

# Trivialization behaviour in conversation

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(oral)

Spontaneous conversations involve a considerable amount of event reporting. Eggins and Slade (1997:265) observed that storytelling alone filled up to 43% of the three hour corpus of casual conversation they collected. In our corpus of family conversations, they may constitute from one third to two thirds of spoken time. One remarkable phenomenon about conversational stories is that they most often concern *unexpected* states of affairs, or states of affairs that are presented as such. Another, no less remarkable, phenomenon is that individuals quite often tend to diminish the originality of others' stories. We will such reactions *trivialization*. Let us consider an example, borrowed from (Tannen 1984:101).

- The following excerpt comes after Steve has mimicked a friend who speaks very loudly. Participants come to speak about a family named Loud in which individuals constantly yell at each other without realizing that they are doing so.

Steve: He does look different? He's just very loud.

David: Speaking of which they had the Loud Family. Remember the Loud Family? On Saturday Night Live? [TV program]

Steve: What was the Loud Family?

David: Dju hear about that? THEY TALK LIKE THIS.

Steve: I know lots of people in New York who talk like that.

Steve's last utterance is a typical trivialization. Whenever people mention situations they know of that are similar to the one offered in the first place as unexpected, their move can be analysed as a way of diminishing that unexpectedness. We propose to analyse why.

Let us define trivialization as the difference between unexpectedness as it is presented and as it is received.

$$T = U_1 - U_2$$

The general definition of unexpectedness is a difference of description complexity (Dessalles, *to appear*). For our purpose here, we may consider that unexpectedness is a function of the probability  $p$  of the recounted event.

$$U = -\log p$$

In our previous example, David's point relies on the atypical character of the Loud family. As he will successfully show in the remainder of the conversation, the behaviour of that family is really incredible, making his members mad. However, at this stage of the story, Steve thinks he is able to associate David's description to the behaviour of several loud persons he knows. As a consequence, for a moment, the Loud family does no longer appear unexpected. This loss of unexpectedness is what we call trivialization. We may measure its effect.

Thanks to its atypical characteristics, the Loud family appears improbable. Its probability in David's eye may be inferred from how much the family's behaviour deviates from the way standard families behave. Steve, however, has another access to that probability. Considering just what he understands of the Loud Family's behaviour at this point, the mere fact that those people speak somewhat loudly, it is not that difficult for him to retrieve similar cases from his own experience. For Steve, the density of loud people is  $D'_v = n/V'_e$  where  $V'_e$  is the hypervolume containing the loud people he knows. The value of  $n$  corresponds to the "lots of people" he mentions. Unexpectedness, in his eyes, amounts to:

$$U_2 = -\log(nv_e/V'_e)$$

$v_e$  designates the smallest egocentric volume containing the event, namely the Loud family. By contrast, we may say that for David, the corresponding density must be much smaller:  $D_v \ll 1/V_e$  since he seems to have never encountered people like the Loud Family. Here,  $V_e$  designates the hypervolume centred on Steve containing all the persons Steve encountered or heard of that are closer than, or as close as, the Loud Family. To

make things concrete, let us suppose that  $D_v \sim 1/(10V_e)$ . The trivialization produced by Steve's remark amounts to:

$$T = -\log(v_e/(10V_e)) + \log(nv_e/V_e) = \log(10nV_e/V_e)$$

We can see how Steve's remark works. As far as trivialization is concerned, the larger the number  $n$  of loud people he knows, the better. And the closer these acquaintances, the smaller  $V_e$  and thus the higher  $T$ . This is why the contextual knowledge that Steve lives in New York is important, as it contributes to make  $V_e$  smaller. Trivialization would have been less efficient with a large value of  $V_e$ , for instance if Steve had mentioned that he new loud people in Thailand.

As we can see, the fact that speakers tend to make trivialization maximum allows us to make predictions about what they may say, the details they may mention and even the direction in which they may exaggerate some parameters.

The notion of trivialization also explains the pervasive existence of story rounds in conversations (Tannen 1984:100). Quite often, participants answer to a story by a second story that is analogue to the first one (Sacks 1992:3; Goffman 1974:510). Story rounds emerge from the iteration of that process, and as a result, a majority of the stories told in conversation come to belong to story clusters. In Tannen's Thanksgiving dinner corpus, 21 of the 48 stories were told in a total of five rounds (Tannen 1984). What is the driving force that urges participants to engage in what resembles a ritual that may sometimes last for a dozen of minutes? The key to understanding story rounds is the fact that each story acts as a trivialization of the preceding one. A trivializing situation  $S_2$  must be closely similar to the trivialized situation  $S_1$ , which means for instance that  $S_2$  has to be atypical along the same dimensions as  $S_1$ . Moreover, as our example shows,  $S_2$  must have occurred in close vicinity to be efficient. As a consequence,  $S_2$  makes an interesting story in its own right. And  $S_2$  may give rise to a new trivializing story  $S_3$ , and so on. Such a schema offers a cognitive account of the existence of story rounds, independent of any social ritual habit or convention.

The idea that trivialization is a form of downgrading act may be counterintuitive. Participants in a conversation, when adding a new story to a story round, may rather have the impression of making a positive contribution, which may also be perceived as such by the first speaker (Maynard 1991:204). Such a description, at the psychosocial level, is undoubtedly valid in many cases. However, there is no formal discontinuity between situations in which we consciously bring down some apparently poor utterance, as Steve did in the Loud family conversation, and when we are excited to contribute with our own story to a stimulating story round. Trivialization sounds like "the same thing happened to me". The immediate effect is to diminish the unexpected character of the previous story in the eye of participants, no matter what its level was, whether the story was perceived as banal or truly exciting in the first place.

The very existence of trivialization makes sense in the evolutionary framework we proposed (Dessalles 1998, 2006). If language is a way to advertise informational qualities, it is important for listeners to demonstrate that they too can perform well on the same topic.

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