26 Narrative in Institutions

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0 Introduction

Within discourse analysis, narrative has been one of the major areas of research. Researchers have explored various levels of questions ranging from the formal structure of narrative, the relation of discourse structure to morphological and syntactic structure, and the use of narrative in the presentation of self to the work of narrative in small group interactions. This chapter provides review of research on narratives in institutions, considering both the effect on the forms of narratives of their location within institutions, and the work that narratives do within and for those institutions. This question is important for linguistics, and for discourse analysis in particular, since institutional constraints have a strong shaping effect on the narratives told within them, and reciprocally, narratives have a strong part in the creation and reproduction of institutions.

In this chapter, I propose that there are two basic approaches to the study of narrative in institutions. The first approach is the study of the way narrative is used to carry out the daily work of the institution. This can include both the use of narrative by members of the institution to do its daily work and the attempts of nonmembers to use narrative in professional settings, such as legal or medical situations, where professionals require the use of specialized, privileged forms of discourse. The second approach is the study of the work that narrative performs in institutions to reproduce the institution, reproduce or challenge its power structures, induct new members, create the identity of the institution and its members, adapt to change, and deal with contested or contradictory versions of the past. We may understand this as the way an institution uses narrative to create and reproduce its identity by the creation and maintenance of an institutional memory.

I use the term "institution" rather than organization, although both terms are used in different fields, for the phenomena examined here. The first reason for the choice is that "institution," in common use, is a broader term than "organization," and this chapter surveys work on formal organizations, such as an insurance company, as well as studies of what are normally called institutions such as the practice of education,

law, and medicine. I therefore use the term "institution" to represent any social group which has a continued existence over time, whatever its degree of reification or formal status may be. Thus, an institution may be a nation, a corporation, the practice of medicine, a family, a gang, a regular Tuesday night poker game, or the class of '75.

1   Narratives and Institutional Work

As we have all experienced, a great deal of storytelling goes on in every institution. While some of this narrative is recreational or personal, a surprising amount of it functions to get the work of the institution done. This section reviews studies of narrative's role in getting work done within and across the boundaries of institutions.

1.1   Narratives help institutions do their daily work

Recently, there have been a number of linguistic and ethnographic studies of work in institutional contexts, which contribute indirectly to our understanding of narratives in these settings. In most cases, the contribution is indirect, since the focus is on other forms of institutional discourse, with narrative described only in passing. For example, Wasson (1996) provides a linguistic analysis of decision-making processes in managerial meetings of a large technology company, and the use of the discourse of these meetings to create identity, agency, and reputation for the participants and the corporation. Similarly, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) provides a comparison of the discourse of British and Italian quality assurance team meetings. They focus on meetings as a genre, with detailed attention to linguistic issues of cohesion: theme, pronominalization, metaphor, and the role of the chair. Wodak (1996) provides detailed linguistic descriptions of the work of discourse in a medical clinic, school governance committees, and group therapy sessions, but touches on narrative only in passing. Kunda (1992) presents an influential ethnography of a technical firm, focusing on the rituals and narratives which construct the self as a member, but does not give the narratives themselves, since the data was gathered by note-taking, not recording.

   The most important description of narrative in work settings is Orr's analysis of the use of narrative in the work of copier repair technicians (1990, 1996). He shows that narrative forms a major part of their work practice, and that these technicians could not properly do their jobs without participating in a community which tells endless stories about copiers, clients, and repair technicians, as part of the work of maintaining an ongoing community memory of difficult problems, unexpected and undocumented solutions, and heroic diagnoses.

1.2   Narratives at the boundaries of the institution

Within linguistics proper, one of the most-studied aspects of institutional discourse has been what I call discourse at the boundaries of the institution. The issue for these

studies is what happens to the structure of narrative (and to the narrators) when one of the interlocutors is in an institutional position to require other interlocutors to provide narratives or other discourse forms in an institutionally specified form. Narrative is a vernacular form, and narratives (and narrators) can get mangled at the boundaries of powerful institutions.

Agar (1985), indeed, proposes this as the central characteristic of institutional discourse, which he defines as discourse produced when "one person – a citizen of a modern nation/state – comes into contact with another – a representative of one of its institutions" (1985: 147). Looking particularly at medical and legal discourse, he proposes a three-part framework for institutional discourse, which typically consists of an interaction – usually a series of question–answer pairs – to diagnose the client, directives given by an institutional representative either to the client or to the institution, and a report made by the institutional representative of the diagnosis and directives.

While Agar does not deal directly with the question of narratives at institutional boundaries, his account suggests why the production of narratives at these boundaries is often contested. An important part of the work of the institutional representative is to use his or her control to fit the client into the organizational ways of thinking about the problem. As we shall see in the discussion of narrative at institutional boundaries, the framing of the problem is most frequently the disputed issue across the boundary. We find these issues in studies of medicine, law, and education.

Frankel (1983) and Todd (1981) demonstrate the conflict between the narrative form in which patients prefer to offer information about their condition, and the question–answer form which physicians prefer, since it matches the record which the physician must construct and the diagnosis tree which they use to determine a condition. Frankel also finds that production pressure affects medical discourse: physicians fear that allowing patients to tell their stories will produce an unfocused discourse which will not provide the needed information within the allotted time. Yet he also finds a conflict between the physician's notion of "presenting problem" which is the focus of diagnosis, and the fact that patients do not always mention the health issue of greatest concern first in their presentation.

Similarly, there have been a number of studies of legal language which show tensions between narrative structure and a question–answer format required by institutional settings. For example, when people on the witness stand try to tell stories, which by their structure require personal judgment in the evaluation sections, they are confined by the questions and directions of lawyers and judges to just telling the facts (Conley and O'Barr 1990; O'Barr and Conley 1996). Similarly, Whelan (1995), in a study of the work of public safety dispatchers (9-1-1 operators), shows how an operator taking a call is tightly constrained by the demands of filling out a form on the computer, while the caller attempts to tell a story about two guys who were shooting.

Both of these cases represent narratives told across the boundary of institutional membership: the two interlocutors do not share knowledge and agreement of what is relevant, what is permitted, and what should be next for a narrative in that context. Witnesses do not normally know the legal rules governing admissible testimony. The person calling 9-1-1 does not know what form the operator must fill out, nor does he or she know that the computer requires him or her to proceed through its fields in

order, rather than being able to sieve out the information needed as it comes up in his or her narrative.

There have been a number of studies of discourse in school settings which argue that schools require students to produce particular forms of spoken discourse shaped by the conventions of expository written texts. These conventions require decontextualization of information, address to a generalized audience rather than those particular persons present, focus on a single topic, and explicit lexicalization of topic shifts. This discourse is quite different from the vernacular forms that students normally use for narration. A number of works argue that while white middle-class children are trained in such decontextualization skills even before entering kindergarten, children of other ethnic groups may not understand these discourse norms, and hence may produce narratives which are not acceptable in a classroom context (Michaels 1981; Scollon and Scollon 1981).

2 Narrative and Institutional Reproduction

We now turn from the use of narrative in the work of institutions to the use of narrative in the work of institution-making: the reproduction and maintenance of institutions, as well as contestations and changes in the institutions' self-representation.

My primary data-source for these questions is a major American insurance company, here called MidWest Insurance, founded in the 1920s. My colleagues and I performed a three-year ethnographic study, including observations and recording of the training and work of insurance sales agents, as well as observations of ongoing training programs, sales conventions, regional meetings, task forces, and management meetings. This work was originally commissioned by MidWest to answer questions about agents' sales practices, customers' understanding of insurance purchases, and the success of the company's new agent training program. This study gave us detailed access to the company's culture during a period of great cultural change.

3 Nonparticipant Narratives in Institutions

Within the boundaries of an institution, many stories are told daily. Social life is created by, and reproduced by, narrative, and life within institutions is no exception. Of these uncountable stories, it is the class of repeated narratives which is the most useful in understanding the work of stories in institutions. Linde (1993: 194) shows that the individual life story is a discontinuous discourse unit, composed of those narratives with long-term repeatability.

In studying narrative in institutions, it is equally important to find the long-term narratives. There are many ephemeral institutional narratives: the stories in the lunchroom about today's computer crash, the terrible traffic, or a manager's momentary fit of generosity or bad temper, stories told during the course of the day or perhaps the week, but which will not survive the weekend. Such narratives also show something about the ways in which membership and identity are created through

discourse. However, this study concentrates on those institutional narratives that are repeatable through time and across tellers. I define this class as nonparticipant narrative (NPN): the narrative told by a speaker who was not a participant or witness to the events narrated, but heard them from someone else. Thus, NPNs have an extended life in the institution, since their very form assures us that they have been retold at least once. (See Linde 1996 for a discussion of the use of evidentials in NPNs to mark group membership.)

NPNs have a special status within institutions because, as we shall show, they form a particular part of the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create current identities for both the institution and its members. At MidWest, the one NPN that everyone knows is the company's history, told as the story of the founder. All versions include the following evaluative points:

- a charismatic founder with a strong vision: the idea that farmers of good moral character should be charged lower rates for auto insurance, since they ran lower risks than city drivers, and an exclusive relation between the company and its sales agents;
- the American rural and small-town origins of the founder and of the company, which still shape its values;
- the development of the company from selling auto insurance to a full service company offering fire, life, and health insurance as well, presented as an ever-growing commercial and ethical success;
- the idea that the company is a family, and represents family values.

Note that this story of the institution's origin gives a coherent account of the company's identity and values. For a member to know this story means to know what the institution is, and what that member must do to be a part of it.

3.1   *In what media are narratives represented?*

I now turn to the range of media used to convey the institutional narratives.

3.1.1   *Authorized biography and history*

Although MidWest was founded early in the 1920s, its founder is still vividly present. He is referred to by name, Mr. McBee, and is often quoted by management. His biography, which is also a history of the company, was written in the mid-1950s, and is still in print. Copies are to be seen prominently displayed in executives' offices, with the front cover turned outward. Our fieldwork team was told that we must read it to really understand MidWest.

I initially had some questions about whether this book functioned more like a ritual object, whose function is to be displayed, or as a text which is assumed always to be relevant to the present, and quoted and interpreted continuously (see Smith 1993). In fact, the biography is read and quoted, particularly by managers. For example, one manager explained that she mines it for materials for speeches since "I don't come by it by blood." She explained that this meant that she was relatively new to MidWest,

having previously worked at another insurance company, and so does not yet claim full storytelling rights at MidWest. (It is also possible that the remark is to be understood literally, since over half of the members of this company have kin currently or formerly employed by MidWest, while this manager did not.)

Taking the story of the founder as exemplary means that his virtues are to be emulated by all members of the company. And yet, an important part of knowing how to use an exemplary narrative is to learn what parts of the model are unique to the founder, and are *not* to be emulated. For example, in religious exemplary narratives, Christians may expect to have to take up their cross, but they understand that this will not include literally being crucified and rising from death after the third day. (Linde (2000) gives a fuller discussion of the use of exemplary narratives.) Similarly, part of being a member of MidWest means not only generally knowing Mr. McBee's book, but also knowing which parts of it should directly guide one's actions. So agents, who are independent contractors, not employees of MidWest, describe themselves as determined, highly principled entrepreneurs, just like Mr. McBee. But while they are business owners like him, they are not business founders. A dramatic turning point in Mr. McBee's life came when he complained about the insurance company he worked for, and was told "Well, T.D., if you don't like the way we run things, go start your own company." This is repeatedly told as an indication of his determined character. This story is told not to inspire agents to found their own companies, but rather to make them proud of having founded their own agency offices, thus showing the same entrepreneurial spirit as the founder.

3.1.2   Newsletter articles

Another source of institutional narratives at MidWest Insurance is a monthly magazine sent to all agents, which frequently retells the history of the company at various levels. It makes continuous reference to stories of Mr. McBee. It often profiles older agents, using their stories to spotlight changes in the business, and to mark the continuity of underlying values. Several years ago, it ran a year-long series of the history of MidWest by decade, highlighting the key events of each.

3.1.3   Speeches and training

Official speeches are frequent at MidWest, at national and regional sales conventions, at special task force meetings, and at events organized by local management. At all of these, we have observed managers retelling stories of MidWest's past. Very frequently, these stories of the company's past are told as a guide to the present and inspiration for the future. The message is: "We have faced difficult times before and won, we have changed before without sacrificing our essential character, and we can do so again. We can rely on our history to guide us in how to change."

As the initial data for the study were being collected, the insurance company was in the process of introducing a new contract for agents. Acceptance of this was voluntary for agents already working under the old one. During a contract rollout meeting, a number of executives used references to known stories about the company's history to make the point that the company has changed before. They cited such changes as "moving our offices out of our back bedrooms, bringing on trained staff, incorporating

microfiche and then computers." One speaker noted that this was his third contract introduction: "In both the previous cases, the people who did not sign the new contract were sorry. Those who failed to change failed to advance."

All new employees hear the history of the company as part of their training. This is particularly relevant for newly promoted managers, who will be authorized speakers for the company, permitted and required to retell these stories. This type of training is often extremely lively and humorous. One training program I observed devoted five hours of the first day of a three-month training to the history and values of MidWest. A video was shown, which included movies of the early headquarters of the company and the typical Model T Fords they insured, still photographs of the presidents, interviews with retired employees, early radio and television commercials for MidWest, etc. During the video, the trainer stopped the tape to add comments or stories of her own. At the end of the video, she then asked the students what they remembered from it, throwing a small roll of candy with MidWest's logo to each person who answered. She then passed out sheets of company milestones by decade, and discussed them, interspersed with stories of her own involvement with MidWest.

Similarly, I have observed a training event for new managers in which someone who describes himself as the "unofficial historian" of the company covered MidWest's history. The audience undoubtedly already knew most of the facts and had read the book. But the speaker was lively and humorous, framing parts of the speech as a sermon or a revival meeting. For example, he ended a story about the founder's ambitious sales goals by saying: "Now brothers and sisters, that's *sales leadership*. If you want to say amen, go ahead. (*applause*)" He also added details not in the official history: an alternative version of a well-known slogan, the origins of the names of local buildings. It was striking how engaging the speaker was, and how engaged the audience was.

3.1.4   *Individual retellings or citations*

In addition to official retellings of the founding stories, I have collected examples of individuals telling or citing these stories to members of the ethnographic team, to potential business partners, and, infrequently, to clients.

In one example, an agent explained that MidWest was better than his previous company because it had been founded by a farmer, and retained the strong ethical values of farmers. What I find extraordinary about this agreement with the founding story is that the speaker had lived his entire life in either a major city or a densely populated suburb. (This location of virtue and probity on the farm is, of course, not exclusive to MidWest. It has formed a central theme in American discourse about virtue and vice for at least 150 years.)

In addition to the telling of stories, insiders often index them: that is, they refer to stories their interlocutors already know. For example, a favorite story in MidWest's history is that when the growth in auto policies caused logistical problems in processing applications, the company hired a number of young women who roller-skated applications around the enormous processing building. Pictures of these skating workers are among the most frequently reproduced in the company. On one occasion, as a number of agents were moving through a long buffet line, I heard

one agent remark to another: "We could use roller-skates to get through this line." This reference indexes a known story; it serves as an inside joke, which supports the status of both interlocutors.

3.1.5 *Narratives of personal experience and paradigmatic narratives*

We now turn to the question of the relation between the narratives of personal experience told within the institution and the official institutional narrative. In particular, we may focus on the repeated narratives that form a part of the teller's life story. For the sales agents, these narratives almost always include socially defined milestones of their careers: how the agent was recruited, relationship to the first manager, the first years of developing a business, moves from one office location to another, addition of staff, winning of specific awards, etc. Each agent has many of these narratives, which are frequently told, not only to the inquiring ethnographer, but also to other agents and managers. While these narratives frame the stages of individual careers, they are told against the background of what we call the *paradigmatic narrative*, which gives an account of the trajectory of an ideal sales agent career. We may distinguish the paradigmatic narrative from a myth or folktale, because the full paradigmatic narrative is never told on any given occasion; rather, pieces of it are told as possibilities. Thus, a manager recruiting a possible new agent might cite the beginning part of the story: "You'll work hard for the first seven years or so, and then you can start to reap the rewards." Further, the paradigmatic narrative gives salience to the telling of stories of individual agents' careers. Thus when an agent tells a success story, or a manager tells a new recruit a story about old Bob down the street, the story has particular relevance if it approximates to the ideal agent career. As Goffman has pointed out (1981), it is the task of a narrator to justify taking up airtime by making the story that of Everyman – what any reasonable person would do in similar circumstances. The paradigmatic narrative represents the work of an entire institution to create such relevance for particular narratives.

4   When and How Are Narratives Told?

Having surveyed the media available for narration, we now turn specifically to the question of how and when narratives are told. When we consider the range of institutions, it appears that there are large differences between how many narratives they maintain, and more generally, how intensely they work their pasts. Thus, it is not enough to ask what narratives about an institution exist; we must also ask what form of existence they have. Narratives may be collected by a company archivist, or an external historian, but if they exist only in a rarely consulted archive, they have no real life. Rather, the key question is: what are the occasions that allow for the telling and retelling of this stock of stories? An important way institutions differ is in the kinds of occasions for narration they maintain, and the ways these occasions are used. This section offers a taxonomy of types of occasions for the telling of narratives. The first axis of this taxonomy is modality: time, both regular and irregular; space;

Table 26.1 Occasions for narrative remembering

	Designed for remembering	*Used for remembering*
Time: Regular occurrences	Anniversaries, regular audits, regular temporally occasioned ritual	Annual meetings
Time: Irregular or occasional occurrences	Retirement parties, roasts, problem-based audits, inductions, wakes, occasional temporally occasioned ritual	Arrival of a traveling bard, coronations, institutional problems, use of nontransparent lexical items
Place	Museums, memorial displays, place-occasioned ritual	Sites of events
Artifacts	Memorial artifacts, designed displays, photo albums, object-occasioned ritual	Artifacts accidentally preserved

and artifact. The second axis is design intention: occasions specifically designed for remembering and occasions with some other primary purpose that have affordances that allow for remembering. Table 26.1 shows typical examples, although no cell gives an exhaustive list of possible occasions.

4.1   Time: regular occurrences

These are occasions with a regular time course: they occur every year, every Sunday, on the anniversary of an event to be commemorated, etc. Some are specifically designed for remembering. For example, the 50th anniversary of D day was marked by ceremonies that were created and designed to allow for narrative remembering. Religious liturgies and ceremonies tied to particular dates are another example of this type.

Other temporally regular events can be used for remembering, although that is not their primary purpose. For example, MidWest holds annual sales conventions in each region and for national top-selling agents, which form a regular occasion for narration. These conventions have formal talks by executives of the company, which regularly invoke the past to explain the present and future, as well as informal meetings of smaller groups of friends.

For American corporations, regular audits are legally mandated occasions for remembering by accounting. They have a conventional pattern, requiring personnel within an institution to present specific records in a specific form to outside auditors. But they are also an occasion for new members of the institution, particularly those

involved with record-keeping, to ask questions and share stories about why the records are as they are, and the history which they record.

4.2   Time: irregular or occasional occurrences

Occasional occurences are events whose exact timing cannot be predicted, but which recur within an institution, and which require certain types of narration. Cases designed for remembering are boundary markers, like retirements or inductions. Inductions are a particular class of occasions on which a new person, or new group of persons, is admitted into the organization, or a new level of it. These occasions include orientation meetings, presentations, etc. For example, at MidWest, part of the training of new agents includes an account of the founding and subsequent history of the company.

There are also irregularly occurring occasions that can be used for remembering. For example, in committee meetings, someone may propose changing a policy. This is often, though not necessarily, the occasion for someone to object by recounting the story of previous problems that the policy was designed to prevent.

One small-scale but important type of temporally irregular occasion is the use of nontransparent lexical items. Unusual words or acronyms may provide the opportunity for the narration of parts of the institutional memory. For example, MidWest Insurance uses the pair of terms "MOC" and "SOC," pronounced "mock" and "sock," which stand for "Moveable Object Collision" and "Stationary Object Collision." Although all auto insurance now protects against both, initially MidWest only provided protection against MOCs, since the founder felt that someone who hit a stationary object was an incompetent driver who should not be driving. Stationary object coverage was added later. These terms provide occasions for stories about how many changes the company has undergone, and about the determined and moral character of the founder.

4.3   Place

Certain places give occasions for narrative remembering. Sites like historical museums or memorial statues or displays are designed to represent or elicit certain stories, such as the memorized stories told by museum guides or available in invariant form in taped tours. Even here, though, some freer and more personal stories may be occasioned. White (1997) describes tour guides at the Pearl Harbor museum, as part of the official tour, describing their own war experiences in relation to the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Sites of notable events may allow for the retelling of those events, while not being specifically designed for memory: Basso (1996) has described the extensive use which the Western Apache make of places and place names as occasions for stories that function as moral instruction in how to behave. A corporate example comes in passing "the first building, where we started," or "the old fire company." This can occasion a story about the founding or the early days. Such occasioning is also used for personally significant spaces: "That's the office I used to have." "Oh, you have Cindy's space."

4.4   Artifacts

Artifacts frequently serve as occasions for remembering. Some artifacts are specifically designed for remembering, like photo albums, or the memorial artifacts described above. There are also less formal memorial artifacts: T-shirts, mugs, and baseball caps that mark local milestones or events. While there have been few studies of how such artifacts are used, we have observed cases in which they serve to establish commonality. For example, a person seeing a commemorative mug on someone's desk may say, "Oh, I was at that meeting too." Further, a collection of such artifacts can serve to establish a person's history within the organization. At MidWest, over the course of a career, an agent may collect an array of memorial artifacts including plaques, model automobiles, pins and other memorabilia, all of which mark various levels of sales achievements. Such a collection is readable by insiders, and narratable to outsiders.

Some institutions, including MidWest, make a very deliberate use of space as an occasion for the display of memorial artifacts. For example, the main lobby of the main corporate headquarters contains a small museum. This includes a Model A Ford built in the year the company was founded, the first rate chart handwritten by the founder on a piece of brown paper, posters of radio and television programs sponsored by the company, gifts given as sales performance recognitions, including top hat and white gloves, leather purses containing gold pieces, and old and new plaques, pins, and statuettes used as rewards for agents. The main headquarters building also contains low-relief bronze busts of the first five presidents in the main atrium, which are used by tour guides and training sessions as occasions for narratives about these men. (See Samuel 1994 for a discussion of English banks which maintain "mini-museums" in their lobbies, containing photographs or wax models and memorial objects of famous clients, such as Florence Nightingale or Lord Nelson, or a letter from Lord Byron asking for an extension of credit.)

Another important form of maintenance of memory is the use of publicly displayed photographs and plaques, which serve to occasion stories. For example, as we walked through MidWest's headquarters to our next meeting, we passed a photo of a now-retired vice-president, and were told that he was the father of someone we had met. This occasioned stories about the careers of both men.

5   Silences: Stories That Are *Not* Told

Having discussed how narratives are maintained and occasioned within institutions, it is now important to turn to the question of silences: what stories are *not* told. This raises the methodological question of how it is possible to give an account of what is not said. Obviously, there are an infinite number of things that are not said. However, what is relevant is what is saliently unsaid, what could be said but is not. Different circumstances allow different forms of access to what is saliently unsaid. For example, for institutions with opposed interests, such as an employer and a labor union, each institution will have some pieces of the past which it remembers, and

some which it does not. Investigating the union's representation of the past is likely to provide stories upon which the employer's memory is silent, and vice versa. (See Pilcher 1972.) In the case of MidWest, since we conducted an extensive field study, we had access not only to official representations, but also to a broad range of unofficial conversations, meetings, interviews, etc. This allowed us a considerable amount of information about material that is *not* represented in the official account of the past.

There are several different types of oppositional stories. For example, the support staff of a company may pass along tales of their manager's incompetence. These may have a radically critical nature: the guy is incompetent, and should be fired. Or they may be stories of carnival reversal, which do not permanently subvert the established order. For instance, a receptionist's story about how the boss tried to make a pot of coffee for a meeting and blew up the coffee machine, drenching his pants, is humorously critical, but does not propose a radical reordering of relations between bosses and support staff.

There are also countermemories and counterhistories, which are explicitly critical of existing power relations and of the official institutional memory. For example, Tulviste and Wetsch (1995) describes the relation between official and unofficial history in Estonia. While the official history of the Soviet domination of Estonia was coherent and well organized, the unofficial history was carried by "isolated observations, reference to public individuals and events, stories about specific public episodes, and relatives' personal stories about their own or others' experiences (e.g. in Siberian camps)" (1995: 321). This unofficial history was relatively unstructured, lacking a systematic, all-encompassing narrative. Its structure was a counterstructure, a rebuttal of the official history, given its shape by the form of the official history.

In addition to countermemories, we must also consider erasures. There can be silences with and without erasure. An institution may be silent about a given event, that is, have no official account of the event. Erasure is stronger. It is an attempt by an institution to eliminate all accounts of an event in the past that differ saliently from the official one. A clear example of erasure is the former USSR's attempt to erase all accounts of the existence of the gulags.

There are a number of silences in MidWest's official narratives. The major one is the absence of an account of a suit brought against the company in the late 1970s, charging it with discriminating against women in the hiring of agents. In the mid-1980s, the company settled the suit, and began a program of recruiting women and minorities. These facts are public, available in the public press, and of course known to agents and employees of the company who lived through these years. Yet they are rarely if ever mentioned in the company's official statements.

How might we discover this silence? The official history of the company was published in 1955, so it could have no account of this event. However, in 1992, MidWest's official magazine printed a series of 12 articles on company history, including highlights of each decade. The highlights for the 1970s and 1980s included items about changes in the leadership of the company, growth of number of policies, record sales, record losses, unveiling of a portrait of the president, and the induction of the founder into the Business Hall of Fame. The lawsuit and its consequences are not mentioned, although it caused perhaps the largest change in corporate policy of those decades.

This is a silence in the official institutional memory, but it is not an erasure. That is, while the lawsuit and its consequences are not directly discussed, they are unofficially discussable, and there have been no efforts to erase any indication of the changes. For example, as part of regional sales conventions, a yearbook of agents in the region is distributed. This yearbook is set up with pictures of the agents, their names, and the length of their tenure with the company, arranged first by half-decade. The book begins with agents of 45+ years of service, then 40+, etc. At 10+ and particularly 5+, the number of faces of women and minorities begin to approach their representation in the general population. Anyone flipping through this book, knowing nothing of the company's history, could guess that a major change in recruiting happened in the early 1990s. Yet if MidWest had wished to erase this obvious shift in policy, it could have organized the book not temporally but alphabetically, thus blurring the representation of this major change.

Why did it not do so? Why was there no erasure? One reason is the obvious fact that the change in policy cannot be erased, since it forms a part of so many people's memories. Another reason is that tenure within the company is very important to people's identities, a key way in which people characterize themselves. An alphabetical arrangement would wipe out this very salient characterization, and probably make the yearbook less appealing to and usable by the agents.

If we examine the unofficial narratives, we find neither silence nor erasure here. All agents who have been appointed within the last ten years have some relation to the lawsuit and its aftermath. While we heard no agent specifically discuss the lawsuit, many agents told stories which assume that we knew about it. For example, one agent's account of how he came to be an agent was that he spoke with several managers, and went with "the first one who had a slot for a white male." His intonation and story structure were matter-of-fact, with no evaluative comment. A woman agent, whose father had been an agent, told us that when she first expressed a desire to become an agent, she was told "But you're a girl!" After working at a variety of other jobs, she applied to MidWest when she heard that the policy had changed. As she told us: "The company was looking to hire women and minorities, that's the only reason I got hired."

In another example, a Hispanic agent explained why he did not accept the first offer to train as an agent:

> They were looking for an agent to be placed in an urban market in [Town] but they were looking for someone that was either, had to be at least 25 years old and uh, of certain racial makeup, and of which I qualified. They only problem was that I was new. I was about to be married and had no money, so there was no way I was going to go and do it.

While there is some absence of fluency in the specification of the desired racial makeup, there are two points to be made. First, the issue is speakable, at least to the extent that American discourse generally allows for discussion of race across racial or ethnic boundaries (the interviewer was Anglo-American). Secondly, the main topic is the explanation of why the speaker did not at this time accept an offer which he later was glad to accept when his own circumstances changed. Thus, these stories are tellable, without apparent embarrassment or anger, to relative outsiders, which suggests that

the official silence apparently does not require a corresponding oppositional stance in an unofficial breaking of the silence.

In addition to the affirmative action suit, another notable silence in the official memory is the absence of mention of the existence of an organization of agents, described in an article in the outside business press as "a would be union" of discontented agents, who describe the company as "run for the benefit of its management and nobody else." We have heard the organization mentioned and even discussed by agents and managers, and have seen copies of the newsletter distributed by the organization to all agents. Agents and managers were quick to express publicly their distance from the organization, and their disgust with its lack of loyalty to the company. Given our position as ethnographers paid by MidWest, it is not surprising that only one person of the hundreds we talked to admitted to being a member.

6   Who Speaks for the Institution?

Another important part of understanding narratives in institutions is the question of storytelling rights: who may speak for the institution, whose account is taken up by others, whose account does *not* count as part of the institutional memory (Shuman 1986). Focusing on institutions necessarily means beginning with the official narratives, and with the accounts of those whose position grants the right to speak for the institution, whether it be the president speaking for the company, or an agent speaking for her or his own agency. That is, institutions have levels, and each of these levels has its history.

Critical theory has focused on hegemonic discourse: official accounts which attempt to naturalize the current state of affairs, to make current power relations appear to be inalterable facts of nature (Mumby 1988). Completely successful naturalization would make counteraccounts impossible, since a different state of affairs could not be imagined. Yet ethnographic accounts (for example, Scott 1985; Watson 1994; Wodak 1996) suggest that hegemonic discourse is rarely if ever fully successful.

But official representations of the institution and complete opposition to these representations are not the only possible stances. Speakers are able to create a wide range of maneuvers, including many combinations of critique, support, and suggested reform. For example, the organization of disaffected agents at MidWest regularly criticizes the management of the company for abandoning the heritage of the founder's policies. It thus makes a moral claim to a legitimate and official stance, since it claims to represent the true past and values of the company, which management has betrayed.

One of the few situated studies of the maintenance of a countertradition is Orr's account of the narratives of repair technicians, which contrast the ways in which the official documentation requires the technicians to fix particular problems with the unofficial ways that actually work (Orr 1996). More such studies are needed to provide a fuller understanding of whether and how such discourses have a life within the institutions they criticize. I suggest that posing the question in terms of institutional memory permits questions not only about what the counterhegemonic discourses are, but where they live, and how they succeed or fail in creating an on-going countermemory.

7   Conclusion

Within sociolinguistics, and particularly within the study of discourse, it has become increasingly clear that linguistic forms can only be understood within their context (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). This chapter has attempted to show that one important context for the analysis of narratives is the institution in which it is told, and the work the narrative performs in and for that institution. Such a study requires analysis of the forms and media for narratives maintained in particular institutions, the relations between these forms, the occasions for narratives, the events and evaluations of these narratives, and the identity of preferred and dispreferred speakers for given speakers (storytelling rights). These questions allow us to map the work that narratives do in institutions: maintaining identity and continuity, negotiating power relations, managing change, and marking membership, as well as transacting the daily business of the organization. Thus, research into narratives in institutions provides an empirical study of one of the primary processes of social reproduction.

Although this work might appear to be more properly located within anthropology, sociology, or folklore, in fact it is central to linguistics for a number of reasons. The first is that attention to the location of narratives within an institution permits analysis of morphological and syntactic phenomena, such as evidentials and point-of-view markers, which can be explained only by an account of a speaker's position within an institution, and what storytelling rights that person claims by a telling (Linde 1996).

Additionally, attention to institutional location allows us to specify an empirically grounded class of constraints on the form and evaluation of possible stories within that institution. For example, a story about founding one's own business which included extreme risk-taking and sacrificing one's family and health is standard in Silicon Valley, but would not be tellable in the conservative culture of MidWest. I do not want to extend the notion of starred sentences to the notion of starred narratives, which would create all too much mischief in the study of discourse. Tellability is not a matter for the intuition of the analyst, but rather for the social negotiation by members of what counts as an event and what is acceptable as an evaluation (Goodwin 1984, 1986; Linde 1993; Polanyi 1989).

In addition, a narrative takes part of its meaning from its location within an ecology of narratives. A given story in an institution has a very different meaning if it supports or contradicts the story of the founder, or the paradigmatic narrative available as a career guide. Thus, to understand the telling of the story of old Bob down the street, we must understand whether it is heard as an instance of the paradigmatic narrative, or whether old Bob is a sad example of what happens when you do not do it the right way.

Finally, attention to narrative in institutions may be seen as an extension of the ethnography of speaking. This began by asking what kinds of speech events and speech acts exist within a speech community (Hymes 1972). More recent developments have focused on issues of performance: not just the speech event, but its location and performance within a stream of activity. I propose that considering institutions as a unit of interest gives an orthogonal account of community, and provides an important unit of study for modern, industrial societies, in which the

speech community cannot be defined as identical to language, dialect, or political boundaries. This chapter thus offers a paradigm for research in a wide range of sites, which are understudied and near to hand. Additional research within this paradigm could greatly add to our understanding of the work of narrative within social groups of all types and sizes.

NOTE

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