

## Silke Meyer

# Editorial

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This volume of *Fabula* is dedicated to narrative analysis.<sup>1</sup> Narrative analysis constitutes an approach between many disciplines – for example, folkloristics, performance studies, linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistic pragmatics –, but it is united by its object of interest, which is stories and why and how people tell them in a variety of contexts. Narrative analysis is thus concerned with topics, structures and intentions of written and oral narrative representations, in other words: with formal devices of stories in their sociocultural contexts. This collection of articles shares not only the object domain of narrative but also the interest in the social and cultural life of stories: What do stories tell us about their authors and protagonists, what is the function of narrative in the lives of narrators?

With this perspective on narrative agents and the broad variety of conversational practices, we first need to clarify what we mean by narrative. The articles collected here mostly rely on interview material and oral narrative in communicative situations. In them, narratives represent a “set of cultural practices” a) with a performative dimension evaluated by a relevant social group (similar to speech act: doing things with words), b) with a semiotic dimension focusing on the indexicality of stories and c) with a social dimension including the dynamics of participation in the narrative performance (Duranti 1997, 14–21). Therefore, narrative analysis must address the following five categories: 1) tellership (the interactive relation between (changing) tellers and their audience), 2) tellability (what is worth reporting, what is not to report), 3) embeddedness (in social context and in master narratives), 4) linearity (how the story is organized) and 5) moral stances (the moral message or function of the story) (Ochs/Capps 2001, 18–54).

With those categories in mind, it becomes clear that not every speech act constitutes a narrative. Narratives are organized by a plot, which turns events and experiences into a causally connected and thus meaningful story. The act of

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emplotment also ascribes roles to authors and protagonists and positions them on a social tableau. These roles are attributed by an imagined or real audience to which the narrative is performed (Bauman 2012). Narratives are socially and performatively embedded. The performance may vary and depend on situations, but it still expresses a moment of identity politics. Telling one's story becomes an essential part of constructing, explaining, affirming or scrutinizing who one is. Of course, not every utterance in conversation fulfills these criteria and the same holds true for the interview material, which forms the empirical basis for most of the articles collected here. The model plot for a narrative opens with an abstract or summary, followed by orientation (information on people, time, place) and troubles (complications representing the tellability of the story), to be concluded with a coda pointing towards a moral ending or function of the story (Labov/Waletzky 1997). During those phases, stories entail a variety of information on a meta-level of evaluation. Especially the abstract summarizes the way in which the narrator wishes to be seen and comprises strategies of identity politics.<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, the coda, introduced with phrases like “and here it comes” or “and that's the whole point” includes the teller's assessments and judgments. Narratives represent a complex act of self-representation and self-interpretation in social context: Interactive narration, if successful, needs a cultural repertoire, performative talent and a social knowledge of discursive tellability, i. e. what stories can be told in which ways without the audience asking “so what?” (Baroni 2014). To tell the right story at the right time to the right audience, however, is well worth it, for it holds the promise of social recognition.

This promise of social recognition points towards the analytical context of social dynamics and hierarchies. *Ce que parler veut dire* – thus the original title of Pierre Bourdieu's book on language and symbolic power (1991, originally published in French in 1982) – refers to interaction between interview partners, formal rhetoric devices, generic structures and their interpersonal function. Bourdieu analyses language and communication as an exchange economy in which subjects aim to be recognized and accepted as members of society. Through language, people create and negotiate social positions as well as symbolic power:

There is no social agent who does not aspire, as far as his circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming: gossip, slander, lies, insults,

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<sup>2</sup> This is why in interview situations special attention is directed to the opening phase of the abstract: the interviewee chooses the way to start his or her story at a certain point. When I asked about debt stories, it was interesting for me when those stories started: with the decision to spend money, with a poor childhood, with a sick partner or with a letter of dismissal at work. The abstract of a story holds very interesting information on self-perception and self-image (Meyer 2017, 128, see also Bude 1990, Jeggle 1991).

commendations, criticisms, arguments and praises are all daily and petty manifestations of the solemn and collective acts of naming, be they celebrations or condemnations, which are performed by generally recognized authorities (Bourdieu 1991, 105).?

However, the creation of the world through naming can only – or more easily – be achieved in specific social positions and through legitimate language. While speaking might be a universal competence, having access to legitimate language is not: “The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable*” (Bourdieu 1991, 55, italics in original). Speaking and storytelling is a social practice of delineating and positioning oneself, linguistic capital thus produces a “profit of distinction” in social exchange (Bourdieu 1991, 55). Narrative competence, i. e. telling a story and thereby achieving such profit, means social inclusion and recognition. Narrative analysis can uncover those mechanisms of distinction and detect how content, form and social position interact in telling a story. It is thus a method that combines practice theory with discourse analysis: in examining what is told and what cannot be told, it exposes the “illusion of linguistic communism” (Bourdieu 1991, 43) and focuses on social positions and hierarchies in communication.

The question of what is told and what cannot be told brings us to the narrative form or genre. Telling a story and getting it right, i. e. achieving social recognition, is not only a social, but also a cultural competence. Narrative analysis can here draw on the affiliation with folkloristics and on the role of language in the discipline of folklore studies (Groth 2015). Examining shared ideas about origin and transmissions of genres, motives, and patterns, means to look at intertextuality and generic expectations in conversational patterns. Amy Shuman and Galit Hasan-Rokem use the sophisticated term of ‘Poetics of Folklore’ for the collective concept of historicity, genre and norm in narrative:

Poetics will be understood as the total body of values predicating expressive modes of culture created in various media by individual authors, artists and performers interacting with values and norms collectively accepted and shaped though shared forms of transmissions (Shuman/Hasan-Rokem 2012, 56).

Albrecht Lehmann developed this structural interest (Lehmann 1983) into studying narrative principles in the theory of (narrative) consciousness in cultural analysis (Lehmann 2007). Stories about success, failure, legitimization or comparison are socially ratified when they are told in accordance with specific narrative structures. In order to be understood, acknowledged and recognized, narrators use narrative patterns to frame their individual experience according to a shared poetic norm. Those patterns are handed down in oral and literary traditions, other expressions for narrative models are “sedimented traditions” (Riccœur 1991), “ready-mades” (Keupp 1999) or “masterplot” (Abbott 2002). By

knowing them und making appropriate use of them, in other words: with a specific narrative habitus (Arthur Frank), storytelling becomes a means of social positioning and an expression of cultural competence.

A final point on the use and usefulness of narrative analysis. On a theoretical level, it takes into account the social and cultural dimension of storytelling as identity politics. Methodologically, I think, it also brings to the table a much-needed transparency in dealing with empirical data. In European ethnology, due to the history of the discipline (Bendix 2012), we have an abundance of literature on the question how to undertake ethnographic research. A series of handbooks, seminal articles and chapters on methodology give good advice about the practical side of fieldwork. How to conduct an interview and “the art of letting or making people speak” (Schmidt-Lauber 2012), how to deal with guided interviews, how to observe and participate, how to deal with closeness and distance in participant observation has been mulled over productively in the relatively short history of European ethnology. And: We also have a number of reflections on what happens when putting ethnographical observations into writing. ‘Speaking for’ and ‘writing for’ as expressions of dealing with hierarchies and power constellations during fieldwork have influenced attitudes and formats of ethnographic writing. Most definitely since the insights in the process and implications of writing culture, ethnologists are aware that methodology is always concerned not only with ways of analyzing data but also with ways of making empirical data (Clifford/Marcus 1986; Berg/Fuchs 1995). However, the phase *between* collecting data (“the art of letting someone speak”) and turning data into an article or a chapter of a book (writing culture), is – in my opinion – not yet adequately represented in methodological reflections.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true for interview-based research, which is surprising, as interviews are one of the main ways of collecting empirical data in European ethnology. What is said in interviews, however, can never be taken at face value. Similarly, to an ethnography of speaking (Dell Hymnes), interviews need to be interpreted with an ethnography of narrative, i. e. as a set of cultural practices, with regard to the function of intertextuality and time in their formal elements and according to the use and consequence of legitimate language.

In this volume we aim to live up to these manifold ambitions and aspirations of narrative analysis and find out what agents want to tell their audience when they use narrative devices in conversation. Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich turns to the different ways how stories find their way into academic writing by examining narrative patterns and the manners of ‘doing stories’ by academic colleagues.

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<sup>3</sup> With the notable and highly recommendable exception of Gabriele Lucius-Hoene’s and Arnulf Deppermann’s handbook on reconstructing narrative identity, see Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann<sup>2</sup>2004.

Ethnographic writing is storytelling following principles of storytelling, just like Hayden White showed for historiography (White 1973). Ethnographic texts have been analyzed as meta-narratives, as if they were fiction with heroes, rogues, and a storied plot. In this context, it is important to reflect the role of ethnographers, their presence in and influence onto the field and in the dialogues with informants. Stefan Groth, in the tradition of linguistic anthropology, undertakes an ethnography of the use of proverbs and figures of speech in multilateral diplomatic conferences of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). In order to negotiate innovation, tradition and common sense or to legitimate one's viewpoint, proverbs serve as successful communicative resource. In analyzing communicative strategies in policy making, he takes into account not only content, arguments and register, but also the pragmatics of tellers' positions, strategies and social relations in which they tie in and out during communication in diplomatic negotiations.

Narratology offers an attractive approach for empirical studies, especially for interview-based cultural analyses. Four articles show how narrative analysis leads to close readings and interpretations of stories used in interview communication. Within this interview-based narrative research, it is hardly surprising that narrative strategies prevail in interviews concerned with crisis, tragic events, failure or deviant behavior. The practice of storytelling has a therapeutic and compensatory effect which is widely acknowledged in narratology. When stories offer the possibility to form identity, they also give the opportunity to amend an incident that has been experienced as wrong, unjust and encumbering. 'Sad tales' function as a form of correcting self-disclosure and shifting of responsibility (Goffman 1961). In this volume, Silke Meyer discusses the theory of narrative ethics with the example of debt stories. Narrative ethics claim that a person needs a story to make sense of his or her life. Assuming that narrators are able to correct rupture and deviance through the right kind of story, she concludes that a socially and discursively compatible debt story can rectify their self-image and compensate for the experience of social exclusion. Based on interview material with debtors, Meyer shows how narrative structure becomes a key instrument in presenting a debt story: conversion, educational or underdog stories enable storytellers to claim agency and take control over the narrative representation of their lives.<sup>4</sup> In the same interest of analyzing narratives as compensation of dramatic

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I would contradict Rudolf Schenda who claimed genre theories would ignore social problems (Schenda 1976, 28), I would argue that tellers are to some extent aware of generic functions as part of a cultural repertoire and they make good use of it in their construction of narrative identity. What I find interesting is the question of consciousness and intentionality in narrative habitus. Here, further narrative research is required.

experiences, Valeska Flor asks about loss of belonging in the context of contemporary resettlement stories from the Rhenish brown coal fields. She analyses coping strategies like participation, transfer of objects, rituals and narratives. Especially retelling is a compensatory technique because it allows agents to solidify their view on events and thus produce agency in a situation of transformation.

Interview communication can and should be read in the light of self-positioning. Linda M. Mülli analyses the narrative positions and specific narrative habitus of young professionals with the UN which place themselves between humanitarian, cosmopolitan and economic interest. What is the legitimate language in a highly symbolically charged place like the UN, which are dominant stories and how are counter-stories used in the self-representations of young UN professionals? How to establish social positions through narrative is also the interest of Gerrit Herlyn in his article on positioning theory as a tool for the narrative analysis of interviews. Based on interview material on risk culture at disasters, he analyses the self-portrayal of professional forces like Fire Departments and the Federal Agency for Technical Relief. In contrasting themselves with other professional helpers and with bystanders and in drawing in on specifics of their institution (for example, qualifications, equipment, experience and the role of speed), the interviewees arrive at a narrative self-representation by comparison. Those comparisons eventually serve to found right and wrong behavior models. In analyzing the different positions in disaster narratives, Herlyn is able to show how stories are morally charged. Alfred Messerli concludes the volume with an overview over narrative analysis in German Studies and other disciplines. He outlines the narratological contributions by Käte Friedemann, Käte Hamburger and Eberhard Lämmert as well as those by 18<sup>th</sup> century men of letters like Johann Jakob Engel and Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg. With the literary scholars Gérard Genette and Albrecht Koschorke, narrative theory is opened up to anthropological and cultural questions of reception and identity.

This volume serves to illustrate that narrative analysis provides methodological and interpretative tools to examine literary and communicative practices. It is our aim to inspire researchers to investigate narrative data not only with the perspective of what is told but how and why it is told in this way, too. The setting of *Fabula* as a journal for narratology with a strong background in the study of folktales offers an ideal location for this endeavor.

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