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“What happened?” From talk to text in police interrogations



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ABSTRACT

Based on 11 interrogations and police records, I examine how stories are elicited, told and written up during the police interrogation. In the process of transforming a spoken story to a written story, we see several transformations. The written story is a more factual, detailed, precise and intentional story on paper constructed according to the institutional perspective of the officer. Whether the stories are told freely by the suspect, supervised or imposed by the officer, police officers adhere to their own structure and chronology of how they make events understandable. This is accomplished through further questioning, interrupting or by telling the story themselves. This process of institutionalization already begins in the interaction and continues when transforming talk to text.

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1. Introduction

As this special issue demonstrates, quoting from the case file, or in some cases, re-enacting in speech facts of the case, are important activities that play a large role in the courtroom setting across various countries. The documents that provide the basis for these quotations and re-enactments should therefore be adequate representations of what transpired before the written document was constructed and became a quotable source. How these documents, which are at the start of the textual chain in the judicial process, are constructed, will be the main focus of this article.

I will specifically look at one type of document that is used in the courtroom setting: the police record of the suspect's interrogation. In the Dutch police interrogation setting, producing an account of 'what happened' on paper is one of the goals of the police interrogation: to write up a report, as much as possible in the suspect's own words, about the events reported in the interrogation. It is the story in this report that matters in the further judicial process (cf. [Komter, 2006](#); [Rock, 2001](#); [Jönsson and Linell, 1991](#)) as it not only forms one of the backbones of the casefile (France: see [Licoppe, 2014](#); the Netherlands: see [Komter, 2013](#)), but that story can also serve as a piece of evidence in court.

In this article I examine how such stories are elicited and told during the police interrogation and what happens in the process when the suspect's version of events is written up and becomes a written version of the events that happened. This is the first step in the textual chain that demonstrates the institutional changes that occur in the interaction itself and when talk is transformed to text. In the written documents, however, we see no traces of this process of institutionalization. [van der Houwen and Sneijder \(2014\)](#) examine the next phase in the textual and judicial chain and investigate how judges, lawyers and prosecutors quote from these written documents in the Dutch courtroom setting.

In order to examine how the talk is transformed to an institutionalized, legal, text, I begin with an analysis of the story solicitation and storytelling. Amongst the Dutch interrogations that I recorded, there are three different ways in which the suspect tells a story in interaction with the police officer. First of all, the suspect is invited to produce a longer turn at talk in

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which the suspect tells a story from beginning to end. Second, the suspect starts telling a story, but the police officer interrupts the suspect immediately and through that interruption he or she steers the storytelling. Third, the story is not told by the suspect himself,¹ but by the officer who imposes a story. This occurs when either the suspect refuses to tell a story, or the story is not the correct story according to the police officer. In either circumstance, the police officer provides a version of the story that the suspect agrees or disagrees with. These various ways of soliciting and telling a story result in different institutional texts in which we see various changes made to the structure and level of details of the story as well as intent. How these texts were constructed, however, is often not visible in the written documents.

2. Storytelling in institutional settings

According to Mandelbaum (2003: 596), “storytelling is a basic method by which we share experiences, and in sharing experiences we undertake such important social processes as joking, performing delicate activities, complaining, accounting, telling troubles, gossiping, and constructing relationships, social roles, and social and institutional realities.” In other words, we produce and achieve all sorts of social actions by telling stories. Stories then, are an important resource in interaction (Schiffrin et al., 2010). Researchers in various disciplines such as (socio)linguistics (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 2004, 2010; Tannen, 1982), communication studies (Mandelbaum, 2003), conversation analysis (Jefferson, 1978; Lerner, 1992), anthropology (Briggs and Bauman, 1992), and psychology (Bruner, 2010) study stories by all sorts of people in all sorts of situations that serve all sorts of functions.

As the suspects’ stories analyzed here demonstrate, stories also feature prominently in institutional interaction. At the doctor’s office patients tell stories (sometimes through answering “more than the question”) about their past or their home situation (Stivers and Heritage, 2001; see also Jones, 2009). During refugee status interviews, refugees are required to talk about their past (Blommaert, 2001) and in court witnesses and suspects are continually invited to tell and retell versions of events (Eades, 2008/9). During police interrogations (Rock, 2001, 2010; Jönsson and Linell, 1991) or at-the-scene police questioning (Kidwell, 2009), suspects and witnesses are asked to tell stories about what happened.

A characteristic feature of such storytelling in institutional settings is that the stories are embedded in a very specific type of context. Often they are not offered voluntarily, but elicited by the professional for a particular goal or function. Within each specific context, stories serve different purposes. Whereas during the doctor–patient interview stories are elicited to explain symptoms, in the police interrogation or at the crime scene stories are elicited to uncover the truth about what happened. There are therefore many ways in which stories are solicited and told, depending on the context and the function of the story.

2.1. Structure of stories

According to Labov and Waletzky, telling a story or a narrative represents a “method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred” (1967: 20). Hence, “narrative construction follows the order of events in time” (Labov, 2006: 37). Along similar lines, Ochs (2004: 270) states in her first narrative lesson that “[n]arratives of personal experience imbue unexpected life events with a temporal and causal orderliness.” Labov and Waletzky’s analyses of the structure of stories of personal experience show the following general structure: orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. In the orientation section, the storyteller orients the listener by introducing the people involved, the location, the time and behavioural orientation. The complicating action refers to the events that occurred that led up to the resolution. Before providing the resolution, however, storytellers often provide an evaluation of the activities that occurred that shows how the narrator felt towards the narrative. After the evaluation and resolution, there may be an additional section referred to as the coda. Here, the storyteller returns “the verbal perspective to the present moment” (1967: 39). Storytellers can do this through the use of the traditional “and they lived happily ever after” or for example by saying “and that was that.” Narratives thus revolve around some kind of important happening, what Labov and Waletzky (1967) refer to as “the most reportable event.” In Goodwin’s analysis (1984) we see that the story contains a preface, background and climax section, where the climax is equivalent to a “most reportable event” or an event worth telling to your audience. Labov (2010) shows that reportable events can also be told at the very beginning of a narrative, in the orientation or abstract.

Many of these observations on narratives of personal experience also hold for the stories told by the suspects in the interrogation room, hence I will continue to use the terminology developed by Labov and Waletzky for analyzing the structures of the spoken and written stories.

2.2. Interactional organization

Stories are not produced by an isolated individual but interactively constructed. In an everyday context they are elicited through a request sequence (Goodwin, 1984). And while the storyteller generally occupies a longer turn-at-talk when delivering the story, the other participants contribute as well by providing continuers, acknowledgements and surprise reactions, asking clarifying questions, and collaboratively evaluating and assessing the story afterwards (see Schegloff, 1982; Goodwin,

¹ All suspects in my data are male and I will therefore refer to suspects as he.

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