Narrative Identity: Questions of Perspective

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Conference Report by Jarmila Mildorf (Paderborn)

"Narrative" and "identity" or even "narrative identity" are tricky terms because first, they are often used very widely and (over-)comprehensively and second, because there is hardly any clear consensus on how to define these terms more precisely. Despite scholars' growing interest in narrative identity for several decades now and despite numerous conferences on this topic we are still far from reaching a full understanding of what "narrative identity" entails and of how we can bridge the gap between various disciplines interested in this phenomenon. On this note ended the colloquium entitled "Narrative Identity: Questions of Perspective", which was held at Humboldt University in Berlin from 26 to 28 November 2009. This may sound rather pessimistic, but what such an assessment really shows is simply the sheer complexity of the issue at hand and the fact that a lot more needs to be done to come to grips with it. It is therefore the more admirable in the conference organizers Eveline Kilian, Martin Klepper and Helga Schwalm (Institut für Anglistik & Amerikanistik) that they did not shy away from putting together an interdisciplinary colloquium dedicated to discussing the concept of narrative identity with special focus on narrative perspective.

This colloquium brought together a range of scholars from disciplines as varied as social and cognitive psychology (Michael Bamberg, Jens Brockmeier, Mark Freeman, Wolfgang Kraus, Gabriele Lucius-Hoene), sociolinguistics (Jarmila Mildorf), rhetoric (Andreea Deciu Ritivoi), literary and cultural studies (Nicole Frey Büchel, Monika Fludernik, Rüdiger Heinze, Martin Klepper, Stefanie Schäfer, Ariane Theis), who engaged in lively but friendly discussions. In fact, one of the main strengths of this event was its congenial atmosphere, which enabled the participants—towering figures in their fields as well as new voices—to meet and talk in depth about their respective "takes" on the issue. Even though the various papers presented somewhat diverse theoretical approaches and methods as well ontologically different types of narrative, participants were not offhand negative or critical towards others—as is unfortunately often the case—but instead showed an interest in sharing their views. The data presented involved both oral stories mainly elicited in interviews, fictional and non-fictional autobiographies and novels. Methods included network and positioning analysis,

sociolinguistic narrative and conversation analysis, discourse analysis, ethnomethodology and narratology.

Martin Klepper opened the conference with a talk that offered a general introduction into the large and in some ways well-trodden area of research on narrative identity. His presentation highlighted the major keywords that structure the field: identity/plurality, embodiment, coherence/contingency, agency/alterity and perspective. All the other papers then presented their respective argument against this backdrop. The papers can be subsumed under four major clusters: 1. aspects and processes of autobiography, 2. autobiography in fictional texts, 3. specific non-standard types of identity presentation in literary texts, 4. identity formation in interview narratives.

The three papers presented by Jens Brockmeier, Mark Freeman and Andreea Ritivoi dealt mainly with questions of identity formation in and through autobiographical narratives. Mark Freeman's highly philosophical paper brought together Ricœur's concept of narrative time with notions of otherness as discussed in philosophers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Charles Taylor. The potentiality of future-oriented narratives was addressed as well as the possibility of a "pre-narrative" identity. Freeman argued that narrative opened a middle path between idem (identity) and ipse (self) and that it hinged around our existential liminality that manifests itself in the presence of absence and the absence of presence. Jens Brockmeier outlined three major claims that are made about narrative and identity in the literature: 1. the hermeneutic claim (we make sense of our lives through narratives), 2. the subjunctive or constructive claim (our lives and identities are constructed through narratives), 3. the performative/interactional claim (identities emerge in situational contexts in which we perform life narratives with and for others). His approach to autobiographical memory was to equate the autobiographical process with the narrative process itself, which he then demonstrated by applying a standard psychological model of autobiographical memory processing to a stretch of text from Ian McEwan's Saturday, in which the protagonist is shown to be reminiscing about events in his life. Andreea Ritivoi, by contrast, looked at real autobiographical narratives by immigrants in the United States and juxtaposed them with certain existing "master" or stereotypical narratives surrounding "the good" or "bad" immigrant. Ritivoi argued that coherence systems emerging from such master narratives were oppressive and potentially detrimental to immigrants' identity formation because they pressed them into identity templates or reified narratives.

Insights and concepts from autobiography studies were adopted for the analysis of autobiographical fiction in the papers by Nicole Frey Büchel, Ariane Theis and Stefanie Schäfer. Nicole Frey Büchel showed in which way Jeffrey Eugenides' novel Middlesex can be seen as an ideal site for understanding multi-perspectival self-exploration. Frey Büchel drew a parallel between the protagonist's quest for a true and stable self and the reading process itself, in which meanings are constantly deferred through the novel's open postmodern structure. Ariane Theis focused on Richard Power's novel The Time of Our Singing and stressed the significance of the Other in identity formation, a constellation foregrounded by both Contextual Therapy and Martin Buber's conceptualization of the I-Thou relationship. Stefanie Schäfer analysed this interpersonal aspect within the framework of an ethics of recognition encompassing both the interaction between different characters in a text and the interaction between the narrator and the reader. These papers raised issues concerning the difference between fictional and non-fictional autobiographies (e.g., whether the difference is important and if so, why) and the relationship between trauma and narrative. What consequences does trauma have for the narrative process (e.g., trauma as something that cannot be narrated, that disrupts narration)?

The papers by Rüdiger Heinze and Monika Fludernik were concerned with fictional texts in more abstract terms and addressed very specific types of identity representation in novels. Monika Fludernik's talk focused on the emergence of collective or plural identities in novels by means of 1. less common narrative situations such as I-and-you narrative, we-narrative and they-narrative, 2. representations of communal speech and consciousness, and 3. representations of national, tribal and other communal identities. Fludernik drew parallels with research on conversational narratives where we-narratives, for example, appear to be much more common than in literary texts. In that regard, Fludernik argued, one has to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive "we" and ask whether a we-narrative simply replaces what is essentially an I-narrative. The composite novel, i.e., a series of short stories that features overlapping characters, offers a good example for the use of multiple identities in literary texts. Rüdiger Heinze looked at 'impossible perspectives' that transcend real-world experiential parameters (e.g. world seen from the perspective of a dog or reversed narratives). Especially postmodern fiction aims at distorting rather than imitating the world we know, and such challenging distortions, Heinze argued, not only heighten our appreciation of the

potential of fiction to create new ways of world-making but also offer new perspectives on narrative identity.

The fourth cluster of papers involved the analysis of non-fictional oral narratives, most of which were elicited in interviews. Jarmila Mildorf sought to achieve a crossover between literary and sociolinguistic narrative analysis by applying a socionarratological framework to the life story of a craft artist. Concepts such as "focalization", "experiencing" vs. "narrating self" and the rendering of direct speech were shown to be of use in the study of perspectivization in oral stories. Wolfgang Kraus addressed the question of self-positioning in narratives from interviews with foreign students who live and work in Germany. These stories were particularly interesting because they showed the tension between what Kraus called biographical (or personal) narratives on the one hand and participatory (or group) narratives on the other. Another question that emerged was what might happen when (unspeakable) personal stories clash with wider narrations of culture. One observation seemed to be that unity in narrative may be an answer to social plurality. The discussion following Kraus' talk revolved around the influence of the perspectives, meanings and readings that may be created by the interviewers, the specific interviewing context, the choice of subjects, the interpretation of their statements etc. The analysis of real-life data requires methodological self-reflexivity on the part of the research team. Further questions included: How can we conceptualize the relationship/tension between claims of indivual agency and contemporary theories of subjectivity (e.g. Foucault) that question the notion of absolute autonomy and see the subject as a product of specific discourses and structural constraints? How can areas that are not explicitly mentioned by the interviewees themselves be brought into the picture and is it necessary to do so?

These questions were also relevant for the data presented by Gabriele Lucius-Hoene, who investigated narrators' employment of a scenic performance of other-perspectives for identity claims and personal stakes in two interviews where patients recounted key moments in their illness narratives. Lucius-Hoene emphasized the possibility in oral narratives of an "almighty author" who can shape or frame the voices of problematic interactants in a story by means of rhetorical devices. Speaking as a psychologist, Lucius-Hoene also made the important distinction between two types of coherence in oral storytelling, namely the one that helps patients create their identity and the one that needs to be deconstructed in psychotherapy because it is precisely the coherent (master) narrative that poses a problem for the patient.

Michael Bamberg presented a discussion of an interview with the politician John Edwards that was aired on ABC television. He emphasized the importance of taking into account suprasegmental and facial cues when analyzing spoken narratives and illustrated this point by means of camera shots from the interview. Bamberg placed his detailed analysis of Edward's self-positioning strategies used to justify his extramarital affair within the wider context of what Atkinson & Silverman (1997) call the "interview society". Bamberg also pointed out two different axes for analysing narrative: constancy and change (diachronic axis) vs. difference and sameness (synchronic axis).

Atkinson, Paul and David Silverman (1997). Kundera's Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self. *Qualitative Inquiry* 3/3: 304-325.