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**Are Japanese conversations planned differently  
from ours?**

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## **Are Japanese conversations planned differently from ours?**

Mariko Karatsu. 2012. *Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women. Conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Following the salient works of Michael Bamberg (2007) and a few others about storytelling and narratives, this first book by Professor Mariko Karatsu (from the University of Arizona) derives from her doctoral dissertation; she analyses how conversations actually work and how persons interact one with each other in the Japanese context. In reality, the Japanese dimension is essential here; but in the same time, it remains obvious this overlooked book is mainly focused on narrative studies and scholars without any knowledge or interest for Japan and Japanese Studies will also find here a fascinating demonstration in sociolinguistics, microsociology, and more generally on social interaction. In the countless examples showed here, all passages taken from conversations in Japanese are translated in English (see examples p. 43-46).

Even though this scholarly book is targeted for experts in its field, Mariko Karatsu's style is exceptionally clear and straightforward; her first chapter begins with very simple terms: "This book investigates storytelling in face-to-face everyday conversations among Japanese women examining the participants' verbal and nonverbal behavior" (p. 1). Right from the start, Professor Karatsu's style is efficient and the definitions she forges or invents are luminous. For example, the basic term of "storytelling" is defined by her following an elegant formula: "an event of conversational toward a story before a story is told, and the story is methodically and sequentially occasioned in the conversation through the participants' interaction" (p. 1).

Using a participant observation methodology, Professor Karatsu went to Japan and took part in various conversations among Japanese women reunited in small groups for discussion and chat. Every element is described with minutia and countless details about the successive steps in these conversations, with a focus on the beginnings and transitions between stories: "Conversational stories are often told as someone suddenly remembers something from the previous talk, such as an account about what was just said" (p. 42). But then, Professor Karatsu asks how the transition from one topic to another can be made and implicitly accepted by all participants: in some cases, Japanese talkers will adopt a typical strategy that does not exist in English; they will use an "embedded repetition to indicate the story's topical continuity from the previous talk" (p. 42). These comparative observations are an important contribution for scholars in sociolinguistics who cannot understand Japanese. Many passages are devoted to the understanding of the linguistic strategies used by these persons interacting in small groups in order to introduce a new story to the group in a logical way (see Chapter 3).

These everyday stories might sometimes seem anecdotal or banal; nevertheless, they are rigorously analyzed, for example in this story titled “My husband didn’t eat Taiyaki” (p. 50), or another one labeled as “Ms. Ueda and Mr. Hirai bowed to each other” (p. 135). Incidentally, the 22 stories included and studied here are listed in an appendix; unfortunately, the list does not include page numbers (p. 217).

Finally, Mariko Karatsu’s *Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women: conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories* must be seen as much more than just a case study about casual conversations. Among its strong points, its second chapter aptly revisits the major concepts in narrative studies (presentation of identity and self) and storytelling. It will be exemplary for graduate students who envisage beginning a doctoral research in sociolinguistics.

## References

Bamberg, Michael. 2007. *Narrative State of the Art*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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