



Gilles Merminod\*

# Preparing for the deployment of ready-made stories in social interaction: reflexivity and narrative practices in professional communication

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2022-0096>

Received July 29, 2022; accepted April 12, 2023; published online April 28, 2023

**Abstract:** Since the nineties, the idea that narratives are essential for an efficient communication has massively spread in management, marketing and politics, supported by the profuse publication of storytelling guides and criticized by a number of social commentators. Nevertheless, little is known about how reflexive activities specific to professional communication partake in the visibility and solidification of this specific way of conceiving the use of stories. Drawing on semiotic-inspired works in linguistic anthropology, studies on talk-in-interaction and narrative analysis, this article analyzes how reflexive activities contribute to the construction of specific conceptions of what narratives are and what they do in professional communication. To achieve this, the article relies on a single case study that details the kind of ready-made stories and contextualization devices a storytelling guide provides for its readers. The analysis shows that the storytelling guide builds up a cultural model that is both archiving past narrative situations (a *model-of* action) and potentially generating new narrative situations (a *model-for* action). By doing so, the storytelling guide not only singles out specific communicative resources but also fuels a metapragmatic model in which accomplished storytellers are at the top of the social structure.

**Keywords:** enregisterment; linguistic anthropology; narrative; reflexivity; tellability

## 1 Narrative practices in professional communication

The idea that narratives are vital for an efficient communication began to spread widely in the 1990s, at first in the United States and then on a global scale (Salmon

---

\*Corresponding author: Gilles Merminod, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland,  
E-mail: gilles.merminod@unil.ch

2010). This idea, of course, is not new: classical rhetoric theorized the use of narratives as an argumentative tool (Danblon et al. 2008), with concepts such as *exemplum* (type of argument) and *narratio* (part of the discourse structure). But professional training and lifelong learning programs, supported by the profuse publication of storytelling guides, have made this rhetorical conception of narratives particularly prominent in business and political communication (Salmon 2010). While the structure and functions of narratives in professional communication have garnered much attention (e.g., Gotti and Sancha Guinda 2013), little is known about how reflexive activities specific to professional communication – such as handbooks, training sessions, etc. – contribute to the visibility and solidification of particular ways of conceiving and using narratives. As a consequence, this article analyzes a storytelling guide to gain a deeper understanding of how reflexive activities contribute to constructing specific conceptions about what narratives are and the role they play in professional communication.

In linguistics and cognate fields, narratives have been widely studied, from the groundbreaking analysis of narrative structure (Hymes 1981; Labov and Waletzky 1967) to the development of studies on narrative competence (Bamberg 1997; Berman and Slobin 1994) and the blossoming of sociodiscursive perspectives on narrative practices (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2020; Ochs and Capps 2001). Even if much of what is known about narratives has been based on literary works, artful oral performances, ordinary conversations and research interviews, the study of narratives in professional settings has not been forgotten, and has been carried out in two directions: on the one hand, narratives have been studied as professional genres, produced for specific purposes; on the other hand, narratives have been studied as a communicative practice in the workplace.

The studies on narratives as professional genres have encompassed all sorts of domains in which language is used as a means of doing work (Gotti and Sancha Guinda 2013; Resche 2016). Various studies have focused on professions that have language at their core, such as journalism, politics or corporate communication. These studies have shown how and why the stories' structures and performances are affected by the specific purposes of a given setting, such as, for instance: *informing* and *entertaining* in journalism (e.g., Cotter 2010; Merminod and Burger 2020), *constructing identity* and *establishing authority* in politics (e.g., Jones 2021; Norrick 2013) or *convincing an audience* and *legitimizing a stance* in corporate communication (e.g., Catenaccio et al. 2021; Declercq and Jacobs 2019). These studies on narratives as professional genres have deepened our understanding of how the people who have to produce narratives as a part of their daily work structure and perform stories, and why they do it that way.

As for the studies on narratives as a communicative practice in the workplace, they have mainly been based on ethnographies in private companies (Wasson 2009)

and on the analysis of social interaction between colleagues (Ladegaard 2018). Ethnographies in companies have shown that stories are resources that help workers to fulfill their tasks in a way that fits in with the expectations of their community (Linde 2009; Orr 1996). These studies have also insisted on the fact that narratives – either written or spoken – play a pivotal role in reproducing the institution's identity and building social relations between its members (Linde 2001). Similarly, studies based on the analysis of social interaction between colleagues have underlined that “stories are used to entertain, educate, socialize, and inform, and to express individual employees' preoccupations, perspectives and feelings” (Ladegaard 2018: 245, drawing on Holmes 2006; Holmes and Marra 2005). They have shown that workplace narratives, in addition to reinforcing ingroup cohesion, workplace culture and corporate values, also have an argumentative function, in their capacity to support a position or explain a given choice or course of action (Ladegaard 2018). Studies on workplace narratives have observed that some types of stories, such as anecdotes, are often seen as *off-record work*: “they are generally regarded as dispensable, irrelevant, or peripheral, and in some cases even distracting in the workplace context” (Holmes 2006: 184). This indicates that narratives do not emerge in a social vacuum, but relate to shared conceptions about what they are and what they do.

Conceptions about what narratives are and what they do correspond with specific ideologies of communication (Spitzmüller 2022), namely narrative ideologies (Merminod 2020a, 2020b). These ideologies are metapragmatic models that link specific ways of telling with types of social situations and thus regiment the telling of stories in a domain of social life. Narrative ideologies have been described in terms of *reportability* (Labov 1972), *tellability* (Sacks 1992), *storyability* (Shuman 1986) or *narratability* (Linde 1993). Such related notions were used initially to describe the story's content and its appropriateness to contextual exigencies: for instance, an event may be considered as worth telling because it is not known to the audience, because it breaches the frame of expectations, or because its telling enables social coordination (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012; Norrick 2005; Ochs and Capps 2001). These notions have then allowed researchers to analyze what is worth telling by whom and to whom, through what means, where, when, why and to what purposes (for an overview: Georgakopoulou 2007; Holmes 1998; Thornborrow and Coates 2005). Most of the studies dealing with these cognate notions have started from the analysis of local evaluations emerging in social interaction and have then associated them with broader concerns (such as the functions of stories in social life or the weight that social structures and cultures bring to their telling). But, except for Georgakopoulou's work on story curation in social media (Georgakopoulou 2021a, 2021b), few studies have looked at how 'generic' metapragmatic practices – that is, reflexive activities that do not appear in the immediate context of a specific telling – contribute to the shape of shared narrative ideologies.

In this respect, the metapragmatic practices which, since the nineties, have popularized the conception that narratives are key for an efficient communication in business and politics, are a case in point. In the French-speaking world, this ideology has crystallized in the expression ‘storytelling’ (Bonnet et al. 2021; Marti and Pelissier 2012), directly borrowed from the English language. It refers to communicative practices that serve to captivate and convince an audience through emotion and the sharing of inspiring stories (Baroni 2016). The second decade of the 21st century saw numerous French-speaking publications devoted to *storytelling* and aimed at developing their readers’ communication skills (Dufour 2021; Merminod 2015). These guides are a valuable locus to study the metapragmatic practices that contribute to the shape of shared narrative ideologies. They are informative about the contextual appropriateness of some ways of telling stories (Silverstein 1993; Verschueren 2000) while they assign social meaning to them (Jaworski et al. 2004). By doing so, they reflexively take part in the construction, visibilisation and possibly the stabilization of shared conceptions about narratives for a given community, in the same way that etiquette manuals and handbooks on elocution partook in the emergence and dissemination of ‘Received Pronunciation’ in British English (Agha 2003).

My article carries out a single case study on one of these storytelling guides and aims at analyzing how it contributes to the construction of a specific narrative ideology. The storytelling guide under analysis has been selected from a collection of guides published in French-speaking Europe over a period of ten years (see below). Even if published in French-speaking Switzerland – a place on the periphery of French-speaking Europe – this guide is quite illustrative of the others. It has been analyzed following an abductive process in which data are coded in iterative cycles to the point of theoretical saturation (Tavory and Timmermans 2009, 2014). In this process, I combined narrative analysis with studies on talk-in-interaction and semiotic inspired works in linguistic anthropology. Narrative analysis enabled me to describe the stories provided by the guide and, in particular, the worlds they represent and the events they sequence (Herman 2009). Studies on talk-in-interaction helped me to understand the type of social situations and communicative processes depicted in the guide when one tells a story (Georgakopoulou 2007; Goffman 1981). Semiotic inspired works in linguistic anthropology allowed me to describe the indexical processes at play in the guide (Silverstein 2003) and how they feed into a specific metapragmatic model (Agha 2007).

## 2 Providing ready-made stories

The French-speaking publishing industry has seen the release of many guides devoted to storytelling, probably stimulated by the editorial success of Salmon’s first book on the subject (in 2007, for the French edition, translated in English in 2010). My collection of guides includes the following items (Table 1):

**Table 1:** Collection of storytelling guides in French.

N°	Title	Release	Authors	Publisher
1	<i>Storytelling, le guide</i>	2009	Stéphane Dangel, Jean-Marc Blancherie	Éditions du Désir, Domme
2	<i>Storytelling, on va tout vous raconter ...</i>	2009	François Meuleman,	Edipro, Levallois-Perret
3	<i>Storytelling du luxe</i>	2010	Jean-Marc Blancherie, Stéphane Dangel	Éditions du Désir, Domme
4	<i>Le storytelling en action: Transformer un politique, un cadre d'entreprise ou un baril de lessive en héros de saga!</i>	2010	Georges Chétochine, Olivier Clodong	Eyrolles, Paris
5	<i>Les 7 Règles du Storytelling</i>	2010	Loïk Roche, John Sadowsky	Pearson Education France, Paris
6	<i>Storytelling : Réenchantez votre communication</i>	2011	Sébastien Durand	Dunod, Paris
7	<i>Le story-telling en marketing: Tous les marketeurs racontent des histoires</i>	2011	Seth Godin	Maxima, Paris
8	<i>Storytelling. L'art de convaincre par le récit</i>	2011	Jean-Marc Guscetti	Slatkine, Genève
9	<i>Il était une fois ... Le storytelling. Comprendre la communication narrative</i>	2011	Philippe Payen	Vocatis, Levallois- Perret
10	<i>Storytelling et Contenu de marque: La Puissance du langage à l'ère numérique</i>	2012	Jeanne Bordeau	Ellispe, Paris
11	<i>Le storytelling pas à pas</i>	2013	Wilfrid Gerber, Jean-Christophe Pic, Alina Voicu	Vuibert, Paris
12	<i>Boostez vos présentations avec le storytelling</i>	2013	Yaël Hanouna-Gabison,	Eyrolles, Paris
13	<i>Storytelling minute: 170 histoires prêtes à l'emploi pour animer vos interventions</i>	2014	Stéphane Dangel,	Eyrolles, Paris
14	<i>La fabrique de l'ennemi: Comment réussir son storytelling</i>	2014	Georg Lewi	Vuibert, Paris
15	<i>Comment concevoir un bon storytelling? Imaginer un récit pour mieux convaincre</i>	2015	Nicolas Martin	50 min, Namur
16	<i>L'art du storytelling. Guide de communication</i>	2018	Guillaume Lamarre	Pyramyd éditions, Paris

These storytelling guides are generally written by people working in communication and consulting, and they mainly focus on narrative practices in the domains of marketing, management and politics. They usually advocate the use of narrative practices in (internal and external) professional communication while describing and exemplifying the rules that govern the telling of stories. These rules concern linguistic (lexicon, syntax, prosody) and multimodal (gaze, gesture, body movement) resources as much as discursive (deictic shift management, climactotelic story structure), interactional (story preface, participants' roles) and

social (appropriateness) issues. In addition, these guides generally provide a number of examples of successful storytelling, with the aim of circulating best practices and helping their readers to prepare future communicative events.

My analysis focuses on one of the abovementioned guides: *Storytelling: l'art de convaincre par le récit*. Like the others, this guide formulates a number of rules that govern the telling of stories (Merminod 2015), and it provides a series of examples – 64 stories – that aim at illustrating how and why telling stories matters. In the remainder of this article, I specifically focus on how these stories prepare the ground for future communicative events and reproduce a specific narrative ideology.

The guide provides 64 stories, which come from diverse sources: storybooks, English-speaking training resources in marketing and communication, history books, personal experience, and the news. The topics are nevertheless fairly limited: apart from some tales, they focus on business challenges and successes (almost half of the stories), historic events (especially in military history), sporting feats, and the unique lives of famous people. These stories are of different sizes (ranging from about thirty words to a thousand), but most of them share the common feature of presenting a transformation that results from the actions of an agentive character “who constructs the world the way it is” rather than being “constructed by the way the world is” (Bamberg 2011: 7). Example 1 illustrates this point.

(1) **Story 7, Johnny the bagger**

Johnny works in a supermarket in the United States. He helps customers put their purchases into paper bags. Competition is fierce, customers are scarce and business is bad. The manager is very worried and gathers his staff together and asks them to think of something personal they can do to satisfy the customers at no extra cost to the company. A personal gesture that might touch the customers and encourage them to come back and to talk about the supermarket. Johnny, who has Down's syndrome, returns home and comes across an old diary full of daily thoughts. For an hour, he writes down the day's thoughts on small paper cards. The next day at work, he inserts a thought of the day in the paper bag of his clients. A few days later, there is a long queue at cash desk No. 3. The manager approaches a customer and suggests that she move to another cash desk, where there is no one. The customer refuses, explaining that she prefers to wait and to get Johnny's thoughts. That evening, the manager calls another meeting with his team. He congratulates Johnny and asks them again to think of a personal gesture. The next day everyone has an idea. For example, the florist cuts off the heads of the flowers that have not been sold and puts them on the customers' buttons, for free. Now the supermarket is always full. Johnny has transformed this supermarket with a simple idea and above all with his heart.

*Johnny est employé aux États-Unis dans un supermarché. Il aide les clients à mettre leurs achats dans des sacs en papier. La concurrence est vive, les clients sont rares et les affaires vont mal. Très inquiet, le directeur réunit ses collaborateurs en leur demandant de réfléchir à quelque chose de personnel que chacun puisse faire pour satisfaire les clients sans frais supplémentaire pour l'entreprise. Un geste personnel qui pourrait toucher le client et qui l'inciterait à revenir et à parler du supermarché. Johnny, qui est trisomique, rentre à la maison et tombe nez à nez avec un vieil agenda garni de pensées quotidiennes. Pendant une heure, il recopie sur des petites cartes en papier la pensée du jour. Le lendemain à son travail, dans le sac en papier des clients, il insère une pensée du jour. Quelques jours plus tard, il y a une longue file d'attente à la caisse N° 3. Le directeur s'approche d'une cliente et lui propose de changer de caisse, là où il n'y a personne. La cliente refuse en expliquant qu'elle préfère attendre pour avoir les pensées de Johnny. Le soir même, le directeur réunit à nouveau son équipe. Il félicite Johnny et relance tout le monde. Le lendemain, chacun a trouvé une idée. Par exemple, la fleuriste coupe la tête des fleurs qui n'ont pas été vendues et les met gracieusement à la boutonnière des clients. Désormais le supermarché ne désemplit pas. Johnny a transformé ce supermarché, grâce à une idée simple et surtout avec son cœur. (pp. 34–35)*

In example 1, the main character, Johnny, is depicted as someone who finds a solution despite the adverse circumstances. His story is organized as a canonical Labovian narrative (1972), with an orientation, a complication and a resolution. Unsurprisingly, such a structure is recurrent in the storytelling guide, which explicitly favors fully fledged narratives over other formats. Nevertheless, there are also smaller formats, such as the simple mentions of past events or sorts of before-and-after comparisons. Example 2 (below), for instance, does not delve into the experience or the actions of the story's characters.

(2) **Story 8, The ring road**

Thirty years ago, when the project for a ring road is being studied, the criticisms are flying: too expensive, too big, too complicated, too much of a nuisance. In addition, some people wonder why the citizens would have to pay for it, when a good proportion of the users would be foreigners. In the end, it is thanks to the vision, enthusiasm and fighting spirit of certain politicians of the time that this motorway is built. An undeniable success achieved by MPs and ministers who recognized the benefits and impact on mobility, quality of life and the economy. An achievement that no one would deny today is an indispensable infrastructure for the city.

*Il y a trente ans. au moment de l'étude du projet de contournement par une autoroute, les critiques fusent : Trop cher, trop grand, trop compliqué, trop de nuisances. De plus, certains se demandent pourquoi les citoyens vont devoir passer à la caisse, alors qu'une bonne partie des usagers seront étrangers. Finalement, c'est grâce à la vision, à l'enthousiasme et à la pugnacité de certains politiciens de l'époque que cette autoroute voit le jour. Un succès incontestable obtenu par des députés et des ministres qui ont su reconnaître les bénéfices et l'impact pour la mobilité, la qualité de vie et l'économie. Une réalisation dont personne aujourd'hui n'oserait nier qu'il s'agit d'une infrastructure indispensable pour la ville. (p. 36)*

Regardless of how they are structured, most of the 64 stories depict a transformation from a *dysphoric* world into a *euphoric* one, namely a *thymic trajectory* (Greimas and Courtés 1979). Associated with the portrait of agentive characters, this positive transformation results in what are sometimes called inspirational stories. As a matter of fact, storying a problem and a way of solving it provides models that have the ability to orient people when they are facing unexpected, unknown or undesirable situations (Bruner 1991; Herman 2003). Such use of a recurrent story pattern – typical in French-speaking storytelling guides (see also Dufour 2021) – meets practical purposes: the storytelling guide aims at developing the readers' communication skills and giving them communicative resources to solve problems they could face at work. In this respect, the 64 stories are conceived as ready-made resources, designed to be reusable in professional communication.

### 3 Preparing for future tellings

The guide has a layout that helps, and even encourages, readers to use the 64 stories it provides. On the one hand, the stories are delimited from the rest of the text by a grey frame and are preceded by a title in capital letters categorizing them each time as a story (*histoire*) and specifying their content. On the other hand, the stories are listed at the end of the book, with their title, keywords specifying their content or the problems they can address, and the page number where they can be found. Their extraction from the guide and their reuse in new situations is thus facilitated.

The preparation for future activities is also ensured by attaching the stories to social situations, with a given participation framework, a specific organization of talk and a shared orientation towards a purpose (Goffman 1981). This can take either the form of narratives that depict the types of social situations in which the telling of stories is relevant, or the form of metanarrative formulations that recontextualize the unfolding social situation as one where a story is told.



### 3.1 Narratives framing ready-made stories

In the guide, ready-made stories are often framed by narratives that explain how and why these stories are told. Narratives are both *typified* and *typifying* resources that structure and give meaning to human experiences (Herman 2003). By framing ready-made stories, these narratives pre-index stories for typical situations in which their telling is relevant and therefore prepares them for prototypical use. The basic social situation represented in the guide is the following: in an institutional context, a main character tells a story to persuade an individual or a group of individuals.

(3) **Narrative framing story 7**

An Italian hospital seeks to improve its reception services. During a working session, Paolo, the manager, reports on the situation and his expectations. An employee speaks up and explains that it is unrealistic to want to offer a better service without hiring additional staff. Paolo smiles and tells the story of Johnny the bagger.

*Un hôpital italien cherche à améliorer ses prestations d'accueil au public. A l'occasion d'une séance de travail, Paolo, le directeur expose la situation et ses attentes. Un collaborateur prend la parole et explique qu'il est illusoire de vouloir offrir un meilleur service sans engager du personnel supplémentaire. Paolo sourit et raconte l'histoire de Johnny the bagger.*

[Story 7: Johnny the bagger]

Having told his story, Paolo observes his team. The protesting employee has calmed down and the protest has disappeared. Together they can start to work out proposals for improving the reception of customers.

*Après avoir raconté son histoire, Paolo observe son équipe. Le collaborateur revendicatif s'est apaisé et la contestation a disparu. Ensemble ils peuvent débiter à élaborer des propositions pour améliorer l'accueil des clients.*

(pp. 34–35)

Example 3 depicts a situation in which a manager tells a story to convince his team to take action. The narrative first establishes a chronotope, that is, the semiotic representation of a storyworld, “in which time, space and patterns of agency coincide” (Blommaert 2015: 110): a hospital manager and his collaborators try to solve a problem relating to reception services. The narrative then represents the emergence of a disagreement between the participants: the proposal of the manager is followed by the counter-proposal of one of his collaborators. This counter-proposal leads the manager to tell a story. The story, then, prompts the collaborator to accept the proposal previously made by his manager. The participants are finally represented as having overcome their disagreement, jointly embarking upon the

course of action that the manager had proposed in the first place. To cut a long story short, the narrative depicts a situation in which the narrator wins the case.

Beyond professional settings, the guide also represents public-speaking situations in which the main character tells a story to persuade a wider audience.

(4) **Narrative framing story 8**

Daniel is a member of the Geneva parliament. He is going to have to take the floor to have a budget increase of more than a 100 million Swiss francs accepted for the city's rail bypass. He knows that there are many opponents, both at the political level and among citizens' associations. The press is constantly railing against this project, which will cost the community several billions of Swiss francs. It is said that this project is too expensive, that the route is wrong, that it will not help to relieve traffic congestion. The struggle also takes place on the legal front, with numerous objections being registered by the courts.

Daniel, standing in front of the other Members of Parliament and the TV cameras, says: "I'd like to tell you a story". This arouses the curiosity of the audience, which usually does not pay attention to the speaker. Daniel, for the first time in a long time, notices that the MPs are listening attentively. Some even smile.

*Daniel est député au parlement genevois. Il va devoir prendre la parole pour faire accepter une rallonge budgétaire de plus de 100 millions de francs suisses pour le contournement ferroviaire de l'agglomération. Il sait qu'il y beaucoup d'opposants tant au niveau politique que des associations de citoyens. La presse ne cesse de tirer à boulets rouges contre ce projet qui coûtera plusieurs milliards à la collectivité. Il est dit que ce projet est trop cher, que le tracé est mauvais, qu'il ne réussira pas à désengorger la circulation automobile. La lutte a aussi lieu sur le terrain juridique avec de nombreuses oppositions qui sont enregistrées par les tribunaux.*

*Daniel, debout face aux autres députés et aux caméras de télévision lance : « J'aimerais vous raconter une histoire ». Il attise ainsi la curiosité de l'auditoire qui habituellement plonge son nez dans les dossiers. Daniel, pour la première fois depuis longtemps, constate que les députés l'écoutent attentivement. Certains ont même le sourire.*

[Story 8: the ring road]

A few weeks after Daniel's story, parliament accepted the proposal, the citizens voted for the construction credit and work on the railway bypass could begin.

*Dans les semaines qui ont suivi l'histoire de Daniel, le parlement a accepté la proposition, les citoyens ont voté en faveur du crédit de construction, et les travaux du contournement ferroviaire ont pu commencer.* (pp. 35–36)

In example 4, the situation prior to the telling of the story is mainly rendered by the representation of the teller's epistemic state (*he knows that ...*). By doing so, the narrative provides a chronotope that underlines the difficulty of the communicative project which Daniel, the teller, is pursuing (*convincing parliament to get a budget extension of more than 100 million Swiss francs accepted for the city's rail bypass*). These difficulties are related both to the opposition to the project he is defending (*the rail bypass is not supported by the public*) and to the immediate social situation (*parliament is presented as an environment in which the audience pays scant attention*). However, despite this unfavorable prior framing, the story told by Daniel is presented as leading to the acceptance of the budget extension. The narrative shows a transformation from a 'desperate' situation to the situation hoped for by the one who opted for storytelling techniques. This example, similar to the first one, posits storytelling as a game-changer, the driving force behind transformations that benefit the storyteller, who thus becomes a persuasive and successful communicator. The narrative that frames the ready-made story somewhat reduces the depicted story-world: the decision to adopt a new credit is only considered in relation to Daniel's story about the ring road, without taking into account other temporalities, spatialities and patterns of agency that could have participated in this decision. There is no causal link explicitly stated between Daniel's story and the budget acceptance, but rather a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning that could lead the readers to think that Daniel's story has clinched the argument.

In these two examples, narratives are used to frame the participants' narrative activities into a *thymic trajectory*, a story pattern similar to that observed in the ready-made stories (see previous section). Here, the fact of telling stories transforms a *dysphoric* world (defined by lack of understanding, boredom and disagreement) into a *euphoric* one (defined by the opposite values, namely: understanding, interest and agreement). In addition, these narratives depict an idealized model of a communication, without any possibility of failure from the moment participants begin to tell their stories. Storytelling techniques have an almost immediate and perceptible effect on the world: they are presented as truly performative, making the world fit the words. By doing so, the guide suggests that telling stories is an efficient communication technique, that outflanks other types of communicative practices when it comes to persuading an audience.

### 3.2 Metanarrative formulations

In addition to using narratives that depict the prototypical situations in which storytelling techniques are efficient, the guide also provides resources that help to frame the situation as a narrative event. These resources are formulations, “practices of saying-in-so-many-words-what-we-are-doing” (Deppermann 2011; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970: 351; see also Bilmes 1981). They enable participants to attribute properties or assign categories to any aspect of communication that could be under scrutiny. Formulations are thus metapragmatic utterances, and those signaling that what was, could have been, is, could be or will be carried out is a narrative activity are more precisely metanarrative utterances (Bauman 1986; Norrick 2004). They correspond to moments “where a speaker more or less reflexively mobilizes more or less conventionalized communicative means to signal that the activity to follow, the activity underway or the activity that is indexed, alluded to, deferred, silenced is a story” (Georgakopoulou 2017: 38).

In the storytelling guide, metanarrative formulations appear in almost a third of the 64 ready-made stories. They are either located in the first sentence that opens the story (example 5), or just before as a preface (example 6). They are always produced by the teller.

(5) **Metanarrative formulations in opening sentences**

The story takes place on 12 December 1945 in Hoboken, New Jersey.

*L'histoire se déroule le 12 décembre 1945 à Hoboken dans le New Jersey.*

(story 16, p. 44)

This is the story of a young man aged 15 who starts an apprenticeship in a private bank in Bern.

*C'est l'histoire d'un jeune homme de 15 ans qui débute un apprentissage dans une banque privée à Berne.* (story 38, p. 80)

(6) **Metanarrative formulations in story prefaces**

I would like to tell you a story.

*J'aimerais vous raconter une histoire.* (story 49, p. 92)

If the narratives that frame the ready-made stories are resources that provide insight into the types of situations in which these stories can be used (for instance, in case of disagreement or lack of attention from the audience), metanarrative formulations are, in turn, contextualizing devices (Bauman 2001; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). They frame the situation as being oriented towards a particular organization of talk and specific expectations regarding participants' ways of doing and ways of being. Therefore, metanarrative formulations create an indexical order against

which the activity to be performed is interpreted. This indexical order is assumed to have a specific effect on the audience by the storytelling guide:

(7) **Effect of formulations on the audience**

Listening to a story transports us into a particular mode. More precisely, the sentence “I would like to tell you a story” induces, according to some specialists, an altered state of consciousness. A light hypnosis, where the individual disconnects from reality for a moment, that of the story. A moment when the rational self is slightly distracted.

*Écouter une histoire nous transporte dans un mode particulier. Plus précisément, la phrase « J'aimerais vous raconter une histoire » induit, selon certains spécialistes, un état altéré de la conscience. Une hypnose légère, où le sujet se déconnecte de la réalité pour un temps, celui du récit. Un temps où le moi rationnel est légèrement distrait. (p. 41)*

In the guide, the use of metanarrative formulations and stories is deemed to have a psychological effect on the audience that goes beyond that of usual talk, facilitating the adherence to the storyteller's viewpoint. In that way, storytellers are portrayed as almighty communicators who are, for a while, completely in control of the social interaction while the audience is both the passive and cooperative recipient of a communication that is necessarily successful. This impression of control is strengthened by the fact that, in the narratives that frame the ready-made stories, tellers are generally described as the only ones managing the telling of stories, without concern for the necessary interactive work done by the people to whom the story is told.

## 4 Pre-indexing and enregistering narrative practices

The 64 stories in the guide – even if presented as resources for talk in professional communication – are written texts; that is, traces of an entextualisation process (Bauman and Briggs 1990). As a result, each story provided by the storytelling guide can be conceived as an indexical sign, which « refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object » (Peirce: CP 2.248 in Hartshorne et al. 1931–1958). In this respect, these stories, as written texts, are what remains of past narrative activities and of the situations in which they were performed. That said, the analysis has shown that these stories are not just traces of past activities, they also project future activities, the tellings that the readers will be able to perform if they decide to communicate with storytelling techniques.

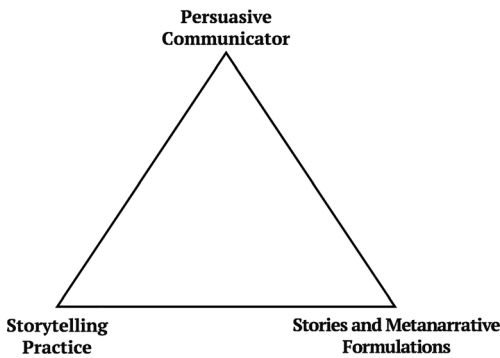
Silverstein's linguistic anthropology insists on the indexical inscription of language activities, through a twofold process of "appropriateness to context" (*indexical presupposition*) and "effectiveness in context" (*indexical entailment*) (Silverstein 2003). This means that language activities can only be understood with reference to the past, present, potential or future situations in which they are performed. This has at least two consequences for the text as a sign of a language activity: (i.) as a *trace-of*, texts archive language activities and are affected by their context of emergence; (ii.) as a *trace-for*, texts potentiate language activities, either by enabling interpreters to reconstruct the activities from which they originate, or by instructing them on how to carry out an activity in the future. In our data, the potentiation of language activities is supported by two pre-indexation devices: narratives framing ready-made stories and metanarrative formulations. Both devices project the subsequent use of ready-made stories in situations specific to professional communication and, by doing so, script future performances in a realm of productivity and maximum efficiency (Cameron 2000; Gong this volume; Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013).

The pre-indexation of ready-made stories for future social situations is entirely oriented towards a given purpose: to be persuasive in contexts that are assumed to be typical of professional communication and public speaking. But, comparable with the entextualization of oral traditions, the storytelling guide "not only potentiates the situated reiteration of texts, but also conditions the canonization of cultural texts, in other words the objectification of stretches of discourse into texts that can serve as an image of the durability and sharedness of a culture" (Giaxoglou 2009: 420). To speak of *canonization* might at first sight seem excessive in relation to the storytelling guide. Such a guide is first and foremost motivated by economic reasons and supports a training program in business communication (Merminod 2015). But to speak of *canonization* underlines the fact that the narrative ideologies promoted by the guide are part of a wider socio-historical process, that of the constitution of *storytelling* as a recognizable semiotic register in the French-speaking world and even globally, knowing that "registers are cultural models of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects, including images of persona, interpersonal relationship, and type of conduct" (Agha 2007: 145).

Semiotic registers do not consist of static repertoires but are models that circulate in society while they are undergoing change (Agha 2005), and they are *enregistered* through "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (Agha 2007: 81). The enregisterment of *storytelling* as a recognizable semiotic register in professional communication could be analyzed through a comparative analysis of storytelling guides and performances in many languages and parts of the world: first, by documenting the register's composition

(what forms and rules does it feature? is there any variation in its composition? and if so, how and why?); then, by analyzing the register's functions and contrasting the guides' prescriptions for use with actual performances (for what aims is such a register used? in which situations? and under what conditions?); finally, by tracking the publication of storytelling guides and other teaching material through time and space and thus mapping the register's circulation (what is the register's course of diffusion? and what are the factors contributing to its circulation?).

Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but the analysis of one storytelling guide has enabled us to grasp a segment of this process. Enregisterment proceeds from the fact of visibilizing indexical links between signs and a context against which they can be indexed (Johnstone 2016: 632–634), including situations, roles, effects, etc. In the storytelling guide, telling stories is primarily connected with communicators who succeed in capturing the attention of their audience and convincing them. In so doing, the storytelling guide connects a social persona (*the persuasive communicator*) with a practice (*storytelling*) and a set of semiotic features and conducts (*stories and metanarrative formulations*) (Figure 1). This results in the construction of a *figure of personhood* (Agha 2007; Park 2021; Spitzmüller 2015), a set of indexicals that make identifiable, enactable and performable a given social persona, here that of a persuasive communicator in relation to a persuaded audience.



**Figure 1:** Providing readers with a figure of personhood.

Beyond this figure of personhood, the very act of making visible indexical links between signs, social personae and practices results in building up a cultural model that is both archiving past situations (*a model-of*) and (with the potential of) generating new situations (*a model-for*). The storytelling guide provides its readers with a complete metapragmatic model, (*i.*) in which co-occurring variables both presuppose and implicate each other (*double arrows* in Figure 2), and (*ii.*) that is based on a set of

binaries that differentiates those who make use of storytelling techniques from others (*distinctive attributes* in Figure 2).

Co-occurring variables	Distinctives attributes		
	Telling stories	versus	Not telling stories
Communicative practice			
	↕		↕
Communicator	captivating convincing successful	versus	boring unconvincing unsuccessful
	↕		↕
Audience	captivated convinced	versus	bored skeptical
	↕		↕
Outcome	understanding interest agreement	versus	misunderstanding disinterest disagreement

**Figure 2:** Differentiating storytelling from other communicative practices.

As do popular handbooks on speech and accent studied by Agha (2007: 209–213), the guide associates semiotic registers with social differences. It illustrates that “registers are products of contrast” (Gal 2016: 121). On the one hand, through the repeated depiction of similar narrative events, in which the storyteller succeeds in persuading an audience, the guide dissociates *storytelling* practices from other already enregistered narrative practices, such as bedtime stories read at home (Heath 1982) or novels studied at school (Gordon 2020). On the other hand, *storytelling* practices are differentiated from other communicative practices in professional settings and public-speaking situations: telling stories enables those who do so to harmonize social relations by captivating and convincing an audience, supposedly in contrast to other practices in professional communication. By extension, the storytelling guide divides the social world into two groups: those who succeed in communicating by telling stories versus those who do not. At the top of the group defined by communicative success are the *accomplished storytellers* whom the guide cites as examples. The storytelling guide presents itself as the means by which one can move up this communicative hierarchy, and therefore readers are positioned as *wannabe storytellers*, ready to climb the hierarchical ladder. Such an observation echoes the studies carried out on skills discourses in late capitalism, which have shown that “communication skills, in particular, are fetishized as surefire techniques that can transform users and [...] credited with the capacity to bring about measurable outcomes” (Urciuoli 2008: 213). In the guide, the use of



storytelling techniques becomes a synonym for communicative and social empowerment, giving a euphoric depiction of a given communicative practice.

Disseminated through mass media, this metapragmatic model is not only likely to reach many people on a large scale, but also to have a greater remanence. This does not mean, however, that it will unilaterally regiment future individual performances as “the ‘uptake’ of [mass media depictions] by audiences involves processes of evaluative response that permit many degrees of freedom” (Agha 2007: 202). In fact, one may even wonder if the spread of this metapragmatic model, through storytelling guides and other reflexive activities, as well as the repeated use of inspirational stories and metanarrative formulations in some domains of social life (in particular political and corporate communication), may lead to a backlash. For the wider audience, the use of inspirational stories may well become, above all, a backfired emblem: the sign of the attempts made by professional communicators to influence people’s opinions. To support this claim, it would be helpful, and this is a limitation of this article, to carry out a study that investigates storytelling’s indexicalities through linguistic ethnography and metapragmatic analysis (see Militello as well as Vitorio, this volume). Storytelling guides result from ex-post rationalizations while language ideologies are both brought along and brought about by participants (Spitzmüller et al. 2021), in a materially and socially situated moment-to-moment process. This, however, should not prevent us from studying what is occurring on other scales (Busch and Spitzmüller 2021; Carr and Lempert 2016). On the contrary, it should remind us of the pressing need, and the relevance, to cross the micro/macro divide with ethnographic approaches (Blackledge et al. 2014; Wortham and Reyes 2015) if we want to understand how and why specific ideologies of communication are coming into being.

## References

- Agha, Asif. 2003. The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication* 23. 231–273.
- Agha, Asif. 2005. Voice, footing, enregisterment. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15(1). 38–59.
- Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bamberg, Michael (ed.). 1997. *Narrative development. Six approaches*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bamberg, Michael. 2011. Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity. *Theory and Psychology* 21(1). 3–24.
- Baroni, Raphaël. 2016. Crier au storytelling ! Réflexions sur les usages instrumentaux des récits mimétiques. *Comparatismes en Sorbonne* 7. Available at: [http://www.crlc.paris-sorbonne.fr/pdf\\_revue/revue77\\_R\\_Baroni.pdf](http://www.crlc.paris-sorbonne.fr/pdf_revue/revue77_R_Baroni.pdf).
- Bauman, Richard. 1986. *Story, performance and event*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bauman, Richard. 2001. The ethnography of genre in a Mexican market: Form, function, variation. In Penelope Eckert & John R. Rickford (eds.), *Style and sociolinguistic variation*, 57–77. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman, Richard & Charles Briggs. 1990. Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19. 59–88.
- Berman, Ruth A. & Dan I. Slobin (eds.). 1994. *Relating events in narrative: A crosslinguistic developmental study*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bilmes, Jack. 1981. Proposition and confrontation in a legal discussion. *Semiotica* 34(3–4). 251–275.
- Blackledge, Adrian, Angela Creese & Jaspreet Kaur Takhi. 2014. Voice, register and social position. *Multilingua* 33(5–6). 485–504.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2015. Chronotopes, scales and complexity in the study of language in society. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44. 105–116.
- Bonnet, Valérie, Pierre Camille-Delahaye & Brigitte Sebbah. 2021. Le storytelling, le récit entre construction et atomisation de l'image et du discours. *Communication & Management* 18(1). 5–14.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1991. The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry* 18(1). 1–21.
- Busch, Brigitta & Jürgen Spitzmüller. 2021. Indexical borders: The sociolinguistic scales of the shibboleth. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 272. 127–152.
- Cameron, Deborah. 2000. *Good to talk: Living and working in a communication culture*. London: Sage.
- Carr, E. Summerson & Michael Lempert (eds.). 2016. *Scale: Discourse and dimensions of social life*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Catenaccio, Paola, Stefania D'Avanzo & Geert Jacobs (eds.). 2021. *Storytelling in corporate discourse: A critical introduction*. Special issue of *I-LAND Journal*. Naples: University of Naples.
- Cotter, Colleen. 2010. *News talk. Investigating the language of journalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danblon, Emmanuelle, Emmanuel De Jonge, Ekaterina Kissina & Loïc Nicolas (eds.). 2008. *Argumentation et narration*. Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.
- De Fina, Anna & Alexandra Georgakopoulou. 2012. *Analysing narrative. Discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Fina, Anna & Alexandra Georgakopoulou. 2020. Rethinking narrative: Tellers, tales and identities in contemporary worlds. In Anna De Fina & Alexandra Georgakopoulou (eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of discourse studies*, 91–114. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Declercq, Jana & Geert Jacobs. 2019. 'It's such a great story it sells itself?' Narratives of vicarious experience in a European pharmaceutical company. *Journal of Pragmatics* 152. 89–102.
- Deppermann, Arnulf. 2011. The study of formulations as a key to an interactional semantics. *Human Studies* 34(2). 115–128.
- Dufour, Stéphane. 2021. La narratologie est-elle soluble dans le storytelling? *Communication & Management* 18(1). 15–29.
- Gal, Susan. 2016. Sociolinguistic differentiation. In Nikolas Coupland (ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical debates*, 113–135. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garfinkel, Harold & Harvey Sacks. 1970. On formal structures of practical action. In John McKinney & Edward Tiryakian (eds.), *Theoretical sociology*, 338–366. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2007. *Small stories, interaction and identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2017. Narrative/life of the moment. From telling a story to taking a narrative stance. In Brian Schiff, Elizabeth A. McKim & Sylvie Patron (eds.), *Life and narrative: The risks and responsibilities of storying experience*, 29–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2021a. Small stories as curated formats on social media: The intersection of affordances, values & practices. *System* 102. 102620.

- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2021b. Designing stories on social media: A corpus-assisted critical perspective on the mismatches of story-curation. *Language and Education* 62. 100737.
- Giaxoglou, Korina. 2009. Entextualizing vernacular forms in a Maniat village: Features of orthopraxy in local folklore practice. *Pragmatics* 19(3). 419–434.
- Goffman, Erving. 1981. *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gordon, John. 2020. *Researching interpretive talk around literary narrative texts: Shared novel reading*. New York: Routledge.
- Gotti, Maurizio & Carmen Sancho Guinda (eds.). 2013. *Narratives in academic and professional genres*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Greimas, Algridas J. & Joseph Courtés. 1979. *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Paris: Hachette.
- Hartshorne, Charles, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks. 1931–1958. *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. 1982. What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. *Language in Society* 11(1). 49–76.
- Herman, David. 2003. How stories make us smarter. *Recherches en communication* 19. 133–153.
- Herman, David. 2009. *Basic elements of narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Holmes, Janet. 1998. Narrative structure: Some contrasts between Maori and Pakeha story-telling. *Multilingua* 17(1). 25–58.
- Holmes, Janet. 2006. Workplace narratives, professional identity and relational practice. In Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin & Michael Bamberg (eds.), *Discourse and identity*, 166–187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, Janet & Meredith Marra. 2005. Narrative and the construction of professional identity in the workplace. In Joanna Thornborrow & Jennifer Coates (eds.), *The sociolinguistics of narrative*, 193–213. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hymes, Dell H. 1981. *"In vain I tried to tell you": Essays in native American ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jaworski, Adam, Nikolas Coupland & Dariusz Galasinski. 2004. *Metalinguage. Social and ideological perspectives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 2016. Enregisterment: How linguistic items become linked with ways of speaking. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 10. 632–643.
- Jones, Rodney. 2021. The wounded leader: The illness narratives of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. *Discourse, Context & Media* 41. 100499.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Language in the inner city*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, William & Joshua Waletzky. 1967. Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In June Helm (ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts*, 12–44. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ladegaard, Hans. 2018. Workplace narratives. In Bernadette Vine (ed.), *Handbook of language in the workplace*, 242–257. London: Routledge.
- Linde, Charlotte. 1993. *Life stories: The creation of coherence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Linde, Charlotte. 2001. Narrative in institutions. In Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi E. Hamilton (eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*, 518–535. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Linde, Charlotte. 2009. *Working the past: Narrative and institutional memory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marti, Marc & Nicolas Pelissier. 2012. *Le storytelling: succès des histoires, histoire d'un succès*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Merminod, Gilles. 2015. Décrire une activité verbale et proposer une norme pour enseigner un savoir-faire: l'exemple d'un manuel de storytelling. *Bulletin Suisse de Linguistique Appliquée (Special issue: Language Norms in Context)* 2. 123–139.

- Merminod, Gilles. 2020a. Narrative analysis applied to text production. *AILA Review* 33. 103–118.
- Merminod, Gilles. 2020b. Situations et idéologies narratives en salle de rédaction: ce que les petites histoires disent de la façon de raconter des journalistes. In Sylvie Patron (ed.), *Small Stories. Un nouveau paradigme pour la recherche sur le récit*, 115–138. Paris: Hermann.
- Merminod, Gilles & Marcel Burger. 2020. Narrative of vicarious experience in broadcast news. A linguistic ethnographic approach to semiotic mediations in the newsroom. *Journal of Pragmatics* 155. 240–260.
- Norrick, Neal. 2004. Humor, tellability, and conarration in conversational storytelling. *Text* 24(1). 79–111.
- Norrick, Neal. 2005. The dark side of tellability. *Narrative Inquiry* 15(2). 323–343.
- Norrick, Neal. 2013. Narratives of vicarious experience in speeches by Barack Obama. *Narrative Inquiry* 23. 282–300.
- Ochs, Elinor & Lisa Capps. 2001. *Living narrative: Creating lives in everyday storytelling*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Orr, Julian. 1996. *Talking about machines*. Ithaca: ILR Press.
- Park, Joseph Sung-Yul. 2021. Figures of personhood: Time, space, and affect as heuristics for metapragmatic analysis. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 272. 47–73.
- Resche, Catherine (ed.). 2016. *La mise en récit dans les discours spécialisés*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1992. *Lectures on conversation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Salmon, Christian. 2010. *Storytelling. Bewitching the modern mind*. London: Verso.
- Shuman, Amy. 1986. *Storytelling rights: The uses of oral and written texts among urban adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1993. Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In John A. Lucy (ed.), *Reflexive language, reported speech and metapragmatics*, 33–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 2003. Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language and Communication* 23. 193–229.
- Spitzmüller, Jürgen. 2015. Graphic variation and graphic ideologies. *Social Semiotics* 25(2). 126–141.
- Spitzmüller, Jürgen. 2022. Ideologies of communication: The social link between actors, signs and practices of a “much needed bridge”. In Judith Purkharthofer & Mi-Cha Flubacher (eds.), *Speaking subjects in multilingualism research: Biographical and speaker-centred approaches*, 248–269. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Spitzmüller, Jürgen, Brigitta Busch & Mi-Cha Flubacher. 2021. Language ideologies and social positioning: The restoration of a “much needed bridge”. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 272. 1–12.
- Tavory, Iddo & Stefan Timmermans. 2009. Two cases of ethnography: Grounded theory and the extended case method. *Ethnography* 10(3). 243–263.
- Tavory, Iddo & Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive analysis. Theorizing qualitative research*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press.
- Thornborrow, Joanna & Jennifer Coates (eds.). 2005. *The sociolinguistics of narrative*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie. 2008. Skills and selves in the new workplace. *American Ethnologist* 35(2). 211–228.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie & Chaise LaDousa. 2013. Language management/labor. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42(1). 175–190.
- Verschueren, Jeff. 2000. Notes on the role of metapragmatic awareness in language use. *Pragmatics* 10(4). 439–456.
- Wasson, Christina. 2009. Linguistic anthropology. In Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini (ed.), *The handbook of business discourse*, 194–212. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wortham, Stanton & Angela Reyes. 2015. *Discourse analysis beyond the speech event*. New York: Routledge.