Sociocultural diversity, identities, and critical education: Comparing conversational narratives at school

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the communicative approach to language teaching should be enriched with concepts and objectives coming from critical theories on language and discourse and, more specifically, from ethnographically informed approaches exploiting students' cultural background and experiences from their everyday social reality. Based on current sociolinguistic findings, special attention is paid to narrative as a discourse genre commonly used in everyday encounters. We develop an educational framework involving the comparative analysis of oral narrative material and focusing on the identities constructed by the narrator(s). The proposed model aims at raising students' critical language awareness by training them to identify and compare the subversive core of narratives and the evaluative stances emerging therein.

Introduction

During the past few decades, a broadly accepted assumption in Educational and Applied Linguistics is that language teaching should not be confined to teaching grammatical rules and lexis isolated from social and textual contexts; rather, according to the communicative approach to language teaching, language should be taught both "for communication" and "as communication" (Olshtain and Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 707; Leung, 2008). This 'learning by doing' approach allows for different views on the communicative circumstances that could be included in school curricula and on the reasons for such choices. In most cases, contemporary language teaching programs aim at familiarizing students with the most common texts and genres, so as to help them cope with everyday contexts.

Given the above, at least in the western world, emphasis is given mostly to non-narrative genres, which contribute to students' academic success and social mobility. Although narratives are the most typical texts included in pre-school or primary school literacy practices, they tend to be abandoned later on, as students grow older, because they are considered to offer a 'child-like' view of reality and are not deemed an integral part of adult and/or professional life (see among others Street, 1995; Klapproth, 2004, p. 47). What is more, whenever some types of narratives are included in school curricula, their analysis usually revolves around their grammatical features and their organizational structure, i.e. narrative as a temporal sequence of events (see among others Knapp and Watkins, 1994).

The selection of the narratives to be taught at school is another issue in point. After fairy tales and fictional prose, students often become familiar with narratives belonging to the literary canon and/or historical texts, since such texts are considered 'typical' narratives. Everyday narratives such as oral, conversational ones and narratives from the web (e.g. blogs, emails, chat rooms) are, to the best of our knowledge, absent from school curricula – with the notable exception of news stories from the press. Consequently, students do not become familiar with narrative literacy practices which seem to be quite common in their everyday lives.

Moreover, students are not usually trained to read between the narrative lines, in other words, to trace and analyze the values and identities projected in what appears to be a 'neutral' selection and a mere temporal ordering of events, but is in fact much more than that. Research has shown that narratives constitute a linguistic lens via which important aspects of the social and cultural context are highlighted or rejected and that speakers use narratives to negotiate specific values and standpoints with their audience (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 197). Even in cases where narrative analysis in class involves making connections between what happens in the story and students' lives and everyday reality, students are trained to identify and discuss *common* values and identities between stories and life. In other words, students are more often than not incited to focus on, or even construct, similarities between the two, while potential sociocultural differences are either downplayed or completely overlooked in narrative teaching (Jones and Clarke, 2007).

At the same time, one of the most important goals contemporary language teaching programs are expected to attain is to raise students' critical awareness (see among others Jones and Clarke, 2007; Prinsloo and Baynham, 2008; Archakis and Tsakona, 2011; 2012). Critical literacy models, in particular, aim at rendering students capable of identifying and scrutinizing the (more or less hidden) ideologies in the discourses surrounding them (Fairclough, 1992). Whatever we say or write interacts with locally or globally dominant discourses, hence we constantly position ourselves in relation to such discourses and construct various identities depending on our particular needs and goals in any given context (Davies and Harré, 1990). Since such dimensions are not always explored in contemporary language teaching, students are not usually aware of the fact that discourse actually constitutes a mirror reflecting reality from a particular *ideological* point of view.

This can be achieved by all types of discourse, even by genres which are not considered 'significant' or 'sophisticated' enough to be included in school curricula, such as everyday conversational narratives. Therefore, our aim here is to propose the integration of such texts into literacy programs aiming at cultivating critical language awareness. The proposed model is based on *positioning* analysis (Bamberg, 1997; 2004) which traces and brings to the surface the identities constructed by the narrators not only for themselves, but also for their audience and for the narrative characters. In our understanding, positioning analysis is expected to cultivate students' ability to trace the (often hidden) assumptions of what is considered 'normal' and what 'abnormal' in the narrated events and by the narrative characters and then to express their own stances towards them.

The proposed model for narrative teaching is designed for application mainly in secondary and tertiary education (12-22 year olds), as well as in adult education (e.g. second chance schools). Although here we concentrate on first language teaching, the proposed model could be used in multicultural classrooms provided that the material collected, for example from immigrant communities in heritage languages, is translated during the analysis in class. It could also be used for second language teaching, after carefully considering the students' special skills and needs. We hopefully intend to address this issue in detail in a future study.

The material considered here involves narratives originating in students' everyday literacy practices and referring to everyday events and contexts students are familiar with. It is argued that this kind of material can significantly enhance students' interest in language learning (see Schank and Berman, 2007, and references therein). Although the data presented and discussed here come from face-to-face interactions, this does not imply that different narrative genres are not suitable for such an approach. Research has shown that genres such as press articles, TV news, etc. have a narrative structure, thus they could be analyzed using Labov's (1972) model for oral narratives, albeit with slight modifications (see among others Bell, 1991, Toolan, 2001, Archakis and Tsakona, 2009; 2011, pp. 128-154, 236-246). Moreover, narratives occurring in internet environments could also be analyzed using Labov's structural model (Hoffmann, 2010; Page, 2010). What is important in any case

is that the narratives collected and analyzed in class are part of students' everyday narrative practices and refer to persons or events which are not distant to their world.

The present paper begins with a brief definition of critical language awareness and with how this can be achieved in class. It seems that the prerequisite for this is an educational program promoting ideological literacy (Street, 1995). Hence, after a brief presentation of the main literacy models discussed in the relevant literature, we argue for a framework for critical language education drawing on students' everyday talk and on their diverse linguistic and cultural experiences. We then offer a working definition of narrative and present the 3-level positioning model proposed by Bamberg (1997; 2004), while we discuss how and what narratives are commonly used in language teaching and how and why such programs could be complemented by the positioning analysis focusing on the social identities constructed in conversational narratives. We also explore some tentative questions which could be addressed during the critical analysis of such material in class. Our model is exemplified via two thematically linked oral narratives which are contrastively analyzed. Emphasis is attached to the different identities constructed by the two narrators. The final section summarizes the main points of our discussion and proposal.

Critical language awareness

Critical language awareness is an application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the domain of education. Its goal is to enrich educational programs of language awareness with critical views disclosing the ways language or communicative phenomena disguise and/or perpetuate sociolinguistic inequality, racism, or sexism (Fairclough, 1992). Thus, it attempts to cultivate students' critical consciousness by enabling them to approach the social world as a -linguistic and/or semiotic- human construction, which is, on the one hand, based on power relations and, on the other, is subject to constant negotiation and fluctuation (Fairclough, 1989; Clark and Ivanič, 1997).

Following CDA, the starting point for the development of students' critical consciousness can be their reflection on experiences of sociocultural and sociolinguistic diversity and inequality. Such experiences, possibly arising from the differences between students' value systems and the dominant one, can be brought to class and become the object of scrutiny and systematic analysis, as well as a motive for students to (re)consider their own (not always conscious) beliefs and assumptions (Fairclough, 1989; see also Morgan, 1997; Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997; Janks, 2000).

Jones and Clarke's (2007) research and teaching proposal are relevant here: they have attempted to find ways to cultivate critical literacy in school students by inciting them to make *disconnections*, namely to identify and critically discuss the sociocultural differences between the social reality and characters as depicted in stories included in the curriculum and their own social experience and personal relationships. The authors suggest that school literacy programs capitalize on identifying (or even creating) similarities between story worlds and students' real worlds, while simultaneously sweeping under the carpet the possibility that students' everyday lives, habits, and relations may be totally different from those described in school narratives. Thus, school stories become accepted as 'natural' and 'normal', since "teachers do not consider that texts are not neutral but instead position readers in particular ways" and eventually "may be positioning them to believe in the authority of texts instead of acknowledging, questioning, challenging, and critiquing them" (Jones and Clarke, 2007, p. 100). In the same authors' view, however, teachers are expected to encourage students "to make disconnections", namely to give them tools "to read, think, and speak from a critical perspective that assumes that texts are constructed from a particular ideological standpoint, and therefore can be deconstructed, or questioned and critiqued" (Jones and Clarke, 2007, p. 104).

Based on the above observations, we suggest that the exploitation of oral, written, or electronic texts originating in students' activities may open the door for students' inequality experiences to enter class. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that teaching materials nowadays often come from specific textbooks, also including the methods and goals of teaching. As a result, teachers are not often encouraged (or even allowed) to employ different texts or genres, while all students are faced with the same texts and genres regardless of their sociocultural background and their particular needs. Despite such restrictive educational practices, many scholars and teachers explore ways to break the walls between school literacy and out-of-school literacy practices (see among others Hull and Schultz, 2001; Pahl and Rowsel, 2005; Koutsogiannis, 2006, and references therein).

The sociocultural approach to literacy

The critical approach to discourse and the cultivation of critical language awareness both require a literacy model favoring the emergence of multiple literacy practices in class. Such requirements are met with ideological literacy models (Street, 1995), which reject the imposition of particular language teaching goals and methods from above. Ideological literacy recognizes the existence of multiple literacy events and practices related to different social and cultural contexts rather than a single, generalized, and 'neutral' literacy objective. Moreover, it takes into account the sociocultural and ideological meaning all linguistic, textual, and semiotic forms carry. The ideological model relies on ethnographic approaches tracing the sociocultural contexts where literacy events and practices emerge. Furthermore, Street (2003) claims that, since sociocultural contexts constitute local activities interacting with, and/or resisting to, dominant, global macrostructures, they are to be approached as being under constant evolution (see also Collins and Blot, 2003).

Discussing ideological literacy models, Baynham (1995) distinguishes between *functional* and *critical* ones. The former pay particular attention to social contexts and goals, and assume that students should be capable of adapting themselves and succeeding in the current social environment. In the latter, the social context is also taken into account, but it is not considered stable, given, and neutral: students are expected to learn how to scrutinize and be critical of this context. In other words, critical literacy encourages students to question any 'neutral' and 'naturalized' version of literacy and relevant practices.

The ideological and critical literacy models by definition rely on ethnographic methods and involve training students to act as literacy ethnographers by keeping records on the literacy practices used in their home and/or community (see among others Heath, 1983; Barton, 1994; Roberts et al., 2001). By comparing literacy practices coming from different cultural communities, students could realize the diversity of literacy practices and, most importantly, the different social evaluation of such practices and, hence, the different cultural views of the world. To sum up, the only way to fight against dominant discourse, often disguised as 'neutral' and 'universal', is to teach others and ourselves alternative ways of viewing both the world and our practices in it (Brodkey, 1987, p. 75).

A critical framework for language education

In the previous section, we have seen that the ideological and critical literacy models suggest that critical consciousness could emerge by students' acquaintance with alternative cultural and ideological views. More specifically, a critical framework for language education could be based on the following theses:

- Literacy and language education programs should not be confined to enhancing grammatical, textual, and communicative skills selected independently from students' social and cultural environments.

- Students' language experiences should be used as teaching materials in class. The oral, written, electronic, multimodal texts originating in students' social everyday reality are expected to become the object of, and the stimulus for, analysis, always in relation to their particular sociocultural contexts and in critical comparison to other available resources (see Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; especially on how teachers could deal effectively with situations in which personal experiences of inequality are involved, e.g. discrimination and racism, see among others Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel and Pope, 1991).
- Special attention should be paid to the development of students' ethnographic sensitivity. Their or others' (i.e. members' of their community) experiences on sociolinguistic inequality could be the starting point for a critically oriented language education.
- The observed differences, either between the sociolinguistic repertoires and attitudes students bring in class or between these repertoires and the skills developed by the formal curriculum, should not be downplayed or even suppressed to the advantage of the dominant sociolinguistic and textlinguistic norms. Such differences are expected to be brought to the fore and become a stimulus for students' reflection and critical discussion in class.

Although teachers may find such activities challenging and time-consuming, it is our contention that both students and teachers could benefit from working with material which will be produced and chosen by the students. Especially if one of the main problems in narrative teaching is that students are not interested in the narratives provided by the school curricula (Schank and Berman, 2007), their own participation in preparing and analyzing narrative material from their own literacy practices could turn out to be a powerful motive for language learning, thus significantly increasing class involvement. It could also help them realize the importance of story-telling in socialization processes and in creating social identities.

On the exploitation of conversational narratives within a critical framework for language education

The proposed critical framework for language education is mainly based on the assumption that language materials from students' everyday social reality should be exploited in class. Furthermore, ethnographic and sociolinguistic research has shown that narrative in its various forms (i.e. conversational narratives, humorous stories, news stories) occupies a central position in people's everyday encounters (see among others Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1996; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Hence, everyday narratives could be used in an educational programme aiming at raising student's critical awareness and skills (Archakis and Tsakona, 2009).

Narrative consists of a sequence of (past) events framed from a specific evaluative point of view (Labov, 1972). This sequence of past events should not be considered an accurate representation of reality, but rather a creative (re)construction of it on the basis of the narrator's communicative goals (Bruner, 1991, p. 5). Thus, narrative construction, i.e. the choice of particular events (and the omission of others) and their representation from a particular evaluative point of view, appears to be a useful tool in the hands of the narrator to construct a specific image for him/herself and for the surrounding world (De Fina, 2003).

Narratives presuppose, and are built around, specific sociocultural expectations and norms: they implicitly or explicitly refer to such norms and their *raison d'être* is to relate a deviation from, or even a subversion of, such expectations. This is what Labov (1972) calls the *complicating action*. Given that there is considerable variation in what is considered 'normal' and what constitutes 'deviation' in different sociocultural communities and historical periods,

narratives also exhibit variation. Consequently, narrative discourse coming from different sociocultural environments constitutes an appropriate locus where different world views can be displayed and different identities can be constructed.

Elaborating on the narrative construction of identities, we consider of particular importance the process of *positioning*. This process involves the development of speakers' identities throughout the course of a narrative. Bamberg (1997, p. 337) suggests that positioning can take place at three different levels of the performance of a narrative event: at the local context, among story characters as an answer to the question "How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?" (level-1), and between narrator and audience as an answer to the question "How does the speaker position him/herself to the audience?" (level-2). The process of positioning also takes place at the wider social context as an interaction between the normative, stereotypical discourses which are in social circulation, and the particular narrated events constituting the story world. This level-3 positioning can be conceived, according to Bamberg, as an answer to the question "How do narrators position themselves to themselves?", i.e. as an attempt on the part of the narrators to make claims that hold true above and beyond the local context of the conversation providing "a (local) answer to the question 'who am I?'" (see also Bamberg, 2004). Becoming familiar with the different levels of narrative positioning will allow students to explore how they or others (as characters or narrators) evaluate 'unexpected' and 'deviant' events, whether they agree or disagree with the assumptions and values projected in the narratives, and eventually to express how they stand in relation to such assumptions and values.

A crucial question then arises as to which narratives should be exploited in class and how. As already mentioned, the materials analyzed more often than not consist of written, literary, and historical narrative genres which are far from students' everyday life, interests, and needs (see among others Tsolakis et al., 2002, 2004; for a critique, see Archakis and Tsakona, 2011, pp. 171-189; 2012, pp. 119-122). This means that narrative discourse is taught via the exploitation of literary texts and not as an everyday communicative practice very frequently used by most speakers in casual encounters. As a result, students are (explicitly or implicitly) instructed to ignore their own everyday narratives and to consider 'canonical' literary narratives as the most common and even the prototypical types of narrative.

In addition, language education in the western world mainly focuses on the sequence of past events as the defining feature of narrative discourse. With respect to this parameter, a lot of grammatical features are examined and taught (e.g. tenses, adverbs, particles, temporal structures; see, for example, Knapp and Watkins, 1994). In contrast, western language curricula do not seem to pay much attention to the *sine qua non* of narrative architecture, i.e. the process of event selection and textualization by the narrator on the basis of his/her evaluation, the subversion of the expected order and cultural norms, as well as the process of narrative construction of identities. Since critical education capitalizes on the comparative analysis of texts coming from students' social reality, the comparison of different narratives in class should highlight and elaborate on the evaluative elements of narratives and the projected identities. This kind of analysis could help teachers and students realize that narrative is a very efficient selective and constructive mechanism based on different cultural presuppositions.

In many places in the western world, classroom population is not homogeneous as students from different sociocultural and linguistic environments coexist. As a result, teachers and students most probably have easy access to rich narrative material for comparative and critical analysis which could enhance students' critical language awareness and consciousness. In this context, it is of particular importance that the collected narratives present different conceptualisations of what constitutes the norm and what deviates from it

(see Janks, 2000; Hull and Schultz, 2001; Knobel and Lankshear, 2002). Such narratives could exhibit a variety of identity construction strategies and positioning moves, either converging to or diverging from dominant meanings. More specifically, while dealing with this sort of narrative material in class and focusing on the narrative construction of identities, questions such as the following could be posed (see above Bamberg, 1997; 2004):

- What are the relationships between the narrative characters, as constructed by the narrator in the narrative world?
- What sort of relationships could be developed between the narrator and his/her audience (or his/her co-narrators) throughout the narrative event?
- In relation to what dominant meanings and discourses does the narrator position him/herself?
- What sort of identities does the narrator choose to project: does s/he appear to agree, question, resist, or even disaffiliate from the dominant meanings and values, namely from what is widely considered as 'normal' or 'expected' in given circumstances?

The discussion of identities and positioning in class is expected to bring to the surface the different norms and standpoints of the students, thus revealing their different sociocultural backgrounds and diverse goals. As a result, students get the chance to explore the sociolinguistic and cultural heterogeneity which is more or less common in contemporary schools.

We argue that from the moment students realize the ways with which identity construction can be achieved through narrative choices, they become able to use such constructions to serve their own priorities and goals. Thus, questions such as the above could enable students to develop a *meta-narrative competence* as part of their critical awareness. This competence may help them detect the ways the narratives they produce and/or read/listen to, disguise or even foster sociolinguistic discrimination, inequality, racism, or sexism (cf. Jones and Clarke, 2007).

To sum up, our proposal aims at raising students' critical language awareness by training them to identify the subversive core of narratives, as well as the identities projected by the narrator for him/herself or the characters of the narrative. Students thus acquire the critical skills required to critically analyze narratives by tracing and comparing the -implicit or explicit- values everyday narratives are built on.

The comparison of narratives: A Greek case study

The tasks constituting our proposal are the following:

- Students could be encouraged to record (or videotape) and transcribe authentic conversations in which they or members of their communities have participated. Students could also collect ethnographic information (see section "A critical framework for language education") for the social structures and cultural assumptions of their community as emerging in the particular contexts where the data is collected.
- Students could be asked to identify and compare the narratives included in the recorded conversations. Then, they could concentrate on the complicating action of each narrative and on the evaluative elements revealing each narrator's attitudes towards the narrated events. Thus, students could become conscious of the cultural norms violated by the narrated events and of the reason(s) why specific event sequences are judged as tellable.
- Special attention could be given to direct speech instances whose presence is very common and crucial to conversational narratives (Archakis and Lampropoulou, 2006;

Lampropoulou, 2007). In particular, teachers and students could discuss the position and function of direct speech instances in the sequence of events and their contribution to the process of identity construction.

- Finally, as to the identities constructed, students and teachers could focus on the three levels of narrative positioning proposed by Bamberg (1997; 2004; see the previous section), i.e. (i) on characters relationships in the story worlds, (ii) on the relationship between narrator(s) and the audience in the particular context of interaction, and (iii) on the relationship between their own selves and the wider social context beyond the local situation.

The example presented here consists of two narratives by female narrators of different age and belonging to different sociocultural communities (see acknowledgements). The topic of the narratives is quite similar: they refer to, and comment upon, power relations among spouses and how such relations affect the household. Both narratives were translated into English by the authors. Due to space limits the Greek original texts are omitted. Pseudonyms are used in both narratives to protect informants' privacy. Double parentheses include paralinguistic features which are deemed relevant for the analysis, or additional information provided by the authors. Direct speech instances appear in bold and are numbered. In order to facilitate the tagging of the turn-taking instances, we have added a letter which stands for a different represented voice, just after the numbers: *a* stands for father's voice, *b* for mother's, and *c* for daughter's.

Although the theoretical background of the present study involves specialized terminology which could discourage and confuse students, the analysis in class could avoid the frequent use of such terminology, as the following analyses will try to show. Needless to say, the role of the teacher here is crucial: s/he is expected to adjust his/her analysis and vocabulary to the abilities and needs of his/her audience. Given that the present proposal is designed for different levels of education (see "Introduction" and section "A critical framework for language education"), the use of specialized terminology could vary accordingly.

Narrative (1) is told by an old woman, Matoula (M) who was born and raised in the village of Afalonas on the Greek Island of Lesbos and migrated to Athens, the capital of Greece, in her thirties, where she worked as a nurse. She returned to her birth place in her mid-fifties, ten years before the recording took place (in 2003). Although Matoula lived for many years in Athens and was using Standard Greek at work, she has never stopped using her native variety, i.e. the local dialect of Afalonas, while she has also kept the memories from her childhood alive and refers to them quite often (see also Archakis, Lampropoulou and Papazachariou, 2009).

During the recording, Matoula converses with a researcher (R) who is interested in collecting dialectal talk and ethnographic information on her community. The old woman relates an incidence which occurred in her family, when she lived in Afalonas, her parents were alive, and she was fairly young. More specifically, the following narrative episode describes a recurring event that occurred when Matoula's father came back home after work. It involves a brief quarrel he occasionally had with Matoula's mother concerning lunch and it is framed as part of the father's bad mood due to hard work:

(1) M: Let me tell you, when my dad was coming home and he was a bit angry he would start (1a) **you Fthimigia** ((laughing)) **where have you been and I've lost you?** Fthimigia was my mom
R: Hmm
M: Well (2b) **Yanni I'm here no no how are you?** (3a) **Fine, and you? Um what kind of food have you made for today?** She says (4b) **beans**. (5a) **Will we have beans again? I can't be eating beans all days**. He was starting pissing off. (6a) **Damn the beans and you and your head**. **Oh my goodness**. (7a) **I'll eat out** ((laughing)) (8b)

> **but where will you go man, there is food, and do you have money in order to go out?** Well there was a small quarrel and finally, (9a) **ok beans with olives are fine, did the kids eat?** (10b) **They did**, he took them ((in his arms)), (11a) **come here my baby I've brought candies and goodies to eat**. We were eating, we were kissing dad, we were hugging him, we did all these.

Some of the topics which could be discussed in class are the following: At the level of narrative world (see level-1 above), and in relation to the complicating action (1a-11a), students could possibly identify a sequence of verbal action in the form of direct speech. The dramatization achieved by the use of direct speech instances highlights the interesting and presumably deviant events in relation to specific values of the village community: the father shows his dissatisfaction with the frugal meal his wife has prepared for him, although the family is not wealthy. His reaction towards his wife could be considered abrupt and rude, especially if compared to contemporary norms of behavior between married couples.

As to the identities constructed by the narrator, it is evident that the personality of husband and father prevails. On the one hand, he is represented as using verbal violence against his wife (6a). On the other, he is represented as a tender father to his kids who respect and cherish him (11a). It should be underlined that the wife and mother does not seem to feel threatened by his offensive behavior and does not react violently. Despite this communicative inequality, the mother is represented as able to calm him down and, most importantly, to use appropriate argumentation to persuade him that he cannot afford anything else (8b) and that the available food is quite nice, after all (9a). In sum, the narrator seems to create different but eventually not unequal roles for her parents. This balancing effort shows her narrative positioning, i.e. her respect towards both her parents for different reasons in each case.

At the level of narrative interaction (see level-2 above), the researcher is the narrator's interlocutor who, acting under the restrictions of his institutional role, confines himself to only prompt her to continue, without interfering in the telling. Finally, as to the traditional values and beliefs in Greece, which more often than not favor(ed) inequality among the two sexes, the narrator positions herself in such a way as to neither underestimate her mother nor overestimate her father. In her construction of the narrative world (see level-3 above), she projects herself as respectful of all aspects of traditional life in her village.

This kind of analysis in class is expected to prompt students to think of the different value system which prevailed a couple of decades ago and which may still survive in certain sociocultural groups today. Such a narrative will help them realize that there is not a single "truth" when it comes to human relations (and family relations, in particular) and that different backgrounds and experiences result in different evaluations and representations of social events.

Such observations could be highlighted via the comparison of narrative (1) with narrative (2), which is told by a woman much younger than Matoula, Mary, a Lyceum (15-18 year olds) student living in the town of Patras. Given that this narrative exhibits some interesting similarities to the previous one (e.g. a common thematic core) but different evaluation and point, they could be used in combination to raise students' critical language awareness by investigating and juxtaposing the values and the identities emerging therein. In other words, students could realize the extent to which the narratives under comparison converge or diverge, so as to critically (re)consider attitudes and stances which are in social circulation and are thought of as 'natural', but are eventually naturalized. More specifically, while narrative (1) refers to traditional family values, narrative (2) refers to contemporary ones.

Narrative (2) is related by Mary (M) in the course of her conversation with her classmate Jane (J) and in the presence of a researcher (R), namely a female university student of

approximately the same age as the other two girls. They all became close friends after spending a long time together. According to the available ethnographic information, Mary and Jane are two middle-class, independent and dynamic young women in their final year at Greek Lyceum. At the time of the recording, their main goal was to enter university. Their performance at school was excellent and they seemed to align themselves with the prevalent values and norms of middle-class Greeks. Mary narrates an incident revealing her father's inability to warm up a meal:

> (2) M: Mine ((my father)) when she tells him (1b) **warm it up**, my mother tells him on the phone, because she has no time any more, she is an accountant. We are talking tax forms, she's freaked out, you know, she doesn't undertake any housework at all
> R: Oh
> M: And she tells my father (2b) **warm it up**, or something, **the green beans or bean soup**, say. Well, in three minutes, say, the whole house stinks, the underneath, the thing, you know what ((the hotplate)), is burnt. Half the house is warmed up ((laughs)). The beans are black. He sets it at ((mark)) three, the maximum thing the cooker can take. (3c) **Set it at one, my good man, so that it warms up slowly. Be patient, man, wait**. Zoom he sets it at three and the whole house stinks. (4a) **But I didn't burn it, but do eat** ((laughs)). Mind you, he is the only one eating.
> R: He is under the impression he hasn't burned it, on top.
> J: Yes yes yes that's right. ((laughs))
> M: (5a) **Well, it's just stuck a bit** he says **and you've made a big deal out of it**.

In the above extract the main narrator is Mary, while Jane and the researcher also participate in the telling. In other words, the interlocutors' involvement is more intense here than in narrative (1), due to their intimate relationship and their agreement on the topic discussed. The three participants thus project their shared beliefs and values, thus strengthening the solidarity bonds among them.

Of special interest are the identities constructed in narrative (2), especially if juxtaposed with those constructed in narrative (1). At the level of narrative world, Mary positions herself positively towards her mother who works hard, and she fully understands why her mother does not do the household chores (*she has no time any more… she doesn't undertake any housework at all*). Therefore, Mary justifies her mother's tendency to give orders to her husband via the phone. Such orders are represented in the form of direct speech (1b-2b). At the complicating action, the husband and father is presented as unable to warm up the food properly (*He sets it at ((mark)) three... the cooker can take*). His daughter is also represented to give him directives in a rather derogatory manner (3c). Finally, the father is represented to apologize in a clumsy way (4a-5a). This construction of the father's character causes laughter to all interlocutors: they seem to position themselves negatively towards the father's inability to adjust himself to the modern way of family life and to everyday domestic chores emerging therein, whereas they fully approve of the mother's 'new' active role.

To sum up, in relation to dominant meanings in social circulation, the girls seem to co-construct non-traditional identities in line with the modern model of the dynamic working woman. They do not share the same values as the old woman of narrative (1) and do not agree with Greek men's traditional refusal (and, hence, inability) to help with the housekeeping, which is by default assigned to Greek women. For them the fact that the father does not manage to successfully perform some basic household tasks, is something worth-telling. Such an expectation for the father is very different from the image of the father created in narrative (1): there the father is represented as capricious and ungrateful towards his wife who, nevertheless, tolerates his behavior and manages to calm him down.

Concluding remarks

Within the communicative approach to language teaching, teaching needs to be closely interrelated with context, hence emphasis is given to language use in social circumstances related to social objectives. In an attempt to complement this approach with concepts coming from critical and cultural theories on discourse and language education, we propose a series of tasks which lead to the critical comparison of conversational narratives originating in different cultural communities, as well as to the comparison of the identities constructed therein. As Kalantzis and Cope (1999, p. 671) put it, "[w]hen learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles and approaches, they gain substantively in meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic abilities and in their abilities to critically reflect on complex systems and their interactions". In this context, the selection of teaching material and related tasks is expected to reflect students' age, interests and preferences.

The main linguistic goal of our proposal is to help students reach the meta-knowledge that language in general and narrative discourse in particular is a very powerful selective and constructive mechanism affecting our perception of the world on the basis of (often implicit) cultural values and norms. We have presented some tentative teaching activities involving the comparison of narratives coming from different cultural communities and aiming at improving not the students' awareness and knowledge of the linguistic system *per se*, but their narrative communicative competence and, most importantly, their *critical stance* towards narrative events. To put it in Jones and Clarke's (2007) terms, such activities are intended to enable students to make *disconnections*, which

> is one way we [i.e. teachers] can begin to bridge some of these gaps so that students' experiences could be validated while they continue to build richer understandings of the texts, others, themselves, and society. Disconnections have the potential to act as a vehicle for moving reading practices beyond *comprehension* toward critically investigating texts (emphasis in the original). (p. 111)

Such an approach to narrative teaching presents a series of advantages: students have the opportunity to focus upon, and elaborate on, the narrative genres which they have come in contact with since their early childhood (e.g. fairy tales) and which are an integral part of their everyday interactions throughout their whole life, either as an oral practice (e.g. family stories, conversational narratives, witness testimonies), as a written practice (e.g. news stories, emails, text-messages, literature), or even as a multimodal practice (e.g. online genres, TV news, reality shows, films and theatrical performances). Hence, the inclusion of everyday narratives in language education programs allows teachers to bridge the gap between out-of-school and in-school activities (see Hull and Schultz, 2001; Moje, 2002) and to adjust their teaching materials to the actual linguistic, communicative and social practices and needs of their students.

An important prerequisite for our proposal is ethnographic research: teachers and/or students are expected to collect narratives from their everyday interactions and bring them to class. Hence, they will have the opportunity to elaborate on narratives which are based on different linguistic and cultural capitals and reflect different values: the comparison and contrast of narratives coming from diverse cultural communities may lead students to unveil and critically approach the dominant, but covert, ideologies. As a result, students could realize that cultural values and assumptions lying behind the 'indisputable' and dominant (educational or other) truths are not as 'universal' and 'commonsensical' as they may consider them to be.

What we consider as the main goal of a critical education program is the ongoing struggle against the ideal of linguistic and cultural homogeneity and the acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity as a rich educational resource. In other words, following Gee (1996, pp. 89, 190-191), our proposal intends to liberate students from their strong attachment to their own ideological and cultural world view, and to prevent them from naturalizing the

epistemological tradition adopted by school, which more often than not is the dominant one. The different identities that students of various ideological and cultural backgrounds construct and project in their narratives may not lead to their harmonious acquaintance, but to more or less serious conflicts in class. We claim that such conflicts are an important step towards critical awareness, since they reveal the ideological and cultural models shaping teachers' and students' behavioral and communicative choices and goals (Gee, 1996, p. 89; see also Jones and Clarke, 2007). If teachers and students achieve this meta-knowledge of seeing the world from different perspectives, even without avoiding conflicts, they come very close to a critical self-knowledge and self-consciousness (Gee, 1996, p. 190-191; McLaren, 2007, p. 226-230), which is the cornerstone of critical education.

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