

# Postscript: Plurifunctional narratives

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## 1. Introduction

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In this brief postscript I reflect on these stimulating papers, starting with hopefully well-accepted general precepts, and then commenting on shared themes, from the nature of narrative entextualizations as objects to the interactive social engagements from which they emerge.

Linguistic anthropology and the comparative study of talk-in-interaction take as axiomatic the plurifunctionality of utterances, which always operate on formally laminated but analytically distinct levels to perform multiple sorts of communicative and sociocultural actions. Furthermore, metapragmatics—a metatheory of what we can do with talk—involves everything from highly regimented, explicit, and available phenomena to problematic, difficult, and largely invisible sorts of action (Silverstein 1981), frustrating the search for definitional precision when comparing folk metapragmatic concepts. Two corollaries follow: that a complex layering of biographical and ethnographic background is required even to identify an interactive fragment as a member of some metapragmatic category (such as ‘narrative’) in the first place; and that all communicative ‘moves’ are interactively negotiated and emergent.

First a complaint: utterances are not only multifunctional, but also multimodal. In these for the most part audio-only narrative studies, with data usually in English or presented in free English gloss, one often feels that formal interactive elements may be rendered invisible by design. Ochs (1979) pointed out decades ago that when our data are reduced to the transcripts we use, we must be especially careful how we choose to transcribe. Is there only one possible standard of transcriptional detail? Does the original language matter? Can we somehow read the Italian through an English gloss? Or interpret significant visible action through a desultory textual paraphrase? In introductory linguistics, one hammers home the dictum: ‘form first!’<sup>1</sup> Formal marks of a genre or an activity are only available for scrutiny if communicative form is taken seriously. Fasulo

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1 and Zucchermaglio analyze genres via, for example, precise characteriza-  
2 tion of Italian verbs. Johnson identifies epistemic moves from the varieties  
3 of English modals that appear in her police interviews. Johnson also  
4 shows, with careful analysis of phraseology, how police interviewers  
5 relexicalize ‘start-point narratives’ into ‘formal evidentiary narratives’ to  
6 incorporate desired perspectives and evaluation. With respect to multimo-  
7 dality, only Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s transcript explicitly includes  
8 visible action as part of the narrative record—and necessarily so since  
9 gestures, movements, and facial expressions are central metadiscursive  
10 mechanisms for managing interaction and voicing interlocutors in their  
11 material.

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## 14 **2. Definitional and typological issues**

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16 All of the studies here seek in one way or another to expand the definition  
17 of narrative, but one wonders in the end what sort of category ‘narrative’  
18 is meant to be, especially across contexts and communicative traditions.  
19 Is it a native category (as suggested by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s  
20 [this issue] criterion: ‘[when] the participants themselves orient to what is  
21 going on as a story’—however, pretheoretically or ethnographically, we  
22 are to understand ‘story’)? Does it rely on vestiges of Labov’s structural  
23 elements—temporal ordering of clauses, complicating actions, or evaluative  
24 components, perhaps?<sup>2</sup> Must narratives be ‘tellable’—a distinctly  
25 context-dependent and presumably culturally variable notion? For Fasulo  
26 and Zucchermaglio temporal displacement is central, the exploitation of  
27 ‘the there and then’, so that narratives can provide for the telling of  
28 unknown, imagined, or at least ‘not fully known’ events. Bamberg and  
29 Georgakopoulou’s (this issue) further elaboration of ‘fleeting moments of  
30 a “narrative orientation” in interactions’ (e.g., hinting that there is a story  
31 to tell but withholding it) is helpful in showing how a native’s perspective  
32 might help identify narratives, but this formulation returns us to interac-  
33 tive and ethnographic matters that are systematically excised from many  
34 of the transcripts.

35 For most of these papers, definitions seem less important than typolo-  
36 gies of a taken-for-granted ‘narrative’ category. But the typologies, too,  
37 are diverse. Thus, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s ‘atypical’ or ‘small’  
38 stories are identified by suspending as criterial certain discursive charac-  
39 teristics they may lack: full development or coherence, for example. De  
40 Fina contrasts ‘self-’ and ‘other-narratives’ (which have different interac-  
41 tive and indexical properties) and expands her scope to what she calls  
42 ‘narrative activity’ (one among many ‘symbolic practices’ with ‘their own

1 roles and modes of speaking' [citing Gaik]). Still, in the end, she proposes  
 2 a fairly simple topic-based typology, contrasting with the sequential (Ber-  
 3 celli, Rossano, and Viaro, for example) or functional (e.g., Kjaerbeck;  
 4 Fasulo and Zucchermaglio) typologies proposed in other papers. As dis-  
 5 tasteful as fixed definitions or coordinated typologies may be, without  
 6 some guidelines it seems hard to be sure that we are studying the same  
 7 things let alone a unified domain.

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### 10 3. Contexts of emerging narration

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12 A strength of this collection is the variety of activities from which the  
 13 data are drawn: psychotherapy sessions, parent–teacher conferences, po-  
 14 lice interviews, workplace planning and post-mortem sessions, and dinner  
 15 conversation at a social club. The studies thus not only problematize can-  
 16 nonical elicited narratives but also implicitly challenge the analytic notion  
 17 of unmarked 'ordinary conversation'. Narratives here emerge from inter-  
 18 locutors' own concerns, but concerns that grow out of situated activities  
 19 each with characteristic interactive and social configurations. Stories are  
 20 'embedded within' (Fasulo and Zucchermaglio) other sorts of discourse,  
 21 and this wider discourse context thus becomes a central analytic object  
 22 to understand the genesis in interaction of storytelling, retelling, rework-  
 23 ing, and suppression. Moreover, as Kjaerbeck makes explicit, narratives  
 24 *project* their discursive contexts in the familiar dual way of all indexical  
 25 signs: they can both presuppose a certain sort of situation, and they can  
 26 creatively refashion the context in their wake. So instead of the highly na-  
 27 turalized (or perhaps invisible) motives behind a Labovian narration, we  
 28 see that stories emerge neither 'naturally' nor 'neutrally'. De Fina has  
 29 perhaps the most seemingly neutral case: narrative as construction of self  
 30 (getting to know each other, self-presentation, identity creation), but al-  
 31 ready highly constrained to certain *sorts* of selves relevant to an Italian  
 32 American social club. As most of the authors point out, there need be no  
 33 particular complicating action in these stories, no risk of a dismissive 'so  
 34 what?' reaction. Indeed, Johnson argues that suspect narratives before a  
 35 police interviewer are designed to emphasize the normalcy of narrated  
 36 events, to minimize the exceptional (and hopefully the culpable as well).  
 37 Nor need the narrative motives be the same for teller and hearer; in fact,  
 38 again as in the police interview case, their interests in narratives may  
 39 be diametrically opposed, a point to which I return at the end of this  
 40 postscript.

41 Several papers usefully link context and activity together via the con-  
 42 cept of 'community of practice', which implies mutually monitored com-

1 municative routines and practices, with an associated social history, and  
 2 evolving interactive negotiation of community-specific forms and rules of  
 3 use over time. Such a notion is explicit in Marra and Holmes' analysis of  
 4 Māori organizational talk and in De Fina's social club, presupposable in  
 5 the workplace interactions of Fasulo and Zucchermaglio, and presumably  
 6 applicable as well to Bercelli, Rossano, and Viaro's therapy sessions, or  
 7 Kjaerbeck's parent–teacher conferences, presumably mini-communities-  
 8 of-practice in the making. It is also the wider community of practice  
 9 (here, one imagines, the British justice system) that gives meaning to the  
 10 otherwise inexplicit notions of 'precision', 'evidentiality', and 'formality'  
 11 as applied to narratives in J's police interviews. De Fina also locates  
 12 some story genres in specific kinds of 'interactional work' (for example,  
 13 on Italian 'origins'): subpractices, from a wider repertoire, that set up spe-  
 14 cific argumentative possibilities to which mini-narratives can connect.

15 Finally, the emphasis on therapy, counseling, and workplace collabora-  
 16 tion reminds us of the overall practical context of this work, and the rela-  
 17 tions between the research questions we ask and the circumstances and  
 18 activities of the interested participants on whom we rely for data. Narra-  
 19 tive studies are thus made consequential to the real world.

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#### 22 **4. Narrative plurifunctionality**

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24 In a much quoted passage, Bauman (1986: 5) writes 'events are not the  
 25 external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather  
 26 the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative. It is the structures of  
 27 signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understand-  
 28 ing'. He goes on to caution that narrative 'may also be an instrument for  
 29 obscuring, hedging, confusing, exploring, or questioning what went on,  
 30 that is, for keeping the coherence or comprehensibility of narrated events  
 31 open to question'. As several papers here point out, canonical narratives  
 32 from this perspective share a kind of event-crystallizing (or questioning),  
 33 hypothetical, 'subjunctivizing' (Fasulo and Zucchermaglio, citing Bruner)  
 34 or 'preconstructional' (if not instructional) function with myths and 'just-  
 35 so stories', but also with conjectural problem solving, Ochs et al.'s (1992)  
 36 'family detective stories', or Fasulo and Zucchermaglio's 'fictions'. That  
 37 is, they bring events and situations into existence in some 'possible world'.  
 38 They involve both a lamination and a (de)calibration of different such  
 39 worlds, including narrated worlds and narrating worlds. Such creative  
 40 binding and mutual projection of distinct worlds is the narrative function  
 41 common to these papers, though often through the reverse formulation:  
 42 that narratives present alternative perspectives on the same 'events'.

1 (Note for example Fasulo and Zucchermaglio's concept of the 'reorgani-  
 2 zation of knowledge' via narrative as part of the reworking of 'events',  
 3 both intersubjectively known and knowable after the fact.)

4 Although with varying sophistication about the notion of 'identity',  
 5 several papers also highlight 'identity work' (Bamberg and Georgakopou-  
 6 lou) or 'identity construction' (Marra and Holmes) in narrative inter-  
 7 actions.<sup>3</sup> Partly this is a corollary of the inherent indexicality of all  
 8 utterances—most prominently co-constructed utterances—which always  
 9 project aspects of interlocutors' manifold 'identities'. Partly it is a matter  
 10 of referentially explicit 'identification'—self-consciously performing  
 11 Māori or Italian or professional selves, for example. Partly it is a matter  
 12 of footing, inhabiting shifting and fragmentable participation frames, as  
 13 with Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's ten-year-olds.

14 For me, more problematic are aspects of interpersonal stance manage-  
 15 ment that one might want to link to projected selves. For example, I find  
 16 'agreement' and 'disagreement' difficult *a priori* categories. One cannot  
 17 reify performance into attitudes or beliefs: stances are more complex  
 18 than that. So can you read off 'cultural values' directly from conversa-  
 19 tional moves, *pace* Marra and Holmes? (And what are the criteria, for  
 20 example, for recognizing irony and thus shifting the valence of such ex-  
 21 pressed 'values'?) By contrast, Fasulo and Zucchermaglio's attention to  
 22 pronoun shifts and footing changes in 'Templates' highlights the intersub-  
 23 jective work always being done in conversation, more complex than just  
 24 agreement and disagreement. Kjaerbeck (this issue) convincingly writes  
 25 that '[n]arrative accounts are descriptions that are produced because of a  
 26 local need in the interaction, and they perform different types of actions,  
 27 e.g., an explanation, a justification, an excuse'. But, as Austin's (1961)  
 28 classic paper on excuses is at pains to point out, we need 'clean tools'  
 29 (lexically and conceptually) to be able to identify such 'types of actions'  
 30 with confidence in ethnographically varied discourse.

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33 **5. Participant frameworks, voicing, asymmetry**

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35 A similar difficulty for me surrounds notions of 'implicitness' and 'indi-  
 36 rection' (part of Marra and Holmes's characterization of Māori interac-  
 37 tive style), since such notions are highly dependent on participant struc-  
 38 tures, which will be my final theme.

39 Bamberg and Georgakopoulou explicitly take up Goffman's (1979) de-  
 40 construction of Speaker, but interestingly the other contributions are less  
 41 explicit; nor do they engage Goffman's more schematic but important re-  
 42 marks about Hearer. All of the authors here seem to agree that narratives

1 are interactive co-productions, 'interactive achievements' by tellers and  
2 recipients (categories which deserve further scrutiny). Fasulo and Zuc-  
3 chermaglio appropriately link this co-production to 'distributed cogni-  
4 tion' through the 'back and forth movements' of tellership and recipience.  
5 However, just as Irvine (1996) productively recast Goffman's decomposi-  
6 tion of Speaker into different component roles as reflecting a diachrony of  
7 (possibly virtual) 'shadow conversations', part of the complexity about  
8 authorship of a story is a function of the social history of particular nar-  
9 ratives and the concomitant Bakhtinian revoicing that accompanies cycles  
10 of narrative tellings and reworkings. This is especially true in the institu-  
11 tional contexts treated in these papers, which require tellings and retellings  
12 fitted to the interactive requisites of successive moments (crime scene, later  
13 interview, lawyer's discourses, court; or therapeutic revelation, reworking  
14 by therapist, evaluation and hopefully acceptance by therapee, etc.).

15 Indeed, one way of understanding the relationship between what De  
16 Fina invokes as the 'macro' and the 'micro' is as a diachronic engagement  
17 between different participant structures. The overall social background to  
18 any interaction is itself a kind of macro-participation frame. Here occur  
19 the discursive lives of both corroborative or hegemonic 'master narra-  
20 tives'—part of what Marra and Holmes may mean by 'culture' and which  
21 may be difficult if not impossible to resist—along with insurrectionist  
22 'templates'. These may be 'shadow' narratives in Irvine's sense, since  
23 they are often only available by allusion, as in Bamberg and Georgako-  
24 poulou's Shaggy-dog story whose whole point is (a way of) telling (or  
25 not telling) about maleness, sexuality, and denial.

26 Resonances between 'macro' participation frames and those of the in-  
27 teraction at hand endow particular interlocutors with differential author-  
28 ity, power, and what Johnson calls 'interactional resources'. Johnson's  
29 Bakhtinian 'superaddressee' in the police interviews, for example—the  
30 judges, the courts, and the justice system in general—sits as a brooding  
31 presence behind the interviewer and interviewee exchanges. (Compare  
32 what Grice 1975 has to say about the 'cooperative principle'.)

33 Reference to macro structures also gives authority, expertise, and pro-  
34 fessionalism to the voices of therapists, teachers, supervisors, lawyers, and  
35 policemen. In most of the cases considered here, there is a built-in asym-  
36 metry of interpretive authority in the reconstruction of events through  
37 narrative: therapists, teachers, etc., have first claim at interpretation,  
38 though there may be insurrection. (Note that the asymmetry may be sub-  
39 tly altered by different individual skills: some police interviewers are 'bet-  
40 ter' than others, Johnson tells us, as presumably are therapists, teachers,  
41 supervisors, etc., whose authoritative positions may inject themselves in  
42 different ways on narrative construals and reshaping.)

1 The asymmetries are not only about authoritative voice, but about  
2 access and interactive power. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou mention  
3 the special sense in which self-stories are often taken as direct mirrors of  
4 teller's subjectivities, because of their nonshared nature and the unique  
5 access that teller's are meant to have to their own experiences. Bercelli,  
6 Rossano, and Viaro's therapists, however, seem not to concede such  
7 uniqueness. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou also highlight a different kind  
8 of asymmetry, where a (potential) teller makes a (potential) story all the  
9 more interactionally 'tellable' by withholding it. This kind of manage-  
10 ment of 'interactional engagement' is another little considered aspect of  
11 narration as activity.

12 However, the most striking asymmetries here have to do with raw  
13 power, nowhere more apparent than in Johnson's study of police inter-  
14 rogations and the professional transformation of narratives to meet insti-  
15 tutional requisites. She contrasts two potentially conflicting desiderata—  
16 protecting the interests of suspects, versus serving 'justice'—and we could  
17 generalize this opposition to most of the institutional contexts examined  
18 in these essays: who has the right to tell one's own story? (And when is a  
19 story really one's own, anyway?)

20 The sad fact, however, is that the balance of interactional power is  
21 clearly stacked against some narrators from the start. Therapists are  
22 meant to do therapy, so clients either acquiesce or buy the services of an-  
23 other. Parents are systematically at the mercy of the 'professional' inter-  
24 pretations of their children's keepers. Institutional settings filter narrative  
25 interpretations—stories in the Māori business are 'heard' as about Māori  
26 values, or in the Italian American club as about claims to Italianness. And  
27 police interviewers are clearly expert at overcoming even the legal protec-  
28 tions supposedly allowed to suspects in interrogation, as the suspect's talk  
29 in the face of the legal 'right to remain silent' in Johnson's paper shows.  
30 This is an institutionalized asymmetry of power. Worse still, Johnson  
31 shows clearly that selective silence is, at the least, a poor 'narrative strat-  
32 egy' for suspects, part of the systematic disadvantaging of witnesses in  
33 Anglo-Saxon courts, where only 'expert witnesses' are given any leeway  
34 in their own testimony, and 'hostile witnesses' can be silenced into accept-  
35 ing other-narration. With respect to culpability and evidence, the interac-  
36 tive shaping of narrative often appears to be a kind of blatant coercion,  
37 especially obvious in police interviews—for example, with systematically  
38 deoiced undocumented indigenous Mexicans in some of my own recent  
39 work (Haviland 2003, 2005), as well, for example, in the asylum inter-  
40 views studied by Blommaert (2001) or Jacquemet (2005).

41 In sum, these essays locate narrative texts firmly in the interactive  
42 activities in which interlocutors co-create them. They go on to explore

1 a great variety of reasons why those same interactants—as well as  
 2 analysts—may extract narratives, rework them, exhibit them, classify  
 3 them, contest them, or perhaps even suppress them as part of ongoing in-  
 4 teractional work. The move from narration to narrating—from object to  
 5 process, and from structure to activity—reinforces a shared sense that  
 6 one must learn how, why, and with whom one can and sometimes must  
 7 tell stories.

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#### 10 **Notes**

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- 12 1. Which of course does not mean ‘form last’.
- 13 2. And recall that for Labov narratives were in some sense beside the point, since the ‘fear  
 14 of death story’ technique was originally devised to divert speakers’ attention to what  
 15 they were saying and away from how they were saying it.
- 16 3. Any illusion that identities can be discrete and monolithic is belied by the ever-shifting  
 17 stances in the rich materials presented here, characterized as ‘performances’ of identity.  
 18 As Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (this issue) write, ‘constructions of self and identity  
 19 [are] necessarily dialogical and relational, fashioned and refashioned in local interactive  
 20 practices’.

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