TRANSLATING TEMPORALITY?
Narrative Schemes and Cultural Meanings of Time
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Translating Temporality?

Narrative Schemes and Cultural Meanings of Time

Jens Brockmeier

Summary: This paper examines "time" as a category of the mind. I argue that to talk about time and temporality is to talk about the way a semiotic fabric web is constructed. More specifically, I shall deal with the linguistic construction of our ideas and concepts of time. Two levels of analysis will be outlined. On the level of the general relation between time and language, I will discuss how different languages construct different perspectives of time; on the level of the personal construction of time, I will discuss aspects of the individual's time synthesis. On both levels the suggested linguistic approach to time has less to do with the grammatical aspects of language than with language seen as a system of action and of interaction. In the wake of Wittgenstein and Vygotsky, this is a view of language as a cultural system of discursive practices. Among these practices, I shall focus on narrative. Drawing on the analysis of an example of (failed) intercultural communication, I will show how narrative works as a model of time, constituting a linguistic, psychological and philosophical framework for our attempts to order the diachronic dimension of our activities. To explain this view in detail, I will point out how narrative "fuses" different times. The argument put forward is that the form of narrative is not only the most adequate form for our most complex constructions of time (such as simultaneous scenarios of diverse times), it is the only form in which they can be expressed at all. As an outcome, language, and through language our concepts of time, appear as instruments that only exist in the uses to which individuals put them in particular context.

If someone asks you what time it is, a possible answer could be: "Sorry, I don’t know exactly, but I think it’s about 2 o’clock." Admittedly, this is a rather simple case of what one may call an act of temporal localization. A rather more complicated picture of time emerges from the opening sentence of William Faulkner’s novel Absalom, Absalom!:

From a little after two o’clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it

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that – a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty–three summers because when she was a little girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them.

No doubt, this is a truly condensed description of how temporal processes can be endowed with multifarious meanings. Is there anything in common between this dense scenario of human temporality and the previous "temporal localization" of a certain moment in clock time? Obviously, both are linguistic phenomena. Having recognized this, it may now appear enticingly easy to go on simply examining the relation between thought, language, and time as if it were generally taken for granted that there is an inner and necessary connection between them. Indeed, in this paper I will suggest understanding what we call time as a fundamentally linguistic construction. Moreover, I shall argue in favor of considering each language as a peculiar construction site of time and human temporality. Finally, I shall focus on contexts of cultural meaning in which these construction sites are intimately embedded. I should note right at the beginning that these views are not generally shared, neither in the humanities and sciences nor in our discourse of everyday life, even if evoked so suggestively as in Faulkner’s portrait of the "long still hot weary dead" flux of time in that September afternoon, carrying the weight of the dust motes from forty–three summers.

The language of days, months, and years

Let me thus start by sketching one of the main rivals to the idea that the construction of our time concepts is closely linked to the use of language. This rival is the claim that our understanding of time is non–linguistically (or pre–linguistically) determined, first of all, in terms of objective temporal patterns which are based on the material rhythms and cycles which structure our lives. In this view, such patterns function as basic "chronotypes" (Bender & Wellbery, 1991) which constitute the temporal organization of our social and mental life on a material level that is independent of all semiotic and, in particular, linguistic mediation. Ontologically, we seem to face here a sort of temporal "primary matter" consisting of natural structures (for example, the cycles of the stars and the planets, and the periodicities of biological life) or of the manifold rhythms of the social organism (as, for example, the order of our working life or the timetable of television). In fact, in modern societies many of these rhythms are correlated to technologies of
time such as electronic media of communication and economic infrastructure (Nowotny, 1994).

If that famous visitor from another galaxy had a particular eye to see how all these diverse patterns merge into one pulsating temporal fabric, he would probably get the impression of a completely "metronomic society," to borrow Michael Young’s (1988) deft expression.

Social Time

Some arguments based on this vision of a metronomic society need, however, to be qualified, in particular as they claim that there exists only "social time." In its strong version, the social time thesis was first explicitly suggested by Emile Durkheim (1915). Durkheim held that our categories of time have emerged as generalizations of social experiences. They do not passively reflect any independent entity time (as was the view of the naive realist) but are human constructions created through collective representations. For Durkheim, in truly Kantian fashion, we cannot think of objects which are not in time and space, being temporally and spatially distinguishable. These distinctions are linked to the processes by which we create them. For example, how can we conceive of time without the activities by which we divide, measure or express it? We can only represent a notion of time that captures succession – for instance, the succession of hours, weeks, and years. In distinguishing moments or intervals of time as periods of duration, we "locate" them within an abstract and impersonal framework. Now, Durkheim asks, what is the origin of these differentiations? His answer is that they are practical guidelines, they provide social necessities.

an endless chart, where all duration is spread out before the mind, and upon which all possible events can be located in relation to fixed and determined guidelines ... [which] are taken from social life. The divisions into days, weeks, months, years, etc. correspond to the periodical recurrence of feasts and public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity ... What the category of time expresses is the time common to the group, a social time, so to speak. (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 10–11).

Durkheim’s conception of the social origin of time as a category of the mind is of great importance in several respects. In both "unsubstantiating" the traditional (absolutist) idea of time and rejecting the naive realist assumption (according to which time–reckoning concepts enable us to grasp time as if it were a given fact of nature), it draws attention to the mundane, social and cultural dimension of its emergence. In doing so, Durkheim suggests a wide program of sociological and anthropological investigations that focuses on the multiplicity of social institutions, practices, and forms of ideas that set up our metronomic societies. Directly or indirectly he inspired many further ethnographic inquiries, including those of Halbwachs (1925),

However, Durkheim’s doctrine of the social origin of time as a category of the mind has also raised several problems. I shall address two of them. In exclusively emphasizing the collective representations of time it fails to account, first, for the interwovenness of social and natural time patterns, and, second, for the complex semiotic and linguistic mediation of human experience of time.

The first problem arises since it is not very difficult to demonstrate that in most cultures there exist a set of common social periodicities – days, months, and years – which are undoubtedly derived from the movement of the sun, moon and related cycles. These natural movements exercise, as the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1992, p. 12) put it, a "contingent effect" on both social life and timekeeping. Apart from universal time orders like the physical–cosmological and the mythical–religious, this is even the case with practical–economic periodicities without immediate astronomical determinants, such as the market–week, which are arranged as they are "for reasons which are inescapably bound up with material considerations, storage and transport constraints, and the like" (Gell, 1992, p. 12).

This shows that it is in various respects very difficult to precisely distinguish nature and culture. Human beings have always used natural rhythms and cycles to organize their social interactions. As a consequence time has often appeared to be an inherent natural quality of these entities. But however objectively given the experience of "naturally" ordered and measured time might seem, it only takes on meaningful form as a symbolic product of and within a cultural context. As a result, physical, chemical, and biological properties of the world as an assemblage of matter have widely fused with all forms of social life. After some ten thousand years of human history there are neither merely "natural" nor merely "social" representations (or categories) of time.

This leads to my second point of criticism. The "social time" theory does not account for the particular semiotic nature of the process of representation, for the "universe of discourse" of time. Time as a category of mind does not simply mirror the temporal order of social life. Certainly, in a sense one could claim that every category of the mind is a social entity. As the sociologist of culture Helga Nowotny (1994) points out in her repudiation of the idea of a private Eigenzeit (proper time), there is no exclusively individual temporality. Like the universalist view, even the individualist view of time is subject to social and historical circumstances. "Like a test liquid which flows through the body to detect particular substances and their courses, 'society' and social time run through a life, however individually distinctive and equipped it is" (Nowotny, 1994, p.8).
No doubt, this is a suggestive picture. But it also reveals the underlying problem of this view, for the flow of (social) time is, of course, a metaphor (if not an allegory). It does not explain how the individual understands and makes sense of this "flow." And what is more, it is not even a metaphor of how we construct subjectively meaningful ideas of time. Differently put, the idea of society and social time "running through a life" cannot suffice if we want to examine this process as a matter of human agency and intentionality, that is, as a matter of active construction of meaning and of its particularly semiotic mediations.

_Time–Making_

Natural rhythms and cycles and patterns of social life have always been used to construct time as a category of the mind. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is no such thing as a category (or a concept, an idea, or an experience) beyond any semiotic fabric. There is neither an ontology of nature nor an ontology of society "as such" to embody given structures of meaning. Meanings are constructed in discursive processes, processes that take place within local contexts of cultures. However, remembering Goodman’s (1978) conception of human "worldmaking," even within such contexts it is the individuals who have to "invent" what the culture offers. How, then, do they invent the time of their culture?

In most general terms, "time–making" is a process of meaning construction that gives shape to the diachronic dimension of human life (Brockmeier, 1995a). The natural or social order within which time and temporality assume significance emerges in an ongoing process of construction of meaning and personal sense. In this view, what we call time turns out to be a symbolic order of meaning (which may include "natural" chronologies), an order that among others has made possible ideas such as regularity, continuity, eternity, and even timelessness.

For this reason, another putatively clear–cut opposition is apparent and misleading: the opposition of language, on the one hand, and world – nature and society – on the other hand. If it comes to the question how we make sense of the temporal dimension of both, inextricably meshed as they are, we are already localized within time as a cultural fabric. Talking about our experiences of time and in time, we are unavoidably entangled in words, metaphors, and stories. That is, we move within the realm of language, or as Wittgenstein said simply, we _use_ language. If we look more closely at what makes up our concepts and thoughts of time, we will find that they do not and cannot exist without language. What kind of existence is this exactly? This is the question I examine in this paper.

This does not imply dismissing any idea about what time or diachronicity is "as such" – prior to and independent from the human mind. But I would like to leave here this ontological or, perhaps more precisely, metaphysical question out of consideration, and rather draw attention to
the specific human approach to time. In doing so, I follow a line of argument in the wake of Kant’s fundamental insight that for the human mind perspectivity is inescapable: the only way of representing the world available to us is from our point of view. That is to say that we have no way of knowing reality "as it really is," independently of the structuring framework that conditions how the world appears to us. Whatever exists between heaven and earth, we will never find out how reality might look "in itself." If we come to be conscious of it, it inescapably will be transformed into a construct of ourselves. It will be caught – and here I am taking Kant’s transcendental argument one step farther – in a web woven from signs and symbols emerged in our historical and cultural activities, whether it be the activities of reflection or imagination, reasoning or madness, calculation or dream.

To sum up my first argument, to talk about time and temporality from the vantage point of the human mind is to talk about the way this semiotic and linguistic web is created by our cultural practices. How, then, we linguistically construct our ideas and concepts of time in detail is my next question. I shall deal with it on two levels: on the level of the general relation between time and language, and (focusing on this relation from the point of view of the individual) on the level of personal construction of time.

The language of human temporality

What Kant is to the issue of a priori, St Augustine is to the issue of time experience. So out of respect for this famous thinker on time, let us ask for the basis of the Augustinean experience of the ubiquitousness of time. Following this question we will find that the way this peculiar experience exists is difficult to separate from the way it is expressed. We have learnt from Wittgenstein (1953) that there is no private language which is used exclusively by one individual, and this argument also is a case in point for the issue of time experiences. It implies that our temporal expressions must be regarded as closely linked to the linguistic devices and practices – to the "grammar," as Wittgenstein called them – through which they are realized. This concept of grammar is a good deal wider than the traditional linguistic notion. For Wittgenstein grammar includes any rule that expresses ways of use for any part of speech under this concept. Closely linked to the concept of language game, grammar refers to the material and symbolic activities which Wittgenstein saw determined by the rules and conventions of a culture’s forms of life. From this cultural perspective the Augustinean experience makes sense, for these practices and their traces are indeed universal: wherever our mind is, so is our language.
Levels of Temporality

This is not to deny the great importance of the biological and neuropsychological aspects of human time perception. Temporality is embedded in all material structures, and it needs to be explored from various ontological, epistemological, and disciplinary vantage points. For example, we know from chronobiology that all forms of life are regulated by highly differentiated "biological clocks." Likewise, in physics we face different forms and hierachical levels of time (see Fraser, 1987 and 1989, for a systematic account of this "hierachical ontology" of time). However, in examining the construction of time in the light of Wittgensteinian ideas of experience, meaning, and grammar, I am concerned with another level of temporality. In focussing on constructions of meaning, I deal with the semiotic nature of ideas and concepts of and about time. Although such constructions may refer to physical, biological, and neuropsychological structures of time, they are not reducible to them. Yet this is a twofold point for, in turn, there is no physics, biology, or neuropsychology that could be displaced by the study of human meaning–making. The discursive construction of mind and its cultural grammar does not stand over against neurophysiology or other enterprises of scientific explanation. Rather, it represents a distinct and irreducible level of phenomena, a specific order of epistemic objects that is dominated by the rules of cultural grammar and principles of interpretive knowledge (Brockmeier, 1996).

To highlight this particular fabric of human temporality, I shall refer to it as a representation of what Vygotsky called "higher psychological functioning." Vygotsky (1978; 1981) described the voluntary versions of activities like thought, memory, and problem solving as "higher psychological or mental functions." All of these functions depend on the use of signs, be it in the process of their acquisition or in their subsequent development. Consequently, the semiotic functioning – or "semiotic mediation," as Wertsch (1986; 1991) and others prefer to put it – of the mind plays a crucial role in Vygotsky's theory of meaning in which signs are seen as the central "psychological tools" of all human meaning–making. The point I want to make now is that this view also includes the making of human temporality. Along the lines of Vygotsky’s and Wittgenstein’s arguments, my inquiry into the construction of temporal meanings will concentrate on language which, in this respect, is the most important sign system.

Linguistic Devices for the Construction of Time

In using a rather wide spectrum of linguistic devices to express the temporal dimension of our experiences and intentions, we also give them shape. To be sure, this is a general phenomenon: language does not only express reality but also creates it. And this is not only true for abstract
categories like "time" or "mind" but also with seemingly more concrete and down-to-earth lexical terms. For example, examining the discourse of environmentalism, we (Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäusler, 1999) have pointed out that an expression such as "greenhouse effect" in fact brings a new reality into being rather than it refers to something that is identifiable independently from a specific discourse and its underlying assumptions. Similar to many key concepts used in the natural sciences, such terms suggest ideas, images, and metaphors that are easily mistaken for the "real world."

In the case of the "reality" of time this is a particularly strong point because there certainly is no such thing as a special ontological entity to which this concept could refer. The word time as it is used in most discourse can be seen as a metaphor for rather different phenomena. Moreover, these phenomena can each be represented by several linguistic devices. All natural languages have developed a rich repertoire of these devices ranging from markers of tense and aspect to inherent lexical features of the verb and temporal adverbs. To express and create "time," these devices interact in manifold ways (Klein, 1994). Furthermore, they are complemented by various discourse devices such as temporal collocations – idioms, sayings, proverbs, cliches and "stock phrases": we spend, divide and steal time, we are out of time, waste time, deal with Father Time, time waits for no one, time heals and marches on, time is over, and we are running out of time. Countless are the expressions for time in everyday speech, in English as in any other language (see, for example, the extensive data from four such radically different languages and cultures as English, Mandarin, Hindi and Sesotho in Alverson, 1994; although I can hardly agree with the author’s "universalist" and "panhuman" cognitive interpretation of these findings). Finally, there are larger discursive units by which we express our ideas of time, such as the forms and genres of narrative. In discourse typically several of these time devices are closely linked with each other. They constitute what Harald Weinrich (1971, p.10) called a temporal Determinations–gefüge (structure of mutal determination).

*The Times of Different Languages*

If we now consider different languages, we note that every language constructs its distinct devices as well as its "structure of mutual determination" in a particular way. This is not only true for languages which belong to different language families, as in the case of the language of Hopi Indians as contrasted with the so-called *Standard European Average (SEA) languages*; in the wake of Benjamin Lee Whorf’s (1956) studies of linguistic relativity of time concepts, this contrast has been one of the most discussed arguments in this area. It is also true for languages of the same family, such as among members of the SEA languages family.
To take just one simple example (which, nonetheless, makes life very hard for every student of language). While most Romance languages have two past tenses, Germanic languages have only one. Instead of the Italian *imperfetto/passato remoto* and the French *imperfait/passé simple* English and German only use the *past simple* or the *Imperfekt*. Therefore *he said* or *er sagte* means in Italian at one time *lui diceva* and another *lui disse*. Sometimes it can even be translated into the Italian tense *passato prossimo* as *lui ha detto*. But this does not imply that it would also work the other way round and could now be retranslated into *he has said* because the English *present perfect* is mostly used to indicate that the past is still in some way connected with the present. This would work, however, with the *Perfekt* in German *er hat gesagt* which – to make things even more puzzling – is in this regard closer to its Italian cousin than to its English brother. In other words, we find several differences in the tense constructions among the Germanic languages as well as among the Romance languages. Moreover, we even find several differences among the dialects and regional versions of one language; for example, southern Italians often prefer the *passato remoto* to the *passato prossimo* that a northern Italian would use.

Apart from being simple, all these examples refer only to *tenses*; that is, they illustrate only one of the linguistic devices used to express time and to construct temporality. Yet this may suffice to demonstrate that every language is a specific construction site of time and human temporality on its own. Passing from one language to another we cannot simply take with us the same model of time and adopt it to new linguistic and cultural raw material. Brecht compared a certain kind of thought or argument to a snowball: You cannot keep it, so every time you need one you have to make it again. It seems to me that we have to conceive of time as Brecht’s snowball. Or as the linguist puts it: "In principle every tense function has to be newly analysed for every language." (Weinrich, 1971, p. 8). That is to say that the human constructions of time not only exist in language, but in languages. And very few (and only rather elementary) of these constructions are actually translatable in the narrow sense of the word, finding a direct linguistic equivalent on the basis of a putative "underlying universal structure of embodied, enculturated mental experience," as Alverson, 1994, p. 7, argues). This is the second aspect of this issue that I would like to emphasize.

The third point, now, has less to do with grammatical aspects of language than with language as a system of action and of interaction, as a cultural system of discursive practices. In this view, language appears quite different from any perspective in which it is captured as a closed system that obeys the linguistic and logic rules which are described by formal or structural linguistics and philosophical semantics. To say it in terms of (post-)structuralist linguistics, this focus on the modes of *language in use* means more than just to shift the theoretical search light from the *langue* (the implicit system of structural distinctions, oppositions, and of principles of
combination that make it possible for a speaker to produce and for an auditor to understand an utterance) to the actual \textit{parole} (any particular meaningful utterance), as many critics of Saussure and Chomsky demanded. What changes here is the very notion of \textit{parole} itself, for a cultural system of communicative practices cannot be sufficiently understood as a system of merely linguistic utterances, even if these are viewed in their cultural context.

Every cultural system consists of a multilayered fabric of material and symbolic practices. These practices are inextricably interwoven in a way that fundamentally questions the traditional distinction between text and context. Rather than functioning solely as a constraint on linguistic performance, the context must also be viewed as a product of language use (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). For this reason, interpretive methods in the wake of Geertz’ (1973) "thick description" have become widespread in linguistic anthropology and in the tradition of culturally and ethnographically oriented studies of language in context which began with Gumperz and Hymes (1972). Yet there is another aspect that hereby comes to the fore, forcing us not only to rethink the traditional dichotomies between language and culture, text and context, material and symbolic practices, but also the dichotomy between the individual and the social. Discursively conceived conceptions of situated talk must take into account different levels of social and individual meanings, including the dimension of individual or personal sense. In what follows I shall concentrate on this aspect of the construction of time.

**Narrative and the individual construction of time**

I already mentioned the linguist and anthropologist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). As both Whorf and his teacher Edward Sapir pointed out, languages construct implicit views and even theories of the world. This argument implies that the ontogenetic development of thought is to be seen as a function of the particular system of language that an individual has learnt to use. I believe Katherine Nelson is right in emphasizing that of all possible positions which we can find in the long–standing debate about the relation between language and thought, only Vygotsky and Whorf have taken seriously the central role of language in human development (Nelson, 1991, p. 279). The modern beginnings of this tradition of thought can be traced back to Humboldt’s idea of the "functional diversity" of language and languages which was one of the sources for Vygotsky’s conception of thinking and speech (as evident, for example, in his idea of the "functional distinction" between dialogue and monologue [Vygotsky, 1986, p. 240; see Wertsch, 1985, p. 85]).
Several aspects of the original version of the idea of "linguistic relativity" (which claims that we view and understand the world relative to our language) or "linguistic determinism" (language determines our view and understanding of the world) have been subject to controversial discussions. Much research in anthropological linguistics and cross-cultural psychology have been continuously fuelling the debate branching out in all directions with new findings, many of them strongly supporting the Whorfian view (see, e.g., Lakoff, 1987, pp. 304–337; Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990; Lucy, 1992a and b). In particular, they confirm that there is no single and universal framework for viewing the world and making sense of its manifold time constructions. Especially, the investigation of concepts such as time, nature, and culture (and their manifold semantic overlapping) from the point of view of comparative cultural linguistics backs up the assumption that different languages offer different perceptions and conceptual constructions of reality. Arguably, one conclusion to be drawn from the study of alternative semantic systems of nature and the environment – for example, of languages in New Guinea and Aboriginal Australia (see Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäusler, 1999) – is that we must reject the view of total effability, the view that anything can be expressed in any language. Philosophically speaking, there is neither an universal ontology nor an universal epistemology to identify a homogeneous semantic of nature, environment, and time.

Most scholars in this area today tend to accept a weak form of linguistic determinism according to which the structure of anyone’s native language influences (but does not fully determine) the worldview he or she will acquire by learning that language (Byrnes and Gelman, 1991, p. 18). In fact, there is much evidence that language structures the child’s view of reality, though this may be a rather subtle and, at times, even unconscious shaping (see, e.g., Brockmeier, 1991; Gelman and Byrnes, 1991; Miller, 1992 and 1994; Nelson, 1996). However, most research so far has been carried out along the lines of traditional linguistic and cognitive issues, focussing on grammatical and conceptual development. Even the proposal of Sapir and Whorf was focussed on how grammar affects the way we think about reality. Only recently, larger forms of discourse have been taken into account; one of which is narrative at which I now shall look more closely.

*The form of narrative*

From the viewpoint of a cultural study of *language in use* we can distinguish several types of discourse, such as conversation, argumentation, description, and narrative. I believe that among these types of discourse, narrative is pivotal for the understanding of our complex constructions of time. Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1991) outlined in much detail that one of the main characteristics of narration is its ability "to tell time." Time, Ricoeur claims, becomes human to the degree to which it is narrated. The point I want to make goes even further. It is only in narrative that our most complex constructions of temporality take form. What are these
constructions? The most complex scenarios of time I have known are the time syntheses that we construct to make sense of our lives and to give meaning to the manifold temporality of our experiences. These time syntheses are at the heart of such things as autobiography, memory, and identity.

In an autobiographical narrative, where someone tells you about his or her life, very different layers and figures of time are combined. Here we deal not only with the classical time modalities of past, present, and future (and, as we have seen, their sometimes intricate tense functions), but also with the different temporal orders of natural, cultural, and individual processes. We find all kinds of splittings, flashbacks, flash–forwards, and other forms of overlap. And we encounter the various subjunctive versions of time (and their moral values), the world of the possible and of the imagined, projected from the future into the past and from the past into the future. For the historian Reinhart Koselleck (1985) these projections are full of *vergangene Zukunft* (past future), while they actually take place in the present, the very present of the talk.

My argument is that for such constructions the form of narrative is not only the most adequate form, it is the only form in which they can be expressed. Perhaps we can even say that it is the only form in which they exist as human temporalities. In being transformed into sequential layers of a story, episodes of fundamentally different temporal dimensions appear to be fused together in one order, the order of the present in which the story is told. The real scene of action of all past time construction is the *hic* and *nunc* of the narrative event – rather we may be convinced that we had already been sitting for hours in the dim and hot office of Miss Coldfield.

Likewise from the point of view of the narrative construction of time, the most important and "technically" sophisticated narratives we tell are stories about ourselves. These stories are usually told to an interested and understanding audience so that the act of telling allows for trying out various version of our lives and their temporal trajectories.

Thus I suggest a perspective on time that focuses on the *form of narrative* (Bruner 1986, 1990, 1991; Britton and Pellegrini, 1990; Sarbin, 1986). The form of narrative constitutes a linguistic, psychological, and philosophical framework for our attempts to come to terms with the diachronic dimension of human existence. The merging of all three frameworks makes up the fascinating nature of narrative as a site of time construction. It is through the linguistic and cognitive structures of narrative discourse that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience. In this view, we will find that the more our time scenarios become multilayered and multivoiced, the less they are simply translatable from one language into another.

This leads to two qualities most narratives share. In order to be told, a story has to move within the framework of a given cultural canon. Ultimately, this is the context in which the form of
narrative must be analyzed, not just the framework of a merely linguistic grammar. A story follows the rules of the games of a culture, and in doing so it is at the same time conveying them. The plots and linguistic devices must accept the norms which are specific both to the social fabric of the culture and to their own understanding. For example, when a student of history writes an essay one of the first rules he or she must learn is to avoid using the first person. The idea behind this stylistic device is that it is not a particular historian who writes a story, or one version, about history but that the historian only reveals the objective course, the "facts" and the meaning of what happened. Similarly, scientific discourse is characterized by a well defined set of narrative conventions (Harré, 1990).

Every narrative genre fixes not only characteristics of texts but also models of understanding and imagining. Bruner (1990) remarked that it is of psychological importance that each genre of narrative suggests a way of comprehending narrative. Narratives embody norms of how reality must be told and seen; they suggest ways in which we come to know and remember; and they define the very notion of what reality is and what imagination is. Like historical essays or academic papers, novels imply visions or versions of the world as well as of its representation along, say, realistic, naive, phantastic, or magical lines. Reading stories by William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez we learn that sometimes the reality of human experience even goes beyond what the mind can imagine at all. In Bruner’s (1991) terms, narratives predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in a twofold sense. While they may be seen as (fictional or real) "representations of social ontology," they also are "invitations to a particular style of epistemology." Bruner refers to path−breaking innovations in literary style and genre that have changed the imaginative options of the mind. For example, literary theory and history of aesthetics has celebrated

Flaubert for introducing a perspectival relativism that dethroned both the omniscient narrator and the singular "true story," Joyce for slyly substituting free association to break the constraints of semantic and even syntactic conventionalism, Beckett for shredding the narrative continuities we had come to take for granted in storytelling, Calvino for converting postmodern antifoundationalism into classic mythic forms, and so on. (Bruner, 1991, p. 15)

Narrative schemes

It is not only literary stories which influence our views of everyday reality; nor are narratives only influential as literary or closed stories. Many linguistic pictures, metaphors, idioms, and proverbs implicitly tell a story or refer to one, revealing their meaning only on the grounds of a presupposed background narrative. In most ordinary discourse storylines appear in interrupted or even fragmented form. Making an excuse often consists of a formula, a hint, an unfinished sentence: "Sorry, I’m late ... but you know ... [smile] ? well, my colleagues ... it was John’s
birthday ... [smile] ?" Because we are familiar with this kind of storyline, we easily complete the sketched narrative. The point I am driving at is the concept of narrative scheme. A narrative scheme works like a kind of "tacit knowledge," and we use it as a model which rarely needs to become explicit.

I experienced this in an embarrassing way when I attended an Italian conference in Turin. When the chairperson at the end of the first day was asked at which time on the following day, which was a Sunday, we should reconvene, the answer was: "Well, I thought .... perhaps, at about nine ..." This was accompanied by a slightly ironic smile and a very typical Italian gesture of a hand going round in a circle. For the visitor coming from abroad it seems that in Italy no conversation can do without such a gesture. There are art historians who believe they recognize this gesture already in paintings and frescos of Italian Renaissance masters. I exchanged an all−knowing glance with a fellow participant from French speaking Switzerland who had, like myself, lived and worked in Rome for some time before. You can imagine the situation the next morning – it was our turn to present our papers – when we arrived at 9.20, opened the door to the lecture theatre and found all other participants already waiting for us.

Surprised and embarrassed, we realized that we had forgotten two important things. The stories we had in mind were the stories that people from the North of Europe usually tell about the time habits of the people from the South. In this case, the story scheme was closely linked to that famous hand movement. Moreover, the certainty with which we thought we could rely on this story scheme and adopt it as a model for real social activities was based on personal experiences we had gained when we had lived in Rome. Now, within the cultural geography of Italy there is an important difference between Rome, traditionally seen as the city of the palazzo, and Turin, the modern industrial center in the North. Some people from Turin, and they are not a small number, sometimes seem to regard Rome as almost another country. Even my Roman friend Carlo never tires of emphasizing that Rome is the most northern city of Africa.

Thus it may become understandable that we did not only apply an, in any case, wrong and discriminating story scheme to the wrong situation but we also left out of consideration that our polite and generous hosts in Turin (nobody commented on our coming late) had their own story schemes about the time habits of people from the North. In their way, they also synthesized a collection of cultural stories which, from the reverse perspective, convey well−known cultural prejudices. These stories have emerged over centuries and lead now a life on their own. If we examined them in more detail we would probably encounter a number of Swiss watchmakers, English sergeants, and Prussian postmen (to mention only one the mildest forms of Teutonic discipline).
Ellipsis

With the help of these narrative schemes, which are evidently highly dependent on cultural traditions, we model most of the storylines that run through our lives and thoughts. Often it is enough to take a single hint, which does not necessarily have to be a linguistic one. Yet whether it be the gesture of my Italian host or the concerned glance of a conference’s chairperson at her watch, the cultural framework in which they are embedded usually makes it easy to capture their meanings. We do our best to find an appropriate narrative scheme to transform such hints in signs that tell us something we can interpret as meaningful. To borrow an idea from Roman Jakobson (1985, S. 20), we "fill in the gaps."

As Jakobson pointed out, elliptical perception is a central characteristic of language in use. For the speaker, the hearer, or for both (seen as aspects of, or positions in, one discursive process), the ellipsis manifests itself at different verbal levels: sound, syntax, and narrative. On each level of elliptical perception the listener fills in whatever has been omitted by the speaker or by him as listener. Jakobson emphasized that we usually fail to appreciate properly the creativity necessary for this "filling in the gap." Yet it is here where we find the heart of the issue of linguistic polysemy which is the textual equivalent of the issue of cultural interpretation.

Telescoping of time

This brings me back to the particular role of narrative in the construction of our time concepts, a construction in which elliptical operations are central. Although this point is closely linked to the other features of narratives already mentioned, it indicates a special quality. In contrast to, for instance, descriptive and argumentative structures of text, narrative structures consist of sequences of events which are arranged in a temporal succession, be it linear or multilinear, circular or elliptical succession, be it direct or reverse, continuous or discontinuous. In literary narratives these forms of temporal succession appear in all kinds of combinations, often simultaneously. Jakobson has provided many arguments against the alleged opposition of synchrony – diachrony, propounding instead the idea of language as a "permanently dynamic synchrony" (1985, p. 6). Now, how are we to understand such synchrony?

Consider the story about my intercultural time discourse in Turin or, perhaps better, about its failure. It is based on the narrative interplay of at least seven distinct temporal levels. These are

(i) the first day of the conference (setting of the stage and presentation of the acting characters),
(ii) the flashback to those experiences which I and my Swiss colleague had had in Italy before (necessary information about the prehistory of the main characters in order to make their behavior understandable),

(iii) the second day (the "narrated event"),

(iv) the reference to different cultural forms of time discourse in Rome and Turin, Northern and Southern Europe (information about the prehistory and the context of the scene of action, suggesting a certain interpretation of the narrated event; in other words: to put you on the track I wanted you to follow).

(v) Furthermore, we have to distinguish the time (or the times) of the "narrated event" from the time of the "narrative event" which, as we already know, is located in the here and now. Yet, even this present has, once again, to be differentiated. As we deal with a written story, we face (at least) a twofold present which refers to

(vi) the time of the composition (the time in which I was constructing and writing down this version of the story) and

(vii) the time in which I am presenting this story to an audience or in which a reader reads its written version. Now a new and none–the–less complex process of temporal (re)construction begins, the act of reading. But I will refrain from keeping track of our story entering this new realm, and instead refer to the works of authors like Wolfgang Iser (1978) and Umberto Eco (1979).

On each of these seven levels we face temporal sequences. All of them are "absorbed" in the synchronic form of narrative. One might call this technique of synthesis telescoping of time. In telescoping several structures of events, each presenting an own temporal level, narrative discourse weaves a texture of enormous density. It would be difficult indeed, as Jakobson (1985, p. 22) put it, "to find another domain, except perhaps for music, where time is experienced with compatible acuity." And it can be seen as an even more amazing peculiarity of this kind of linguistic amalgamation of diverse sequential orders that its complexity mostly escapes our attention.

Interpreting the cultural grammar of time

Both telescoping and ellipsis are forms of narrative time construction that are not only special to the example examined here but are inherent to many forms of discourse. The more complex a
linguistic time scenario is, that is, the more different levels and figures of time are being merged, the more it includes special forms of telescoping and ellipsis. These forms are special, first, because the set of narrative schemes and storylines involved is bound to the meaning system of a particular culture. And second, the temporal constructions in question depend on the mostly very particular ways individuals use the meanings of their culture. Meanings live only through the personal sense which an individual bestows upon them. Therefore they might vary from one context to another, from one individual to another, and even from one particular moment to another moment in the life of the same individual. As Nelson (1991, p. 284) remarked, "there is not one system but millions of idiosystems, each individual having acquired a particular set of related meanings." To explore the personal construction of time one thus must take into account both the cultural canon and the personal sense emerging in the individual idiosystem.

Now remembering my initial point about the inner connection between language and human temporality, there is some need for a qualification. Language constructs time and each language does so in its own way, but this view can only be held if language is not understood in the sense of traditional (structural) grammar as a closed and exclusive verbal system. The study of narrative makes it clear that the grammar of larger discursive units is a cultural grammar: It deals with forms of life. We have seen that this argument also holds true for the grammar of complex concepts of human temporality. Pragmatics is the name for what linguists do when they describe the way we socially act with and in linguistic discourse. In this sense, ethnographers of communication speak of "cultural pragmatics" (Carbaugh, 1994). We therefore might call the kind of study I have sketched here cultural pragmatics of time.

Viewed this way, we cannot consider translation as the key issue of bilingualism; rather, the basic problem at stake here is that of cultural interpretation. That is to say, cultural pragmatics must be conceived of as a part of cultural hermeneutics. Hermeneutic, as Bruner (1991) put it, implies "that there is a text or a text analogue through which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and from which somebody is trying to extract a meaning" (p. 7). If we take the concept of text or text analogue as including every kind of discourse (written as well as oral), then we can also adopt the second half of Bruner’s argument. This draws on a general quality of most discourse, namely, that it implies a possible difference between what is expressed and what is meant. This differentiability of discourse entails that there is no singular solution to the task of determining the meaning of an expression. What is called determining is a move in a hermeneutic field.

If one implication of the view outlined in this paper is that it brings profoundly into question the assumption of universal natural symbolisms (or biological mechanisms) enabling human beings to communicate and to know, then also the idea of an universal structural equality of human thought and thinking is rejected. This idea has always supported the claim of "translatability" of
knowledge from one cultural–historical context to another. The claim that anything can be expressed in any language (that is, the idea of total effability) implies that concepts of time are likewise translatable. In this view, time concepts in different languages and cultures represents instantiations of one universally compatible order of temporality – in much the same way in which all knowledge and structures of cognition are seen as being regulated by the same universal standards.

Negotiating time

The stance I have taken here is in sharp contrast to this position of universal translatability and effability. Drawing on Wittgenstein and Vygotsky, I have argued that language, and through language the construction of time, appears as an instrument that exists only in the uses to which individuals put it in this or that concrete cultural context. On an empirical plane, this implies the case for the priority of cultural speech–act analysis over independent studies of syntax, semantics, and cognition (see, for example, Harré’s [1993] critical discussion Wierzbicka’s universalist theory).

We only understand what makes languages and their respective constructions of time different if we examine the web of cultural meanings that each language mediates and reflects, a web which cannot be reducible to autonomous linguistic structures. To become immersed in this web (for example, learning a (new) language) means to become immersed in a (new) culture with its own semiotic universe and its specific communicative practices. In this view, understanding another language as interpreting the code of alien cultural symbolisms is but a gradual extension of the business of interpretation in general, a gradual extension of our "universe of discourse", to put it in semiotic terms. As we know from Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), there is no speech–act, no discursive event which does not imply at least the two agents of the basic dialogue. We thus have to conceive of these processes of interpretation as acts of mutual negotiation. It is against the backdrop of this idea of negotiating meaning as the fundamental principle of every act of communication that the idea of negotiating time takes form.

To be sure, sometimes moving between different languages is difficult. As I have proposed in this paper, this is also due to the fact that the diversity of languages reflects a "deep–structure" diversity of conceptual systems and cultural practices. However, understanding another language as interpreting the code of alien cultural symbolisms is a kind of negotiating meaning that, I believe, does not require qualitatively different cognitive and linguistic practices and epistemological principles. Interpreting the individual use of meaning within the framework of a given culture takes place in one form or another in every discourse, whether it be within a native language or between different languages.
This is not to suggest a new cognitive or linguistic universalism. I rather want to describe the way we come to terms with the basic experience of difference itself; for this experience and the correspondent practices of interpretation are not specific to any particular culture. In a nutshell, my the thesis is that the problem of understanding an alien language, an alien culture, and an alien idea of time shows the same hermeneutic structure as understanding the alien – the other – in our own language, culture, and time. All interpretation is social interaction, as all social interaction implies mutual interpretation. Each agents of discourse brings an intention, and perhaps also the need and the necessity, to understand. In the end, interpretation turns out to be the basic operation of all cultural negotiation, indispensable for every interaction of distinct perspectives.

References


