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Affiliation, Topicality, and Asperger's: The Case of Story-Responsive Questions

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Objective In storytelling environments, recipients' questions have mainly been described as non-affiliative. This article examines how the topicality of story-responsive questions relates to the recipients' displays of affiliation. Furthermore, we investigate whether there are differences between the practices of neurotypical participants (NT) and participants diagnosed with Asperger syndrome (AS) in this regard. While aiming to uncover the practices of story-responsive questions in general, we also seek to shed light on the specific interactional features associated with AS. *Method:* Our method is qualitative Conversation Analysis. Drawing on a dataset of Finnish quasi-natural conversations, we compare the interactional consequences of story-responsive questions asked by NT- and AS-participants. *Results:* We show how the NT-participants in our data use a specific set of practices to manage the topical relevance of their questions, while the AS participants' production of otherwise very similar questions differs precisely with reference to these practices. Furthermore, we argue that the different ways in which the NT- and AS-participants treat the topicality of their questions influence the relative affiliative import of the questions in subtle, but yet significant ways. *Conclusions:* The affiliative import of story-responsive questions can only really be seen in retrospect, since, in their subsequent turns, the questioner can cast their action as having prepared the ground for affiliation.

Keywords: Storytelling, story reception, affiliation, topicality, autism spectrum disorder, Asperger syndrome

Introduction

Storytellings are built around conveying a stance toward an event, and recipients are expected to display affiliation – that is, to endorse the tellers' affective treatment of the events (Stivers, 2008). In previous conversation analytic literature on troubles telling and storytelling, recipients' questions in response to tellings have mainly been described as non-affiliative (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Heritage, 2011; Jefferson, 1984), since they can focus on ancillary matters and thus circumvent affiliation. Some researchers, however, have suggested that questions that allow the teller's on-topic talk to continue can come across as affiliative (see Kupetz, 2014). In this paper, our aim is to deepen understanding of the topicality and affiliation of these *story-responsive questions* by looking at interactions with neurotypical (NT) participants and participants diagnosed with Asperger syndrome (AS).

Research on storytelling with respect to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including Asperger syndrome (AS)[1,] has pointed to atypicalities in ASD participants' orientations toward relevant topical information (Dean, Adams, and Kasari, 2013; Diehl, Bennetto, and Young, 2006; Losh, and Capps, 2003; Solomon, 2004). Interactions with both AS- and NT-participants might thus offer broader insight into how story-responsive questions topically engage with prior telling. In what follows, we show how the NT-participants in our data used a specific set of practices to manage the topical relevance of their questions, while the AS participants' production of otherwise very similar questions differed precisely with reference to these practices. Furthermore, we argue that the differences in how the NT- and AS-participants treat the topicality of their questions influence the relative affiliative import of the questions in subtle, but yet significant ways.

Topicality and affiliation in conversation

Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 81) noted that sometimes conversationalists specifically attend to accomplishing a topic boundary and that there are various mechanisms for doing so (see also Button, and Casey, 1985). In contrast, a procedure that has been called 'topic shading' (Schegloff, and Sacks, 1973) or 'stepwise topic shift' (Jefferson, 1984; Sacks, 1992) involves the fitting of differently focused, but related, talk to a last utterance in the development of a topic. Such stepwise topic shifts are taken to be the norm in interaction, because participants generally work to tie each turn to the previous one (Holt, and Drew, 2005; Riou, 2015). Topicality has also been discussed in relation to moments of (dis)affiliation and (dis)agreement in conversation. For example, Maynard (1980) pointed out that topic changes commonly occur after turns that display discrepant participant positions. Furthermore, McKinlay and McVittie (2006) described topic changes in workplace meetings as a practice to move away from overt disagreement, as they demonstrated that 'topic flow maneuvers' are used to move from a negative evaluation to a positive evaluation.

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[1] With the publication of the DSM-5 in 2013, Asperger syndrome (AS) was replaced with a broader diagnostic category of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). We use the term AS since the participants in our study were diagnosed before the new diagnostic manual.

Asking questions is an important strategy by which participants engage each other in a new topic (Riou, 2015; Schegloff, and Sacks, 1973). Maynard (1980) has described questions as a resource for recipients to 'disattend' ongoing topical talk: a recipient can ask a question and redirect the focus off a complaint, for example. In a similar vein, Jefferson (1984) observed that, by asking a so-called 'ancillary question' – that is, a question that focuses on a mater subsidiary to the heart of the trouble – a troubles-recipient may be taking up an opportunity to disengage from trouble-talk and introduce other materials. According to Heritage (2011:164--8), this practice of ancillary questioning is a resource by which recipients may completely decline affiliation with the position taken by the teller: at the point where an empathic response to the telling would be due, the recipient raises a somewhat related question about the matter. However, Kupetz (2014) has suggested that questions that allow for the teller's on-topic talk to continue, such as candidate understandings, can come off as empathetic after all (Kupez, 2014:15--17; see also Muntigl, 2016:588).

It is worth noting, however, that the analysis of topicality involves a complication regarding the distinction between topic transition and continuity. As has been described by Riou (2015:67--8): "in theory, any turn can be 'about' the topic under discussion and thus correspond to topic continuity, and the same turn can also be a development on that topic, and as such, be part of a step-by-step shift." This is especially true when analyzing questions, since questions always direct topical development to some extent – even when they are designed to merely allow the teller to elaborate (Mandelbaum, 1993). Thus, there seems to be an inherent ambiguity as to the topicality of story-responsive questions.

Topic management and storytelling in ASD

Persons diagnosed with ASD can be atypical in their management of conversational topic (e.g. Paul, Orlovski, Marcinko, and Volkmar, 2009). When studying high-functioning children with autism or Asperger's, Ochs and Solomon (2005; 2010) found that the children's utterances sometimes fell in a zone between irrelevant and completely relevant—a zone they called 'proximal relevance' (Ochs, and Solomon, 2005:143). That is, their utterances seemed to drift from the topic of the previous set of utterances. However, the children rarely produced radically incoherent utterances and made great efforts to articulate appropriate contributions, and they often succeeded. Ochs and Solomon (2005) concluded that children with ASD benefit from the fuzzy constraints of coherence, which allow their proximally relevant contributions to pass as 'roughly' appropriate.

Previous research on persons with ASD has focused more on their atypical practices of narration (see e.g. Dean, Adams, and Kasari, 2013; Diehl, Bennetto, and Young, 2006; Losh, and Capps, 2003; Solomon, 2004) than on their practices in the reception of stories. For example Solomon (2004) found that some children with ASD were very capable of introducing narratives, but the telling that followed over an extended course of propositions was often not coherent. The current study also aims to fill this gap in research by focusing specifically on the reception of stories.

Conversation analysis (CA) has enormous potential for the investigation of ASD (see O´Reilly, Lester, and Muskett, 2016). Many recent CA findings have highlighted the subtle competencies of participants with ASD that have previously gone unnoticed (e.g. Dindar, Korkiakangas, Laitila, and Kärnä, 2016; Korkiakangas, and Rae, 2014; Muskett, and Body, 2013; Sterponi, and Shankey, 2013; Stribling, Rae, and Dickerson, 2007). The competencies of participants with ASD tend to manifest more readily in and through multimodally oriented

CA studies of naturally-occurring interactions, in comparison to psychological studies in experimental settings (Korkiakangas, and Rae, 2014). Our dataset lies in between these two extremes and can therefore be described as quasi-natural. The dataset was created for research purposes, but unlike in structured interviews, the discussion was allowed to unfold freely and without any researcher interventions. While caution is needed in the application of our results to naturally occurring interactions, this dataset is invaluable for enabling a fine-grained micro-level comparison between the practices of AS- and NT-participants in the same interactional setting (cf. Hobson, Hobson, Garcia-Perez, and Du Bois, 2012). We agree with O'Reilly, Lester, and Muskett (2016:358) in that the sharp analytic focus of CA can also be used to triangulate and expand previously established knowledge of ASD (see also Dobbinson, 2016). In what follows, we will show how some of the atypicalities found in psychological experiments are realized in specific interactional practices.

Materials and methods

The dataset consists of ten video recordings of 45–60-minute dyadic conversations, in which one participant has been diagnosed with AS, and the other is neurotypical (AS-NT discussions), and of nine conversations where both participants are neurotypical (NT-NT discussions). All participants are unacquainted males, between the ages of 18 and 40. The AS-participants were recruited from a private neuropsychiatric clinic where their diagnoses had been obtained by using the ICD-10 criteria (World Health Organization, 1993). The neurotypical participants were recruited to the study via student email lists, and their neurotypical status was confirmed by using the autism-spectrum quotient (Baron-Cohen *et al.,* 2001).

The participants were instructed to talk about happy events and losses in their lives. The conversations, however, were free to unfold in any shape or form, and the participants more often talked about neutral topics in the course of the conversations. These topics included work, studies, family, and other personal information that was relevant for getting acquainted with one another (see Svennevig, 2014 for analyses on first conversations, and Maynard, and Zimmerman, 1984, for an experimental setting comparing topical talk in acquainted and unacquainted dyads). The instruction worked well in that the participants ended up telling a lot of stories about their personal lives.

The dataset was collected as a part of a larger project that investigates the psychophysiological underpinnings of talk-in-interaction (see e.g. Peräkylä, Henttonen, Voutilainen, Kahri, Stevanovic, Sams, and Ravaja, 2015; Stevanovic, Henttonen, Koskinen, Peräkylä, Nieminen von-Wendt, Sihvola, Tani, and Sams, 2019), and for this purpose, the participants' psychophysiological activations were recorded (e.g. heart rate and skin conductance). The physiological data are not reported in this article. The conversations were transcribed using a detailed conversation analytic notation (Hepburn & Bolden 2013). Participants' names and place names were anonymized. All participants were informed about the use of the data, and they signed a consent form. The study and the consent procedure had prior approval by the Ethics Committee of the Helsinki University Central Hospital (date of the decision: 21.09.2011). The NT-participants conversing with AS-participants were informed about the clinical status of their co-participants, and similarly, the status of the NT-participants as neurotypical was revealed to AS-participants. We originally considered keeping both participants unaware of each other's clinical statuses, which might have been methodologically optimal, but in the end we considered it practically impossible.

The data was analyzed by means of conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007), which is a qualitative method for studying audio and video recorded interactions for the purpose of unravelling recurring interactional practices through which social actions are constructed. The collection analyzed for this study comprises stories, anecdotes and other tellings of various lengths (N=593). These involve a display of stance by the teller regarding what is being told, and they make relevant the recipient's affiliation with that stance (Stivers, 2008). For simplicity of expression, we use the term 'story' to refer to all of these instances. We have focused on 63 cases in which a story has reached its (possible) completion and, instead of displaying affiliation, the recipient asks an 'ancillary question' (Heritage, 2011) or a 'factual follow-up question' (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). We have excluded cases where there is a clear affiliative reception before the question, and cases where the recipient first closes the topic and then makes a disjunctive topic shift that is also marked as such (see Jefferson, 1993, for an analysis of these phenomena). In the entire collection (N=63), 34 questions are asked in the NT-NT discussions and 29 in the NT-AS discussions. In these latter type of discussions, 17 questions are asked by NT-participants and 12 by AS-participants.

Analysis

In this section, we describe practices that participants use to manage the topicality and affiliation of their story-responsive questions. Although such questions are utilized by both NT- and AS-participants, the questions of AS-participants are not similarly accompanied by the specific practices that NT-participants use. As we show below, even when the AS-participants' questions are very similar to those of the NT-participants, the resulting patterns of interaction deviate from the patterns that typically surround NT-participants' questions.

The analysis is organized according to three pairs of examples, in which we first present a case with a story-responsive question by an NT-participant and then follow it with a case from an AS-participant to illuminate the subtle differences in the practices regarding the questions' topicality and through it, the eventual affiliative import. We begin with examples where a recipients ask for factual information related to the events mentioned in the telling and the questions do *not* lead to a topical shift. We call this practice a *display of interest*. Then we move on to more complex cases, where the story-responsive questions can be analyzed as redirecting the focus of the teller's topical line of talk. In the analysis of these more complex cases, we describe two practices that participants use to achieve topical coherence between the story and the story-responsive question: *backward linking* and *forward linking*.

Display of interest as affiliation

First we present an example in which the story-responsive question, albeit not endorsing the stance of the telling, works to display interest in the events mentioned. This is a telling by the AS-participant (T) who talks about an exciting upcoming event of starting a new hobby. The NT-participant (R^N) asks about the location of the new hobby in line 7.

(1) New hobby (A10)

T = Teller (AS-participant)
R^N = Recipient (NT-participant)

```
01 T: mä odotan sitä niinku (.) tavallaan niinku @innolla
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           I anticipate it like          (.) kind of like with @enthusiasm

02   ja sillee (.) jännityksellä että mitähä se oikee o, (.) no
     and like   (.)   excitement that what is it really [going to be like] (.) well

03   oonha mä siit ↑lukenu et kylmä niinku sillee mut. (.) sit (.) mä
     I have read about it so I do you know but. (.)                then (.) I

04   niinku nään sen oikees[ti et mitä se on. .hh[hh
     like will see what it is for real .hhhh

05  R:                     [mm.                  [okei,
                            mm.                   okay,

06  T: e[t n- ]
       that n-

07 → R: [missä] sä, (.) käyt. (0.3) alat kä[yä.
        where do you (.)  go.      (0.3) will start to go.

08  T:                                     [öm (.) tossa:
                                            um (.)  there

09     (.) ö:: °öm° (.) täällä Laukaan Matinmäessä?, (.) nio:
       (.) umm um     (.) here in Laukaa's Matinmäki (.) there is

10     kam[ppailuopis(h)to, (.) n-niin (.) siellä, (.) .hh
        a martial arts club       (.) s-so (.) there, (.) .hh

11  R:    [°↑okei.°
           okay.

12  T: siellänii aina sitte, (.) nmm (.) tiistaisi ja
       there always then (.) nmm (.) on Tuesdays and

13     torstaisi e(h)ttä. (.) [.hhh
       Thursdays so (.) .hhh

14  R:                        [(n') ↑kuulostaa, (.) hyvältä mun (.)
                               (well) that sounds good my (.)

15     mun, (.) yks ↑kaver- (.) hyvä kaveri ni: °.hh° harrasti
       my    (.) friend (.) a good friend (.) .hh (.) practiced

16     just vuos sitte tota, (0.3) karatea ↑ja,
       that just a year ago (0.3) karate and,
```

[SECOND STORY CONTINUES]

T describes himself as being enthusiastic and excited about his new hobby (lines 1-4), and R^N receives this information with "okay" (line 5). Then R^N asks the question "where do you go" followed by a self-repair "will start to go" (line 7). This elicits more telling, and T shares the specific location and time of the new hobby (lines 9-13). Next, R^N produces an affiliative turn

"that sounds good" (line 14) and begins a second story (see Sacks, 1992) concerning a friend who has also tried karate (lines 15-16).

In line 7, R^N's question focuses on the location where T is about to start his new hobby. The question could be used to circumvent the moment of affiliation altogether by initiating a step-by-step shift to another topic (cf. Heritage, 2011). This is not, however, what happens here. Instead, R^N acknowledges T's response (line 11), allows him to elaborate (lines 12-13), and produces an evaluative turn that acknowledges the whole telling sequence with "that sounds good" (line 14). In this way, R^N constitutes his previous question as a display of interest and *not* as a topical shift, and he continues with his own second story with a similar focus and stance. Even though the question in itself does not endorse the affective stance of the telling, it seems to enforce the 'tellability' of the event (see Sacks, 1992, see also Berger, 2017).

In the following case we show how a similar question that focuses on objective information leads to visible trouble. This example is from an AS-NT conversation, and the telling is prompted by a question from the AS-recipient (R^A), who asked whether T has experienced any losses in his life. The extract starts from T's response:

 (2) Biggest loss (A10)

T = Teller (NT-participant)
R^A = Recipient (AS-participant)


```
01   T: .hh ↑no:, (0.2) kyl mul on, (.) semmonen et niinku ↑oma:, (.)
         .hh  well, (0.2) I do have, (.)  such that like my own, (.)

02      ↑iskä nii, (.) öa: ↑kuoli, (.) tossa, (.) neljä vuotta
         dad so,  (.) um  died, (.) about, (.) four years

03      sitt(h)e, (.) .hh ja ja, (.) se on semmone? (.) elämän niinku
         ago,    (.) .hh and and, (.) that is kind of? (.) life's like

04      ↑suurempii menetyksii mitä on käyny,
         one of the biggest losses that have happened (to me)

05 → R^A: .hh ö: siis °#y:#° saako viel kysyy et miten se niinku,
          .hh umm so may (I) still ask that how it like,

06   T: °.mt° .h no siis ↑se oli, (.) °#ö#° sillai et mä olin,
         .mt .h well so it was (.) um like that I was,

07      (.) armeijassa sillo ja,
         (.) in the army then and,

08   R^A: mmh,
          mmh,

09   T: sit tuli: (.) vaan niinku viestii, (.) ↑viestii siitä
         then I just got (.) like a message (.) message that

10      #että# .h et et, (.) faija on kuoll(h)u? (0.3) °.mth°
         that .h that that (.) dad has died? (0.3) .mth
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```
11        #ä#-veli laitto viestiä ettäh?
          um-brother sent a message that?

12 →  Rᴬ: mut niinku mitä: syytä että ni[inku,
          but like what/any reason that like,

13    T:                              [siis se oli#::#, (.) se oli
                                       so he had (.) he had

14        saanu sydänkohtauksen lenkillä ja, (.) .hh ja: [se oli tosi
          had a heart attack while jogging and, (.) .hh and (.) it was really

15    Rᴬ:                                               [°mm°
                                                         mm

16    T: sillai, (0.3) ehkä ↑pahint siin oli se et ei:; (.) ei kerenny
         like, (0.3) maybe the worst part of it was that (I) didn't (.) didn't get

17       niinko, °.h° (.) hyvästelee ja sillai?
         to like .h (.) say goodbye and stuff?

18    Rᴬ: että ei niinku pä[ässy hö- (.) päässy hautajaisii tai tol-=
          that (you) didn't like make it (.) make it to the funeral or li-

19    T:                   [°et°
                            that

20       =ei ↑EI: se, (.) ei ↑sillai mut et, (.) ko toinen lähti
         =no NO it,  (.) not like that but that (.) when he left

21          sillai; (.)y[htäkkii,
            like        suddenly

22    Rᴬ:              [m                    .mthh

23    T: ilman et ei ollu @mitää@ sairaut tai @mitään@. (.) ni se et
         without being sick or anything (.) so when

24       toine vaa kualee pois nii .hh et, (.) sä et >tiedätsää< (0.2)
         someone just dies ((waves hand)) so, .hh that (.) you don't >you know< (0.2)
```

[THE TELLING CONTINUES]

T describes a big loss he has had in his life: his father's death (lines 1-4). Rᴬ's question (line 5) is formulated by the "may I ask" question frame, which shows that Rᴬ orients to the topic as a delicate matter (Clayman et al., 2007). The question is incomplete ("how it like") and left ambiguous, as "it" could refer to any aspect of the event. The most probable ending to the turn would have been "happened". The question seems to display interest and it allows the teller to elaborate, similarly to example 1. In his response, T explains how he found out about his father's death: he was in the military service and received a message that his dad had died (lines 6-10). T then continues by further specifying that it was his brother who sent the message to him (line 11). What happens next is very interesting: Rᴬ does not acknowledge this new information as received but reformulates his original question and pushes for the

reason for the death of T's father: "but like what reason that like" (line 12). T responds by saying that his dad had a heart attack while jogging (lines 13-14). This essential information is received minimally by R[A] ("mm", line 15).

T then continues his story and focuses the talk again on his affective stance with an extreme case formulation ("the worst thing about it was that I didn't get to like say goodbye", line 16). At this point, R[A] produces a candidate understanding "that you didn't like get to go to the funeral or" (line 18). This question could be considered as an 'affiliative candidate understanding' (see Antaki, 2012; Kupetz, 2014) that allows T to make his situation more clear. T, however, does not treat the question as affiliative but instead responds to it with strong disagreement: "No NO it, not like that but that… when he left like suddenly" (lines 20-21). T also raises his voice and waves his hands while speaking (line 24). T's response here seems relatively strong considering that R[A]'s turn (line 18) is a simple misunderstanding. However, if one examines the local interactional context in which this is the third possible slot for R[A] to empathize with T's loss, the strong reaction by T makes more sense. In addition to clearing up what he meant, in his subsequent talk T focuses once more on the abrupt nature of the death (lines 20-24), making the affective stance of the telling available for R[A] to endorse (notice also the phrase "you know", line 24, cf. Clayman, and Raymond, *in press*).

In example 1, we showed how a question that focuses on objective events became part of a larger affiliative trajectory in the unfolding of turn-by-turn interaction. The example demonstrated how story-responsive questions can be used to display interest in the events described in the telling, even if they do not explicitly endorse its stance: "a display of affection toward others can take the form of showing them attention and interest" (Svennevig, 2014:314). In example 2, in contrast, we showed how a similar question was not framed as affiliative in subsequent turns, and how the teller, then, pursued affiliation by continuing his telling and shifting the focus back to the affective stance.

Redirecting the topical line of talk: Two practices to coherence

In the following, we present examples of story-responsive questions that, in one way or another, redirect the topical focus of the telling. The section is divided into two parts that reflect the practices used to achieve topical coherence between the story and the story-responsive question: backward linking and forward linking. In each part we present an example by an NT-participant and follow it with an example from an AS-participant.

Backward linking

Backward linking refers to a practice in which the recipient asks a question that focuses on ancillary matters but follows it up with a topical contribution that accounts for the somewhat incoherent question in retrospect. This extract is from a discussion between two neurotypical participants. The teller (T) has been describing the difficult experience of his parents' divorce. The recipient (R[N]) then asks a question concerning T's siblings (line 11).

(3) Parents' divorce (A17)

T = Teller (NT-participant)
R[N] = Recipient (NT-participant)

```
01  T: et joo muistan kyl siin, (0.2) itkeneeniki ethh se oli,
        so yeah I remember even (0.2) crying then so it was,

02  R: mm.
        mm.

03  T: se oli sillee, (0.4) aika niinku? (1.0) rankkaa: no hyvihä
        it was like, (0.4) kind of like? (1.0) hard well it all

04     siin kävi: me: muutettii: (.) tota#:# ö: mun pikkusiskon ja
        worked out well in the end we moved (.) umm with my little sister and

05     äitin kaa siihe iha lähelleh ja#:# sit sai niinkuh siel alueel
        mother really close by and so then (we) could continue

06     .h [vaikuttamista,
        .h living in that area,

07  R:    [noni. (.)  joo,
           alright. (.)  yes,

08     (1.5)

09 → R: o- onks sul (.) siis- sul o yks sisko.
           d- do you have (.) so you have one sister.

10     (0.4)

11  T: öö joo siis pikkusisko ja: sit om myös totahh isosisko
        umm yeah I mean a little sister and then also a big sister

12     mut seh (.) se ei asunuh (.) meil ennää sillo?
        but she (.) she didn't live (.) with us anymore then?

13   R: njoo, (1.6) njoo (0.5) se, (2.6) o- o- onneks on sisaruksiah
        yeah (1.6) yeah (0.5) it, (2.6) l- l- luckily (one) has siblings

14  T: mmh
        mmh

15     (0.6)

16  R: #e- mei-# meiän vanhemmil on kans ollu välillä vaikeeta nih [.h
        o- ou- our parents have also had difficult times sometimes so .h

17   T:                                                              [joo.
                                                                      yeah.

18   R: jos ei ois ollu siskoo nih (0.6) ois välillä kyllä ollu
        if (I) wouldn't have had a sister (0.6) it would've sometimes really been

19     hankala itte kestää sitä?
        hard for myself to cope
```

T emphasizes the emotional meaning of his parents' divorce with the turn "I remember even crying then so it was" (line 1), to which R^N only responds minimally (line 2). Then T further explicates the affective stance by stating "it was kind of like hard" (line 3), but this time he does not wait for affiliation. He continues to the next stage of the story by describing how everything went well in the end: they moved close by with his little sister and mother (lines 3-6). R^N responds to this with "alright yes" (line 7).

After a 1.5 second pause (line 8), R^N asks a question about a detail mentioned in the story, "do you have- so you have one sister" (line 9). With some hesitation, T responds that he has two sisters (lines 11-12). R^N continues with an evaluative turn "luckily one has siblings" (line 13). This turn could lead to more talk about siblings, which would be a considerable departure from the emotional topic of T's parents' divorce. Instead, R^N moves on to depict his own perspective: "our parents have also had difficult times sometimes, so if I wouldn't have had a sister, it would've sometimes really been hard for myself to cope" (lines 16-19).

This example follows Jefferson's (1984) description of a stepwise transition of topic nicely: first, T backs away from the heart of the trouble (anxiety about his parents' divorce) and includes some ancillary information about his family (lines 3-6). Then, R^N asks the other-attentive question about T's siblings and builds on the response to further stabilize the topic of siblings with the turn "luckily one has siblings" (line 13). However, the topic transitions are not used here to disengage entirely from trouble-talk but to move on to the recipient's perspective. The story-responsive question topicalizes an element that the recipient has access to and allows him to transition to his own experience. This is in line with the suggestion that Heritage (2011:180--1) has made: "it may be that independently accessible aspects of a scene are often preferred by an empathizer, who wishes empathic affiliation to transcend the particulars of a report, and to escape into independent agreement that is not merely responsive to the report's details alone."

Next we present an example from the AS-NT discussions, in which the AS-recipient asks questions that are not made relevant in retrospect. Previously, the recipient ($R^{A)}$) has talked about his forthcoming studies and has expressed hope that, after the normative four years of studies, he would hold the diploma in his hand. The NT-teller (T) congratulates R^A for finding "his thing" and starts to tell a story about how he himself found mechanical engineering as such a thing for him. This quite elaborate telling concludes in a general observation of how important it is to study something that one enjoys (lines 1-4). Thereafter, the recipient (R^A) asks for a clarification concerning T's studies (lines 5-8).

(4) My thing (A10)

T = Teller (NT-participant)
R^A = Recipient (AS-participant)

```
01  T: oon ↑kokenu et seon et iha mitä vaa opiskelee et kun[han, (0.2)
        I have experienced that it's like whatever (one) studies as long as, (0.2)

02  R^A:                                                   [°mm°
                                                            mm

03  T: °.hh° tietää et, (0.2) ö: se on se oma juttu
        .hh (one) knows that, (0.2) um: it is your own thing

04     ja haluu tehä ni son, (0.2) mummielest tärkeetä,
```

and what (one) wants to do so that's (0.2) in my opinion important,

```
05 → Rᴬ: .mth siis sä opiskelet ↑nyt, (0.2) sitä ko[ne-
          .mth so you study now,  (0.2) mechanical-
```

```
06  T:                                              [↑joo, (.)
                                                     yeah, (.)
```

```
07        [joo.
           yeah.
```

```
08 → Rᴬ: [ö:: monesko vuosi.=
          umm what year are you in.=
```

```
09 T: =mullon: neljäs vuos.
       = it's my fourth year.
```

```
10       (1.0)
```

```
11  Rᴬ: joo aiko-, (.) aika aika kauan. (0.2) aika kauan=toim-
         yeah quite, (.) quite quite long. (0.2) quite long=that
```

```
12       mse: kaveri josta mä kerroi[n nii se on tuol (0.2)
         the friend I told you about he is in the (0.2)
```

```
13   T:                             [↑joo,
                                      yeah,
```

```
14  Rᴬ: sähkötekniikka .hh puolellahh,
         electrotechnology .hh side,
```

```
15  T: joo?=
        yeah?=
```

```
16  Rᴬ: =puolella et mä nyt en tiedä yhtää et missä se täällä on
         =side that I don't really know at all where it is here
```

```
17       mutta. .hhh[hh
         but. .hhhhh
```

```
18  T:              [joo,
                     yeah,
```

```
19  Rᴬ: eipäkai sillä nyt niin, (.) sillee nii väliä oo [ettäh .hh
         I suppose it does not really (.) kind of really matter so.
```

```
20  T:                                                  [joo:. (0.3)
                                                         yeah. (0.3)
```

```
21       mutmut (0.3) eli tosiaa, (.) #ö:# tääl o ↑meil on, (.)
         butbut (0.3) so anyway, (.) um here is we have (.)
```

```
22       seittemän puol vuotta? (0.4) ni on se keskiarvo opiskeluaika,
         seven and a half years?  (0.4) is the average studying time,
```

T's turn (lines 1-4) can be described as a summary assessment, which is hearable as topic termination implicative (Jefferson, 1984). It is also formulated in the Finnish zero person format (see Laitinen, 2006), which makes the experience more general and available for agreement (the zero person is reflected in the translation "whatever *one* studies"). R^A asks for clarification "so you study now mechanical-" (line 5), which T confirms in overlap at the moment when the word is recognizable as "mechanical engineering" (lines 6-7). After this, R^A asks how many years T has studied (line 8), to which T responds "it's my fourth year" (line 9). This is followed by a 1.0 second pause (line 10), after which R^A produces an evaluative turn : "yeah. quite quite long. quite long" (line 11), which invokes the earlier topic of the length of studies. R^A's turn also conveys that there is something unexpected in T's response.

The topicalization of the time T has studied could be used to endorse the stance that T really has found his thing, if after four years he still enjoys doing it. But R^A's subsequent talk does not support such an interpretation. Instead, R^A makes another topical shift by mentioning that his friend studies at that same school, but he doesn't know where (lines 12-17). This friend has only been mentioned in passing in an unrelated context. Again, this new topical contribution about R^A's friend could be made relevant for T by, for example, explaining that his friend started three years ago and enjoys his studies. However, instead of accounting for his questions and his ambiguous evaluation ("quite long"), R^A displays an orientation toward the irrelevance of his contributions by stating that "I suppose it does not really kind of really matter so" (line 19). We can see that, after R^A's questions, T does some work to go "back on track" with his turn "but but… so anyway" (line 21). He begins by clarifying that the average study time in his school is 7,5 years (line 22), thus orienting toward R^A's earlier evaluation that T has studied "quite long" (line 11) as accountable.

Example 3 showed us how a question that first appears topically ancillary can be made both topically coherent and a necessary component of affiliation in retrospect. This is achieved by the questioner's new contribution that explicates the relevance of the question, which is described here as backward linking. In example 4, in contrast, the recipient displayed an interest in the teller's general situation and provided independent knowledge about the topic, but the relevance of these contributions to previous telling and its affective stance was not spelled out, as it was in example 3. Thus, we argue, in example 4 the recipient's questioning ended up circumventing affiliation with the stance of the telling.

Forward linking

Forward linking is a practice in which the recipient asks a question that builds a topical link or a pivot (cf. Jefferson, 1984:203) from the previous telling to a new topic. This first example is from NT-NT discussions, in which the teller (T) talks about the time he was majoring in physics and the feeling of success he got from solving complicated math problems. His telling does not receive much affiliation from the recipient (R^N), who asks about a loosely related matter of laboratory assignments (lines 11-15).

(5) Trigonometric functions (A14)

T = Teller (NT-participant)
R^N = Recipient (NT-participant)

```
01   T: sä väännät jotain trigonometrisii £funktioit seittemän sivuu£?
```

you write seven pages of like trigonometric functions?

02   (0.3) .hhh s't loppue l'p'ks sä keksit @hei et jos mä,
      (0.3) .hhh then in the end you figure out that @hey if I,

03   (0.4) t[een tähän tämmösen £jutun ni sit mä saan tän
      (0.4) do this kind of £thing here well then I will get this

04 R: [khe
        he

05 T: tämmösee muotoo ja sit se, (.) sit se toimii.=°se o
     into this kind of form and then it, (.) then it works.= it is

06   niiku sille:£°, .hhh[hhh ((subdued fist pump gesture))
      kinda like:£, .hhhhh ((subdued fist pump gesture))

07 R: [°#joo#°.
              yeah.

08 T: £<vii>kon tehny sitä yht [tehtävää ni siint saa£, (.)
     £been doing that exercise for a week so you get£, (.)

09 R: [£mhh hh£
          £mhh hh£

10 T: älyttömät niink[u?
     an awesome like?

11 → R: [.mt (.) tos, (0.5) [fyssas oliks tei]l
        .mt in physics did you have

12 T: [(°iha ookoo°)]
              (pretty ok)

13 → R: >paljon< (.) labra. (0.4) °m[m°
     a lot (.) of lab. (0.4) mm

14 T: [.mt .hhhh
        .mt .hhhh

15 → R: jutt[ui   myös,
     things also,

16 T: [yks kurssi ja se oli £ihan kauhee£.
     one course and it was £completely horrible£.

17 R: °heh°
     hah

18 T: £h s(h)e oli siis ↑aiva hirvee ku[rssi£.
     £it was a completely horrible course£

19 R: [joo ei.
           yeah no.

```
20        (0.7)

21   R:   .mt >taas< (0.3) mua vähän harmittaa se et <mä en nyt>
          .mt >on the other hand< (0.3) I'm a little bit bummed that this year I didn't

22        tänä vuonna ilmoittautunu jo tohon,(0.5) Johdatus
          sign up for the, (0.5) Introduction to

23        Eläintietee-seen?
          Zoology?

32 T:     >joo,<
          yeah,
```

[STORY ABOUT ZOOLOGY COURSE CONTINUES]

In lines 1-10, T describes the experience of solving hard mathematical problems and the feeling of success that it brings. T concludes his telling with an excited and smiley voice "then it works" (line 5), and he continues by saying, "it is kind of like", and does a fist pump gesture in the air imitating celebration (line 6). At this point of story completion, R^N does not reciprocate the smile but looks down and says in a low voice "yeah" (line 7). Then, T continues with an emphasis on the effort behind the success "been doing that exercise for a week so you get an awesome like" (line 8). At this point, R^N cuts T off and starts to ask his question in overlap "in physics did you have a lot of lab things also" (lines 11-15).

R^N's question is connected to the topic of studying physics, but it clearly also starts something new by introducing the word "lab" into the talk. It projects further talk about laboratory assignments. The question does not show affiliation with the stance related to the excitement of solving math problems. However, the question seems to shift the topic towards something that R himself enjoys. The evidence for this is shown in line 21, where R^N begins to talk about a zoology course that had nice laboratory assignments (not shown in the extract). The question works as a pivotal topic change, which does not ignore the previous topic completely but which utilizes it and projects another (potentially) mutually interesting topic. Moreover, R^N starts his question with the referent "in physics", which can sometimes be called a 'left dislocation' or 'foregrounding' (see Keenan, and Schieffelin, 1976). This practice is often found in topic shifts because it reintroduces a referent which has not been mentioned in a while and thus is not in the foreground of the minds of the participants. In this sense, by starting his turn with "in physics", R^N does extra work to connect his utterance to the current topic while also demonstrating an orientation that his turn, in fact, does not follow naturally from the previous talk.

In the next example from the AS-NT discussions, the question by the AS-recipient (R^A) similarly works to produce a topic change. However, the new topic is not based on the previous topic but it emerges out of more ad hoc conversational moves. The participants in this extract have been briefly discussing television and internet phenomena that circulate among youngsters. Then, T begins to tell about his experience as a substitute teacher. R^A asks a question concerning the subjects T was teaching (line 14).

(5) Completely lost (A6)

T = Teller (NT-participant)

R^A = Recipient (AS-participant)

```
01   T: mu:t mut jotenki (0.2) krhmm no emmä tiiä siel huomaa et
        but but somehow   (0.2)  well I dunno there you notice that

02      itte jotenki kuistil tommosist
        I myself  am somehow out of the loop of those

03   RA: °mhehe°
         hehe

04   T: netti,
        Internet,

05   RA: °mhh°
         mhh

06   T: jutuist niiku,
        things kind of,

07   RA: mm.
         mm.

08   T: ne aina heitti jotain ihme läppää siellä (1.2).hh hh (0.2)
        they were always cracking really weird jokes there (1.2) .hh hh (0.2)

09      mä olin iha £piha(h)lla hehe£
        I was completely £lost haha£

10   RA: mm.
         mm.

11      (1.8)

12   T: mut ei se mitää ei kai opettajien kuulukkaa
        but it's okay I guess teachers aren't supposed to be

13      (0.8) olla messissä.
        (0.8)  in the loop.

14 → RA: mhh (0.4) mitä sä opetit.
         mhh (0.4) what did you teach.

15      (1.0)

16   T: mantsaa ja, (0.2) bilsaa. (0.7) ja sitte, (1.0) liikuntaa.
        geography and, (0.2) biology. (0.7) and also, (1.0) PE.

17   RA: hähä
         haha

18      (0.8)

19   T: (tai sillee [-)
        (or like -)
```

```
20    Rᴬ:              [mä sain huonoimman numeron liikunnasta.
                        I got the worst grade from PE.

21    T: joo.
         yes.

22    Rᴬ: mä sain vitosen liikunnasta,
          I got a five from PE,

23    T: okei.
         okay.
```

[THE TOPIC OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION (PE) CONTINUES]

T says, "I myself am somehow out of the loop of those Internet things"(lines 1-6) and delivers the punch line "I was completely lost" (line 9) and laughs. This receives minimal recognition from Rᴬ ("mm", line 10). After a 1.8 second pause T backs away from the stance and states "but it's okay I guess teachers aren't supposed to be in the loop" (lines 12-13). After an outbreath, Rᴬ asks "what did you teach" (line 14). The question is topically relevant to teaching, but it does not focus on elements related to the telling about being out of touch with young peoples' Internet interests. T responds after a 1.0 second pause (line 15) by listing the subjects "geography, biology, and PE" (line 16).

The most interesting thing is, again, what happens next. After T responds to the question, Rᴬ laughs and starts to talk about his own physical education grade (line 20). Here, the question-answer sequence seems to work only in the service of providing new topics or 'mentionables' (Maynard, and Zimmerman, 1984; Schegloff, and Sacks, 1973) that Rᴬ himself has first-hand knowledge of. Similarly to example 4, the question builds a topical link towards the recipient's experiences, but here the new topic is catalyzed by the (arbitrary) response to the question. The question also resembles example 1, in which the recipient asked about factual information related to the events in the telling, which we described as a display of interest. Here, however, the teller's answer is not received affiliatively and the question does not lead to more topical talk about teaching experiences. The sequence eventually ends when Rᴬ concludes that he hates gymnastics and T states that he has been a professional athlete (not shown in the extract).

In the two examples above, the questions by both the NT- and AS-participants did not engage with affiliation with the teller's stance, in moments when affiliation would have been relevant. However, in example 4, we showed how the question built a topical link from the previous telling to a new topic that shared the stance of the previous one. In example 5, in contrast, we showed how the question similarly induced a topic change, but the new topic was not based on the previous telling. In addition, the new topic did not mirror the stance of the previous telling, and it led the participants in misaligned positions.

Discussion

In our analysis, we found that the relation between the topicality of a question and the degree of affiliation displayed through the question is not straightforward. The affiliative import of story-responsive questions can only really be seen in retrospect, since the questioner can cast their action in an affiliative or non-affiliative light in subsequent turns. This is possible because questions, in addition to sequentially implicating an answer, project a post answer-

slot in which the questioner has the right/obligation to talk again (Jefferson, 1984; Sacks, 1992). This slot can then be used to constitute the question as a display of interest (with an explicitly affiliative turn or a second story, see example 1), to link it to the previous telling (by explicating its relevance, see example 3), or to link it to something new (by launching a story that is 'touched off' by the previous topic and shares the stance of the previous telling, see example 4). These results are in line with previous observations according to which asking an ancillary question is an effective tool for recipients to decline affiliation with tellers (cf. Heritage, 2011). However, our data shows that sometimes this might be done in favor of solidarity on another level: recipients may pose questions in order to refrain from overt disaffiliation (cf. McKinlay, and McVittie, 2006), or they might try to find a way to empathize with the experience on a more independent level and establish a 'likeness' (cf. Maynard, and Zimmermann, 1984) with their conversational partner. These other levels of solidarity might be especially important in this context of unacquainted pairs, since the participants strive to find out similarities between them as part of relationship building (see Maynard, 1980; 1989; Maynard, and Zimmerman, 1984; Svennevig, 2014).

The differences that we found between NT- and AS-participants were subtle. Both groups topicalized items that were sometimes quite far from the 'gist' of the previous tellings (see examples 3–6). The differences appeared mostly in the *orientations* to the questions' topicality: NT-participants utilized the materials mentioned in the previous telling in order to transition to a new topic without ignoring the previous telling, and they directed the talk to a direction where affiliative actions were possible. NT-participants seemed to 'engineer' (Holt, and Drew, 2005:45) the link from one topic to the next and to strategically forge connections between topics (see also Jefferson, 1984). Such orientations toward maintaining coherence were not clear in the questions posed by AS-participants, even though the questions themselves where similar to the ones asked by NT-participants. These differences in how AS-participants treated the topicality of their questions arguably influenced the eventual affiliative import of their questions in subtle, but yet significant ways.

In some sense, then, story-responsive questions have properties that resemble a 'retro-sequence' recently described by Kendrick (2019). In the same way as a repairable 'trouble source' does not exist until a repair initiator invokes its problematicity (Kendrick, 2019; Schegloff, 2007), an affiliative 'display of interest' does not really exist until ensuing talk constitutes the question as such. Similarly, a turn can have 'independent topic potential' (Jefferson, 1984), but only the realization of the topic makes the turn retroactively a topical pivot. Another parallel can be found in the concept of 'multiple drafts' (see Enfield and Sidnell, 2017:523): when new information becomes available, the 'identity' of an action may be transformed. As the topicality and affiliative import of story-responsive questions become apparent only in subsequent turns, using them requires the participants' mutual trust (cf. Garfinkel, 1963, see also Lindholm, and Stevanovic, *in press*).

Our study has two key limitations. First, since our dataset was created for research purposes, our results cannot be uncritically applied to naturally occurring interactions. However, the phenomenon of affiliation is relevant for both contexts. The importance of displaying affiliation in quasi-natural settings has been established in a set of studies. They have found that the affiliative responses of story recipients in these interactions reverberate in the (neurotypical) tellers' bodies, calming them down (see Peräkylä et al. 2015; Stevanovic et al. 2019). Second, our results concerning the AS-participants are limited as our sample size is small and the autism spectrum very heterogeneous (Masi, DeMayo, Glozier, and Guastella, 2017). The findings of the current study, therefore, need to be complemented with analyses of

bigger samples, including studies of naturally-occurring interactions. Indeed, our research should first and foremost be considered a novel conversation-analytic endeavor "for opening up avenues for investigation that otherwise might go unnoticed" (Pomeranz, 2005:93).

In conclusion, our results regarding the topicality of AS-participants' questions resonate strongly with Ochs and Solomon's (2005; 2010) findings regarding 'proximal relevance': the questions were relevant enough that the AS-participants' conversational partners could co-operate and adapt to their topical line. Thus, the continuing coherence of talk is made possible through adaptive flexibility of participants (see Goodwin, 1995), which allows for the interaction to continue without disruption. However, the adaptive moves by NT-participants do not erase the AS-participants' subtle breaches in topical coherence, which can affect the affiliative import of their questions and eventually undercut the solidarity between the participants. When do tellers decide to pursue affiliation (as in example 2) and when do they instead decide to drop their line of action is a matter of complex contextual considerations, the unravelling of which will be the task of future research. Increasing the understanding of specific interactional practices and their effect on the relationship between participants can help to discover specific interactional features that are related to ASD and build understanding between different interactional repertoires.

Acknowledgements

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