Self-presentation via direct speech in Greek adolescents' storytelling

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the investigation of direct speech in Greek narratives. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to examine how the producers of oral narratives present themselves as interactional protagonists via direct speech representation in personal stories. In particular, this study focuses on the use of direct speech within the conversational narratives of Greek adolescent groups. I consider direct speech as an important device because of its saliency and functional richness in the narratives told by the adolescents. I will argue that, in the present narrative data, direct speech is very frequent and functions as a means of presenting oneself.

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1. Introduction

The representation of other voices through discourse, generally referred to as *reported speech*, has been examined by many scholars (see among others, Chafe, 1994; Clark & Gerrig, 1990; Coulmas, 1986; De Fina, 2003; Holt, 1996; Mayes, 1990; Myers, 1999; Voloshinov, 1971) who have adopted various and different approaches regarding the forms and functions it embeds either in written and/ or in spoken language.

This study deals with the exploration of the use of *direct speech representation* in Greek conversational narratives. As I will show, direct speech is salient and performs multiple functions in the specific conversational data. In particular, I will argue that direct speech can be employed as part of a narrative strategy that serves the reporters' current conversational goals (see also De Fina 2003; Georgakopoulou, 1997; Tannen, 1989). More specifically, the employment of direct speech on the part of narrators contributes to the emergence of aspects of the narrators' identities, and therefore functions as a means of presenting oneself and other characters.

In order to analyse my narrative data I will first distinguish between the kinds of stories found in my data, following the study of Coates (2003). Then, based on quantitative results, I remark that direct speech is a frequent narrative resource. Furthermore, I investigate the type of acts encoded within the direct speech instances. For this purpose, I follow Brown & Levinson's (1987) and Culpeper's (2005) theories of politeness and impoliteness. On the basis of these theories, I distinguish between *face-threatening acts* (where face-threat is usually minimized via the use of hedging) and *impolite acts* (where face-threat is deliberate and is maximized via the use of offensive markers) reported by the narrators. These distinctions will be further discussed in the analysis sections.

Taking into consideration the analysis of politeness and impoliteness, I argue that narrators use their own voices and the voices of others to implicitly evaluate elements of the story. In particular, I illustrate that my informants present themselves and other characters of their stories as (not) performing specific types of (speech) acts in order to serve their current conversational goals, namely to present themselves in various roles. More specifically, my narrators construct themselves in different ways through the politeness or impoliteness strategies they employ within direct speech. In this way, my narrators talk about themselves in (verbal) action within the stories they tell. Finally, my claims with regard to the narrators' self-presentation are supplemented by the ethnographic observations I have collected concerning the narrators in question.

2. Theoretical framework

In terms of theoretical framework, this study follows the line of research that deals with the narrative construction of identities. In particular, I adopt a dynamic, social constructionist approach (Sarbin & Kitsuse, 1994) on identity construction that does not view identity as something stable. Rather, identity is viewed as a process that emerges

contextually and is negotiated discursively (see, among others, Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). To this end, narratives play an important role in identity construction. As Schiffrin argues (1996:170), the content of our stories (what we tell about), and our story-telling behaviour (how we tell our stories) are all sensitive indices not just of our personal selves, but also of our social and cultural identities. From this perspective, narrative forms the "linguistic lens" (Schiffrin, 1996: 199) through which narrators display aspects of their identities.

For the purpose of categorisation of the direct speech instances I also adopt politeness theory (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). In order to discuss the terms I will be using, I will first refer to the notion of *face* which is the starting point of politeness theory. Erving Goffman (1967: 5) defines *face* as the public self-image a person effectively claims for him/herself. According to Brown & Levinson (1987: 61), this involves two aspects, *positive face* and *negative face,* which correlate with two basic desires and wants of any individual in any interaction. "*Negative face* refers to the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others" (ibid.: 62). "*Positive face* refers to the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (ibid.).

Brown & Levinson argue that "the notion of face is sensitive, as it can be lost, damaged, maintained or enhanced in interaction" (1987: 61) and any threat to face must be continually monitored during an interaction. Indeed, everyday interaction is formed in a way that both aspects of face are inevitably sometimes threatened or damaged. Brown and Levinson (1987: 65-8) discuss types of speech acts that lead to face threat and constitute *face threatening acts* (FTA's). In particular, they outline four main types of politeness strategies a speaker may consider when performing an FTA. These four different politeness strategies embed different degrees of face threat. Therefore, according to Brown & Levinson (ibid.) an FTA may be performed *bald on record*, that is, in a straightforward way. However, it may also be performed via the use of hedging, namely with a *redressive act* of either positive or negative politeness. Additionally, it may be produced *off record,* that is, indirectly. These terms will be used throughout my data analysis concerning the classification of different direct speech instances in terms of face threat.

3. Data and methodology

The data I am using constitute part of a broader set of narrative data that have been collected for the purposes of a longer research project[1] I have participated in as a researcher. The project involved the collection of naturally occurring conversational narratives amongst young residents of the town of Patras in Greece. For this purpose, a group of seven researchers including myself tape-recorded authentic conversations between male and female informants which resulted from our interactions with them. The informants did not feel as though they were submitted to an interview. This is because they felt comfortable talking with us, since we had got acquainted with them

[1] K.Karatheodoris *2425,* Research Committee, University of Patras, headed by Dr Argiris Archakis.

for almost two months. At the same time, we collected ethnographic observations concerning each one of them. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on 310 naturally occurring conversational narratives involving both male and female informants. More specifically, 190 narratives were produced by male informants, and 120 narratives by female informants. In the following section I will discuss the kinds of stories I have come across in the specific data.

3.1 Kinds of stories

In order to present the kinds of stories included in this data, I adopt Coates' terms (2003) and therefore make a distinction between *stories of self-disclosure* and *stories of achievement*. According to Coates, stories of self disclosure reveal personal feelings; also, via these kinds of stories, narrators present themselves as people who go through difficult experiences and who are aware of their own vulnerability. More specifically, in the present data I have come across *stories of embarrassment*; that is to say stories where narrators describe situations that made them feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Furthermore, I have come across what I will call *stories of exam stress* in which narrators present themselves as stressed, anxious or confused during exam writing. Via the employment of the above-mentioned stories, my narrators expose their feelings and reveal weak aspects of their characters, since they admit that they felt embarrassment, stress or confusion.

On the other hand, I have come across stories of achievement where narrators present themselves as successful and thus focus on their ability to act confidently in the world. Furthermore, I argue that in stories of achievement narrators give emphasis to the result of the story, for example how they managed to win at gambling; whereas stories of self- disclosure are self-referential because in these stories emphasis is placed on aspects of the protagonists' characters and on personal feelings.

3.2 Verbal action in the stories

What is particularly important in the present narratives is the fact that the kind of action that takes place within the stories is usually verbal action. That is to say, my informants choose to tell stories that involve speech representation as the core of the complicating action. This means that resolutions are very often achieved via speech[2]. According to Toolan (2001: 154), social relations are characterized by verbal interaction, and people's everyday lives necessarily involve talk, as part of satisfying their needs. Indeed, the vast majority of the stories revolve around the students' everyday school and family life and involve the employment of informal talk. Therefore, verbal action is very often the core of these stories. In quantitative terms, 220 (71%) out of the 310 (100%) stories include speech representation whereas 90 (29%) out of 310 (100%) do not include speech representation.

Furthermore, the form of speech presentation that predominates in the specific narratives is direct speech. This means that my narrators select to represent in direct

[2] See section on female self-presentation.

speech what they have heard or said in previous contexts. The role of direct speech is crucial to these stories because it involves various functions. In general, my narrators animate an interactional world within the story itself, since they represent verbal interactions embedded in their stories. Moreover, they are able to construct their stories by shifting from represented interactional worlds to the current storytelling worlds. Put differently, they are able to make comments on the represented interactions. Thus, narrators are able to highlight and therefore evaluate certain aspects of the story and of the represented voices of the story participants. Therefore, direct speech constitutes a strategy of interpretation (De Fina, 2003). In a similar vein, via direct speech, they construct themselves as story participants and therefore reveal certain aspects of their identities, since particular kinds of identities stem from ways of talking about the self in action (De Fina, 2003).

In the following section, I will discuss how my narrators select direct speech in order to represent themselves as interactional protagonists in different ways, and therefore project different aspects of their identities. For this reason, I will focus on the content of the represented direct speech utterances within stories of achievement. I will provide two indicative examples. The first one consists of an achievement story produced by a female narrator, and the second one constitutes an achievement story produced by a male narrator.

4. The narrators: ethnographic observations

The two narrators in question come from a different educational, cultural and social background. More specifically, Areti, who is the narrator of the first story, lives in a middle class neighbourhood. She also attends a school that is located in the same area. She is in the last grade of high school and her performance at school is very good. Her goal is to go to university. For this reason she also receives private tuition at home. This is common practice for the vast majority of Greek students who aim to go to university. During weekends, when she has some spare time, she goes out with friends. Overall, her everyday routine mainly revolves around school attendance, private tuition, and individual study.

Yannis, the male narrator, forms part of a "close knit group of intimates" (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003: 4). According to my ethnographic observations, this group seem to have strong friendship bonds, as well as common ideas and perceptions that lead them to the adoption of a specific world view. In a nutshell, they consider themselves as anarchists, they dress untidily and remain unwashed, and they take pride in their bad performance at school. Additionally, they have invented a bizarre type of amusement, namely what they call "car walking". This means that during the night they walk on top of parked cars and they see that as having fun. Finally, a very important observation is that they maintain a scornful attitude towards most of their teachers, the political parties (and their schoolmates who belong to them), their parents, the clergy and the police. On the basis of the above, it could be argued that they seem to reject the norms of the establishment, since they

deliberately deviate from the traditional values and norms they observe around them. In particular, according to the narratives they produce, they do not seem to accept social relations reflecting positions of power, and they do not accept social conventions.

In the following sections, I will discuss how the two narrators' linguistic behaviour corresponds to the above-mentioned ethnographic observations.

4.1 Female self-presentation

The following story has emerged from a conversation between two female informants, namely Dimitra (D) and Afroditi (A), and a female researcher. In particular, this forms the last story of a series of five narratives that revolve around school teachers. All five stories are set in school and involve verbal interactions between students and teachers regarding school issues. Via the story under investigation, the narrator explains how she persuaded the headmaster of the school to reconsider the issue of the students' educational day trip to Athens. It should be noted that the headmaster had cancelled the students' trip because the school had been previously occupied by students who protested against a newly introduced educational law. The student/narrator decides to go to the headmaster's office in order to request him, on behalf of the students of her class, to repeat an assembly so that the teachers would discuss the students' educational trip.[3]

A: So I knock on the door I go in and I say::**, Mr Mpouropoule**[4] I say**, can we occupy you for a second? um::,** he says **yes yes,** I tell him **sir** I say**, I know** I say**, we have tired you with the issue of the excursion, but it is something** I say **something sir that we want so much, if you want** I tell him I say:: **if you want I can tell you a few words and this'll be the last time we bother you ok** he says**, you haven't tired me up** whatever he was saying, and I say **sir** I say::, you told us I say **that the teachers have been informed about the subject,** I say::, I say **but we asked two teachers, and they didn't know anything** I say**, nor that:: the exhibition ends at the seventh of January nor that:: um:: the theatre is what we also want to play and we want an idea.** He told me **I know I know anyway** I say to him**, I asked the:: um::, the teachers and they told me that they don't know about it,** I say **is there any possibility** I say**, that you had <u>one</u> more assembly, so that** I say to him **we will have time to inform the teachers, meanwhile** I tell him **we we don't go to Athens for fun** I say**, we have a certain goal, if we wanted** I tell him **to go for fun, we would go somewhere else em: we are** I say to him **pupils**

[3] The following transcription conventions are used:

- / self-repair
- (...) unintelligible talk
- <u>text</u> stressed parts of utterance
- text:: extension of syllable
- , short pause (2-3 seconds)
- {text} clarification points made by the author
- ( ) omission of speech

[4] All parts that include direct speech representation are emboldened.

from the humanities area, serious kids , I don't believe I say to him **that you've heard anything bad about us, that we are something like causing trouble and such at the school, or** I say to him **concerning the school-occupation I don't believe** I say to him **that in one day, the gaps of two weeks occupation, could be therefore covered** and he says:: to me, **alright** he says to me **it is not that the issue, then** I say to him **what's the issue?,** he says to me **the other kids** he says:: to me**, they had arranged to go to the::**, where they had arranged to go?

D: To Dimokritos?

A: Yes:: **but they won't go** he tells me**,** I say to him **however these kids can go there anytime they want, Dimokritos will not move its place, whereas** I say to him **the exhibition ends** , you know I had found an answer// [to each subject he says to me]

D: // [Yes it's what he told her, and she told him]//

A: //he was also looking at me and meanwhile he was quite laughing, now I say:: to myself **nothing else will happen in here, but anyway alright** he tells me**, we will make another assembly tomorrow, but I don't believe** he says to me **that you'll have any positive results alright** I say to him**, please do the assembly as soon as possible, and if nothing happens, at least** I say **we won't worry that something could have happened to us.**

In the specific story, the narrator-protagonist carries out a plan in order to realize her wish, namely to go on the trip. This involves the persuasion of the headmaster to repeat an assembly where all teachers would vote on this issue. However, in the Greek educational context, this plan involves the performance of face-threatening acts on the part of the student, since she will be requesting something from the head teacher. More specifically, from the very beginning of the story the narrator presents herself as acknowledging that her initiative, namely to enter the headmaster's office in order to discuss with him the issue of the excursion, involves a face-threatening act (FTA). She decides to perform it, though, via the use of hedging, in order to realize her wish. For this reason she reports in minute detail the words uttered from both parties, namely the teacher's and hers; these words, which as we will see are of paramount importance for the outcome of the story, are reported in direct speech.

More specifically, the utterances she presents herself as producing involve the use of redressive negative politeness strategies in order to reduce the face-threat. From the very beginning she uses linguistic markers that pay deference (*Mr Mpouropoule*) as well as markers that minimize the imposition (*can we bother you for a second? If you want I can tell you a few words and this will be the last time we bother you*). Furthermore, she underlines that she is aware of the threat imposed to the teacher and takes it into account in her decision to perform the FTA (*Sir I know we have tired you with the issue of the excursion*). In Brown & Levinson's terms (1987: 188) she admits the impingement, which is a form of apologising. In addition, she adopts positive politeness strategies (*but it is something… something sir that we want so much*) in order to secure empathy from the head teacher; according to Brown & Levinson (1987) empathy and understanding

are characteristics of one's positive face, since they refer to the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.

Then, she presents her arguments one by one, which she also enriches with positive polite-ness strategies (*we we don't go to Athens for fun … we have a certain goal … we are … pupils from the humanities area, serious kids, I don't believe … that you've heard anything bad about us, that we are something like causing trouble and such at the school*). It could be argued that, by uttering these words, the narrator intends to appeal to the head teacher's emotions.

Finally, she makes her request (to ask him to repeat the assembly) twice, which also consists of a face-threatening act. The first time she utters it, she adopts the redressive act of distancing the hearer from the particular FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 204). This is achieved by switching the tense form present to past. The second time she makes her request at the end of the narrative, she is more direct (*please do the assembly as soon as possible*); however, she employs the linguistic marker **"***please***"** which minimizes the threat. Also, the narrator adds evaluative comments that present herself as able to provide an answer to the headmaster's objections *(you know I had found an answer to each subject*), as well as presenting herself as acting with confidence, because she makes no evaluative comments on anxiety on her part.

In addition, there is a tendency to report the interaction with a lot of detail about the exact words that the narrator and the headmaster are supposed to have used. Of course it is not possible to establish whether those words were actually uttered the way they are reported, and, more importantly, it is unlikely that she can remember the words verbatim,[5] but the narrator gives the impression that she remembers exactly what was said. Tannen (1990: 141) notices that detail gives the impression of verisimilitude to the hearer and thus makes situations appear very real.

Overall, the narrator presents herself as adopting politeness strategies that give deference, which forms the appropriate behaviour one should adopt towards the headmaster of a school in Greece. I observe that the story ends with the potential realisation of the protagonist's wish world. It should be remarked that she achieved the solution to the problem verbally and although she performed a series of face-threatening acts, she presents herself as having managed to maintain social harmony. Therefore, the state of disequilibrium which existed in the narrative universe has been converted to a state of equilibrium, since the protagonist's desires will be potentially fulfilled. Overall, the narrator presents herself as successful in the maintenance of social harmony after her verbal encounter with the headmaster. Also, it should be remarked that she did not need to have reported the whole conversation in so much detail. However, she does so in order to highlight her ability to **"**manipulate**"**speech so as to behave in a polite way, and therefore reinforce the importance of her polite behaviour. I could therefore conclude that, by offering this narrative, the narrator aims at self-promotion because she presents herself as capable of persuading the headmaster of the school with regards to an important issue that concerns many students, by behaving appropriately. Finally, there is a focus on the result of the story, namely that

[5] This confirms the constructed nature of reported speech (see Tannen, 1989).

the assembly will be repeated. This is presented as an achievement on the part of the narrator/ protagonist which constitutes a result of her polite verbal behaviour.

4.2 Male self-presentation

The following story emerged from a conversation between two male informants and two researchers, namely one male and one female. It is the 20th. narrative out of the 65 identified in the specific conversation; it forms part of a series of six narratives that revolve around incidents concerning the students and some of their teachers. Via these six stories, either the narrators display achievement which emerges from the represented interactions with the teachers, or teachers themselves are denigrated via their represented words and/or actions. In particular, the following story is set in the school environment, and describes a rather heated disagreement which results in conflict between the narrator and his Latin teacher during the Latin class.

> **Υ:** The person who is teaching us Latin Latin/ I was writing you know, a poem in his class, my grammar book was open, my reading book was open, everything open he sees me writing/ he comes up he comes slowly with the Latin book over me and while he was reading Latin, bap, he gets my notebook I grasp the notebook too he was pulling it, **let go** he tells me **let go I'm not letting go** I am pulling it buf on the desk /my desk **if you please sir lower the tone of your voice** he tells me I say to him, **the tone of my voice** I say to him **would be better if your behaviour was more appropriate** I tell him **what kind of bullying is this you coming and taking my notebook?** he went yellow he went white he went red he went you can't imagine ready to die **say another word say one more word** he says **and I'm taking you in one more word,** he was stuck the man was foaming

At the beginning of the story the narrator presents himself as writing a poem and not paying attention to the lecture, but he is presenting himself as cleverly avoiding detection by keeping his Latin books open on his desk. However, the teacher observes it and then the verbal conflict begins; the conflict is again reported in direct speech.

First, the narrator presents himself as refusing to defer to the teacher (*I'm not letting go*). Then the teacher is presented as performing a face-threatening act (*if you please sir lower the tone of your voice*) because he asks the student to change his behaviour; however, the teacher reduces the threat by using hedges, namely he employs *please* as well as the "*if* condition" which distances the hearer from the particular FTA. At this point, the content of the student's utterances is unexpected and totally inappropriate to the specific circumstances. More specifically, not only does the student not obey his teacher's request, but he presents himself as verbally attacking the teacher. In particular, he performs face-threatening acts that attack the teacher's positive face, since he judges his behaviour. The degree of face threat is maximized if we take into consideration social relations, namely the fact that in Greece a student is not allowed to attack a teacher's face especially in the context of a school class. Moreover, the vocabulary choices (*bullying*) of the above utterances reveal a purposeful

verbal attack on the teacher on the part of the student. In particular, the attack involves the student presenting himself as the victim of abuse.

The notion of intentional face-attack has been introduced by Culpeper (1996, 2005) as an indicator for the consideration of an utterance as impolite. More specifically, Culpeper (2005) suggests that impoliteness comes about when: "(a) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (b) the hearer perceives and/ or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (a) and (b)" (ibid: 38). Impoliteness, then, has two aspects: "the offensive information being expressed by the utterance and the information that it is being expressed intentionally" (ibid: 39). Indeed, the present narrative data include various reported utterances like the above that aim at an intentional face-attack via the use of offensive markers (i.e. *bullying*). Via the above impolite reported utterances the narrator presents himself as having managed to make his teacher upset. This is made evident by the employment of evaluative hyperbolic comments which describe the teacher's mood (*he went yellow, he went red, he went you can't imagine ready to die*). The last reported words that belong to the teacher, as well as the narrator's evaluative/ hyperbolic comments, indicate the teacher's fury and loss of control.

According to the analysis above, the narrator presents himself as capable of upsetting a person with authority by performing a series of impolite utterances. In other words, the narrator presents himself as having managed to disrupt social harmony. Also, in the specific story verbal conflict is not resolved; on the contrary, the story ends with the teacher being upset and furious. The above result is presented as an achievement on part of the narrator-protagonist who displays heroism by presenting himself as capable of attacking a person with authority, and therefore able to reverse power relations. This is because the student is presented as giving orders, whereas the teacher is presented as losing control of the verbal encounter. It should be remarked that in Greek contexts, the specific behaviour on part of the student would certainly lead to punishment. However, no punishment is reported, since the narrator constructs direct speech as well as the whole narrative according to his conversational goals, namely to present himself as successful after a verbal conflict with his teacher. The addition of relevant evaluative comments contributes to this purpose.

5. Summary and conclusions

The present analysis has showed that direct speech is a frequent and important device in adolescents' narratives, through which they relive their verbal encounters with others. At the same time, this recollection of past experience allows narrators to evaluate the narrated events and express their stance towards them. Hence, via the representation of words in direct speech, the adolescents in question construct a represented story world (De Fina, 2003) in which certain characters and actions are highlighted, thus projecting particular interpretations of the original speech event. In this way, they are able to present themselves and project aspects of their identities through direct speech representation in various ways.

In particular, in the above study, I provided two indicative examples, and discussed how two different informants present themselves as interactional protagonists via the stories they produce. More specifically, I examined how the two narrators present themselves as having achieved their goals via the employment of speech. The female informant narrates her verbal encounter with the head teacher of the school where she presents herself as strategically employing a series of politeness strategies that reduce the threat on the teacher's face. Therefore, the narrator presents herself as having achieved her goal by maintaining social harmony and not having damaged the teacher's face. In contrast, the male informant presents himself as successful after a verbal conflict with his teacher. More specifically he is presented as having intentionally attacked his teacher's face by performing impolite utterances that resulted in the disruption of social harmony.

The employment of direct speech in storytelling could thus be related to the projection of aspects of the narrators' identities, namely alignment with traditional values and norms in the case of maintaining social harmony, and deviation from traditional values and norms in the case of disrupting social harmony. These aspects of identity displayed by the two informants can be further related to the ethnographic observations concerning them. As discussed in the preceding sections, the male narrator forms part of a close knit group of intimates who tend to adopt, among others, an aggressive behaviour towards authority figures, since they refrain from mainstream thinking in various ways. The female narrator seems to be much more aligned with mainstream thinking, based on her ideas and actions concerning the traditional values and norms. On the basis of these observations, I would argue that the narrators' linguistic behaviour reflects their ethnographic background. Therefore, I argue that the recollection and dramatization of verbal encounters with people with authority that is achieved through direct speech might be a vehicle for adolescents to express who they are, share their beliefs, or crucially project and construct aspects of their identities. In other words, the present narrators have presented who they are by representing what they did and said to specific people on specific occasions.

This function of direct speech has proved to be a general tendency of the adolescents in the vast majority of my narrative data. However, I would like to underline that that my selection of two narratives produced by narrators of different genders was random. Thus, I do not aim to make binary comparisons between the two different genders regarding self-presentation through the use of direct speech. I would therefore like to point out the explanatory nature of my analysis. This means that the analysis of direct speech in a larger number of narratives might provide different results. Additionally, the investigation of direct speech in the stories produced by different narrators emerging in different contexts might well also lead to different conclusions.

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