PERSONAL NARRATIVE ONLINE

26-27 JUNE 2015

http://tinyurl.com/bayreuth2015

#narr15
CONGRESS PROGRAM

26 JUNI 2015

13:00 Registration, coffee & sandwiches

13:45 – 14:00 Welcome

14:00 – 14:45 Theresa Heyd – “Tales of Tumblr – West African narratives of belonging on social media”

14:45 – 15:30 Alexandra Georgakopoulou – “From writing the self to posting self(ies): A small stories approach to selfies”

Coffee break

15:45 – 16:30 Ruth Page – “Shared Stories? Analysing co-tellership and counter narratives in social media accounts of notable figures”

16:30 – 17:15 Niamh Ni Bhroin – “Protecting networked privacy in social media research”

Conference dinner 19:00
PERSONAL NARRATIVE ONLINE

27 JUNI 2015

9:00 – 9:45 Daria Dayter – “Boundary work through personal narrative: becoming a ballet student on Twitter”

9:45 – 10:30 Marie-Thérèse Rudolf von Rohr, Franziska Thurnherr and Miriam A. Locher – “The functions of ‘personal narratives’ in three written online health contexts”

Coffee break

11:00 – 11:45 Tom Van Hout – “Life is a pitch: self-presentation in the age of corporate speak”

11:45 – 12:30 Theresa Heyd and Cornelius Puschmann – “#fail: Narrativity and metalinguistic function in hashtags”

Lunch

Special Panel „Online narrative practices in Africa and African diaspora“

13:30 – 14:15 Susanne Mühleisen – “More about me” - self-presentation as personal basic narratives in Caribbean online dating ads”

14:15 – 15:00 Eric Anchimbe – “Digital narratives of belonging in Anglophone versus Francophone Cameroon”

End of conference, farewell
Narratives of belonging in the digital diaspora. Corpus approaches to a cultural concept.
Theresa Heyd (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)

The notion of ‘narratives of belonging’ has become popular in recent years. Originating in anthropological research, the term has been applied to life stories constructed around migration, displacement, and diasporic experience. Based on this tradition, the underlying narrative concept tends to remain general, as it caters to “analyzing narratives as accounts of lived lives, as a way of structuring the past, and as modes of communication and performance” (Besson and Olwig 2005). It is argued here that the concept can also be made fruitful for sociolinguistic inquiry into diasporic discourse, by providing a more principled look at structural and linguistic properties that are indicative of such narratives.

In this study, I examine narratives of belonging based on a large-scale corpus of digital diasporic discourse (Heyd 2014). I discuss structural features of such (typically small) stories and the linguistic patterns they contain, such as code-switching and the use of (often nonstandard) toponyms. In the specific context of digital linguistic practices, I argue that diasporic narratives of belonging provide evidence for the increasing importance that anchoring to physical space and locality hold in online communication. In this sense, the study provided here links the analysis of personal narratives online with sociolinguistic concepts of space and place.


From writing the self to posting self(ies): A small stories approach to selfies
Alexandra Georgakopoulou (King’s College London)

Selfies have as of lately earned a prominent place in the diverse forms of self-representation on social media. In sociolinguistic terms, they have been undergoing a process of enregisterment (Agha 2005), as attested to in moral panics in public discussions and in a developing selfie-related lexicon. A phenomenon worthy of study then, yet largely unexplored, particularly within discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives on identities (possibly due to the selfie’s visual nature). My aim in this talk is to venture (and justify) a small stories ‘claiming’ of selfies as a case of a perfect match between epistemology, analysis and data. Selfies present the semiotic hallmarks of small stories, as I will show, and so they constitute valuable ‘data’, the study of which will enrich the strand of small stories inquiry into genres as communicative and social practices on social media. At the same time, I will argue that the small stories apparatus is well-suited to selfie analysis: it has been specifically developed to account for ego-genres that challenge the assumptions and modes of analysis of conventional narrative and life writing studies. Using a range of data, from lists and discussions of most circulated selfies to selfie postings by adolescent women on FB, I will show how within a small stories framework, far from being narcissistic expressions of ‘ideal selves’, selfies emerge as contextualized co-constructions of the everyday.
Shared Stories? Analysing co-tellership and counter narratives in social media accounts of notable figures

Ruth Page (University of Leicester)

My presentation will discuss the analytical framework and interdisciplinary methods that are required when researchers begin to examine social media sites as contexts for narrating biographical accounts of notable figures.

Social media sites, platforms and projects have enabled people with relatively little technical expertise but with access to the Internet to document their own life history and to co-construct social commentaries on lived experience, giving rise to sizeable, publically available archives of biographical material. The archives of social media sites pose a variety of analytical opportunities and challenges for the narrative researcher. On the one hand, a great deal of tractable material is available for scrutiny. For example, the English Wikipedia archives extend back to 2002. But not all site archives are publically available in the same way (Twitter and Facebook restrict access to the archives, for example). There are also challenges related to analysing the multimodal content posted to these sites. What is the relationship between image and text in these social media stories? How do we map the flows of resemioticised entextualisation when multimodal content is modified as stories unfold over time and across different contexts?

In the case of controversial figures, the biographical accounts constructed in social media often consist of multiple, conflicting versions of events which can position the figure in relation to social judgements which change over time and from national perspective. In this presentation I will give examples of the conflicting, multiple stories that were published on a public Facebook group that was set up in response to the death of former British Prime minister, Margaret Thatcher in 2013. In my analysis, I will show how social network analysis using Gephi can be combined with the textual analysis of comment threads and visual analysis of the images posted to the page to interpret the different forms of counter narratives (Bamberg and Andrews 2004) that emerged in the 10 days following the death of Thatcher. Through this mediated analysis, I show that a surface level interpretation that focused on the stories of Thatcher’s actions as posted to the comment thread alone cannot to take into account the cultural critique in the form of trolling that took place on the page and constructed a meta-narrative of its own.
The discussion of the Thatcher RIP pages are set in the context of the wider project in which I am engaged. These additional case studies include:

- The Murder of Meredith Kercher articles in the English and Italian Wikipedias
- The #iambradleymanning campaign on Tumblr
- The Youtube commentary on the live streamed sky news trial of Oscar Pistorius
- Commoditised storytelling in X Factor Twitter interactions
Dancing in the dark: Protecting networked privacy in social media research

Niamh Ní Bhroin (University of Oslo)

In the field of Internet Research understandings of privacy have evolved from considerations of spatial control to 'Networked Privacy' (Marwick and boyd 2014). I argue that operationalizing the latter concept can strengthen the protection of privacy in research. I discuss this with regard to the obligation to seek informed consent from research participants in a European context. I argue that current requirements are not realistic as networked interactions in social media necessarily involve third parties that cannot always be identified in advance. With reference to examples from my own research, I differentiate between core and ancillary research participants. I present and evaluate strategies implemented to avoid encroaching on the privacy of these participants. These include exploring how research participants manage their privacy because this influences access to third party data. This article contributes case-specific knowledge to support ethical decision-making with regard to the protection of privacy in social media research.
Boundary work through personal narrative: becoming a ballet student on Twitter

Daria Dayter (University of Basel)

The stark contrast between the elicited narratives from sociolinguistic interviews and the fragmentary stories that occur in new media has prompted researchers to turn to the new, dimensional approaches to narrative in their analyses of online discourse. However, in my paper I intend to go back to the classic model of narrative as proposed by Labov & Waletzky (1967). The longer, fleshed-out narrative that can be usefully described in terms of the narrative elements – orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution – is also present in social media discourse. I look at the Twitter stories that contain these prototypical elements, and examine the way in which authors use orientation to accomplish boundary work. The data comes from a corpus of 11 Twitter users who all belong to a community of ballet enthusiasts and who engage with ballet physically as well as online. The members of the community strive to achieve the status of a “ballet hero”, i.e. a hardworking, dedicated student who has the physical and cultural characteristics of a potential professional dancer. Since the community is geographically spread, a large part of identity work is accomplished online. Reports of ballet-related activities substitute the member co-presence in class or rehearsals and play a critical role in subjects’ move from novice to a fully-fledged member. Specifically, the orientation component in these stories, used to set the scene for the ensuing narrative, is a means to control the actual audience. Rich in membership categorisation devices, in-group lexis and allusions to common ground, orientations draw an unambiguous border between those who are in the know and those who are not. In this paper, I examine two orientations which, in their own very different ways, mark the accompanying narrative as an in-group affair.

References

“[…] me and hubby quit cold turkey too”: The functions of ‘personal narratives’ in three written online health contexts

Rudolf von Rohr, Marie-Thérèse, Franziska Thurnherr and Miriam A. Locher (University of Basel)

SNF project “Language and Health Online” (https://language-health-online.unibas.ch/)

This paper reports on how online personal narratives of various forms and functions are strategically used in three e-health practices (smoking cessation on websites, on forums, and email counseling). Personal narratives are abundantly used in these contexts for various purposes, e.g. to appear authentic or reflect on personal transformations. We understand narrative as a communicative process that helps making sense of the world and as a means for identity construction. The following research questions are addressed: How are personal narratives used in the aforementioned practices? How are narratives used to position narrators and their audience? Through a qualitative discourse analysis, we uncover socio-pragmatic functions of narratives in context, such as legitimization of content, establishing common ground, or reflecting on progress. Additionally, narratives are used to create a range of identity positions, e.g., quitters and clients as succeeding in their effort to change, or peer supporters as authentic. Despite our data sets differing in their technical affordances and social and contextual factors, the use of narratives transpires as pervasive and multi-functional in nature. The results not only shed light on how personal narratives work in these three practices, but also on how narratives can be used for specific interactional goals more generally.
Life is a pitch: self-presentation in the age of corporate speak

Tom Van Hout (University of Antwerp/Leiden University)

Success in the globalized new economy depends largely on the ability to present yourself in entrepreneurial terms. This requires autobiographical identity work (Pavlenko 2007) in all-purpose narratives of professional accomplishment and merit (Gee 2006). Such narratives present the self as a dynamic and transferable bundle of skills, experiences, and achievements across a range of mobile communicative contexts such as job applications, academic profiles and professional biographies (Urciolu 2008, Gershon 2014). Life thus becomes a project that needs to be managed and accounted for in the standardized, corporatocratic register of CV speak.

In this paper, I engage with two educational contexts of autobiographical identity work: undergraduate college applications and graduate employment communication. I offer an autoethnographic account of two distinct episodes in my own trajectory from a student to an assistant professor of language; first as a moonlighting application ghostwriter for affluent ethnic minority pupils in Antwerp looking to attend college in the UK and the US, and second as an instructor of professional communication to ethnically diverse, but inexperienced MA students at the University of Antwerp. Both episodes are grounded empirically in textual artifacts such as emails, personal statements, professional biographies and student feedback.

In the analysis, I show how (i) students struggle with the homogenizing effects of commodified language use and the quest for authenticity in saturated attention markets; and (ii) how this discursive struggle clashes with received language ideologies of “foreign” language teaching and learning as well as the playfulness commonly associated with social media. The paper concludes with a reflection on what counts as linguistic competence in globalized, densely intertextual arenas of identity management and narrative self performance.


#fail: Narrativity and metalinguistic function in hashtags

Cornelius Puschmann (Zeppelin University/Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society)
Theresa Heyd (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)

Hashtags are a widespread feature of online discourse that has proliferated with the growth of social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. While traditionally, hashtags allow users to mark up postings or pictures with keywords to denote particular places, events, or make use of other controlled vocabulary, they are also increasingly popular as an instrument for creative self-expression and language play. In this function, they are often used to qualify a user’s attitude towards the preceding text, providing a meta-commentary on its content. Highfield et al. (2013, p. 321) label this usage "emotive", while Page (2012) refers to "evaluative" hashtags. Beyond providing entertainment, Zappavigna (2011) sees such devices as a source of ambient affiliation that help users connect to other, rather than serve to identify particular issues. Seeking affiliation and releasing emotions is of course also a prime function of narrative, and accordingly, many messages with emotive/evaluative hashtags have narrative elements, even when the content and trajectory of narration are minimal. In the case of Twitter, these are very much 'small stories' (both in length and depth) in the sense proposed by Georgakopoulou (2006).

In our analysis, we draw on a corpus of 20,000 tweets using the perhaps most prototypical emotive hashtag, #fail, to trace the narrative and metalinguistic function of hashtags. The lexical item fail has become an emblematic element of current digital linguistic practice, and thus can fulfill a range of emotive/evaluative needs and goals. However, the canonical denotation of to fail as 'to end without success' bears an implicit narrative potential, as the underlying resultative verb semantics hints at the typical structural pattern of storytelling.

Combining quantitative and qualitative discourse analytical methods, we

a) classify and compare different types of narrative subjects
b) differentiate between varying levels of narrative 'completeness'
c) relate the occurrence of narrative tweets to gender and time of posting.
By exploring residual narrativity in and through hashtags, we provide a first look at emerging forms of storytelling in social media. Our work thus contributes to the understanding of personal narratives online, and to the analysis of digital linguistic practice in a more general sense.


"More about me" - self-presentation as personal basic narratives in Caribbean online dating ads.

Susanne Mühleisen (University of Bayreuth)

Dating ads are known as self-promotional texts where the advertiser uses carefully selected features of their alleged character ("I'm an easygoing girl") and personal history to create desire in an unknown but by no means unspecific group of addressees. Rather, the expression of relational goals ("seeking serious-minded guy") is also part of the self-portrayal of the advertiser. Unlike in match-making in many face-to-face interactions, there are no witnesses (friends, colleagues, relatives) or co-narrators to the stories about the self in dating ads. Self-disclosure (Gibbs et al. 2006) and self-presentation in a positive light which can also be found in certain Twitter communities (cf. Dayter 2014), are therefore an essential part of the format. Both traditional forms of matchmaking advertisements such as newspaper dating ads (Bruthiaux 1994, Coupland 1996) and the more current and highly prolific cyber-romantic versions (Gibbs et al. 2006, Smaill 2004) have received scholarly attention in recent years.

While dating ads in print media were characterized by a number of micro- and macro-structural restrictions such as abbreviations and syntax specific to the text type (Bruthiaux 1994) as well as severe limitation of words, participants in online dating have a much wider opportunity to represent themselves in a multi-media environment, including text-based descriptions, photographs as well as interactive communication tools such as e-mail or instant messaging (Gibbs et al. 2006).

This paper draws on exemplary data from the Caribbean sector of the online dating site "Connecting Singles". Part of the format of the website also includes a free passage section ("About Me") which invites writers to portray themselves in more extended narrative text, often fragmented life stories, “small stories” (cf. Georgakopoulou 2007) which, together with other elements like aphorisms contribute to creating a basic personal narrative. The following questions will be addressed in the analysis: how are past and projected stories used in the identity construction of the advertiser? What role do specific Caribbean cultural references play in the self-presentation? Are there any gendered differences with regard to self-disclosure, self-praise and expression of relational goals? These points will also serve to reflect on more general issues of global
versus cultural-specific strategies of self-presentation, identity management in personal ads.


“Digital narratives of belonging as anglophone or francophone in a Cameroon online news forum”

Eric Anchimbe (University of Bayreuth)

This paper looks at how readers’ comments on an online news forum (The Post newspaper) show their belonging to the historical anglophone linguistic in-group and how this is contrasted to belonging to the francophone out-group. These groups emerged from the British-French colonisation of the country after WW1, with anglophones representing the former British colony and francophones the French.

These comments, some of which adopt an autobiographical identity (Pavlenko 2007) format, project the anglophone in-group as an ideal, exemplary, perfect society which unfortunately is not free because it is oppressed, deprived, humiliated by the francophone out-group which controls political power and access to economic resources.

My focus here is on the use of pronouns that index or indicate in-group or out-group belonging. The plural pronouns we, our, ourselves, us are typically used by the anglophone commentators to create a solid in-group through the narration of a common (colonial) history, linguistic background (use of English) and ways of life. However, where exclusive plural pronouns like they, them, their, themselves are used, reference is generally made to the francophones as an out-group that must be differentiated from the closely-knit anglophone in-group. Sometimes, these pronouns are also used to castigate other anglophones who do not adhere to in-group values or who are considered to have betrayed the group by working with or sympathising with the francophone out-group.

The corpus consists of 14,500 words, made up of the news article (“Ahmadou Ali violates Constitution, bans English at press conference”, ca. 500 words) and readers’ comments published in The Post newspaper in January 2007. The software AntConc is used to search for concordances of the pronouns in the corpus, which are then analysed for variables such as inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness, positive in-group identity vs. negative out-group identity, oppressed vs. oppressor, as well as other variables that recreate in-groupness and out-groupness.

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