Other People's Stories: Person and Evidentiality in Individual and Group Memory

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This paper surveys the use of grammatical person in oral narrative and shows that second and third person narratives bear a complex relation to individual and group identity and memory. In particular, the paper demonstrates the existence of a class of narratives of events not witnessed by the speaker, non-participant narratives, and shows how these are shaped by the speaker's claim of membership or non-membership in the groups and events involved, as well as by the role that narrative plays within an institution. Non-participant narratives use resources of person, evidentiality and marked or unmarked quotation from written or traditional sources to construct large scale issues of memory and membership.[1]

Why Look at Person?

The investigation of the person of narrative, while apparently a small question, opens a door into a number of very important issues. Some obvious issues include the pragmatics of evidentials and point of view markers, as well as the overall structure of differing types of narratives. There are wider issues concerning the relation between the narrative of personal experience to other genres, including myth and folklore.

Beginning with Labov and Waletzky (1966) and Labov (1972), discourse analysis has focused on the narrative of personal experience. Labov and Waletzky (1966) defines the narrative of personal experience as a form distinguished from "complex long-standing literary or oral traditions," such as myths, folk tales, legends, histories, epics, toasts and sagas. The narratives analyzed in this work are defined as not "the products of expert storytellers that have been re-told many times, but the original productions of a representative sample of the population." There has been an emphasis on originality and on the creativity of the ordinary person in the ordinary flow of everyday conversation. This contrasts with earlier emphases, particularly within anthropological linguistics, on the collection of traditional texts, partly because these are thought to embody older and purer forms of disappearing languages.

Within both linguistics and folklore itself, there has been an assumption that non-personal forms of oral narrative — myth, legend and folktale — are dying traditions locating in dying forms of social organization like the village or the tribe (Dégh 1989). While there have been collections of urban folklore, they have not studied how these tales and artifacts are situated within social organizations, or what work people use them to do (Brunvand 1981, Dundes 1975). In this paper

I will show that the study of narratives within a variety of flourishing institutions reveals a continuum between what we would call narratives of personal experience and what we would call myth and folklore. (Linde (to appear) offers a fuller discussion of this point.) The study of narrative benefits enormously from examining how stories are told within institutions, what work they do, who has rights to tell them and what material and social resources support them.

PERSON IN NARRATIVE

Typically, any narrative is described as having a person, which corresponds to a grammatical person: first person, third person, etc. However, the relation is more complex than a simple person marking. Almost any first person narrative has more characters than the narrator alone, and hence will contain third person characters and verbs. Some third person narratives will include the narrator as a subsidiary character, or observer and will thus contain first person verbs. What determines the person of a narrative is not the simple presence or even numerical preponderance of a given grammatical person. Nor is it necessarily the person of the main character or protagonist. Rather, the deciding factor is the point of view from which the narrative is told. The point of view character determines the person of the narrative.

Discourse analysis has traditionally focused on the first person narrative of personal experience, that is, the narrative in which the point of view character and the protagonist are identical to the speaker. In fact, that is how oral narrative has been defined, beginning with Labov's classic work on narrative which locates the definition of oral narrative in the narrative of personal experience, which must necessarily be a first person narrative, since it requires personal experience (Labov 1972: 359, Linde to appear). Obviously, there are other persons possible for oral narrative, although they have not been studied in the detail that the first person narrative has received. Studying narratives told in second or third person raises complex issues of constraints on reportability and on storytelling rights, as well as some rather complex issues of elicitation and context of telling.

Second person narratives

The first question about second person narratives is why they should exist at all. The constraints on storytelling rights would suggest that people have the most authority about their own life, and therefore other speakers can not tell narratives about those lives (Shuman 1986). However, there are circumstances where a person is **not** in command of all the facts, or all the meanings, and therefore can be told a second person narrative. There are a number of reasons why this may be the case.[2]

The protagonist was drunk, or otherwise insensible. This can lead to the classic request: "Tell me, what did I do last night?" This question is reasonable because someone else may have a better memory of the events than the protagonist does.

The protagonist may not remember the details of some event she was involved in and may ask another participant to tell her the story again.

The protagonist did not understand the consequences of what happened, or had a very different view of them. For example, I was once told a narrative about myself by a friend about a situation in which I, as editor of the college newspaper, bravely confronted a complaint from the wrestling team about lack of coverage of their events by inviting them to write for the paper. I was astonished at hearing this narrated as a brave confrontation on my part. My friend, who was present but silent during the exchange, was a judo champion: he perceived a physical threat in the complaint from which he might have to defend me. I perceived only a correct complaint about a shortage of sports writers, which I tried to remedy. When my friend praised me years later by telling me this narrative, I was astonished at his agonistic and highly dramatic version of an event I barely remembered.

The protagonist's actions had consequences unknown to her at the time. For example, I have had narratives told to me about how some purported action of mine as a graduate student was taken as an example by later generations of graduate students.

The protagonist was too young to remember the events. One regular subtype of this class of narratives are the narratives that are told to children about their actions as babies. The narratives of this type that persist form a particularly important kind of personal myth. Such narratives point to central events, or to examples of typical character traits. These childhood narratives thus form one important way that parents convey to their children their characters, their position in their families, and their similarity to or difference from other family members.[3] [See Miller et. al. 1989, Miller et. al. 1990, Stone 1988.]

The protagonist does not know what is happening to or being said about her behind her back. These have been extensively described in Goodwin's work on he-said-she-said sequences. These are complex sequences in which A tells B what C is saying that B did (Goodwin 1988). These accounts can have serious social consequences for the future relations of all the parties involved.

The protagonist must be reminded of something she did that she does not see as currently salient. One important type of examples like this are the disputes which can be very frequent between couples. Here the narrative may be indexed rather than told: "But there was the time when you told your boss he didn't exist."

However, if the offender does not even remember what the offending action was, or why it was and still is offensive, then the entire narrative may be told.

Third person narratives

Although third person narratives are more frequent than second person narratives, they still do raise a question about the circumstances under which they can be told.

First, there are specific constraints on the reportability of third person narratives. These are more reportable of all interlocutors know the protagonist. A third person narrative with a protagonist unknown to the addressees must have events which are extremely reportable, because of their drama, or because they are extremely relevant to some topic already discussed in the conversation.

Finally, there is a serious issue of evidentiality in describing third person narratives. There is an important difference, as I shall show, between a third person narrative in which the speaker was a minor participant or silent witness of the events and one in which the speaker did not witness the events, but rather heard about them in some other way. We will return to this issue of participation and the nature of evidence.

Grammatical Person and Membership

Thus far, the discussion has assumed that the person of the narrative is the correct dimension of identification. Certainly, it appears that person is a dimension of evidentiality: One knows the events of a first person narrative in a very different way than one knows the events of second or third person narratives. However, this paper attempts to show that claimed identity and group membership is also extremely relevant in shaping what narratives get told and with what point of view.

The key point in this analysis is the demonstration of the existence of the non-participant narrative (NPN): A narrative told by someone who was not a participant in the events narrated. The point of view of these narratives can be that of either We or They, regardless of the grammatical person of narrative.

This study uses data from two different institutions, since it is within institutions that NPNs are most easily collected. The first source is interview data tracing the history of work teams, specifically product development teams in a Silicon Valley computer firm. Of these 6 interviews, 3 speakers produced NPNs. The product development teams studied in this paper form a valuable site for issues of language, group memory and group identity because the teams and the speakers' memberships are nested in larger and larger circles of membership. They also have relations with other groups which may be known and viewed as allies or enemies or which may be newly formed and almost entirely unknown.

The second data source is an ethnographic study of work practice in a major American insurance company, which I shall here call Mid West Insurance. This company is of great interest since it has a long history, and furthermore, works its past very intensely, using oral and written stories as well as photographs and physical artifacts to induct members and to interpret future actions as coherent with the valued past.

NON-PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

For the NPNs the most important distinction is not evidentiality, that is, the way that the speaker learned of the events, but rather the speaker's claimed membership, as well as the degree of institutionalization of the narrative. That is, there is a difference between the way a speaker tells a narrative of what she considers to be her group and the way she tells a narrative of a group she considers to be other (the Enemy, the Rival, the Nuisance, or the Management), even though both kinds of narratives have been heard second-hand. There is also a difference between narratives that are relatively ephemeral, that is, narratives of a group or institution that is relatively short-lived and narratives that have become fixed within a long-lived and highly reified institution.

Some examples of NPNs

Let us begin with two examples of two non-participant narratives taken from Linde 1996 to illustrate the differences in style caused by differences in membership.

The first narrative was told by a speaker about activities of her own development team that took place before she joined. In fact, it is the narrative of how she came to join the team; it is thus her own origin myth.

1. Sp: And it's, uh, really frustrating work. These guys___this group started—I'll do a little bit of history, we'll do more later but —

   Int: Okay, yeah.

   Sp: --when this group started a couple of years—three years ago, the f—the five or six engineers who were already here **felt** that they wanted an interface person. They **wanted** somebody to take all those decisions off their hands. They didn't want to have to make them, they didn't feel qualified to make them, whatever. And so **they** actually pushed **their** manager who pushed **his** manager who was unwilling to spend the money on an interface designer and they actually made this huge pitch to him that they wanted to have somebody there. And so that was when I was hired. And so they themselves made the decision that they wanted me to come here.

The second narrative is the history of how the project as a whole was first brought into being by upper management, a group to which the speaker does not belong. It is distant in time from the time of speaking and some of the people involved have since left the project or the company.

2. Sp: Okay(hh). A long, long time ago, a galaxy far, far away ((spoken very fast)), Roy Bergen

   Int: Last couple of years or--?

   Sp: Yes, about three years ago. Roy Bergen, Robert Trout, and, uh, shhh, what's his name? Mike McFenerty

   Int: Yeah, I know him.

   Sp: Okay, Mike (???) was the head of [the hardware division] at that time, doing stuff(?). Uh, Bergen was head of [the labs] where [the overall project] was at the time.

   Int: Right.

   Sp: Okay, and Trout was still head of this. Uh, they said, let's do a [specific type of] product. Um, Robert said, **we'll** productize it. Bergen said, **we'll** provide the initial software, which was [Product Name] And Pendleton said, we're going to come out with a [product] which is (now just) known as [Name].

These two narratives are clearly very different and the ways in which they differ are systematic. They divide along the lines of the speaker's perception or claim to membership or identity. The first speaker is describing the actions that her own group took to get her hired. The dramatic point here is that a group of engineers was willing to argue with their management to get an engineering position filled by a user interface designer, someone who was perceived as not a person who would write code. This is a surprising action within this work culture. As she later describes their second level manager's reaction:

3: Then they had to make a huge pitch to Walter, uh, to—to spend—from Walter's point of view to spend a—a req for an engineer on a person who wouldn't write any code. [Laughs] You know, what—what good was that?

The narrative includes their actions and their motives, told extensively and dramatically. The point of view of the narrative is that of someone who was present, or at least who has full knowledge of the events, their background and their meaning. It is thus a We narrative, even though "we" is never used in the telling.

In contrast, the second speaker is telling the origin myth of an entire product development project. He describes how upper management brought this project into being. Although he later worked on this project, he was not present or involved in these events, and he is not a member of the group whose actions are described. This narrative is not told like a personal narrative. No motivation is provided, and the telling is formulaic, almost like a fairy tale. The opening marker is a quasi-formulaic quote from *Star Wars: A long, long time ago, a galaxy far, far away*. Indeed, this has become formulaic in the lore of Silicon Valley: Steve Jobs is said to have used it as the opening for his speech as he left Apple Computers. There is also a characteristically fairy-tale like use of the Rule of Three, in this case, three entirely parallel and non-realistic clauses:

> Um, Robert said, we'll productize it. Bergen said, we'll provide the initial software, which was [Product Name] And Pendleton said, we're going to come out with a [product] known as [Name].

This is certainly told like a fairy tale, rather than a realistic narrative: In my experience of business meetings, no one has ever announced a decision in one sentence. And the point of view is not that of a participant: There is no full account of the events, their background and their meaning, nor of the participants' motives. It is this a They narrative.

FUNCTION OF NPNS WITHIN THEIR INSTITUTIONS

Let us now turn to the function which NPNs serve within institutions. Non-participant narratives can form an important part of the memory and self-presentation of an entire group or institution, not only the memory and self-presentation of an individual.

In every institution, whether it be a corporation, a family, a gang or a regular Tuesday night poker game, there is a body of stories that everyone in the group tells or at least has heard. These are important carriers of the company's identity, values and history, and are used to help induct new members, explain the group to outsiders, and negotiate the legitimacy of new activities or changes in policy, direction, etc. Thus, the function of the narratives and the varying rights which members have to tell them, is crucially involved with the nature of the institution.

Most or all groups have examples of this class of narratives which are regularly and appropriately told by speakers who were not present at the events narrated. The most common NPN, for any institution, is an origin story for the institution. For example, many people can tell the story of how their parents met. These narratives are crucial for understanding the formation and negotiation of group identity, group memory, the stance speakers take towards the institutions they are involved with and the negotiations between groups in a larger institution. When a

person tells a narrative about a group event at which she was not present, she may be telling the narrative of the We, either directly through the use of the first person plural or as a third person narrative about members of the We. Or she may be telling it remotely as the story of some group of They that she does not belong to. Such manipulation of point of view can provide very strong evidence about how identity is perceived and negotiated.

Mid West Insurance has a very extensive and highly institutionalized origin story, which is organized around its charismatic founder, a figure whose memory is still frequently and respectfully invoked. This story exists in many forms, since, as previously mentioned, this company works its past very extensively. It exists as an authorized history and biography of the founder, a book published in the late 1950s, which is still in print and which is prominently displayed by many managers and executives. The story also has been told in installments in the company magazine. It is represented in a museum exhibit of historical memorabilia with extensive labels commenting on them in the lobby of the main building and in traveling historical exhibits at sales conventions. The origin story is told often by managers to agents and to newer managers at various levels.

The example below is a narrative about the founder. The oral version was told to an ethnographer as part of an unstructured interview. The speaker is a manager who has been with the company for over 45 years. He knows a great deal about the history of Mid West, and of the insurance industry, and appears to enjoy discussions of history. The ethnographer did not specifically elicit this or the many other narratives about the founder and the history of the company which he told. As we have observed, telling these stories is clearly part of his ordinary discourse practice. The written version of this narrative was published in the company magazine in 1992.

I have no external evidence for whether the oral version is derived from the written version or if this is an oral story extant in the company which the written version records. The fuller form of the confrontational conversation in the oral version of the narrative does not prove that this is the original form, since this is the kind of detail which skilled narrators frequently invent.

Oral Version	Written Version **Silencing the Guns**
	In addition to the Depression, other challenges had to be met during the '30s. Mid West had become big enough for people to begin taking "pot shots" at the organization.
And then, um, oh, <u>one story about McBee</u> was some editor because the newspaper was getting a lot of advertising from one of (the brokerage firms) and, uh, so the editor, the broker guy (???) Mid West and so forth and started really giving him a bad time (to pay for it). So the broker got the editor to write this about Don't put your money into Mid West, Don't buy insurance from them, They'll cancel you. So the agent was really getting uh, taking the heat. He called, uh, finally called McBee and said, Well. it's this guy on this newspaper is killing me and I don't know how to—I don't know how to get around him. McBee got on the train in (?) <u>and the story goes</u> that, uh, he walked into the editor's office and said, uh I understand that you've been giving the Mid West agent out here a bad time. And the guy said Yeah, so what? He said, My name's McBee, I'm the uh president of this company.	Anonymous letters and pamphlets were sent to policy holders by competitors. Rumors and stories were circulated to discourage interest in Mid West. One of the blasts was handled by T. D. McBee personally. Stopping in a small western city, he went to the editor of the paper and said, "My name's McBee. I'm president of Mid West Insurance."
	"Oh, you are, eh?" answered the editor.
	"Yes sir," said Mr. McBee, "and I'm looking for the fellow who has been rawhiding my agents out here every week in this paper."
And he said, Well, yeah, what do you expect **me** to do about it?	"Well, I'm him. What are you going to do about it?" snapped the editor.
He said, not a **thing**. He reached over, he had a cigar in his pocket and put it in **his** pocket and he said, Keep it **up**. He said, uh, uh, "He's written more business just from that than you can imagine" And walked out the door.	"Nothing," Mr. McBee said with a grin. "I just want to shake your hand. Here, have a cigar. You're a fellow after my own heart. You know, you've got these agents so mad they're writing more insurance than I ever dreamed they could. Keep up the good work. Don't say I talked with you, but just keep on riding them."
So the editor's guns fell silenced. [LAUGHTER] So He was that kinda guy He would do that kinda stuff.	The newspaper's guns fell silenced.

There are obviously a number of salient differences between the oral and the written versions of this narrative. One is the use of evidentials in the oral version: *One story about McBee.*, as well as *and the story goes*. These are an indication of a narrative which has become institutionalized. Not only was the speaker not a participant (he was not born at the time of these events), but he is telling a story which is familiar within his work world in both oral and written forms and which has a canonical shape, including key incidents and key phrases. It is interesting to compare this usage to quotatives like: *As the old saying goes*. It appears that there is a wide class of institutionalized language which must be marked as such. In particular, this speaker uses evidentials of this sort when he tells personal third person narratives about key characters in the history of the company. He does not use them for more chronicle-like accounts of the march of large-scale events.

Additionally, the oral version contains an explicit quotation of the slanders the editor was writing, organized in the familiar folktale pattern of three escalating statements: *Don't put your money into Mid West, Don't buy insurance from them, They'll cancel you.*. In contrast, the written version contains a more explicit explanation of why Mr. McBee wanted the editor to keep slandering his agents: *You've got these agents so mad they're writing more insurance than I ever dreamed they could. Keep up the good work. Don't say I talked to you, but just keep on riding them.*

However, for the purposes of this paper, the most crucial difference is the point of view of each of the stories. The written version is framed as a story of Mid West Insurance and Mr. McBee. It is thus relevant to all members of Mid West Insurance: both sales agents, as well as those working in claims, operations, etc. In contrast, the oral version is framed as a story particularly relevant to agents, telling their history, since it demonstrates the valued qualities that agents share with the founder. It was preceded by a story about how Mid West Insurance faced serious business difficulties just after the end of World War II and was saved by the actions of the agents, who showed the same determination and dedication as the founder. The narrator concluded this story about the attitude of agents at this time: *And if someone ran down Mid West Insurance, them's fighting words. I'm the same way. I still am.* He then moved immediately to the story given above, which shows how the founder dealt with someone running down the company. By its placement and framing, this story demonstrates how agents and the founder continue to share the same qualities of determination and loyalty to the company. Indeed, in this version, it is an agent who calls on the founder to defend the company, while in the written version, there is no specification of how the founder became involved with the offending editor.

While the story was told to a fieldworker, we have reason to believe that it is one that the speaker in his role as manager has often told to agents. We have certainly heard many stories of this type, in particular stories about the founder, told at

conventions, at meetings and in casual conversation between agents and managers of all levels. These stories form a way of inducting new members and reminding old members of the values of the company and the kinds of identities and actions that are supported and valued.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the study of person and point of view in NPNs opens out onto large issues of the organization of institutions and groups and the ways in which memory can be preserved, contested and changed. Certain narratives have a very long life, longer and broader than the life of a single speaker. Other people's stories thus become a key way of inducting us into who we are and where we belong.

Notes

[1] This paper on other people's stories necessarily relies on other people's contributions. I would like to thank first those anonymous speakers who so kindly shared their stories with us. I am grateful to the members of the ethnographic team with whom I studied the insurance firm: Christopher Darrouzet, Joe Harding, Nancy Lawrence and Charline Poirier, as well as to all the members of the insurance company studied, who were incredibly generous and hospitable to us. I would also like to thank my colleagues at IRL and Stanford: Penny Eckert, Ray McDermott, Norma Mendoza-Denton, Loyda Olson, Elizabeth Traugott and Helga Wild, who contributed substantially to this research, as well as very helpful suggestions from Laine Berman, Alessandro Duranti, and Livia Polanyi. And I must again express my gratitude to all my colleagues who often wonder if I am listening to what they are saying or the way they are saying it.

[2] Most of the examples of second person narratives used here come from my own history. This is a necessary consequence of the fact that it is nearly impossible to elicit second person narratives about oneself. One can, of course, elicit first person accounts of second person narratives told to the narrator, but this introduces an added complexity of person, and eliminates the context of the narration.

[3] While I have not done a formal study of this type of second person narrative, informal questioning suggests that at least half of the people I asked remember at least one story told to them as children about their actions as babies or younger children.

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