

The magic of dialogue

DbI Network International course

INS HEA – Suresnes (France)

June 22-25

Dialogicality and narrativity.

By Jacques Souriau

In informal discussions, conversationalists tend to spend a lot of time exchanging narratives and some authors consider that gossiping makes up as much as 70% of human beings' discussions (DUNBAR, 1996). Narratives are obviously a core aspect of human thinking and communication. They are studied from various points of view: some researchers try to grasp their internal structure as related to events and characters (LABOV, 1978, 1981, 1997. PROPP, 1968); other ones are more interested in the typical emotional dynamics that is recognisable in all the narratives (GRATIER. & TREVARTHEN, 2008); some look more at the deeply culturally entrenched cognitive semiotic processes that make human people produce narratives in order to make sense of life (GREIMAS, 1966).). Other ones look at how narration is related to time (RICOEUR, 1983, 84, 85... Most of these researches take on a monological stance and look at narratives as a product of human minds rather than as a collaborative activity carried out by communication partners. They either focus on stabilised forms, most of the times written texts (we can recognise here LINNEL'S "written language bias" (LINNEL, P. 1998) or in the individual potential of each individual being, including in the earliest stages of life. By contrast, the present article will take on a more dialogical stance and investigate how in conversations, partners collaborate for the production of narratives. This problem will be addressed from two perspectives:

- 1- A first part will focus on linguistic aspects of "normal" daily conversations between people without disabilities. All the elements presented are drawn from the presentation made by Jacques Brès (Professor of Linguistics – Montpellier University) on Thursday June 24 during the DbI International course "The Magic of Dialogue".
- 2- A second part is a written reconstruction of the presentation made the same day as a response to Jacques Brès by myself. It will address the same topic but in the context of deafblindness and with more focus on the gestural elements that contribute to the co-production of narratives.

Part 1: Narratives and verbal interaction

(This part based on the presentation by Jacques Brès).

In his presentation, Jacques Brès explained how conversationalists co-organise their exchanges in order to keep the conversation going while co-producing narratives. He described how the co-

operative telling of the story is linked to the structure of the narrated event. Many of the processes he addressed seem to be extremely relevant for the field of deafblindness. They can be used to describe aspects of conversations with Congenitally Deafblind people and also to help their partners to improve their communicative competencies. Here are some of these aspects:

- **Narrative vs non narrative clauses.** In conversations, interlocutors produce clauses (or utterances) that are either narrative or non narrative. According to LABOV (1977), you have a narrative only if you have two clauses temporally connected. This is illustrated by this example (SACKS, 1974) where two clauses are presented in two different orders (A and B). These two sequences, although they are made of the same clauses mean totally different stories.

Sequence A:

Clause a: *the baby cried*

Clause b: *the mammy picked it up*

Sequence B:

Clause a: *the mammy picked up the baby*

Clause b: *it cried*

Sequence A means that the mammy picked up the baby because it cried.

Sequence B means that the baby cried because the mammy picked it up.

In other words, if one reverses the order of the clauses, the meaning is totally changed. In conversations, the causal-logical implication of the two clauses is usually expressed by words like “and then...”. Sequences A and B are understood as narratives. By contrast, sequence C will not be treated as a narrative in a conversation:

Sequence C:

clause α : *Yesterday, I met the woman of my life.*

clause β : *A bomb exploded in the centre of Baghdad.*

Clauses α and β are two pieces of information that are autonomous and do not constitute a narrative. Of course, there could be a narrative link between these two clauses, but it would require extra work by the two interlocutors to show how these clauses are narratively connected...

Most of the time, conversationalists exchange more utterances than the core narrative clauses. These other clauses can be called *non narrative clauses*; and as there is no requested order for them, they also can be called *free clauses*.

Let us look at the following conversation between Paul and Mary (family conversation reported by Jacques Souriau):

Paul a It reminds me of Grand Pa Henri
Paul b when he fell into the water.
Marie a: *what ???,*
Paul c I think he was more than 80 at that time.

Paul d and it happened in mid November,
 Paul e The weather was a bit cold
 Paul f And Grand Pa wanted to go out.
 Paul g You know his house.
Marie b: Yes
 Paul h next to the river,
 Paul i with only a small road between his garage and the river.
 Paul j Well... he reared his car out of the garage
 Paul k But he probably lost control
 Paul l and the car went slowly out straight into the water.
Marie c: whoa!!!
 Paul m Yes and he found himself under a few meters of water.
 Paul n Imagine, a man of that age, stuck in a car under 2 or 3 meters of water.
Marie d: Gosh... And what happened?
 Paul o Grand Pa is really incredible....
 Paul p He opened calmly the window of the car and went out into the water.
 Paul q As he said
 Paul r "I started to think inside my head... it will be less tiring to swim under the water instead of trying to reach immediately the surface..."
 Paul s And he calmly swam to the shore where he managed to hang to the grass
 Paul t But he did not manage to pull himself out to the road because the embankment was too slippery.
 Paul u Fortunately, a guy passed by, saw him and helped him out.
Marie e: Incredible !!!
 Paul v Now Grand Pa is a true hero.
 Paul w The story was reported in local newspapers. Even Europe 1 presented him with a beautiful watch that he still wears proudly as a memory.
 Paul x You know.. Grand Pa is an incredible guy.....

LABOV divides the elements of a conversation that are related to a narrative (narrative and non narrative free clauses) in 6 categories:

1- abstract: what is it about?

Examples:

Paul a It reminds me of Grand Pa Henri
 Paul b when he fell into the water.

2- orientation: who, when, what and where?

Examples:

Paul c I think he was more than 80 at that time.
 Paul d and it happened in mid November,
 Paul e The weather was a bit cold

3- complication: and then, what happened?

Examples:

Paul l and the car went slowly out straight into the water.
Paul m Yes and he found himself under a few meters of water.

4- evaluation: so what?

Examples:

Paul n Imagine, a man of that age, stuck in a car under 2 or 3 meters of water.
Paul o Grand Pa is really incredible....

5- resolution: how was the problem solved?

Examples:

Paul s And he calmly swam to the shore where he managed to hang to the grass
Paul u Fortunately, a guy passed by, saw him and helped him out.

6- coda: Is it finished?

Examples:

Paul v Now Grand Pa is a true hero.
Paul w The story was reported in local newspapers. Even Europe 1 presented him with a beautiful watch that he still wears proudly as a memory.

The clauses that express the *complication* and *resolution* are the narrative clauses. The other ones are non narrative and free. Without *complication*, there is no story, no plot. Without *resolution*, the space opened by the *complication* would be left open and the listener would be frustrated. *Complication* and *resolution* are the core constituents of the narrative; sequence A (above) is reduced to these two components:

Clause a: the *baby cried* *complication*
Clause b: *the mammy picked it up* *resolution*

The narrative clauses carry out a referential function: they refer to the structure of the reported event. In short, they tell the story. But the narrative clauses would not be sufficient for the partners to achieve the sharing of a narrative in a conversation. Without the non narrative free clauses, the narrative would be empty. According to LABOV, reduced to the narrative clauses, the narrative « may carry out the referential function perfectly and yet seem difficult to understand. Such a narrative lacks significance: it has no point » (LABOV, 1967: 33). In other words, the narrative clauses take care of the content of the narrative, whereas the free clauses take care of how this narrative is addressed and constructed together with an addressee.

- **The interactive structure of the oral narrative.** The structure of the narrative as described by LABOV does not take into account at all the interplay and collaboration between the partners of the conversation in order to keep the narrative going and achieve it. Jacques Brès suggests that 4 elements help the interlocutors organise their collaboration: 1.the *agreement protocol* 2.the *bridging*, 3.the *veridictory utterances* 4.the *answers of the addressee of the narrative*.

1. **The agreement protocol.**

Usually the teller and the listener of a story negotiate an agreement about whether the narrative will be told or not. The narrative is either an offer (the teller asks the listener if he is interested in the story) or a request (the listener asks the teller to tell the story; for instance in an interview). This task is implemented either through direct questions or using other non narrative utterances: for instance, the abstract gives the addressee the opportunity to express his interest or lack of interest; other utterances aim at verifying that the narrative is not already known (“Do what happened to Paul yesterday?”).

2. **The bridging.**

Some utterances are produced in order to make the bridge between the knowledge of the addressee and the setting of the narrative.

Paul g You know his house.
Marie b: Yes
Paul h next to the river,

3. **The veridictory utterances**

Sometimes the story teller tries to convince the addressee that the narrative refers to events that really happened. Sentences like “I swear that it is true...” or “you can ask Paul...”. They aim at securing the relevance of the narrative project for the two interlocutors.

4. **The answers of the addressee of the narrative.**

In conversations, the telling of the stories is partly determined by the answers of the addressee. These answering contributions can take the form of non verbal vocalisations (“mmm...”), gazes, utterances that approve or criticize. It can even consist in inserting another narrative that echoes the leading one.

In summary, in dialogues, the authorship of a narrative has to be granted to the two (or more) interlocutors. The integration of the narrative in the conversation requires a collaboration of the two partners, in order for them to negotiate the relevance of this communicative activity, to connect it to both the here and know setting of the conversation and to the mental space of the story.

Part 2: Narratives, verbal interaction, gestures and Deafblindness

(An answer to Jacques Brès by Jacques Souriau)

The presentation by Jacques Brès is almost exclusively based on examples drawn from verbal exchanges. In order to link his conceptual structure with the context of congenital deafblindness, it is necessary to address the question of gestures since they play an important role in deafblind communication. In the oral presentation of this part, many video-clips were used; unfortunately,

it is impossible to integrate them in a written text. Therefore, we will have to do without video illustrations to explain the links that can be made between the context of usual verbal conversations and the particular aspects of congenital deafblindness. We will move progressively from the context of seeing-hearing people to congenital deafblindness through examining intermediary situations: we will see how gestures are used (as related to narrativity) in hearing-speaking people, in deaf signers, in people with acquired deafblindness and then we will use an example drawn from the experience of congenital deafblindness.

Gestures in seeing-hearing people

Researchers who study the use of gestures in communication consider that gestures are not an addition to or a comment on verbal utterances but full constituents of the processes that allow people to communicate (McNEILL, 2005). Gestures and speech are intertwined and complement each other. They are used as equally important resources for co-constructing the topic of a conversation and regulating the communicative interaction. Deictic, iconic and metaphoric gestures (McNEILL, 2005). show elements that are indispensable for the interlocutors to understand each other and keep the conversation going smoothly. In the video presented during my answer to Jacques Brès, we could see a fisherman talking about what happened in his boat. In order to do that, he spoke, but also made a lot of gestures describing objects (for instance crabs) or actions (drawing a rope). It is important to add that the orientation of these gestures is not only related to the present space of the conversation but also to the space imported from the narrative (in the example shown, the fisherman was moving as if he was walking in his boat although he was actually on a quay; he also pointed to places that did not belong to the actual space, but to the narrative space). Therefore, gestures not only contribute to forming utterances, they also construct the space that is imported from the narrative (the space where the narrated event took place).

Deaf signers

Sign language speakers use spatial-gestural resources with a lot of expertise and sign languages evolved lexical and syntactical forms that stabilised to make up the lexicon (a repertory of standard signs) and the grammar of sign languages. But it would be wrong to consider that deaf signers' job is only to produce standard signs in the right grammatical order. Standard signs make up only a part (and sometimes a very small one) of the elements that one can observe when deaf signers are talking. In the famous example used by David McNEILL lab (A Tweety and Sylvester comic strip) deaf people tell the story of Sylvester (the cat) climbing up a pipe (a first time inside the pipe and the second time outside the pipe) mainly using iconic gestures showing the pipe and the cat climbing inside or outside. In these excerpts, there is not a single standard sign; hands are used to draw the elements (objects and actions) that are relevant for the narrative. It is also important to underline that when using these iconic gestures, signers gaze mainly at the signing space and very seldom at the partner (SCHWARTZ, 2009). One could hypothesize that standard signs are mainly used to set up the *bridge* between the present space and the narrative space, whereas the iconic gestures are more frequent in the story telling itself. Gaze orientation would also allow differentiating expressions that are related to the interaction (gazes at the partner) and other ones that are telling the story (gaze at the iconic gestures). Therefore, deaf signers seem to have other ways than words (standard signs) to integrate the story in the flow of interaction. Of course this is a hypothesis that would be worth investigating further.

Tactile signing by people with acquired deafblindness.

Before addressing the situation of the congenitally deafblind people, it is interesting to look at what happens with visual signers who became deafblind (people with acquired deafblindness) and moved to tactile signing. In the huge corpus she studied for her dissertation on tactile sign language, Sandrine SCHWARTZ (2009) found only one short stretch (a few seconds) where the signers used iconic gestures to describe space and action (instead of standard signs). This fact contrasts drastically with what can be observed in visual signers. One could hypothesize that there are two possible causes for this phenomenon: one is that tactile signers cannot leave the tactile contact with the partner (therefore, there is no way for the hands to move to an iconic narrative space); the other one is that the iconic gestures (that show the narrative space and actions) have to be visually monitored, which cannot be done by the blind signers (by contrast, visual signers look almost exclusively at the iconic narrative gestures when they tell the story). In other words, signers who became blind keep representing the space in visual terms (although they cannot easily use these visual representations when communicating) and have not enough constructed a tactile representation of space that they could use fluently when communicating. Their expertise in using standard signs allows them to compensate for the lack of iconic narrative gestures and prevent them from developing further their tactile knowledge of the space when communicating.

Congenital Deafblindness.

In order to look at what happens in the case of people with congenital deafblindness, we used excerpts from the video “Traces” (VEGE, BJARTVIK, NAFSTAD, A. et al 2007). This clip does not show two deafblind people having a conversation but discussions between a deafblind person (Ingerid) and a professional (Gunnar) who is expert in deafblindness and narratives. Gunnar has also entertained a many year companionship with Ingerid and he is very good at scaffolding her competencies. In this little film, one can see how an event (feeling a crab walking along the arm and then falling down) is co-constructed and then re-played and told in another context. The design of the film is to study the links between two different settings: the first one is where the event took place (the initial event of playing with crabs on the sea shore) and the second one takes place in a room where the crab event is narrated. The film shows clearly how elements of the initial event (movements, sensations and sequences of actions) are restored in the narrative context in order to bring back the whole story. Several aspects of this film are interesting for the present discussion:

- we can see that the two partners co-construct and use a tactile space : the walking of the crab is expressed through an iconic gesture (fingers “walking”) moving along Ingerid’s arm. This tactile construction of the space has two origins: one is the fact that the event would not have taken place if Ingerid had not felt the crab walking along her arm and then falling down (Ingerid cannot perceive an event which would be only visual); the other one is that Gunnar replayed immediately this event using his own hand to play the role of the crab along Ingerid’s arm and also using Ingerid’s hand to help her feel the event from two perspectives: 1- as perceiving the crab walking on her right arm and 2- at the same time as impersonating the crab with her left hand (being helped by Gunnar). During the initial event, on the sea shore, we can observe alternations between the real events (a crab

walking along the arm and then falling) and replays of this event (imitating the crab walking along the arm, using either Gunnar's or Ingerid's hand).

- In the second situation, when the story is told some time after the initial event in a different physical context, we can detect aspects that contrast with the initial event. One is that Ingerid smiles often during the telling of the story, which contrasts with the seriousness and concentration she displayed during the initial event. In the story telling context, the cognitive mastering of the event is already there which allows Ingerid to enjoy the story and maybe the memory of the fear she had to overcome during the initial event. Another aspect is that in addition to the iconic gestures that were co-constructed during the initial event, Gunnar produces many utterances made of standard signs; these sign utterances are comments related to how they both feel here and now about the story. They take care of the present interaction whereas the iconic gestures keep the story alive. Another aspect is that Gunnar has various roles in the conversation: he can be Gunnar here and now, commenting on the present interaction; he can be the crab walking on Ingerid's arm; he can also be Gunnar during the initial event. These role differences are clearly made visible through the way he uses his hands on Ingerid's body or on his own body while impersonating the crab with his fingers. Interestingly, he helps Ingerid to do the same with her own hands and body.

This last example shows that in conversations with congenitally deafblind people, the parameters that connect a narrative with the present interaction are not intrinsically different from what happens in conversations between seeing-hearing people. We recognise the interplay between the space of the present interaction and the narrative space. The difference is in the method for producing these links: they have to be tactile and kinaesthetic. Space elements and roles are performed by the movements of the body and of the hands. It is also important to underline how much these aspects have to be scaffolded in order to be effective. The dialogicality of this type of communicative event appears in the way interlocutors shift from the present space to the narrative space and also in the way they impersonate various roles in the conversation (they can be the here and now interlocutor, or a character in the narrative – including themselves in the context of original event). In the “Traces” film, we can observe how the two partners play intuitively with these parameters. It could be interesting to study them further.....

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