LaD Final Squib - Small Steps or New Episodes? What *en toen* Does in Storytelling

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1 Description of Linguistic Phenomenon

In Dutch, *en toen* is commonly used in spoken narratives. People often use it to move a story forward. While it can express temporal sequence, it does not always refer to exact chronological order. It helps more to build the structure of a story by organising events in a meaningful way.

In general, research on discourse markers has shown that elements such as *then* can function beyond their literal temporal meaning. They help organise narrative structure (Schiffrin, 1987) . In this way, *en toen* can be considered as a discourse-organising marker rather than only as a time expression. Even though the English *and then* is not exactly the same, it can sometimes be used in a similar way in spoken storytelling.

In English, *and then* can be used in a similar way. However, the Dutch marker *en toen* seems to be more flexible in everyday conversation. It appears frequently in storytelling and it can mean just moving on to the next part or even a bigger change in the story. For this reason, *en toen* is well suited for studying how speakers put together their shared memories in interaction.

When it comes to my 3-minute dialogue, the Dutch expression *en toen* ("and then") appears many times. The speakers use it while recalling events from multiple holidays and describing what happened. Even though *en toen* seems like a simple way to connect events in time, it does actually play an important role in the storytelling. It helps build the timeline in the story and makes sure that the structure clear is for the listener.

I noticed that *en toen* has two main functions in my data. It can show a small narrative step in the same scene or it can open a new episode in the story. Because of this, the phenomenon works at the pragmatic and discourse level. It does not change the meaning of the sentence. Instead, it shapes how the story is organised and how the memory is built together.

Below there are two short examples from my corpus to show these functions.

Case 1: New Episode Marker (00:00:40–00:00:53)

- G: *en toen* ((laughs))
- G: waren toch mensen van het nieuws gekomen ((laughs))
- S: ((laughs))

Here, *en toen* starts a new scene in the story because a new event begins.

Case 2: Narrative Step Marker (00:01:48–00:01:56)

- S: *en toen* hadden we die om ons pols heen gedaan

Here, *en toen* marks the next small step in the same situation.

2 Research Question(s) and Hypothesis/es

My research question is:

> **How does the marker *en toen* function to structure storytelling in my conversation, based on its use as either a narrative step marker or a new episode marker?**

This question focuses on how speakers use *en toen* ("and then") to move through a shared memory and organise the story while they talk.

Hypotheses

H1: *En toen* is used more often as a narrative step marker than as a new episode marker.

H2: The speaker that uses more new episode markers takes the main storyteller role.

The dependent variable in this study is the function of *en toen*. Each token is labeled as either a Narrative Step Marker or a New Episode Marker. The independent variables include speaker, turn position within the utterance and co-occurring cues. An example would be laughter or topic shifts. These variables help explain when *en toen* is used to show different kinds of movement in the story.

3 Dataset Description

My data set is a short conversation (about three minutes) between two speakers, Selinay (S) and Gultanem (G). They talk about their shared holiday memories. The marker *en toen* appears many times in their storytelling. I used each token of *en toen* in the transcript as my unit of analysis.

To answer my research question, I focused on four variables:

1. function label (narrative step or new episode)
2. speaker (S or G)
3. turn position (beginning or middle of the turn)
4. co-occurring cues such as laughter, topic shift or other pragmatic markers ("ohja", "ja").

Some methodological choices were informed by course readings on corpus methods and pragmatics (Stefanowitsch, 2020; Bender, 2022).

4 Linguistic Analysis

4.1 Annotation Scheme

I created an annotation scheme with two labels. Each token of *en toen* fits into one of these two categories.

Label 1: Narrative Step Marker Meaning: the speaker uses *en toen* to show the next small step in the same scene. How to recognise it: the story stays in the same situation and the action follows naturally. English example: "I opened the door and then I walked inside."

Label 2: New Episode Marker Meaning: the speaker uses *en toen* to start a new moment in the story. How to recognise it: a new event begins, the topic changes or the emotional tone shifts. English example: "We were having dinner and then suddenly the fire alarm went off."

Linguistic cues Annotators could use laughter, topic shifts, place changes, "ohja/ja" and turn position. These cues help, but they are not labels themselves.

4.2 Inter-Annotator Agreement & Variation

In order to test reliability, I compared the independent annotators C and M using Cohen's kappa (Landis and Koch, 1977) . They did not take part in the conversation, so they are the most neutral pair. I also created a confusion matrix to see where they agreed and disagreed. The speaker annotations (S and G) were not used for inter-annotator agreement, but served actually as an additional qualitative layer to contrast listener-based interpretations with participants' own memory structuring.

Pilot Annotation

I first selected ten tokens and annotated them with another annotator. We tested the two labels and checked whether the definitions were clear. We discussed the cases where the labels were harder to choose. Also confirmed that all tokens fit into one of the two categories. After the pilot, no major changes to the categories were needed. The definitions were clear enough for the full annotation.

Full Annotation

After the pilot, all annotators labeled the full data set independently. Each token received either the narrative step marker or the new episode marker. I chose not to use an LLM because I preferred human annotators. Therefore, instead of using an LLM to annotate the data, I asked an outsider student to annotate my corpus. I also asked both of the speakers (additionally) to annotate the corpus as well. While doing so, we discussed their idea of memory co-construction, in order to see it from their perspectives as well.

During the discussion with speakers S and G, I could understand that their labeling was driven by the "feeling" of the memory rather than just the words. For instance, G mentioned: *"Als ik 'en toen' zeg aan het begin, voelt het alsof ik een nieuw hoofdstuk in mijn hoofd opensla van die vakantie."* To me this explains why the speakers identified more New Episodes (NE) than the neutral listeners. For the participants, each *en toen* at a turn start, functioned as a mental anchor for a specific shared memory.

This produced five versions of the annotation:

- E = Elmas (the main researcher)
- C = Carla (independent student annotator)
- M = Meleny (independent student annotator)

- S = Selinay (speaker)
- G = Gultanem (speaker)

4.3 Additional Analysis (computational)

I used simple Python scripts to analyse how the two labels appear in my corpus. I looked at frequency, turn position, agreement and variation.

Frequency of labels

When I looked at the neutral annotators, C and M, they were very close in their choices. C used 8 NE and 7 NS labels, while M used 7 NE and 8 NS labels. This shows that the distinction between a "New Episode" and a "Narrative Step" was used almost equally by people who just listen to the story. However, the speakers (S and G) used more NE labels (9) than NS labels (6). This might mean that for the people telling the story, the shifts in the narrative feel more important than for the people listening.

For a deeper analysis, I looked at individual choices of both neutral annotators for every *en toen* token.

In Gultanem's story, C chose NE 8 times and M chose NE 4 times. They both agreed on NE in 4 cases, but there were 4 cases where C said NE and M said NS. Interestingly, M never chose NE when C chose NS. This shows that C was more likely to see a "New Episode" than M in this part of the data.

In Selinay's story, they were much more similar. They agreed on NE 6 times and on NS 6 times. There were only 2 cases where they disagreed (C chose NE and M chose NS).

Turn position

The position of *en toen* in a turn seems to be a very important cue for the labels. Most of the time, when *en toen* appeared at the very beginning of a turn, it was labeled as a New Episode (NE). When it was in the middle of a turn, it was more often a Narrative Step (NS). This makes sense because a new part of a story often starts when a speaker begins a new turn.

Cohen's kappa

For Selinay's story, C and M had a Kappa score of 0.7200, which stands for substantial agreement. For Gultanem's story, the score was 0.5000, which is moderate agreement. The confusion matrix showed that most disagreements were cases where the annotators chose opposite labels (NS vs. NE). This makes sense because the boundary between a small step and a new episode in such conversations can be hard to decide on.

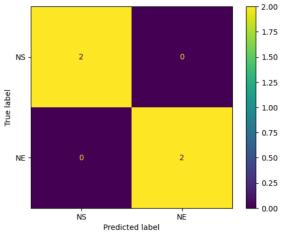

Figure 1: Confusion Matrix

Transcript	Kappa Score	Raw Agreement
Selinay	0.7200	85.71%
Gultanem	0.5000	75.00%

Table 1: Agreement between neutral annotators C and M

Speaker comparison

I also compared the speakers' labels. Interestingly, the speakers (S and G) tended to label events as 'New Episodes' more often than the neutral annotators. This may suggest that their personal 'mental map' of the holiday is different from how a listener perceives the story. What looks like a small step to an outsider might feel like a major shift to someone who actually lived it.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

My analysis shows that *en toen* plays two main roles in structuring storytelling. It seems to function both as a narrative step marker (NS) for small actions and as a new episode marker (NE) for larger shifts. The turn position patterns and the balance between (NS) and (NE) support the idea that these two functions work together in order to structure the shared memory. The agreement between C and M also suggests that the labels are clear enough to be used by different annotators. Even though it is sometimes hard to decide between a small step and a new episode, the overall pattern is still clear.

The results of my research show that the research question can be answered: *en toen* is indeed a key linguistic marker for organising shared memories by marking different levels of narrative movement.

Regarding my hypotheses, the results were interesting. My first hypothesis (H1) was that NS markers would be more frequent. However, the data showed a very even balance between NS and NE. Especially for the neutral annotators. This might suggest that both functions are equally important for the flow of a story. My second hypothesis (H2) appears to be supported by the data: the speakers used more NE labels than the listeners. This could mean that the person telling the story takes a more active role in "marking" the big shifts in the narrative. Potentially because their personal memory of the events is more structured than that of a listener.

In conclusion, *en toen* is more than a simple time connector. It is a structural linguistic tool that likely depends on the speaker's role and the position in the turn. For future research, it would be informative to use a larger corpus or look at other markers like *en* or *dus* to see if they show similar patterns between speakers and listeners.

A Appendix

Annotation Guidelines

Each occurrence of *en toen* was annotated using one of the two labels below. Annotators were instructed to choose the label that best captured the function of *en toen* in the local narrative context.

Narrative Step Marker (NS)

Definition: *en toen* is used to mark the next small step within the same scene. The story continues in the same situation, and the action follows naturally from the previous turn.

Example: "I opened the door and then I walked inside."

New Episode Marker (NE)

Definition: *en toen* is used to introduce a new part of the story. This often involves a change in topic, location, or emotional tone.

Example: "We were having dinner and then suddenly the fire alarm went off."

Linguistic Cues

Annotators could use the following cues to support their decisions: laughter, topic shifts, changes in location, emotional reactions, the use of markers such as "ohja/ja", and the position of *en toen* within the turn. These cues were optional and did not determine the label on their own.

References

Emily M. Bender. 2022. Implicatures and dialogue. In *Linguistic Fundamentals for Natural Language Processing*, pages 164–176. MIT Press.

J. Richard Landis and Gary G. Koch. 1977. The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, 33(1):159–174.

Deborah Schiffrin. 1987. *Discourse Markers.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Anatol Stefanowitsch. 2020. Quantifying research questions. In *Corpus Linguistics: A Guide to the Methodology*, pages 141–166. Language Science Press.

Use of AI Tools

Use of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) only as a language assistant. The experimental results and theoretical answers are my own work.

B Link Github

https://github.com/KaElmas/Language-as-Data/tree/main/final$_squib$

https://github.com/KaElmas/Language-as-Data/tree/c15eda41b02acaae58b6622ad5c953bb301c18c6/final$_squib$