

DEBORAH SCHIFFRIN, ANNA DE FINA,
AND ANASTASIA NYLUND, EDITORS

Telling Stories

Language
Narrative and
Social Life



Telling Stories

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TELLING STORIES: Language, Narrative, and Social Life

Deborah Schiffrin, Anna De Fina, and Anastasia Nylund, Editors

Georgetown University Press
Washington, DC

Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C. www.press.georgetown.edu

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Georgetown University Round Table On Languages and Linguistics (2008).

Telling stories : language, narrative, and social life / Deborah Schiffrin, Anna De Fina and Anastasia Nylund, editors.

p. cm. — (Georgetown University Round Table on languages and linguistics series)

Papers based on those presented at the 2008 Georgetown University Round Table On Languages and Linguistics (GURT).

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58901-629-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Discourse analysis, Narrative—Congresses. 2. Narration (Rhetoric)—Congresses. 3. Storytelling—Congresses. 4. Sociolinguistics—Congresses. 5. Psycholinguistics—Congresses. I. Schiffrin, Deborah. II. De Fina, Anna. III. Nylund, Anastasia. IV. Title. P302.7.G48 2008

401'.41—dc22 2009024105

⊗ This book is printed on acid-free paper meeting the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence in Paper for Printed Library Materials.

15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
First printing

Printed in the United States of America

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■ Acknowledgments

Telling Stories is the outcome of the 2008 Georgetown University Round Table in Languages and Linguistics (GURT), titled *Telling Stories: Building Bridges among Language, Narrative, Identity, Interaction, Society, and Culture*. We could not have put together such a stimulating and high-quality collection of papers without the effort of all those who contributed to the success of the conference. Indeed, GURT 2008 provided narrative analysts from all over the world with an opportunity to present and discuss their work. Thus we are indebted to all those who helped us organize this edition of GURT.

In particular, we would like to thank Georgetown's Faculty of Language and Linguistics and the Linguistics Department for their generous support. We also want to acknowledge the work of all the students who volunteered to assist us in the many tasks related to the conference. Of special note is Jermy Jamsu, our webmaster and master of other electronic issues, and Inge Stockburger, whose calm demeanor qualifies her as an event planner if she ever decides to leave linguistics (hopefully she won't)! Special thanks go to Manela Diez, who devoted her efforts to resolve the innumerable small and big problems that come with the organization of an event of this kind. GURT simply could never happen without her. And of course we are grateful to the many student volunteers who managed registration, book displays, technology, copying, displaying posters, and so on. Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues for undertaking the review of abstracts: Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi, Michael Bamberg, Ellen Barton, Mike Baynham, Colleen Cotter, Nikolas Coupland, Norbert Dittmar, Mark Freeman, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Marjorie Goodwin, Cynthia Gordon, John Haviland, David Herman, Barbara Johnstone, Christina Kakava, Kendall King, Michael Lempert, Luiz Paulo Moita Lopes, Galey Modan, Ana Relano Pastor, Sabina Perrino, Rob Podesva, Aida Premilovac, Branca Ribeiro, Natalie Schilling-Estes, Amy Shuman, Elizabeth Stokoe, Deborah Tannen, Joanna Thornborrow, Andrea Tyler, and Ruth Wodak.

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■ Introduction

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NARRATIVES ARE FUNDAMENTAL to our lives. We dream, plan, complain, endorse, entertain, teach, learn, and reminisce by telling stories. They provide hopes, enhance or mitigate disappointments, challenge or support moral order, and test out theories of the world at both personal and communal levels. Given this broad swath of uses and meanings, it should not be surprising that narratives have been studied in many different disciplines: linguistics, literary theory, folklore, clinical psychology, cognitive and developmental psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history. And in the past few years, we find that narrative has become part of the public imagination and has provided ways of categorizing more and more genres and social practices.

When we first envisioned the theme of the Georgetown University Round Table 2008, we wanted its primary focus to be the linguistic study of narrative, especially as it has developed within discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. However, as suggested by our conference theme and subtitle—building bridges among language, narrative, identity, interaction, society and culture—studying the language of narrative took us far afield to other concerns: the construction of self and identity; the differences among spoken, written, and mediated narrative discourse; the role that small and big (e.g., life) stories play in everyday social interactions; and the contribution of narrative to social status, and to roles and meanings within institutional settings as varied as therapeutic and medical encounters, education, politics, media, and marketing and public relations.

What we envisioned bore fruit. The oral presentations, organized panels, workshops, and posters became a forum for building interconnections among language, narrative, and social life. Of course publishing every presentation, each worthy of publication, was impossible. After a general call for written versions of the presentations, peer reviews led us to the subset of submissions that appear in this volume. As the reader can see in the remainder of the introduction, the individual chapters in this volume are united by several underlying themes.

The volume begins with three very different, but ultimately interconnected and important, contributions from the three Georgetown University Round Table plenary addresses, by William Labov (a linguist), Richard Bauman (an anthropologist and folklorist), and Jerome Bruner (a psychologist). Each contribution evokes some of

the same underlying themes: the moral order, remediation of a story, the “master discourses” of Western culture. For example, the moral order underlies Labov’s search for a rationale or cause of unexpected violence and the ability to predict or foresee the course of life; Bauman examines the use of tall tales that involve deception for personal gain, while also endorsing canonical myths and master stories of public negotiation; and Bruner highlights how legal efforts to curtail digressions hark back to the narratives that provide the foundational myths for Western culture and the backbone of Western civilization.

We begin by double-voicing chapter 1, by Labov, “Where Should I Begin?” He examines the preconstruction of several stories: How do storytellers know where to begin? How can omissions be as critical to the story’s outcome as what has been included? In chapter 2 Bauman also addresses beginnings, but rather than focusing on the starting point of a narrative itself, he examines a technological beginning—the use of sound recordings of narratives in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These recorded narratives highlight individual trickery, along with the use of common features of American oral storytelling and a general “country” style. In chapter 3 Bruner harks back to cultural beginnings, looking at the narrative mode as the primordial tool for making sense of existence and as the most traditional repository of collective norms and mores.

In the remainder of this introduction, keeping in mind that each chapter relates in numerous ways to our overall themes, we suggest a few connections among the chapters as well as links to the three plenary contributions. Labov’s focus on the moral order of actions and reactions from specific characters in the story world suggests a connection to positioning theory and the repercussions of narrative form and function (including self-disclosure) for identity construction.

In chapter 4, “Positioning as a Metagrammar for Discursive Story Lines,” Rom Harré provides a theoretical model for the important relationship between positioning and story lines, both of which are crucial for identity. What he proposes is that beliefs about rights and duties to perform certain types of acts determine how social interactions contribute to a story line. These beliefs form a metagrammar that transcends the rules and conventions constituting the grammar (i.e., the shared knowledge of a set of rules and conventions) of an unfolding story line.

Another direction in positioning theory is taken by Alan Hansen and his colleagues, who in chapter 5—“Ay Ay Vienen Estos Juareños’: On the Positioning of Selves through Code Switching by Second-Generation Immigrant College Students”—examine how second-generation Mexican immigrants use code switching, especially in reported speech in both small and long narratives, to manage self and other identities. They show that bilingual code switching has an especially important role in constructing a mother-in-law as the “biggest enemy.” Although the mother-in-law was prefigured as an antagonist before her appearance in narrative form, a switch to Spanish and the physical pounding of hand and fist on the table emphasized her as a domestic antagonist.

Identity is also at the center of chapter 6, by Leor Cohen, “A Tripartite Self-Construction Model of Identity.” Building on an interactionist and social constructionist social psychological model of identity, Cohen analyzes a narrative of a first-year

Ethiopian Israeli female college student during a focus group session in a language learning program. He shows how elements of personal, collective, and relational orientations are negotiated by the storyteller and how they interrelate with each other, thus adding cogent support for the argument that identities are not cognitive structures but are carefully constructed in discourse.

Another analysis of immigrant identity, Gabriella Modan and Amy Shuman's "Narratives of Reputation: Layerings of Social and Spatial Identities," chapter 7, proposes a reassessment of orientation and the role of place in narrative, taking as data a series of stories narrated by an Israeli immigrant during an interview focused on his perceptions about his multiethnic neighborhood. The authors argue that the presence, absence, or level of detail of orientation serves as a strategy to include or exclude the listener as an in-group member. They also show how place relates to identity construction in narrative, discussing how deictic shifts contribute to creating or disallowing certain subject positions for narrators and their stories.

We have moved from narrative and the moral order, to narrative beginnings, to positioning theory and other approaches to the study of the connections between narrative and identity. The contributions from Michael Bamberg and Malavika Shetty lead us to public media that alter the channels through which we hear, see, and absorb a version of experience, thus remediating again the way a narrative is put forth. Shetty's "Identity Building through Narratives on a Tulu Call-in TV Show," chapter 8, examines how social constructs like gender, caste, and class can be constituted and reproduced through narrative. By analyzing the show *Pattanga*, Shetty shows how narratives are used on TV to politically and culturally define a Tulu identity. She illustrates, for example, how traditional narratives are introduced and co-narrated in order to strengthen a sense of collective membership and to emphasize community achievement and claim the dignity of the Tulu language. Telling a narrative on the show also becomes an occasion—especially for women and lower-caste viewers—to propose changes in their role relationships, and hence facets of their identities. Thus, canonical and traditional Tulu narratives in a public format became a resource to project and create a different persona.

Continuing the focus on remediation, in chapter 9 Bamberg analyzes a television interview with the erstwhile U.S. presidential candidate John Edwards, shortly after he had acknowledged a previously unknown extramarital relationship. Bamberg deconstructs the multimodal facets of the interview, as well as the complex of interactional and situational levels of context, in order to address two interrelated keys to identity: self-disclosure and authenticity. By bringing together a repertoire of discursive tools, Bamberg shows that Edwards's performed disclosures depended on both verbal and nonverbal devices that refocused the attention of the viewing audience from the characters within a story world to the inner mental entity of a narrative self for which a broad, diverse, and distant audience came to feel empathy.

Following up on Bamberg's discussion, in chapter 10 Alexandra Georgakopoulou questions the associations among identity, reflection, and self-disclosure typical of biographical approaches to narrative that, according to her view, stem from excessive reliance on interviews. Using data from an ethnographic study of adolescent interaction in a London middle school, she compares how narratives contribute to

identity claims in conversational exchanges between the adolescents and in interviews, and she finds significant differences both in the way stories are used for identity work in the two contexts and in the sequential placement of stories with respect to identity claims. She concludes that reflection and self-disclosure should be seen as relatively de-essentialized and multidimensional, rather than absolute, concepts that come with different possibilities in different contexts.

A similar criticism to traditional views of identity is expressed in chapter 11, by Jarmila Mildorf, "Negotiating Deviance: Identity, Trajectories, and Norms in a Graffiti's Interview Narrative." Mildorf argues against a tendency in life stories research to focus on what she calls "integrative" life trajectories, and for the need to look at life stories created around identities associated with deviance and crime. She presents the case study of her interviews with a graffiti writer in the city of Stuttgart and shows how the interviewee himself strives with the conflicting needs to present a coherent life story, to confront negative perceptions of graffiti writing, and to emerge as an authentic representative of his youth culture.

Continuing on the theme of narrative and identity, but from strikingly different perspectives, in chapter 12 Lars Christer Hydén and Linda Örluv show how people with Alzheimer's disease have cognitive and linguistic difficulties that impede the telling of stories that might contribute to identity work. By comparing multiple tellings of the same story, these researchers illustrate how a narrator with the disease used strikingly different communicative resources when telling a narrative to three different audiences. In one telling, for example, chronology was downplayed in exchange for thematic development and variety more typical of longer life stories than of those focusing on one experience.

Also highlighting the importance of situating a narrative in its particular constellation of contextual features is chapter 13, by Jenny Mandelbaum, "The Management and Import of Concurrent and Intervening Actions during Storytelling in Family 'Ceremonial' Dinners." Her analysis reminds us that not only can listeners alter the design of a narrative, but they can also become coauthors, transform relational and interpersonal matters, and reshape the larger activities in which they are embedded. On the basis of more than forty naturally occurring videotaped ceremonial family dinners, Mandelbaum uses a close analysis of conversation and turn taking to show how narratives may be constructed from beginning to end during the intervention of other activities that overlap with, interrupt, or possibly challenge the integrity (cf. truth, authenticity) of another's story.

Although the raw material of narrative is often open to different interpretations, most narratives are not openly tested for truth and authenticity. In the next two chapters, however, we turn to narratives that are deeply concerned with questions of truth, tellability, and the moral order. Both Isolda E. Carranza and Laura Felton Rosulek unpack how the legal system demands that one version of events be privileged over another. As they both show, heteroglossia, or multiple voicing, has a role in the legal process in assigning truth and authenticity to only one version of what happened.

In chapter 14 Carranza shows how truth and authorship are shaped in the course of the path taken by witnesses' depositions within the institutional meanders of the justice system. Using data from a very large corpus of oral criminal trials for homi-

cide in a large city of a Spanish-speaking country, she focuses on the multilateral character of storytelling in institutions and the complexity of the entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization processes. Thus the genre known as a deposition (by a witness or defendant) is part of a story trajectory that results from a network of social positions and their specific power relations, which play a crucial role in the administration of criminal justice.

In another courtroom study, “Legitimation and the Heteroglossic Nature of Closing Arguments,” chapter 15, Rosulek examines differing versions of “reality” in closing arguments during criminal trials. Instead of searching for truth or authenticity itself, she uses a Bakhtinian perspective to show how multiple voices allow conflicting versions of events at the center of trials. Her contribution, based on data from official transcripts of the closing arguments in eighteen felony trials in a state district court in the Midwestern United States, along with Carranza’s, adds to our understanding of the varying linguistic strategies (in different countries and during different facets of a trial) used by lawyers to make their cases.

The last two chapters return to context and focus more explicitly on narratives across the media. Along with Bamberg’s and Shetty’s chapters, which use data coming from television shows, these final chapters push the boundary of remediation a bit further.

In chapter 16, “Multimodal Storytelling and Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives,” David Herman contends that structuralist narratology failed to come to terms with two dimensions of narrative: the referential or world-creating potential of stories; and the issue of medium-specificity, or the way storytelling practices, including those bearing on world creation, might be shaped by the expressive capacities of a given semiotic environment. The focus of the chapter is on how discursive patterns provide cues to cognitive processes that create mental models. Herman studies multimodal stories, specifically three graphic narratives, and shows how the medium in which these narratives are told has a constitutive influence on how messages are encoded and most surely on story reception as well.

In chapter 17, “The Role of Style Shifting in the Functions and Purposes of Storytelling: Detective Stories in Anime,” Fumiko Nazikian takes mediated narratives as data to illustrate the discursive functions of two Japanese verb ending forms, *desu/masu* and *da*. Specifically, she argues that such forms have different roles in the construction of point of view in narrative. By analyzing the *Detective Conan* anime stories, she shows that the *da* form is used to mark a switch from an ongoing event to narrated events, and to create vivid images in the mind of the other participants as if they were in the narrated scene. Conversely, the *desu/masu* form is also associated with discourse-organizational and interactional effects. In particular, in the detective stories the protagonist resorts to this form to underscore his authority and the legitimacy of his hypotheses about events leading to crimes.

This collection of seventeen contributions provides a small but significant window into some of the themes that, in our view, will define research on narrative in the coming years. Some of these themes have already started taking center stage—for example, the diversification of methodological tools, concepts, and contexts in the study of identities in narratives. Others are relatively new, such as the investigation

of how mediated communication has changed storytelling practices and our conception of narrative. Yet other questions were already central to narrative research but have taken new directions—for instance, the study of how narratives participate in the construction of the moral order, and the different roles that truth and deception play in varying social practices. What emerges from the chapters in this book is a common emphasis on contexts and practices, a close attention to differences rather than an assumption of homogeneity. These elements confirm a welcome opening up of the field to the realities of postmodern societies.

■ Where Should I Begin?

WILLIAM LABOV

University of Pennsylvania

THE QUESTION THAT FORMS the title of this chapter has been asked by most of us as we are just about to deliver a narrative. It is not put to the listener but is directed inwardly, to the self as author of the narrative. Whether or not the question is formulated explicitly, it must be answered by everyone who tells a story.

The answer may seem obvious: “Begin at the beginning.” But how does the storyteller discover that beginning? And is there more than one possible beginning for any given story? The pursuit of these questions will tell us something more about how narratives are constructed through the prior construction of a causal chain of events. It will also show how the transformation of events in the interests of the teller is facilitated by his or her decision on where to begin.

An answer to “Where shall I begin?” requires a process of *narrative preconstruction* (Labov 2006), which must precede the delivery of any narrative of personal experience. An explication of that process begins with the concept of *reportability*. Given the fact that narratives occupy more conversational space than most turns at talk, it appears that certain events and sequences of events carry enough social interest to justify that occupation, whereas others do not.¹ The normal narrative is centered upon a *most reportable event*: the event that is the least common and has the greatest consequences for the life chances of the actors involved. But a report of the most reportable event is not itself a narrative. Consider the turn of talk:

(1) Jacob Schissel: My brother stuck a knife in my head.

This utterance is not a narrative. It is treated by the listener as an *abstract*, indexing the existence of a narrative in which is the most reportable event. It is normally followed by a request for that narrative:

(2) WL: How’d that happen?

The answer to this question is usually the narrative itself, which is more than a description of the most reportable event: It is a request for the causes of the most reportable event, or an accounting of it. Even when (2) takes a less explicit demand for an accounting, “What happened?” the narrator understands it as a request for more than a string of events, but a sequence that satisfies the demand for *credibil-*

ity. The fundamental dynamics of narrative construction are built on the inverse relationship between reportability and credibility: the more reportable an event, the less credible (Labov 1997). A narrative may be dismissed by listeners if it is not deemed reportable, with the responses “So what?” “Et puis?” “Y que?” and their equivalents. It may also be dismissed as a fabrication unworthy of attention if the causal accounting delivered by the narrator is considered inadequate.² A certain amount of attention must then be given to establishing the credibility of the most reportable event. If we identify the most reportable event as e_0 , the narrator must identify some prior event e_{-1} that answers the question, “How did e_0 happen?” and stands in a causal relationship to e_0 . This is a recursive process. Given e_{-1} , a prior event e_{-2} is required that stands in a causal relationship to it and answers the question “How did e_{-1} happen?”

Any answer to the question “Where shall I begin?” requires a termination of that recursive process. Narrative preconstruction can be terminated when it encounters an event e_n with no immediate or obvious cause. This may be termed the *initiating event*, because it initiates the chain that leads to the most reportable event. As we will see, this initiating event may be viewed as mysterious and puzzling or as trivial and unimportant. An answer to the question, “How did (e_n) happen?” would be “I don’t know. We were only, . . .” followed by a description of ordinary behavior. We will call this behavior the *initial matrix* i_0 , for which the question “Why did you do that?” would be heard as foolish or inappropriate. Given the identification of the most reportable event e_0 , the causal sequence $e_{-1} . . . e_n$, and the initial matrix i_0 , the narrator can begin the process of *narrative construction*.

In the framework for narrative construction developed in Labov and Waletzky (1967), the first building block is the “orientation,” which provides information on the time, the place and the actors involved in the narrative.³ It also provides information on what the actors are doing in this ordinary situation: behavior that is expected and needs no explanation. The orientation is built upon the initial matrix i_0 .

Narrative preconstruction necessarily precedes narrative construction. It does not have a unique termination. As we examine various narratives of personal experience, it will appear that the choice of e_n and i_0 , arresting the causal chain at a particular link in the sequence, is not strictly determined. The decision on where to begin is a major element in the construction of the narrative in the interests of the teller. At first glance, the orientation section of the narrative is only a domain of factual information, with less evaluative material than any other section. Yet location of this orienting information determines more than anything else the assignment of praise and blame for the causal sequence that leads to the most reportable event.

The Norwegian Sailor

In several analyses of narrative structure, I have dealt with Harold Shambaugh’s account of the Norwegian sailor. Shambaugh, a thirty-one-year-old resident of Columbus, Ohio, had traveled widely in the service. In a discussion of the use of common sense, he mentioned several occasions when quick reactions were called for, including one in South America.⁴

