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## **Narrative: State of the art**

Katherine Nelson

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**Narrative:** State of the art. Ed. by MICHAEL BAMBERG. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. Pp. 271. ISBN 9789027222367. \$143 (Hb).

Reviewed by KATHERINE NELSON, *CUNY Graduate Center*

In Merlin Donald's (1991) view, narrative is the 'natural product' of language. By this I take him to mean that when language emerged among *Homo sapiens* it served primarily to represent narratives of events that could not be easily communicated by the mimetic means of action and gesture. Why would narrating loom urgently as a goad to the evolution (biological and/or cultural) of language? Ochs and Capps (2001:60) suggest an answer in their list of motivations for narrative: 'Human beings narrate to remember, instill cultural knowledge, grapple with a problem, rethink the status quo, soothe, empathize, inspire, speculate, justify a position, dispute, tattle, evaluate one's own and others' identities, shame, tease, laud, and entertain, among other ends'. Narratives serving these varied purposes require resources of complex grammars, especially for expressing temporal and causal relations, keeping separate tags on ongoing processes and actions in events, and invoking a multiplicity of linguistic markers of tense and aspect (see Ricoeur 1988).

These two aspects of narrative—roughly, function and structure—are the focus of *Narrative: State of the art*, edited by Michael Bamberg, also the editor of the journal *Narrative Inquiry*. Interest in narrative has grown dramatically from its earliest appearances as a scholarly construct in the social sciences (e.g. Labov & Waletzky 1967, Chafe 1980, Mitchell 1981, Peterson & McCabe 1983, Bruner 1986) to the present time. A 'turn to narrative' in the humanities and social science research has been evidenced by the abundance of narrative research that has taken place over the past twenty years or so and by the number of different journals concerned with narrative that have appeared. Reflecting on this 'turn', Bamberg as editor of *Narrative Inquiry* asked a number of active researchers on narrative to write a short essay on what had contributed to the appeal of narrative scholarship, what had been accomplished, and what the future direction of the enterprise might be. The contributors to the volume, all highly respected in their specific

fields, have each been studying how narratives serving a diversity of functions are situated in everyday conversational contexts, how they are constructed to meet social and cultural norms, and how they serve personal as well as social needs.

ALEXANDRA GEORGAKOPOULOU sums up the results of the inquiry over recent decades:

. . . narrative remains an elusive, contested and indeterminate concept, variously used as an epistemology, a methodological perspective, an antidote to positivist research, a communication mode, a supra-genre, a text-type. More generally, as a way of making sense of the world, at times equated with experience, time, history and life itself; more modestly, as a specific kind of discourse with conventionalized textual features. (145)

Rather than concluding that the result is a confusing jumble of concepts, it might be suggested that narrative is similar to the language of which it is composed, serving many diverse uses and presenting many diverse aspects and components for examination and analysis.

The book is inevitably more modest than the 'state of the art' of its title proclaims. The authors of its short chapters have contributed thoughtful and persuasive essays from diverse perspectives. Its shortcomings as a work, however, must be noted: it is a hardcover reprint by the publisher of a special issue of *Narrative Inquiry* (16.1, 2006, also titled *Narrative: State of the art*). Unfortunately, the publisher neglected to include an index for the hardcover volume; moreover, although abstracts for each article are retained, professional identities are omitted for more than half of the authors. Given the breadth of both geography and discipline represented among the contributors, this is unfortunate, but I can report that the majority of the authors are North American, with solid representations from the UK and from Germany; psychologists predominate among the twenty-six contributors, followed by sociologists, with a few scholars of literature, linguistics, communication and other social sciences, and applied fields.

In his introduction, Bamberg identifies two main strands of research revealed in the varying chapters, namely, how narrative represents aspects of life and the subjectivity of experience, and how social and cultural prescriptions determine the way that sequences of events are arranged and reported. Bamberg sees these two strands coming together, combining the active subject engaging in and thereby also constructing the social practice of narrative with the reciprocal influence of social practices on individual telling about thinking, feeling, and acting. Relations between the social and the personal are of course enduring concerns in the social sciences and humanities. The prevailing emphasis on qualitative analysis in narrative research relates to another theme, the presumption that narrative inquiry is always interpretive, with its roots in hermeneutics and phenomenology. RUTHELLEN JOSSELSON is concerned with the critical question of how research so constructed can become cumulated over different studies, citing Mikhail Bakhtin for the comment that all research is fundamentally conversation. This work, however, is not a post-modernist one, nor is it positivist; Bamberg's vision is more pragmatic and functional than either. A sampling from some of the issues brought out in other chapters exemplifies the general pragmatism of the enterprise.

For the most part, the narratives considered (and many examples are presented) occur in ordinary conversational situations. WILLIAM LABOV, considered by many to be the father of contemporary narrative research, writes on narrative PRECONSTRUCTION, focusing on cognitive processes that operate in the construction of narratives in such contexts. He argues that cognitive processes first identify a narrative as 'reportable' and then engage in moving back and forth in time to establish the beginning of the narrative and subsequent movements through it before the actual reporting of it. Event chains compose the sequence of narrative clauses and reveal how the narrator reorganizes and transforms the events of real time in the finished narrative. A similar analysis of cognitive and linguistic processes involved in the report of a remembered event is presented by BARBARA JOHNSTONE in her study of vernacular variety in different narrative registers.

In contrast with this cognitive approach, PATRICK COLM HOGAN provides a brief overview of classical narrative theory in terms of componential and functional issues, wherein function serves either emotional or ethical and political purposes (echoing the underlying themes in this book of personal expression and cultural norms). He claims that these traditional categories remain dominant in current work even though the location and composition of narrative have changed.

In terms of componential theory Hogan notes the influence of cognitivism in the analysis of narrative (e.g. in Labov's and Johnstone's work) as a new trend, but basically finds the classical analysis, dating back to Aristotle, to underlie much of present theory.

DAVID HERMAN considers related issues in the use of narrative in fiction, that is, as stories are used in talk within the fictional narrative, touching on linguistic pragmatics and discourse analysis as well as literary theory and socially distributed cognition. Discussing Virginia Woolf's *To the lighthouse*, he notes:

Woolf's figural narration, by questioning the very boundary between speech and thought, suggests the inextricable interconnections among language use, social interaction, and the deployment of cognitive frames for understanding how discourse, at a micro-interactional level, both reflects and shapes broader social conditions and processes . . . Scenes of talk in Woolf are also scenes of identity-construction, social positioning, and the negotiation of gender roles, among other things. (94)

A fundamental question is addressed by LIZ STOKOE and DEREK EDWARDS, who provide examples from different interactional contexts to examine the location and function of narrative: when and why is narrative used? Why tell a story in THIS particular context? Is there a meta-formulation with respect to how narrative appears in conversation? (If there is, it has not yet been described.) Bamberg and some others see this as an issue of situatedness and as an important focus in the study of 'small stories'. He contrasts small stories with the more traditional study of 'big stories'—stories of life histories, or autobiographies, elicited in social institutional settings such as interviews for research or for applied purposes when elicited by social workers, police, or in courts. Bamberg favors research concentrating on small stories, arguing that they reveal more about how personal and social concerns are incorporated into narratives. He also believes that the focus on small stories is leading to new methods of analysis that reflect the situated nature of narrativizing embedded in sociocultural practices. This concern among others is shared by JAN BLOMMAERT, who studies the meaning of narratives in applied contexts—such as interviews with applicants for asylum—through the analysis of the use of voice, emphasis, and focus, patterns that reveal the structure of a narrative.

CRISPIN SARTWELL emphasizes the place of narrative in cultural forms of social life, contrasting blues ballads that tell a story and blues songs that do not. Cultural influences are also emphasized by PAUL ATKINSON and SARA DELAMONT, who take note of the convergence between the 'narrative turn' and a 'performative turn' in the social sciences, reflecting, they believe, the emergence of an 'interview society' in which 'celebrity is created through the mass distribution of confessions, and through which ordinary people can have their personal problems and experiences transformed into public (albeit ephemeral) goods' (197), a concern sometimes characterized in terms of the narcissistic society. They caution researchers that no account mirrors reality or records a truth, and that the analytic stance must maintain a distance from the telling of narrative.

The major strands and themes highlighted by Bamberg's introduction can be found further reverberating throughout the collection, with many papers emphasizing the construction of self and identity, and others focused on action in real-world contexts. Yet for all the diversity of topics, function, and situatedness, there are noticeable gaps in this selection of research on conversational narrative. Especially notable is the omission of the social coconstruction of narratives, which was so insightfully analyzed by Ochs and Capps (2001), who drew on a diverse sampling of natural speech samples. The different perspectives of persons of different social status and roles, such as age, gender, and family position, were shown to affect their contributions to the social construction of a shared story. STEPHANIE TAYLOR approaches this aspect in her contribution, asserting that 'talk is the site and the range of practices in which our identities are constituted' and that 'identities are in part conferred . . . and in part actively constructed, contested and negotiated' (113–14). She emphasizes that talk is interactive and is not simply the communication of what already exists within people.

Another unfilled gap in the work is the development of narrative competence, despite major contributions to the recent literature by developmental psychologists (e.g. Bruner, Nelson, McCabe and Peterson, Slobin, Wertsch, among many others). Ochs and Capps (2001) also focused attention on the topic of acquisition, viewed in terms of children's developing abilities

to participate in narratives of personal experience, where the narratives are undertaken as coconstructions to which the child is a privileged contributor (see also Nelson 1996).

Toward the end of the volume, an unusually rich chapter by RITA CHARON, a medical doctor, focuses on the function of narrative in medicine, and its general failure in the past to serve as a source of important information in the practice of medicine. Charon concludes with an eloquent statement of the difficulty of human communication in narrative, in medicine, or in general.

We all try but fail to express an unreachable meaning, intermittently seen or sensed but not capturable for representation or display . . . this falling short of saying, this silencing by the ineffable, this running out of language . . . Acts of reading and writing, telling and listening—whether in fiction, conversation transcripts, medical visits, or the embodied wordless gesture . . . —put us in the presence of these efforts, futile though they may be, to give voice, to tell, ultimately, what it means for us to be within . . . human lives—in time, in language, in freedom, in bodies, and in one another's care. (233–34)

As the contributors to this work attest, the study of narrative in its everyday occurrence highlights our efforts to make sense to one another through language, while their commentaries on the state of the art of narrative research suggest the incredible richness in narrative that remains to be explored creatively in future research.

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**Sociolinguistic variation: Theories, methods, and applications.** Ed. by ROBERT BAYLEY and CEIL LUCAS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 422. ISBN 9780521691819. \$35.90.

Reviewed by RICHARD CAMERON, *University of Illinois at Chicago*

Sociolinguistics is practiced across multiple disciplines with differing agendas, objects of research, and points of origin. Irrespective of the discipline, one linguist clearly stands apart for his many contributions. This is Walt Wolfram. In 2007, as a tribute to Wolfram, Robert Bayley and Ceil Lucas edited the book reviewed here, an accessibly written selection of articles that clearly reflect the honoree's wide range of contributions. Hence, it provides a useful survey of variationist practice for 'students of linguistic variation' (1), the intended audience.

Themes include interactions with core linguistics (RALPH FASOLD and DENNIS PRESTON, LISA GREEN, GREGORY GUY, CEIL LUCAS, KIRK HAZEN, ERIK THOMAS), issues of research practice (MICHAEL MONTGOMERY, NATALIE SCHILLING-ESTES, IDA STOCKMAN, SALI TAGLIAMONTE), language acquisition and education (ROBERT BAYLEY, CAROLYN TEMPLE ADGER and DONNA CHRISTIAN, ANGELA RICKFORD and JOHN RICKFORD), and style, ideology, and concerns of public interest (JOHN BAUGH, ALLAN BELL, RONALD BUTTERS, A. FAY VAUGHN-COOKE). The contributors listed here are an accomplished group.