

# Social Issues in the Understanding of Narrative

Charlotte Linde

NASA Ames Research Center  
MS 269-2, Moffett Field CA 94033  
Charlotte.Linde@nasa.gov

## Abstract

This paper proposes a number of social issues that are essential in understanding any given story, and thus, that must be included in a comprehensive approach to computational modeling of narrative. It focuses on oral narratives, and on the social event of the telling of a story. For participants in the telling, the central social issue is the story's evaluation or meaning: the point or moral of the story. Value or meaning is created relative to social membership, and so, to understand evaluation, it is not sufficient to understand a story solely as a bounded unit. Therefore, this paper examines the ways in which narrative meaning is negotiated between narrator and interlocutors. It demonstrates how a given story can take on different meanings for different audiences. The life course of a story is also proposed as relevant dimension for understanding. Ephemeral stories are distinguished from stories which have multiple tellings, both for the stories of individuals, and for stories which form part of the story stock of institutions. Storytelling rights are also considered: who within a group has the right to tell a particular story on a particular occasion. These issues are proposed as potential meta-data to be used in the analysis of stories. Finally, the paper indicates an area in which computational understanding of narrative, including these social issues, has potential for practical applications: as part of current commercial knowledge capture and archiving activities.

## Social Issues for the Understanding of Narrative

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a number of social issues that are essential for the understanding of any given story, and thus, that must be included a comprehensive approach to computational modeling of narrative. The central social issue for interlocutors (speakers and hearers) is the narrative's evaluation or moral meaning. Value or meaning exists relative to social membership. Therefore, this paper examines issues related to the negotiation of meaning between narrator and interlocutors, to the use of stories within groups, and to the status of particular stories within groups.

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I propose these issues as potential meta-data in the representation of stories. Additionally, I will discuss one area in which such modeling has potential for practical applications: as part of current commercial knowledge capture and archiving activities.

## Data: Genres and Sources

It is important, in discussions of narrative, to specify the genre being considered, since narratives appear in a variety of genres and media, and both genre and media affect their structure. The following discussion focuses mainly on spontaneous oral narratives, since this has been my primary area of research. I have also investigated in relation between such oral narratives and written versions of the same narratives, but do not discuss this issue here, since the movement between spoken and written versions of a narrative involves an additional layer of complexity not necessary for the current argument. (See (Linde 2008, chapter 5) for a discussion.)

In this discussion, I draw on my own research in a variety of settings and narrative types. These begin with the analysis of the creation of coherence in individual life stories, drawn from interview data (Linde 1993). In discussing the life of stories within groups, I use a study of a major American insurance company, here called MidWest Insurance, that has been in business since the 1920s. With colleagues at the Institute for Research on Learning, I carried out a three year ethnographic study, including observations of the training and work of insurance sales agents and their offices, as well as observations of ongoing training programs, sales conventions, regional meetings, special task forces and corporate meetings. Although this work was originally commissioned by MidWest to answer questions about agents' sales practices, and about the company's new training program for agents, it gave us access to the work of the company in a wide variety of contexts. And since MidWest was an extremely narrative-rich environment, it allowed for the observation of how stories are used, passed on, recorded, altered, and disputed, within a bounded social institution. (Linde 2008).

Finally, I use my observations of narrative and institutional memory at NASA, based on my position as both a participant and an observer.

### **Evaluation of Stories: Moral Meanings Exist Within Groups**

As is well known, a story is not just a representation of a sequence of events involving persons, places, objects and actions. What distinguishes a story from a list of events or a temporally organized chronicle is the inclusion of moral meaning, or evaluation. That is, stories must have a point, a moral, and this moral is usually related to the speaker's justification for taking and holding the floor for an extended turn at talk. In his classic analysis of narrative, Labov identifies the overall evaluation of a story as the answer to the implicit question "So what?" (Labov 1972, p 370.)

The evaluative elements of a story represent the storyteller's proposal for how the narrated events should be understood: they are disgraceful, they show just how people should behave under such circumstances, they are surprising, they use past events to explain the present or to propose actions for the future.

The important issue for computational understanding of narrative is that the evaluative dimension can only partially be understood using only the narrative unit itself. If we attempt a structural analysis of narratives, we can certainly identify lexical items which are likely to be used evaluatively: good, bad, outrageous, can you believe ..., etc.. However, unlike the other components of narrative, evaluations can not be completely defined structurally. While other components of narrative can be identified by a combination of their syntactic form and their placement, evaluations can appear anywhere in a story, and are not syntactically identifiable.

Evaluations are exactly the component of narrative that require us to investigate beyond the formal structure of a delineated discourse unit. A narrator includes within a story a meaning for the sequence of events: its evaluation. While this is proposed by the narrator, it can be accepted, disputed or rejected by the interlocutors. Part of a successful event of narration is the achievement of agreement (or at least an absence of overt disagreement) on the moral meaning of the story. Meanings exist relative to the norms and beliefs of given social groups. Even within a single group, meanings can be disputed, misunderstood, or missed entirely. And across the boundaries of social groups, dispute or misunderstanding is even more likely.

An interlocutor can dispute a proposed evaluation or refuse to accept it. In such a case, the narrator may have to change the proposed meaning, or the narration can simply fail. Polanyi (1989) analyzes an example in which a narrator proposes an unacceptable evaluation. Describing an experience of fainting on the New York subway during

rush hour, she likens the event to the Jews being herded into Nazi cattle cars. Her two interlocutors reject this extreme evaluation, and a negotiation for a mutually acceptable meaning ensues. One points out that the people around her were nice, but the speaker rejects this, arguing that they were nice only because she was a well-dressed, young, white woman. If she had not obviously been a member of a privileged group, they might have trampled her. The other interlocutor asks if she had grabbed the strap in the subway, suggesting that the problem might have been her own fault, since she might be incompetent as a subway rider. The narrator rejects this, stating that she was holding the center pole. Finally the narrator describes the strange, out of body experience of fainting. The interlocutors agree that this experience is indeed weird, and the negotiation successfully closes with agreement, though on a meaning very different from the narrator's initial proposal.

Goodwin (1986) describes a complex narrative event in which disagreement over the interpretation of events leads to the splitting of the five person conversational group. The issue is an event at a local racetrack: was it a big fight, as the main narrator proposes, or was it an empty display of aggression, all show, as the narrator's wife proposes. Some of the interlocutors accept the evaluation of the event as display, and leave to get a beer. The narrator continues his narrative with the remaining member of the audience, who is willing to accept his evaluation of these events as an actual fight.

These two examples show disagreement and negotiation of evaluation of a narrative occurring during a single telling. They show that the narrator does not have complete control over the moral meaning of the story: the interlocutors may disagree or alter the proposed evaluation. In addition, a story can have different meanings relative to different audiences. To illustrate: my husband and I have a brief story about how he once bought a used car for twenty five dollars from a friend, and since then, has considered it ridiculous to pay any more than twenty five dollars for a car. This is a story we retell (see below for a discussion of retold stories), and we refer to this purchase as the twenty five dollar wonder-car. Between us, it is both a story about a triumph of shopping, and a joking reference to my husband's lack of interest in automobiles. In the course of retelling it to other audiences, I have seen it take on a variety of meanings that I never intended or expected.

This story, told to my family and friends in New York, was heard as a claim about what good shoppers we were, relative to the moral belief that one should never pay retail prices for anything. The moral issue at stake here is naiveté versus understanding how the world works: "they" are always trying to charge more money than they should, and it is a moral triumph to circumvent this effort.

When I told this story to successful professional colleagues during more prosperous times than the present, it was an embarrassing narrative failure, a story about being poor or cheap that I should have known not to tell. The moral issue at stake here is success: one should not even suggest that one is not successful enough to buy a new and expensive automobile, let alone appear to boast about it or find it amusing. (The indications of narrative failure are absence of uptake: interlocutors make no comment and quickly change the subject.)

Finally, I had the opportunity to tell this story to members of the California Highway Patrol while studying their work practice. They found it an entirely acceptable story, but to my surprise, they heard it as an indirect claim about my husband's admirable prowess as a mechanic, an incorrect interpretation. I could not correct them by specifying my intended meaning: my husband's lack of interest in cars, since such a lack of interest would be almost impossible to narrate to people whose profession is centrally concerned with multiple aspects of the world of automobiles. The moral issue introduced by my audience involves gender-related competence. If I had been the purchaser, I might have been able to shape the story as a cute-little-me account about my own lack of interest in automobiles that could have been acceptable to this audience. But as a story with a male protagonist, they could only hear it as a claim about competence.

I offer these examples to demonstrate the point that a story does not have an intrinsic meaning. The narrator may propose or assume a particular meaning. But a story's meaning is always understood relative to the values of its interlocutors: tellers and hearers. And values are not solely a matter of individual choice: they are also held relative to the positions the individual holds in groups and institutions. It is possible for my husband to be indifferent to cars, even within the automotively intense culture of California. But it would be difficult, if not impossible, to be a highway patrol officer without interest in automobiles, and respect for automotive competence.

## **The Adventures of Narratives**

Let us move now from the issue of evaluation, which is located within the structure of the narrative, to aspects of the functions of narratives within their larger social world. We could think of this as an examination of the adventures of narratives as they live in their worlds. These include the life course of a story: is a particular story ephemeral, told once or twice, or does it have a long life? There are also issues of storytelling rights: does a particular narrative have only one proper teller, or may others tell it, and on what occasions? Finally, what is the life of a particular story within a group or institution: how often is it told, who is expected to know it, and what is it used to accomplish?

These are certainly not the only questions one could ask about how stories are used, but they do represent issues at a variety of scales of social investigation. And as I discuss below, they suggest opportunities for constructing a valuable taxonomy of meta-data for narratives.

### **Ephemeral and Repeated Stories**

The first issue about the adventures of narratives is their life course. Some stories are ephemeral, tellable and told only once or a few times. They may be locally occasioned by a very particular combination of interlocutors, immediate circumstances and prior conversation which is unlikely to recur. Or they may pertain to the day's events: what happened at work, what happened at home. These are the "How was your day?" stories. Often these involve events so relatively mundane that they have only one proper recipient. Such stories only rarely concern events which become so consequential in an individual's life that they are retold again and again.

### **Individual Life Stories**

Other stories have extended reportability, and a subset of these stories form part of an individual's life story. I have defined the life story as a discontinuous discourse unit, comprised of just those narratives which have long term repeatability. These are the narratives which a speaker tells and retells over the course of his or her life, the narratives of the most important events, the events which have made the speaker who he or she is. These narratives are reworked as circumstances or understandings change; they are told differently to different hearers at different times. They thus form an important part of the socially transacted memory of the speaker. (Linde 1993)

The reportability of a story is not fixed, but rather depends on the narrator's skill in framing it, and the relation between the interlocutors. However certain types of story are more likely to be repeated. By social convention, certain types of story tend to have extended reportability. These include stories of educational and career milestones, personal events such as marriage, the birth of children, divorce, etc., major illnesses, religious or ideological conversions. These are kinds of stories that tend to be form part of the repeated stories of a life story, but any speaker may frame entirely different and idiosyncratic events as the stories which have an extended life, because of the personal importance they are understood to have.

### **Repeated Stories in Groups and Institutions**

As we move from stories of an individual to stories within institutions, a similarly valuable starting point is to ask which narratives have an extended life. For institutional narratives, an extended life means not only that they are repeated over a long period of time by a single speaker, but also that they are retold by narrators other than the original protagonist. This move from a single narrator to other narrators is a point at which a story gains a special

status within institutions because this class of stories forms one important way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to propose current identities for both the institution and its members (Linde 2008).

How can you tell whether a given story is one that is repeated? One of the advantages of ethnographic observation is that one has the opportunity to hear it repeated, and to note the occasions for that repetition. However, even if one has only one instance of a given story, there are ways to determine whether it is ephemeral or repeated. Certainly stylistic features of fluency and artful crafting can suggest that a story is not being told for the first time. But a story told by someone who is not the protagonist, or indeed, not present in the story, suggests that this speaker is repeating a story previously told by someone else. I do not identify these as third person stories, since it is perfectly possible for a speaker to tell an ephemeral story with a third person protagonist: "You won't believe what Chris did today." Rather, I discuss them as repeated or retold stories.

### **Story Stock within Institutions: Who Knows and Who Tells a Given Story**

Let us now consider the life of repeated stories within social institutions. Most institutions maintain a stock of specific repeated stories which are expected to be known by all members, and to be told on appropriate occasions. It is, of course, possible for a story to be repeated by a non-participant only once. A piece of ephemeral gossip may function in this way. However, there are stories that are told repeatedly within institutions, over periods of time longer than the tenure of any given member. Part of being a competent member is knowing how and when to tell such stories. These core stories have a special status within institutions because they form an important part of the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create current identities for both the institution and its members.

Just as there are certain topics for stories that are likely (though not required) as part of an individual's life story, so social institutions have certain topics for stories that are likely to form part of the story stock. The mostly likely is the story of the founding of the institution and its founder. Founder's stories are frequently a central part of the story stock of an institution. Indeed, at MidWest, the authorized history of the company is framed as a biography of the founder. Though this is a written story, during the course of our ethnographic observations, we heard many oral versions of the founder's life, told on a variety of occasions. Other likely components of the story stock include stories of averted disasters, major changes in the institution's direction, and exemplary triumphs. (In a business context, I would assume that other stages of a commercial life course would also be part of the story stock: a start-up company receiving venture funding, an initial public offering, a merger or acquisition, etc..

However, I have not had the opportunity to study institutions as they reached these points, so my observations are anecdotal and not systematic.)

Given a stock of stories known by many people, we may ask about storytelling rights: who gets to tell a story that everyone is expected to know (Shuman 1996). One might assume that first-hand experience would give primacy, but in fact, this issue is much more complicated, raising the question of the relation of power and rank to storytelling rights: who has rights to tell what kinds of stories on a particular occasion, who may speak officially for the institution, and what kinds of stories are not told. Positional power grants storytelling rights, as does long tenure within an institution.

To illustrate this, here is an example of how a story acquires a new teller. When the Institute for Research on Learning hired a new director, he had to preside almost immediately at meetings with clients where it was necessary for him to tell the story of the origin of IRL. These tellings happened in the presence of members who had been at IRL since its founding, or had been members for much longer than the new director. At first he handled this awkward discourse obligation by telling the story with strong evidential markers of non-participation: "I've only been on board for three weeks, but I've been told that ...". These evidentials marked his somewhat delicate membership position: he was the director, and hence the person who should properly tell the story, but he was also a newcomer, who did not have the first hand experience that his subordinates had. Over the course of time, as he became more and more centrally a member of the Institute and a part of its subsequent history, he came to tell the story with no marking of how he came to know it. Although he told the story in the third person, he told it vividly, with a camera's eye view, including details of motivation, direct quotations, etc.. Furthermore, other IRL employees' versions of the story became changed by the director's version, even those employees who were present at the original events. Over the years, the story came to include the director's account of the business reasons for the founding of institute, even in versions told by researchers who were primarily interested in the intellectual aims for the Institute.

Once we begin to include power relations in our investigation, we must then also consider disagreement and opposition. Institutions contain official stories, which everyone is expected to know; they also may contain oppositional stories which give alternate histories or alternate meanings. Individuals may tell oppositional stories, but such stories are most stably maintained by counter institutions. Thus, a labor union within a corporation may maintain for its members stories about or interpretations of events which differ from the official accounts. While some counter stories preserve the memory of different events from those in the official story,

others may use the same past events to provide a different interpretation of present happenings. Thus, an oppositional group may agree with the official story of the founding values of a corporation, but then use that story to argue that management's current actions show that they have abandoned those values which they claim to uphold.

### **Why the Status of a Story Matters**

Let us now consider why it is important to understand the status of a story in its social context. First, as discussed in the section on the evaluation of stories, part of the task of someone listening to a story is to respond appropriately. Most usually, this is to display understanding and agreement with the narrator's proposed meaning. Occasionally the interlocutors' response is to understand the proposed meaning and to reject it, or renegotiate it. Thus, the story is not a closed unit in itself. It is socially porous at the point of its evaluative meaning.

Second, part of the meaning of a story in a given telling includes the way in which the story is intended to be used. For example, a story about the insurance company's founder told to a potential customer may be simply a way of indicating that the company has been in business for a long time, and is therefore stable. Told to me as an outside consultant, it was proposed as one example of what I needed to know to be able to understand the company through a knowledge of its history and values. Told to new and prospective employees (as it often was), it was a teaching story: here is a story showing qualities which you too are expected to embody as you become a member, and to include within your own stories.

### **Meta-Data for Understanding Narratives**

It could be argued that these adventures of stories in their social worlds are perhaps interesting, but beyond the scope of the task of computational understanding of narrative. I would suggest that many of these issues could be fruitfully viewed as meta-data for understanding narratives. The discussion above suggests that there is a range of types of meta-data required for the understanding of narratives. Whether carbon- or silicon-based, the interlocutor must know or be able to derive certain data about both the narrative, and the narrator.

Who is the narrator, and to what group or groups do they belong or attempt to claim membership? This may already be known to the interlocutor, be referenced directly in the story itself, or remain to be derived from cues in the story. Who are the actual or expected interlocutors, and what knowledge and values can they be expected to recognize and share? What is the relation between the participants in the narrative event? What knowledge and history do they share?

Meta-data about the narrative itself: Is the narrator telling a story of personal experience, or is this a repeated story, maintained within an institution? Is this an ephemeral story with limited reportability? Is it part of the core story stock of a group or institution, expected to form part of the knowledge of all members of that group? Is it told as a teaching story, conveying intending knowledge about facts or values?

I suggest these as possible components of the computational representation of narrative. No story can be understood simply as a decontextualized structural unit; it must be understood within the social relations of production and reception. Further, these kinds of meta-data can be helpful in tackling the challenge of understanding how we recognize a story as the same story across different tellings, and how we can begin to account for the differences in the tellings.

### **Proposed Application**

In addition to the theoretical problems involved in the computational understanding of narrative, I would also like to suggest a practical application in an area that is waiting for advances in the field of computational narrative understanding. I refer to current, ongoing efforts at "knowledge capture" in commercial and government organizations. In practical terms, this currently refers to attempts to retain knowledge held by departing employees.

For example, at many government agencies, there is a concern about the high percentage of employees eligible for retirement, who could "walk out the door, and take their knowledge with them" (Linde 2001). This issue is exacerbated at NASA by the pending end of the Space Shuttle program, which will result in loss of personnel, as well as a gap of an unknown number of years during which there are no human spaceflight missions, and thus no opportunities for new personnel to be trained.

Various government and commercial organizations are implementing a variety of responses to these actual and pending losses of knowledge. Some these are well-organized efforts to capture specific forms of expertise, or mentoring and shadowing programs to train specifically the departing expert's replacement. Some involve collecting stories as part of an immediate curriculum development activity, embedding these stories within training materials. However, a very common attempted solution is to conduct recorded interviews as part of the exit process. These interviews result in video or audio recordings which are treated as archival material, potential knowledge that may be used at some later time, in ways that the archivists can not fully predict. In practice, this means the creation of archives of recorded interviews and stories, with the hopeful prediction that automatic indexing and language understanding programs will later be developed to allow such records to become easily

searchable. This desired ease of search would be considerably assisted by automatic recognition of the suggested meanings and morals of these stories for future audiences, as would the addition of extended meta-data.

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