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Linguistic correlates of self in deceptive oral autobiographical narratives

J.S. Bedwell [a,*], S. Gallagher [b], S.N. Whitten [a], S.M. Fiore [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA
[b] Department of Philosophy, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study collected orally-delivered autobiographical narratives from a sample of 44 undergraduate students. Participants were asked to produce both deceptive and non-deceptive versions of their narrative to two specific autobiographical question prompts while standing in front of a video camera. Narratives were then analyzed with Coh-Metrix software on 33 indices of linguistic cohesion. Following a Bonferroni correction for the large number of linguistic variables ($p < .002$), results indicated that the deceptive narratives contained more explicit action verbs, less linguistic complexity, and less referential coherence (sentences being cohesive with each other). The results support a theory that, in deceptive narratives, there is greater narrative distance between the self that narrates and the self that is narrated about. This suggests that narrative selves are constituted not as autonomous selves, but are subject to processes (e.g., psychological, linguistic, social) that are likely operating on a subconscious level.

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing amount of interest in narrative and the concept of narrative self in recent philosophy of mind and cognitive science (Dennett, 1991, 1992; Hutto, 2008; Nelson, 2003; Ricoeur, 1992; Schechtman, 1996, 2011; Velleman, 2006; Zahavi, 2007). The notion of a narrative self has been distinguished from other conceptions of self, and especially from the "minimal self," defined as a pre-reflective consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, or what has been called the self-as-subject (Gallagher, 2000; Zahavi, 2005). Within the context of autobiographical (or self-) narrative, the narrative self is composed of both the narrating self (the narrator) who in the act of narration, "here and now," is telling the story and is being affected by it, and the narrated self, the object (the protagonist) of the narrative. The dynamics between the narrating self and the narrated self can be studied in terms of the identity or narrative distance that exists between the narrator and the narrated self.

"Narrative distance," a concept that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, is used in narrative theory to indicate how far removed the narrator is from the narrated events (Andringa, 1996; Lothe, 2000). There are different kinds of narrative distance. (1) *Perspectival distance*: there is less distance between the narrator and the narrated events if the narration is done in the first person versus third person perspective. (2) *Evaluative distance*: narrative distance may also be measured in terms of the extent and the valence of the narrator's evaluation of the events. (3) *Temporal distance* can be characterized as the distance between the time when the narrator narrates and the time represented by the narrated events. In this regard, if my narrative of a series of events is based on episodic memory, then the limitations imposed by my memory may introduce important

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, 4000 Central Florida Blvd., University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816-1390, USA. Fax: +1 407 823 5862.
E-mail address: jbedwell@mail.ucf.edu (J.S. Bedwell).

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discrepancies between what I narrate and what actually happened – a difference between narrated events and historical events. Finally, (4) *hermeneutical distance:* narrative distance not only reflects differences in perspective, valuation, and temporality, it reflects how various interpretive aspects of the narration can introduce limitations and biases into the recounting of events. More generally, hermeneutic theory (Gadamer, 1989; Ricoeur, 1981) suggests that temporal distance is unavoidable and that all narrative recounting is an interpretation, the veracity of which is measurable in degree, but is never one-hundred percent, due to factors such as the narrator's interest or purpose, the audiences and their expectations, etc.

Similar notions of distance hold for autobiographical (or self-) narrative. Specifically, one can ask about the distance between the self who narrates and the self who is narrated. When the narrator says, for example, "I had a great time in college," the 'I' points in two directions. It points back to the person who is telling the story, the narrator, and it signifies that the narrator means to say something about herself; but it also points to the person or character who the narrator *was* at some point in the past. The narrator implies an identity between herself and the person she is talking about, but it is certainly a legitimate question to ask whether there is some degree of difference or narrative distance involved. First, even in a first-person autobiographical narrative, the person the narrator is today is not necessarily identical, in the relevant sense of ipseity or selfhood, to the person she was in the past.[1] She might say, "I did this in college, but I certainly wouldn't engage in that activity today. I've changed quite a bit."

Second, it's also quite possible that the narrator doesn't have it right when she states "I had a great time in college." Perhaps she did not have a great time in college (as a historical fact) even if she is under the impression that she did. To some extent this will depend on the veracity or selectivity of her memory (perhaps she can only remember the few good things that happened); but it also will depend on certain hermeneutical biases generated, for example, by the kind of things she is interested in reporting, or by the kind of effect that she would like her narrative to have, or the kind of audience she is addressing.

For these reasons it is not uncommon, in narrative theory, or in cognitive science, to find claims that autobiographical narrative involves a social or narrative construction of the self, or that some percentage of any particular self-narrative is a fiction or confabulation (e.g., Dennett, 1991; Flanagan, 1996; Gazzaniga, 1998; Jopling, 2000). In the study that we report here, we set aside these kinds of considerations, which generally go to the issue of the truth value of autobiographical narratives. We don't mean to affirm (or deny) the truth value of the set of narratives that we'll identify as non-deceptive. Our focus will be on narratives that are *explicitly* deceptive, the result of intentional misrepresentation or falsification (Ekman, 1985), and on contrasts between deceptive and non-deceptive narratives. At the same time, we think that the notion of narrative distance can be helpful in this respect. In addition this focus on explicitly deceptive narratives is different from the more controversial concept of "self-deception," which includes deception that may or may not be consciously intended. Although there is ongoing debate about whether self-deception can be intentional (see, e.g., Bermúdez, 2000; Mele, 2000), and although the concept of narrative distance may be quite relevant to this debate, this is not something we need to address here. Again, the kind of deception involved in this study is clearly intentional misrepresentation in that the subject, following explicit instructions, sets out with the intent to create a deceptive narrative.

In a study of non-autobiographical deceptive communication, Anolli, Balconi, and Ciceri (2003) point to evidence that in such narratives there is less self-reference, more frequent references to third parties and to objective factors, and greater use of impersonal vocabulary. They suggest that there is a greater impersonality or "depersonalization" (p. 689) involved in deceptive communications. This kind of depersonalization is consistent with an increase of narrative distance.

In order to investigate the identity dynamics of the self in narrative, we examined syntactical structure in 176 short, oral autobiographical narratives, half of which resulted from instructions to make the narrative deceptive, and half of which resulted from instructions to make the narrative truthful (i.e., non-deceptive). We hypothesized that there would be an increase of narrative distance in deceptive autobiographical narratives compared to non-deceptive autobiographical narratives. That is, there would be a greater degree of impersonality or depersonalization in the case of deceptive than in non-deceptive narratives. We addressed this hypothesis with a comparative analysis of linguistic structure in the two kinds of narrative.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Fifty undergraduate students were recruited via academic credit incentives through the University of Central Florida Psychology Department's online undergraduate research participation system. From this initial sample of 50 who chose to participate, four were excluded for self-report of psychotropic prescription use, as these medications have the potential to change cognitive functioning. From the remaining 46 participants, two were excluded as outliers for the total word length of their narratives (see Section 2.3 below). This resulted in a final sample of 44 participants who were included in the

[1] Ricoeur's (1992) distinction between *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity is relevant here. *Idem* (sameness) refers to numerical identity, and in this sense one would say that the narrator is talking about himself rather than about someone else. Ipseity, however, is a concept that allows for a difference between myself as the one I am describing at an earlier (or later) time, and myself as narrator in the present. I may not be the same person I was when I was in college, X number of years ago. Narrative (self-) identity according to Ricoeur, is the product of the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*.