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Positioning between Structure and Performance

Michael G.W. Bamberg

Temporality and Evaluation

There are two possible interpretations of what the term *narrative* implies in Labov and Waletzky's original 1967 (this issue; henceforth L&W) framework in terms of how narrative is linked to *personal experience* in particular and to sense-making in general. The first, more simplistic reading implies that narratives – particularly those of personal experience – are representations of something that once happened and what this past happening meant (or "now" means) to the narrator. The second, more indirect reading requires the act of telling – or "representing" at a particular occasion in the form of a particular story – to intervene, so to speak, between the actual experience and the story. It was the first reading of L&W that originally fascinated me and lured me into exploring narratives as a window to people's experiences. However, in the course of having worked with narratives over the last two decades, I have moved more and more to adopt the second reading.

Other contributors to this issue have commented in one or another way on this tension between a traditional, structural approach and a more performance-based, pragmatic approach to narrative and narrative analysis. Whereas the first takes its starting point from what was said (and the way it was said) and works toward why it was said, that is, its meaning, the second focuses more strongly on how it was performed as the main index for what the narrative as an act of instantiation means to the performer. It also should

be noted that within this second reading the audience is much more of a factor that impinges on the shape of the narrative and its performance. What actually is being said is one of the many different performance features in what the speaker aims to achieve in the act of narrating.

L&W's analytical suggestion to start with the identification of *narrative clauses*, that is, with "matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred" (this issue), and then take *the free clauses* as an index for the narrator's evaluative stance, appears to give prominence to form over function, inasmuch as it seems common sensible that one has to first identify the sequence of temporal events before one can assess the seemingly more subjective criteria that led to an evaluative stance on those events. Thus, the events present somewhat of an "objective" basis, without which an evaluative stance could not be rationally claimed and upheld. Temporality, which later in the 70s became a fascinating topic for all kinds of cross-linguistic comparisons, seemed to form a solid basis upon which formal linguistic systems and systems in use (as in narratives) could be explored.

Without being able to follow up on the history of these hopes and their demise (and some recent transports [in state] to new hopes in the exploration of the relation between language and space), I attempt here to outline an approach to evaluation that picks up on L&W's original suggestions; however, one that is more in line with their functionalist orientation, treating temporality as one among many other performance features that all ultimately are in the service of discursive purposes and the formations of local identities.

Narrative Positioning

Although the notion of *positioning* was originally not developed exclusively for the analysis of narrating as an interactive activity, it nevertheless attempted to employ strategically the notion of plots and story lines. Building on Hollway (1984), Davies and Harré (1990) defined positioning as a discursive practice "whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (p. 48). Thus, in conversations – due to the intrinsic social force of conversing – people position themselves in relation to one another in ways that traditionally have been defined as *roles*. More importantly, in doing so, people "produce" one another (and themselves) situationally as "social beings."

Although this approach explicitly addresses the analysis of language under the heading of how people attend to one another in interactional settings, and although traditional narrative analysis along the lines suggested by L&W addresses the analysis of what the language is referentially "about," namely sequentially ordered (past) events and their evaluations, we have attempted to apply the notion of positioning more productively to the analysis of storytelling (see Bamberg, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Crawford, 1996; Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, &

Bamberg, 1997) in order to link these two approaches. For this purpose, we considered the process of positioning to take place at three different *levels* that are formulated in the following as three different positioning questions:

1. *How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?* At this level, we attempt to analyze how characters within the story world are constructed in terms of, for example, protagonists and antagonists or as perpetrators and victims. More concretely, this type of analysis aims at the linguistic means that do the job of marking one person as, for example: (a) the agent who is in control while the action is inflicted upon the other; or (b) as the central character who is helplessly at the mercy of outside (quasi "natural") forces or who is rewarded by luck, fate, or personal qualities (such as bravery, nobility, or simply "character").

2. *How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?* At this level, we seek to analyze the linguistic means that are characteristic for the particular discourse mode that is being employed. Does, for instance, the narrator attempt to instruct the listener in terms of what to do in face of adversary conditions or does the narrator engage in making excuses for his actions and in attributing blame to others?

3. *How do narrators position themselves to themselves?* How is language employed to make claims that the narrator holds to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation? In other words, we hold that the linguistic devices employed in narrating point to more than the content (or what the narrative is "about") and the interlocutor. In constructing the content and one's audience in terms of role participants, the narrator transcends the question of: "How do I want to be understood by you, the audience?" and constructs a (local) answer to the question: "Who am I?" Simultaneously, however, we must caution that any attempted answer to this question is not one that necessarily holds across contexts, but rather is a project of limited range.

Positioning: Three Examples

Children's accounts of emotion situations. As a first example of how the positioning approach to narratives was put to use, let me offer two illustrations from my ongoing studies of children's accounts of emotion events. When asked to give an account of a situation when "you made someone else angry," a 6-year-old answered: "It was a couple of years ago, when I took the crab away from my brother, then I stuck my fist out, and he ran into it and got a bloody nose." Typical for this answer is the positioning of the *I* as an agent who nevertheless does not have full control over the outcome of his actions and consequently cannot be held responsible. The narrator positions the *I* in such a way that the event described is characteristic of the event type "accident." The *other*, here his brother, is positioned vis-à-vis the *I* as

somewhat agentive: If he hadn't moved himself into the fist, this situation would not have occurred.

In contrast to the linguistic devices employed for this type of scenario, accounts of situations when "I once was angry" typically position the *other* as being a highly individuated and often unjust agent, whose actions are targeted willfully at the *I* construing the relationship between the two characters as one of perpetrator and victim: "When my sister slapped me across the face, just because she didn't let me in her room, and I wanted to play a game, but she didn't let me, and she slapped me across the face."

The two different types of linguistic strategies can clearly be differentiated in terms of the syntactic constructions that are employed (see for more details Bamberg, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). However, these different syntactic construction types are argued to be pragmatically organized by the discursive purpose for which they are employed: whereas constructions used for the construal of the first type of positioning serve the purpose of saving face, the strategies employed for the second positioning serve to elicit empathy and align the audience in a moral stance with the *I* against the *other*.

Teenager's accounts of their sexual identity. Crawford (1996) prepared a detailed analysis of all three positioning levels in two different narrative accounts of the same experience, both given by the same 13-year-old girl. The experience involved being away from home and spending an excessive amount of time on the phone. The first account takes place in a classroom context and is given to a female acquaintance of the same age:

> Narrative 1
> We were talking on the phone from the hotel ... to this kid John ... for three hours, and the phone bill came up to fifteen dollars, for one night, my Mom was like wicked mad at us. (Crawford, 1996, p. 45)

At another occasion, the same situation is presented to her best friend (female) and two overhearing boys, again in the classroom:

> Narrative 2
> When I was in Connecticut this weekend, my friends, we were stayin for competition, right, and they met this boy, right, so they called him out from the hotel, and he was having phone sex with one of my friends, you know how they have phone sex, right, like, aw, you're wearing this, oh baby, you look so fine, you know, and all, they're having phone sex, I was sittin there, I was cracking up, I was like "no sir." (Crawford, 1996, pp. 59–60)

In her analysis, Crawford first delineated the positioning devices used to set up the we versus *my Mom* in the first narrative, resulting in a typical teenage alignment against an adult world, in harmony with the peer-group values. By contrast, Narrative 2 employs a rather different positioning strategy: Firstly, the descriptions of the agentive characters are different

(*we* vs. *they*; *they* made the call, whereas in Narrative 1, *we* used the phone); secondly, *this kid John*, who was the recipient of the call in Narrative 1, is positioned agentively as *having phone sex* in Narrative 2; and thirdly, *I*, who is not mentioned in Narrative 1, is singled out and positioned as nonagentive (sitting) and explicitly distancing herself from what is happening. In addition to positioning the characters distinctly, the narrator (in a number of free clauses in the middle of Narrative 2) seeks to position herself to her audience as an expert on the topic of phone sex (Positioning Level 2).

In sum, the linguistic devices employed in the two narratives result: (a) in different positioning of the characters in the narrative event (the situation described) and (b) in two rather different relationships between the narrator and her two different audiences. Furthermore, Crawford demonstrated that the differences in these two positioning strategies resulted in two different moral positions and identity claims, both of them interactively and locally achieved. The first can best be described as a claim with regard to her position as a young person in conflict with the adult world of telephone bills and responsibilities, the second as a young person who is knowledgeable about topics concerning boys and sexuality. Both claims are made against the background of existing moral orders that are being tested out and questioned in the narrative discourse conducted with the audience. In other words, the two claims as to how the narrator wants to be understood as a person (who she "is") are explorations that could be modified in the subsequent course of the conversation. The narrator's implicit claim in the second narrative that "she is not that kind of girl" is clearly maintained, but "open to negotiation" (see Crawford, 1996, for an elaboration on this point).

Women's accounts of their pregnancies. In my third example, we (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1997) attempted to distill the identity claims in an even more direct way. We analyzed narrative interviews of two pregnant women who had been diagnosed previously "at risk" due to a history of gestational diabetes, thereby, in case of a further pregnancy, placing themselves as well as their fetus at risk. By performing a discursive analysis of these women's positioning strategies, we hoped to be able to reveal their claims as to who they are and how they made sense of their situation in comparison with the master narrative of the normal course of pregnancy and birth giving.

Our analysis started with a detailed analysis of how the two interviewees positioned themselves as characters within the depicted situations as they relate to their family members, friends, and neighbors, but mainly in their relationships with their physicians, From there, moving to Positioning Level 2, we analyzed their positioning strategies with the interviewer (and behind her a more generalized [female] audience). Let me skip a detailed account of the linguistic constructions employed by both interviewees and move straight to a summary of their claims as to how they seem to understand

themselves – at least in this conversation – in light of their claims as to who they are and how they want to be understood.

Mary, the first interviewee, views herself as a self-reliant person, who is better equipped than anyone to devise a program of self-care that will meet her individual needs and ensure the health and safety of herself and her unborn baby. Her complaint regarding doctors is that they fail to respect the soundness of her judgment and the efficacy of her agency. Her identity claim as a self-reliant individual lends her authority as she advises others to claim self-reliance for themselves. She constructs her own identity by asserting that she herself is unusual and that ways of understanding pregnancy that may apply to others often are not useful to her in her efforts to cope with the adversarial challenges of a difficult pregnancy.

Sue – the other interviewee – attributes the notion of pregnancy that she disputes not to medical authorities, but to the majority of the general public, whom she portrays as uninformed. Her critique of this popular view of pregnancy is in a sense more radical than Mary's, for Sue is asserting not only that this widespread version bears no resemblance to her pregnancy, but that it fails to take into consideration the truth that complications are a common experience for many pregnant women. Bearing witness to this diversity of experience among expectant mothers, she concludes that the concept of nor-mality embodied in the standard pregnancy narrative is in need of revision. When doctors appear in her account, they are depicted not as opponents but as benign and knowledgeable allies who help her to arrive at a more realistic appreciation of pregnancy as a potentially perilous undertaking. Far from constructing herself as asserting her power to control the outcome of events in her pregnancy, Sue insists that uncertainty is ineluctably a part of the process and that no expectant mother can eliminate pregnancy's inherent risks or dispel its mysteries. Sue constructs herself as a realist, whose authority is grounded in openness to points of view beside her own and in her realistic acceptance of the limitations to her own control. In other words, she grounds her lack of power and self-control in a position of authoritative realism.

Positioning and Evaluation

The three examples of positioning analysis were meant to outline how this type of analysis proceeds. Although children at the age of 6 years do not seem to be able to make far-reaching claims with regard to their identity that enable us to analyze their narratives for positioning at Level 3, their choices of linguistic constructions to position themselves as characters in reported personal experiences reflect clearly the ability to construct scenarios in light of discursive purposes such as attributing blame or saving face. Our analysis of the two reportings of the same event in the 13-year-old adolescent's narratives highlighted positioning at Level 2. Here the construction of the

narrator-audience relationship by use of linguistic constructions was fore-grounded. Although both narratives referred to the same event, the language used marked two different positioning vis-à-vis the two audiences: Both entailed claims regarding "what kind of girl I am," though both claims are thoroughly grounded in the here-and-now of the conversational setting. The identity claims (Level 3) may best be understood as situationally instantiated and put up for negotiation. Our positioning analysis of Mary and Sue focused more strongly on the linguistic means employed to construct identity claims relevant for Positioning Level 3. Although these claims are nevertheless locally tied to the interview situation, they bespeak a discourse type that searches across past events (of personal experience) for evidence to make claims of a more decontextual sort. In our article (Talbot et al., 1997) we attempted to sort these discourses in relation to preexisting master discourses on the topic of pregnancy and moral identity; that is, we asked the question: Where did these discourses come from and how did they achieve their coherence and persuasive powers?

Turning back to the question of how this type of positioning analysis compares with L&W's original notion of evaluation, it should be noted that in my proposal narrative is defined considerably more broadly than in L&W: The discursive situation and the discursive purpose are as central as the semantic (temporal) organization of the narrative. In this sense, the analysis of positioning is an attempt to unite the pragmatics of narrating with the linguistic (structural) analysis à la L&W into one that emphasizes more strongly issues such as "the assignment of praise and blame" (Labov, this issue) and "viewpoint" as central to the emergence of structure and meaning in narratives.

In line with Labov's general acclaim of the analysis of language use, I hold that the analysis of positioning is basically a linguistic analysis, one, however, that takes linguistic (and extralinguistic) devices as performance features (or as "contextualization cues"; see Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, this issue) that index how narrators want to be understood. "Temporally ordering" and "stepping out of the flow of events" are two options in the repertoire of speakers. Other contributors to this issue have pointed to other devices that figure centrally in their analyses, and Labov's own contribution clearly points in the same direction. Positioning analysis may possibly best be understood as granting more centrality to the speaker's active engagement in the construction process of narratives.

At the same time, the proposed type of analysis points up that any attempt to assemble and analyze performance features as put to use for discursive purposes needs to acquire a multiplicity of potential functions. Although the "what's-the-point-question" seems to be particularly legitimate, a story may often serve more than one purpose: Above its very referential and informative function, it may entertain, be a piece of moral advice, extend an offer to become more intimate, seek audience alignment for the purpose of joint

revenge, and serve as a claim as to "who I really am" – and all this at the same time. In addition, these functions are not only achieved with narratives that position the self as one of the central actors. They are also used in narratives about (third) persons other than the self – fictional or nonfictional, and they similarly apply to generic *others* as central characters. Thus, although narrative analysis traditionally tends to privilege narratives of personal experience as providing some special access to experience and "the person," narratives as acts of narrating in general lay themselves open to the same kind of positioning analysis.

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Blank Check for Biography?: Openness and Ingenuity in the Management of the "Who-Am-I Question" and What Life Stories Actually May Not Be Good For

Michael Bamberg

In recent publications, Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I (Bamberg 2007; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2007a, 2007b) have put forth the argument that life stories – that is, stories in which tellers cover their personal past from early on, leading up to the "here and now" of the telling situation – are extremely rare. People never really tell the true details of their lives, unless for very particular circumstance – as, for example, in life story interviews, and occasionally in therapeutic interviews. Of course, this is not entirely true. There indeed are occasions, although these cannot be characterized as typical everyday and mundane situations either, in which people opt for something like a life story in an attempt to do damage control to their (public) image.[1] Here I use one such incident to show how life stories provide a welcomed repertoire that on one hand seemingly opens up the narrator's subjectivity, displaying genuinely personal information, but on the other hand does exactly the opposite: counteracting and undermining its goal of displaying openness and ingenuity.

In our ongoing discussions with Mark Freeman, in which we push for the investigation of small stories (Bamberg 2007; Freeman 2007; Georgakopoulou 2007b), we also have argued that work with narrative in the domain of identity analysis can no longer be restricted to the textual, referential level