

“Big” stories and “small” stories: reflections on methodological issues in narrative research

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Abstract

For us methodological issues are very closely interrelated with theoretical issues: a given theoretical stance opens up particular methodological possibilities and choices, while foreclosing others. We are specifically interested in the theory of how narrative constructs identity, agency and social space/positioning in both transitory and enduring ways and in a variety of contexts. Our starting point is that narrative and identity theory needs to move beyond constraining models of conventional generically based narrative analysis towards more distributed, dynamic and nuanced accounts. We will build our presentation around the notion of small and big stories: small stories typically though not exclusively occurring in ordinary conversational exchanges (Georgakopoulou 2006a, 2006b, fthc; Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, 2005) and big stories (lifestories, autobiographical accounts) again typically but not exclusively elicited in interview contexts (Baynham 2004,2005 and forthcoming). Neither of these fit the canonical Labovian, short range narrative of past personal experience of landmark events which, in retrospect, now seems strangely decontextualized. At the same time small narratives tend to be researched within the terms set by post-Labovian narrative analysis, at best remaining on the fringes of inquiry into narrative and identity, while at worst being treated as not narrative at all. What happens when narrative analysis decisively shifts focus away from highly bounded and canonical narrative genres and begins to see narrative as multiple genres embedded in a wide range of social practices and distributed through discourse?¹ Ethnographic interview data where big stories are typically elicited for a range of purposes such as the study of self-identity and spatialization practices have come to be viewed as a methodology of choice across a wide spectrum of the social sciences. Small stories on the other hand tend to be identified in everyday talk partly on the basis of being defined (& looked out for) as "a format of telling"/talk-in-interaction (i.e. raising interesting issues of misalignment, co-construction, and identity-at-work).

¹ Its pervasiveness extends well beyond interview and conversational contexts, and is encountered for example in classroom and institutional discourse but this is beyond the scope of our paper.

Given the relative lack of cross-fertilization between narrative and identity analysis of big and small stories, we will ask how a linguistic ethnography perspective can facilitate dialogue and theory construction, perhaps indeed cutting across and problematizing the distinction between big and small stories? How can small stories, understood as momentary and fleeting shifts into narrativity, be seen as a characteristic feature of the ethnographic interview, exhibiting and occasioning conversational features of alignment and identity work, while casual conversation itself can be the occasion for “the big story”. Our practical issues for discussion are: a) how do you identify and analyze such fleeting and transitory small stories in both interviews and conversation b) what analytical categories work with big stories told over time that seem to blend and shift into other kinds of talk?

Introduction

This paper is, as it were, in design. Alexandra and I will present it alternately, but it is at an early stage of integration so we apologise in advance for any bumpiness. The theoretical given is perhaps the Labovian account of personal narrative and how we have both in different ways worried away at it in relation to types of narrative data which didn't quite fit the mould and have forced us to reconsider our analytical categories in a number of ways.

I first began to engage with the Labovian model many years ago in my doctoral research with the Moroccan community in West London. Somewhat eccentrically at the time, less so now, I wanted to do a study of second language learning that was sociolinguistically grounded and discourse analytic in approach. Since the study was of second language learning rather than of discourse analysis I chose to focus on narrative as a rather well described genre which I could use as my starting point. How wrong I was, and indeed how analytically naïve.

The data, drawn from open-ended interviews of a sociolinguistic, or as I would think now, ethnographic variety provided many frustrations to the butterfly collector of performed oral narrative. The data was rich and interesting and has absorbed me in different ways for many years, but in a number of ways has resisted reduction to the Labovian analytical categories. On the one hand the narratives I encountered were too big and complex for the Labov model, life-stories, multi-episode with many shifts

in time and space, combining shifts in an act of performance with extensive evaluative commentary, narrative re-tellings that seemed to blend or bleed into extensive evaluation, a secondary rather than a primary genre in Bakhtin's sense, a genre composed of shifts from one genre to another and back again. I called this at the time autobiographical discourse but would now call it, following the work of Charlotte Linde, life-story. So these were the big stories. On the other hand there were other kinds of data in which the people I interviewed spoke at length in non-narrative ways about the issues and problems that they encountered in migrating to London. What was also characteristic of this talk were the prevalence of little what you might call shifts into performance, too fleeting and momentary to hit the radar generically, the dramatisation of performance of a snatch of conversation, the reference to a particular sequence of events. The data was full of this momentary narrative-like talk, which I thought of at the time as narrativity, the pervasive distribution of narrative-like features in talk but which I think corresponds in some ways to the "small stories" recently brought into discussion by Alexandra and Michael Bamberg, and here we have it – large stories and small stories, both of which led me away from a focus on Labovian narratives of personal experience, the data forcing me to shift, revise and expand my analytical categories. Far from seeing narrative as a solved problem, I recognized it as an open problem that has engaged my attention on and off in different ways ever since.

The other issue that I struggled with in this research was the nature of interview data. There were a number of influences at the time which tended to oppose interview data with "real" interaction from an ethnography of communication perspective, and I'm thinking here of the contention of the late Nessa Wolfson that the open-ended sociolinguistic or ethnographic interview is not a speed event and indeed some remarks of Bourdieu in the first chapter I think of *Outline of a theory of practice*, disparaging the semi-theoretical disposition engendered in informants by learned questioning. I worried at the time that my data was in this sense inauthentic. My thinking about this was turned around by the more reflexive approach to interviewing in the work of people like Briggs and indeed to research methodology more generally in the work of Hammersley and Atkinson has led me to distinguish between real and artificial, authentic and inauthentic, interviews and casual conversation are contexts with different affordances, enabling/producing different kinds of talk with different kinds of interest for the participant and analyst. Alexandra will now go on to set the scene for her presentation and then, time permitting we will look at data drawn from both ethnographic interviews and classroom talk.

(Alexandra)

DATASET ONE

Narratives of Moroccan Migration (cf Baynham 1988, 2003, 2004, 2005)

EXTRACT ONE

(M.A. describes how he came to settle in London. Interview early 1980s)

- 1 M.A./ yes I was living in the country because when I
got back to my job I went to see my sister in Belgium
- 2 I/ yeah
- 3 M.A./ she was going she was going to er Mecca and
she
- 4 I/ yeah
- 5 M.A./ that's right and I missed her and I came back to
London I - I mean I came back to Hertfordshire and they said you
the job is gone and er so I came to London and I had virtually no
money very little money
- 6 M.A./ so I came to London ad I had virtually no
money very little money but I wasn't really concerned because I
still went to the one arm bandit playing you know I didn't
- 7 I/ yeah
- 8 M.A./ then when I began to feel it is that when I'm
went to the agency and they told me that there was no job today
come back tomorrow
- 9 I/ yeah
- 10 M.A./ and I wasn't going to have that you know I just
er 'cos I remembered I used to work with a Spanish in Stowe
school who said to me he was going to the London Hospital to

work and I said why don't you try the London Hospital now think that if there was say any Moroccan the ordinary Moroccans he would probably wouldn't be able to er go to an agency by then if he was not taken by another Moroccan who already lives in London you know

11 I/ yeah

12 M.A/ so I had at that particular time I had nobody and erm so you know I was just looking for a job and I went to the London Hospital and er when I went there I stayed with them

13 I/ mmm

14 M.A/ for a while there and this is **it's a chain events you know which erm if erm an Englishman was doing the same thing he would have planned his way well I didn't you know it just whatever happened happened you know**

15 I/ you fell into it sort of thing

16 M.A/ **yes I just let myself go it's like a leaf in the wind you know yeah I don't erm I don't say well today I'll do this and tomorrow I'll do this this money is for today that money is for tomorrow this you know .. I still do it the same thing today (LAUGHTER) you know I've never changed even at my work you know I was disorganized well I was called disorganized and erm always as well I found success in it I don't know why**

The first extract is from an extended life-story with many shifts in a time and space in which Mohammed describes how he came to migrate to England, constructing himself in some ways as an atypical case, somehow different from the other Moroccan migrants (turn 10). He is also interestingly in turns 14 and 16 constructing himself or more particularly his life-story in contrast to how an Englishman might live his life, which he characterises as through planning, characterising his own life as being organised on a principle of chance or luck:

“just whatever happened you know”

Mohammed constructs himself in his narrative in rather the same way as the hero of the picaresque novel, a literary genre with a similar range of episodes across space and time, with an artful and ingenious hero, making the best of life in a range of situations – what is interesting for our purposes today is the extensive evaluative commentary in (14) and (16) which illustrates how in the life-story, the big story, there is a shifting in and out of performance and correspondingly a blending or bleeding of narrative into evaluative talk. Earlier in the extract (turn 10) we see a short shift into performance in the extended narrative (turn 5-12).

EXTRACT TWO

(“Interview” conducted in Moroccan Community Association Offices early 1980s)

a)

- 1 Mr Ch/ I see three children just last week
- 2 I/ yeah
- 3 Mr Ch/ you know the cigarette e doing something I
dunno what this white small one put it inside on the cigarette and
when um he ask him 'scuse me what you doing the cigarette I
said to him no just () something I ask him you Morocco he said
to me yes
- 4 I/ you asked the b- the child
- 5 Mr Ch/ yeah you Morocco he said to me yes I ask him
my language this this no good for you what you doing like this I
dunno one colour boy another one English why this boy (HITS
THE TABLE) if this boy going good for school how can e going
e doing this

b)

- 6 Mr Ch/ and every year when he finish the school last
erm July he give to him the certificate what the what the snu
yaqula l-hisa:b

- 7 I/ hisa:b
- 8 A el G/ hisa:b I don't know
- 9 Mr Ch/ you know er that one this three four zero this
one
- 10 I/ maths we say maths
- 11 Mr Ch/ one go od he give to him this nice if this
writing no good he give to him only three or zero he writing here
they you no no very good for a writing or no good for this one
when he bring this one the father and the father he looking this
one oh my son what's the matter with you you no looking for this
he writing look teacher what he said to you and headmaster
- 12 I/ yeah
- 13 Mr Ch/ but in here I see no worry or you how old are
you four years five years you going another class six years you
going another class when he have sixteen when he have sixteen
oh you can he going a college or you can he going to look for the
job

Extract Two comes from an interview that was interestingly subverted, turned into something else discursively by its participants, I had arranged to interview the secretary of one of the Moroccan community associations in the office of the organisation. When I arrived he was there with another Moroccan. I started the interview with Ahmed and while we talked other men dropped into the office until at the end there was quote an audience sitting listening. As the interview progressed Ahmed fell silent and Mr Ch became more voluble and the conversation moved from the interview format into a heated extended turn in which Mr Ch castigated the English education system for failing Moroccan children. The extended turn as it grew more heated was punctuated with Mr Ch banging the table for emphasis as I was positioned as a representative of the British education system to whom these gestures could be addressed.

In section (a) he described an incident in which he saw three boys taking drugs, the story being told in the service of his argument:

“if this boy going good for school how can e going e doing this”

In (b) Mr Ch uses generic narrative to build up his argument about the ways that British schools fail Moroccan children, describing the scenario in which the father responds to the bad school report contrasting with the perceived situation in London - a “no worry” situation, with children moving up through the school system unable to read and write effectively and eventually emerging unemployable. Here performed narrative is at the service of an argument, the argument itself being in a sense performed in front of an audience.

In extract one narrative blends or bleeds into extended evaluative commentary, interestingly a meta-commentary on the narrative itself, while in extract two the shifts in to performance are in support of an argument. Both types of narrative are above and below the radar in terms of the Labovian model or personal narrative.

Issues to explore.....

- An underlying positivist trope in “real language”
- Moving away from generic classification towards shifts and blends – both in discourse and in social practice
- Notion of shifts into performance
- Ethnographic stance concerning the emergence of analytic categories from the data – how does this differ from CA line? In terms of what CA rules out of consideration – everything except the interactional unfolding of talk.