

## Theoretical Contributions

# Memory, History and Narrative: Shifts of Meaning when (Re)constructing the Past

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## Abstract

This paper is devoted to the examination of some socio-cultural dimensions of memory, focusing on narratives as a meditational tool (Vygotsky, 1978) for the construction of past events and attribution of meaning. The five elements of Kenneth Burke's Grammar of Motives (1969) are taken as a framework for the examination of reconstructions of the past and particularly of histories, namely: 1) the interpretative and reconstructive *action* of 2) a positioned *agent* operating 3) through narrative *means* 4) addressed to particular *purposes* 5) within a concrete social and temporal *scenery*. The reflexive character of such approach opens the ground for considering remembering as one kind of act performed within the context of a set of on-going actions, so that remembrances play a directive role for action and so have an unavoidable moral dimension. This is particularly relevant for some kinds of social memory such as history teaching and their effects upon identity.

**Keywords:** history, memory, mediation, narratives, events

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Vygotsky (1978) was among the earlier psychologists claiming the need of taking into account culture as one of the key issues for the development of higher psychological functions. It is through the appropriation of cultural elements from a social milieu that somebody born in a group turns from a biological agent into a competent social actor. Historical narratives is one of the key tools for the construction of a socially shared meaning of the collective past, for giving sense to current events and for the imagination of possible futures. Thus the newcomer is expected to assume the collective narratives of the past of the group, first as part of the audience, then as actor performing in the on-going socio-historical drama, and eventually (once acquired the necessary skills), as a voice transmitting the received stories, or even as a more or less original author of new ones.

School obviously is one of the main institutional settings for the transmission of official stories about the past (Wertsch & Rozin, 1998). However, as it has been repeatedly pointed out (Fivush, 1994; Nelson 2000), individuals are also exposed to family conversations, sharing experiences and remembrances throughout their development, so they get familiar with the symbolic resources necessary for building their own autobiographical memory as well as for the transmission and participation in the transformation of the collective memory of their group. Thus memory has a social character from its very beginning. And this is so not only because memories are shared with people in different social settings, but also because from very early on we are exposed to an avalanche of remembrances and narratives about the past of the different groups we belong to – family, community, nation, etc. These narratives,

even if they refer to events happened earlier than our birth date, are very often integrated in one's memory, and so make us to "regard the past, both within and beyond the limits of personal memory" (Mink, 1987, p. 93).

Attention to narratives as a device for the construction, communication and attribution of meaning to remembrances has been growing in the last decades (Bruner, 1990; Edwards & Potter, 1992; László, 2008) with particular emphasis on their 'poietic' (Freeman, 2001) meaning-making capability. Harré and Gillett (1994) went as far as to term this new sensitivity the *discursive revolution*. Studies on the autobiographic (Neisser & Fivush, 1994), collective (Feldman, 2001), family (Middleton & Edwards, 1990) or national (Billig, 1995) past assume that research on memory cannot be limited to individuals, but has to be understood as a phenomenon involving both mind and culture (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009).

This paper attempts to discuss issues related to the socially distributed character of memory, and particularly the central role historical narratives play in the social construction of the past<sup>1</sup>. A point of view closely related to other socio-cultural studies on memory (Middleton & Brown, 2007; Wagoner, 2012; Wertsch, 2006). We will start with an examination of the mediational role narratives play as indispensable tools for shaping and giving meaning to events of the past. So viewed, any reconstruction of a historical past results from an interpretative act a situated agent performs with a particular purpose or, in other words, as an action with a sense oriented towards future action; an orientation that unavoidably relates the past with the present, and the present with a future one takes as desirable or fearful. Such a view begs the question of the temporal and social sceneries in which historical reconstruction happens, sceneries in which multiple agents with different positionings and purposes put forward conflicting interpretations of the past. Thus historical (re)construction is unavoidably a controversial and argumentative process.

## Social (Re)construction of the Past: Five Elements of a Grammar

Kenneth Burke (1969) offered a pentad of elements to be considered as a structural tool (a grammar) for the analysis of any account of human activity: the *act* (action and the form that it takes), the *agent* (whom or what the responsibility of the activity is attributed to), the *agency* (the means or ways applied to reach the goal), the *purpose* (the aim or goal, the "why" or "what for") and the *scene* (where the activity takes place). This analytical device developed first as a tool for the analysis of literary and theoretical productions, but Burke himself also took it as suitable for the study of any kind of human activity. Thus, this pentadic grammar could be used both, for the analysis of the products of remembering (the narratives, the stories about the past taken as a literary production), and for the study of the very process of producing such narratives – remembering as an action carried out by an agent in a social and temporal scenery, employing linguistic and narrative means for a particularly purpose. Since our interest here is in focusing on how remembrances are produced we will mainly focus on the analysis of the production process, rather than on the product of this process (narratives about the past), although the latter cannot be left completely aside of our consideration.

The following pages will briefly examine how these five elements take shape when human agents go into presenting events of the past, particularly through historical narratives. We will especially center on the mediational role of narrative forms, on the positioning and purposes of the narrating authors and in the dynamics of the sceneries in which these actions are carried out.

### Narratives as Mediational Means for the Construction of Events

Mediation is a key concept, since our relationship to the world, far from being direct, is mediated through different tools (either technical or symbolic) which shape experience. As Wertsch (2006) states, “to be human is to use the cultural tools, or mediational means, that are provided by a particular socio-cultural setting” (p.11). According to this viewpoint higher psychological functions are mediated by cultural tools, such as language and narrative. These allow us to master the world and orientate our actions within it. In remembering, narratives guide us in rationalizing and giving meaning to the past by linking it with the present. The result is a plausible story, which, in turn, orientates our actions towards certain future goals. But how does this mediational role actually operate when accounting for past events?

Many people take reconstructions of the past to be a mere reproduction of ‘what really happened’. Following Bamberg (2009), we assume that what happens in the world does not directly show as sharply clear-cut events, neither are these tidily ordered in sequences, and even less structured in an understandable plot. Brockmeier and Harré (2001) take these naïf beliefs as a consequence of what they call *representational fallacy* and *ontological fallacy*. The effect of the first is to understand events as objective realities with a given meaning, waiting to be captured and translated into language as accurately as possible, and so taking narratives to be a resource for representing what really happened. This belief entails two related epistemic difficulties. The first is finding the most accurate and aseptic way of translating reality into narrative accounts; something that points to the delicate question concerning language, the very use of which, according to Carr (1961/2001), would “forbid [the historian] to be neutral” (p. 19). In addition, as long as it is impossible to reproduce the infinity of happenings that have taken place, criteria based on relevancy or significance are required, which Carr claims would have very much to do with the future consequences of the events. So, from this standpoint, the significance of a particular event would not stem so much from any of its supposed inherent qualities, but from the way we relate that event with later ones; something that usually calls for a narrative plot.

But, does reality come into view in the form of ready-made plots? This is what would follow from the ontological fallacy, according to which, “there [would be] really a story ‘out there’, waiting to be uncovered, prior to the narrative process” (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 48). Historians traditionally associated to the so called *narrative turn* such as Mink (1987) or White (1980) claim that a particular episode (either historical or autobiographical), as well as the plot, the genre and the theme that gather them together, are a consequence of the form in which the past is narrated. Thus *form* does not only provide a sense to the past, but also carries with it a certain moral appeal (White, 1986).

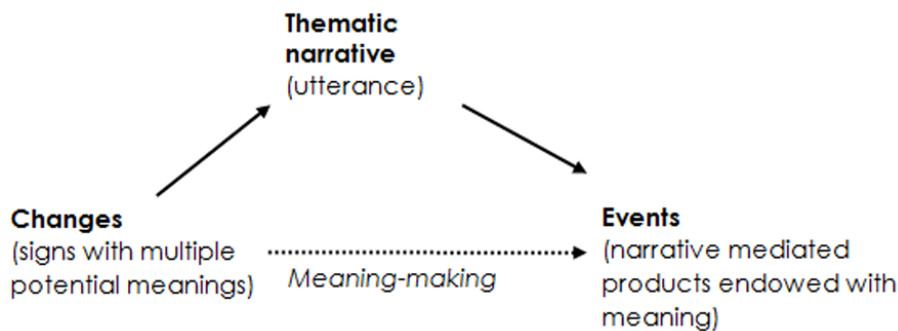
So viewed, reconstructing the past is not a mere representation of supposedly objective historical events – as follows from the representational fallacy –, nor results from a close and faithful reading of the story plot to which the events belong to – as the ontological fallacy demands. Rather, as Bamberg (ibid) points out, it results from the actions of individuals who via the use of mediational artifacts (mainly narratives) interpret their experiences and construct what eventually will appear as events. Event construction is then mediated by language, not only by lexicon and syntax, but also by narrative forms, genres and *narrative templates* (Wertsch, 2007). Narratives are tools for reconstructing, moralizing and domesticating historical past in a credible and understandable way.

### Interpretative Action

Events are not entities with an independent existence, but a result of the narrativization of the past shaped through the superimposition of a theme and a narrative plot. However, this does not make that any story about the past

could pass for a history of what happened<sup>ii</sup>. Narratives about the past (autobiographical and historical) cannot be arbitrary. They are for accounting for changes. But, what changes?, how to account for them?

Here comes the issue of significance, not only as relevance, but also of meaning, something that inevitably takes us to the realm of interpretation, to semiotics. If we take into account Voloshinov's philosophy of language (1973/1930), we may take the traces left from changes happened in the past as signs capable of receiving multiple meanings by their inclusion within different thematic narratives (see Brescó, 2008). Meaning is not a feature belonging to the change, but a result of the function that change has within the narrative plot<sup>iii</sup>. The way and position in which changes get instantiated in particular utterances within the plot is what makes them to take a particular sense and fulfill a narrative function. As Figure 1 shows, changes of the past should not be confused with the result of their interpretation as it appears within a particular thematic narrative. As Bruner (1991) points out, "the act of constructing a narrative is considerably more than 'selecting' events either from real life, from memory, or from fantasy and then placing them in an appropriate order. The events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative" (p. 8).



**Figure 1.**

The narrative construction of events

This genetic process shows in the way the September 11th, 2001 attacks were presented in mass media. The crashing of commercial airplanes against the Twin Towers has become a paradigmatic example of flash-memory (Brown & Kulik, 1977), since many people can vividly recall the images TV broadcasted alive. However, at that time few people, if any, were able to understand what was going on, to attribute a meaning to what they were watching in TV screens. It was for this purpose that specialists were summoned to give sense to that by inserting it into a narrative, that in addition to identify the particular agents carrying out these actions, also attributed them some intentions and motives, as well as placing the events within a wider story providing the supposed historical causes for an event that then was publicly being constituted alive. The resulting narrative inaugurated a new way of thematising contemporary history at large, replacing the old canonic schema of the Cold War into a new one. This meant to give a new meaning to events already constituted under the old theme, such as the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. And what is more important, the re-rationalization of the past within a new thematic carried with it not only a new narrative framework for the interpretation of the present, but also provided arguments for justifying some decisions shaping the immediate future.

### Explanatory Purposes

The same change can be subjected to many interpretations, and so multiple events may be constituted at the service of the explanatory purposes at play. So the falling of the Twin Towers could be interpreted, for example,

as resulting from a terrorist attack against Western Democracies under the thematic of a supposed “Clash of Civilizations”; or as the desperate response of the oppressed, if understood under a thematic of “imperialism”; or even, following conspiracy theories, as belonging to a cynic strategy of the “industrial-military complex” to justify the conquest of third countries. This drives us to take into account the moral implications that come together with any explanatory purpose when (re)constructing events of the past from a particular thematic, since the projection of certain future scenarios tends to be argued upon the narrative construction of a past, which also serves for interpreting the present. This is the reason behind the controversies that abound around any version of the past, particularly about the interpretation of the signs it left in the present (archaeological remains, documents, etc.). As Voloshinov (1973/1930), using a Marxist terminology, said: “sign [i]s an arena of the class struggle” (p. 23).

Obviously the purposes one may have when recalling a past can be of many kinds. They can point towards probing, founding or justifying a theory, a decision taken, a behavior, a judicial verdict, a personal or political claim, etc. In sum, purposes linked to interests that go well beyond an uninterested reverence for the past of an antiquarian kind (Nietzsche, 1957/1873-76).

Danto (1985) approaches the *explanatory intentions* of the historian as a key element for shedding light on the process of construction of events. Of course, to account for the changes known and providing a credible narrative, supported by proofs, should be among the explanatory purposes of the explorer of the past. However, the changes happened, or rather the evidence gathered about them, and the narratives constructed under a particular thematic are bounded together and cannot be disentangled, not only because of the significance and meaning the plot provides, but also because narratives play an abductive function, making one to fill the gaps of the produced story by hypothesizing events that cannot be supported by material or witness proofs, but that are indispensable for the narrative to hold together.

The cultural tradition in which narratives are produced is also relevant for the constitution of events, since they orient individual’s expectations about what happened, taking them to infer or even imagine some events. This is a well known phenomenon in the reconstruction of historical and biographical past (Levi, 2003), and is particularly relevant in the juridical domain, when it concerns the stories juries elaborate in order to make sense of all the evidence presented in court to produce a verdict (Pennington & Hastie, 1992).

### **Scenery: Temporal and Social Dynamics in the Narrative Construction of Events**

Any human action has a sense, and therefore can be subjected to a semiotic analysis. Interpreting the past is no exception, it is a dynamic and conflicting task always situated in a social context of controversies (Billig, 1987). The very *raison d’être* of history is precisely the diachronic and synchronic presence of multiple discourses in a continuous dialogical process (Bakhtin, 1981), arguing and counter-arguing alternative views about the past. This line of thought is what takes Hayden White (1980) to state that for a fact to be qualified as “historical” it must be able to be placed, at least, within two alternative narrative versions. Remembering is no different. As Middleton and Edwards (1990) conclude after their analysis of conversations about the past that the facticity of a particular event results from contrasting different points of view about what happened, and does not originate from a pre-existing reality to which the conversation refers<sup>iv</sup>.

Moving now to the temporal realm, the example of September 11<sup>th</sup> also shows how the superposition of a narrative plot upon events acts as a powerful tool for linking the present with parts of the individual or collective past in order to orient towards some near or distant future scenarios. This is not an aseptic and objective process. It

results from the projection of a thematic narrative linked to the explanatory purposes of the individual within his/her on-going activity in which the interpretation of the past plays a functional role.

This is a process that needs to be regularly re-actualised, as new changes happen placing individuals before new presents, open to alternative imagined futures. This calls for revising the old ways of looking and thematising the past with the effect of re-signifying some events, and even to look for new relevant signs, before left aside, whose interpretation may end up producing new events, and so transforming the narrative produced. Collingwood (1946) refers to this as the historical dimension of history.

### The Positioned Agent

The social context of controversy gathers a multiplicity of voices linked to social and individual positionings (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003) which struggle for (re)constructing episodes within a credible narrative thematic congenial to their positioning. This requires deploying rhetorical resources to describe and account for the episode. These rhetorical devices discursively constitute and evaluate the participating agents and their goals, means and actions, as well as the sceneries in which they played. Some get delegitimized, and some others justified or excused (Austin, 1961), according to one's identity position (Bruner, 1990).

Thus, according to the *positioning theory* (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), the way a conflict is interpreted is also a way of positioning oneself vis-à-vis the on-going controversy, since it carries with it an attribution of rights and duties to the agents involved. This shows in the form in which individuals thematise the past in order to justify some present actions to reach some future goals. Present positionings are not foreign to the interpretations of past made, because they are not about the past; they are rhetorical devices, historical arguments for supporting current demands, either individual or collective.

This argumentative context calls for the consideration of the *multivoicedness of historical representations* (Łuczyński, 1997) when it comes to studying the way people (re)construct the past, assuming that every historical account belongs to a broader dialogue involving multiple voices identified with different positionings. As Wertsch (2006) points out, this implies a *hidden dialogism* inasmuch as every version of the past constitutes, in one way or another, a response to a competing interpretation of a given episode. This is why the term *(re)construction* has been used in this paper. Thus, far from referring to an accurate and complete reproduction of what actually happened, we want to highlight that the past is always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed by multiple positioned agents through different narrative forms (see Brescó, 2009).

### Conclusions

This paper began pointing to the links between the social memory of a group and the autobiographical memory of individuals. Zerubavel (1996), when talking of *sociobiographical memory*, refers to this connection and remarks that individual social identity is bounded to the capability to conceive some events of the history of the group as belonging to one's own past, and so making them able to produce genuine feelings of pride, shame, resentment, or even guilt.

Memory and collective memory has become an area of interest for research (e.g., Rosa, Bellelli, & Bakhurst, 2000) in which special attention has been given to the role of historical narratives for gaining the loyalty of the population (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990). School history books are key tools for the social transmission of a shared version of the collective past, and so for strengthening national identity (Carretero, 2011; Carretero,

Rosa, & González, 2006). Learning historical narratives of the group is not only a way of sharing knowledge, but also a way of managing the conveyed events in such a way that they could be experienced as if lived in first person plural (Billig, 1995), so that individuals could appropriate the narrative and feel appealed to become actors to perform a continuation of the received script.

The use of history has important social and moral consequences, because the social reconstruction of the past has a powerful effect on our interpretation of the present as well as our view about the future. This is particularly evident when we look to not too far away uses of some versions of the national past in order to justify some political enterprises. However, the growing globalization, in addition to the increasing multiculturalism of some societies set new challenges that call for a more responsible use of the interpretations of the past (see Brescó & Rasskin, 2006; Brescó & Rosa, 2009). As some authors claim (e.g., Blanco & Rosa, 1997; Egan, 1997), teaching of history should promote a critical and reflexive approach, avoiding the naturalisation of historical narratives, so that they could not be taken as faithful representations of what happened in the past.

This paper attempts to contribute to this process of denaturalization by resorting to Burke's pentad as a suitable model that allows reflecting upon some of the elements worthy of being taken into account for the social construction of the past. The socially constructed nature of historical narratives is among these elements, together with the unavoidable interpretative, temporal, controversial and moral dimensions bounded together in any interpretation of the past. In sum, our attempt has been to unpack and highlight some of the elements that account for the social, cultural and political character of memory.

Vygotsky called for taking into account how cultural artifacts mediate the development of human individuals, but we should not forget that he also highlighted that consciousness develops within social exchanges, and plays a not negligible role in the direction of behavior. Perhaps we may expect that a growing awareness of the fabric of the social construction of the past would facilitate a more critical and reflective use of historical stories, and so to go beyond in our understanding of social life. Even if members of a cultural group cannot dispose of the narrative forms of their received tradition (Bakhtin, 1986), perhaps a growing awareness about how memory and history work may empower individual's agency and capability for authorship, and so contribute to developing an active citizenry more able to contribute to the increasingly complex world we are living in.

## Notes

- i) We take History as one of the cultural tools for memory (Rosa, 1993), without going in this paper into the discussion of the debate Halbwachs opened about the similarities and differences between history and collective memory (see e.g., Nora, 1989; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Poole, 2008; Wertsch, 2007).
- ii) The differentiation between *history* and *story* that exists in English does not appear either in Latin languages or in German, where the words *Geschichte*, the same as *historia*, *storia* and *histoire* gather together both meanings, somehow conflating the idea of fiction with that of representation of the past.
- iii) As Ricoeur (1981) states, "to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot" (p. 167).
- iv) "Our own explanations are judged not against the pre-given facticity of the source (except in the vulgar sense of its material existence) but against [other] human constructions of meaning [...]. In the end, the fact-value distinction is itself difficult to sustain since facts only signify, only have human meaning, within explanatory frames" (Popular Memory Group, 1982, p. 225).

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