

## Going Narrative: But Where Will It Take Us?

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There is a growing interest in narrative for policy making in community development. The implicit assumption in most projects is that just making stories available will increase recognition in readers and by some automatic process it will enhance understanding and thereby a sense of community. In this essay I want to explore this assumption, as it makes the value of narrative self-evident, but may leave its full potential for community development untouched. To find answers, I look for a starting point in what we all share: our biology. From there, I propose that narrative is the language we use to communicate about our relations in the world.

*It's true you can't live here by chance,  
You have to do and be, not simply watch  
Or even describe. This is the city of action,  
The world headquarters of the verb –  
(Edmond, 2002, p. 142)*

In the Netherlands, there is a growing interest in narrative, not only in various academic disciplines, but also for some ten years in policy-making for community development. In some projects, stories from formal or informal communities are collected and made available. For instance, the project *Verhalen uit de stad* (Stories from the City) in Amsterdam is based on the assumption that recognizable stories will bring the residents of the city closer together (City of Amsterdam). In other projects, learning to tell, share, and listen to stories is a vehicle to increase social cohesion. An example is the Dutch method *Buurtreminiscentie* (Neighborhood Reminiscence), whereby

the sharing of memories makes it possible to work up the community into an experienced unity. Connecting people through the stories they share with each other leads to the development and reinforcement of unity. By involving more and

more groups and individuals an increasingly large part of the neighborhood will be interconnected by the stories they share. (Verduin, 2009, p. 20, translation mine)

The implicit assumption in both projects—and there are similar examples—is that just making stories available will increase recognition in the public and by some automatic process it will enhance understanding and thereby a community feeling. In the second project, the emphasis is also on the so-called activation of citizens. In this article I want to explore this assumption, as it makes the value of narrative self-evident (who could be against community feeling and social cohesion in today's "Big Society" discourse, echoed by Dutch government?), but may leave its full potential for community development untapped. For instance, the examples show the importance of the aesthetic, amusing, and/or therapeutic characteristics of stories, but do not go deeply into what it is that actually establishes the connection between individuals. This is the narrative value I examine here.

As a rough guide to this text, let me underscore beforehand that I have written it as the academic I am today. In their discussion of the consecutive crises in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) pinpoint the origins of the crisis of representation in a bundle of works that "made research and writing more reflexive and called into question the issues of gender, class, and race" (p. 18). Moreover, behind the qualitative research process "stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective. ... Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (p. 21). To this personal biography I want to add the disciplinary upbringing of the researcher. The practice (Bourdieu, 1980) in which academics are disciplined is of relevance to how their thinking and reasoning are shaped. My own upbringing was first in the humanities and second in the social sciences. It was not until after my graduation, when I started to work at the faculty of Natural Sciences, that I realized that an important element of what it means to be human had been missing in my schooling. I guess I had been trained in the tradition of what Slingerland (2008) calls the "High Humanist stance,"

which holds that the humanities are a *sui generis* and autonomous field of inquiry, approachable only by means of special sensibility produced by humanistic training itself [... and the ...] conviction that only trained humanists can seriously engage in humanistic inquiry. (pp. 2-3)

As a consequence,

By enthusiastically embracing the confines of an ontologically divided world [i.e. *nature/explain* versus *mind/understand*]—and vigorously opposing and often demonizing anyone who dares to question this divide—it seems to me that humanists have doomed themselves to endlessly and onanistically spinning stories inside of stories. (p. 4)

In the intellectual autobiography with which Slingerland prefaces his book, he writes about the reactions of his colleagues and friends from graduate school when they hear about his interest in behavioral neuroscience: “As they slip away, I sometimes note wistful expressions of regret: they know that I had a perfectly respectable humanistic upbringing. What went wrong?” (2008, p. xi). In my own student years I had not noticed any hostility towards the natural sciences. They were simply non-existent. With my first job I entered a new world. As I continued my scholarly development into the narrative analyst I am today, every now and then I visited the natural sciences to see if I could find answers for one of my most nagging questions: is it valid to assume the existence of narrative patterns outside of my own interpretations?

Atkinson and Delamont (2005) acknowledge that there is patterning in the social world, but how do we leap from the individual to the social and what—if anything—does narrativity have to do with it? If we can explain how narrative patterns come about and how they relate to social change, then the arguments for narrative policy-making become all the stronger. Surely, to humanities scholars, the arguments for narrative policy-making may be clear, as they are used to appreciating the contingencies of local contexts and to assiduously attempting to do justice and give voice to the particular. However, to policy-makers, for it to grow out of the experimental sphere and become a habit, more convincing arguments may have to be put forward as their approach to justice is focused on the general. This essay is designed to share my findings. It is structured along the lines of *if-then* reasoning: if assumption X is plausible, can we then assume Y as its consequence? This shapes my essay as a metalogue, “a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem, but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject” (Bateson, 1972, p. 1). Unlike the metalogues between Bateson and his daughter, my metalogue will be the reflection of a thinking-out-loud exercise by myself, giving it here and there a confessional tone (Van Maanen, 1988).

I start with an outline of the starting point for my expedition that is suggested in “but where will it take us?” and then continue my search to finish with policy-making for community development.

### **From Population to Individual to Species**

In some disciplines it is a common assumption that biographies are highly individual and that, as a consequence, so are the narrated biographies. This assumption is related to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) outline as a crisis of representation that reoccurred in sociology in the mid-1980s. Academics from critical theory, feminist theory, and post-colonial theory maintained that the neutrality of representation of the “other” was a fiction. They preferred theories that focus on patterns over theories that depart from causal loops and linear relations. This crisis continued in the following decade, when poststructuralists and postmodernists criticized representation, legitimacy, and the praxis of the social sciences. They first questioned the possibility of representing lived experiences without mediation and claimed instead that these experiences were products of researchers’ texts. The second put aside the aspirations of the grand narratives that try to offer all-embracing explanations for humanity, often mutually exclusive and oppressive. They turned to local, small-scale theories instead (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In response to the decline of grand narratives that described whole populations with fixed categories, scholars started to focus on micro- sociologies based on qualitative methods.

The before-mentioned assumption of uniqueness is, however, contested by the upsurge every now and then of vibrant collective narratives. The processes of scapegoating (Girard, 1982) and moral panics (Victor, 1998), wherein individuals of/or minority groups are broadly appointed as wrongdoers and thereby accused of bringing about great social distress—and sometimes violently expelled with general consent—as well as the “emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, ... the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking” and other phenomena Gladwell calls social epidemics (2001, p. 7), are all instances of jointly told narratives and their translation into action. Unlike the grand narratives that were of a hegemonic character and more or less covertly imposed, scapegoating, moral panics, and social epidemics are grounded in popular convictions and spread in a more outspoken and horizontal way. The discursive practices that Foucault (1975) describes as historically grounded in truth regimes share similar features as the power to define circulates in multi-dimensional networks, but in general these practices are of a more stable nature.

The ideologies Van Dijk (1998) analyzes are of a similar joint and stable character. Collective narratives, be they implicit or explicit, evolving or disruptive, show us that narratives are also of a nature that surpasses the individual, of a fabric that is inter-individual. In other words, narrative research presupposes inter-relatedness or patterning. Of course, the ambition to study narrative in the first place indicates this awareness; otherwise, all individual narratives would be incomprehensible to begin with. Most narrative researchers indeed depart from a text in context. Still, the *origins* of the relationship or interconnectedness between the two and, moreover, the role of narrative therein, remain unclear. The relations are assumed to exist—albeit not in an essentialist, universal form but varying across cultures—rather than their non-cultural origins being explored in the humanities and social sciences (Slingerland, 2008).

In my own evolution as an analyst, looking back I can see how I started from a structuralist framework and moved on to a poststructuralist and even postmodern framework. This worked out quite well for me on a theoretical level. However, on a practical and empirical level, it failed to explain collective narratives and, indeed, collective actions. The risk of solipsism lurks if interconnectedness is disregarded. Maybe I had taken the leap to poststructuralism and postmodernism too easily. Is there indeed no such thing as an Archimedean point that serves as a certain point of reference to us all? How are we then able to share anything? Solving this puzzle was of great urgency to me, as I make my living with narrative sociology. At least I should have valid assumptions about shared narrative patterns in groups. And then I hit myself on the head, as I sometimes do when I find an answer that has been staring me in the face all along: “It’s the biology, stupid!” I yelled to myself, paraphrasing Bill Clinton. What unites all narratives, from ante-narrative (Boje, 2001) and micro- or small stories (Boje, 2001, Georgakopoulou, 2006) to grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979) and everything in between, is that they are generated by humans. They are human products. This epiphany brought me back to my thought experiments about language and communication halfway through the 1990s as I tried to figure out what, if any, were the connections between language and reality, between thought and action in the first place.

In this essay I explore whether I can make my reasoning back then productive for my thinking about narrative now. A lot of research is about what narrative is or does, but little research explores where it comes from. This I find a promising starting point for the expedition into “but where will it take us.” If we consider narrative as inherently human, can we then assume biological origins? If so, is it then safe to

assume it is characteristic of our species? These questions will be explored in the next section.

### On the Origins of Narrative

Biologists Maturana and Varela (1984) distinguish between *organization* and *structure*. An organization is a collection of all relations that necessarily exist between the components of a system for it to be a member of a specific class. A structure is the collection of the components and relations that actually form a unity and that grant the organization its reality. Structure is the incorporation of organization. Organization determines the identity of a system; structure determines how its parts are physically articulated. The difference is similar to the one perhaps more familiar to us, namely between *langue* and *parole*. Biographies may be unique, but their narrated manifestations share common features (that allow, for instance, the literary transformations Sools, 2012, demonstrates elsewhere in this issue). Abbott (2008), for instance, speaks of the “Horatio Alger story” in terms of a master plot. Nineteenth-century novelist Alger published over 120 books, most of which “narrativize the same master plot featuring a youth... , who, though born in poverty, rises by his own hard work and clean living to the highest of social standards and often great wealth” (Abbott, 2008, p. 47). Although the characters in the Alger novels are fictive, we recognize their story in real-life characters like Andrew Carnegie and Abe Lincoln, “and it expresses in its shape convictions about life that are dear to many Americans” (p. 47). The presence of master plots suggests that they are of a different level than the individual biographies themselves. One could say that the “master plot” is organization and the “Horatio Alger” story is structure, but there are more master plots and this suggests that master plots themselves are structure, assuming an organization. If all humans narrate (tell stories, however structured), then narrative is on the level of the species and part of the organization. This also explains its broad variety on the structural level. As a sociologist with a background in the humanities, I usually study patterns in narratives. That is, I am occupied with the narratives as manifestations, the product of what Schiff (2012; in this issue) calls “making present.” I study the *parole* to see if I can learn something about the *langue*. As said, for me to be able to do so, I have to assume that there indeed is a *langue*, some generative source we all tap from. Is there indeed a narrative aspect on the level of the organization?

What sets us living beings apart from non-living entities is that we continuously produce ourselves. Maturana and Varela (1984) call

this *autopoiesis*, self creation. Autopoietic systems are both and at the same time producer and product. They are autonomous in that they are capable of specifying their own regularities. However, they depend on their environment for resources that enable them to maintain their system. In other words, there is a paradox: autopoietic—read, autonomous—systems depend on their environment for the maintenance of their autonomy. This paradox can only be solved if we go beyond linear thinking and its consequent binary models. Therefore, Maturana and Varela (1984) propose a circular reasoning. Every class creates its own phenomenology, and in the case of autopoietic systems, this is a biological one of circular productivity. They explain:

Since a living system is defined as a system by the concatenation of processes of production of components that generate the processes that produce them and constitute the system as a unity in the physical space, biological phenomena are necessarily phenomena of relations between processes which satisfy the autopoiesis of the participant living systems. Accordingly, under no circumstances is a biological phenomenon defined by the properties of its component elements, but it is always defined and constituted by a concatenation of processes in relations subordinated to the autopoiesis of at least one living system. (p. 112-113)

In this sense, two people accidentally running into each other is not a biological phenomenon, whereas the bodily contact of two people courting is. Certainly, in the first case there are processes, but they do not satisfy the autopoiesis of anyone. Contrarily, in the latter case, they do. Maturana and Varela (1984) explain the difference by grounding circular productivity in two aphorisms: 1) all doing is knowing and all knowing is doing, and 2) everything that is being said, is said by *someone*. To know, as an act of the knower, is deeply rooted in his or her being alive, in the organization. As a consequence, all knowledge creation depends on the structure of the knower. To know is a generative act, an act that enables living beings to continue living in a specific environment by creating their own world. There is a circular relationship between acting and experiencing. We do not see a “space” in the outer world, but we experience our own imaginative space as “real.” The world we know is the world we perceive. It is our structure that enables our perception. As our structure is our individual materialization of the organization that we are part of, perceptions are highly individual. However, living systems are part of a larger network of exchanges as they depend on their environments for

resources to maintain autopoiesis. Ontogenesis is the history of structural changes that a system undergoes without loss of organization.

If the interactions of two or more autopoietic systems have a recurrent or very stable character, there is an ontogenetic coupling between them. Every ontogenesis takes place within an environment. Both autopoietic systems and environments can be described in terms of their structure (radiation, velocity, density, etc.). Autopoietic systems and their environments, including other autopoietic systems, are pacemakers for structural change as they influence and are being influenced by each other. However, they elicit or trigger changes, but do not determine or instruct them. The response depends on the proper structure at that moment, not on the external stimulus. Yet recursive interactions result in a history of mutually attuned structural changes. This is called *structural coupling*, and it results in congruence between the systems. On an intimate scale, we see this congruence, for instance, in what one might call “family sayings” (e.g. Rees, 1995), a private lexicon within close families which is rather incomprehensible to outsiders. Sometimes this lexicon is created by a lack of regular words. In my family, I introduced the word *invouwing* (“infolment”) because I did not know the word *oksel* (“armpit”) yet. And sometimes the utterance is a catch-phrase, such as “straight into the muscle,” an innocent description my sister used to tell my parents where I had hit her, now still used in my family to indicate “bull’s eye!” Moreover, expressions do not have to be verbal, as gestures and facial expressions can be quite communicative as well. I sometimes put on a face that my family calls “snuik,” a word I cannot translate in any language nor an expression I can describe. This kind of intimate communication reflects a structural coupling and congruence between autopoietic systems, in this case my family members and me. As autopoietic systems depend on their environment for the sake of their autonomy, these structural couplings are of vital importance. As Maturana and Varela (1984) put it, all knowing subjects are involved in all knowledge processes in a personal way, rooted in their biological structure. Their impression of sure and secure facts are individual phenomena. They do not regard the knowledge activities of others. This circular productivity of knowledge leads to a loneliness that can only be survived in a world that is jointly created with others.

Where, then, do we go from closed circuits to interconnectedness? This has to be the transitional space of the relations between processes. This space is the domain of communication and language as products of the structural couplings of autopoietic systems (Maturana & Varela, 1984). One could suggest that narrative is the language with which we communicate our



structural couplings. However, that would propose a one-on-one, magical relationship between language and reality (e.g. Vinden, 1998). It would also deny the space within the sign between signified and signifier. Therefore, I suggest that narrative is the language with which we communicate *about the structural couplings as we perceive them*.

This is somewhat different from the traditional notion of narrative as the structure in which events are linked in a particular way. From a biological perspective, we have to define “event” first as a biological phenomenon. As stated earlier, two people bumping into each other is not a biological phenomenon, whereas two people courting is. Why so? Because in the first case there is no structural coupling and in the second case there is. Bumping into one another only becomes an event if it ends in courting (or some other type of relationship between two autopoietic systems). This is in line with the distinction that Culler (1981) makes between narrative as representation and narrative as construction. Narrative as representation departs from the event (first there was the event, then the representation of it), whereas narrative as construction ends in the event (first there was the narrative, then there was the creation of the event in the context of that narrative). An event is then a structural change within the autopoietic system, dependent on the structure of that same autopoietic system at that moment in time, that is, when it is informative for the system. In other words, an event is an event when the autopoietic system attaches meaning to it. If we assume that knowing is doing, is there then a special place for the verb in narrative?

### **The Land of the Verb**

Of course, not all communication is verbal. My “snuik” face is as non-verbal as it gets. Still, here I am interested in the linguistic and ultimately share-ability of narrative. How do we express what we perceive in such a way that we can share our perceptions, make the individual inter-dividual? As Glenberg (2008) proposes, the meaning of a situation or event consists of the set of actions one can undertake in that situation. The set of possible actions is determined by the goal-directed mesh of affordances. An *affordance* is the interaction between body morphology and the physical environment. In other words, it is our perception of what an object affords us to do with it, how it enables us to interact with it in what way. A *mesh* is the process by which affordances are combined to accomplish goals. The Indexical Hypothesis (Glenberg, 2008) proposes that we use three processes to convert words and sentences into embodied, action-based

meaning. We go from words to a consideration of the actions implied by the sentence and if we create a smooth and coherent simulation, then we understand the sentence. These three processes are: 1) indexing or mapping words and phrases to objects in the environment or to perceptual symbols; 2) derivation of affordances; and 3) meshing.

To understand the first process, the “orientational metaphors” of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) can be helpful. These are metaphors that organize whole systems of concepts with respect to one another. “Orientational” refers to their spatial orientation. As they explain,

These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment. Orientational metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation . . . . Such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. Though the polar positions up-down, in-out, etc., are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can vary from culture to culture. (p. 14)

They conclude that “Most of our fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more spatialization metaphors” (p. 17). As they elaborate, health and life are “up” (*Lazarus rose from the dead*) and illness and death are down (*she fell ill, he dropped dead*). Correspondingly the concept of happiness is structured in terms of the erect posture (*that lifts the spirit*) and that of sadness with a drooping posture (*I’m down*), physical size with strength (*I have control over her*) or weakness (*he is under my control*). In general, everything positive is spatially termed as “up,” whereas everything negative is termed as “down,” even when there is no clear reference to physical terms (*high/low income, the top/bottom of the social ladder*). All orientational metaphors are rooted in experience. This is not to suggest that all “up” metaphors are the same. The concept is the same, but the experiences on which they are based are very different. There is not necessarily a variety in “ups,” yet verticality enters our experience in many different ways. Still, there is coherence among happiness, health, and control as “up” metaphors. Within such a coherent system, saying “I’m down” while meaning “I’m happy” is an aberration.

A further basis for understanding is our experience with objects and substances. This is part of the second process, the derivation of affordances. As Glenberg (2008) states: “Note that the affordances cannot be derived directly from the words because words do not have

affordances. Instead, it is the objects that words designate that have the affordances and are a major source of meaning” (p. 46).

This is similar to the Saussurian divide between signifier and signified within the sign. The relationship between the two is sometimes iconic, that is, related to reality. Examples are paralinguistic aspects such as intonation, speed, and volume in speech acts or onomatopoeic words as *ding dong*. However, most relationships are arbitrary. And yet we are able to enter the linguistic space we create on the organizational/langue level and learn to share meaning on the structural/parole level. How do we do that? Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduce the term “ontological metaphors” to describe how “our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies) provide the basis for an extraordinarily wide range of ontological metaphors, that is, ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (p. 25). Doing so

allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind. Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, and quantify them—and, by this means, reason about them. (p. 25)

Also, we assess what we can do with these entities and substances: “Apparently, when we think about the meaning of a word, at least some part of that meaning is in terms of how to act on the object named by the word” (Glenberg, 2008, p. 51). How we conceptualize experiences in terms of ontological metaphors and how we consequently apply them is part of the meshing process, when we combine affordances into actions. This implies some knowledge of what we can do and again, this is grounded in our experience. For instance, as we are bounded by our skins and experience the world as “outside,” we experience ourselves as containers with a surface and an in-out orientation. We project these qualities onto other physical objects with similar characteristics but also onto our natural environments (*in/out of the woods*), or we impose them on less clearly bounded areas when we mark off territory (fencing it, naming it). As we look at something, our field of vision defines a boundary in that there is something we can see and other things we cannot (*I have him in sight*). Likewise, we turn events, actions, activities and states into discrete entities. These examples are instances of what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call “container metaphors.” They enable us to identify meanings in situations and events as they inform us about the actions we can undertake therein. Meshing, then, is to combine the

affordances into a coherent simulation. Meshing is contingent. We evaluate actions based on our estimation of their do-ability.

That this is all part of our biology is supported by research into depression narratives. For instance, Westerbeek and Mutsaers (2008) found that “Several authors underline that depression as an experience can hardly be expressed verbally; it is played out in a parallel infernal universe in which time stands still and where language is inadequate” (p. 31). For example,

Some nebulous force has moved you into this chambered and unearthly landscape, its origins obscure, its meridians unmapped. It is a state unto itself. . . . You are resident now in some parallel universe, a place inclined to resist the concrete nouns, verbs, and adjectives we use to describe other landscapes. (Jeffrey Smith in Westerbeek & Mutsaers, 2008, p. 38)

Since I’ve been on Prozac I came to think that I need to reconstruct an entire record of my life, including all small bits and pieces of the tape that I threw away into a waste basket, in order to see it all again and put it together in a totally new way. The logic in my script is lost and chronology does not agree anymore either: everything clatters as a pocket full of coins—I’ll have to rewrite the whole story. (Emma Brunt in Westerbeek & Mutsaers, 2008, p. 41)

These narratives reveal that in a state of depression, sufferers can no longer perceive meaningful—that is, in time and place demarcated—events and so cannot find the words to talk about them. Indeed, the inability to perceive and structure, to create containers and orientate, in short, to have a sense of knowing what is going on, leads to an inability to actually keep going on.

But even if we take our bodies as the points of departure for conceptualizing ourselves and our world, we still need to explain the notion of shared concepts as the ingredients for communication. How do we know that “I’m down” is not generally used for “I’m happy”? Obviously, we may experience the same things, as our bodies are to a large degree built the same way. Moreover, as Semin and Cacioppo (2008) argue, “our representations of the social world are fundamentally connected with the actions that our bodies perform” (p. 120). Still, how do we recognize our experiences in others’ experiences? In other words, how does this attuning in structural coupling take place? This is the biological foundation of the social which I will explore in the next section.

### The Importance of Being “Us”

As Maturana and Varela (1984) suggest, structural couplings create a communicative space. In order to understand this space, we should abandon the individual and move towards the dyad as our unit of analysis. The dyad is created by *affect attunement* and *synchronization*. Stern (1985) defines affect attunement as “the performance of behaviors that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state without imitating the exact behavioral expression of the inner state” (p. 142). In their Social Cognition (SC) model, Semin and Cacioppo (2008) hypothesize that synchronization brings about the distribution of social cognition across brains. The starting point is the observation of the action of another person. We perceive this action more clearly as its goal relates more to us. If the goal relates to us, the observation serves as a stimulus. Next, and aside from activating a goal, all actions, regardless of their relevance, activate an implicit monitoring process that they call “Monitoring Synchronization”:

The multimodal neurophysiological sensorimotor processes involved in the execution of any real (or imagined) action give rise to synchronization of neurophysiological sensorimotor processes in the observer of human action ... . Aside from their monitoring function, these processes link two or more human agents, thereby putting them on a similar footing. It is jointly recruited processes with *overlapping* “identities” that facilitate understanding (co-cogitation) and adaptive co-action (co-regulation) between two or more individuals. (p. 123; emphasis added)

In the quotation above, I stress the word “overlapping,” as Semin and Cacioppo (2008) explain that synchronization is not about complete equivalence between producer and receiver of stimuli. This would create confusion between self and other, which is in general not the case. Moreover, it would lead to a never-ending loop of continuously performing the very same actions. In contrast, synchronization is a partial correspondence.

Affect attunement and synchronization as described by, respectively, Stern (1985) and Semin & Cacioppo (2008), address non-verbal exchanges, but my family sayings suggest they can be verbal as well. Moreover, these sayings can be considered both as expressions of belonging (being the dyad) and vehicles for understanding (creating the dyad). Cognition, says Glenberg (2008), is

for action. Language comprehension involves the simulation of action. Acting in a linguistic space calls upon neural systems that are also used for perception, action, and emotional processing. This is called neural exploitation (Glenberg, 2008). When we hear verbs, there is action in Wernicke's area (language perception), in Broca's area (language production), and in the areas of the brain associated with motor activity. In other words, when we engage in communication, our brains function *as if* we, as recipients of stimuli, undergo the same structural change as their source.

### **Back to My Nagging Question**

So, is it valid to assume the existence of narrative patterns outside of my own interpretations? I think my answer is a "yes" when we involve biology in our reasoning. Admittedly, I am not a biologist and the field is far richer and more complex than I can or dare present here. And of course, there is a risk involved in translating one discipline into another. Sociobiology is a case in point that also shows ethical limitations to unthinkingly superimposing one conceptual framework on another. And yet, understanding narrative can be enriched by understanding biology. Biology stresses the importance of our bodies and the relationships between our bodies and the environments we occupy with them, our moving around between objects and people, concepts and events, our interactions with them, how we perceive and experience *and share*. As narrative has survived for such a long time, it has to have some evolutionary benefits for it to have become part of the organization of the human species. The ability to enter the interconnecting domain of language and communication serves an evolutionary purpose—that is, the survival of the species. Understanding narrative from an evolutionary perspective helps us to reason about text, context, the interrelations between them, and the role of narrative therein. As I proposed earlier, narrative is the language we use to communicate about structural couplings as we perceive them. We can enrich this definition with the concept of "overlap" and hypothesize that narrative is our ability to create overlaps by communicating about structural couplings as we perceive them. As such, it is both text and context. As a biological phenomenon of living systems, it obeys the logic of circular productivity, "the concatenation of processes of production of components that generate the processes that produce them and constitute the system as a unity in the physical space" (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 112). Narrative is, then, the linking pin between inside and outside, between text and context, between organization and structure. It produces the overlap and therein serves as a tracking

device. As such, it is a boundary concept that helps us understand where we are.

The importance of being “us” is familiar in my own academic habitat. For instance, in his book *The Songlines*, Chatwin (1987) describes the patterns that unify Australian Aboriginals to their ancestors and their land as

the labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as “Dreaming-tracks” or “Songlines”; to the Aboriginals as the “Footprints of the Ancestors” or the “Way of the Law.” Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence. (p. 2)

This is a clear and appealing example of how autopoietic systems create a joint space in which they participate. Obviously, the spatial environment is part of this co-created social environment and, in fact, an active co-constructor as its elements are part of the structural couplings between system and environment (see also Willemse, 2012, in this issue on a narrative that is “all over the place”). As mentioned earlier, if narrative is part of the organization of our species, then it must provide us with benefits to have survived our evolution for such a long time. And maybe it has become even more timely in some societies, where we can create structural couplings with just about anyone and anything. Indeed, now that we have moved into an era in which communication is less and less real-time and face-to-face and all the more an act of disentangled producers and consumers, maybe the evolutionary benefits of narrative for the survival of the social, of “us,” are becoming acutely tangible. This brings me to a concluding remark about the relationship between narrative and policy-making.

### **But Where Will It Take Us?**

As a biological phenomenon, narrative is informative but not determinant. This type of “advisory relationship” is also known in the social sciences. For instance, working with Mills’ vocabularies of motives, Foucault’s discourse analysis and Wittgenstein’s language games, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) develop a theoretical framework for narrative analysis that focuses on how people construct their selves in interactions. The contexts in which these interactions take place set the conditions for possible linguistic choices and actions, but do not determine them. Where does this leave policy-making and its desire to

actually determine interactions and relations between people, citizens and states, consumers and providers of public services?

Today, policy-making has an inclination towards large-scale, unambiguous facts. Part of this is inspired by the desire to do justice to all or to serve a large market. It tries to define the organization of the social by determining the future. However, as such, it often disregards structural variety in the here and now. Elsewhere (Basten, 2010), I have argued that the matter of “who is to be studied” and “made object of policy” is decided beforehand and therefore also informs the focus and outcome of the analysis. This is most visible in *a priori* categories, where race, social class, and gender seem to produce conditions rather than being the products of attribution. It is an Ouroboros that bites its own tale: people are involved in research based on who they are and subsequently defined in terms of those very same selection criteria. This is a circularity that results in self-fulfilling prophecies. Can narrative, as theorized here, inspire a different approach?

Policy-making is future oriented. By itself, narrative does not take us anywhere. We are not driven by our narrative sensibility or predisposition. However, it advises us on what directions we might take. As Sools (2012) and Squire (2012) argue (in this issue), future steps are part of narrative. I suggest this is because they create a relationship between “what is” and “what is not yet.” Every relation has, in order to be informative, a meaning:

“Meaning” may be regarded as an approximate synonym of pattern, redundancy, information, and “restraint,” within a paradigm of the following sort: Any aggregate of events or subjects ... shall be said to contain “redundancy” or “pattern” if the aggregate be divided in any way by a “slash mark,” such that an observer perceiving only what is on one side of the slash mark, can guess, with better than random success, what is on the other side of the slash mark. We may say that what is on one side of the slash mark contains information or has meaning about what is on the other side. (Bateson, 1972, p. 130-131).

This also goes for relations in time. We may guess, but do not know what is on the other side of the slash mark. By creating redundancy, the “sure guess” resembles the experience of knowing. And yet, in the end, all we can do is guess our way into the future. Regarding policy, this may inspire a different route to take than the one travelled so far. Instead of starting from guessing what people need and then determining who is in want, it can begin by exploring the event-based networks people narrate in, locate where people position themselves,



and what, if any, their needs are in that position. I have outlined this method elsewhere (Basten, 2010) and experimented with it as well. For instance, in one of my projects in community development (Basten, 2011), I reconstructed a jointly told narrative of an urban area, based on 26 interviews. This narrative gave rise to active networks of residents, entrepreneurs, professionals, and civil servants who shared a concern for one or more of the issues that emerged from the narrative. With this essay, I hope to have given the rationale for, and thereby inspired trust in, narrative policy-making. If valid, it also implies that policy-makers have to be part of the structural couplings with the ones they make policies for. As mentioned earlier, meaning is related to the perceived action radius. The meaning of policy-making, then, depends not so much on the narratives it creates, but all the more on the narratives it wants to serve and be part of.

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