

# 人類學研究

## 第捌卷

庄孔韶 主編

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## Narrative Engagement and Narrative Templates

James V. Wertsch

**Abstract:** An earlier version of this material was presented at the Matchpoints Seminar, Aarhus on “Conflict in Memory: Interpersonal and Intergenerational Remembering of War, Conflict and Transition”.

**Keywords:** Narrative Engagement; Narrative Templates; Conflict in Memory

More than two millennia after Aristotle's *Poetics* we are still trying to understand what it means to say humans are story-telling animals. Disciplines ranging from hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1984-86) to psychology (Bruner, 1990) and from literary theory (Brooks, 1992) to political philosophy (Smith, 2003) continue to debate the issue. One upshot of all this effort is that narrative sometimes seems to take on as many guises as there are disciplines studying it: history, for example, sees it as the gateway to understanding the past; psychology assumes it provides insights into the self; and literary studies take it as a starting point for distinguishing periods and categories of writing.

The resulting plethora of ideas reflects competing disciplinary agendas—often pursued with no inkling of what others might be doing. This fragmentation is often taken to be a source of frustration, but perhaps it should simply be viewed as an indication of how pervasive narrative is in human life. If forms of mental and social life extend all the way from the most routine and automatic to the most reflective and analytic, why shouldn't narrative have a corresponding range? Perhaps it takes on so many guises precisely because it plays so many roles in the human condition. With this in mind, I shall employ the generic “narrative” as a loose cover term when talking about these issues and differentiate within it a few complementary strands.

My particular perspective on narrative is tied to a second general issue that





of collective memory, in particular the collective remembering of nations. Just as is the case for narrative, there are many definitions of national memory, and sorting these out will depend on understanding the different ways we employ stories about the past. To be sure, nations are just one of many communities that rely on memory to “imagine” themselves, but in the contemporary world they have singular importance. Contrary to those who see nations and national identity as increasingly unimportant in a global, or even “flat” world, daily headlines remind us that they are very much with us. “Mnemonic standoffs” (Wertsch, 2008b) such as those between Indians and Pakistanis over the 1947 Partition or Israelis and Palestinians over the formation of Israel in 1948 can be found just about everywhere in the world. Modern states devote massive resources to promulgating national narratives through history instruction, commemoration, and other practices aimed at fostering national identity and loyalty, and all too often these efforts end up being the source of discord.

In trying to understand these issues I start with the instrumental role that narratives serve in memory. Narratives function as “cultural tools” (Wertsch, 1998) that shape our understanding of the past, and when shared by a collective, they provide the means for forming what Eviatar Zerubavel (1983) calls “mnemonic communities.” Recognizing the power of narrative tools to shape our understanding of the past does not mean they somehow take over our lives and control individual and collective representation. Instead, the very notion of instrumentality entails the idea that a narrative tool must be taken up and used by an active agent to have its impact. The resulting picture is one of an inherent and irreducible tension between tool and agent (Wertsch, 1998), and in the case of national memory the implication is that narrative tools serve as a kind of “co-authors” with those who employ them in coming up with accounts of the past.

From this perspective, every act of using a narrative tool in speaking or thinking about a national past involves two poles of an opposition: an active agent and one or more items from the “stock of stories” (MacIntyre, 1984) provided by that agent’s community. By keeping this formulation in mind we can avoid notions of collective memory that fall on one side or the other of an oversimplified dichotomy. Specifically, we reject both the notion that narrative



tools mechanistically shape individuals and the idea that individuals function as autonomous, “unencumbered” (Sandel, 2009) cognitive agents who operate independently of sociocultural context. Instead, the picture is one in which active agents operate with narrative tools to make sense of the past, and these tools have certain “affordances” and constraints (Wertsch, 1998) that shape how agents are likely to do this.

From this perspective agents and tools always work in tandem, and the range of possibilities for this interaction can vary widely. Of particular interest from my perspective is how the agents using narrative tools reflect on and control these tools—or fail to do so. In what follows I shall outline three forms of what I shall term the “engagement” of agent with narrative tools: two under the heading of “specific narratives” and a third involving “narrative templates.”

### **Specific Narratives**

Specific narratives are what we usually have in mind when discussing national narratives. They are specific in the sense that they include concrete information about setting, times, agents, and other aspects of particular events (Wertsch, 2002, 2008a). As is the case for narratives in general, specific narratives do not just list information, but organize it around the two basic dimensions (Ricoeur, 1984-86): a horizontal dimension concerned with temporal order and a vertical dimension concerned with the plot that grasps together information into a coherent whole. As Hayden White has noted, it is possible to order information along the first dimension with the help of annals or chronicles without necessarily grasping it together into a plot. It is the two dimensions operating in a complex tandem that create narrative, providing a reminder of the power of Aristotle’s seemingly simple observation that a narrative has a beginning, middle, and end.

### **“Closed Narratives”**

One of the two subcategories of specific narratives I shall outline includes texts that present information that treats only a single uncontested perspective as legitimate. This is a matter of degree, but in many cases this tendency clearly outweighs an inclination to consider alternative viewpoints. In general,



collective memory—when contrasted with “formal history” (Wertsch, 2011)—employs narratives that reflect a tendency toward being closed to other competing perspectives, and in this sense we can say that collective remembering has a predisposition to using closed specific narratives. Peter Novick (1999) was making this point when he noted the inclination of collective memory toward “impatience with ambiguity, especially moral ambiguity.”

As an illustration of a closed specific narrative consider an account of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia excerpted from the *Georgian Daily*<sup>①</sup>, an English language newspaper published in Tbilisi, Georgia:

In the months before the attack, Russia prepared its logistics and deployed heavily armed soldiers disguised as “peacekeepers” in the Georgian territory of Abkhazia. Provocations increased there and in South Ossetia, the other Moscow-backed Georgian separatist territory.

In Russia’s North Caucasus region, the 58th Army conducted an exercise that simulated invasion of Georgia. Meanwhile, so-called “volunteers” congregated near the northern mouth of the Roki Tunnel, which leads from Russia to Georgia.

At about 03:00 on August 7, Russian tanks rolled through the tunnel into Georgia. Another force was marshaled and held in reserve just north of the border, along a road that leads to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

From Abkhazia, Russian forces seized the port of Poti and large bits of the western Georgian region of Mingrelia. 4,000 naval infantry debarked at Ochamchire, a former Soviet naval base in Abkhazia. The Russian Black Sea Fleet blockaded Poti and Batumi, Georgia’s other major port. The Russian Air Force prosecuted a well-considered air target set against both military and civilian targets.

This account is closed in the sense that it treats only one voice as legitimate. It presents the events from a Georgian perspective that assumes it is solely Russian aggression that initiated the action and moves the plot forward. No mention is made of provocation by Georgia or any other actor, and no consideration is given

① [http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=10548&Itemid=132](http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=10548&Itemid=132)



to the larger geopolitical context. Instead, the account is straightforward and unambiguous about the motivation that is needed to understand the beginning of the war.

It should be noted that impatience with ambiguity also characterizes many Russian versions of the 2008 war, so the point is not about a Georgian perspective in particular. Instead, it is about how narrative tools involved in collective remembering can have a tendency toward being unambiguous and univocal when it comes to the actors in stories and their motives. This penchant for streamlining an account of the past to focus on a single set of motives and actors can often increase the “goodness” of the story in that it increases the coherence of how everything fits together in a neat way, and the result is that such accounts are closed to considering information from competing perspectives.

### **Dialogic Narratives**

In contrast to closed specific narratives, accounts of the past may allow for more than one perspective or voice to surface. By treating more than one voice as legitimate it introduces an element of complexity, challenge, and contradiction. The emergence of alternative perspectives creates forms of what M.M. Bakhtin (1986) termed dialogue, or multivoicedness. Instead of impatience with ambiguity, then, dialogic narratives recognize it, and instead of organizing information into a unified neat narrative based on the unambiguous motives of a single actor, they give legitimacy to competing perspectives about intentions and motives.

Such narratives are still specific in that they include information about concrete settings, dates, and actors, but they are less certain and univocal in their assignment of intention and more patient with ambiguity, especially moral ambiguity. This is not to say they are more accurate in any simple sense, but they often are more complete in that they recognize mitigating circumstances and competing motives. This “dialogism” (Holquist, 2002; Rommetveit, 1998) can surface in several forms and at different levels of intensity, but in general it introduces an element of complexity into narrative missing in closed narratives.

As an example of a dialogic narrative, consider a second account of the beginning of the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. This one is excerpted





from Wikipedia, a source that encourages multivoicedness in the very way that texts are produced.

The 2008 South Ossetia War or Russo-Georgian War was an armed conflict in August 2008 between Georgia on one side, and Russia and separatist governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other.

During the night of 7 to 8 August 2008, Georgia launched a large-scale military offensive against South Ossetia, in an attempt to reclaim the territory. Georgia claimed that it was responding to attacks on its peacekeepers and villages in South Ossetia, and that Russia was moving non-peacekeeping units into the country. The Georgian attack caused casualties among Russian peacekeepers, who resisted the assault along with Ossetian militia. Georgia successfully captured most of Tskhinvali within hours. Russia reacted by deploying units of the Russian 58th Army and Russian Airborne Troops in South Ossetia, and launching airstrikes against Georgian forces in South Ossetia and military and logistical targets in Georgia proper. Russia claimed these actions were a necessary humanitarian intervention and peace enforcement.

Russian and Ossetian forces battled Georgian forces throughout South Ossetia for four days, with the heaviest fighting taking place in Tskhinvali. After five days of heavy fighting in South Ossetia, the Georgian forces retreated, enabling the Russians to enter uncontested Georgia and occupy the cities of Poti, Gori, Senaki, and Zugdidi.<sup>①</sup>

The opening paragraph of this account provides information about the setting of an ensuing narrative, and as such this segment is relatively neutral with regard to plot and motive, but in the second paragraph these elements emerge clearly—and in a way that is quite different from the account in the *Georgian Daily*. For starters, events are emplotted in such a way that the outbreak of hostilities is attributed to Georgia rather than Russia, but this does not leave us with just an alternative closed narrative from a Russian perspective. Instead, both Russian and Georgian voices surface in the text, thereby presenting the motives and actions of the 2008 conflict in a more complex way than found in closed narratives.

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① [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008\\_South\\_Ossetia\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_South_Ossetia_war)



For example, the Georgian attack is portrayed as an attempt to “reclaim the territory” of South Ossetia, suggesting that even though Georgia may have initiated the conflict, this was part of a larger multivoiced narrative of what happened. Furthermore, the immediate cause of the Georgian attack is presented as provocation by local, Russian-backed opposition and by Russian “non-peacekeeping units” that had been moved into South Ossetia. In both of these instances the implication is that this narrative reflects a conversation, or dialogue among competing perspectives.

Perhaps most striking from the perspective of dialogicality are the two expressions “Georgia claimed...” and “Russia claimed...” found in the second paragraph. Each of these expressions indicates a qualification to the assertion that follows, an indication that it is a response or rebuttal to other voices in a “hidden dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.197). Consider for example “Georgia claimed that it was responding to attacks on its peacekeepers and villages in South Ossetia.” Minus the expression “Georgia claimed” this could be a statement in a closed narrative told from a Georgian perspective where all the facts and interpretations are settled and not open to further question. The inclusion of the qualifying expression suggests that Georgia’s actions reflect its interpretation of the situation, an interpretation that has been challenged by other voices in an ongoing public debate about who initiated the conflict. As such, this allows for the legitimacy of more than one perspective.

In Bakhtin’s view dialogicality is ubiquitous in human discourse, suggesting that it surfaces in some way even in closed narratives, although in a different or lesser form. A glance back at the closed narrative from the *Georgia Daily* supports this. The title of this article is “Russia Was First”, suggesting it was written in response to someone who was insisting that Russia was *not* the initiator of the conflict. In this case, then, the full meaning of the text can be understood only if one understands that it is a rebuttal to some other voice. Rather than being found in the internal content of the article, the dialogicality is reflected in the fact that it is a response to some other voice and hence part of an ongoing dialogue between conflicting perspectives.

The closed and dialogic specific narratives outlined so far have been about events that unfold over a few hours or days, but duration of the events reported is not



a defining feature for specific narratives; they may concern events that unfold over much longer periods as well. For example, a story of “200 Years of Occupation” (i.e., by Russian and Soviet forces) is a well established part of the Georgian mnemonic community and indeed has been institutionalized in various ways. It is at the heart, for example, of the Museum of Soviet Occupation in the capital city Tbilisi. The opening of this museum in 2006 was met with a strong negative response in Moscow, providing a reminder of the strikingly different national narratives at work and the resulting mnemonic standoff between these two countries.

The 200 Years of Occupation narrative has recently become the focus of a public discussion about history instruction in Georgia. Nearly all members of the Georgian mnemonic community recognize that the beginning of this story is the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk and the ensuing occupation of parts of Georgia by Russian in 1800, but the specific way this episode should be taught and the lessons it holds today are the foci of an increasingly polemic debate in the country. In a 2010 article in the popular Georgian magazine *Tabula*, for example, public intellectual Kakha Bendukidze wrote the following in connection with a manual to be used by teachers.

Starting next year Georgian schools teachers will have an opportunity to use the teacher’s handbook “200 years of occupation.” The first time I heard about this not-yet-existent book, I was scared that it would be some primitive agitprop, with its conspiracy theories and exaggeration of Georgianness. Then I figured out that this might be one of the most important books of recent years, and not only for school pupils.

Why? If you think, that a cruel Russia annexed the adamantly independent Georgian people but was unable to enslave them, and if you think all of us heroically fought for freedom for 200 years and have completely preserved our culture, language, faith, and unity, then you need a fairy tale narrator, and it might be better that the book not be written at all. If you want to learn how we pitifully submitted and lost a great deal, thereby acquiring something more ugly than beautiful, yet still survived and now have to make something out of ourselves... then you need a different kind of book.

What kind of book do I want? I want this book to:

- Show Georgia and Russia in the context of the 200 years of world



history in which their encounter unfolded

- Tell about Georgian collaborationism
- Show the emergence of Soviet phenomenon among us such as the intelligentsia, double morals, and a seemingly (imaginary) equal society that is in fact deeply stratified: Vera-Vake vs provincials
- Explain why Stalin and Beria were scoundrels [literally “no man,” *arakaci*] and not praiseworthy Georgians.
- Discuss how we became a country of legalized thieves and the true nature of the Soviet Georgian militia [implying the militia was involved with mafia - legal thieves]
- Analyze how the Georgian economy was decaying and the way in which corruption in Moscow was part of this.
- Make us think about why in the first half of the twentieth century monks in Gelati [an important center of Orthodox thought in Georgia] and Akaki Tsereteli [a prominent Georgian writer and social critic] wanted Georgians to convert to Catholicism.
- Tell us how the republic and country of Georgia became so impoverished.
- Remind us how Georgian “Tergdaleuli” liberals emerged.
- Teach us who Dimitri Yifiani was
- Ask us which traditions are truly Georgian and which ones are Soviet formations
- Describe why we have the [territorial] borders we have today
- Accurately reconstruct what happened in the war with Russia in 2008
- Ask us the following question: What did the Russia/Bolshevik party know that allowed them to force us to bow down?
- And many other things

Don't know about you but it would not be useless for me to read such a book.

The column was published on 13 September 2010, 14:14 (last accessed on 20 February 2012)

As was the case for the first dialogic narrative I examined, several voices seek to be heard in this article about the 200 Years of Occupation story. In this case the

mutivoicedness reflects divisions *within* Georgia rather than between Georgia and Russia, and Bendukidze's article both characterizes these voices and calls for them to participate in producing a complex dialogic narrative rather than hide in the certainty of closed narratives. Thus in the second paragraph he asserts, "If you think, that a cruel Russia annexed the adamantly independent Georgian people but was unable to enslave them, and if you think all of us heroically fought for freedom for 200 years and have completely preserved our culture, language, faith, and unity, then you need a fairy tale narrator, and it might be better that the book not be written at all" . This is directed at conservative Georgian nationalists, whose voices Bendukidze dismisses as needing "a fairy tale narrator" . Indeed, much of the article is a polemic against such voices, but Bendukidze also has critical points to make in response to those who argue that the Russian presence in Georgia since 1800 never amounted to an occupation.

A major difference between this dialogic narrative and the one from Wikipedia concerns the voices that surface in the text. The Wikipedia text reflected input from—and responses to those who went online and contributed to the article, and the result was largely a face-off between Georgian and Russian perspectives. In contrast, Bendukidze's article reflects a debate *within* the Georgian mnemonic community. The very title of the narrative, "200 Years of Occupation" points to a general mnemonic standoff between Georgia and Russia, but another, more local form of dialogue is also involved, namely a debate with other members of the Georgian public. Again, the statements in this argument about a Georgian national narrative cannot be fully understood without recognizing the voices to whom Bendukidze is responding.

### Narrative Templates

The cases I have outlined so far all involve specific narratives, meaning they contain concrete information about events (dates, locations, characters, etc.). They also involve the sort of conscious reflection that goes into composing texts for public presentation. Such conscious narrativizing of concrete events is what we usually have in mind when speaking of national narratives, but it is hardly the only form that narrative engagement can take. By examining others it may be possible to transcend some of the disciplinary isolation that plagues discussions of narrative and to come up with a more differentiated and nuanced account.



In this regard “narrative templates” present a useful contrasting case. As outlined elsewhere (Wertsch), narrative templates are: a) “schematic” in the sense that they involve generalized knowledge structures; b) narrative in form, meaning that they are organized around temporality and plot; and c) templates because their schematic structure can underlie multiple specific narratives, each of which includes information about a particular dates, characters, and so forth.

Rather than being some sort of universal archetype, narrative templates vary across mnemonic communities. Indeed they serve to distinguish one collective from another. The underlying codes at issue come into particular focus when we see members of different collectives interpret events in different ways. Indeed, in some instances groups come up with such dissimilar interpretations of an event that they seem not to be talking about the same event at all, and in the most extreme of these cases things devolve into the “sealed narratives” (de Waal, 2003) and “mnemonic standoffs” (Wertsch, 2008b) that foster conflict and violence between national groups.

It is also worth noting that specific narratives take the form of concrete spoken or written texts whereas narrative templates are hypothetical structures or codes posited by researchers in an attempt to understand patterns of interpretation by individuals, especially individuals as members of mnemonic communities. As such, the codes are seldom the objects of reflection by those who use them, and the veiled way in which they operate is precisely one of the sources of their power over memory and thinking. The research literature of the last century is replete with comments on these nonconscious structures. In his comments on the “effort after meaning” involved in human memory, for example, Bartlett noted that the “scheme, or pattern is utilised in a completely unreflecting, unanalytical and unwitting manner” (1932, p.45).

In contemporary cognitive neuroscience and psychology these claims have resurfaced in discussions of topics such as “implicit memory,” “intuition” (Haidt, 2012), and “System 1 processing” (Kahneman, 2011). Contemporary investigators occasionally note links to Freudian notions of the unconscious, but in general something quite different is at stake. Instead of being about repressed thoughts and unconscious emotions and drives, the claims are about rapid, nearly





automatic processes that occur in the “blink” of an eye (Gladwell, 2007) in perception and decision making. Such assertions are often accompanied by claims that conscious reflection amounts largely to post hoc justification for processes that have already occurred. To some degree this can be viewed as continuing a longstanding debate in philosophy whose roots go back to Plato’s concern about rational control over the passions, and they surfaced early in psychological writings when William James raised questions about how physiological responses may precede rather than follow emotional experience, but more recent findings extend these ideas in several specific ways.

In his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, for example, Daniel Kahneman writes of two main “characters” (19) in a story of mental life: “System 1” and “System 2.”

- *System 1* operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.

- *System 2* allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration. (20-21)

For Kahneman “The automatic operations of System 1 generate surprisingly complex patterns of ideas, but only the slower System 2 can construct thoughts in an orderly series of steps” (21), and these require effortful conscious reflection. In his analysis System 2 can sometimes step in and check work that System 1 does in its an automatic, nonconscious way. But because its operations require effort and concentration, “one of [System 2’s] main characteristics is laziness, a reluctance to invest more effort than is strictly necessary” (31). As a result, we often make do with impressions and decisions from System 1 mental processing rather than subject them to System 2 reflection.

Kahneman does not delve into national narratives or narrative engagement, but his analysis has several implications for the study of these topics. As in the case of Kahneman’s System 1 functioning, narrative templates appear to be associated with quick, almost automatic judgments that are not subject to the effortful conscious reflection of System 2. Rather than selecting an item from