

Swedish symposium on narratives

November 26-27 2009 folklorists from Umeå University and Gotland University gathered in Umeå for a symposium/workshop on “Interpreting narratives”. This was the first symposium of its kind in Sweden for some ten years; one of the goals was to invigorate folklore studies in Sweden by establishing network co-operation on an informal basis.

Anna Sofia Lundgren, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå, presented her current work within the larger research program at Umeå university on Ageing and Living Conditions. She has interviewed elderly people who do voluntary work at schools as “school grandpa/grandma”. She notices two distinct traits that reoccur in the interviews. One is nostalgia, which occurs as a way of speaking: references to days gone by, in terms of “we have to regain, return to...” or in a more definite way as “some good things lost”. The other thing she noticed was how experience was put forward, especially their own experiences as a resource and a motivation for their being at school. However, these qualities were often framed and embedded: nostalgia was often presented with reservations and qualifiers in order not to sound conservative. Age is presented as a quality that enables them to remit important values to the children – one of which is “structure”, an empty signifier that can refer to quite contrary phenomena but is forward as something that children need. Anna Sofia proposes an analysis on three levels: the construction of identities and identifications, that is, how age is made; the situational level with the interaction between elderly interviewee and younger researcher, with meta-comments; and how the interview relates to larger discourses on ageing and schooling.

Coppélie Cocq divides her time between lecturing in folklore at Gotland University and in Sami culture at Umeå University- In her presentation she discussed how the social functions of narration in traditional Sami society have their corresponding forms in contemporary society. She finds that traditional Sami narratives are quite suited to adaption; oral tradition has been recorded in writing and transmitted via mass media like children’s books and radio. Today, there is further adaption as new media have become part of everyday ambience. In order to study Sami tradition in new media, she proposes attention to how different discourses can be present in the same texts, the concept of intermediality, and how critical discourse analysis offers good perspectives on new media since it focus on production and distribution as well as consumption – an important holistic perspective since to-day’s media situation promote “producers”, contributing in forms as YouTube, Wikipedia, fan fiction, as well as in interactive narratives.

Marianne Liliequist, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå, who also is taking part in the Ageing and Living Conditions Project has made life story interviews with elderly people, and pose the question of what makes the life story comprehensible. While many researchers (and politicians) put forward good economic and health conditions as the primary qualities of good ageing (and a good life in general), the narratives instead focus on continuity. Injustices and bad conditions are seen in the light of having been able to cope with them. Life does not have to be seen as a good life, but importance lies rather on being able to tell a coherent story to one self. Marianne discussed how to handle this from a social-constructive perspective – are they narrating coherent stories in order to meet up with contemporary and situational presumptions – but strongly advocate respecting the narrator's rights to interpret her/his experiences.

She also brought forward quite another perspective on how the contemporary situation affects the life story. In her interviews with elderly Sami, she found a distinct difference in how ethnic oppression in their youth was interpreted. For those who had lived all their life in the countryside and had been taking part in the reindeer husbandry, this was overshadowing all bad memories of being mistreated. For those who had moved to the cities and had lead an urban life, the traumatization in their youth lingered on much longer, and was notable in how they tried to learn the younger generations to be proud of their ethnic origin. This group was more outspoken in stating ethnicity.

Marianne Liliequist also drew from yet a survey in the Ageing and Living Conditions project, a series of interviews with very old persons (85+), and for many of them, the memory work was their most important task of the day and they complained about not being respected for this, having to take part in “activities” in accordance with ideas of activity as a sign of the good life. Having a daily inner conversation with deceased relatives, and planning for a good funeral, were creative spaces for them but was considered to be improper acting since younger relatives might get upset.

AnnCristin Winroth, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå, had given her presentation the title “Ludmila, Nora and the ambiguous patientship with never-ending illness narratives”, drawing from her doctoral thesis built on interviews with people who had seen alternate medical treatment. Inspired by Birgitte Rørbye's methodology of structural analysis of healing narratives, she analyzed a 2002 advertisement campaign from the Cancer Research Fund where world champion athlete Ludmila Engquist was given space to tell her own story of being diagnosed with breast cancer, given treatment and returning to world elite athletics. Important themes in her and many others' illness narratives were the illness as a time for

reconsidering what is important in life, gratefulness, the script of different emotional phases, and an in some way positive outcome. To AnnCristin, the illness narrative genre has a strong impetus towards shaping comprehension within a “biographical holistic” perspective. However, in the attempts to create a common understanding of the illness, there are questions of narrative power and entitlement at work. This was illustrated with the narrative of Nora, an “annoying” patient with a 15 year-long illness history. She had developed a competence in narrating her illness story in detail and with biographical coherence, which however marked her as troublesome since her story was far too long and did not follow the script of distinct symptoms, correct diagnosis, relevant treatment and a quick return to health. Instead, she met doctors for five years before she had a diagnosis and she was sent from one clinic to another with no one taking responsibility for coordination. Her narrative is to a large extent a story of how she had to learn how to take control of the process, and the fight against the doctors’ authority in order to get tests, what medicines to take, and what was written into her case-book (the official narrative of her illness).

AnnCristin summed it all up by pointing to the ideal of the illness story as a harmonizing process leading to atonement, with no traits of chaos and stigmas visible. To her informants, it has been important to continuously reconstruct their narratives, to keep their own case-books in order to have some control and power. This gives the illness narrative qualities of political claims, reaching out beyond the interview and the everyday situation.

Ulf Palmenfelt from the Gotland University spoke of life stories being affected by “external” events and conditions in society and history. He drew upon a collection of life stories from Gotland and gave some examples where the outer world intrudes into the narrative: personal memories of peace day 1945, the sinking of the ship Hansa where 84 persons were drowned in 1944, a worker finding the factory burned down and moving in order to get a new job, a narrator who suddenly halts a story of his father since he realizes it involves a traumatic experience for the interviewer. Ulf then discussed the examples on structural levels. The form is usually a movement from one kind of situation/status, then something happens, and a new situation has arisen. The ego could be an actor, or subject to an action; in that case, who is acting is not important – the importance is in the narrator being part of the story. An important question is at what level of collectivity the event is situated on a scale from the totally collective to the totally private. Some happenings like the 2004 tsunami in Thailand or September 11 cannot be narrated in all ways, there are collective restrictions on what is suitable and how it is performed. The relative distance of the narrator to the event

can vary, from taking a direct and active part, being an eye-witness, registering the aftermaths, and this influence the possible ways of narrating.

Ulf then posed the question if Albert Eskeröd's concept tradition dominant would be suitable. From the corpus of life stories, he could name some recurring themes that would qualify as tradition dominants: important years (1914, 1918, 1932 - the Krueger company breakdown that shook the Swedish financial and industrial system- 1939, 1945 et c), important local places, recurrent events, local values. He also proposed the concept of chronotope, nodes where time and space collapse. To end with, he stressed the possibilities of using these stories in order to understand how local history is made, perhaps even the rise of the grand narratives of society.

Krister Stoor, lecturer in Sami culture and research fellow at the Centre for Sami Research at Umeå University, spoke of the Sami yoik as narrative, in order to widen the understanding of yoik from the more restricted view as "song". Research on yoik has conventionally seen each yoik as a separate unit. Here, Krister used recordings from the 1940s and 50s in order to stress the yoik as an integral part of narrative performance where spoken and yoiked parts are different modes of narrating and remembering. The concept of "complex yoiks" used by Israel Ruong denotes narratives where more than one theme is the topic at the same time. Krister noted how this way of using yoik not easily can be adapted to contemporary stage performance; for instance, Sjul Andersson delivered a six minute recitation of the names of his deceased relatives, a rendition not suited for an audience attuned to variation.

Krister then spoke of yoik as a historical document, giving the example of the yoik to Seldutnjenja, a neck of land in the Skelleftea River. The place is not marked on any map, but this yoik was recorded by at least seven different persons. This points to the importance of the place, namely, this was a place on the wanderings where the reindeer husbandry was easy since the landscape held the herd together. The variants of the yoik differs according to the yoiker's age – those still active in husbandry also speak in active form, whereas older people are remembering when they used to go there with the reindeer. Two versions from Sara Maria Norsa, as young and as old, show this change and thus make clear the importance of the situational context to the specific rendering of the yoik.

Other aspects to observe concerns how the poetics of the yoik can give clues to meaning. Sometimes nonsense syllables are not translated; however, they may serve as markers of

importance, drawing attention to central wordings. Emotional intensity may be marked by changing from third person to first person.

Alf Arvidsson, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå, presented an overview of different trends in a narrative movement in Sweden, where oral narration is championed for different qualities and purposes. There is one artistic trend, making narration a professional stage performance; a pedagogical trend, where narratives are used in schools both as a didactical device and as a competence in it self; a trend where narratives give form to local history ; and a commercial trend, in Swedish called "storytelling" (yes, the English word), focusing on narratives as a means to sell products and/or forging an organization. As an example of how these trends intertwine, the Bjurholm Storytellers' Academy was presented. This club in Swedish smallest municipality was started in the late 1990s by some elderly men, anxious to preserve the knowledge of local history and earlier living conditions. They started to organize public narration evenings, encouraging other local people to participate. After a few years, they started to cooperate with the local school teachers and inspired children to document their grandparents', old relatives' or neighbours' stories of days gone by. These were firstly gathered and printed, and then the academy storytellers produced a CD where they read the stories the children had collected. An analysis of the CD contents reveal a strong emphasis on popular beliefs, mostly encounters with supernatural beings. The setting of the events make older traditional agricultural work visible, like logging and husbandry. This pattern was reproduced in a second school project, held under the title of "family history, local history and popular beliefs".

As shown, there was a heavy bias toward representing the municipality as old agricultural country and to make localities in the nature distinguished by means of narratives of supernatural meetings, thus reflecting the attitudes of the academy of rescuing memories of a different way of living. The role of school children in documenting stories may also account for the emphasis on popular beliefs, dramatizing differences to contemporary society most effectively. Memories of social conflict and deviant persons, often strong themes in local knowledge, have been avoided, probably in order to strengthen local cohesion.

Katarzyna Wolanik Boström, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå, presented material from a media research project where news journalism texts on chemicals from Sweden and Poland are compared. The concept of framing has been used as a sorting device, with "economical" and "environmental" framing the most frequent. Within the economical frame, in Swedish news the chemicals themselves or the chemical industry often took the role of villain, whereas in Poland, the environmental laws of EU instead were occupying this role. In the environmental frame, Swedes tended to speak of Sweden as an international spearhead

for global environment, whereas Polish media focused primarily on Polish nature. She discussed how methods of narrative analysis can further the work.

The presentations were followed by vivid discussions in a cheerful and constructive manner. We all had a good time and made plans for continuing cooperation in order to strengthen folkloric narrative research in Sweden.

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