance in various discursive phenomena. (a) A *pause* can be defined as a brief silence in producing speech and is measured in seconds (secs). Any brief silence longer than 0.3 sec was considered as a pause. (b) *Speech rate,* refers to the tempo of speech production, i.e. it determines how fast or slow somebody speaks. Speech rate was calculated here by dividing the time of intonation phrase under examination by the number of syllables uttered (cf. Crystal 1997). The result shows the average syllable time per intonation phrase. Speech rate was calculated in milliseconds (msecs). (c) *Intensity* refers to the average loudness of each intonation phrase and is measured in decibels (dbs).

3 The data of the study

The data comes from 3 spontaneous, unstructured conversations of 6 Greek girls between 15 and 17 years old. Each conversation lasts about 1 hour. The girls (2 in each conversation) interact in the presence of the researcher. All of them had either affinity or friendship bonds with the researcher, who was a university student of about their age (21 years old). Due to the nature of this relationship, we can safely assume that the emergence of the interview schema between the researcher and the informants has been avoided (Giakoumelou 2009).

In this corpus, 22 humorous conversational narratives were isolated, within which 170 jab lines were identified.

4 The analysis of the data

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, our hypothesis is that jab lines in conversational narratives are prosodically marked off from the rest of the surrounding non humorous narrative discourse. In what follows, we will test our research question both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.1 Quantitative analysis

In this section we investigate the presence of pauses before and after jab lines and measure jab lines for speech rate and intensity using the *Praat* software for speech analysis. We also measure the speech rate and intensity of the preceding non humorous utterances, so as to examine whether there is a noticeable differentiation between them. For the purposes of the statistical analysis, we semi-randomly picked one hundred non humorous narrative intonation phrases. In particular, we avoided intonation phrases from the beginning and the end of a humorous narrative, as well as intonation phrases that preceded and followed jab lines, as these intonation phrases were expected to have a pause either at their starting point or at their end.

As far as the prosodic feature of pause is concerned, we conducted a non-parametric Chi- square (χ^2) test, since our dependent variable is nominal (presence of pauses before and/or after jab lines, absence of pauses). Our aim is to investigate how many jab lines in our data are marked off by pauses and to compare them with another set of narrative intonation phrases that are not humorous. The Chi- square (χ^2) test reveals whether there is a statistically significant differentiation between jab lines and non-humorous narrative intonation phrases, as well as the occurrence of pauses before and after them.

	Pauses				Total
	Pause before	Pause after	Pause before and after	No pauses	
Non humorous intonation phrases	15	25	16	44	100
Jab lines	25	37	104	4	170
Total	40	62	120	48	270
Chi-Square Tests	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)		
Pearson Chi-Square	90,633	3	*.000*		

Table 1: A statistical comparison of jab lines and non humorous intonation phrases on the basis of pauses (Chi- square)

The results of the test (Table 1) show that there is a highly significant differentiation between non-humorous intonation phrases and jab lines, pertaining to the presence of pauses at their boundaries (Sig. = .000< 0.05). The majority of jab lines, 166 (97.6%) out of 170, is marked off by pauses, a percentage that could not be accidental, if compared to non-humorous intonation phrases, where pauses appeared in 56 instances (56%), a percentage that indicates no correlation between non humorous narrative phrases and the appearance of pauses.

In order to investigate whether jab lines are systematically marked off in terms of speech rate and intensity in our data, we measured speech rate and intensity in every jab line, as well as in the non-humorous intonation phrase preceding the jab line. T-tests were conducted to quantitatively check the hypothesis that jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases within a turn are significantly distinct in terms of speech rate and intensity. In particular, the first T-test, which compares jab lines and their preceding intonation phrases in terms of speech rate, shows whether there is a statistically significant difference between these two kinds of utterances.

	Type	N	Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speech Rate	jab lines	170	161.624 msecs	*.000*
	non humorous inton. phrases	72	136.551 msecs	

Table 2: Distinguishing jab lines from non humorous intonation phrases on the basis of speech rate (T-test)

The results of the T-test (Table 2) are statistically highly significant (Sig. = .000 < 0.05). This indicates that jab lines and non humorous utterances differ in terms of speech rate. In other words, jab lines are produced at a slower speech rate than the surrounding non humorous utterance.

The second T-test compares jab lines with non-humorous intonation phrases in terms of intensity.

	Type	N	Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Intensity	jab lines	170	70.75 db	*.001*
	non humorous inton. phrases	72	67.64 db	

Table 3: Distinguishing jab lines and non humorous intonation phrases on the basis of intensity (T-test)

The results of the T-test (Table 3) shows an overall significant difference (Sig = .001< 0.05) between jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases in terms of

intensity: jab lines are produced at a higher intensity level than the surrounding non humorous phrases.

These measurements clearly show that *jab lines are prosodically marked off from the surrounding non humorous phrase.* More specifically, *they are produced at a slower speech rate, higher intensity, and very often between pauses.*

4.2 Qualitative analysis

We now turn to the qualitative analysis of our data. In humorous narrative extract (1), which comes from a conversation between two close friends, Chara and Niki interact in the presence of the researcher, Maria. In her narrative, Chara humorously presents an accident she had when she was younger[2]:

(1)
1. Chara: I had ((an accident)). At Styra I,(0.368) as I was going down
2.   once, and we were at the taverna. >Well I was going down,< I
3.   was running[3] **(.)** *I was also::: ***(0.342)*** thin*[4] ( ). ((ironically)) **(2.0)**
4. All: Ha ha ha
5. Chara: And (hhh) I was running you know, and well there I was holding
6.   an ice-cream in my hand >in my hand stick [in hand[5]< *always*
7.   *with an ice cream in my hand*[6]]. **(0.642)**
8. Niki & Maria: [Ha ha ah   ]
9. Chara: Well I was going down like this and [I am ru:nning[7] **(0.634)**
10.   *and I stumble and fall*[8]] **(0.482)**
11. Niki & Maria: [Ha ha ha   ]
12. Chara: >In the meantime< there goes the ice cream (0.492) I [had-   ]
13. Niki: [Th(hhh)e]
14.   ice(hhh) cream=

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[2] The extract was translated from Greek by the authors. The original Greek text is omitted due to space limits.

       The following conventions are used for the transcription of the data: *Italics:* jab lines, **-** : interruption and self-correction, **::** : prolongation of a sound, <u>Underlining</u>: the stressed parts of utterances, ((comments)): explanatory contextual information, [: overlap,] : end of an overlap, = : latching of one person's utterance, (.): pause less than half a second, (0.0): pause of length in approximate seconds, **.** : falling intonation, **,** : ongoing intonation, > < :Indicate that the talk is speech rated up or "compressed" in relation to surrounding talk, < > : Indicate that the talk is slower or "stretched" in relation to surrounding talk, °word°: lower voice intensity, wo(hhh)rd: integrated laughter, ( ): incomprehensible utterance. Speech rate and intensity measures related to the present study appear in footnotes. See Jefferson (1989, 2004), ten Have (1999), Pavlidou (2006: 215–217).

[3] Speech rate: 109.37 msec/syllable, Intensity: 64.73 db.

[4] Speech rate: 187.87msec/syllable, Intensity: 68.42 db.

[5] Speech rate: 103.27 msec/syllable, Intensity: 69.47 db.

[6] Speech rate: 113.47 msec/syllable, Intensity: 77.87 db.

[7] Speech rate: 140.5 msec/syllable, Intensity: 68.72 db.

[8] Speech rate: 179.83 msec/syllable, Intensity: 64.1 db.

15. Chara: =[It had, yes. Listen. A big thing like that had opened right
16.   here   (0.55)]
17. Niki: [Ha ha ha]
18. Chara: A huge wound right here it took like you know a year later
19.   to:: (0.867) °a year° (0.55) (eh), half a year. (0.584) >Well<
20.   (0.99) then I move on (0.542) and I say as I am falling
21.   down (0.40)
22. Niki: Ha ha ha
23. Chara: (   ) This big thing breaks open right here (0.45) I hurt myself
24.   right here and my knees[9] **(0.82)** and, °«Guys»° >I say<
25.   «*Guys ((look out)) for the ice cream*[10]!» **(1.2)**
26. All: Ha ha ha
27. Chara: ((They were)) watching me covered in blood ru(hhh)nning[11]
28.   ((down my knees)) *«Guys ((look out for)) the ice cream*[12]!»

The jab lines identified in (1) are based on several incongruities: in line 3, the narrator describes herself as *thin*, while it is implied (as common knowledge among the participants) that she was a fat child. This incongruity is further illustrated in the second jab line in lines 6–7, where the narrator is self-portrayed as *always* holding an ice cream in her hand. In line 10, while she was walking down the street, she unexpectedly slipped—and this can be considered incongruous, since there seemed to be no indication that she was in danger. Furthermore, despite her injury that shocked everyone present, she reacted in an unexpected way: she got worried for the wasted ice cream that fell from her hand (lines 25, 28). Given that the narrator does not suffer any permanent and irreparable damage, all the above incongruities can be interpreted as humorous. By laughing at her incongruous past behavior, in particular at her obsession with ice cream, Chara frames her story as humorous.

Focusing on the prosodic features of the jab lines identified, we observe that jab lines are prosodically delimited in terms of pauses (lines 3, 6–7, 10, 24–25), speech rate (lines 3, 6–7, 10, 25, 28) and intensity (lines 3, 6–7, 25) from the surrounding non humorous utterances of the narrative in a systematic way. In general, every jab line in the data examined is marked off from the surrounding discourse by such prosodic features, which occur in clusters rather than in isolation.

In what follows, we elaborate on the conversational and pragmatic functions of prosodic features and, more specifically, on the interpretation they cue in interaction.

First, we examine the way pauses function in the humorous narratives of our corpus. The jab lines in lines 3, 6–7, 10, 24–25 are produced between pauses. It appears that the narrator employs pauses in order to indicate the boundaries of the jab

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[9] Speech rate: 122.58 msec/syllable, Intensity: 71 db.
[10] Speech rate: 194.32 msec/syllable, Intensity: 76.17 db.
[11] Speech rate: 152 msec/syllable, Intensity: 78.81 db.
[12] Speech rate: 153 msec/syllable, Intensity: 72.9 db.

lines she produces, thus marking them off from the surrounding non-humorous utterances and underlining their role within the narrative. Moreover, by using pauses, the narrator emphasizes the main points of her story (cf. Mischler 2008).

The relative importance of speech rate is also attested in this narrative: jab lines are characterized by a remarkable decrease in speech rate (lines 3, 6–7, 10, 25, 28). This decrease, combined with the presence of pauses, is used by the speaker to highlight the fact that these jab lines bear the main points of the story, and call for audience attention.

As for the pragmatic function of intensity, we observe that the jab lines in 3, 6–7, 25 are produced in higher intensity compared to the previous non-humorous utterances. By producing the jab lines in higher intensity, the narrator clearly indicates and emphasizes the most important points of the narrative, aiming at enhancing audience involvement.

It is, finally, interesting to note that, after every jab line, the audience burst into laughter (lines 4, 8, 11, 26). The presence of laughter after the jab lines shows that the narrator's attempt to attract and secure audience attention and to share her point of view with them is successful.

To sum up, in the humorous conversational narratives of the corpus under investigation, pauses and differentiation in speech rate and intensity indicate the boundaries of jab lines, i.e. TCUs including incongruity. The clustering of such prosodic features aims at emphasizing humorous and tellable aspects of the story. Therefore, prosodic features combined with the incongruous content of the jab lines and with laughter reveal the narrator's intent to attract the attention of the audience and to propose a specific—in the present case, humorous—interpretation of the narrated events. Audience laughter following every jab line confirms that the audience recognize the narrator's intention to frame these utterances as humorous and that they share her perspective.

5 Concluding remarks

In the present paper we examined whether, how, and why jab lines are prosodically marked off from the rest of the surrounding non humorous utterance. Our analysis supports our hypothesis that prosodic features are used in humorous narrative turns, in order to distinguish the humorous part(s) from the surrounding non-humorous parts of a turn. More specifically, it has been shown that the presence of pauses before and/or after jab lines, along with differentiation in speech rate and intensity, distinguish jab lines from preceding non-humorous utterances in a systematic way. As a result, listeners are provided with cues to help them recognize the transition from non-humorous parts of a turn to humorous ones and back. Moreover, apart from signaling humorous stance, the clustering of prosodic features in jab lines creates vividness and enhances audience involvement. Therefore, it appears that through their prosodic choices, speakers design their humorous turns with a clear orientation to their recipients.

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