

In search of episodic units:

A corpus-based study of Wan and Chuvash

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Workshop on Larger Discourse Units



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- “The primary drawback to the episode/paragraph approach lies in the difficulty of providing explicit and structure-independent means of identifying episodes and episode boundaries” (Tomlin 1987: 475).

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- How do we make sure that our “units” are not imaginary (in text, corpus, language), and that they are cross-linguistically applicable?
- “The primary drawback to the episode/paragraph approach lies in the difficulty of providing explicit and structure-independent means of identifying episodes and episode boundaries” (Tomlin 1987: 475).
- If such units exist, they should correspond to the use of **specific structural means**, and at the same time, be associated with **specific meaning or function**.

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- Ideally, such a method should be:
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- The method should rely on **quantitative analysis** of corpus data; and it should be **allowed to fail** to yield results in case of insufficient or low quality data.

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- look for **asymmetries in the distributions** that would suggest that a particular marker is sensitive to episodic structure (signals for either episode boundaries or continuity within segments);
- assess the method's **cross-linguistic applicability**: comparison with data from a typologically different language.

Language and data

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 - a South Mande language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire,
 - a thriving storytelling tradition,
 - surrounded by neighbors with equally thriving traditions (some of them also represented in the corpus: Mwan, Guro).
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- The Chuvash subcorpus:
 - a Turkic language spoken in Russia,
 - storytelling no longer widely practiced,
 - recordings from semi-professional storytellers,
 - agglutinating, vowel harmony, flexible SOV.

Annotation into units

- clause-level annotation in ELAN,
- a combination of criteria for narrative analysis (Labov 1972) and thematic unity (Dijk 1981),
- some of the categories are culture- and genre-specific,
- with special attention to narrative event sequences.

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 - 'It's because she killed the man that the sick have trouble marrying'...

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- **Speech:** speech by the characters.
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 - ‘And the old man sat down under the rice straw’;
 - ‘And he took a gun’;
 - ‘and put the front of it out a little’...

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 - ‘When the morning came, he went to God. God told him...’
- **Tail-Head elements:** repeated reference to the same event.
 - ‘And the morning came. When the morning came, he went to God.’

Comparing distributions

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- Since this study focuses on episodic structure, i.e. thematic units: only narrative event sequences taken into account.
- Within narrative event sequences, differences in distributions are sought between **sequence-initial** (first clause in the episode) vs. **non-initial** clauses.
- Common suspects:
 - the choice of referring expressions (pronouns vs. nouns, Fox 1987),
 - conjunctions and discourse particles (Bakker 1993),
 - backgrounding devices such as nominalization (Mithun 2002)
 - the choice of tense-aspect (Schiffrin 1981),
 - prosodic means (pauses) and fillers (not addressed here)...

Results of the comparison

(only 26 of the 82 annotated stories analyzed so far)

Parts of speech

	Initial	Non-initial	(% initial)
pronoun	308		
noun	288		
verb	288		
conjunction	177		
determiner	145		
postposition	99		
adverb	61		
sentence-final particle	60		
auxiliary	45		
aspectual particle	31		
ideophone	28		
adjective	25		
interjection	11		

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conjunction	177	514	26%
determiner	145	359	29%
postposition	99	306	24%
adverb	61	125	33%
sentence-final particle	60	85	41%
auxiliary	45	165	21%
aspectual particle	31	75	29%
ideophone	28	158	15%
adjective	25	78	24%
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Major asymmetries

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Referring expressions

- The ratio of referring expressions (nouns + pronouns) to verbs is the same in initial and non-initial event clauses: 2 to one.

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(% verbs)	(33%)	(32%)

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verb	288	840
(% verbs)	(33%)	(32%)

- The proportion of pronouns is significantly higher in non-initial clauses ($p < 0.001$):

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
pronoun	308 (22%)	1069	1377 (100%)
noun	288 (29%)	689	977 (100%)

A closer look at pronouns

- No effect for demonstrative vs. 3SG personal pronouns
(difference *not* significant):

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>bə</i> ‘that one’	54 (27%)	145	199 (100%)
3SG	186 (24%)	603	789 (100%)

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- A strong effect of pronominal form: free-standing pronoun vs. lengthening ($p < 0.005$).

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>è</i> = 3SG.SUBJ	99 (21%)	373	472 (100%)
<i>à</i> = 3SG	36 (29%)	89	125 (100%)
<i>:</i> = +3SG	16 (12%)	114	130 (100%)

A closer look at conjunctions

- The conjunction *bé* ‘then’ is the most frequent word in narrative sequences, yet it shows no asymmetry in its distribution:

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>bé</i> ‘then’	147 (25%)	451	598 (100%)
all words	1615 (25%)	4735	6350 (100%)

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- The conjunction *ké* ‘if/when’ shows a significant bias toward initial event clauses ($p < 0.01$):

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>bé</i> ‘then’	147 (25%)	451	598 (100%)
<i>ké</i> ‘if/when’	20 (47%)	23	43 (100%)

A closer look at sentence-final particles

- Particles overrepresented in sequence-initial clauses:

	Initial	Non-initial
<i>m̄</i>	16	11
<i>ḡ</i>	14	9
<i>ḡ + m̄</i>	6	1
<i>wà</i>	8	2

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- Particles overrepresented in non-initial clauses:

	Initial	Non-initial
<i>wá NEG</i>	0	32
<i>dé</i> 'as soon as'	0	9

Linkage between clauses in narrative sequences

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 - no overt linkage.
- The check against the independent annotation confirms the same general trends.

Linkage between clauses in narrative sequences

- Episode breaks are correlated with the use of backgrounding particles and nominalization.

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
particles	43 (61%)	27	70 (100%)
nominalization	7 (50%)	7	14 (100%)
No linkage	104 (20%)	407	511 (100%)

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- They are not correlated with the use of the general-purpose conjunction *bé* ‘then’:

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>bé</i> ‘then’	81 (20%)	332	413 (100%)
No linkage	104 (20%)	407	511 (100%)

A closer look at adverbs

- Adverbs overrepresented in initial events: weakly grammaticalized

	Initial	Non-initial
<i>tālli</i> ‘until’	19	11
<i>yá</i> ‘there, then’	5	6
<i>wānɛ</i> ‘there’	4	5
<i>sé</i> ‘just when’	5	0

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- Adverbs overrepresented in non-initial clauses: heavy lexical content + ‘(not) yet’

	Initial	Non-initial
<i>ségé-ségé</i> ‘completely’	4	25
<i>sá</i> ‘over there’	0	8
<i>pí</i> ‘(not) yet, still’	0	6

Another check: ten most frequent words

		Initial	Non-initial
<i>bé</i>	'then'	147	
<i>è</i>	3SG.SUBJ	99	
<i>ø</i>	DEF	97	
<i>à</i>	3PL	61	
<i>gā</i>	go:PAST	41	
<i>à</i>	3SG	36	
<i>bë</i>	'that one'	36	
<i>gé</i>	'say'	33	
<i>ŋ</i>	PERF	33	
<i>gó</i>	'in'	23	

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<i>bə</i>	'that one'	36	<i>ŋ</i> PERF	124
<i>gé</i>	'say'	33	:	+3SG
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Asymmetries in the distribution of words

- Frequent words overrepresented in initial events:

		Initial	Non-initial	Total
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$g\bar{a}$	go:PAST	41 (57%)	31	72 (100%)

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		Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>é</i>	DEF	97 (33%)	294	391 (100%)
<i>gá</i> go:PAST		41 (57%)	31	72 (100%)

- Frequent words overrepresented in non-initial clauses:

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>gé</i> 'say'	33 (12%)	235	268 (100%)
: +3SG	16 (12%)	114	130 (100%)

A closer look at tense and aspect

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'They come from the village.'
- Some aspectual constructions involve both markers:
(4) à á zò lé kōŋ gó
3PL PROG come PROG village in
'They are coming from the village.'

Past tense vs. aspectual constructions

- In narrative event sequences, the major distinction is between the **past tense forms** and **aspectual constructions**; the latter involve an auxiliary and/or a post-verbal aspectual marker.

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
past tense	120 (35%)	225	345 (100%)
auxiliary	45 (21%)	165	210 (100%)
post-VP particle	31 (29%)	75	106 (100%)

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- The difference is significant for past tense forms vs. constructions with auxiliaries ($p < 0.001$), but not for past tense vs. constructions with post-verbal particles.
- The asymmetry is consistent with the opposition between the past and the perfect as the **two major narrative forms**.

Distributions of the past and the perfect

- The perfect is significantly more biased toward clauses that are not initial in narrative sequences ($p < 0.001$):

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- The choice between the past and the perfect is sensitive, in narrative event sequences, to episode boundaries.

Tense/aspect and conjunctions

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- Linkage in non-initial event clauses ($p < 0.001$):

	<i>bé</i> ‘then’	No linkage
past tense	159	51
perfect	2	149

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- This suggests that some units are held together by the perfect, while others are held together by “conjunction + past tense”.

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- A similar function is associated with conjunctions:
“temporal conjunctions occur when there is some break between events, and suggest that they function to separate events from one another” (55)
- All this is strikingly different from Wan, where:
 - episodes tend to start in the past and continue in the perfect,
 - the major temporal conjunction is not associated with unit boundaries.

Interim summary: biases

	Beginning of units	Unit-internally
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- Data: a small portion of the corpus of traditional narratives (Nikitina 2022).
- Annotation based on the same principles, even though the strategies for linking clauses differ dramatically from those of Wan.

Selected parts of speech

	Initial	Non-initial	(% initial)
noun	233		
verb	213		
pronoun	129		
particle	109		
adverb	27		
adjective	22		
numeral	27		
interjection	8		
ideophone	0		
conjunction	5		

Selected parts of speech

	Initial	Non-initial	(% initial)
noun	233	441	35%
verb	213	468	31%
pronoun	129	191	40%
particle	109	159	41%
adverb	27	83	25%
adjective	22	64	26%
numeral	27	36	43%
interjection	8	25	
ideophone	0	23	
conjunction	5	10	

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	Initial	Non-initial
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(% verbs)	(37%)	(43%)

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	Initial	Non-initial	Total
pronoun	129 (40%)	191	320 (100%)
noun	233 (35%)	441	674 (100%)

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- All these effects are possibly explained by higher incidence of pro-drop in non-initial clauses.

A closer look at pronouns

- Unlike in Wan, demonstrative pronouns are more likely to appear in initial event clauses than 3SG pronouns ($p < 0.05$):

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
‘this’	35 (47%)	40	75 (100%)
‘that’	30 (53%)	27	57 (100%)
‘that aforementioned’	19 (43%)	25	44 (100%)
‘what’	15 (38%)	24	39 (100%)
3SG	15 (25%)	45	60 (100%)

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- Perhaps demonstrative pronouns function as long-distance anaphors, and are more suitable for reference across episode boundaries?

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- Unlike in Wan, conjunctions are rarely used in Chuvash (and most are borrowings from Russian).
- The discourse linking function is instead associated with particles:

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>ta/te</i> ‘and’	44 (39%)	68	112 (100%)
<i>ëntë</i> ‘already’	35 (46%)	41	76 (100%)
<i>vara</i> ‘then’	11	6	17

A closer look at particles

- Episode boundaries are correlated with the use of the clause-final particle *ta/te* ‘and’ ($p < 0.005$).

	Initial	Non-initial	Total
<i>ta/te</i> ‘and’	30 (48%)	33	63 (100%)
No linkage	118 (27%)	317	435 (100%)

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- The particle is forward-looking, i.e. relates the unit to the one that follows.
- The particle may have a backgrounding effect, just like the backgrounding sentence-final particles in Wan.

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- This distribution is similar to the one observed in Wan: the past is more likely to be used to start an episode than the alternative form.

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present	17 (8%)	194	211 (100%)

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	Conjunction	No linkage	Total
past	40 (21%)	154	194 (100%)
present	17 (8%)	194	211 (100%)

- This is similar to the situation in Wan, where the use of the past tense was correlated with the use of the conjunction (as opposed to the perfect).

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- In Chuvash, overt pronouns are reserved for less identifiable participants, and they are overwhelmingly demonstrative:

	Beginning of units	Unit-internally
Chuvash:	demonstratives	3SG

Comparison (2)

- Both Chuvash and Wan make use of particles to relate a unit to the one that follows.

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Wan:	backgrounding particles
Chuvash:	particles ‘and’, ‘already’
Wan:	nominalization
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- Both languages switch tense or aspect within units (from the past to the present or to the perfect).

	Beginning of units	Unit-internally
Wan:	past	perfect
Chuvash:	past	present

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- Past tense forms tend to be introduced by a conjunction in Wan (the clause-initial ‘then’), by a clause-final particle in Chuvash (the forward-looking ‘and’).
- Non-past forms (the perfect in Wan, the present in Chuvash) are associated with absence of overt linking.

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- There also emerged unexpected correlations between the different phenomena (the use of conjunctions and particles with past tense, as opposed to the perfect or the present).

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