Pauses as indicators in story structure (Benin)*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives

The main claim of this paper is that Fongbe storytellers structure their performance by pauses. The research is based on the Fongbe Verbal Art texts called hwènúxó, which were collected by the author in Benin in 1976.

The main objective of this paper is to gain a better insight into the performance of Fongbe verbal art texts. This includes the storytellers’ way of speaking and the question whether, and if so to what extent, their performance is driven by the stories’ content. My working assumption will be that speakers use various types of pauses as content markers. These pauses thus reflect the storyline in the mind of the performer (see Longacre 1990:2). The performance is structured by a consciously planned pattern of silences indicating, for instance, the end of a paragraph. In this pattern, long pauses are used to signal moments of special interest, such as the peak (i.e. the climax of tension and/or confrontation), the main theme, a flash-forward, or a cliff-hanger (see Longacre 1990:8).

1.2 Previous Analyses of Pauses

Most research on pauses focuses on spontaneous speech or speech production in an experimental setting. For instance, Goldman-Eisler (1958:230) considers the occurrence of hesitations in spontaneous speech, while Goldman-Eisler (1972:107) describes the modification of pause structure when spoken English texts are read out by subjects. This work shows that the hierarchy of syntactic structures is reflected differentially in the pause structure of spontaneous speech. Deese (1980:83–84) observes that while oral discourse is much less orderly than written discourse, skilled readers use pauses for rhetorical functions. Further, in his research on text production in a lawyer’s dictation process, Schilperoord (1996) finds a correlation between pause patterns and hierarchical text production structure. Schilperoord...
shows that pauses are involuntary; pauses reflect cognitive processes, while differences in pause-time reflect differences in cognitive processing. While these studies are interesting from a historical point of view, they are not very helpful for an analysis of the process of storytelling in Fongbe. The main reason is that none of the works cited consider the function of pauses as content markers. Rather, they restrict their attention to pauses that reflect involuntarily acts and pauses that are caused by hesitation. In Fongbe storytelling practice, on the other hand, interruptions from the audience — which are not marked by hesitations or pauses — evoke a welcome reaction on the part of the storyteller.

In 1976, Fongbe hwènúxó (meaning ‘word of time’ or, more precisely, ‘the word from the mouth of the sun’) is still considered an art. The stories relate both real and imaginary events. The language in which the stories are told differs clearly from colloquial speech. The recorded material shows that storytelling is an acquired art. An experienced storyteller is at least forty years’ old; some of the most famous storytellers are in their seventies. Their performance seems very natural, yet is amazingly flawless and elaborate. The stories of skilled storytellers are marked by a very orderly discourse. The different text versions of the same story (which were recorded at different sites) indicate that while the process is based on a mental storyboard, the discourse is improvised during the process by adding details or songs. The interaction with the audience forms part of the performance (e.g. the storyteller uses information that is in the active consciousness of both storyteller and audience). The performance itself sounds like a sophisticated conversation in which the use of prosody is maximally exploited (cf. Chafe 1994:43,69).

1.3 Method

The digitised Fongbe verbal art texts provide us with a numerical and graphical representation of sounds and silences in relation to time. Digitised recordings make it possible to study texts using numerical parameters such as utterance length and speech rate. The software programme Praat was used to measure both the length of the utterances and the length of the pauses between them. Pauses were assumed to have a certain minimal length. Both utterances and pauses were marked in a TextGrid file. The data were saved in a Notebook file (number and length of utterance, number of syllables; the number of syllables was counted to determine the speech rate of the speaker). Another file contained the pauses (both number and length of pause). These data were imported in a Microsoft Excel file for further analysis. This resulted in a numerical analysis and a graphic representation. These can then be used to determine their linguistic significance.
1.4 The Story

In 1975 and 1976 the author of this paper learned Fongbe, a Kwa-Gbe language spoken in the South of Benin. 39 texts were recorded on analogue tapes between April 12 and June 16, 1976. These tapes were transcribed and translated in Benin in 1976, and were digitised in 2007. The stories were collected in three rural villages, in the communities of Ayou, Abomey-Calavi and Abomey.

This paper presents an analysis of two versions of the same story, *The story of the sadist co-wife*. This story was told by two women: Avosehwe, 37 years, from Calavi, on May 4, 1976 (this story is referred to as Calavi 2), and by Nagè Tokoudagba, 80 years, from Abomey, on June 16 (this story is referred to as Abomey 5). The plot involves two co-wives who are jealous and argue all day long. The ‘central participant’ of the story is a saucepot which, thanks to magic glue, finds the culprit who defecated in the lovely sauce prepared by the second wife. The co-wife is discovered with the saucepot clinging to her body. She has to pay the penalty for her misbehaviour: in the Calavi version she is sent away; in the Abomey version she is killed by the effect of the poisonous glue.

2. Measurements

2.1 Numerical and graphic analysis

Theoretically, there are several possible correlations of the relevant parameters. It is likely that there is a relation between the length of the utterance and the number of syllables, since the more syllables an utterance has, the longer it takes to utter. There is also a possible relation between speech rate and pause length (where the speech rate of an utterance is defined as the number of syllables divided by the total duration). A third possible relation is that between the length of utterance and the length of pauses; both are relevant in relation to the speech rhythm.

2.2 Description of graphics and statistical relations

Consider first the relation between duration (length in seconds) of an utterance and the number of syllables. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of this relation in the Calavi 2 text.

Figure 1 shows that when an utterance contains more syllables, the duration of the utterance is longer. More specifically, there is a positive relation between the number of syllables and the duration of the utterance (with a correlation coefficient of 0.84). Clearly, it takes more time to pronounce an utterance that has more
syllables. The high correlation coefficient indicates an almost straight relation between the number of syllables and the duration of the utterance. Note, though, that the length of an utterance does not generally affect the speech rate. The graph clearly shows that there are a limited number of exceptions. An analysis of these exceptions, which involve the first and last lines of the songs, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Figure 2 shows that, contrary to expectation, there is no relation between speech rate and the length of pauses (as is suggested by the correlation coefficient of 0.024).

Next, Figure 3 shows that there is no relation between the duration of an utterance and the duration of a following pause. This is supported by the correlation coefficient of 0.016, which indicates that there is no relation whatsoever. Thus, the duration of a pause is independent of the length of the preceding utterance. This
implies that the length of a pause can have a rhetorical function of its own, e.g. an indication of a specific phenomenon.

The data further show that pauses are not influenced by the speech rate of a preceding utterance. As can be seen, there are some utterances that deviate from the general pattern. These exceptions have been analysed separately, by checking their place and function in the story.

The data discussed here are representative of the corpus as a whole. They suggest that the length of pauses is independent of both the length and speech rate of a preceding utterance. As a consequence, pause duration is a phenomenon that can be studied in isolation.

### 2.3 Pause duration

The Calavi 2 text consists of 234 utterances and 233 pauses. The Abomey 5 text consists of 89 utterances and 88 pauses. The storyteller from Calavi respected the narrative tradition of repeating the main scene three times. The storyteller from Abomey only told the last part of the story. The average pause duration is about 0.5 seconds. The length of most pauses is between 0.1 and 1.5 seconds, as is shown by the accumulated data in Figures 2 and 3.

### 3. Interpretation of the results

#### 3.1 The Patterns of Pauses

Figure 4 shows the length of the pauses that occur between the first 20 utterances of the Calavi 2 text. The third paragraph of the Calavi 2 text consists of utterances and pauses 15–20. This paragraph exhibits a pause pattern in which successive
pauses become increasingly longer. This paragraph is representative of Fongbe storytelling in general. The first pause in this paragraph is short, taking less than one second. The second pause has about the same length. This is followed by a gradual variation in the length of shorter pauses until the end of the paragraph, which is marked by an extensive pause. This type of paragraph thus reflects a consciously marked unit in the narrative discourse. The attested pause pattern supports Serzisko’s (1992:84) assertion that pauses form the basis of the segmentation of the units of a speech act: “Grundlage für die Segmentierung sind Pausen, die wir als Indikator für eine Intonationseinheit ansehen.”

3.2 Different pause types

The graphic representations of possible relations between utterances and pauses that have been discussed above display a number of outliers. Consider Figure 5, which contains the same graphs as Figure 3. Closer inspection reveals three
clusters of extensive pauses. These small clusters indicate moments of special interest. For instance, the end of paragraph (B) is indicated by a longer pause than usual (between 1.5 seconds and more). Other extensive pauses occur not so much at the end of a paragraph, but rather have a rhetorical function (A); examples from the Calavi text include the presentation of the main theme, a flash forward and the peak. An example from the Abomey text (which is not shown here) involves an extensive pause that indicates the cliff-hanger of the story. Notice, finally, that (C) represents the songs in the text, which, as can be seen, involve hardly any pauses. Below, I will discuss these phenomena in more detail, using examples from both texts.

3.3 Pauses as paragraph markers

The third paragraph of the Calavi 2 text consists of utterances and pauses 15–20 (see also Figure 4). The content of this paragraph is given in (1) below, where the duration of the pauses is represented between square brackets (in seconds). Note that the glosses used here differ from those in Lefebvre (2002), owing to a difference of interpretation. The paragraph starts with an utterance that summarises the end of the previous paragraph, which ended with a pause of 1.38 seconds after the utterance and was on her way to the market. Note further that there is no independent pronoun; the storyteller’s use of bó indicates that the same subject is implied. She subsequently introduces the central participant (the sauce), which is syntactically marked by a demonstrative and the definite marker ɔ́. This clause is repeated, with the sauce being ‘tracked’ by the definite marker ɔ́. Next, the second image of the sauce is introduced (i.e. the pot in which the sauce is prepared). This paragraph exhibits a pattern of pauses in which the pauses become successively longer. The paragraph ends the way it started (i.e. with the woman who prepared a lovely sauce before going to the market).

(1) a. bó yì axì
   conjss go market
   ‘and went to the market’ [0.83]

  b. é xwè yì gbé ɔ́ núsùnnú nɛ́ ɔ́
     3sg go go out top 3sg prepare sauce dem def
     ‘before she left she prepared this sauce’ [0.81]

  c. dà núsùnnú nɛ́ ganjí bó núsùnnú ɔ́
     prepare sauce dem def well conjss sauce dem
     dust body
     ‘prepared this sauce correctly and the sauce is lovely’ [0.96]
Some of the extensive pauses in this excerpt do not function as paragraph markers, but instead indicate specific rhetoric functions. These are considered in more detail in Section 3.4.

3.4 Pauses as indicators of the main theme

The beginning of the story shows the stereotypical start of hwènùxó. The second utterance states the theme of the story and is followed by an extensive pause. After this, the subject of the sentence changes from the story to the co-wives, as is signalled by the different subject conjunction bó:

(2) a. hwenuxó cé zòn mɔ́ géé bó yi mɔ́
   time-gen-word pos fly thus certainly conjss get find
   ‘my story has taken off to land at’ [0.10]

b. àsísí àsísí wè
c. bó ye dò wù hwàn wè
   co-wife co-wife two
   ‘two co-wives’ [2.56]
   conjss 3PL AUX body jealous PFOC
   ‘and they were jealous’ [1.08]

This story is about two jealous co-wives.

3.5 Pauses as indicators of the peak

The fourth paragraph of Calavi 2 introduces the jealous co-wife, who sneaks into the hut of the other woman and eats her lovely sauce. Here we find a clear pattern of pauses, building up to the peak. The peak and relieved herself in that sauce is followed by an extensive pause of 2.5 seconds.
(3) a. ẹ sọ nụ
   3sg take thing
   'she prepared herself' [0.15]

b. ẹ
   3sg
   'she' [0.44]

c. ván yànu tòn
   open arse gen
   'opened her arse' [0.55]

d. bó nyè ọ̀mì kó n dọ nụsùnnú ɔ̀ mè
   conj ss relieve excrement pour put sauce def in
   'and relieved herself in that sauce' [laughter] [2.54]

e. bó nyè ọ̀mì kó n dọ nụsùnnúzèn n è ɔ̀ mè
   conj ss relieve faeces pour put saucepot  def  def in
   'and relieved herself into that very saucepot' [0.44]

(When she had satisfied herself,) she positioned herself over the pot, defecated into it, (ha, ha) (and put the cover back.).

3.6 Pauses as markers of flash-forwards and cliff-hangers

The Abomey 5 text contains an example of a flash-forward followed by a cliff-hanger. Here the storyteller cries out for her saucepot before admitting that she has lost sight of it. Then the saucepot answers, before starting the song (which begins with the same words). The pauses in this excerpt become increasingly longer, culminating in an extensive pause of more than 3 seconds before the song.

(4) a. nụsùnnúzèn cè jọe jọé
   saucepot pos sound of frying condiments in hot oil
   'my own saucepot' [0.88]

b. fi ẹ ká gbòn ọjì
   place 3sg but pass q
   'but where did it go to?' [1.48]

c. ẹ dọ nyí ní kɔ
   3sg say name for-him cry loudly
   'it cried loudly here I am' [1.95]

d. ẹ dọ han nè
   3sg get song dem
   'it started this song' [3.26]

(Shes looked in vain for the saucepot, she cried) “Sweet saucepot! Then it cried out "Here I am" and it started to sing.
3.7 Short pauses as markers of ‘breaking news’

The storyteller relates ‘breaking news’ by providing the audience staccato with important content that does progress the storyline: the pause is much shorter than the preceding utterance, up to 70% shorter. It is salient that the storyteller switches to direct discourse and uses the pronoun I. This happens in the songs sung by the central participant and in the following example of an interior monologue, shown in the utterances 46 to 49 of Calavi 2.

(5) a. [fí] éló ká lè go sí nó wá jè place dem but repeat come Gen conjss come fall ‘but where did this come from to fall’ [0.30]

b. núsúnúzén mè nù mì un ka sú hòn ce ne saucepot in for 1sg 1sg but close door pos dem nya [disappointment] ‘in my saucepot, since I shut my door, huh!’ [0.63]

c. hén what ‘what!’ [0.14]

d. étè ka djè nya 3sg.wh but dei [disappointment] ‘what! but what is going on huh!’ [0.31]

“How did this get into my pot?” she cried, “I shut my door. What’s going on?”

4. Conclusions

Fongbe storytelling is a complex and elaborate art. Unlike everyday speech, the stories are performed without hesitations. This makes the nature of the pauses in these ‘planned narrations’ different from those in colloquial conversation — rather than hesitations, they are part of the performance itself.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the data discussed in this paper is that storytellers mark the end of paragraphs by using an extensive pause (i.e. one with a duration of 1.5 seconds or more). This use of pauses is consistently maintained during a story. The duration of pauses is not influenced by speech rate, nor does the duration of an utterance influence the duration of a following pause.

The data further suggested that extensive pauses are also used for rhetoric purposes. The introduction of the main theme is signalled by an extensive pause. The peak of the story is followed by a long pause (whereupon the audience reacts with laughter, adding to the duration of the pause); after that the storyteller continues
by repeating the peak once more. In both versions of the stories the use of a flash-forward or cliff-hanger involves long pauses.

Short pauses do occur in staccato utterances in which the storyteller gives information that contributes to the storyline; these pauses are up to 70% shorter than the preceding utterance. In such cases the storyteller often switches to direct discourse. This happens both in songs, where the central participant uses I, and in interior monologues; both are marked by staccato utterances.

The discovery that pause patterns signal the end of paragraphs provides a useful tool for investigating the use of grammatical markers and constructions that are related to paragraph structure, such as serial verb structures and topic markers. I hope to address this issue in future work.

Notes

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1. In the words of native speakers, they are stories that “could have happened, or, if they did happen, happened like this.”

2. Future research on the narrative structure of these stories will draw on Longacre (1990) and Serzisko (1992).

3. The following abbreviations are used in this paper:

- **AUX**: auxiliary
- **DEF**: definite
- **CONJSS**: conjunction same subject
- **DEI**: deictic
- **DEM**: demonstrative
- **pFOC**: predicate focus
- **GEN**: genitive
- **HAB**: habitual
- **NEG**: negative
- **PL**: plural
- **POS**: possessive
- **Q**: question
- **REL**: relative
- **SG**: singular
- **TOP**: topic
- **WH**: what question
- **1**: first person
- **3**: third person

References


Goldman-Eisler F. 1972. 'Pauses, Clauses, Sentences.' *Language and Speech* 15, 103–113
