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Stance, positioning, and alignment in narratives of professional experience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines narratives of professional experience in a corpus of forty interviews in which English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers reflect on their professional life histories as well as their current teaching. The notion of "stance" emerged as a major theme: the teachers positioned themselves in relation to the policy environment, to learners, teaching and learning, and their sense of control in their working lives. Narrative was an important discursive resource for doing so and a range of narrative types (personal, generic/iterative, hypothetical, exemplum, and 'negated') are identified, each demonstrating performance features. Using Dubois's (2007) definition of stance, I examine the dynamic relationship between stance taking and discursive positioning, discussing the role of performance in these processes. Shifts into performance are shown to depend on participant roles and alignments in the interviews rather than on particular narrative types. Thus, the data contradicts some of Wolfson's (1976) observations on narratives in the research interview. The analysis contributes to our understanding of the research interview as a dynamically co-constructed speech genre rather than as a neutral locus for gathering data. (Professional narrative, performance, stance, alignment, positioning)

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the role of narrative in a dataset of forty interviews with ESOL teachers, collected as part of a larger study in Adult ESOL classrooms in the UK (Baynham et al. 2006). The primary focus of the interview was not on eliciting narrative, but nevertheless there was a pervasive deployment of narrative, at least in Georgakopoulou and Bamberg's "small narrative" sense (Bamberg 2006, Georgakopoulou 2007), as the interviewees responded to the invitation to display their professional practices. The interviewers involved in the study were either practicing ESOL teachers or researchers who had previously been ESOL teachers. This resulted in a high degree of congruency between interviewers and interviewees, with interesting discursive effects.

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THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERVIEW

Each interview contained four phases: (i) discussion of a class recently taught and observed by the interviewer; (ii) discussion of the context of teaching and their practices as teachers; (iii) discussion of how they became ESOL teachers and how their practice has changed over time; and (iv) discussion of students in the class observed. Phases (i), (ii) and (iv) brought in a "here-and-now" aspect to the interview: interviewees were invited to talk about their current practices to the interviewer. Phase (iii) brought in a "then-and-there" aspect: the interviewees were invited to talk about their professional lives, including their choice of becoming an ESOL teacher.

The questions asked in phase (i) seemed to orient towards personal narrative, with or without performance features. Having observed the lesson, the interviewer was in a position to co-construct the narrative of a recent shared past through contributing both questions and comments. The questions asked in phase (ii) seemed to invite generic or iterative narratives, of what was typically or repeatedly the case. Interestingly, performance features occurred regularly here as well. The questions asked in phase (iii) oriented towards life-history narrative, that is, not narratives of the recent past or of the present. Again performance features were in evidence. In phase (iv) the questions oriented responses towards third-person narratives of student lives, as well as generic or iterative and indeed hypothetical narratives (what they typically do or say, what they might do or say). Another narrative subtype identified were narratives of what was not said and did not happen. These can be described tentatively as NEGATED NARRATIVE.

Shifts into performance in this dataset overwhelmingly involved shifts or switches into performed direct speech, not especially linked to personal narrative of the canonical sort, but also co-occurring with generic/iterative narrative, hypothetical and negated narrative. They can be understood through the analogy of code-switching and mode-switching: the speaker momentarily shifts or switches into performance in what Hymes (1996) calls fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world.

TYPES OF NARRATIVE IN THE DATA

The types of narrative found in the interviews were: PERSONAL NARRATIVE (with or without performance features, current/recent past or more distant past), GENERIC/ITERATIVE NARRATIVE (with or without performance features), HYPOTHETICAL OR FUTURE NARRATIVE (with or without performance features), NARRATIVE-AS-EXAMPLE OR EXEMPLUM (occurring in any of the above contexts, with or without performance features), and NEGATED NARRATIVE (with or without performance features).

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Personal narrative

In the middle of an evaluative discussion on a lesson, an ESOL teacher (L) switches into performance (indicated in bold) to dramatize the thought processes of students who rejoined a class with other students absent on the first day.

(1) L: ESOL teacher, R: Interviewer

L: um it was nice having this- How many did we have today? Ten?
R: Yeah
L: Yeah it was nice because it really felt like the first lesson back this year because last week two students on Tuesday four on Thursday and it's (.) it's not a nice feeling for the teacher it's not a nice feeling for the students. **They're like well why me?** They sit there and they're first **and think is nobody coming**? And I don't want them to then **think well I won't come for the next lesson**. So everybody got called. Anyone I could get through to I spoke to. Anyone else I left messages. So we got nearly everyone back.

Unusually for this dataset quotative "like" is used as a framing device here (line 6). In the following extract the teacher (M) and the interviewer (R) are discussing different students in the class. The story of Miriam's loudness is told to highlight her achievement in speaking more assertively. M does not attribute it to his own interventions, but to Miriam's own agency. The shift into performance is used to dramatize an occasion when she speaks loudly to get his attention, provoking a response from M addressing the manner of her utterance rather than its illocutionary intent. (Pedagogical interactions give a special licence to the teacher to ignore illocutionary intention and comment in this way.)

(2) The story of Miriam's loudness

M: teacher, R: Interviewer

R: and what about the others?
M: some of the others. Well it's funny because Miriam and Bina came out quite low on the speaking. Now I've given everyone their scores on that privately and Miriam and Bina I was dithering about whether to tell them or whether it's just cajole them or- **And the funny thing is the last few days Miriam has been extremely loud. And that's nothing to do with our cajoling. It's nothing to do with the fact that I've had a headache for three days. [laugh] She's just been much louder.**
R: **you mean talking more?**
M: **talking more and more strongly. Her weakness has always been that [.] she tends [.] they tend to murmur as if speaking is something she's rather embarrassed about. More like you're discussing something private in a bus queue. But the last two or three days she's been very loud. And I think she jokingly shouted something. I was talking to someone and she tried to get my attention and she said Matt could you answer? I said brilliant just keep that volume all the time Miriam just shout like that all the time and I'll be really happy. Please please make it louder.**

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19 R: do you think- Is that as a result of you telling them that their speaking-
20 M: I don't honestly think so. Maybe she's just got to point where she's
21 got the confidence to realize this is actually quite a noisy buzzy class and you
22 need to. Which again is another argument against a noisy buzzy class
23 actually. The quiet ones can get drowned out.
24 R: but she seems to have decided to assert herself?
25 M: she seems to be. Yes yes.

M dramatizes the reflective processes by which a teacher routinely scrutinizes professional practice, both displaying and evaluating it. Should he inform the students about their performance in speaking or hope by cajoling them to trigger improvement? Is Miriam's improvement in confidence in speaking attributable to his interventions or to Miriam herself?

Generic/iterative narrative

Generic or iterative narrative deals with what happens typically or repeatedly (cf. Baynham 2003, 2005). In the following discussion the focus is on the desire of students to shift from community-based classes into the more academic college environment. Discussing problems with giving homework, L switches into performance to dramatize something typically or iteratively true.

(3) L: ESOL teacher, R: Interviewer

1 L: mm the problem for them is it's a community class because it's like an
2 introduction to studying. And normally when students (.) they start often in
3 the community and when they're starting to feel confident and start attending
4 regularly they start begging to come to the college.
5 R: mm
6 L: then they feel that's real study. So they don't really approach this as
7 real study because they don't see themselves in an educational institution.
8 So (..) giving them homework isn't (.) not a help (.) with these particular students
9 because they're not very independent learners because they're (.) most of them
10 have amazing literacy problems. So whatever you give them is going to
11 involve some type of literacy (..) for most types of homework. Um so we've
12 done spelling homework we've done worksheets. And it's very erratic.
13 Normally I get nothing back on it. Spelling homework they will do. **But I've**
14 **been saying to them you know this is homework you do today then we**
15 **practice again tomorrow you prac- No. Straight away in the class they**
16 **will do it all. And you're trying to stop them saying no no no tomorrow.**
17 **And they just go no tomorrow I'm busy.** So I don't feel they're moving
18 forward enough. The majority of them will speak their first language at home.
19 Which is perfectly fair in their own home. [laugh] But a lot of would like
20 more hours.

L's self presentation is evidenced in the "teacher talk" simplification in the language quotatively addressed to the students: "this is homework you do today then we practice tomorrow" (lines 14–15). L also dramatizes the learner language of her students with its deleted copula, using a free direct-speech form without signalling quotative, as shown in (4).

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(4)

1 L: but the moment the children come out (.) then the mothers the students
2 want to go home. It's understandable. **We tired**-

The reformulation ("the mothers, the students") indexes the double identities of these students, simultaneously evoking L's pedagogical identity.

Narrative as example

The narrative as example or exemplum is told to illustrate a point (cf. Eggins & Slade 1997:257–59), sometimes, as here, explicitly framed by a marker such as "for example," otherwise not prefaced by a marker, leaving its exemplary status to be retrieved pragmatically.

(5) "Kuldeep and Sachin were sitting there doing nothing"
L: ESOL teacher, R: Interviewer

1 L: but you know but today considering how little support they had in
2 terms of human support they'd learnt a lot of study skills to refer to bits of
3 paper and write. So you know
4 R: yeah they were all doing that.
5 L: yeah and I actually- And they were helping each other. And I mean
6 really really technically they needed more help but I was actually surprised at
7 how they were helping each other. **And at one point for example Maya**
8 **got up from my group and asked if she could go and get Hari from the**
9 **other group to help her. And that's that's that's really- And at one point**
10 **I thought Oh God Kuldeep and Sachin were sitting there doing nothing.**
11 **When I went over there they seemed to be actually conferring they**
12 **weren't doing nothing.** So they've learnt a lot in all sorts of ways. How to
13 use their resources. The resources that I've given them to lean on. I think
14 they've learnt a lot.

The exemplum, with its structuring performance features, the alternation between Maya's request in indirect speech and L's performed thought "Oh God" (line 10), dramatizes a teacher's real-time anxiety in losing control of what students are doing in the class. A dilemma in professional practice is evoked, underlying it as an additional perhaps more important point to the story, that the students were in fact helping each other, drawing on the resources "that I'd given them to lean on," contributing to a positive representation of professional identity and professional practice: I am the sort of teacher who values students learning from each other and provides resources to support them in doing so.

What didn't happen: Negated narrative

In addition to generic/iterative and hypothetical narratives, there is a more unusual narrative type evidenced in the data, albeit less frequently than the others—a form of negative/negated narrative: the story of what didn't happen.

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(6) M: Teacher, R: Interviewer

R: and why do you think they don't want to do the speaking?
M: well we used to go into saying it was the cultural thing. It's you know that a lot of countries language is taught very grammatically. It's a lot of literacy work in language teaching. And it struck me the other week that of course it's partly that but the other point is of course that they learn to speak- They aren't taught to speak and listen in their own languages. It's something that just comes (.) that they just acquire.
R: um-hm
M: therefore they haven't actually got any (..) um (.) they've got no spoken language experience. Formal experience. And of course it's (.) that's why they do think that these games are quite odd. And their experience of learning is (..) as indeed it is for myself learning English. **No one comes in and says no Matt this is how we make these vowel sounds.**

The topic of the discussion is the negative proposition that learners are not taught to speak and listen in their own languages. Following from this proposition is the positive proposition that learners therefore find activities that focus on speaking and listening odd and difficult to adapt to. The negative proposition is dramatized by a switch into performance, both generic and negative: something that no one ever says. It is something of a tribute to the resilience and flexibility of the performance mode that it can be strategically brought into play in such a wide range of semantic environments. It also suggests, importantly for narrative theory, that performance features need to be separated from co-occurrence with personal narrative and treated as a feature of discourse more generally. The identification of these argumentative propositions indicates that narrative is not the only game being played here (cf. Hill & Zepeda 1993, Baynham 1995), suggesting that performance features typically associated with narrative are also to be found in argument structures.

JOINT CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE WITH INTERVIEWER

The recent-past narratives prompted by the interviewer's questions about the class just taught afford opportunities for joint construction both of the interview and of narrative. Here the interviewer (R) and the teacher (L) are discussing a detail of the class that R has just observed.

(7) "She maybe felt a bit stressed"

L: other times we've done differentiated worksheets where some have had the picture and then they're not looking at the words. They're not considering them together. They're only looking at the picture. So this time pictures were taken away at that stage. And we did pretty good. There was one- One woman **as you know** struggled a bit more with that. But I think that was her reading skill. Once the question was given to her aurally she could choose her answer quite easily.

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8 R: **I think she maybe felt a bit stressed sitting next to us**.
9 L: yeah
10 R: I **think she appreciated the help. She knew that I was looking.**
11 L: I know [laugh] because somebody- Yeah I mean she's not- You know
12 everybody is (.) likes you to come into class because nobody has an issue
13 when you're in the room. It's all like hello J. all happy to see you. Um (.) **but**
14 **yeah knowing that you could see her work was maybe a little bit**
15 **worrying**. [laugh]

The incident provides an opportunity for discussing the possible effects of R being in the classroom as a researcher, triggered by L's "as you know" (line 5), through which L aligns herself to R as having shared the experience in question. This enables R to take a role in co-constructing the narrative ("I think … I think" and the even more evidentially authoritative "She knew …"), giving rise to L's very hedged evaluative comment "but yeah knowing that you could see her work was maybe a little bit worrying" (lines 14–15), to be further discussed below.

SHIFTS INTO PERFORMANCE

Characteristic of this data, rather than canonical performed personal narrative, is a complex texture involving the interaction of different kinds of narrative and argument structures, with strategic shifts into performance. Performance features have been in evidence in all of the data presented thus far, co-occurring with the different types of narrative identified and not especially associated with personal narrative. This is interestingly at odds with Wolfson's prediction (1976, 1982) that the interview as a frame mitigates against performance features. Wolfson also argued, of course, that "the degree of solidarity between the participants will affect the verbal behaviour of the subject" (Wolfson 1976:197). It may be that solidarity features in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee in this study can explain this.

SPEAKER STANCE AND ALIGNMENT IN THE INTERVIEW

In "The story of Miriam's loudness," M shifts away from mimetic performance into diegetic summary.

(8) M: teacher

1 M: I think- […] They respond well to it. When you- Most respond. Of
2 course there are always some who are very very [.] quiet and embarrassed by
3 the whole thing. And also it's just a teaching teaching- You know speaking
4 speaking. And er [..] but um [.] you know I think that you explain to them this
5 is why you do this. But there are always students moaning about pair work.
6 **And I say look the point is- You know you explain sort of communication**
7 **going on and so on**.

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This reformulation (lines 6–7) shows how shifting/switching into and indeed out of performance is itself a stylistic choice. Here the speaker starts in performance ("And I say look the point is- ") and reformulates to complete the utterance in diegetic summarizing mode ("You know you explain sort of communication going on and so on"). What is the significance of the reformulation strategically? Having illustrated the types of narrative involved in the interviews, I will now show how these shifts in and out of performance contribute to the construction of speaker's stance and alignment, both in relation to current discourse time (the unfolding of the interview as a joint construction of interviewer and interviewee) and story time (the classroom events that are being narrated/talked about). Stance has been the topic of sustained research interest for nearly two decades (Ochs 1992, 1996, Hunston & Thompson 2000, Englebretson 2007, Johnstone 2009). The stance literature is extensive and for brevity I orient the discussion to DuBois' recent synthesizing definition: "stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (Dubois 2007:163). Stance in this sense is intimately connected to positioning and alignment. This interview was an invitation for interviewees to display and comment on their professional practice, thereby indexing professional identities, through the stances they take up, and what they align to, both towards the interview co-participant (the interviewer) and what the talk is about (their practice and the contexts for it). In talk these two dimensions of stance tend to overlap, so that speakers are typically simultaneously orienting to the topic under discussion and their co-participant in discourse.

ALIGNMENT OF CO-PARTICIPANTS TO EACH OTHER

It is interactive commonality that Wolfson argued was so strikingly absent in the failed interviews she considered, yet which is strikingly present in the data under consideration, due to the congruence of social roles of interviewers and interviewees described above (all of the research team were or had been ESOL teachers). As Cortazzi and Jin (2000) point out, the evaluation of performance features is dependent on shared norms for evaluation. The availability of shared norms to align to could be explained in terms of congruence in social role between interviewer and interviewee, using Sarangi and Slembrouck's (1999) distinction between discourse role and social role.

As suggested earlier, the alignment of co-participants to each other and to the topic of the interview is based on the assumption of a high degree of commonality. This varies to some degree across interviewers: those who were currently ESOL teachers invoking maximum solidarity with interviewees, or those who, having formerly been ESOL teachers, have now moved into academic roles, creating more social distance. There are interesting indications, which I cannot develop here,

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that performance features in the interviews co-relate with the relationship between participants, with the closer the relationship the higher incidence of performance features. This would further support Wolfson's arguments about the importance of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee in this respect.

In order to understand the mechanisms of orderly interaction, it is always interesting to look at instances where such shared understandings become problematized; there is such an instance in extract (7) ("She maybe felt a bit stressed") quoted above. The invitation to co-construct the classroom narrative ("as you know") led to an evaluative discussion of whether a student felt stressed at sitting next to the researcher (R). A potential awkwardness arises in that the incident highlights R not in his role as a colleague but in another social role, that of researcher. This triggers a performed "small story" (repeated below from extract (7)), the purpose of which is to assure R that he is more than welcome in the class.

(9)

1 L: You know
2 everybody is (.) likes you to come into class because nobody has an issue
3 when you're in the room. **It's all like hello R. all happy to see you.**

L's heavily hedged evaluative comment "but yeah …," instead of confirming the welcome nature of his presence, actually confirms that R's ability to see the student's work "was maybe a little bit worrying" for the student concerned.

Such brief instances of conversational trouble temporarily pull apart the smooth lamination of social and discourse role, demonstrating how the interviewer is managing the potentially divergent social roles of colleague and researcher. The interviewer's self positioning or stance, as the sort of researcher (and indeed the sort of teacher) who does not make students nervous is potentially challenged, resulting in the high degree of hedging with which L challenges R's espoused stance. This can be profitably understood in terms of FACE WORK (Brown & Levinson 1987) or what Locher and Watts (2005:1) call RELATIONAL WORK. L's hedging redresses R's positive face.

ALIGNMENT AND STANCE OF CO-PARTICIPANTS TO THE INTERVIEW TOPIC

In the previous discussion I examined an instance when the smooth unfolding of the interview became momentarily problematized. Here I return to some instances of the smooth lamination of social (collegial) and discourse (interviewer/interviewee) roles in the exemplum quoted above in (5), repeated here in (10).

(10)

1 L: but you know but today considering how little support they had in
2 terms of human support they'd learnt a lot of study skills to refer to bits of
3 paper and write. So you know

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R: yeah they were all doing that.
L: yeah and I actually- And they were helping each other. And I mean really really technically they needed more help but I was actually surprised at how they were helping each other. **And at one point for example Maya got up from my group and asked if she could go and get Hari from the other group to help her. And that's that's that's really- And at one point I thought Oh God Kuldeep and Sachin were sitting there doing nothing. When I went over there they seemed to be actually conferring they weren't doing nothing.** So they've learnt a lot in all sorts of ways. How to use their resources. The resources that I've given them to lean on. I think they've learnt a lot.

R aligns to L's initial statement ("yeah they were all doing that"), suggesting a smooth lamination of social and discourse roles, untroubled by the moments of conversational difficulty identified above. This leaves L free to articulate and favorably self-evaluate the activity being described. The narrative arises out of a conflict between the amount of support and the amount of independence a group of students might need to perform a task effectively, between the notion of students being helped by a teacher to learn and students helping each other. It dramatizes the conflict and L's uncertainty about which way to go, discursively projecting her stance as a reflective and self-questioning practitioner, going through moments of self doubt, while taking a risk with an activity that comes right in the end.

The discursive construction of professional stance is of course not entirely composed of narratives of professional triumphs. The narrative of Miriam's loudness provides another example of the discursive construction by the teacher (M) of a professional stance in relation to an incident in his teaching. In "The story of Miriam's loudness," he projects a persona of professional indecision ("I was dithering"). According to him, Miriam's gratifying loudness is not attributable to her teachers' cajoling, despite the interviewer's attempt to suggest as much ("is this a result of you telling them"). The interviewer then aligns with M's interpretation that the initiative came from Miriam herself and was not a consequence of his teaching ("but she seems to have decided to assert herself?"). He briefly entertains an argument against a noisy, buzzy class, suggesting, as mentioned above, that argumentative structures as well as narrative are closely intertwined in these interviews. M constructs for himself in discourse a tentative, self-questioning stance, yet one in which robust positive values can be identified, such as that of students asserting themselves, speaking loudly even if interruptively. The way that he confidently responds to her request, by commenting on the manner of it, suggests that a confident pedagogical stance informs his apparent tentativeness.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Wolfson's predictions, the interview did seem to be a site for narrative performance, providing the analyst recognizes and takes seriously the notion of small stories as well as the range of noncanonical narrative types (generic/iterative,

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future/hypothetical, negative), which are amply in evidence in these data. Seen from this perspective, the interviews involve complex mixes and blends of narrative, interacting with generalizations and argumentative structures. Through these means, those interviewed construct accounts of their professional practice rich in evidence of their professional stances. Interviewers and interviewees align themselves to the forms of professional practice under consideration, smoothly laminating both social and discourse roles. In moments of conversational trouble, the mechanisms that support this lamination are interestingly revealed, resulting in pragmatic repair work to keep the interview going, thus maintaining and working on face.

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