



Once upon a tale

On the foundational role of narrative in constructing linguistic and social experience

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the importance of narrativity as a cognitive and linguistic procedure, and the role of storytelling as a social practice. After examining the structural analogy between the “story frame” and our ways of organizing, representing and understanding the world, it argues for the crucial contribution narrativity gives to our experience of being human. It then analyzes the role played by natural languages as the main semiotic system through which this narrative modality is expressed, and retraces the paths along which meanings emerge as the result of recursive linguistic practices in a shared environment. Being narratively and socially constructed, we will further point out, words and meanings only make sense within a relational frame, and the practice of storytelling itself becomes a privileged way to share them in a certain – necessarily local – cultural context. Both as a received competence and an interactional skill storytelling, we will conclude, has a strongly pragmatic dimension, whose exploration will finally lead us to the concept of “narrative community”.

Keywords

Narrativity, storytelling, sense making, linguistic meaning, narrative thought, narrative community

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... as of why I tell a lot of stories, there's a joke about that. There was once a man who had a computer, and he asked it, "Do you compute that you will ever be able to think like a human being?" And after assorted grindings and beepings, a slip of paper came out of the computer and said, "That reminds me of a story ...".

Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* (1979)

Prologue

Why is narrative so important for the understanding of people's life?

All of us have probably got a vague, yet very deep intuition of the crucial role narration plays in our everyday experience and of the pervasiveness narratives have in our daily routine. There seems to be something very "human" in the very act of telling stories, something which can be nevertheless quite difficult to define: at the same time, we feel that a better circumscription of the nature of storytelling might take us a lot further as to penetrating fundamental aspects of our way of being-in-the-world.

This is exactly the aim of this paper: a comprehensive mapping of this fascinating human faculty in the attempt to investigate the network of its manifold dimensions, a reflection on narrativity as the main modality through which human beings construct, interpret and experience reality³.

In particular, we begin with an analysis of storytelling as a cognitive operation (§ 1-2): here we shall call it "narrativity", understood as a basic semiotic modality by which we frame our individual and collective experience. Narrativity will be investigated as a form of thought and knowledge which seems to be specifically human and contributes deeply to our sense of identity.

In the second part of the article we examine the way this faculty consolidates in a verbal form, generating a linguistic device that we shall indicate with the terms "storytelling" or "narration": verbal systems constitute in fact an essential prosthetic means through which the search for meaning by stories unfolds (§ 3). The privileged meeting of narrative language and meaning will be dealt with in three dimensions: the moment of acquisition (§ 4), the phase of configuration and that of the use of linguistic meanings (§ 5). According to the lexico-narrative hypothesis we support here, meanings form and consolidate, tend to be mutually associated and *de facto* co-occur within stabilized sequences of content which can be defined as "narrative micro-universes".

Taking cue from this emphasis on very early and situated narrative interaction, we are then going to analyze the proper "telling", i.e. narration as a social action, by delving into the context-sensitivity, pragmatic effects and strongly interactive nature of storytelling as a shared practice: this more anthropologically-oriented perspective will

³ An essential reference study on several of the topics discussed in this article is represented by Mitchell (1981).

finally lead us to introduce and explore the crucial concept of “narrative community” (§ 6).

Such a particular itinerary within the storytelling theme has been drawn in order to start from an examination of cognitive skills, follow their unfolding in language and, through language, retrace the making of narrative identities which are actually relational and distributed from their very beginning.

Besides basing on specialist literature, the analysis will be carried out by keeping to some key-points: the strong link between narration and language; the essentially interactive and relational nature of linguistic meaning and telling; the intensely pragmatic nature of *storytelling*, which is primarily an act and, as such, always able to produce some effects.

As will be clear in the course of the paper, we have chosen to focus on cognitive and linguistic processes that respond to a narrative *modus* rather than on culturally-codified narrative products (which might then become the object of possible case studies to follow).

Narration will finally turn out to be a very complex phenomenon which leads us to investigate both thought and language, the subject and his/her representations, the individual and his/her group: briefly, mind, body and culture as an irreducible unit. In mapping the complex narrative attitude we all live by, we intend to stress both its linguistic dimensions and its social role, exactly because these two aspects are deeply interconnected: their mutual constitution will be more closely discussed in the final part of the paper.

1. Knowing through telling

From a cognitive point of view, narrativity is a particular way of processing data. This mode of thought consists in organizing experiences, actions and events through the framework of a story, so that they are perceived as connected not in a casual way, but according to a meaningful order, roughly following the sequence “initial situation – complication – solution”: in this sense, it presents to our awareness ‘a world in which timely human actions are linked together according to their effect on the attainment of human desires and goals’ (Polkinghorne 1988: p.16)⁴. According to neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, in fact, the continuous activity of establishing threads that unify and organize our self and experience is performed mainly by our left brain hemisphere, which carries out a crucial interpretant role by integrating new information with what is already known⁵ and so helps us make sense of the social world we live in.

⁴ The essential elements of a “well-formed narrative” are those summarized in the pentadic composition formulated by Burke (1945): act, agent, agency, scene and purpose. See a later reference in §4.

⁵ See Gazzaniga 2000, Gazzaniga, Russel & Senior 2009. Different from physical causality, the common-sense causality developed by the brain through the continuous integration of past knowledge and present-day experience, together with our faculty of anticipation, is the basis on which “narrative causality” depends (see, among others, Siegel 1999).

The outcome of this process, itself unfolding in a narrative shape, either written or oral – but, as we shall illustrate later, essentially linguistic – then becomes *discourse*, a specific form of communication, strongly related to social interactions and to the cultural dimension.

As a mode of thought, anyway, narrativity mainly intervenes at a procedural level in those domains of human experience that have to do with the knowledge of the self and of the socio-cultural world wherein one lives (Bruner 1991: p.4). The study of narrativity opens up interesting perspectives on both the devices of human understanding and learning, and the way we, as humans, develop our competences in the articulate and sometimes confusing world of relationships. As explained in the work by Smorti (2007), human thinking is structurally pushed by a need to attribute to the world plausible meanings that allow it to make conjectures on events and actors: to do so, it resorts to stories.

By narrating, we continuously build an understandable version of the world⁶. Telling stories not only makes the flux of experience manageable, but also contributes to substantially increase our comprehension of reality: through ‘... its power to configure a sequence of events into a unified happening ... narrative ordering makes individual events comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute’. In fact, conceiving of two or more events as interconnected enhances our understanding of them, because ‘narrative displays the significance that events have for one another’ (Polkinghorne 1988: p.18). Inserted in the context of a story, they both acquire a meaning and are, in turn, essential to the meaning of the story itself: in other words, they get involved in the complex phenomenon of hermeneutic composability⁷.

Seen as a very particular, yet extremely widespread, way of interacting with the world, storytelling turns out to be first of all one of our most spontaneous ways of knowing: the bond between narration and knowing is rooted in the etymology of the term “narrative” itself, which derives from the Latin *narrare* and refers back to the form

⁶ Storytelling is not only a way of representing the world but also of *constructing* and getting to know it: our contribution adopts a constructivist perspective on the cognitive level (the main device for constructing our experiences is, as we shall see, of a narrative kind) and – as we shall clarify later or –an interactionist perspective on the level of socio-cultural analysis (meanings, included those assigned to experiences, are constantly co-constructed and negotiated by social actors, who shape and redefine them through a praxis which is especially linguistic and, according to our focus here, narrative. Moreover, in a Wittgensteinian interpretation, meanings are always situated and bound to the “rules” of the communicative and behavioral “game”).

⁷ Which, in his writings on the topic (1986, 1990, 1991) Bruner indicates among the fundamental features characterizing both narrative as a product (text, discourse), the thought that produces it and, more generally, a narratively constructed reality. We would also like to stress that “narrative thought”, especially if confronted with the so-called scientific “paradigmatic thought”, has a horizontal and syntagmatic orientation (because it concerns the connection and organization among parts), is strongly intensional and represents an interpretive model for actions and events developed in relation to goals and context (Fleisher Feldman et al. 1990; Kornell 1987). For a more systematic confrontation of the two modes of thought and discourse, see the pioneering work by Lyotard (1984), even though more recent studies are gradually highlighting the compenetration of these two modalities across disciplines (Smorti 1994).

narro (“I report”), thus to *gnarus*, meaning “he who knows in a particular way”, and finally to the Sanscrit root *gnâ*, “to know” (White 1980: p.5; Bruner 2002: p.31).

The most recent acquisitions of cognitive psychology indicate that the above-mentioned basic structure, which makes a simple sequence of events become a *narrative* sequence, has a kind of resonance with our mental grammar⁸: the so-called “story frame” or “story scheme” (Smorti 1994: p.54). Since early childhood, such a grammar allows us to understand stories through an ongoing process of anticipation:

‘The scheme of a story is a system of very abstract expectations on how stories work. Developed on the basis of the regularities that the subject has discovered through his/her interaction with stories, these expectations allow to predict the phases of a sequence of events and the way they are connected to one-another’.
(Smorti 2007: p.76)

This system of expectations is not innate and doesn’t simply exist in the abstract in our mind: it is rather structured and reinforced through our routinized contact with the stories heard, received and encountered within our local cultural environment. While we’ll soon return to the dimension of narrative habit, for now suffice it to stress that telling is not a mere container for actions, but has a real constructive and transformative value: it structures those actions according to both temporal (e.g. linearization and sequencing) and semantic (e.g. that particular kind of connection which has to do with intentions and motives) internal principles of organization.

Weaving stories (about oneself and others) is, in fact – both at an individual and collective level – a fundamental strategy of control (of the chaos constituted by perceptions, which need to be selected and signified, thus brought at the level of representation), rearrangement (the structuring and connection of meaningful perceptions mainly through their linearization, which enlightens their sense) and expansion (the story becomes, in turn, the base and device for the interpretation of other experiences and, above all, a possibility for the active transmission of cultural meanings).

Narrative-based thought is for us, then, a sheer mode of knowing: not only a necessity and a very powerful cognitive resource, but also a crucial means to find our way in social interaction, as we shall argue later on⁹.

This “thinking through telling” seems to be an extremely widespread aptitude, recorded by ethnographers in very different cultural contexts and even potentially able

⁸ The term *grammar* is loosely intended here as a filtering device that enables us to organize experience according to a narrative scheme. In the course of the article many specifications will be given as to its socio-pragmatic origins and development.

⁹ Narrative thought involves an individual’s personal and social competences: the capability of attributing mental states to others, and thus being able to take on perspectives other than one’s own (it’s the so-called *perspective thinking*: see Smorti 1994: p.131; Tomasello 1999), interpreting others’ actions according to genres and antecedents, making decisions based on the elements of knowledge one has at disposal (Kornell 1987), imagining the possible, playing with rules, producing meanings that fit the context and negotiating (through) representations.

to function as a meta-code (White 1980: pp. 5-6). We are capable of producing and understanding stories – two processes presupposing each other – because we have always (perhaps even since before our birth) been immersed in a dense narrative environment: that is why we grow up getting particularly receptive towards a certain, always locally inflected, narrative grammar and gradually develop a narrative competence of our own (Polkinghorne 1988: p.107 ff.).

2. *Narro, ergo sum*

Considered on the basis of these premises, narrativity surely contributes in an essential way to our experience of being not only “human”, but *completely cultural* humans (Smorti 2007: p.10). Whether or not narrativity is a device inherent to human “nature” (maybe even connected to the process of our speciation itself) is still an open question, but this hypothesis benefits from the good points developed by many scholars and several, more or less recent, studies. Take, for example, Ricoeur, who has many a time remarked the structural, and precisely narrative, link between human life experience and temporality (Ricoeur 1981: p.165) and has, above all, located the hypothesis of an end of narrative very close to the extreme limit of what we can consider “culture” (Ricoeur 1984). Additionally, according to Roland Barthes narrative is, in its infinite variants of material forms, ‘present at all times, in all places, in all societies: indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative ...’. It is ‘there, international, transhistorical, transcultural’ (Barthes 1975: p.237). As Paolo Jedlowski (2000: p. 194, italics in original) points out:

‘the narrative interpretation of reality is part of the set of processes through which reality properly becomes a *human* reality. If we narrate, it’s because we are not immediately transparent to ourselves, and our actions get out of our understanding. By narrating, we increase our understanding. We are a *narrating species*: there are no other species like this’.

In Bruner’s opinion as well, narratives (especially autobiographical ones) are procedures for “life-making”: ‘we seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative’¹⁰. This means we can only grasp the sense of events *post-factum*, in a narrative modality and, even more important, only by telling to *others*: another essential aspect we shall develop in a short while.

Evidences on how crucial narration can be for a definition of our species itself come from studies on phylogenesis (which have reconstructed the emerging of a crucial human faculty, i.e. the symbolic duplication of experience, and highlighted how its transmission has always been committed to narrative - musical, gestural, graphic, iconic, verbal and written – forms) as well as from those focusing on human ontogenesis (in-

¹⁰ Bruner (2004: pp.692-693). In Bruner’s theory of narrative, storytelling is conceived as the specific faculty of human mind which allows the individual to continuously redefine him/herself thus concurring, reflexively, to the development of his/her own mind. On the self as a center of narrative gravity see Dennett (1992).

depth studies conducted on young children have repeatedly underlined the importance of specific learning conditions that make one-another possible and exploit the same dynamics¹¹ involved in narrative processes). Although aware of how problematic it might be to extrapolate ontogenetic data to phylogenesis, Bruner (2002: p.111) maintains that some features of the “human” actually intersect the properties of narration in such a surprising way to justify the hypothesis of a structural connection between narrativity and our human way of being-in-the world. Such features, especially relating to the mimetic sense, are in fact tightly connected to language¹². And this is not all: in the same way as language, as a habitudinary device of thought and action narration leaves a sort of trace that, in turn and recursively, becomes capable of structuring the way a subject reads situations and experiences, and of ‘laying down routes into memory’ (Bruner 2004: p.708).

From an evolutionary point of view (at both the cognitive and the social level), narration has always been an essential support for memory. This is particularly the case in oral cultures, where the only possible solution in order to remember has been, and is, that of creating linguistic modules provided with rhythm, repetitions, antitheses, mutual references, rhymes, assonances, refrains: in other words, linguistic forms based on predictable and culturally codified constituents which, in their being used and repeated, end up structuring thought itself.

In any case, telling and self-telling presuppose an operation of reflexivity and meta-cognition that is only possible because we are given the resources of recursive thought, this in turn being accessible for us thanks to the development and use of language.

3. On linguistic narrative thought

We can consider the meanings of historico-natural languages as the privileged form of our shared experience. Within the reflections collected in the Course in General Linguistics (Saussure 1959: *passim*), the notion of *linguistic form* emerges as a direct consequence of admitting the arbitrary character of the conceptual side of sign – of the *signifié* – and of its identification as an oppositive-differential value; the role of social

¹¹ Such as the understanding and management of “scenes of joint attention”, the capability of learning through others by conceiving of them as intentional beings, communicative routine, faculties as meta-cognition and the reformulation of representations: see, in particular, Tomasello (1999).

¹² Resuming the paleontological studies by Meril Donald, Bruner (2002: p.108 ff.) notes that the increase in prehistoric hominids’ brain dimensions has led, among other things, to the emerging of a mimetic sense that made our ancestors able to represent and imitate past and present events: an ability that offers remarkable advantages in terms of knowledge and cultural transmission. Mimesis can become a story only through language because language owns three crucial properties: at-distance reference (the fact of linguistic expressions being able to refer to things that are not present *hic et nunc*); the arbitrariness of reference (signs don’t necessarily have to resemble what they are the signs of); a grammar based on cases (a feature we find in all verbal languages: through its own means, each language distinguishes the agent, the action, the recipient of the action, the instrument of the action, the domain and the direction and progress of the action. In this way, languages enable us to track and travel through human actions again and again).

mass as the sole warrantor of the value system – of the *langue* – finally seals the theoretical path traced by Ferdinand de Saussure¹³.

In his best known work specifically dedicated to the relationships between thought and language (Vygotskij 1987), Lev S. Vygotskij gets back to assigning the verbal meaning a prototypical role as the tool that most directly stimulates the development of thought; the Russian psychologist also stresses the social peculiarity of verbal thought. With special reference to the processes of linguistic ontogenesis, he highlights the communicative – tied to social bonds and action-oriented – function of first language in the child¹⁴.

More recently, it has been Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) to underline once more the role of language as the main tool for the attribution of meaning, as well as its mutual relationship to the processes of cultural access (1983). The American psychologist and his colleagues (Bruner & Haste 1987: p.2, italics in original) observe:

‘through language the child is quickly aided in her entry into *culture*: ... its categories, and its ways of interpreting and evaluating events. These are not *invented* by the child; they are the common currency of the culture, the framework that determines the boundaries of the child’s concepts. Its medium is language and the forms of linguistic behaviour’.

Linguistic meanings constitute the keystone of human conceptual architecture, because they seal the most central contents for both the individual and her group in a shared, and sharable, form: we could summarize the sense of what we have discussed so far by saying that “learning to mean” is learning to be in the world or, even better, to be part of it. What is lexicalized are, in particular, the most relevant clusters or configurations of experience, knowledge and shared life. Meanings are thus originated in what speakers do, perceive, experience and know; they consolidate as a mode or form of shared thought and “go back” to the world as a way of “enacting the world” itself. Bruner (1983) observes that they represent at the same time the instrument and the product of our knowledge¹⁵.

¹³ An early reception of the saussurian semantics can be found in the works by Tullio De Mauro (1965, 1967); more recently, it has been discussed and argued in the Writings in General Linguistics (Saussure 2002).

¹⁴ The attention for meaning constitutes a fertile line of continuity between Saussure’s thought and Vygotskij’s. The latter’s proximity to the matters that Saussure was already posing can be identified, among others, in the observations according to which ‘we have known only the external aspect of the word, the aspect of the word that immediately faces us. Its inner aspect, its meaning, remains unexplored and unknown as the other side of the moon’ (Vygotskij 1987: p.47).

¹⁵ The role played by language in the emergence of autobiographical memory confirms this twofold functionality. Language is at the same time the vehicle through which human experience, i.e. the content of remembrance, is shaped – so that ‘what we tell certainly influences, and may become, what we “know” about our own past’ (Pasupathi 2001: 661) – and ‘the way in which memories are expressed’ (Fivush & Nelson 2004: 574). On a further, intersubjective level, language represents the instrument to create and participate in collective memory: in ‘a shared past’ which ‘allows each individual to enter a community, or culture’ (ivi: 576). For a further discussion of some of these aspects see §6.

Tied in an essential way to the processes of perception and experience categorization, meanings do express the modalities and constitutive properties of these processes.

According to the Vygotskijan terminology (Vygotskij 1987), the practice of making sense of the world (Bruner & Haste 1987), in fact, configures itself as a gestaltic, holistic or complex-based modality. It proceeds from the first forms of consciousness through the creation of scenes, i.e. sequences of stereotyped actions wherein roles, objects and action types are well defined. We can refer to them in the general terms of “script” (Schank & Abelson 1977) and hence to our experience and knowledge as “script-based” (Nelson 1986)¹⁶.

It is on this cognitive-experiential modality that verbal meaning systems interweave their form. That is to say, our linguistic knowing and acting realizes itself within what Vygotskij (1997) defines as *natural forms* and Wittgenstein (1953) calls *forms of life*: experiential spaces or contexts of sharing characterized by *routines* of repeated events. As to linguistic ontogenesis, Tomasello (2003: p. 88) in fact notices that

‘if a child were born into a world in which the same event never recurred, the same object never appeared twice, and the adult never uses the same language in the same context, it is difficult to see how that child – no matter her cognitive capabilities – could acquire a natural language’.

On the other hand Saussure (1959: pp.19, 77) had already declared the necessity for arbitrary values to be anchored by – or better yet, to embody – the *habits* of the speaking mass. Languages form – or *weave together* – the main domains of narrative thought, regarding which Bruner (1986: pp.13-14) affirms:

‘It deals with in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. It strives ... to locate the experience in time and place. ... narrative is built upon concern for the human condition ...’.

‘We are so good at telling’, Bruner (2002: p.3) further underlines, ‘that this faculty seems almost as “natural” as language’ (ibid.).

In their being habitudinary, languages and their meanings are narrative tools and products. They allow us to *tell* – to construct and experience – the habitudinary

¹⁶ A first theorization of the module or *package* of conventionalized knowledges can be found in the definition of *scheme* by Bartlett (1932) and in that of *frame* by Fillmore (1968). As set of previous information of which the machine must dispose to process the input either of a natural image or of a text written in natural language, the latter has found a further reception in the domains of cybernetics and artificial intelligence (Minsky 1975). Common to the diverse meanings of the notion is, however, the hypothesis according to which the processes of our knowledge proceed through stereotyped structures that allow to elaborate new information. ‘The schematic representation of events’, in fact, ‘helps to be both conscious of what is canonical and able to “manage” the unexpected’ (Smorti 1994: p.83). A more recent formulation of the notion of *frame* is provided by Fillmore & Atkins (1992); the centrality of *schematization processes* through which memory stores meaningful information has been recently re-highlighted, among others, by Pasupathi (2001: 657-658).

sequences of our shared individuality, which are in turn the object of narrative thought and, to close the loop, the domain of the verbal form. There cannot be any narrative thought without a habitudinary core and, it seems plausible to conclude, there cannot be any systems of meaning – which are the form of narrative thought itself – without a much alike habitual instance. Our thought – meaning our knowledge and engagement with the world – is thus mainly a linguistic, narrative and habitudinary one.

In the next paragraphs we are going to better clarify the reciprocal relationship between these aspects in two essential phases: that of the acquisition and of the configuration and use of meanings.

4. From stories to words: the linguistic-habitudinary ontogenesis

In the constructivist perspective adopted here, linguistic meanings are to be intended as tool and product of the constant, interpretive activity carried on by the human being (Varela et al. 1991); for Bruner and his colleagues (Bruner & Haste 1987) we are a species voted to the practice of *making sense* – of attributing a sense to the world. This activity not only is determined by the understanding and interpreting capabilities rooted in the species' structures of biological corporeality but, in order to be lived and experimented, also needs a context of action and content sharing. Briefly, it requires the culture that the subject is part of. The construction of meaning emerges as a twofold process, or as a privileged interweaving of nature and culture: in order for the child to learn to speak, the presence of certain sensorimotor and perceptual mechanisms, as well as of a flux of cultural interventions by reference adults, is necessary. In this sense, the approach can also be defined as functional-interactionist or sociopragmatic (Vygotskij 1987; Bruner 1978, 1983, 1987; Halliday 1975; Bates 1976; Tomasello 2003)¹⁷. Taking these premises as a starting point, we shall now see how the process of verbal ontogenesis is a path cluttered with narrative-habitudinary forms.

In the epistemological model proposed by Jean Piaget (1950, 1967), the relationship between organism and environment constitutes the essential background to understand how intelligence develops; hence it particularly accounts for the need for language to anchor by the subject's very first physical-perceptual experience¹⁸. In Piaget's approach the development of psychic functions appears to be the result of the

¹⁷ The constructivist position can also be intended in the terms of a moderate experientialist approach to (the origin of) signification. In the more recent Italian research scene it is aptly represented, among others, by the works by Violi (1997), Basile (2005, 2008), Gargani (2004).

¹⁸ Piaget's model is made join with the so-called principle-based constraint paradigm on linguistic acquisition and lexical learning. In this sense, the development of symbolic capabilities seems determined by inborn prerequisites, as in the position expressed by Chomsky (1957), or bound to sensorimotor cognitive preconditions, as proposed by Piaget. In our – constructivist or moderately experientialist – perspective, on the contrary, the highest fecundity of Piaget's position seems to surface exactly there, where it is integrated by the theories – such as those belonging to the Vygotskijan-brunerian line – that conceive of linguistic development as a process of social acculturation. It is in this enlarged sense that we talk about a functionalist-interactionist approach. As Bruner (1997) maintains, it is a matter of “celebrating the difference” between the two epistemological models.

organism's ongoing process of adaptation to the environment and corresponds to the balance reached by the two complementary mechanisms of assimilation and accommodation.

The habitudinary factor therefore plays a key role in supporting psychic adaptation and development. As Piaget (1952: pp.1, 122, italics ours) observes:

‘Verbal or cognitive intelligence is based on practical or sensorimotor intelligence which in turn depends on acquired and recombined *habits* and associations. ... Sucking thumb or tongue, following with the eyes moving objects, searching for where sound comes from, grasping solid objects to suck or look at them, etc., are the first *habits* which appear in the human being’.

The first habitudinary paths – the first stories – in which the subject takes part emerge then in the form of action units produced by the recurrent assimilating activity. An important part of the child's first activity has to do with repeating, conserving and combining motor schemes, *muscular*, procedural or even bodily memories. *Deferred imitation*, which emerges between 9 and 12 months of age, can be considered as a representative example of the early human systematic nature: it implies the infant's ability to recall and perform a new action on an unusual object even several days after its first accomplishment (Fivush & Nelson 2004: 574).

On the other hand, since the very first moments in life the practice of making sense of the world realizes itself within a context of social negotiation and hermeneutic attitude. The human being naturally poses him/herself as a *transactional* (Bruner 1987) or typically *cooperative* (Tomasello 2008) *self*: an individuality constructing and defining itself through its relationships to others.

The social relationship gives the child an interpretive frame for experience and verbal meanings: learning to mean thus equals learning to negotiate meanings in a way congruent with the requirements of one's cultural space. Rather than of learning the grammar of a language, it is a matter of learning a “linguistic pragmatics”: ‘learning a language, then, consists of learning not only the *grammar* of a particular language, but also learning how to realize one's intentions by the appropriate use of grammar’ (Bruner 1983: p.38, italics in original).

Besides taking place on the background of the relationship with the environment, it is within relational contexts, where child and adult carry out common actions, that the first linguistic games occur (Wittgenstein 1953: §42): the meal time, the appointment with the little bath and the change of the nappy, play times, the shared visualization of an image book, a journey by car are a few examples. We can refer to them in terms of *format* (Bruner 1983) or of *joint attentional frame* (Tomasello 1999, 2003), whereas Basile (2010, 2012) proposes the variant notion of *shared situation*¹⁹. The socio-interactive origins of verbal communication are inscribed in the name of habit as well:

¹⁹ An essential form of pre-linguistic, interactive story is further identifiable in gaze co-orientation. Since the child's first month of life, in fact, the mother or the reference adult are used to following the direction of her gaze and naming the objects as they are gone through: the looking-and-naming sequence constitutes a

‘much of *early infant action takes place in constrained, familiar situations and shows a surprisingly high degree of order and “sistematicity”*. Children spend most of their time doing a very limited number of things. Long periods are spent in reaching and taking, banging and looking, etc. Within any one of these restricted domains, there is striking “sistematicity”’. (Bruner 1983: p.28, italics in original)²⁰

The use of the first words is therefore a form of “telling” and “carrying on telling” the same stories, that’s to say the re-iteration of paths that *are* habitudinary and at the same time *create* habit. Even the first uses of a language which refer to the past, appearing at about 18 months of age, concern the earliest familiar routines or “just-completed actions” the child is involved in (Fivush & Nelson 2004: 574).

What happens below the threshold of the two years of age leads again to stress the intimate correlation among language, narrative modality and habitudinary instance. Up to this stage language and thought represent two independent lines of development. This phase of linguistic practice can be considered as that of “pragmatic words”: tools useful for acting and intervening on contingent reality related to the first experiential domains of the child’s life (e.g. social regulators, the caregivers’ names, everyday home objects, body parts, words relating to spatial categorization, formulaic expressions).

From this moment on, on the contrary, language begins to carry out an “intellective” function: the child starts to actively and progressively enlarge her vocabulary – this is in fact referred to as the *vocabulary spurt*; it is the child herself who asks the name of every thing. Vygotskij (1987: p.101 ff.) identifies the intersection point between thought and language – and, with it, the origin of meaning as a unit of verbal thought – in a transition from external to internal language and, more specifically, in the expressive form of egocentric language.

Vygotskij criticizes Piaget’s interpretation (Piaget 1962), which sees in egocentric language the fundamental proof of childhood psychic egocentricity (i.e. of the fact that the child doesn’t in any way try and put herself from the interlocutor’s point of view). For Vygotskij (1987: p.259):

sort of proto-conversation whereby adult and child establish a joint reference toward the same reality (Bruner 1978; Tomasello 2003). The socio-interactive origins of communication also allow us to understand the central role played by the child’s reference adults, especially the mother figure. In Vygotskijan thought (Vygotskij 1987) this aspect finds a specific thematization in the definition of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), understood as the distance between the child’s actual and potential developmental level or, in other words, between what she can do autonomously and what she can learn with the help or intermediation of caregivers. The same supporting function performed by the adult is condensed in Bruner’s notion of *scaffolding* (Bruner 1983: p.27 ff.). Further evidence for the crucial role played by caregivers in the infant’s cognitive development is provided by studies focusing on the relationship between language, narrative and the emergence of autobiographical memory, according to which a more highly elaborative style of reminiscence in parents fosters better memory skills in children (see, among others, Pasupathi 2001: 665; Fivush & Nelson 2004: 574-576). A similar scaffolding role is played by peer groups in late adolescence and early adulthood (Pasupathi & Hoyt 2009).

²⁰ It is within the first socio-interactive formats that the child has the chance to experiment and define the essential components of storytelling: act, agent, agency, scene and purpose (on these aspects, also see §1).

‘... the function of egocentric speech is closely related to the function of inner speech. It is not an accompaniment of the child’s activity. It is an independent melody or function that facilitates intellectual orientation, conscious awareness, the overcoming of difficulties and impediments, and imagination and thinking. It is speech for oneself, or speech function that intimately serves the child’s thinking’.

Vygotskij had noted that the child’s first language essentially fulfils a socio-communicative function. The appearance of egocentric language thus marks the beginning of the transition toward its internal, i.e. conscious or reflexive, function: ‘the child’s egocentric speech is [...], one aspect of the transition from the child’s social, collective activity to his individual mental functions’ (ibid.). Wittgenstein (1953: §32) would later observe that ‘... “think” would ... mean something like “talk to itself”’.

Egocentric language more exactly represents the arrival point of the first “cultural apprenticeship” of the child. In fact, as Pasupathi (2001: 651) has more recently highlighted, ‘much learning and development begins in social practices and gradually becomes represented internally’. Apparently, the child is privately engaged in a narrative of her own actions and world, but actually she is internalizing her form of life. In doing so, it is as if she were telling this form of life to herself: a form of life which is made up by the first cultural formats the child actively takes part in, the first habitudinary stories in which she acts as a co-protagonist and the words that cross them.

By means of the same internal narrative modality, the child transfers them from the contingent reality in which they originate to her own interior mapping of experiences, to that treasure of impressions that end up being the same in all speakers (Saussure 1959: p.13). It’s no surprise, then, that the appearance of egocentric language coincides with the beginning of a more extended linguistic reference to past events: i.e. to internalized and, consequently, remembered ones (Fivush & Nelson 2004: 574).

First words thus originate in the initial forms of life or stories shared by the child and the caregivers: through egocentric telling they become decontextualized and generalized tools, symbols with which to recall or, alternatively, return co-acting both the same paths of content and those that will roughly be similar to them.

In conclusion, these words are pushed to become meanings: they are, moreover and constitutively, linguistic narrative-habitudinary forms.

5. Narrative configuration and use of meanings

Associative relations are defined by Saussure (1959: p.123) as ‘relations ... associated in the memory’; they reside ‘in the mind’ - ‘in the brain’- of the speaking mass (ibid.). Their position is furthermore ‘outside discourse’ (ibid.). So,

‘for instance, the French word *enseignement* ‘teaching’ will ... call to mind a host of other words (*enseigner* ‘teach,’ *renseigner* ‘acquaint,’ etc.; ... or *education* ‘education,’ *apprentissage* ‘apprenticeship,’ etc.). All those words are related in some way’. (ibid.)

On the other hand Bally (1940: p.196) remarks:

‘The word *bœuf* makes you think of: 1) *vache, taureau, veau, cornes, ruminer, beugler*, etc., 2) labour, *charrue, joug*, etc., *viande, abattoir, boucherie*, etc., and finally 3) it can release, and releases, in French, ideas of strength, endurance, patient work, but also of slowness, heaviness, passivity’.

A word can indeed “make one think”, that is it recalls or evokes linguistic concepts or ideas. The associative field is located in the thought of the speaking mass.

An essential thread seems to tie this kind of relationships to the ‘inner storehouse that makes up the language of each speaker’ (Saussure 1959: p.123): in other words, to the *langue* (Bally 1940: p.195). Associative relation and field appear to be the most important device for the mapping of collective linguistic thought, i.e. it is in them that the idea of meanings as the result of a consolidation – more accurately, of an inter-subjective sedimentation – process of the most central contents expresses itself.

Moreover, at a closer look they resemble paths of meaning that branch off from a sign and arrange themselves around it: they equal the beginning or *incipit* of a story that has got a linguistic content. Associative relation and field offer an essential demonstration of the fact that meanings tend to agglomerate around a same topic, that they can co-occur within the same narrative sequence. They can alternatively be understood in a more moderate connotation of semantic relationship, i.e. as a relationship between stability values or *nuclei* among all the possible perceptions and representations²¹.

An additional support to the lexical-narrative hypothesis comes in fact from the more recent constructivist approaches, which stress the limits of a merely positional and relational description of meanings and underline, on the contrary, their necessary integration with domains constructed by means of experience and language. The re-definition of semantic field proposed by Eva Feder Kittay & Adrienne Lehrer (1992) can be understood in this perspective. Within what the two scholars define as the hypothesis of *local holism*, in fact, ‘a semantic field consists of a lexical field – that is, a set of lexems or labels – which is applied to some content domain (a conceptual space, an experiential domain, or a practice)’ (ivi: p.3). It has, in substance, the configuration of a linguistic and experiential microcosm: again, of a scheme, a frame, a narrative script. As Violi (1997: p.131) informs us:

‘We mustn’t think this suggestion has too much literary a taste; not only novels, but also our actions, from the most usual to the most unusual and complex, are endowed with a narrative dimension. Behind every sequence of actions you can identify a narrative program, and single terms themselves very often activate one.

²¹ On the other hand we don’t share its “strong version” proposed by the structuralist vision, i.e. that of a differential and opposing relation among seeds, figures or atoms of meaning within a same semantic field. From our viewpoint the core of the re-interpretation can be seen in the conversion of associative into paradigmatic relations; one of its first theorizations is in Hjelmslev (1953), whereas a further one is traceable, among others, in the works by Coseriu (1970, 1973).

... In this perspective every term is connected by associations to the other terms that are part of the same narrative program ..., potentially belonging “to the same story”.

Being constructed through a process, meanings seem to be narrative tools insofar as they are considered with reference to their modality of organization or configuration. It is again on this first level that they emerge as processual-evolutive tools and products, i.e. as forms that have a narrative origin in the world experienced by speakers through the acquisition processes (see §4) and consolidate as a shared – likewise narrative – modality of “thinking this world” itself.

The continuity line between the *becoming* and the *being-there* of meanings can yet be understood on a second level as well.

Although based upon different epistemological premises, the traditional semantic models end up proposing a one-way idea of the lexical functioning that can be led back to the relationship *type/token*. The type always constitutes an invariant unit – a sort of “virgin unit” of lexical meaning – which then actualizes or, indeed, variably “tokenizes itself” in uses. Yet these same lexical uses seem not to respond to a linear and predictable logic of occurrences repeating, with marginal modifications, their respective type: it is rather variability that dominates the scene and the sole semantic occurrences we have at disposal are texts – the Saussurian and Ballyan *parole*. Thus the model of invariants and variants is not sustainable because it is not plausible, and structuralist and cognitivist semantics pull up short in front of the longstanding question of contextual variability²². Furthermore, the level of formalization they reach seems to lose any kind of continuity with the speakers’ world – with their actual processes and communication practices.

The only semantic manifestations we have proof of are, in fact, always local configurations of meaning. Such manifestations don’t seem to be otherwise identifiable if not in the speakers’ everyday activity of reiterated construction and experience of the paths of content that are most central – if not in treading the boards of our space, or better of our inter-subjective life *discourse*.

The way meanings are used is not so much different from the way we learn to use them within shared situations – or forms of life – linguistically experienced and consolidated. The processes of language acquisition can thus prove useful to better understand the “normal” lexical-linguistic use as well. Besides, the creations of *parole* are not limited to an execution process but dynamically stimulate and “erode” the system of values active in collective consciousness – ‘language is necessary if speaking is to be intelligible and produce all its effects, but speaking is necessary for the establishment of language’ (Saussure 1959: p.18). What wholly emerges here is the processual and

²² We have already observed how, within the structuralist paradigm, meaning becomes a formal scheme of relationships among values, i.e. among semantic traits. We consider as well partial the cognitivist interpretations that identify meaning with a mere conceptual scheme (see for instance Jackendoff 1983; Langacker 1987; Lakoff 1987), hence losing sight of the role that every historico-natural language plays in organizing the same content matter. A synthesis of these aspects is offered in Violi (2003).

evolutive nature of meanings, which were born as narrative-habitudinary linguistic forms, likely consolidate and are “preserved” in the speakers’ minds and, again in the same way, “go back to the world” as a way of acting it out (cfr. §3).

In other words, according to the hypothesis supported here the stability we can attribute to meanings is not different from the one characterizing the situations of our life which, since its earliest phases, tend to reoccur according to highly predictable rhythms and schemes. The *situation* is clearly understood as a complex of functions for the anchoring of propositional contents, which concern at the same time the relationships among the utterance, the people involved in communication, the physical time and space wherein it takes place, the interlocutors’ social hierarchy, the prosodic, mimic and gestural aspects²³. The situation can also be seen as the essential crossroad among language, speakers and the world: in other words, as the place where the indissoluble synthesis between the symbolic and the indexical dimension (Bühler 1990) expresses itself. To conclude, the interaction of these multiple factors can also be summarized in Wittgenstein’s notion of *form of life* (Wittgenstein 1953: §19), that is of human beings interacting through the use of linguistic symbols and sharing practices and knowledge by means of them.

The fecundity of a narrative interpretation hence emerges in its entirety if it is understood not only with reference to the modalities of construction and configuration of meanings, but also with regard to their functioning itself. In turn, it leads to a local redefinition of meaning or, even better, as it seems now possible to assert, of *signification* – of the subject’s utterance practice in his/her routinely shared space of life.

‘Is what we call “obeying a rule” something that it would be possible for only one man to do, and to do only once in his life?’, Wittgenstein (1953: §199, italics in original) observes.

This statement is, of course, reminiscent of what Saussure (1959: p.104, italics ours) had already highlighted:

‘to summarize: language does not offer itself as a set of predelimited signs that need only be studied according to their meaning and arrangement; it is a confused mass, and only attentiveness and *familiarization* will reveal its particular elements’.

Language and *habitus* – language and story: our common story.

6. On the community-building power of storytelling: the narrative community

As explained in the first paragraph, man is a reflexive being animated by intentions and goals, who interprets others’ actions in a mainly narrative way and acts on the basis of the meanings he/she has him/herself produced: as the primary vehicles for the

²³ Even remembering processes lead us to stress the role of situation as anchoring, or even better as “shaping-factor” of the contents that are constructed within it. ‘Memories are’, in fact, ‘situationally bound constructions’ (Pasupathi 2001: 652), i.e. ‘influenced by the context in which they are produced’ (ibid.). A more detailed illustration of the role of listener in shaping conversations about past events is provided by Pasupathi & Hoyt (2009: p.560 ff.).

formulation of those meanings, linguistic practices and shared pragmatic routines are crucial to the building of common paths and visions²⁴ and, through them, to the making of individual and collective identities.

Let us now to explore the fundamental importance of storytelling from a social and cultural point of view²⁵. Borrowing from Bakhtin's intuition, we must recognize that no one is ever really the first to tell. The narration and reception of stories are dynamically interconnected processes, involved in a virtuous circle of mutual conditioning. As in learning a language, so in developing a narrative competence we draw from *stories* preexisting us, and appropriate plots coming from others. In this way we actually insert ourselves into something that has its own *history* and take part in a broader communicative entanglement. In other words, if, on one hand, we actively narrate, on the other we are also narrated ever since, in that we reproduce the narrative repertory of the group we belong to²⁶. Considered as something formulated and told, stories are a tradition-making device²⁷; considered as something listened to and incorporated, instead, they constitute an inculturation device which locates us along already-travelled paths, providing us with way-finding tools, recipes for thinking, reference values for actions as well as solutions for understanding the "new" (which, being reconducted to a narrative genre, becomes more culturally familiar).

Seen in the perspective adopted here, stories are always social because such are both their pre-conditions, as we have explained so far, and their outcome or effect, as we shall now clarify.

First of all, stories are a social device because storytelling implies a relationship between a teller and (at least) a listener.

Understanding the stories we are given implies sharing a series of premises with the teller: principles concerning the nature of life and things, ways of believing as well as basic rules regarding storytelling itself, which are arbitrary but somehow codified in narrative habit (Bruner 2004: p.699). It is precisely by means of social contact (both among peers and generational) and thanks to paths that are often very difficult to trace, that 'narratives do accrue and, as anthropologists insist, the accruals eventually create something variously called a "culture" or a "history" or, more loosely, a "tradition"'. 'Once shared culturally – distributed in the sense discussed earlier – narrative accruals

²⁴ Not exempt, of course, from dialectical confrontation and even conflicts of perspective: these important dynamics are possible exactly because narratives are in a way open discourses and offer the chance to formulate competing versions of reality (see Bruner 1991: pp.17-18).

²⁵ This is undoubtedly a very broad topic, which we can only deal with here with reference to some aspects, as the inculturation process and the social transmission of knowledge, but which would deserve a much longer and in-depth analysis: for a general overview of possible research potentialities and paths, see Blazer & Sanchez 2002.

²⁶ Telling stories always means locating oneself in, and continuing, a tradition. It is not a case if narrative discourses have so far condensed in modules (repertoires, schemes): structures deposited mainly through oral narrative routine, independent from contents but tied to the specific worldview of a community (Jedlowksi 2002: p.152 ff.).

²⁷ Whereby "tradition" is to be intended in its original meaning of active *transmission*, as the latin etymology suggests.

achieve “exteriority” and the power of constraint’ (Bruner 1991: pp.18-19): being a cultural and linguistic device, the habit of telling stories ends up structuring our perceptual experience, organizing our cognitive processes and shaping our lives narratively (Bruner 2004: p.694).

While they are generated to grasp the sense of experience, stories only make sense if, and in that, they are told to someone, i.e. in the relationship between the narrator and a public; if the individual wants to increase the strength of stories, he/she must tell them to others (Smorti 2007: p.67). As a real «currency» within every social context (Bruner 2002: p.19) and a form of discourse²⁸ which is always to be located in a relational frame (Pontecorvo 1991), stories serve to circulate meanings, exchange information and transmit knowledge. Their sequential articulation facilitates their understanding, memorization and sharing, thus creating the conditions for their very reproducibility in space and time. Considered from this perspective, all narratives display a very concrete dimension and can be viewed as actions bound to a context, to the relationship between he who tells and he who receives them, to gestures and the body, to the management and social use of knowledge:

‘as we know, storytelling is an action as well, and this action is *social* as far as it is addressed to someone else. ... Yet narrating is a special action: what is narrated is a story, and stories, in turn, are about actions. Narrating is *the action of he who narrates action*, and of he who listens to its story: the story told is shared’. (Jedlowski 2000: p.187, italics in original)

As an everyday communicative and performative act²⁹, a distributed and cooperative experience in which ‘two or more people share a story’ (Jedlowski 2000: p.66), a steady co-construction of meanings – briefly, as a *cultural practice* – storytelling generates identity, memory, a fluid horizon of interpretation and belonging. As the path-breaking work by Maurice Halbwachs has highlighted through the reference to aphasia, in fact, there is always a strong tie between language and the capability to build and keep a memory (Halbwachs 1992: p.43 ff.).

Even more strongly than any other kind of talking and social rumination, storytelling is a strategic device of collective life which makes it possible to restructure our remembering according to the present and the recipient; as such, it reinforces the ties among individuals sharing the same memories (Halbwachs 1992: p.49 ff.; Hinchman & Hinchman 1997; Paez, Basabe & Gonzales 1997). In fact remembering and shaping the past are themselves, at least partly, a social action because they imply a certain amount of negotiation, and even personal memory entails a social dimension (Pasupathi 2001).

²⁸ Originally oral and/or graphical, but that since its ancient origins has made use of the most diverse *media* (see Potteiger & Purington 1998).

²⁹ As already stated, storytelling has a transformative power over experience: but, as a linguistic act, it also has the capability of stimulating and orienting social action (cfr. Smorti 1994; Andrews et al. 2002). Enfolded even in the smallest aspects of everyday life, it is so widespread that it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish it from the other elements of discourse. For a more in-depth exploration of narrative quotidianity, refer to De Certeau (1990) and Ochs (2002).

The development of a collective memory is, in turn, a crucial step in the genesis of a sense of community. Common memories are both generated and supported, among other means, through habitudinary storytelling: this continuous act of narrative remembrance is so powerful that it can even develop without actually referring to shared experiences but rather to more general cultural representations or to what Pennebaker calls ‘presumed memories or histories’ (Pennebaker, Paez, Rimé 1997, *Introduction*).

This is why in discussing the social role of storytelling we prefer to emphasize more the process than one of its specific products. It’s not so much a matter of *having* the same memories as of *telling* the same things and sharing rules regarding what is worth telling and remembering and how it is better to do it. Storytelling is, first of all, an action or, even better, a performance in a context.

Storytelling has traditionally served the purpose of rooting the group in a territory, explaining its origins, passing on parental genealogies, cosmologies, secrets, forms of expertise. Somehow – but only partially – different, in this sense, from everyday and more “distributed” narratives (e.g. life-stories, family stories, work life stories, gossip and metropolitan legends), such a kind of storytelling usually takes on the form of myth and is not always accessible to everybody. In these cases, in fact, each community has its own proven narrators, which is why discussing narratives should always push to explore the local “culture of the word”, local ideas on orality and storytelling as well as the whole anthropology implied in the profile of those called and authorized to tell³⁰. Such official storytellers are, however, merely the tip of an ice-berg, the spokesmen of a community of people which, even when not actively telling, nonetheless understand and move within a web of narratives regarding the community’s origin and destiny.

Through the access to the notions the group considers most important, the knowledge of certain stories marks the belonging or non-belonging to the group itself. Moreover, the coherence and repetition of the act of storytelling itself has a very important consequence on the building of social knowledge: the more we tell about something, the more this narrative comes to coincide with what we *know* of that thing (Pasupathi 2001). Telling – as we said at the beginning – is a way of knowing, and the continuous building-up of common memories and perceptions is hence the most evident effect of the chaining of narrative acts.

³⁰ A very important essay dedicated to the figure of the storyteller is of course that by Walter Benjamin (1936). The debate is still open as to how this figure historically developed; anyway, a particularly interesting suggestion comes from Bruner (2002: p.18): referring back to Victor Turner’s theory of the shift from ritual to theater and from collective participation to the concentration of procedures in few priests’ hands, he hypothesizes a likely passage from a situation of “diffused storytelling” to the emergence of “authorized storytellers”, endowed with the right to tell the stories of a community in special occasions marking crucial moments for the group. The ability to tell seems to be acknowledged and appraised in all societies, not only as a virtue but also as a responsibility: a double connotation which often pushes tellers to provide their stories with a formal and recognizable structure (and which might have led to the development of genres). ‘Storytellers’ are usually ‘among the most honored members of the tribe’ (Bruner 2002: p.111) and, because of the strong cultural value very often associated with experience and wisdom, its eldest members.

Among the functions Paolo Jedlowski bestows to storytelling, the most crucial seems to be precisely that of community-building³¹:

‘that which shows itself in the setting up of a link between storyteller and recipient. It can be either an ephemeral contact or the construction (and maintenance) of a community stable in time. ... If narrating is sharing a story, this function corresponds to what narration presupposes and produces as most elementary: mutual belonging, the sense of a sharing’. (Jedlowski 2000: p.160)

Considering the importance of this latter aspect and on the basis of the whole itinerary traced here, let us finally turn to what can probably be considered the most important concept an ethnography of storytelling should explore, and to which this article would like to represent an introduction: that of “narrative community”³².

From an ethnographic point of view, a narrative community is constituted by those who share specific pragmatic dynamics, received contents and interpretive rules for the stories they feel as “theirs” and fundamental for mapping their values as a group. The members of such a community ‘share not only the stories but the interpretive frameworks that makes them intelligible and tellable’ (Potteiger & Purington 1998: 57, italics in original).

In this sense, the first and smallest narrative community we encounter in social analysis is constituted by the child and her caregivers: as we have seen, it is within this nuclear interaction that the very first human experience of sharing stories and learning to tell takes form.

On a broader level, ethnographers very often encounter communities on the field whose local knowledge is constructed and transmitted narratively: in this sense, stories can become very important sources for the understanding of socio-cultural dynamics such as the relationship among memory, tradition and change, the maintenance of religious identities, the struggle for political and environmental claims³³.

As knowledge is never evenly distributed within a group, a narrative community is not a monolith. Quite on the contrary, it is a reality characterized by blurred edges: while some of its members will be the most authoritative and authorized storytellers, some other people will be viewed as “good knowers” of the most significant shared stories but will not feel “authorized” to tell them (in this case active and passive storytelling can represent a factor of social differentiation along the lines of gender, power, age); others,

³¹ The other functions being the referential, the empathic, the normative, the cognitive, the identity, the mnemonic and the ludic one (Jedlowski 2000: pp.160-163).

³² To the authors’ knowledge, this concept has never been used up to now, if not in a generic sense (see, for example, Jedlowski 2000: p.106 ff.). A very similar notion is that of “interpretive community” (Potteiger & Purinton 1998: p.57), but it doesn’t seem to put enough stress on the role of narrative communication and knowledge in the building of in-groupness.

³³ One of the authors has herself conducted in-depth fieldwork research among native communities in US reservations and in Southern Caucasus: in both cases, a focus on storytelling has proven essential for the observation and understanding of local cultural representations (more precisely, the research focused on the perception and practice of sacred places).

still, will only know those stories approximately, whereas some members of the community will declare that they have “just heard of them some when” but would not feel able to retell them. In any case, all of them will somehow feel bound by the sharing of a certain set of symbols, values, events and places that are constantly mentioned and reframed in the narratives they have grown with.

Built upon the basis of a common memory and, above all, a common narrative framework for interpreting experience, the narrative community is thus one generated and constantly reproduced by a web of routinized social practices through which narratives are shared, interpreted – and often re-interpreted – in the endless game of sense-making and negotiation.

A possible end of the story

The world we inhabit is for us, from the very beginning, a narrated world. We tell stories since we first learn to mean and continue doing so during our whole life because, by weaving experiences into a meaningful structure, storytelling enables us to make sense of events, actions and perceptions.

This particular mode of thought is so widespread among societies and ancient in the traces it has left through history that it not only seems to be co-extensive to our species but also to be constitutive of our individual and collective identity. The first aspect we want to stress is thus the narrative peculiarity characterizing us as *homo fabulans*: we are a narrative species.

Most of our narrative way of experiencing our shared world takes the form of a “linguistic praxis”. The cognitive and linguistic ability to tell stories develops in fact since early childhood in the continuous, habitudinary interaction of the child with her caregivers within an environment.

This particular focus on the ontogenesis of meanings leads us to conclude that our very first experiences with language and meaning are *narrative* experiences. Telling stories is thus our originary and most significant way of interacting with reality.

On the other hand, such a perspective on the generation of linguistic meanings sheds light on the social and interactional nature of our narrative faculty: since its earliest development within the protected, and somehow limited, environment of the family, storytelling requires to be approached and investigated as a context-bound performance. Beyond the acquisitional level, in fact, the ordinary linguistic use can as well be understood in terms of “linguistic praxis”.

Before focusing on its (always culture-specific) contents, then, we have felt essential to analyze aspects such as the relationship between teller(s) and listener(s), the cultural conditions of telling, the social profile of the storyteller and the pragmatic effects of an act which is relational from its very beginning.

Within societies, stories are shared as a particular, yet crucial, form of knowledge and a device of collective memory: a group of people able to frame and reproduce its sense of identity through storytelling is a narrative community. After engaging with the cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic role of storytelling, we believe that the structure and

inner dynamics of a narrative community represent the privileged perspective from which future ethnographic case study could take cue from.

In what representational terms can the semantic and processual perspective endorsed here be translated? Could it, for instance, constitute a working framework from a glottodidactic point of view? On a sociological level: how do collective stories form and establish themselves as a sort of cultural currency? How does narrative knowledge relate to cultural change?

Questions such as these remain still open, and might represent other possible plots of the story we have been telling here.

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