Telling the story: Meaning making in a community narrative

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Abstract

Narrative theory distinguishes between the theme of a story and its form or ''telling''. This idea is central to Narrative Psychology, where narrative is proposed as a way of understanding cognition (Bruner, 1986, 2004) and the concept of *narrative templates* (Wertsch, 2002) is used to explain underlying regularities in how collective memories/accounts are structured and expressed. Linguistic studies of narrative have mostly examined ''one-off'' tellings, focusing on structural or social features, with a related concern to define narrative discourse *per se*. Consequently, there is little empirical examination of how shared templates are realised in different settings, nor of how such templates structure everyday understanding within communities. Here, we examine two separate tellings of a political/community narrative in a Belfast nationalist community. Both draw upon a shared template, which links sense-making and identity at different levels within the community. However, there are marked performative differences between the two tellings. Our analysis is distinctive in focusing on a shared narrative in two settings rather than on a self-contained narrative event. We highlight three key points relevant to narrative pragmatics. Firstly, we show how community narrative operates as a shared sense-making resource for members. Secondly, we demonstrate that different discourse activities are used to realise the underlying template, and hence, we argue against seeking definitive descriptions of ''narrative discourse''. Finally, we show how the narrative performances reflect power and the perceived purpose of the respective interviews, thereby providing a framework for identity positioning.
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1. Introduction

Since at least the 1980s, the study of narrative has been proposed as a way of understanding cognition, including memory and identity (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 2002, 2004). As part of this narrative psychology, theorists such as Wertsch (2002, 2008a,b) have suggested that *narrative templates* underlie collective accounts and hence, these templates structure shared understandings and memories of events and outcomes. We suggest that this concept has been under-examined within linguistic studies of narrative, where analyses have usually focused on self-contained narratives, and further, have been concerned to delineate narrative discourse in terms of either formal/structural features or rhetorical/social outcomes (or both). In this paper, we examine two separate tellings of a shared political/community narrative in a Belfast nationalist community. We have three analytic aims relevant to narrative pragmatics: (1) to examine the role of the shared narrative (template) as a sense-making resource within the community; (2) to examine how the same template is collaboratively realised across different speakers and settings and, crucially, through a range of different discourse

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activities; and (3) to analyse performative and interactional differences between the two tellings, which demonstrate the role of narrative as a framework for identity positioning.

2. Narrative: content and form

Narrative theory has drawn distinctions between the content or theme of a story, that is, the *narrated event* and its form or telling, that is, the *narrative event* (Ricoeur, 1984; see Juzwick, 2014; Sarangi, 2008; Thornborrow, 2014). Thus, the same basic story can be told in different forms on different occasions of ''telling''. This dualistic notion is drawn from work in a number of academic traditions, including literary studies, folklore/anthropology, psychology, and sociolinguistics (see McQuillan, 2000; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012; Juzwick, 2014; Thornborrow, 2014). For example, literary analysis has examined the structure, cultural forms and textual qualities of narrative (often literary texts), while anthropological studies have explored the content and form of stories, their cultural resonance and the storytelling practices of different cultures (Propp, 1968; Polanyi, 1982). Within narrative psychology, narrative has been proposed as a way of understanding cognition (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 2002, 2004). Here, the culturally available narrative form is seen as a type of deep-structure that underpins everyday thinking and expression.

Bruner (2004) cites the work of early Russian formalists who developed a three-part distinction between the *fabula* (i.e. the overall theme, e.g. jealousy, ambition), the *sjuzet* (i.e. the discourse, including sequence, language, plot) and the *forma* (i.e. the genre or type, e.g. romance or tragedy, of which, in turn, many ''tokens'' or instances exist). Of course, similar distinctions between theme and realisation can be found throughout the history of the study of narrative (McQuillan, 2000), and are reflected in taxonomic efforts, dating from Aristotle's *Poetics*, to determine specific set categories or forms of construction. For example, White (1973) suggests organising texts/narratives as tragedy, romance, comedy, and satire (for application of this to psychology, see Gergen and Gergen, 1993). In relation to our personal life-stories, Bruner claims that we generate and tell our narratives from the range of ''possible'' lives and worlds available to us, thereby becoming ''variants of the culture's canonical forms'' (Bruner, 2004:694). Hence, we articulate our own and others' stories within the narrative forms that our culture provides for us, that is, by drawing on the narrative ''cultural tool kit''. Bruner further argues that narrative is ''our preferred, perhaps even our obligatory medium for expressing human aspirations and their vicissitudes, our own and those of others'' (2002:89).

Bruner's discussion of underpinning narrative forms has been developed further in the fields of anthropology and cultural psychology, notably by Wertsch (2002, 2008a,b) who has empirically examined the role of such ''narrative templates'' in the organisation of collective memory and interpretation. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin in philosophy (Bakhtin, 1981) and Vygotsky in psychology (Vygotsky, 1987), as well as Bruner's narrative approach to cognition, Wertsch examines the process of collective remembering and interpretation as a series of dialogic realisations of an underlying cultural representation of events; in other words, a narrative template. As told in a given setting, then, narratives are always located within the previous articulations of others and the individual voice (or voices) of the tellers must be textually coordinated with these other versions and representations. Wertsch further distinguishes between ''specific narratives'', which focus on particular events, actors, and instances, and ''schematic narrative templates''. These latter are the broader narrative templates that we have been discussing and are defined by Wertsch (2008b:120) as ''abstract forms of narrative representation [which] typically shape several specific narratives''. Unlike the archetypal categories of narrative described above, however, these narrative templates are specific to particular cultural traditions and, moreover, may be expected to differ from one culture to another.

In this paper, we are focally concerned with the idea that a shared narrative template can underlie the production of individual and group-based stories. We are specifically interested in how such templates become realised discursively, pragmatically, and interactionally, across different speakers and story forms. Although linguistic research on narrative has often distinguished between the story and the telling (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1997; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012; see section 3), there has been very little empirical examination of the way in which the same shared narrative may be realised through different discourse activities, and by separate groups of speakers. Before moving to the analysis, we will firstly outline some key concepts within the linguistic/pragmatic study of narrative, including the focus on tellings, rather than templates, which provide a point of departure for our paper.

3. Linguistic studies of narrative: tellings vs. templates

Sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discourse-based approaches to narrative have focused on various aspects of the linguistic production and use of narratives in a range of sociocultural contexts. As noted earlier, a central concern of such work has been to define the features and/or the social functions of narrative. Thornborrow (2014) identifies three distinct approaches here. The first is focused on the formal and structural features of spoken narrative, deriving from Labov's classic sociolinguistic studies of narrative components and sequencing (Labov, 1972, 1982; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). The second examines the cultural meaning and significance of spoken narratives, including the features that make a story