
LENA MARANDER-EKLUND

The Significance of Narratives and Narrating

Introduction

This is Baltus, a fabular beast. It is not, however, an animal character in a story, but a visual presentation of a scheme of narratives that are used in classrooms today. In this lecture²¹, I shall discuss the functions and significance of narratives and narrating; why it is important to be able to tell stories, and the significance of narration for the individual. The examples presented here are taken from my research on stories of childbirth (Marander-Eklund 2000).

Baltus – teaching how to narrate

The fabular beast Baltus is a concrete visual presentation of the basic structure of a narrative. Baltus is used in drama based pedagogy²² (Hagtvet & Pálsdóttir 1992, cf. Østern 1994) in some comprehensive schools today, to teach pupils what elements to include in a story and the order in which they may be narrated – in other words, how a message is conveyed in narrative form. The children will learn that a narrative includes the following elements: an introduction indicating *who* is involved, as well as *when* and *where* the events of the story take place. After this, *the main action* of the story is narrated, with a treatment proper of the story's dilemma, followed by *its resolution*. In addition, an assessment or evaluation of the event itself is presented, along with a description of such integral

elements of the narrative as feelings, emotions and smell perceptions.

These are also the elements of which narration consists according to linguist Mieke Bal (1985), and that according to another linguist, William Labov (1972), constitute the basic structure or schema of a story. Schema refers not merely to a specific form of narration, but equates to an internal model, a general knowledge concerning a structure that helps organise concepts and events in the memory which can then be brought forth and re-presented when necessary.

These elements, which we can see constitute the fabular Baltus, also exist in narrations of personal experience as they are given in an interview situation where the interviewee is able to speak freely about the event. This study explores narrations of childbirth, where the narrations consist of an oral expression of a personal experience of giving birth to a child. It is an event that is narrated from a strictly personal point of view, taking place in a particular time and a space, by specific actors. Furthermore, the events are evaluated or assessed in one way or another. The events are narrated in the form of a plot where a problem is solved at a dramatic turning point – in this case the 'problem' is the delivery and the 'solution' is the birth of the child.

Today's school children thus learn to narrate by means of engaging with the

The fabular beast “Baltus”

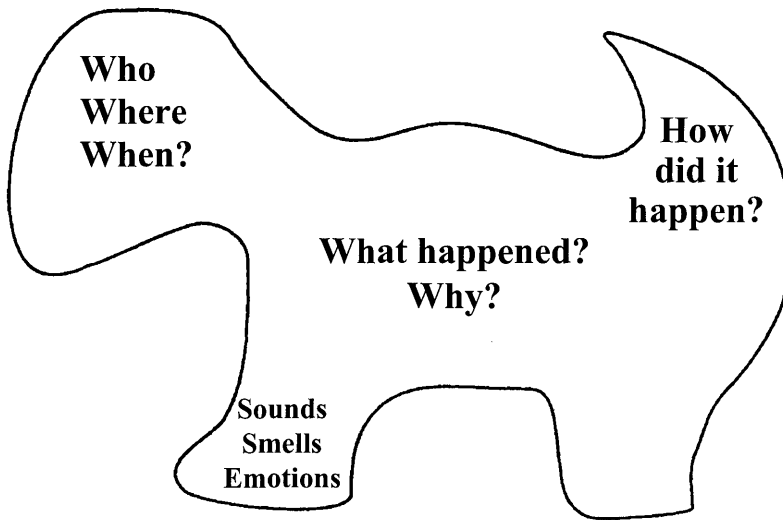


Figure 1. The fabular beast “Baltus” – a visual presentation of a narrative structure (Freely based on Hagtvet & Pálsdóttir 1992: 90)

fabular beast Baltus as a pedagogical tool. Baltus provides a narrative structure, a disposition that helps the pupil remember what the elements of which a story consists are. Baltus exercises stimulate linguistic awareness, develops story telling techniques, and helps the child produce texts of better quality (Hagtvet & Pálsdóttir 1992, 88ff.)

A question raised by the example of Baltus is: why do stories constitute such a vital form of communication, to the extent that it is taught in schools? Viveca Adelswärd is a linguist who considers the fact that children are taught the “right” way to tell a story, i.e. a way that is recognised by the listener, as a step on the way towards adulthood – becoming a fully functioning member of society (Adelswärd 1996, 24). In her view, the child learns to tell a story by co-narrating with adults. By co-narrating with the child, the adult trains the child to ask questions such as “when did it happen?”, “where was it?”, which in turn helps the child to understand what a story may be about or how an event might be

presented. Narrating stories is a basic cultural and social skill.

The function of narration

Narration is a basic form of communication between human beings – a way of communicating experience and understanding one another. According to media and communication researcher, Professor Arthur Asa Berger, narration is an effective way of sharing ideas, because it is a means of learning about life, and of communicating what one has learned (Berger 1997, 9-10). Narratives are also a means by which an individual can arrive at an explanation of the world, giving expression to his or her own view of the world or of shared values (Hydén 1997, 9-10). Narratives can thus be seen as an analytic resource that helps us to develop social and cultural insights (Hymes 1981).

Albrecht Lehmann, a folklorist, distinguishes three main functions of personal experiential narration: an individualizing function, an identifying function and a comforting function

(Lehmann 1978).

The first, the individualizing function allows the narrator to reinforce her self as an individual. This is also pointed out by another folklorist, Charlotte Linde, who emphasizes the social function of narratives in creating and maintaining personal identity. Narrating is significant for creating our internal, private sense of self and a major resource for conveying that self and negotiating that self with others (Linde 1993, 98).

This function is strongly present in the narrations of childbirth that I have studied. They were all narrated in interview situations. I interviewed women who were giving birth for the first time; once before childbirth, once right after childbirth, and once a year after delivery. The interviewees are at the centre of their narrations, both as narrators and as the main characters of the narration itself. The women clearly had a need to speak about the event which was significant for them; something they narrated with feeling, and great enthusiasm. The story literally “bubbled out” of them. They were also pleased to have someone listen to them, and to get the main role as narrator in the interview situation, talking without being interrupted. During the interview, my aim was to create a situation where the interviewee was able to narrate the experience without being interrupted. I considered this strategy essential as a means of gaining narrations that in due course I could compare in form, content and meaning. This was essential also in order to let the women themselves decide what they considered important enough to be highlighted in the narrative, what message they wanted to convey – in what way they chose to present themselves. In these personal narratives the women giving birth are at the centre of the experience. They speak about giving birth in terms of their own physical experience, from the point of view of an empowered “self”. The physical

experience bestows structure to the narration, giving it form and content. The narrator, the woman giving birth, draws the listener into the sequence of events in a space with an intensified meaning, a time of particular significance. The events are narrated, dramatized and explained, all according to the narrative patterns she has access to. The narration is based on examples from expert literature, the media, maternity clinics, and narrations by other women. These narrative patterns shape the structure of the narration and, to some extent, its content as well, naturally in interaction with the general opinions of childbirth. The events that are narrated are assessed and reassessed in relation to perceptions of these external viewpoints on the woman’s situation in the present moment. Contents and themes of the narratives include expectations, pain, lack of control or hopes of controlling the situation, the functioning of the body and its intuitive responses to the situation, as well as a sense of exposure. The “I” of the narrative expresses both happiness and joy in giving birth, as well as feelings of fear and anxiety related to it. It expresses a wish for individual choice in the delivery itself – to be able to choose a safe and painless delivery *or* a delivery untouched by outside interference, with the facilitation of it as an experience being a key requirement. The narration confirms the narrators’ self-identity as birth-givers and as women; it is a heroic telling of a heroic deed. These childbirth narratives become self-presentations, a description of the narrator herself. She places herself in the position of a woman giving birth when narrating the story when it is told directly after the delivery, and mainly as the mother in the narrations given a year later.

The second function introduced by Lehmann is the identifying function, where the narrator formulates her membership of a group. Alf Arvidsson, a folklorist,

describes this as “narrating your group”, suggesting that the essential values of the group are expressed and repeated within the group in order to reinforce membership and belonging, creating a feeling of togetherness (Arvidsson 1998). This function was less evident in my research data than the individualizing function, quite possibly because I encouraged the interviewees to take the main role in the producing of the narrative. The narrations can nevertheless be viewed through a sense of a female community and the act of telling the story does bestow upon the narrator membership in the group comprising “we who have given birth”, which by definition excludes women who have not given birth. Women take great pride in talking about their performance in giving birth to a child. At the same time, the role of a mother is experienced as both surprising and bewildering. Their narration gives expression to those values which may be shared by women who have given birth, and the features of real, normal delivery. It also reflects the concept of a “real” woman who gives birth to babies.

Outside of interview situations, narrations of childbirth also have a pedagogical function, where the narrator gives her personal view of what may happen during childbirth. Narratives on childbirth can also have an entertaining function, despite the fact that some people consider childbirth narrations unpleasant to listen to, and despite the fact that anyone who has not given birth is excluded from the narrative community.

According to Lehmann, the third function of a narrative is to gain comfort. By telling the story the narrator aims at achieving an inner balance, at times even to reconcile herself to an unpleasant reality. This is often done by turning a negative event into something positive, as if to adjust something that has happened so as to come to a *happy end* version of the event by

narrating it (Lehmann 1978, cf. Virtanen 1982). Narrating an event is a way of making sense of experiences, structuring the events in a meaningful way, and in a way in which the narrator and the recipient may resolve a dilemma (Robinson 1981).

As I have already pointed out, the women giving birth felt compelled to narrate this significant event in their lives. Thus, in my view this kind of narration can also be seen as therapeutic: creating order by verbalising the event, analysing what has happened, and making sense of one’s own role in it. This also involves opening up sore points, revealing disappointments and difficult experiences. By making sense of the actual event and one’s role in a sequence of events, the narrator is also empowered in the situation. The narrator gratifies her own wish to tell the story and perhaps only rarely takes into consideration that her description may inspire aversion, anxiety or apprehension in the recipient.

One function of narration is ‘glossing over’. The narrators transform what did not go *so well* into a *happy end* version by making changes they can live with. With time, they become more critical about their own input as well as that of the hospital staff. The woman giving birth excels as the parturient. Narrating the event also involves dramatization and the story is amplified by evaluating the described events. This is done by repeating the descriptions several times with a sense of situation comedy and a comic tone of voice, using laughter as a means to ease a trying experience.

Narration is a way of conveying a message. The message may involve the experience of giving birth as such, with positive or negative comments concerning the day in the maternity ward, or the narration experience as such.

Message and identity – the power of narration

Let’s go back to the question as to why

it is so important to be able to narrate; what makes knowledge of the structure of narratives so important that it is included in teaching today. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, narrations are a very effective way to convey a message, more efficient than non-narrations, such as descriptions of different kinds, and lists, including chronologies and tables – texts that lack a dramatic turning point. Secondly, stories are vital in forming our self-identity.

We are subjected to a stream of narratives. Narrations conveying a message, biblical metaphors, stories such as *Peter Struwelpeter*, or today's news. In the view of Ulf Palmfelt, a folklorist, TV news has much in common with folklore. For example, the language used is very "down to earth"; events are linked in time and place, with names given to the persons involved. Events or incidents are narrated in a compressed form and with a very clear turning point, often as a battle between good and evil. Stereotyped roles are given to the 'characters' in the news; a person in power, the debater or the opposition to the person in power, the entertainer and the hero. The newsreader's introductions have their parallels in the introductory "Once upon a time..." (Palmfelt 1995, 39ff.). It is no coincidence that TV news is structured in this way – it is an effective way to trigger emotions, be it aversion or sympathy, and to convey the message compellingly.

Why is it so important to tell stories about yourself and your personal experience? According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, autobiographical narratives and the formation of self-identity share a lot of common ground. In today's post-modern world, it is no longer the *great* social and political narratives that our lives are structured by. Interest in self-narratives can be seen as an expression of self-reflection and modernity, the kind of self-reflection that is a prerequisite for identity forming

(Giddens 1991, cf. Lyotard 1984). The individual becomes "a somebody" through stories and narration, as opposed to being a nobody, "a zero". In her study of life-stories of criminals, ethnologist Birgitta Svensson has been able to draw the conclusion that her subjects preferred their criminal identity to that of being "a nobody" (Svensson 1997).

The spirit of the times insists that we all should be placed in a context. Everyone must continuously strengthen their identity in relation to their environment. Narratives are a way to form this identity, a way of saying who you are.

NOTES

ⁱ *Lectio praecursoria* (introductory lecture at doctoral disputation) 14 April 2000.

ⁱⁱ I would like to thank MEd Petra Örn who introduced Baltus as a pedagogic tool for my children and also helped me get more information about this type of pedagogy.

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