



PRAGREV

Pragmatics.Reviews

Online Publication of the
European University VIADRINA

Volume 2, Number 1

March 2014

dx.doi.org/10.11584/pragrev.2014.4.1

ISSN: 2196-2871

www.pragmatics-reviews.org

Social identities are constantly reconstructed and reevaluated by individuals

Argiris Archakis, Villy Tsakona. 2012. *The Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.

Two noted scholars from Greece, Argiris Archakis and Villy Tsakona, wrote this interdisciplinary book on pragmatic analysis linked with the narrative construction of social identities. This intersection between these two disciplinary fields is not new (Bamberg 2007), but this book brings a very original contribution and introduces a welcome educational dimension that is not common to most works in narrative studies. Their aim (and plea) is outlined right from the start. Firstly, Archakis and Tsakona want to show how identities can be constructed through what people say and the various ways they express themselves: “in conversations among peers or intimates, narratives are often used as a means of organizing and shaping experience and as strategies for constructing and projecting identities” (p. 2). Secondly, the authors aim for the inclusion of the conversational narrative methodologies for pupils, in order to make them aware of how discourses in the media and everyday life are made to be plausible and seductive: “there are important reasons for the integration of conversational narratives into language teaching curricula” (p. 2).

As many scholars in media education and in critical education already do (Giroux 2011), Archakis and Tsakona are very much aware that younger pupils have to be cautious regarding everything they hear, watch, and are exposed to, especially through the media: “the inclusion of everyday discourse in language courses is expected to contribute to the fulfillment of this goal through highlighting the resources for the strategic construction of identities, and diagnosing their ideological and evaluative loads” (p. 2). Incidentally, the concept of ideologies reappears frequently, although it was not listed in the index (see pp. 24, 27-29, 34, 135, 167 note 1).

This *Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education* comes into three parts. Although it might seem familiar to scholars in sociolinguistics, the theoretical framework described in the first two chapters should not be overlooked because it provides an excellent mapping of narrative studies. Then, Chapters 3-4 demonstrate through conversation analysis plus a variety of examples (even punch lines and jab lines) how teenage identities can be constructed through narrative mechanisms (p. 102). Finally, the last three chapters give and compare some new frameworks for the analysis of conversational narratives (p. 146). Among its numerous strong points, *Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education* is engaging right from the first pages. The basic definition of narrative studies given by the

authors in their Introduction is very clear and most useful, among the most efficient I have read: “The term narrative here refers to what in layman language is known as *story*, in expressions such as *He began to tell me incredible stories; His story had no interest (...)*” (p. 2).

In a few places, Archakis and Tsakona’s book also links pragmatics with narrative studies: “Pragmatic theories help us understand how meaning, conceived as interactional achievement of interlocutors, contributes to identity construction” (p. 22).

The whole book aptly demonstrates that social identities are not immutable but constantly reconstructed and reevaluated by individuals: “various pragmatic theories and analyses have suggested that speakers display multiple and not *a priori* given identities. They construct their identities by taking into account each recipient, and design their discourse to meet the goal they set each time” (p. 25). My only quibble would be about the numerous endnotes which should have been footnotes because they are so helpful and meticulously written, for example this definition of ideologies (p. 167) or this discussion about the various conceptions of narratives (p. 169). As such, this *Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education* is not meant to serve as an Introduction to narrative theory; nonetheless, it could successfully be used by newcomers in this field because of its clarity and wide spectrum.

References

Bamberg, Michael. 2007. *Narrative State of the Art*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Giroux, Henry. 2011. *On Critical Pedagogy*. London/New York City: Continuum Press.

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Research Interests: American Studies, Canadian Studies, Quebec Studies, Cultural Studies,
Gender Studies, Environmental Studies, Social Theories

Yves Laberge: Review on *The Narrative Construction of Identities in Critical Education*. 2012.
In PRAGMATICS.REVIEWS 2014.2.1

Are Japanese conversations planned differently from ours?

Mariko Karatsu. 2012. *Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women. Conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Following the salient works of Michael Bamberg (2007) and a few others about storytelling and narratives, this first book by Professor Mariko Karatsu (from the University of Arizona) derives from her doctoral dissertation; she analyses how conversations actually work and how persons interact one with each other in the Japanese context. In reality, the Japanese dimension is essential here; but in the same time, it remains obvious this overlooked book is mainly focused on narrative studies and scholars without any knowledge or interest for Japan and Japanese Studies will also find here a fascinating demonstration in sociolinguistics, microsociology, and more generally on social interaction. In the countless examples showed here, all passages taken from conversations in Japanese are translated in English (see examples p. 43-46).

Even though this scholarly book is targeted for experts in its field, Mariko Karatsu's style is exceptionally clear and straightforward; her first chapter begins with very simple terms: "This book investigates storytelling in face-to-face everyday conversations among Japanese women examining the participants' verbal and nonverbal behavior" (p. 1). Right from the start, Professor Karatsu's style is efficient and the definitions she forges or invents are luminous. For example, the basic term of "storytelling" is defined by her following an elegant formula: "an event of conversational toward a story before a story is told, and the story is methodically and sequentially occasioned in the conversation through the participants' interaction" (p. 1).

Using a participant observation methodology, Professor Karatsu went to Japan and took part in various conversations among Japanese women reunited in small groups for discussion and chat. Every element is described with minutia and countless details about the successive steps in these conversations, with a focus on the beginnings and transitions between stories: "Conversational stories are often told as someone suddenly remembers something from the previous talk, such as an account about what was just said" (p. 42). But then, Professor Karatsu asks how the transition from one topic to another can be made and implicitly accepted by all participants: in some cases, Japanese talkers will adopt a typical strategy that does not exist in English; they will use an "embedded repetition to indicate the story's topical continuity from the previous talk" (p. 42). These comparative observations are an important contribution for scholars in sociolinguistics who cannot understand Japanese. Many passages are devoted to the understanding of the linguistic strategies used by these persons interacting in small groups in order to introduce a new story to the group in a logical way (see Chapter 3).

These everyday stories might sometimes seem anecdotal or banal; nevertheless, they are rigorously analyzed, for example in this story titled “My husband didn’t eat Taiyaki” (p. 50), or another one labeled as “Ms. Ueda and Mr. Hirai bowed to each other” (p. 135). Incidentally, the 22 stories included and studied here are listed in an appendix; unfortunately, the list does not include page numbers (p. 217).

Finally, Mariko Karatsu’s *Conversational Storytelling among Japanese Women: conversational circumstances, social circumstances and tellability of stories* must be seen as much more than just a case study about casual conversations. Among its strong points, its second chapter aptly revisits the major concepts in narrative studies (presentation of identity and self) and storytelling. It will be exemplary for graduate students who envisage beginning a doctoral research in sociolinguistics.

References

Bamberg, Michael. 2007. *Narrative State of the Art*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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