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# THE NARRATIVE APPROACH IN INVESTIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES: LINGUISTIC TOOLS TO REVEAL “THE STORY IN THE MAKING”

*“Narrative and narrativity are concepts of social epistemology and social ontology. These concepts posit that it is through narrativity that we come to understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities. Social life is itself storied and narrative is an ontological condition of social life.”*  
(M.R. Somers, 1994, p. 614)

*Abstract.* The research question addressed in this paper is essentially how far a narrative approach can go towards identifying, describing and explaining the dynamics of subjectively co-constructed organizational realities, and so affirm its unique value as a research paradigm. The study uses selected extracts from a data set of management-leadership communications in order to illustrate a unifying framework for narrative. The conceptual model which I present can be used as a research platform from which to describe a variety of story types and to see what they have in common as “stories”. The multi-factor analysis deriving from this theoretical framework uses methodologies from discourse analysis, enabling us to link overarching narrative features with their pragmatic, persuasive purposes through the identification of key linguistic features. These linguistic resources (lexico-grammatical choices and patterns, and pragmatic-semiotic strategies) constitute the building materials on which these stories are construed. Storytelling in organizational discourse can then be seen in its complexity, incorporating real and hypothetical accounts, completed, ongoing or overlapping narrations, many of which are intrinsically embedded and essentially pluri-vocal in nature. In sum, qualitative discourse analysis of this kind can provide a unique window onto how the organization becomes literally “storied into being” in accordance with the “performance” of its organizational “actors”.

*Keywords:* storytelling, narrative conceptual dimensions, organizational discourse, multi-factor linguistic analysis, qualitative research, transdisciplinarity.

## 1. Introduction

There has been a steady increase in interest in narrative approaches on the part of organizational scholars in recent times, together with a recognition of the central importance of discourse and communication in the creation, maintenance and modification of organizational life. This may be considered part of an upturn in qualitative empirical research, in general, in the social sciences, in contrast with an arguably over-concern with the formulation of abstract models and the use of purely quantitative methods.

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For linguists specialized in discourse analysis, on the other hand, who focus on the socially-constituted meanings through language, narratology and storytelling have been the focus of studies in a variety of discourse fields (including health interactions, legal encounters, educational settings, and more recently in economics, finance, and business). With regard to the last, the narrative approach has produced a significant body of research in business discourse on topics as central as the performance of leadership; organizational identity, reputation and culture; change, company rebranding and strategic planning. These results have confirmed the need for an invaluable research partnership between organizational experts and discourse linguists.

Yet any attempt to apply a “Narrative Approach” to empirical data in virtually any field of scholarship is inevitably fraught with intrinsic difficulties of both a theoretical and practical nature. This, despite the fairly well-established “linguistic turn” in the social sciences in general, in disciplines as various as the humanities, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, education, communication studies, and philosophy (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Deetz, 2003). The tools and concepts used in narrative analysis across these disparate fields are largely borrowed from literary studies: describing stories, plots, events, characters, points of view, but their applications have led to a multiplicity of definitions and theoretical assumptions. Some people would claim that this does justice to the subject itself while admitting a fundamental weakness: “The richness of narrative analysis resides in its unruly openness, but points of reference are needed to tame the variety in the field” (Robert and Shenhav, 2014, p.1). Nor are there many stable or strong distinctions in the use of key terms: narrative research, narrative analysis, narrative studies, narrative approach: “Narrative analysis remains a relatively open intellectual space characterized by diversity but also fragmentation” (Stanley and Temple, 2008, p.276).

This paper proposes a conceptual underpinning to a narrative approach in the specific field of interest for my purposes here, namely organizational studies, as applied to a linguistic analysis of a sample of corporate and management discourse. This linguistic study takes its place in the rapid expansion of narrative perspectives and the development of a narrative research paradigm in management and organizational theory in recent years. In my study a multi-dimensional descriptive and explanatory framework is elaborated with which to identify and analyse the stories told by organizational participants from a linguistic point of view in order to reveal the processual dynamics of “talk at work”.

## **2. Narrative analysis: definitions and assumptions**

### *2.1 Narrative status and perspective*

Before embarking on the illustration of a personalized framework for narrative analysis, we need to spend some time on the long-standing academic debate as to the status and significance of narrative, which takes on a variety of colours and hues over different disciplinary studies and have repercussions for decisions about what constitutes the object of research and what kind of methodology becomes appropriate and illuminating (see Robert and Shenhav, 2014, for a comprehensive review of the issues). Although these are not mutually exclusive categories, the focus in narrative study may be based on an assumption that narratives play a fundamental role in structuring the human mind and rationality, or that they actually create the social world: Walter R. Fisher (1984) popularized the term *homo narrans* to capture this link

between narration and ontological “reality”. On the other hand, a weaker version of this sees narrative not so much in terms of a connection with mind, but as a way to represent experience in an organized fashion, to oneself, and also as an important tool to communicate information, identity and ideas, to produce persuasive messages and to motivate and legitimate actions. In this perspective, the “reality” and the “the truth” of the narrative are different. The focus of research, in this case, is on the *representational* qualities of narratives, the *telling* of the story rather than the story itself, with an emphasis on the conditions and contexts of its performance, the *process* rather than the *product*.

These truths do not reveal the past “as it actually was”, aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us, instead, the truths of our experience [...]. Unlike the Truth of scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation. (Robert and Shenhav, 2014, p. 6)

This second, interactionist, position has significant implications for conducting narrative analysis, rooting it firmly in a co-constructivist paradigm, where inter-subjectivity and interpretation, themselves, become part of the objects of research. Storytelling, here, is seen as performance in an open-ended, dynamic system: narratives become co-narrated, collectivist, interconnected, fluid and permeable. The narrative analysis reported in this study has adopted this status and set of assumptions for the nature of narrativity.

## 2.2 Schools of narrative study

The conceptual framework for narrative study to be presented in 2.3 must be placed within the existing paradigms for narrative description and the schools of study to which they belong. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish two main streams, classical narratology in the Labovian sense (Labov, 1972, 2001, 2006; Labov and Waletzky, 1967), and the neo or post-classical school (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Greimas, 1973; Norrick, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Herman, Vervaeck, 2005; Wang and Roberts, 2005; Bamberg, 2006, 2007; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Wiles, Crow and Pain, 2011). Underlying the classical tradition is the conception of narrative as *object*, “the story” is to be observed and analysed according to its structure. This has been called “the sequential canon” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p.123), with an emphasis on the idea of an identifiable sequence or succession of chronological events. These are thought to comprise the “big” stories of history as well as personal, “autobiographical” narratives. One of the founders of the classical structuralist school, William Labov, formulated “the syntax of the narrative” and elaborated the way stories can be dissected into the ways their respective parts, (termed “abstract”, “orientation”, “complication”, “evaluation”, “resolution” and “coda”), are put together. Narrative, he says, is “a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of events referred [...] in accordance with temporal junctures” (Labov, 2006, p. 37).

Related to this structure of unity, (a beginning, a middle, and an end), is the notion of causality and non-randomness: events in stories must be linked in a logical fashion. Arising from this causal chain, “the most reportable event” (Labov, 2001, p. 41), the point of the story, usually emerges and this is commonly linked to some kind of problem-solving quality in the narrative, so reflecting the expression of the

participants' intentions. Intentionality, then, or rather "participant responsibility" (Labov, 2001, p. 37) is a determining factor in the evolution of the story and retrievable from the deconstruction of its parts.

Cultural anthropologists and sociologists, on the other hand, prior to the classical narratology represented by Labov, were describing storytelling in very different terms and with varying research objectives. Inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Algirdas J. Greimas (1973), scholars of this school were concerned not so much with overt narrative structure but rather with uncovering a deep semiotic one, *a structure of meaning*. Neo or post-classical narrative scholars are currently drawing on this tradition to some extent. This new school of narrative analysis focuses on the context of production, and the relative contributions of interlocutors, based on the premise that a narrative's meaningfulness is to be found in the participants' reactions and interpretations and not in any formal properties of the narrative itself. The linearity and pre-determined structure implied in the classical narratology school are replaced by fluidity and imprecision:

Therefore, chaotic and uncertain narrative forms are to be expected. Indeed, as cognitive and communicative instruments, most narratives are unfinished, for they are a way to grapple with unsolved life-experiences. (Robert and Shenhav, 2014, p. 9)

This has led to a focus on unstructured forms of narrative, which are seen to consist, often, in small and fragmented pieces of told experience, with multiple time referencing. In fact, post-classical narratologists make a plea for research which goes beyond traditional narrative coherence:

Indeed the postclassical school claims that with its focus on the structured story, narrative analysis has traditionally neglected a whole range of "small stories", such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell. (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 130)

This latter school of narrative, working within an interactionist, co-constructionist perspective, opens up new areas of research to be considered an essential part of narrative description, "such as *telling* roles and *telling* rights", (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381). Consequently, often working within the theoretical constructs of Critical Discourse Analysis, storytelling has been found to be a useful avenue to investigate issues such as identity, power, gender and culture.

### *2.3 Reconciling classical and post-classical paradigms: a conceptual framework for a linguistic investigation of narration*

The conceptual framework for narrative presented in this paper attempts to transcend the distinctions between the two research paradigms outlined above and to integrate elements from both which can be effective in identifying and interpreting organizational storytelling. This means starting with some fundamental questions about the scope and nature of stories. How do we recognize a narrative? What constitutes a story? What are its features? Can these features reveal what is common across different kinds of story, and over different discourse fields? Can a common analytical process be applied to seemingly heterogeneous data? And conversely, when investigating these features, what would *not* seem to qualify as a narrative?

To start with, the framework to follow admits the usefulness of structural analysis, not restricted to functional story "stages" of the classical type, but granting the

existence of a narrative form of some kind which is worthy of investigation. Also in linguistic terms, narrative description consists of systematically investigating the properties of texts: genre type, syntactic patterning, lexical choice, the effects of modality and channels, and so on. This means that, for the linguist, *a priori* quantitative methods, such as those currently to the fore in corpus linguistics cannot be excluded. Then, moving from viewing the story as the object of study to examining the processes of its creation and the role of the storytellers and their audiences in this, pragma-semiotic analysis works at recovering the strategies involved in performing key areas such as evaluation, persuasion and interpersonal stance.

Listed below are the main features and aspects which I propose should be included in a descriptive-conceptual framework for a linguistic narrative analysis:

- Temporality

Basic to post-classical analysis is the idea that a story is not just the passive recounting of events, a chronology, a list of events in date order. Yet, undoubtedly temporal issues are key, designing the unfolding of a story of events and experiences over time. The notion of “*emplotment*” is a basic feature of narrative, and “plot requires a pre-understanding of time and temporal structures” (Boje, 2001, p. 113). In identifying narrative, then, one is at the same time employing time as a central organizing concept. Yet narrative detaches the storyteller’s observations from *real* time, and any particular series of events can be incorporated in many different stories, at different temporal junctures, each of which is open to multiple interpretations. The process of *emplotment* by the storyteller means that any narrative can possibly, and most probably will, incorporate links with past, present, future or hypothetical happenings and experiences. This has been acknowledged by many narratologists: “A narrative is any account of doings or happenings, past, present or future” (Taylor, 1995, p. 9). And the “double arrow of time” has been described where “the context of narratives about the past are re-encoded in the present context” (Mischler, 2006, p. 30-47). Temporality remains a central area in identifying and describing stories by linguistic means, involving plotting stories over time, but in a quite different perspective, however, from the classical structuralist school.

- Sequentiality and adjacency

Stories seen in a multiple temporal dimension means that movement and directionality are central elements to the telling. Storytellers construct their own, personal, *narrative order* in order to construct sense in a storied form. In the processes of narrativization our versions of reality take narrative form: stories are means of interpreting and infusing events with meaning. As narrative scholars Brown and Rhodes say,

People understand complex events in ways which are *integrated* (my italics) and temporally coherent rather than as atemporal and abstract, disconnected frameworks [...]. The presence of a plot constructs the passage from one state of affairs to another. (2005, p. 178)

A linguistic analysis will look at how this narrative order is achieved, at the sequencing and adjacency of information, and the function of, for example, cognitive framing devices<sup>1</sup> and argumentation features.

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<sup>1</sup> Frame Theory was originally coined by the anthropologist and semiotician, Gregory Bateson (1954), and developed by the sociologist Ervin Goffman (1974, 1981). Intended as both a social as well as a cognitive

- Causality, intentionality

William Labov's notion of participant responsibility and intentionality remains an important dimension in the analysis of stories. This is intricately related to the expression of interlocutor roles and identities, which can be traced through the linguistic construal of participant stance, footing and positioning,<sup>2</sup> or the creation of the causal relationships of events, for example. Narrative is closely implicated in processes such as socialization and collective centering, learning, the exercise of power and control, and culture formation. Linguistic analysis along this dimension can reveal the motivating forces at work in both the macro and micro contexts of participant discourse, and so provide the essential *why* of the story.

- Subjectivity

Again a Labovian concept is enduringly insightful, that of the most reportable event, but becomes transformed when placed in a newly-extended theoretical framework. It is closely linked to the previous dimension, intentionality and causality, but, rather, this focuses on the discursive marking of *salience* and *affect*. As we have said, what people try to make sense of are not the events *in themselves* but *accounts* of them: in the process they may subjectively interpret prior tellings in order to produce further inter-subjectively charged accounts, both for themselves and their audiences. People tell stories to describe past, ongoing, or anticipated events, their own perceived role in personal relationships, including successes and failures, and, as a consequence, express a wide range of reactions and emotions. Linguistic analysis along this dimension will investigate just how this *narrative force* and persuasive power is conveyed.

- Symbolic representational value *versus* factive

This dimension undeniably pertains to the more newly-developing school of narrative analysis, the idea developed in the earlier parts of this paper, that stories are understood as symbolic forms of discourse as opposed to the recounting of incontrovertible "facts", and that these are co-constructed through teller interpretation and hearer reaction.

People use narratives to order their experience as they make sense of it. Narrative recasts communication as a form of symbolic action, providing sequence, meaning and structure [...]. Narratives are thus regarded as the means through which experience is reflexively reconstituted, made meaningful, and made communicable." (Brown and Rhodes, 2005, p. 175)

A linguistic analysis along this dimension will identify and investigate how this symbolism takes tangible form, whether it be through the use of interdiscursivity and intertextuality,<sup>3</sup> the adoption of varying narrative genres such as myth or saga, or the use of multimodal instruments in the telling of the story.

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sense-making mechanism, Goffman identifies complex levels of "speech activity framing" which indicate what people think they are *doing* when they talk to each other. Moreover, in multimodal analysis, framing is used to indicate the windowing and perspectivizing resources used in meaning-making in, primarily, visual texts.

<sup>2</sup> The concepts of "stance", "footing" and "positioning" are used here in the Goffmanian sense. "A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and others present, as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance." (Goffman, 1981, p. 128)

<sup>3</sup> Both these terms have been used differently by scholars in the same and in different research traditions (Bakhtin, 1981; Fairclough, 1995; Bhatia, 2010). Conversely, they have often been used as virtually interchangeable. For our purposes here, interdiscursivity is intended in the broadest sense delineated by

- Plurality and reflexivity

Another tenet of the neo or post-classical school of narratology is that of the pluralization of stories, with multiple participants, and the contemporaneous and contiguous existence of various narratives in different time frames. In the professional context analysed here, business organizations have been described as “[...] a network of inter-related narrative interpretations, formed from a pluralistic construction of a multiplicity of stories, storytellers and story performance” (Boje, 1995. p.1000), and as “[...] entities in which competing centripetal and centrifugal forces operate through multiple, often partially overlapping narratives, creating polyphonic and plurivocal societies” (Brown and Rhodes, 2005, p.184). A linguistic analysis along this dimension will involve tracking the textual connections in order to follow the processes of the co-construction of chained multi-stories.

My conceptual framework will be used to derive a multi-factor linguistic analysis of the organizational data. The various dimensions will be examined in order to identify the linguistic resources employed in the realization of narrative intentions, and where possible, their outcomes. This allows us to relate linguistic features to their rhetorical-pragmatic potential, and so, finally, to integrate the narrative conceptual dimensions with discursive use.

### **3. The value of the Narrative Approach in organizational studies**

#### *3.1 The shift from quantitative to qualitative focused research*

The value of narrative methodologies in organizational research is by no means undisputed, and yet arguably narrative approaches have provided a rich body of knowledge to date on major areas of enquiry such as company communications, politics and power, learning and change, identity, identification and culture. Some of the earliest work in management and organizational theory which explicitly favored narrative study goes back to the 1970s (Mitroff and Killman, 1975), who proposed using stories, myths, sagas and other forms of narrative as a valuable source of data. In the 1980s and 1990s a growing focus on the language symbolism of organizational culture prompted the use of participant narratives in order to explore the meaning of organizational experience. The recent linguistic upturn in organizational studies has consolidated the use of narrative, not only as a valuable form of empirical data but also as a theoretical lens with which to guide research.

Organizational actors operate in communication and through discourse [...]. In communication, actors co-create their subjectivities in the form of personal and professional identities, relationships, communities and cultures, through linguistic performances. (Jian et al., 2008, p. 314)

Organizations are fluid and are themselves co-constructed by their participants through discourse:

Organization is not a pre-discursive social entity reflected in language, rather the organization is *talked into being* (my italics) through a set of relational understandings enabled and enacted through discourse. (Aritz and Walker, 2012, p. 268)

Storytelling reveals essential organizational processes:

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Christopher N. Candlin and Yon Maley: “The use of elements in one discourse and social practices which carry institutional and social meanings from other discourses and social practices” (1997, p. 212).

Rather than viewing organizations as static, homogeneous and consistent entities, narrative approaches demonstrate the processual characteristics of organizations. and can render both the paradoxes and complex causal relationships inherent in organizational change open to analysis. [...] It is the ability to reflexively engage with the lived experience of work that is a key methodological advantage of narrative approaches. Narrative and rhetorical techniques can be used to examine how people in organizations represent and construct their lives. (Brown and Rhodes, 2005, p. 25)

The value of the study of “talk at work” has changed from being an interesting, but peripheral research accessory, to its recognition as a fundamental indicator of organizational experience. “Talk is at the heart of all organizations. Through it, the everyday business of organizations is accomplished. People in organizations talk all day, every day” (Boden, 1994, p. 28).

In sum, the move to include qualitative narrative approaches in organizational research reflects a dissatisfaction with a previously predominating “realistic” ontology, with its assumption of having a “reified” organizational entity to describe, and an objective “truth” to reveal, usually through the use of sophisticated data bases and complex abstract statistical quantification. Conversely, qualitative narrative study can provide new sources of empirical material and sharper analytical tools to be used in micro-studies, together with a practice-driven theory, enabling the localities of practice to be examined. Today, organizations are becoming ever more complex, transient and permeable, and this kind of local knowledge becomes indispensable to tracking changing organizational realities.

### *3.2 Findings to date about the value of narrative studies*

A strong version for the status of narrative (as discussed in section 2.1) argues that people are predisposed to think in storied form and some believe that narratives constitute a basic organizing principle in human cognition. Leaving this issue aside, the value of storytelling in sense-making in organizations has been summarized as follows (Brown and Rhodes, 2005, p.182):

#### Stories

- aid comprehension
- suggest a causal order for events
- enable people to talk about absent things
- act as mnemonics
- guide action
- convey shared values and meanings
- reduce the equivocality (complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability) of organizational life
- are the main source of knowledge in the practice of organizing. Narratives are fundamental diagnostic tools that encourage the spread of common understandings within communities of workers
- can be used to predict future organizational behavior.

Going more deeply into specific areas, David Boje’s formulation of “Storytelling Organization Theory” (1995) is seminal in demonstrating the importance of storytelling within the organization. In a Critical Theory perspective, he highlights the

political implications of role and power relationships within organizations, how some stories become more dominant and hegemonic, and others marginalized.

Looking at the use of storytelling within corporate management, studies have hypothesized that it is a vehicle for the exchange of rich and complex information, serving to explain complex processes of organizing, to share best practice, and to express a manager's individual "vision" to other organizational members, (McKenzie, 2002).

Narration also plays a fundamental role in learning, in the transformation of personalized or distributed *information* into shared *knowledge*. It is a powerful sense-making and sense-giving mechanism and abstract, theoretical ideas can be brought to a practical level and made understandable in everyday practices:

Increasingly the fields of organizational studies and discourse analysis are coming together. Focusing on the language of leadership, Brown (2006), Clifton (2012) and Fairhurst (2007, 2010) describe how organizational identity is a discursive construct and how narration creates, maintains and modifies corporate culture. Narration also informs employees about preferred organizational cultures as "accepted scripts", and socializes people into organizational norms. It promotes forms of social and inter-subjective interaction that reflect belief systems, role expectations, and conditions for work behavior.

Stories have long been used as a metaphor for learning, and storytelling is one of the world's oldest teaching tools. They are seen as both a window and a mirror, allowing people to look out at the world and offering a reflection back. (Barker and Gower 2010, p. 306)

Finally, stories, by framing organizational events and meanings, establish a social context for members and promote a sense of organizational membership. They help to create a collective sense of memory and a future vision through processes of bonding. Narration, then, illustrates the importance of communication dynamics which convey value-laden features and realities.

### 3.3 A transdisciplinary research collaboration

This study hopefully serves to illustrate the value and the need for real transdisciplinary research, and for research partnerships which integrate both subject expertise and linguistic expertise. Despite the burgeoning literature about organizational narrative, arguably the *content* of narrative itself has been under-conceptualized and inadequately theorized. As Section 3.1 and 3.2 demonstrate, the power of narrative is usually described in broad generalizations. Often narration in these research frameworks is a taken-for-granted category, and the language of stories remains largely unanalyzed. This is where discourse linguists can play an important part in the analysis of data after its collection, in order to see how language works in the storytelling process, how it does what it does. Linguistic frameworks, theoretical models, and methods (both quantitative and qualitative) enable a discourse analysis of narrative texts to be carried out, so putting organizational discourse research on a stronger footing and providing it with a sounder descriptive and explanatory basis. On the other hand, clearly discourse linguists working in the field of organizational narration need to be close to the specialists in the field and knowledgeable about the progress of the Narrative Approach, the theorizing which is taking place on the subject, and the actual form narrative studies are taking.

The remaining part of this paper will illustrate the conceptual framework for narrative which I have compiled and described in Section 2.3. This is an attempt to provide a systematic means to identify and analyse the phenomenon of narrative, as both object and process, from a discourse perspective.

#### **4. The data and methodology**

Only a few selected excerpts from one recent study are used to illustrate this, predominantly theoretical, contribution. The intention is not to present a new empirical piece, either in part or in its entirety, but to demonstrate how my proposed conceptual framework for narrative could be applied. This framework has gradually emerged over time, in the completion of a number of studies where narration has featured to greater or lesser extents (Bowker, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2015, 2017). This is the first occasion for the framework's presentation.

The data describes managerial-leadership storytelling, consisting of the recordings and presentations slides of a day's research seminar and workshop held in September 2014 by the CEO of a well-known Italian semiconductor company, He was an invited speaker at the Faculty of Economics, Sapienza University of Rome, to an audience of professors and students in its Management Department. The business, located in the Abruzzo region of Italy, was previously owned by two American multinationals in succession and then sold to an Italian-German company. The CEO is a notable figure in the history of the company and he recounts an extended story about the struggle for the recreation and maintenance of trust by all the stakeholders over a critical organizational time frame. The CEO returned to the Faculty in January 2017, to address the participants of the ASSIOA (*Associazione Italiana di Organizzazione Aziendale*) Winter School, where the story was updated.

The methodology used in the original research project, from which these excerpts have been selected, is multi-layered and integrated, using both quantitative and qualitative tools. For our purposes, here, the full details of the analysis have not been elaborated.

#### **5. The research focus**

As stated in the abstract, the main purpose of this paper is to present a unifying descriptive conceptual framework for narrative which can be applied over a variety of story types and organizational contexts. The main dimensions of this were outlined in Section 2.3: temporality, sequentiality and adjacency, causality and intentionality, subjectivity, symbolic representational value, plurality and reflexivity.

I suggest that a scheme of this kind could be useful in guiding a linguistic analysis of narrative texts. This means making connections between the distinguishing narrative characteristics with language use: in this way, the pragmatic, persuasive purposes of individual stories can be retrieved through the identification of key linguistic features and strategies. The linguistic resources (lexico-grammatical choices and patterns, and pragmatic-semiotic strategies) effectively index narrative type and allow us to confirm what stories have in common, what the constituent properties of "a story" are, according to the macro-dimensions of the framework. At the same time, it enables us to specify how stories vary, as micro-narratives, according to the communicative intentions of tellers and audiences, and in their varying temporal and spatial settings.

## 6. Selected analysis

### 6.1 Story 1. The industry's time-lines and learning histories

The first set of stories recounted by the CEO can be considered examples of realistic texts, where he retraces the company's history in the form of collective group stories: the company's founding, the various passages of ownership, its recurrent challenges, through to its present troubles. It is delivered in factual mode, and the primary speech functions of the discourse are descriptive, referential and ideational, that is to say information-carrying and reporting functions.<sup>4</sup>

The main narrative framing and the keywords of the discourse are provided by the title of the presentation "*Leadership, Competence, Courage in a Complex World: Generative Leadership in Complex Contexts*" (original in English)<sup>5</sup>. Secondary-level framing occurs in Slide 1 showing the outline of his talk:

#### Slide 1. Talk outline.

We shall talk about:

- The semiconductor industry and Avezzano: complicated eco-system-also complex?
- My crisis, my story: storytelling and sense-making unknown to myself.
- What we have learnt: connecting up the dots.

The three areas correspond, in fact, to the three different, but interlinked, stories to be recounted by the CEO: the story of the industry, his own personal story, and the learning lessons to be derived from these two sets of experiences.

The presenter proceeds to give an overview of the company, its history, its strengths and achievements. The technical and commercial competence acquired and currently held by the company is strongly emphasised from the outset, as shown in Slide 2.

#### Slide 2. Summarized value proposition.

- Reliable, fast and flexible customer-specific manufacturing and development partner
- Providing volume leading-edge specialized technology capacity down to 90nm and copper metallization
- Advanced analog and mixed-signal process technologies down to 110nm CMOS Image Sensor optimized technology on 110nm and 90nm incl. Back Side Illumination
- Special competencies and technologies for Smart Power, Imaging, Smart Card and Secure products manufacturing



<sup>4</sup> The literature on speech functions and the relationship between language form and pragmatic meaning is vast and extremely rich due to the number of disciplines linguistic analysis has drawn on over time: cultural anthropology, developmental and social psychology, sociology, linguistic philosophy, for example. The speech function typology used here refers to Roman Jakobson's classic formulation (1960), and includes referential, argumentative, expressive, poetic and phatic functions.

<sup>5</sup> The PowerPoint slides are mostly in English. While the CEO spoke *impromptu* to the audience in Italian, he read from the slides in English. The linguistic analysis is carried out almost entirely on the slides in English, and where Italian is used, in Slide 3, it has been glossed in English for this paper.

The photograph of the technician at work complements the main written information contained in the slide, which describes the company's expertise, knowledge and comparative advantage in the marketplace: technical language and terminology provide the main lexis nexus, supported by positive evaluation conveyed by adjectival groups conveying strong appreciation, *leading-edge specialized technology, advanced analog, optimized technologies*. The text takes the form of extended nominalised phrases, *reliable, fast, and flexible customer-specific manufacturing and development partner*, which focus solely on the status and products of the industry. The absence of agents or verbs (other than in participle form) and the concentration of compound noun groupings project an image of authority, credibility and strength, attributing a sort of reified "factive truth" to the description.

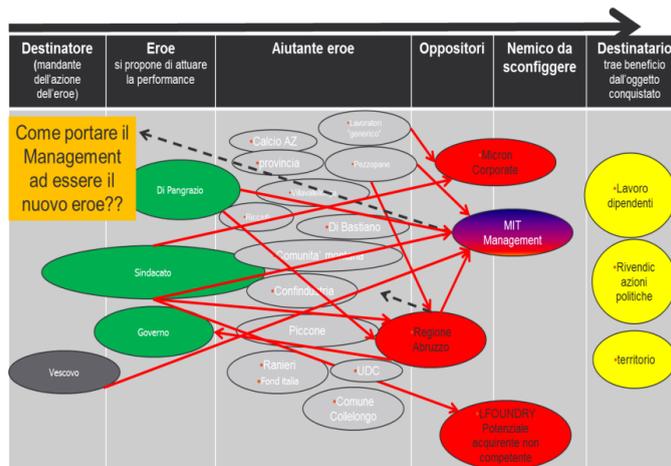
At this point, the story changes direction. So far, we have had an objective description of the company, its history, achievements and risks for the future in what we may call "narrative horizon scanning". The persuasive force lies in an appeal to reason and logic, and trust claims are based on creating a competence face depicting expertise, authority and knowledge. However, after the company's acquisition by two US multinationals in succession, and the later formation of an Italian joint venture with Germany, the Abruzzo semiconductor plant faced a major crisis in trust within the organization, and a breakdown in credibility and legitimacy in general. The current CEO now assumes full responsibility for this situation and continues, in his communications, as the main protagonist into the next story, a battle for the reconstruction of trust.

## 6.2 Story 2. *The industry as fable, myth and allegory—the site for moral battle: "My Crisis, My Story"* (original Slide title in English)

The CEO tells of his central role in the evolution of the Abruzzo semiconductor industrial plant, the accusations levied against him in the course of developments and his equivocal position with regards to all the stakeholders concerned. He is both an unwilling victim of circumstances and the main protagonist for change. As acting Vice President of the second-owning American multinational company, present in five regions of Italy, and then playing a central role in the founding of the new joint venture with Germany, he found himself in the front line of a massive crisis in trust between management and employees in the new state of affairs. When he became the CEO of the new company, he assumed responsibility for an indispensable process of reconstruction of identities and organizational culture.

In Slide 3, he goes on to present what may be considered his "Signature Story", an epic story of conflict in allegorical mode, a fable recounted in pictorial form. This scenario is based on the classic "Greimas Model" of narrative (1973), which is considered important in organizational studies (Wang and Roberts, 2005). What is of interest here is the semiotic construction of the visual text and the interplay of language and image.

Slide 3. How can management become the new hero?



The main question stands alone “How can Management become the new hero?” Then, the various forces and protagonists in this fictionalized conflict are lined up in their vertical ranks, indicated with a significant use of colour (in the original slide, obviously obscured in print form): working from left to right, the senders of the heroes (in grey), the heroes themselves (in green), and their lieutenants (without colour); the opposition and enemies to overcome (in red); and the beneficiaries-receivers of worth (in yellow).

The ellipses containing the names of the personalized and institutionalized participants cross over the demarcated lines, however, and the entire complex web of alliances, alignments and compartmentalized “battles” is delineated with dotted and continuous lines in red, connotating a sense of movement, flux and instability. Heroic action is expected to ensue from the national government (*governo*), the local government (*regione*), the unions (*sindacato*), aided by a whole range of single individuals, organizations and agencies. Management of the single companies, past and present, are considered the foes to defeat through appropriate and effective strategies and policies. The beneficiaries, the winners, extend beyond the workforce (*lavoro dipendenti*) to political policy-makers (*rivendicazioni politiche*) and the socio-economic status of the region itself (*territorio*).

The visual scenario constitutes an emotively intense, elaborate visual metaphor for the struggle to recreate trust, assuming the guise almost of a Holy War, a struggle between Right and Might: in fact it is for the Bishop (*il Vescovo*), in grey, on the far left of the battleground, to rally the forces against one clear enemy, corporate management.

The CEO draws his own conclusions about the present state of affairs. Using a series of questions to construct a narrative order, he addresses his audience directly, reading the information from Slide 4.

Slide 4. Direct questions about conflict.

- Is it true that management is necessarily the enemy of the workforce?
- Who is the true enemy? Is it necessarily a physical person? Or, an idea?
- How to become a hero? *What kind of sense-making to adopt* to offer to stakeholders?
- *How to use storytelling, metaphors* (my italics) in interpersonal communication and with the mass media?
- How can institutions become the lieutenants of management?

In this way, he adopts a proximal stance in his positioning with his interlocutors and creates room for his final proposals. The new CEO, in first person, now explicitly champions the use of narrative and storytelling as both content and method in the trust creation process among his organizational members.

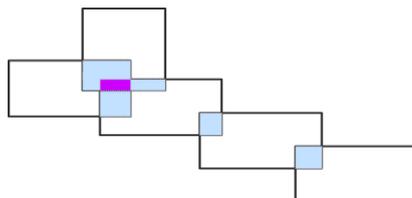
6.3 Story 3: The Avezzano semiconductor industry as the site for learning lessons: Complexity and Strategic Inflection Points: “Adapt or die” (Slide title)

The CEO here uses a third type of narrative which is primarily dialectical in type, drawing on the forms and structures of argumentation and delineating elements of causality and intentionality. He finishes his seminar describing “what we have learnt; connecting up the dots”, producing what may be called “strategic texts”, creating future narratives by which to convey these “learning lessons”. In this third story, the CEO uses projected scenarios to explain his ideas about the need to change existing paradigms of organizational thinking, principles for action and corporate mindset. This has important implications for leadership and the preparation of executives, who will need to possess a different set of skills, talents, intellectual and personality traits than those traditionally defined. He finishes by defining this new “authentic-generative leadership” based on inter-relational and communication competencies.

The speech functions of exposition and argumentation are predominant in this type of narrative, whose main themes deal with the presentation of problems and solutions, the processes of cause and effect, and the creation of hypothetical scenarios and ensuing responses.

Visual symbolism is again important in the narrative, this time using geometry as a metaphor and cognitive aid. The mathetic, concept-forming function of the semiotic configuration emerges, in the match between the diagram and the slide title, showing the value of extended networking, which is symbolized by the shared space created by the three overlapping rectangles (Slide 5).

Slide 5. Who makes up the Group? Is the final Network The Group?



During the course of this exposition the CEO makes recourse to a range of sources of expert opinion on the subject of organizational complexity and corporate mindset.

Space does not permit details, but he includes citations and attributions, for example, from Andy Grove, former CEO of *Intel*, currently the largest semiconductor business in the world. Within this intertextual frame, Andy Grove's book "*Only the Paranoid Survive*" (1996) is cited for the relevance of its description of "Strategic Inflection Points" in a company's lifecycle and how to use them to advantage.

*Slide 6. Learning Lessons*

- What have we learnt?
- A crisis is not an extraordinary event but a continuous process in the life of an organization and its individuals. Every event *necessitates a strategic choice, without which we are destined to die.*
  - *If we decide not to choose, the world will not stop, but we will find ourselves absolutely unprepared to face a crisis or an emergency, which if predicted and handled in time, could even be avoided.*
  - This means we *must develop* the concept of "resilience". This means facing events *positively*, reorganizing *positively*, facing difference *efficiently* and *being able to reconstruct ourselves.*
  - We *need* resilience among the workforce, first of all: *the crisis* in the Avezzano plant has *threatened* several fundamental individual needs: *certainty* for the future, *a sense of belonging, social recognition*, with important effects on *trust levels* in the organization.
  - We *need a national and European industrial policy* in order to be *competitive* on a world level.

The language of conditional forms and expressions of modality construct the argumentation and provide narrative form through sequencing and adjacency: options are considered, *If we decide not to choose, the world will not stop*, and repercussions are spelt out, *without which we are destined to die*. Necessities and possibilities are listed using semantic patterning, *every event necessitates a strategic choice; an emergency, which if predicted and handled in time, could even be avoided; we must develop the concept of "resilience"; we need a national and European industrial policy.*

Negative evaluative language is juxtaposed with positive appraisal, which emerges as the stronger, overall: *the crisis, which threatened, where we are destined to die*, can be transformed into a situation where *we are being able to reconstruct ourselves, facing difference positively, efficiently, creating certainty, a sense of belonging, social recognition and effects on trust levels.*

This third set of stories continues in the same vein, projected towards an improved future for the business, and recounting plots of cause and effects, problems and solutions, and their enactment in hypothetical scenarios.

**7. Findings**

*Table 1. Story type and narrative mode.*

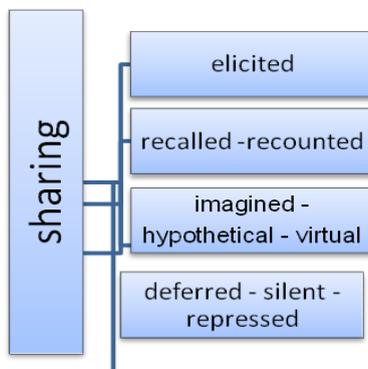
STORY TYPE AND TEMPORAL FRAME	NARRATIVE MODE AND FUNCTION
Learning histories (bounded past/present time lines)	Factual/factive/objectivized Descriptive, ideational, referential
Fictionalized story (unbounded temporal/spatial coordinates)	Allegorical/mythical/saga Expressive, poetic
Learning lessons (projected future time)	New/prototypical scenarios Expository, argumentative, mathetic

As summarized in Table 1, it has been possible to identify, in these brief excerpts, three series of interlinked stories, with differing speech functions and narrative modes and forms: the essentially descriptive, referential-ideational discourse of the history of the company up to present day; the nature of the crisis and the ongoing saga of contemporary troubles, recounted in allegorical form and drawing on expressive, poetic speech functions; finally, the hypothesized future story lines of the business, formulated using mainly expository and argumentative strategies in the delineation of an “enlightened leadership”.

This accounts for much of the variation in the managerial-leadership storytelling contained in this particular set of data. It remains to summarize how the conceptual framework for macro-narrative parameters proposed in this paper has been indexed by the pragma-linguistic features on which the stories have been constructed.

With respect to the dimensions of temporality and spatial framing, the following Figure 1 indicates the variety inherent in narration. The point of departure is the consideration that stories are told and shared in ongoing interactive situations between tellers and audiences.

Figure 1. Story type and temporal-spatial dimension.



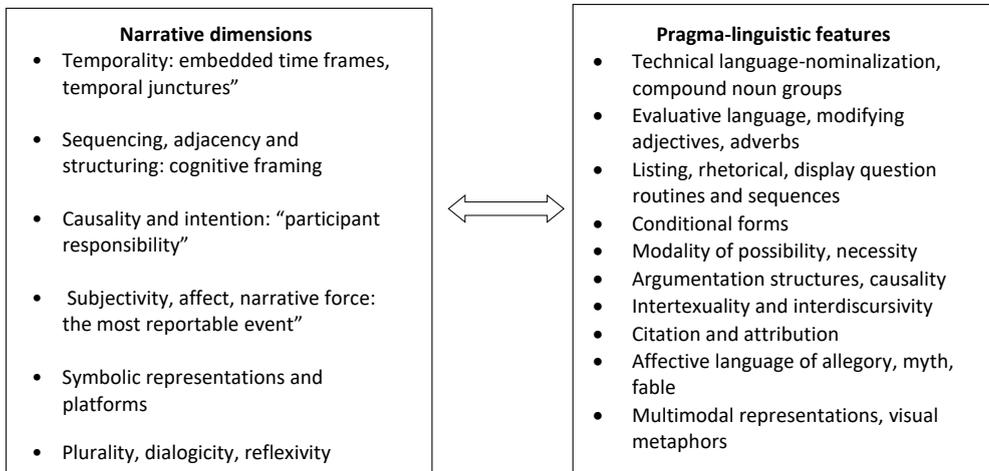
Then, as explained in Section 2.3, narrative detaches the storyteller’s observations from *real* time, and in the process of emplotment links will probably be made with past, present, future or hypothetical happenings and experiences. These may be recalled and recounted once again from a point of reference in the past, or elicited by interlocutors as a group experience in the present time (such as in simulations or demonstrations), or constructed in an imaginary or virtual setting, or even left incomplete, deferred, for some reason.

Figure 2, on the following page, completes the description, bringing all of the narrative dimensions included in my conceptual framework in line with the linguistic features which have been identified as important in this particular set of managerial-leadership storytelling. A reading should not be done horizontally on an item-to-item basis, as very often a linguistic form, pattern or pragmatic strategy will be working on different levels simultaneously.

Narrative research is basically an investigation into the nature and dynamics of subjectivity, which poses a number of challenges in itself as to the certainty of interpretation and the reliability of results. Moreover, the territories of “Stories” and

“Facts” are not clearly demarcated nor are they mutually exclusive, and it is for the researcher to try and see how they affect each other, their blending, fusion, and curious, interdependent symbiosis.

Figure 2. Narrative dimensions and pragma-linguistic features.



Yet hopefully the study described here shows the possibility of a fruitful transdisciplinary effort directed towards putting the Narrative Approach in organizational studies on a stronger scientific footing with added descriptive and explanatory power. From the linguistic side, the conceptual framework illustrated here allows us to uncover the properties of organizational narratives, drawing on both classical and post-classical schools and paradigms. On the other hand, the rise of the Narrative Approach is not just a source of valuable empirical data, but constitutes a theoretical lens to capture organizational processes in a time of rapid change, providing rich theoretical descriptions. In sum, this illustrates a significant development in social science research in general, going beyond statistical data, getting closer to people and finding new ways to study behavior. In the case of storytelling, the topic becomes how the participants, themselves, document their accounts when telling the stories of their own lives.

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