

Stories and Speech Acts in Performing Power **Sky Marsen**

Center for Management Communication
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California

This paper uses an eclectic approach informed by narrative semiotics (Greimas 1987, Herman 2009, Taylor & Van Every 2014) and speech act theory (Austin 1975, Kissine 2013) to explore power and authority. It examines, the ways in which relationships of power and authority are embedded in the narrative elements of interactional situations and expressed through the illocutionary force of utterances.

An axiom of narrative semiotics is that narrative structure underlies most forms of discourse and interaction (Cooren 2000 and 2015, Marsen 2006), even when participants do not explicitly engage in storytelling. By tracing the narrative elements in a text we can detect the different 'programs of action' that are at play, the agents' expectations and goals as well as the interrelational positioning of agents that ascribes a role to them within the unfolding of events. Also, for a narrative to exist there must be some conflict that disrupts the existing 'order of things' and sets a series of events in motion. Therefore, the narrative approach is by definition equipped to deal with friction between agents and their competing goals – a friction that often forms the basis for power relations.

This paper approaches conversation as a set of utterances aiming to direct the narrative events in different directions according to the interests of the speaking agents. Following speech act theory, certain utterances carry more than a propositional value and, in fact, have tangible effects on the material and social world. The type of act that an utterance represents ('directive,' 'commissive,' etc.), and whether the utterance is 'felicitous' or not (i.e. whether it has the intended result on the world) depend on the speaker's sincerity and on his/her status – in other words, on his/her authority to enact a change in the world.

The positioning of agents, which leads to interactions of power and acting-out of authority, can be fruitfully examined using the actantial model. An actant is an abstract category used to classify agents in relation to their functions within the story. Since it indicates the role that an agent plays and his/her status in the story, it is pivotal in delimiting aspects of power. Narrative semiotics identifies six actants, which can include both human and non-human agents: subject (the main agent), object (the main goal), sender (the motivating factor in wanting to attain the goal), receiver (the beneficiaries of attaining the goal), helpers and opponents (the agents that help and oppose the subject in attaining the goal).

Approached actantially, 'authority' is often a function of the relations between the sender (motivator) and the subject (agent). Examining the given scenario along these lines, the clash between the two main agents (David and Kim) revolves around

non-acceptance of the sender in each other's narrative, which makes the desired goal of each unacceptable to the other. David's goal is to obtain a marriage license, a desire that is authorized by his sender, the Supreme Court. Kim hinders this goal 'in the name of' or 'under the authority of' God. As senders, the Supreme Court and God underpin contrasting sources of 'authority' and therefore motivate different programs of action.

Since the text is constructed from the perspective of David, (the camera is with David and the other members of the public, and opposite the space of the administrators and Kim), it positions David as the actantial subject. In this schema, Kim is positioned as an opponent in David's quest to attain the license. Since she is the formal 'authority' in this context, she has more power than David and her actions (not issuing the license) have the power to define the outcome, unless David can either receive assistance from a representative of his helper (the 'law'-evidenced in David's repeated requests for the police), or produce a perlocutionary effect with his utterances (in other words, unless he can persuade Kim to comply).

David and Kim's utterances articulate their different narrative positions and employ a number of speech act strategies aimed at gaining the power to direct the narrative towards the outcome sanctioned by their respective sender-subject relationship. These speech acts include *directives* ('don't smile at me,' 'I'm asking you to leave,' 'call the police'), *indirect threats* ('I pay your salary'), *declaratives* ('you should be ashamed of yourself'), etc.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooren, F. (2000). *The organizing property of communication*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cooren, F. (2015). *Organizational discourse*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Greimas, A. J. (1987). *On meaning: Selected writings in semiotic theory*. Translated by Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Herman, D. (2009). *Basic elements of narrative*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Kissine, M. (2013). *From utterances to speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marsen, S. (2006). *Narrative dimensions of philosophy*. London: Palgrave.

Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2014). *When organization fails: Why authority matters*. New York, NY: Routledge.