

Part 3: Structuring the discourse

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Part 3: Structuring the discourse

The main objective of this part of my book is to explore how the performers structure the narrative discourse of the stories. In chapter 9, I will describe the details of the timing that the performers use to segment the discourse. The digitization of the corpus allows me to do a number of statistical calculations. I will discuss the multifunctional use and cohesive function of the particle **ǎ** in chapter 10. The discourse often shows the definite Fongbe particle **ǎ** that structures the discourse. The performers place the particle after noun phrases as well as at the end of an utterance that is an adverbial WHEN- or IF-clause. I will discuss in chapter 11 the structuring of the content. Finally, I will sum up the conclusions on the structuring of the discourse in chapter 12.⁶⁸

9. The timing of the speech act

During the recording of the stories, I often perceived the deliberate timing of the speech and the silences in-between by the performers. This chapter describes the timing of the speech act that governs the segmenting of the utterances. The digitization of the recorded stories enables a thorough analysis of this observation. The segmented utterances as spoken by the performers are at the base of my analysis. These segments accounts for the way the performers deliver a story. Serzisko's study on the discourse of the **Ik**, a people from northeast Uganda confirmed my perception, and therefore was very helpful to tackle this issue. He based his description on the segmenting of speech acts by pauses. He considered the pauses as the essential criterion to note how native speakers segment narrative discourse (Serzisko 1992: 4). In addition to the segmentation, I will also consider the function of pauses within clauses and between clusters of clauses. The performers use clusters of clauses that convey a clear-cut chunk of information. These clusters bear a close resemblance to the paragraphs that organize written texts. However, the word 'paragraph' is an appropriate description of the way the performers segment their speech (see chapter 19 The concept of the storyboard).

One of the main features of the utterances is that the the performers produce them whilst performing. Utterances are not analogous to clauses or sentences that consist of the lexical and grammatical items that create a syntactically well-formed and meaningful speech act. An utterance may consist of just a fragment of a clause, for example a noun phrase or a conjunction. It also often happens that a single adjunct or interjection, which expresses the performer's attitude, forms an utterance. The only category that cannot constitute an utterance is the Fongbe verb phrase. The

⁶⁸ The mode of speaking, and the question whether, and if so, to what extent, the performance is driven by the stories' intrigue or plot is discussed in the chapters about Style.

performers deliberately structure their discourse in utterances. This structured discourse intends to convey a story and its message.

Before embarking on my analysis, I want to make clear that the timing of the speech act primarily concerns the length of the pauses. The performer decides on the timing of speech and directs the length of pauses. The deliberate use of pauses in the performance is the opposite of faltering speech (see 11.2).The performance of Fongbe stories has nothing in common with the hesitant pauses that are characteristic of European conversation. In this respect, the performance of Fongbe stories widely differs from spontaneous conversation.⁶⁹

9.1. The pattern of pauses (statistical analysis)

This section discusses the pattern of pauses in the performance of Fongbe verbal art. The background of this approach is that the prosody of the discourse is tangibly audible, due to the silences between the utterances that segment each individual utterance. My working assumption is that performers use the variation of the lengths of pauses to structure the discourse by the skilful delivery of a pattern of pauses indicating, for instance, the end of a paragraph. The performer indicates the conclusion of a fragment of the story by inserting an extensive pause, as the statistical analysis will show.⁷⁰

Within the pattern of pauses, the performer also uses relatively long pauses to highlight the moments of special interest, such as the topic and the peak of the story, as well as flash forwards or cliff hangers. The pauses between utterances last between 0,1 and 4 seconds; the pauses that performers place after rhetorical phenomena last between 1,9 and 2,5 seconds.

I analysed the utterances and the length of the pauses of different versions of rather similar stories. Different performers at different villages performed these stories. I first analysed two versions of the same story known as ‘The sadist co-wife’. This story was told by two women: **Avɔsehwe Zomagba**, 37 years old, in Abomey-Calavi, May 4, 1976 (this story is referred to as Abomey-Calavi 2, AC 2) and by **Nagè Tokoudagba**, 80 years old, in Abomey, June 16, 1976 (this story is referred to as Abomey 5, A 5). I also analysed two versions of the story called ‘The day to thresh the millet’ (AC 4 and A 4).⁷¹ Finally, I analysed three versions of the ‘Cat and

⁶⁹ Several studies discussed the major features of conversation in European languages. These analyses show that conversation is a spontaneous speech act that goes with faltering speech and hesitant pauses (Deese 1980, Goldman-Eisler 1972 and 1985).

⁷⁰ The performers also use a particle in the clause that follows the extensive pause; I will discuss this in the section on tail-head constructions (10.1.).

⁷¹ A glossed version of the Abomey 4 story is to be found in appendix 2.

leopard' stories (Ay 5, AC 16 and A 7). The complete analysis involves seven stories that come to 9 403 words.

I transcribed the recorded stories in the utterances that segmented the performers' discourse. I used the software programme 'Praat' to digitize the original audio recordings (Boersma and Weenink 2007). This software visualises the sound waves that are represented on a time scale. This graphical representation makes it possible to measure in milliseconds the length of the utterance and the length of the pauses following that utterance. The number of syllables within each utterance stems from the transcription by simply counting.

The numerical data from each story consists of three series of quantitative (numerical) data: the length of the utterance in seconds (u), the number of syllables within the utterance(s) and the length of the pause following an utterance in seconds (p). The utterances and pauses are numbered with an utterance number (n).

These seven sets of numerical data stem from seven stories, from three different villages, each told by a different performer. This avoids the dominance of a specific (sub) dialect or the personal way of speaking of one storyteller. I consider the set of data of each of the stories to be independent of each other. The numerical data of each set can be analysed on specific patterns and deviations from the general patterns as well.

I calculated the Pearson correlation coefficient of the series of numerical data in order to determine a relation or a pattern between the different parameters (Anderson, Sweeney and Williams 1996). I used graphical representations to determine the linguistic significance of the numerical data. All techniques are commonly used in applied statistics.

The graphics and the probability analysis are made with the extensive statistical functionality of the spreadsheet programme that is part of the Microsoft Office Suite. The calculations have been verified with the SPSS statistical software. The results were identical.

Numerical and graphic analysis

Theoretically, there are several possible relations 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 relation that should be considered is that of the length of the

pauses in relation to the length of the preceding utterances; both parameters are relevant in relation to the speech rhythm (Aalders Grool 2008).

Description of the statistical relations

Let us consider first the relation between the duration (length in seconds) of an utterance and the number of syllables. Figure 5 is a graphic representation of this relation in the Abomey-Calavi 2 text. Each dot in the scatter diagram represents an individual utterance.

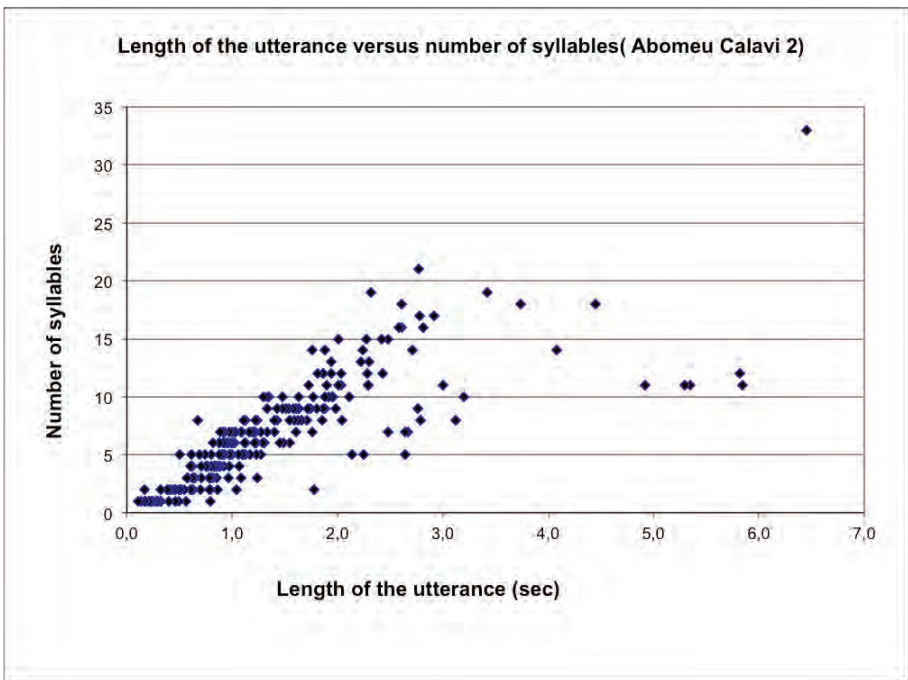


Figure 5 Length of utterances versus number of syllables

The graph 5 shows that when an utterance contains more syllables, the duration of the utterance is longer. More precisely, there is a positive relation between the number of syllables and the duration of the utterance, with a correlation coefficient of 0.84. This must be considered a 'good correlation'. The high correlation coefficient indicates an almost straight relation between the number of syllables and the duration of the utterance. The straight relation also indicates that the length of an utterance does not generally affect the speech rate. The speech rate of the performance is constant, and the cadence of the prosody is smooth.

There is no relation between speech rate and the length of the pauses, as is shown in figure 6. The Pearson correlation coefficient is a low 0.024.

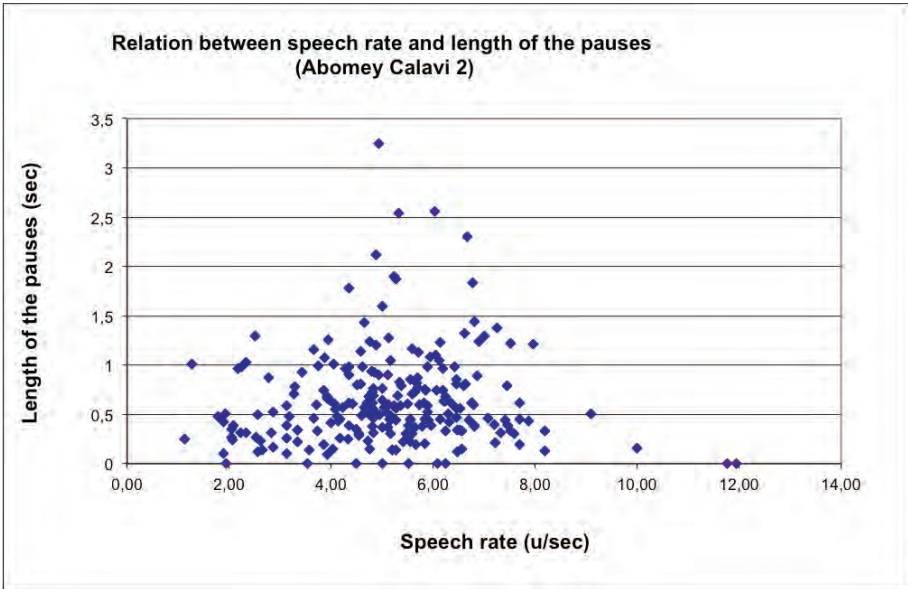


Figure 7 Speech rate and duration of pauses

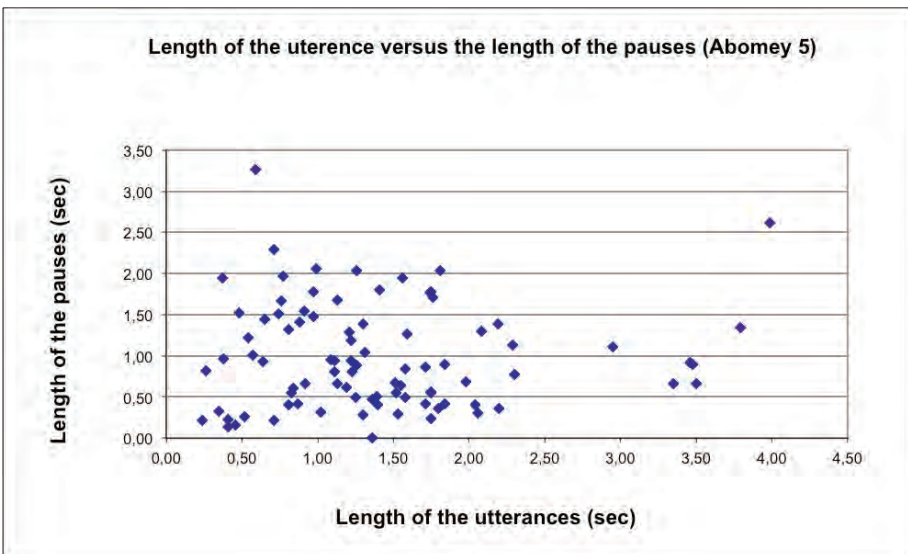


Figure 6 Utterances versus pauses AC 2

Next, figure 7 and 8 show that there is no relation between the length of the utterance and the length of the following pause in two versions of a similar story. The lack of a relation is supported by a Pearson correlation coefficient of respectively 0.016 and 0.049, which indicates that there is no relation whatsoever. Thus, the length of a pause is independent of the length of the preceding utterance.

The data further also show that the speech rate of a preceding utterance does not influence the length of a pause. As the scatter diagram shows, several utterances deviate from the general pattern (the points that represent the majority of the pauses and utterances). These exceptions have been analysed separately by checking their position and function in the story (see below in this chapter). The data discussed

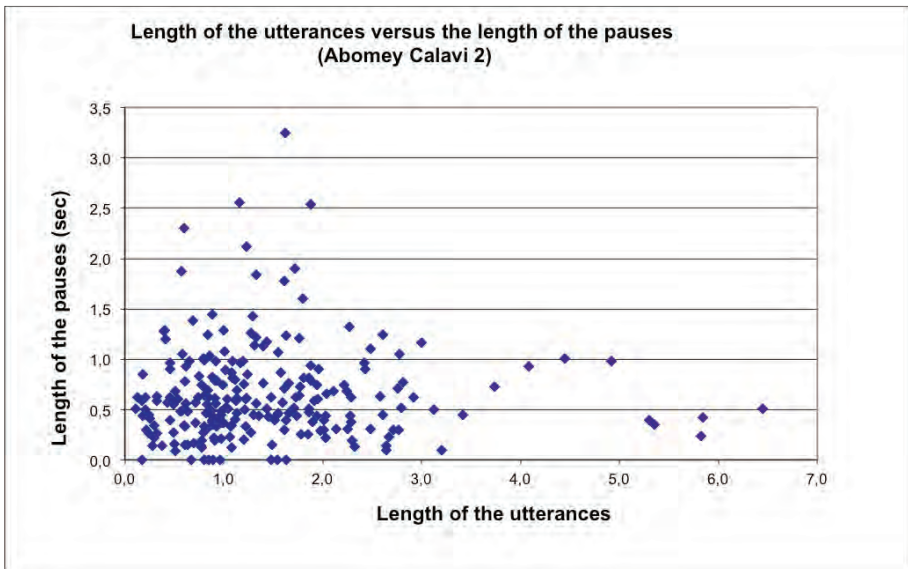


Figure 8 Utterances versus pauses A 5

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. This implies that the length of a pause can have a rhetorical function of its own, for example an indication of a specific phenomenon.

We may conclude that pause duration is a phenomenon that can be studied in isolation.

Pause duration

The length of the two editions of 'The sadist co-wife' considerably varies, probably due to the mood of the performer. The Abomey-Calavi 2 text consists of 234 utterances and 233 pauses. The Abomey 5 text consists of 89 utterances and 88

pauses. The performer from Abomey-Calavi extended the narrative discourse with the maximal recurrence of four repetitions (see chapter 17). The performer from Abomey just told a rudimentary version of the story, and added no digressions. The data of the analysed stories show the following pause lengths: the average pause duration is about 0.5 seconds. The length of most pauses is between close to zero and 1.5 seconds, as is shown by the data in figures 6, 7 and 8.

9.2. The pattern of pauses as a content marker

I will describe the different types of pauses that the performers use as shown in the graphics that represent the numerical data. The dots in the graphs are not data taken at random. They represent an utterance or a pause with a specific position in the story (see appendix 3). This makes it possible to check whether the position of an utterance in a graph can be related to a narrative phenomenon. For instance, this allows to distinguish between an underlying pattern of pauses, and pauses that are used in a specific situation in the discourse.

Figure 9 shows the length of the pauses that occur between the first 20 utterances of the Abomey-Calavi 2 text. The third paragraph of the Abomey-Calavi 2 text consists of the utterances and the pauses 14-19. The highlighted part of the text shows a pattern of pauses in which the successive pauses become longer. This paragraph is representative of the Fon performance of storytelling in general. The third paragraph of the Abomey-Calavi 2 text consists of the utterances and pauses 16-20 (see figure 9).

The content of this paragraph is given in the example below where the duration of the pauses is indicated between square brackets (in seconds). The paragraph starts with an utterance that summarizes the end of the previous paragraph, which ended

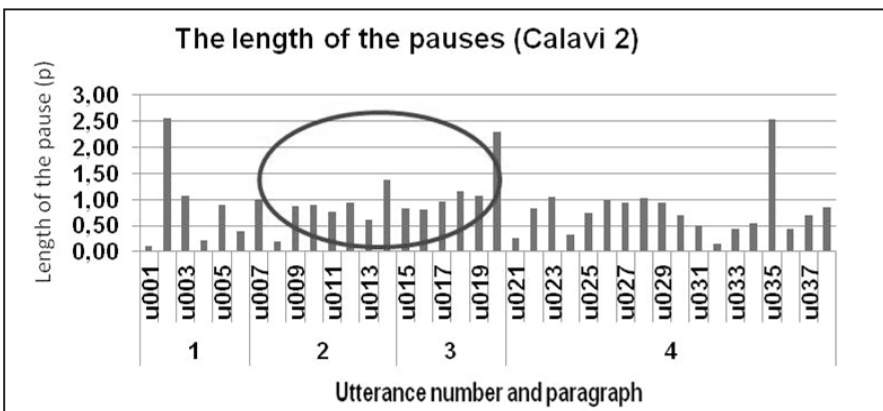


Figure 9 Length of pauses AC 2

with a pause of 1.38 seconds after the utterance ‘and was on her way to the market’. Note further that there is no personal pronoun; the performer uses the conjunction **bó** meaning ‘and’, which indicates that the clauses have the same subject. I will discuss the multifunctional use of the particle **ɔ́** later (see 10. and 11.2.). However, this paragraph exhibits a pattern of pauses in which the pauses successively become longer. The paragraph ends as it began, with the woman who cooked a delicious sauce before she went to the market.

(u 15) **bó yì axì**

CJss go market

‘and she went to the market’ [0.83]

(u 16) **é xwè yì gbé ɔ́ é ɖà nùsúnnú ’ne ɔ**

CL₃ go go PURP TOP_{CL} CL₃ prepare sauce DEM_R DEF

‘before she left she cooked that very sauce’ [0.81]

(u 17) **ɖá nùsúnnú ’né ɔ́ ganjì b̀ nùsúnnú ɔ́ fé-wũ**

prepare sauce DEM_R DEF well CJds sauce DEF dust-body

‘she was good at cooking that sauce. And the sauce was delicious’ [0.96]

(u 18) **bó ɖá dó zèn ɔ́ mɛ bó ka ɖu kpɛɖé**

CJss prepare put pot DEF LOC CJss but eat some

‘and she cooked it in the pot and, well, she tasted some’ [1.16]

(u 19) **bó jó é kpo ɔ́ dó**

CJss leave RES remain DEF put

‘and she put away the rest’ [1.07]

(u 20) **bó yì axì**

CJss go market

‘and she went to the market’ [2.30]

‘(One day, one of the co-wives prepared her goods and she went as she always did to the market.) And she went to the market. Before she left, she cooked that very sauce, she was good at cooking that sauce. And the sauce was delicious. And she cooked it in the pot and, well she tasted some. And she put away the rest, and went to the market.’ [AC 2: 15-20]

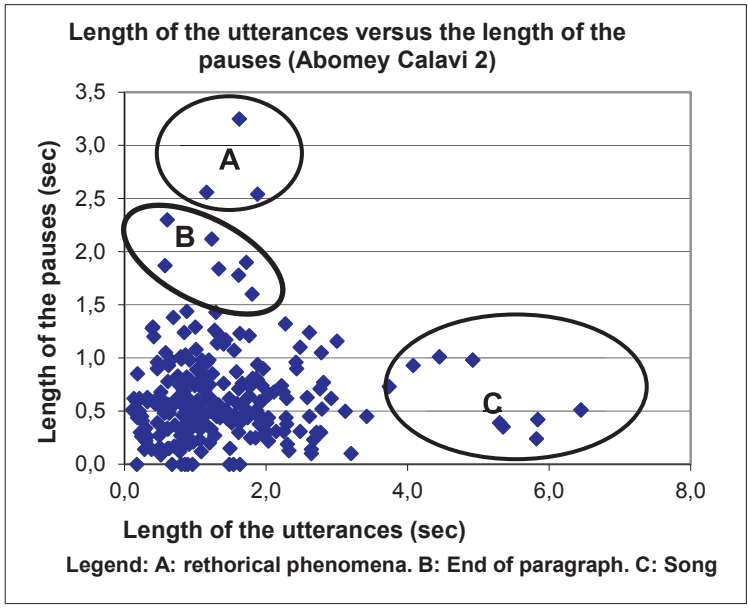


Figure 10 Rhetorical phenomena AC 2

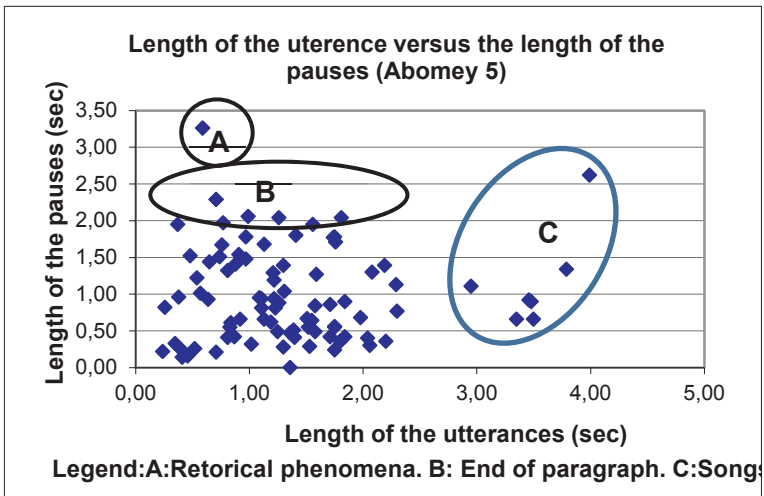


Figure 11 Rhetorical phenomena A 5

This paragraph is a deliberately marked chunk in the narrative discourse. This chunk affirms the analyses made by Serzisko, who stated that pauses are at the basis of the segmenting of the units of a speech act (Serzisko 1992: 84). There is a difference though with the statement by Serzisko who mentions the following: ‘Gründlage für die Segmentierung sind Pausen, die wir als Indikator für eine Intonationseinheit ansehen.’ On the contrary, the pauses in Fongbe indicate a kind of ‘punctuation’, for Fongbe is a tonal language instead of an intonation language.⁷²

9.3. Rhetorical pauses

All graphical representations of possible relations between utterances and pauses that have been discussed above display a number of outliers. Consider the figures 10 and 11, which show the same graphs as figures 7 and 8.

Closer inspection of figure 10 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). The other extensive pauses in cluster (A) do not occur at the end of a paragraph, but rather have a rhetorical function. These pauses are content markers that provide us with new information about the plot. The examples from the Abomey-Calavi text include the presentation of the main topic, a flash forward and the peak.

The examples taken from the Abomey text involve an extensive pause that indicates a cliff hanger (A) (see figure 11). The end of paragraph (B) is again indicated by a longer pause than usual. Notice, finally, that (C) in both graphs represents the songs in these texts, which, as can be seen, thoroughly differ from spoken discourse, apparently not alone for its melody. Below I will discuss these phenomena in more detail, using examples from both texts.

Pauses as indicators of the agents and the topic

The beginning of the story shows the formulaic start of **hwènùxó**. The second utterance starts the story by the introduction of the agents. This utterance is followed by an extensive pause. The third utterance reports the topic of the story.

⁷² This paragraph introduces the central participant in a flashback. The extensive pauses of the utterances 18 and 19 of this example do not function as paragraph markers, but instead indicate the rhetoric function of a cliff hanger.

hwenu-xó cé zòn m̀ gée bó yí m̀
 time-GEN.word POS₁ fly thus AJ CJss get find
 ‘my story took deliberately off to land on’ [0.10]

àsísí àsísí wè
 co-wife co-wife two
 ‘two co-wives’ [2.56]

b̀ yě d̀ wù hwán wè
 CJds 3PL AUX body jealous pFOC
 ‘and they were jealous’ [1.08]

‘This is a story about two jealous co-wives.’[AC 2: 1-3]

The performers use pauses to emphasize an important part of the story: the introduction of the agents and the topic.

Pauses as indicators of the peak

The fourth paragraph of Abomey-Calavi 2 introduces the jealous co-wife (Agent B), who sneaks into the hut of the younger wife and eats her lovely sauce. Here we find a clear pattern of pauses that is building up the peak. The peak ‘and she relieved herself in that sauce’ is followed by an extensive pause of 2.54 seconds.

é ś nǔ
 CL₃ take thing
 ‘she prepared herself’ [0.15]

é
 CL₃
 ‘she’ [0.44]

ván ỳnu t̀n
 open arse GEN
 ‘opened her arse’ [0.55]

bó nyè mǐ kón dó nùsúnnú ś m̀
 CJss relieve excrement pour put sauce DEF LOC
 ‘and relieved herself into that sauce’ [2.54, laughter of the audience]

bó nyè mǐ kón dó nùsúnnúzén 'né ́ mè
 CJss relieve excrement pour put saucepot DEM_R DEF LOC
 ‘and relieved herself into that very saucepot’ [0.44]

‘(When the first wife had eaten her fill,) she positioned herself over the pot, and defecated into it. ‘Ha, ha’ said the audience. (And she put the cover back...)[AC 2: 32-36]

Pauses as markers of flash forwards and cliff hangers

Performers use flash forwards and cliff hangers to increase suspense. Both these phenomena are followed by remarkably lengthy pauses. The flash forward is used to anticipate the plot of the story. The flash forward occurs in the midst of a paragraph, and may be uttered by the audience. The cliff hanger on the other hand, is used as an open-ended question at the end of a paragraph.

The Abomey-Calavi 2 text provides us with two fragments that show a cliff hanger and a flash forward. The first fragment is an example of a cliff hanger at the end of the paragraph, upon which the audience intervenes with a flash forward. Later in the story, the second co-wife looks for her saucepot in vain, and cries out the same utterance that this time is a cliff hanger at the end of the paragraph that is followed by the song of the central participant.

án é ná síte ́ é síte=kpó nùsúnnú-zén=kpó [1.32]
 MDM CL₃ IRM stand TOP_{CL} CL₃ stand=and sauce-GEN.pot=and
 ‘Look at this! When she would get up, she was stuck to the saucepot’
 [cliff hanger]

[the audience and the performer are laughing]

nùsúnnú-zén ví cè jǒèè-jǒèè [3.25] [flash forward]
 sauce-GEN.pot child POS₁ IP
 ‘My dear saucepot! Frizzle sizzle!’

‘(This time the first co-wife was stuck to the glued rim of the saucepot.) Look at this! When she would get up, she was stuck to the saucepot. ‘Ha ha’ said the performer and the audience. “My dear saucepot! Frizzle, sizzle!” said the audience. (The first co-wife tried to free herself from it, but her efforts were in vain)’ [AC 2: 128, 129]

nùsúnnú-zén ́ fi é ká [0.40]
 sauce-GEN.pot DEF place WH but
 ‘But where was her saucepot?’

nùsúnnú-zén ví cè jǒèèè-jǒèèè [0.50]

sauce-GEN.pot child POS₁ IP

‘My dear saucepot! Frizzle sizzle!’

‘(When the second co-wife returned from the market) she looked in vain for the saucepot, she cried ‘My dear saucepot! Frizzle! Sizzle!’ [AC 2: 159, 160]

Short pauses as markers of ‘Breaking News’

The performer’s speech becomes staccato when ‘breaking news’ to the audience. The staccato speech informs that there is new information that unravels the incident and accelerates the denouement: the pauses are much shorter than in the preceding utterances, up to 70 % shorter. The contrast between the peak and the denouement is huge. The change of prosody is audible when the agent switches from reported speech to direct speech, which entails the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’. This pronoun is hardly used in stories, but it occurs in the songs of the central participant and in an ‘interior monologue’ as the following example shows:

ø éló ká lé gó-sín bó wá jè
 ø DEM_N but repeat come-GEN CJss come.to fall
 ‘but where does this come from and floats down’ [0.30]⁷³

nùsúnnú-zén -mé nú mĩ
 sauce-GEN.pot-LOC LOC 1SG
 ‘in my saucepot in front of me’

un ka sú hɔn ce ’ne nya
 CL₁ but close door POS₁ DEM_R IJ
 ‘I shut my door, huh!’ [0.63]

hén

IJ

‘how come!’ [0.14]

été ka ðjè nya

WH but DEI IJ

‘Look at this! Now what is going on? Huh!’ [0.31]⁷⁴

⁷³ The performer utters an elliptical clause that omits the noun that is emphasized by the demonstrative pronoun.

⁷⁴ The interjection **nya** conveys disappointment.

‘‘Now what dirt did get again into my saucepot?’ she cried, ‘I shut my door, huh! How come! Look at this! Now what is going on? Huh!’ [AC 2: 46-49]

The first utterance in this example shows how the performer breaks off the first clause to emphasize the saucepot and its content in the second utterance. The second utterance continues, and the performer adds a new clause that provides us with new information ‘I shut my door’, and an emotional cry of disappointment.

9.4. The timing in songs

Songs are a genre in its own right, as I discussed in chapter 7. This is also shown by the relation between the length of the utterance and the number of syllables.

Figure 12 shows again that when an utterance contains more syllables, the duration of the utterance is longer. The scatter graph clearly shows that there are a limited number of exceptions. These involve the first and last lines of the songs. In the figures 10 and 11 the exceptions in cluster C also represent the relatively long utterances in a song.

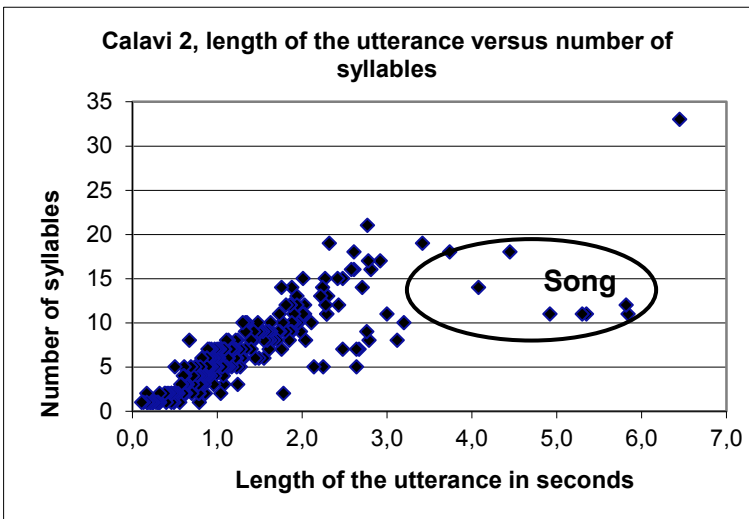


Figure 12 Songs AC 2

The performer mentions that she will sing a song, and the audience clearly recognises the song. One can hear the melody as well as a rhythm that differs from the spoken text in the performance. However, the numerical data do not offer a consistent pattern for all songs. One of the reasons is that a rhythm is not fully described by speech rate, length of the pauses or length of the utterance alone. Another reason is that songs differ one from another in timing and wording.

Nonetheless, the exceptional occurrence of relatively long utterances in songs is in line with the conclusion that the song is a different genre that the performers add to the discourse.

