

Category Terms as Story-Telling Shortcuts

Elizabeth Reddington

Teachers College, Columbia University

Following Stokoe (2012), who grounded her study of membership categorization practices in the analysis of particular sequences of interaction, such as advice-giving, I will examine how participants invoke and orient to categories in story-telling episodes. Because category terms are inherently inference-rich (Schegloff, 2007), I argue that they may serve as a powerful resource for story-tellers: By invoking particular categories, a speaker can prompt a listener to make inferences that facilitate the telling of the story, obviating the need for certain accounts and explanations. I will analyze two extracts from a Skype phone conversation in which one female friend shares stories about her apartment-hunting experience with another female friend. I suggest that evidence for categorization work in these extracts may be found both in what the participants say and in what they do not have to say.

As Extract 1 begins, O is in the midst of providing an update on her apartment-hunting efforts. In line 2, she launches a story about the real estate agent with whom she has been working.

Extract 1

01	O:	and: (.) yeah just some of- at the very beginning,
02		the places that I saw were just- (.) th- the
03	→	real estate agent that's showing me from one-
04		from this one agency she has rea:lly <u>like</u> (0.7)
05		taken care of me she's so:: <u>nice</u> . she's probably
06		close to our age. and initially I was a little
07		skeptical <u>but</u> now that we've been talking I see
08	→	that she's about to be I mean her husband's
09	→	<u>like</u> in theology >studying to be a <u>pastor</u> < so I
10	→	think she just might <u>actually</u> be a nice person.
11	E:	heh heh heh o::kay.

The story-teller states that she was initially “skeptical” about the real estate agent’s being “so:: nice” to her (lines 5-7). Why should nice treatment be cause for skepticism? The category term ‘real estate agent’ appears to contain the answer. The term must invoke certain category-bound predicates, specifically, features such as ‘not genuinely nice,’ ‘nice only to earn a commission,’ or perhaps even ‘not trustworthy.’ The speaker does not actually delineate these predicates because she does not have to. The category is inference-rich (Schegloff, 2007) enough to advance the story-telling; there is no need for a detour to describe what ‘typical’ real estate agents are like or why a customer should be wary. The absence of such accounting suggests that the speaker takes for granted that the appropriate inferences will be made by the listener. This assumption appears warranted, as the recipient does not indicate any trouble with comprehension at this point. Thus, the participants display that they are ‘on the same page’ when it comes to ‘real estate agents.’

What the story-teller does elaborate on is the change in her attitude toward this particular real estate agent, why she is no longer “skeptical” (line 7). The speaker provides an account of this change in lines 7-10 in part through the invocation of categories. This occurs in two steps. First, the speaker references the agent’s “husband” (line 8). Use of this category term implicitly establishes the agent’s membership in another category, ‘wife,’ and positions her as part of the standardized relational pair, ‘husband-wife.’ Again, there is no explicit mention of the predicates linked to these categories; however, the agent’s association with her husband and his intended profession is used as an explanation for her behavior. In order for this leap to be made, it seems that another predicate must be oriented to, a feature along the lines of ‘husbands and wives share traits and values.’ Such a predicate would pave the way toward allowing the speaker to account for a wife’s behavior with only a reference to her husband’s profession.

Naming that profession represents the second step in the story-teller’s account. ‘Pastor’ also appears to function as a category term, implicitly invoking predicates which are, in this case, positive, such as ‘genuinely nice’ or ‘trustworthy.’ The association with her husband and his profession, then, is presented as evidence that this real estate agent might also be genuinely nice and allows the story-teller to account for her change in perspective. The agent is ultimately presented as an exception to the category’s rules. Having stated her case, at the end of her turn, the story-teller positions the real estate agent as a member of a final category—she is “a nice person” (line 10). This conclusion is greeted by the listener, without delay, with laughter and an acknowledgement token in line 11. There is no evidence in the listener’s response that there has been anything problematic in the story-telling.

As the conversation continues, O goes on to describe several apartments that she has visited. Then, at the start of Extract 2, she returns to the topic of the ‘atypical’ real estate agent.

Extract 2

- 01 O: an (.) then (.) today: she showed me:: (0.2)
 02 because she’s- she’s really: (.) been nice about
 03 this and has been keeping me updated every
 04 evening she’ll send like new listings or in the
 05 m- >even as we’re out< she will check and say
 06 oh something just came on the market ↓let’s go.
 07 ↑and she’s like dropped me off at the ↑T. today
 08 she picked me up from one of my viewings
 09 because she’s like I set it up for one-thirty
 10 >we have fifteen minutes you’re never gonna
 11 get there without a car so I’m gonna pick
 12 you up<.
 13 E: that’s nice.
 14 O: that’s ↑rea↓lly nice.
 15 (0.8)
 16 O: → so I really would actually like for her to get
 17 the money: hhh so I almost want to rent with
 18 her so she gets the money hh[h]
 19 E: [yeah.]

O first cites more specific examples of the real estate agent's "nice" treatment in lines 1-12. Finally, in lines 16-17, she states that she would like to rent through this agent so that the agent can earn the commission. In the end, the prior work done to establish that the agent is 'a nice person' serves as an account for the story-teller's wish to rent through her. This statement is met with an agreement token from E, again suggesting that there were no problems in following the logic of the story. Understanding both stories ultimately hinges on the juxtaposition of this particular real estate agent and the category 'real estate agent,' and the apparent ease with which the stories are received suggests that E is able to make the necessary category-based inferences to understand the speaker's change of heart.

The unproblematic telling and receipt of a story that relies on category terms in such a way may thus serve as evidence that the participants are orienting to shared assumptions about the categories. The data presented here suggest that explicit linking of category and category-like behavior need not be the only form of evidence that categorization work is being done by participants. Category terms may, in fact, be deployed as shortcuts in story-telling, advancing the story and obviating the need for the speaker to provide background information or accounts. When stories involving categorical references come off and are received without a hitch, it is possible to infer that teller and recipient are making use of shared, common-sense (Schegloff, 2007) assumptions about those categories.

REFERENCES

- Schegloff, E. A. (2007). A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 462-482.
- Stokoe, E. (2012). Moving forward with membership categorization analysis: Methods for systematic analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 14(3), 277-303.

Elizabeth Reddington is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has taught English language learners at the university level in Poland and the community college level in the U.S. Her research interests include classroom discourse and second-language writing.