

# Narrative Discourse

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This entry brings two lenses into fusion and, by use of a few brief illustrations, documents what narrative discourse is able to contribute to the general field of applied linguistics. On the one hand, we are modifying discourse by looking at discourse through the lens of a special type or genre of discourse—the generic form of narrative and the functions it serves. On the other, we bring a discursive perspective to narrative, that is, we view narrative as a discourse mode—in contrast to viewing it as a text type or a literary genre (see Fludernik, 2000), or as a general formula for “experience” or “life.” We will begin with some clarifications of narrative—first along formal and structural lines, followed by considerations how narratives are contextually and functionally put to use, feeding into a brief illustration within two practical fields (retardation and Alzheimer’s) in which narrative discourse has been analytically explored and applied.

## Narrative in Discourse—Forms, Structures, Contexts, and Purposes

Narratives, as discourse modes, come in different types and formats and are put to use in different contexts, and often for quite different purposes. What falls under the header of narrative ranges from folk or fairy tales and oral histories to eulogies at funerals or sharing time recounts in preschool about what happened yesterday, to personal stories shared in institutional or more private conversational settings such as accounts in the courtroom, in therapy sessions or in research interviews, to bedtime stories, and to potentially more personal stories around the dinner table or in private (though sometimes also public) disclosures. Varying quite drastically in content, these storied discursive genres nevertheless share certain family resemblances in terms of conventionalized discursive histories that set them aside and constrain the kinds of functions for where and how they can be put to use. In addition, speakers may choose to center their story exclusively on others (as in fairy tales, certain bedtime stories, eye-witness reports in court, or in gossiping about neighbors), include themselves to a degree (as in eulogies, roastings or wedding speeches), or make the self the almost exclusive topic (as in self disclosures in therapy or in research interviews, or as in confessions).

With regard to what is special about narratives, it is commonly held that narratives serve the purpose of passing along and handing down culturally shared values of what is considered good and aesthetically valued, so that individuals learn to position their own values and actions in relationship to established and shared categories and thereby engage in their own formation process as persons. It seemed to have been the recognition of this function that inspired a good deal of the *Narrative Turn* in the social sciences and humanities, where narratives have gained a special status as a privileged access mode in the investigation of personal experience (see however Atkinson, 1997). In the wake of working with narratives over the last decades, narratives have proven to highlight and bring to the fore the relevance of differentiating and integrating a sense of self in the identity formation processes of institutional and personal continuities (Bamberg, 2011a). However, at the same time, it is through those narratives that counter established norms and conventions that people can identify discontinuities and define “new” positions, thereby contributing to change and transformation—first of all locally and contextually, but also potentially more generally in terms of larger societal transformations that even may take on global dimensions. The question whether narratives represent and simply mirror continuity and change

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or whether they are viewed as facilitating and maybe even instigating change and transformation is one that will be picked up again further below.

Building on its function to position a sense of self vis-à-vis culturally shared values and existing normative discourses, narrative discourse claims a special status in the business of identity construction. In narratives, speakers typically make claims about characters and make these claims (that are said to have held for a there-and-then) relevant to the here-and-now of the speaking moment. In other words, whenever narrators in their discourse rely on narrative resources, they connect some spatio-temporal coordinates relevant for a character in the past (or an imagined future) with a different time-space zone (usually one that is relevant to the participants in the here-and-now of the interactive situation). And mapping out this space and navigating it in terms of what has changed and what remained the same is what makes narratives one of the cornerstones for the construction of identities; irrespective whether these are the identities of institutions, groups and communities (real or imagined), or individuals (again: real or imagined) (see Bamberg, 2011a; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011).

Summarizing thus far, it seems that the attempt to fuse a narrative with a discursive lens (and vice versa) has the potential to bring issues of constancy and change into sharper focus and at the same time highlight particular positions that are taken as more personal or individual stances vis-à-vis commonly shared and circulating positions that are floating within communal discourse practices. Proceeding with sharpening these two lenses, two types of analytic work with narratives should be distinguished: (a) approaches in which discourse is underdetermined and narratives are analyzed as monologues in terms of what they are about and as units of structural form; and (b) approaches in which narratives are overdetermined and equated with experience and life, whereby discourse becomes the mere expression of *narrative thinking* or *narrative being*. A combination of these two ways of working with narrative analytically would provide an alternative that makes use of the resources and analytic procedures that both approaches have to offer.

### Caveats: Underdetermining Discourse— Overdetermining Narrative

Typically, the first kind of approach builds on a notion of narrative discourse as representing and referring to events or happenings of the past and as minimally connecting two propositions that represent two temporally bounded events (see Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997; Bamberg, 1997 for specifics). For lack of a better term, and in contrast to the next section where language is taken as derived from and working *on top of* conceptual structures, the terms *language-on-the-ground* or *bottom-up approach* are chosen here. The events depicted accordingly have typically taken place in the past, but can be ongoing in the present (as in a coverage of an ongoing event), or fictitiously take place in some future. Discourse here is defined, following the original definition of Zellig Harris (1952), as larger than the clause; and its analysis is concerned typically with the cohesive ties between the clauses, that is, how events are connected in speech, forming a (back)ground against which something else can begin to stand out as new, as relevant or foregrounded. These approaches start from the clause as the basic unit of analysis and analyze how connections bring about what a story is considered to be about: its content—its theme. Analysis focuses typically on what is *old* (already shared) and *new* information, what is the *topic* and what is being *commented on*, what is the *background* and what is *foregrounded*, the *theme* versus the *rheme*, and how *agency* constellations emerge at the content-level of stories that are interpretable as protagonists and antagonists, as villains and heroes, as perpetrators and victims. What is deemed to be relevant (to the speaker—personally, or to the context in which the story

is embedded) is part of a *speaker stance* that is signaled in how the information is presented at the clause-level and tied into the thematic whole of the discourse unit.

A similar approach, also starting off from the referential and representative functions of discourse, focuses on speakers and hearers bringing to narrative discourse a particular kind of cognitive repertoire (in the form of a *story grammar*) (see Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). This enables them to work from a prototypically mentally represented structure of storied discourse units (often called *plots*) down into their components—their beginning, middle, and end. These component parts are said to consist of an (optional) *abstract*, followed by an *orientation* (or *setting* or *exposition*), followed by a *complication* (also called *problem* or *crisis*), maybe an action or action orientation toward a resolution, that—if acted upon—results in the *resolution* (or occasionally *failure*), which then is ultimately followed by a *coda* (or *closure*). The *orientation* takes the story recipient to the there-and-then where the action takes place—and where characters emerge as protagonists and antagonists—while the *coda* leads the audience back into the here-and-now of the telling situation. Engaging in narrative discourse by starting from conceptual units that are fleshed-out linguistically in a second step that has been visualized in the form of a top-down analytic procedure, where language is conceptually driven.

To summarize these two approaches, while the *language-on-the-ground* approach views the textual whole in a bottom-up configuration, emerging from the use of linguistic devices that form clauses and index how they are to be understood as text, the cognitive approach works the other way around: It starts from the textual whole that is assumed to be conceptually available—working down to the bottom parts to be filled in (*fleshed-out*) in terms of discursive devices. Both language-based and cognitive approaches deal with discourse primarily as representations of contents—and from here have an option to venture into the audience-designs of these texts, but only as a second, subsequent step. Both approaches also work with the notion of a speaker as positioned vis-à-vis an audience and fashioning the text from a point of view that is—at least to a degree—colored by affect and value orientations. However, in spite of laying bare some important micro-level components as the building blocks of narratives, the interactional function of narratives in discourse settings (i.e., why they are shared and surface here-and-now) is not fully exploited and leaves the exploration of narrative discourse as textual units underdetermined, as if speakers have narratives in their heads—which can best be tapped into in their purest form when speakers speak (monologically) to themselves.

In contrast to underdetermining discourse and its value for shedding light onto narrative as a discourse mode, approaches that equate narrative with life have gone the other way and resulted in an overdetermination of narrative. Starting with original claims of theoreticians who pointed toward the potential of narratives for the interpretation of lives (particularly life stories and life-event stories—e.g., *The Narrative Study of Lives*, see Josselson & Lieblich, 2009), a research branch has emerged that separates (told) narratives from discourse and posits narrative as an abstract and principled way of making sense of the world (as *world-making*—see Bruner, 2001, 2003) and more strongly, as the designing and generating force for (meaningful) experience and living a meaningful life (see McAdams, 1993; Randall, 1995; Xu & Connelly, 2010). A number of critics have termed this tendency to overdetermine narrative a form of “narrative imperialism” (see Sartwell, 2000; Strawson, 2004; Phelan, 2005), while others have engaged in a campaign to reformulate this thesis in a way to preserve the contributions of narrative in analyzing identity and experience and merging it with *language-on-the-ground* approaches under a constructionist flag (see Bamberg, 2011b; Bamberg et al., 2011).

Naturally, and this is where both approaches can be transformed into one converging lens, narratives don't just empower or constrain their users with identity generating potential, just as narrative discourse does not take place in disembodied minds. Narratives

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typically are shared and performed between people and for (interactive) purposes—in situ and in vivo. Consequently, from a discursive perspective, particular attention needs to be placed on how and where identities and conventions from the past are confirmed and where and how they are contested (see Bamberg, 2004, 2011a). This space within the social dimension of discourse, that is, narratives-in-interaction as bodily performed, is the site to be explored with an eye on where and how the boundaries of traditional categories are conventionally handed down and tested out over time. In interaction, narratives form the location to try out, contest, subvert, and draw up new boundaries that, if reiterated and practiced over time, may result in constructions of alternative and new boundaries for new identity categories.

Summarizing thus far, and underscoring the contributions of narrative discourse as a research domain for applied language studies, it is the close link between narrative discourse and the construction of identity that opens up fields for exploration that go beyond traditional linguistic studies. If people make sense of themselves in their narrative practices (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Bamberg, 2011c), then questions of *who-I-am* as a female, who was born in Switzerland, grew up in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland (with a Swiss passport), living and working in New England (USA) for the last 30 years—as a therapist—as a Green-Card-holder, and as a mother of two girls who play soccer, practices a conservative form of Judaism, married to her lesbian partner who is a Catholic, and driving a Volvo station wagon open up as categories to be explored further; not only in terms of how these identities are expressed in isolation or combined; but in addition as exemplars of what it means to be Jewish *and* lesbian, or to be a Swiss Italian native-speaker who lives in the United States, or to be a Volvo-driving soccer mom. As interesting (or uninteresting) as these identity constructions may be as research projects, and while it may be doubtful whether any of these categories may be tied into spatio-temporal coordinates of presenting a past that is made relevant for the present (if at all), it is narrative par excellence—as a discourse mode that offers insight into how these identities may be put to work in terms of a construction of a spatio-temporal past—that bears on the present here-and-now of its telling.

#### Narrative Discourse—Use-Inspired and Use-Inspiring

Since narrative discourse cuts through almost all dimensions of practical lives, it may come as no surprise that the fields to which narrative analysis has found entrance are manifold. Not only has it become a multi-disciplinary endeavor, spanning across the humanities and social sciences into the realms of education, medicine and law, it is increasingly being used to do inquiry into interesting knowledge domains—such as the body, emotions, sex and sexualities, aesthetics, art, education and institutional organization, to name just a few. Particular kinds of experience have been opened up to closer inspection by way of analyzing the narrative discourse that is used to make sense of phenomena such as: marriage, weddings and divorce; emigration, immigration, nationality and globalism; menarche and menopause; loss of and relationships with loved ones—for example, parents, siblings, friends; life transforming (traumatic) incidents—such as illness, retardation, war, and rape; professional careers and trajectories, especially those of care providers and teachers; and last but not least, of course, the restoration of identity in (narrative) therapy.

Bringing a narrative dimension to discursive practices—and a discursive dimension to shed light onto narrative practices—does not automatically result in new or critical dimensions of knowledge production, and neither does the merging of these two lenses directly (and positively) feed into new real-life practices or policy making. Rather, the impact of narrative research remains often unnoticed and hidden. For this reason, one domain of narrative-inspired discursive research is picked to illustrate which kinds of use-inspired

dimensions may open up to be further explored. The domain chosen here is one where narrative discourse, particularly in its identity-building function, is threatened by mental retardation and memory loss.

In one of their examples of practical fields of doing narrative discourse research, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) take their readers into the narrative practices of a family with a daughter who has been diagnosed as severely mentally retarded. And although the transcripts read to the outsider as if the daughter is communicatively inapt and not reciprocating, Gubrium and Holstein can document how stories unfold collaboratively between the participants who construct Mary as an “accountable subject who has sensible judgment and distinct preferences” (p. 157). A very similar point is documented in Goodwin’s (2007) analysis of storytelling practices in multiparty interactions with a participant who, because of a severe stroke, has a verbal repertoire of only three words: *yes*, *no*, and *and*. The contribution of studies that explore retardation not solely as a problem of individual consciousness but as one that is situated in narrative interactive practices has led to rethink issues around “quality of life” and how to train care personnel and advise family members in their care work with patients.

Turning to threatened identities due to memory loss, Hamilton (2008) uses the narrative lens to understand better the “narrative traces” in Alzheimer’s patients’ discourse; and how such “traces” can be used in vivo and in situ interactions to give patients “a chance to hold onto a robust and varied sense of self narratives . . . that serve as the stuff of enduring personal experience narratives” (p. 77). Similarly, Hydén (2010) can be seen as building on Hamilton by stressing that narrative meaning and narrative identity are the product of interactive work.

While the use-inspiring orientation of these types of narrative research may often not directly translate into interventions or immediate practical applications, they certainly contribute to the debunking of accepted wisdoms, here assumptions of retardation and Alzheimer’s as purely individual deficits that have to be encountered and treated as such. However, the four studies presented here in short form entail implicit recommendations for change as well as a potential empowerment of those involved in daily interactions with those who live diagnosed and stigmatized (see Hamilton, 2008, p. 79).

**SEE ALSO:** Analysis of Identity in Interaction; Analysis of Narrative in Interaction; Conversation Analysis and Identity in Interaction; Discourse and Identity; Identity and Second Language Acquisition; Interviews; Language and Identity; Multimodality and Identity Construction; Positioning in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Qualitative Methods; Qualitative Sociolinguistic Research; Qualitative Teacher Research; Subjectivity

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