

## Towards a pragmatics of non-fictional narrative truth: Gricean and relevance-theoretic perspectives

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### Abstract

From a linguistic perspective, ‘truth’ is undoubtedly a pragmatic notion, as the truth of an utterance is not determined solely by its linguistic meaning, but is dependent upon the context in which it is uttered. Although pragmaticists have devoted some theoretical attention to factual truth, truth that is not established through comparison with an observable external reality remains comparatively under-theorised. This paper focuses on a particular kind of truth that falls within this category, namely non-fictional narrative truth. “Narrative truth” is defined as a judgement of verisimilitude accorded to the meaning of a narrative as a whole. This narrative meaning is neither rationally nor empirically verifiable, but rather arrived at by a hermeneutic process. The paper argues that certain criteria previously identified as influencing hearers’ perceptions of testimony also contribute to the creation of an impression of narrative truth. It then examines the position of these criteria within Gricean and relevance-theoretic pragmatic accounts of interpretation. Using as an illustrative example a transcription of a testimony presented to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the paper considers whether behaviour deemed ‘cooperative’ in typical conversational interaction is sufficient to yield an impression of a narrative’s truth in this particular domain. A principal finding is that adherence to the standard Gricean ‘recipe’ for cooperative conversational behaviour, with its prioritisation of truthfulness, fails to yield an impression of narrative truth. Relevance theory, on the other hand, which places equal emphasis on the form and content of utterances, more easily explains why the truth of certain kinds of narratives may be questioned. However, the criterion of relevance is also found to raise some complications, as what counts as ‘relevant’ differs across speakers and cultures. The paper concludes with a contemplation of the ethical issues raised when certain kinds of narrative are deemed ‘untruthful’ and remain figuratively unheard.

**Keywords:** narrative, truth, Grice, relevance theory, TRC

### 1. Introduction

Narratives, as Threadgold (2005:264) notes, have political consequences. Certain storytellers have “the power to name, to create ‘official versions’, and to represent legitimate social worlds”, whilst others do not (Threadgold 2005:264). An aim of the study of narrative – and

more broadly, of the study of language-in-use in general – should be to understand why certain narratives are better received than others. Such discrepancies in reception also have repercussions when it comes to the equal treatment of speakers, and therefore are of additional interest from a human rights perspective.

Much research into the nature of narrative has been done in fields such as (cognitive) psychology (particularly the work of Bruner 1991, 2004) and narratology. Within linguistics, sociolinguistic work on narrative has been prolific, with considerable attention having been devoted to canonical narrative structure (e.g. Labov 1982 and Labov and Waletzky 1997; Thornborrow and Coates 2005 is an additional example of a collection of work on the sociolinguistics of narrative). Pavlenko (2002, 2007) and Bamberg (2006) (also Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) have approached the matter with a particular emphasis on the narrative construction of identity. Testimony, which falls under the category of “non-fictional narrative”, has been analysed from a discourse-analytic perspective (e.g. Blommaert, Bock and McCormick 2006; Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007; Bock 2008; and Bernard 2009); within the frameworks of systemic functional linguistics (e.g. Bock 2009, 2011) and classical rhetoric (e.g. Olmos 2008); in the field of cognitive science (e.g. Lesage et al. 2015); and from the viewpoint of epistemology (e.g. Faulkner 2011). There has also been recent interest in the pragmatics of testimony (e.g. Warner 2013; Pedersen 2014; Peet 2015). However, there is still much room for development in linguistically-grounded theories of how the pragmatics of a narrative affect the way in which it is received or perceived.

In light of the above, this paper focuses specifically on the perception of non-fictional narrative truth. The meaning of a narrative as a whole, for present purposes, is understood to be something hermeneutically composed from the meaning of and relations between its constituent parts (Bruner 1991:8). Because hermeneutic analysis is essentially an act of interpretation, there may be a difference between “what is expressed in the text and what the text might mean” (Bruner 1991:8). On the basis of this hermeneutically-composed meaning, hearers may validate individuals’ subjective experiences by judging them as ‘true’ (Posel 2004:21). Truth is ultimately understood to be a pragmatic phenomenon, as it purports to say something about the relationship between something linguistically expressed and a state of affairs in the world.

The aim of the paper is to take some preliminary steps towards a pragmatic theorisation of non-fictional narrative truth, by identifying certain features – some discursive, and some belonging to the cognitive environments of the narrative’s audience – that lend themselves to the creation of an impression of truth in the hearer. To this end, we analyse a transcription (presented and discussed in Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 2009) of one particular testimony offered by Mrs Notrose Nobomvu Konile before South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This analysis is conducted from both a Gricean and a relevance-theoretic point of view. We show that general remarks made in Krog et al. (2009) regarding the testimony’s ‘strangeness’ can be explained in light of discursive aspects such as coherence and linearity. Importantly, the analysis also highlights the importance of the criterion of relevance, which was absent from Mrs Konile’s testimony, and in so doing emphasises the shortcomings of the Gricean approach when applied to narrative truth. The paper concludes with a brief meditation on the ethical issues raised when a testimony’s relevance, as defined by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), is prioritised.

## 2. Theoretical background: Communication, cooperation and cognition

The Gricean pragmatic programme, as is well known, takes as a foundation the cooperative nature of typical communicative events. Generally, when individuals produce an utterance, they wish for their hearer to understand their intended meaning – their utterances are, in Habermas' (cited in Cooke 1998:10) words, usually “teleological” and “intentional”. The Gricean maxims of Quantity, Quality, Manner and Relevance<sup>1</sup> act as implicit guides for speakers whose intention is to successfully convey their intended meaning. Relevance theory, laid out in Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), focuses its attention on the interaction between cognition and communication. It accords precedence to a conceptualisation of relevance that differs from Grice's maxim of Relevance, the formulation of which Grice himself acknowledges is lacking (Grice 1975:46). This section illustrates this primary difference between the two frameworks with reference to a notion central to the remainder of this paper, namely speaker responsibility.

### 2.1 Speaker responsibility within Gricean- and relevance-theoretic frameworks

Within both Gricean- and relevance-theoretic pragmatics, the speaker is supposed to produce a certain kind of utterance – one that will aid the hearer in accessing her intended meaning. Ultimately, this places some constraints on the relationship between the classic pragmatic divisions of ‘what is said’ and ‘what is meant’.

Although its precise contents are subject to much debate, ‘what is said’ is for present purposes understood as the literal meaning of an utterance that is accessible following disambiguation and reference assignment. ‘What is meant’, on the other hand, is part of what is communicated, but is not encoded in the literal meaning of the linguistic form used (Chapman 2011:193). Grice attributes the source of this additional meaning to implicature.<sup>2</sup> Implicatures arise when one of the conversational maxims is flouted. In such a case, a speaker may appear to be behaving uncooperatively, but once what is implicated by the utterance is taken into account, this impression is dispelled. Within a Gricean framework, the speaker's primary responsibility is to adhere to the maxim of Quality – the most “urgent” of the maxims, in Grice's (1975:46) words – by being truthful. This is because when an individual utters something she believes to be false, she fails to make any contribution to a conversational exchange; for what she conveys is not merely deficient information, but no information at all (Sperber and Wilson 2012:49).

Relevance theory, as noted above, accords primary importance to relevance, which is defined in such a way that cooperative conversational behaviour can be explained without reference to the other Gricean maxims, and without implying any agreement on a common purpose, or any knowledge of accepted norms. The foundational assumption of relevance theory, termed the “cognitive principle of relevance”, is that human cognitive processes have three broad aims: increasing the quantity of knowledge an individual possesses; improving the quality of the knowledge she possesses; and improving the organisation and accessibility of this knowledge (Sinclair and Winckler 1991:13). These three modifications of knowledge are termed “cognitive effects”. The hearer's goal in an interpretative situation, within the relevance-theoretic framework, is to extract the maximum number of cognitive effects with minimal processing effort.

<sup>1</sup> The Maxim of Relevance is also referred to as the Maxim of Relation in the literature.

<sup>2</sup> Some familiarity with the Gricean programme is assumed here. The reader is referred to Grice (1975) for his seminal lecture on the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims.

Utterances, furthermore, are what Sperber and Wilson refer to as “ostensive stimuli”; stimuli that are deliberately produced with the intention of conveying meaning of some sort to an audience. These ostensive stimuli come with a “guarantee of relevance” (Sinclair and Winckler 1991:20). From this guarantee of relevance, Sperber and Wilson derive the “communicative principle of relevance”, which states that “every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sinclair and Winckler 1991:22). This means that, as hearers, we are entitled to expect an utterance to generate worthwhile cognitive effects without requiring excessive use of our cognitive resources in order to derive these effects (Carston 2002:3). Contrary to the Gricean prioritisation of truthfulness on the part of the speaker, the relevance-theoretic approach places equal emphasis on the speaker’s responsibility for the content and the form of an utterance.

The above constraints guide speaker behaviour in everyday conversational interaction. Given that no pragmatic theory has yet convincingly argued for treating narrative and other conversational interactions differently, it is reasonable to begin by considering whether these guidelines, if adhered to by the narrator, lend themselves to the creation of an impression of the narrative’s verisimilitude within the hearer. Before testing this assumption with reference to Mrs Konile’s testimony, let us first consider whether additional constraints on speaker behaviour arise, due firstly to the employment of the narrative form itself, and secondly to the particular domain in which the TRC narratives were delivered.

### **3. Narrative and truth inside and outside the context of the TRC hearings**

Speaking generally, Bruner (1991:4) defines narrative as “a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual’s level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors”. Furthermore, narratives are “a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention... rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness” (Bruner 1991:4). There is neither a rational nor an empirical method of determining a narrative’s truth – Bruner (1991:8) states that “parts and wholes in a narrative rely on each other for their viability”.

This part-whole dependency is not the sole determining factor of a narrative’s meaning. Indeed, Bruner (1991:10) notes that interpretation “has more to do with context than text, with the conditions on telling rather than with what is told”. Different domains are governed by different “conditions on telling” (Bruner 1991:10), and thus what is deemed an ‘acceptable’ narrative within one sphere may be unacceptable within another. For present purposes, it is therefore important to identify the narrative conventions that dominated the TRC hearings.

The TRC was assigned the task of helping South Africans address the violence and traumas of their past by investigating the actors and motivations behind human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1994 (Bock 2011:184). As such, it took as its focus remembering: “remembering in order to properly document, remembering in order to repair and to reconcile, remembering in order to forget, remembering in order to be able to move on sensibly and sensitively” (Anthonissen 2007:1). The testimony to be considered in the present paper was delivered before the TRC’s Human Rights Violations (HRV) Committee, which specifically

considered narratives chronicling the personal experiences of victims of abuses of power and human rights violations during the relevant period (Blommaert et al. 2006:34).<sup>3</sup>

Narratives such as these may be characterised as “internally bound”, as it is the speaker that determines, often with the intention (conscious or not) of eliciting a particular interpretation in the hearer, which events to narrate, and how to structure this narration (Bernard 2009:20). It is also the case that, in the context of the HRV hearings, narratives of abuse and suffering at the hands of the apartheid state are to some extent what Bruner (1991:9) terms “banal”, in that they adhere to the conventions of canonical narratives delivered in this particular context. Such “banal” narratives are, according to Bruner (1991:9), understandable via a “well-rehearsed and virtually automatic interpretive routine”. It is when a narrator deviates from these canonical testimonies and is not able to beguile the hearer with a particularly skilful narration that an interpretative challenge for the hearer arises (Bruner 1991:9).

### 3.1 Truth and the TRC: Factual and narrative truth

Bock (2008:39) notes that four kinds of truth were explicitly distinguished in the official TRC report. Two of these are relevant to the present discussion. Firstly, factual truth is that form of truth prioritised within legal and scientific disciplines which is supported by factual, verifiable evidence and obtained through unbiased methods (Posel 2004:20). This form of truth was prominent in the TRC amnesty hearings, which provided a space for perpetrators of human rights violations to confess what they had done and why (Bernard 2009:21).

Narrative truth, in contrast to factual truth, is described by Posel (2004:3) as acknowledging that “truth-finding is an active, interpretative activity that is inevitably and irrevocably imprinted with the subjectivity of those who set off in its pursuit”. Furthermore, it is recognised that the truth of an assertion is not something that will necessarily be universally granted – Posel (2004:4) points out that narrative truth is established “strictly within the limits of a particular paradigm or way of thinking”. It is this form of truth that was prioritised during the hearings of victims’ testimonies (Bernard 2009:21).

There are clear differences between what counts as ‘truth’ within the factual and narrative domains. Indeed, narrative truth represents a separate discursive arena, within which validity is determined according to the capacity of individual stories to elicit emotion in the hearer (Posel 2004:17). Consequently, what counts as evidence does not take the form of verifiable facts, but is the “spectacle of subjectivity” that in its intensity authenticates a narrator’s story (Posel 2004:17).<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, narrative truth privileges verisimilitude, whereas factual truth seeks verifiability (Harris 2005:218).

It is possible, therefore, for an impression of narrative truth to arise even when an individual narrative is not internally consistent or conflicts with another version of events that has been put forward (Posel 2004:17). These kinds of narrative inconsistencies might plausibly be attributed to the distortions of memory wrought by trauma. However, what is important –

<sup>3</sup> See McCormick and Bock (1999) for technical details of the functioning of the HRV committee.

<sup>4</sup> In line with this observation, Bruner (1986, 1990) identifies two principle modes of thinking: narrative and paradigmatic (also referred to as “logico-scientific”). Harris (2005:218) explains Bruner’s bipartite division as follows: the former is a means of “encoding subjectivity” that deals with the human experience, beliefs and emotions; the latter takes as its focus “rationality” and the “observation and analysis of physical reality”.

specifically within the emotionally-loaded arena of the HRV hearings – is that the hearer is able to come to an understanding of the narrative as a whole that is both meaningful and appropriate according to the conditions under which it was told.

Skilful storytellers – what Bruner (1991:9) calls “narrative seducers” – can create such meaningful narratives. Another means to this end is to employ a ‘banal’ and familiar narrative script (Bruner 1991:9). Importantly, for either of these options to be available, the speaker needs to have knowledge of the conventions and narrative traditions of the culture and the domain within which she speaks (Bruner 1991:12). Furthermore, the skilful narration of a story necessarily demands some level of linguistic prowess – as Bruner (1991:4) points out in his definition of narrative, the power of the form is limited by the narrator’s story-telling proficiency.

The issue of narrative convention and tradition is set aside for the moment, and we turn to a consideration of the linguistic aspects of favourably-perceived narratives. The following sections of the paper consider the (extra- or para-) linguistic and discursive features that contribute to the creation of an impression of narrative verisimilitude. We then present a pragmatic analysis of Mrs Konile’s testimony.

### **3.2 Pragmatics, narrative truth and the question of reliability**

In certain situations, judgments of narrative truth may primarily be judgments of whether an individual’s description of an event is reliable. Yacobi’s (1981:113) narratological approach to reliability relates it to the “resolution of tensions” within a text. That is to say, a narrator’s reliability is called into question when a reader or hearer is confronted with “referential difficulties, incongruities or (self-) contradictions” in the narrator’s account (Yacobi 1981:113-114). In such a case, hearers typically attribute these tensions, incongruities and contradictions to unreliability or untruthfulness in the narrator.

Tensions of this nature can be linked to the presence (or, perhaps more frequently, absence) of linguistic aspects that, as Bernard (2009:22) notes, can influence the hearer’s impression of a narrative, or they may arise as a result of extra- or paralinguistic factors. An example of such an extralinguistic factor is the ‘expectations of iconicity’ that govern communication. Blommaert et al. (2006:44-45) define “expectations of iconicity” as expectations regarding the relationship between manners of speaking and the subject matter spoken about. This means that speakers are expected to, for example, employ a ‘serious style’ when discussing serious matters, and a humorous style when talking about something humorous.

Expectations of iconicity are closely related to generic expectations which, according to Yacobi (1981:115), dictate certain “rules of stylization” in narrative. For example, a eulogy delivered at a funeral is conventionally affectionate in tone and largely hagiographic in content. If these expectations are not met, what is delivered will likely be dismissed as not a “proper” eulogy; the speaker will be said to have deviated from a ritualistic norm. Expectations of iconicity are also often closely related to truth judgments: for example, conventions governing the content of a formal denial dictate that a suspect being questioned in relation to a murder case would not joke about how she despised the victim if she wanted her protestations of innocence to be taken at face value.

Regarding the linguistic aspects that influence an audience's perception of a speaker, Blommaert et al. (2006:56) state that judgments of the acceptability of a testimony are inextricably tied to "textual and discursive criteria" such as coherence and linearity. In keeping with this observation, Angermeyer (2011:220) highlights the correlation found in legal situations between the speech style of a witness and the evaluation of her testimony. Jurors described witnesses who used so-called "powerless language", which is marked by intensifiers, hedges and hesitation on the part of the speaker, as comparatively untrustworthy, unconvincing and untruthful. With reference to multilingual and intercultural communicative contexts – the status quo in the majority of South African discursive spaces – a speaker's lack of fluency in a language other than her mother tongue, and the presence of ambiguities and misunderstandings in speaker testimony, have also been found to be interpreted by evaluators (such as governmental interviewers of asylum-seekers) as indicators of duplicity and evasiveness (Angermeyer 2011:223; cf. also in this regard Blommaert 2009).

Under the circumstances considered in the present paper – the emotionally-charged space of the HRV hearings – it is plausible, as remarked above, that some incongruities in a testimony may be attributed to the memory-distorting effects of trauma. However, it would seem that for this kind of allowance to be made, the conventions of the discursive space must be adhered to, and the abuses suffered by the speaker must be made relevant. A burden is therefore placed on the speaker to present her testimony in such a way that her trauma is foregrounded.

The following analysis of the testimony of Mrs Konile reveals that she does not foreground the trauma she has suffered; nor does she adhere to the expectations of iconicity that govern the domain of the HRV hearings. Furthermore, her narrative lacks coherence, and its events are not chronologically ordered. It is argued that these aspects of her testimony contributed to its inhospitable reception. Furthermore, although to this day the Gricean approach is more prominent within pragmatics, it is ultimately found that the importance of the textual and discursive criteria identified in this section is more easily and elegantly accommodated within a relevance-theoretic approach, as the latter recognises form and content as equally important, whereas the Gricean approach accords precedence to the maxim of Quality.

#### 4. Data

The testimony of Mrs Notrose Nobomvu Konile, the mother of one of the murdered ANC activists known as the "Gugulethu 7", is dealt with at length in Krog et al.'s (2009) work of 'creative non-fiction' *There Was This Goat*. Mrs Konile is characterised as an "unmentioned, incorrectly identified, misspelt, incoherently testifying, translated and carelessly transcribed woman" (Krog et al. 2009 cited in Young 2012:117). In a documentary that chronicles the events surrounding the murder of the Gugulethu 7 (*Long Night's Journey Into Day*, Reid & Hoffman 2000), Mrs Konile is never named or heard, but, as Garman (2010:190) points out, her refusal during the TRC hearings to forgive her son's murderers – a reaction unique amongst those of the other mothers with whom she testified – is captured in all of its intensity.

According to Garman (2010:190), Krog was preoccupied with the dismissal of Mrs Konile's seemingly incomprehensible testimony, which Young (2012:117-118) describes as marked by "strangeness". Furthermore, the testimony's resistance to the archetypal trajectory followed by narratives presented before the TRC is argued by Krog et al. to have rendered it inaudible and Mrs Konile herself invisible (Krog et al. 2009 cited in Young 2012:117-118). Mpolweni and

Ratele applied their linguistic and sociocultural knowledge to produce a retranslation of the original Xhosa transcript of her testimony (Garman 2010:190). Building on this retranslated version, the authors make a concerted effort to understand this forgotten narrative. However, in order to explore the confusion with which the original narrative was met, we presently consider the English translation of the initial Xhosa transcription of Mrs Konile's testimony.<sup>5</sup>

Essentially, as highlighted throughout Krog et al. (2009), the bulk of the material in Mrs Konile's transcribed testimony is orthogonal to the human rights violation she is expected to describe. She speaks of going to Cape Town and of dreaming of a goat (Krog et al. 2009:13); of her own illness and confusion (Krog et al. 2009:14, 16); of being knocked down by a rock whilst digging for coal; and of drinking urine (Krog et al. 2009:16). In the midst of this jumbled narrative, she describes seeing the body of her son and his interment.

A closer look at her testimony, however, reveals aspects of a narrative of suffering that go beyond Mrs Konile's brief mention of the body and burial of her son. She describes herself as being "scared"<sup>6</sup> (Krog et al. 2009:13), and her circumstances as "miserable" (Krog et al. 2009:13) and "difficult" (Krog et al. 2009:16). Furthermore, the events that she narrates are set in an environment of poverty – she says that she was "going through a miserable life" (Krog et al. 2009:13).

Despite these disclosures, Mrs Konile's testimony was not well received, and remained figuratively unheard until Krog et al. brought it into the light. It is clear that her original opportunity to present the story of what had happened to her did not restore her dignity, as the HRV hearings, according to the official Truth and Reconciliation of South Africa report (1998:114), set out in part to do. A primary aim of the present paper is to argue that part of what led Mrs Konile's testimony to be dismissed was its unexpected content, which failed to foreground her suffering as a result of her son's murder. In addition, we argue that her narrative's jumbled form also compromised its acceptability.<sup>7</sup> The following sections consider in more detail the form and content of Mrs Konile's narrative, indicating in each case how Mrs Konile's testimony deviates from the archetypal, 'banal' victim's testimony presented to the TRC.

#### **4.1 Mrs Konile's narrative: Form and content**

Mrs Konile's testimony is (by a hypothetical listener who voices her opinions in Krog et al. 2009) characterised as "garbled", "incoherent" and "non-logical"; devoid of structure and a "sense of space" (Krog et al. 2009:1-21). As noted above, coherence, logical consistency and linearity are some of a number of criteria that determine how a narrative is perceived. The absence of these criteria can therefore only have contributed to the poor reception of Mrs Konile's testimony.

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<sup>5</sup> The difficulties of translation – although undoubtedly extremely relevant to the (mis)understanding of Mrs Konile's narrative – are not dealt with in the present paper. The reader is referred to Krog et al. (2009) for further discussion of the problem of translating between languages and across cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Although Krog et al. (2009:50) note that this was incorrectly transcribed in the English translation as "scarred".

<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps important to note at this point that we do not take a stance within the present paper as to the truth or falsity of Mrs Konile's narrative. The sole aim is to demonstrate, from a pragmatic point of view, why it may be difficult to accept the narrative as true.

Turning now to the content of Mrs Konile's narrative, Krog et al.'s hypothetical listener<sup>8</sup> typifies the reaction of the hearer when a speaker does not fulfil the hearer's expectations of iconicity. Consider the following quote from *There Was This Goat*:

This was her big moment. She sat before a mighty Commission... she could have talked about her son's death by apartheid and have demanded justice. She could have described a brave activist. But what did she do? She talked mostly about herself and the bizarre things that happened to her, which had nothing, absolutely *nothing*, to do with gross human rights violations as far as I can tell.

Krog et al. (2009:23)

Blommaert et al. (2006:35) point out that expectations that lead to reactions such as the above when thwarted are to a large extent brought about by traditions that shape the ways in which language is used within a culture, and which in turn affect ways of speaking and narrative conventions. The aforementioned authors capture these traditions under the Bakhtinian label of "intertextuality". The latter term refers to the fact that all speech is composed of bits of language that have been used before by others. Thus, when we speak, we bring previously-used speech, reorganised to suit our present purposes, into a new context.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, Blommaert et al. (2006:35) highlight that this 'used' speech is not unvalued, but brings with it its own "history of... assessment and evaluation". Thus, before a speaker says something, what she says has already been historically characterised as valuable or trivial, relevant or peripheral, and socially acceptable or unacceptable (Blommaert et al. 2006:35).

The meaning of an utterance is therefore heavily influenced by the relative social worth of the discourse within which it is articulated (Blommaert et al. 2006:35). Bourdieu refers to this phenomenon as "legitimate language", arguing that "in order to make oneself understood (including: in order to make the desired impact with one's words), one has to produce specific forms of discourse, not just any discourse" (Bourdieu 1991 cited in Blommaert et al. 2006:35).

Clearly, the language Mrs Konile uses is not 'legitimate' in this sense. Furthermore, the patterns of acceptable TRC testimony have been argued by Ross (2009 cited in Young 2012:125) to have been particularly gendered. These additional expectations, Ross claims, "render[ed] women invisible except in stereotyped roles as victims and mothers of victims" (Ross 2009 cited in Young 2012:125). Thus, the deviation of the content of Mrs Konile's narrative from the expected tale of what Young (2012:118) refers to as "the bereaved mother" likely added to its incomprehensibility.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 A Gricean approach to narrative truth in Mrs Konile's testimony

As noted above, in terms of the responsibility of a cooperative speaker within a Gricean framework, Grice (1975:46) himself argues that adherence to the maxim of Quality is the most "urgent" requirement a speaker must fulfil. Thus, 'what is said' should fulfil the maxim of Quality, unless the speaker is opting-out of or purposely flouting that maxim. However, when

<sup>8</sup> In keeping with the discussion of the perspective of a "hypothetical hearer", we use "listener"/"audience" throughout the analysis, even though the English version of Mrs Konile's testimony was never orally delivered.

<sup>9</sup> A similar observation is made by Kress (1985 cited in McCormick and Bock 2009:240).

considering the construction of a meaningful narrative from a Gricean angle, it is evident that the remaining maxims must play at least as important a role as the maxim of Quality. This is because, as noted above, criteria such as linearity and coherence that are requirements for speaker fulfilment of the maxim of Manner have a dramatic influence on hearer judgments of a narrative's acceptability and/or truth. Non-fulfilment of the maxim of Manner by speakers who are disorderly and incoherent will therefore have a negative effect on a hearer's judgment. The maxim of Relation also plays a role, as digressions from the conventional subject matter of a victim's testimony that fail to generate conversational implicatures will inevitably compromise a narrative's coherence.

The English transcript of Mrs Konile's testimony has the latter stating that she was "pinned down by a huge rock while digging for coal" in Cape Town (Krog et al. 2009:16). Krog et al.'s hypothetical hearer exclaims at the obvious falsity of this assertion because there is nowhere in Cape Town where coal can be dug; nor is there anywhere where individuals stand at risk of being pinned down by rocks, aside perhaps from Table Mountain (Krog et al. 2009:22). In addition, Mrs Konile's testimony, as already mentioned, is hard to follow, and the information she offers about the strange happenings in her life is orthogonal to the matter she is expected to discuss – that of her son's death at the hands of the apartheid state. One might imagine that if the narrative were linearly structured and conformed to the listener's expectations of iconicity, it would have met with a more sympathetic ear, despite its apparent untruths. We conclude from this that Grice's maxim of Quality is neither a necessary nor a sufficient determiner of narrative truth – Mrs Konile's apparent violation of all of the conversational maxims must have contributed to her narrative's dismissal as not just untrue but inaudible, both in Krog et al.'s (2009) text and in reality.

Clearly, if we wish to develop an account of narrative truth from a Gricean perspective, some modifications to the programme's classical assumptions about cooperative conversational behaviour must be made. A simple prioritisation of the maxim of Quality might suffice in contexts where a speaker's utterance is rationally or empirically verifiable, but otherwise does not. Relevance theory, as pointed out above, incorporates some substantial modifications of the Gricean programme into its foundational assumptions. The following sub-section considers whether these modifications constitute suitable ground upon which to build a theoretical account of narrative truth.

## **5.2 A relevance-theoretic approach to narrative truth in Mrs Konile's testimony**

Recall that the relevance of an utterance depends both on its content (in terms of how many cognitive effects it produces) and on its form (with less processing effort required in order to derive cognitive effects from an utterance being an indicator of greater relevance). Thus, it is important to consider firstly how cognitive effects may be generated by non-fictional narratives, and secondly, how the form of a narrative influences its interpretation from a relevance-theoretic perspective.

### 5.2.1 Cognitive environment and cognitive effects

Consider the quote below:

All humans live in the same physical world. We are all engaged in a lifetime's enterprise of deriving information from this common environment and constructing the best possible mental representation of it. We do not all construct the same representation, because of differences in our narrower physical environments on the one hand, and in our cognitive abilities on the other. Perceptual abilities vary in effectiveness from one individual to another. Inferential abilities also vary... People speak different languages, they have mastered different concepts; as a result, they can construct different representations and make different inferences. They have different memories too, different theories that they bring to bear on their experience in different ways. Hence, even if they all shared the same narrow physical environment, what we propose to call their cognitive environments would still differ.

Sperber and Wilson (1995:38)

Concerning non-fictional narratives offered under very specific circumstances such as that in question, it is arguable that the cognitive environments of the hearers concerned at the moment of hearing will be influenced by very specific expectations regarding the narrative and the role that the speaker will adopt. These expectations hark back to the culturally-specific traditions that, according to Blommaert et al. (2006:35), shape language use. Examples of salient expectations in this case would be along the lines of those expressed by Krog et al.'s (2009:23) hypothetical hearer – that Mrs Konile would expand upon the murder of her son, and demand either punishment of his killers or reparation from the state. In addition, as Young (2012:125) points out, she may have been expected to speak from the position of a grieving mother. The kinds of cognitive effects that may arise in such a situation will be relatively limited; conceivably only including those that reinforce hearer expectations of how the narrative event would unfold. In this case, because of Mrs Konile's digression into fantastical events unrelated to human rights violations, it is likely that a large part of her testimony would fail to produce any cognitive effects whatsoever, and would thus simply not be relevant.

The above makes it clear that there are limits to the kinds of experiences speakers can incorporate into their non-fictional narratives if they wish them to be relevant for their audience. Having thus dealt with the content of Mrs Konile's testimony from a relevance-theoretic perspective, the following sub-section turns to a consideration of its form.

### 5.2.2 Form, relevance and narrative truth

Similar demands regarding the form of an utterance play a role in both Gricean and relevance-theoretic accounts of how an impression of narrative truth may arise. Speaker contributions, according to the relevance-theoretic approach, should be fluent, coherent and chronologically ordered in order to reduce the processing effort demanded of the hearer. Sperber and Wilson (2012:282) go so far as to remark that “[s]ince relevance varies inversely with effort, the very fact that an interpretation is easily accessible gives it an initial degree of plausibility”. Mrs Konile's incoherent and unstructured testimony would require large amounts of processing effort from her audience in order for them to reach an interpretation that produces any sort of cognitive effect (if we suppose that such an interpretation is even accessible if her audience is

not able to press her for further explanation or clarification). Due to the fact that an interpretation yielding cognitive effects is so far from easily accessible, it is a) unlikely that a hearer will even go through the effort of deriving such an interpretation and b) once arriving at such an interpretation, equally unlikely that she will accept it as plausible. A more probable reaction would be the hearer questioning why, if Mrs Konile did mean to convey an account 'suitable' for delivery before the HRV committee, she did not incorporate relevant information concerning the human rights violation that had impacted her life.

The above suggests that although relevance theory acknowledges the importance of the form of a narrative (in terms of orderliness, coherence and so forth), it ultimately demands that the narrative adhere to certain contextual limitations. Put differently, only particular utterances can be accepted as relevant within certain domains, for only particular utterances will produce cognitive effects in accordance with the audience's cognitive environment, affected as it is by culturally-specific traditions regarding what constitutes 'appropriate' language use. As Polanyi (1979 cited in Thornborrow and Coates 2005:11) notes, the judgment of a narrative's significance depends on whether it contains "culturally salient material generally agreed upon by members of the producer's culture to be self-evidently important and true". Talk (whether coherent or not) about drinking urine and being crushed by boulders is excluded from what counts as meaningful within the TRC's discursive space.

## **6. Implications: Truth, relevance and questions of ethics**

Without support from empirical data, it is of course impossible to argue conclusively that an impression of truth *cannot* arise from a narrative that is disorderly in form and irrelevant in content. However, it is clear that it is far more difficult for an impression of verisimilitude to arise from such a narrative. When a narrative does not follow the conventions of the realm within which it is uttered, and when the narrator is not skilful enough to beguile her audience into extracting from her tale the desired interpretation, the act of interpretation – putting together the respective meanings of the narrative's constituents – becomes strenuous. Ultimately, as Bruner (1991:8) notes, it is only when the "parts and whole [of a story] can... be made to live together" that it becomes plausible to accept the story as true.

The questions considerations such as these raise are a) whether the criteria hypothesised above to be important in the generation of an impression of non-fictional narrative truth are indeed influential in real-life narrative reception; and b) if they are, what are the implications for our understanding of narrative truth? The first of these questions requires empirical data to be answered, and is thus put aside for further research. The second question is essentially an ethical one, and demands deeper consideration. Indeed, we must think about whether, if hearer expectations of relevance play such a crucial role in judgments of truthfulness, there is a danger of speakers being unjustly dismissed, particularly when speaker and hearer may be said to possess markedly different cognitive environments. Differing expectations of relevance may constitute yet another barrier to mutual comprehension between speakers of disparate backgrounds. If this is the case, then the present paper must conclude with a familiar call for greater strides towards intercultural understanding to be taken.

In conclusion: this paper has discussed non-fictional narrative truth in light of both Gricean and relevance-theoretic pragmatics, where "narrative truth" is defined as a judgment of verisimilitude conferred upon the meaning of a narrative, which is in its turn hermeneutically

derived. Using a single testimony from the TRC hearings as an illustrative example, criteria previously discussed in Blommaert et al. (2006) with general reference to testimonies presented before the TRC were shown to be important in the generation of an impression of narrative truth. Paramount amongst these were coherence and linearity, and generic restrictions that relate to the satisfaction of hearers' 'expectations of iconicity' regarding the relationship between manners of speaking and the subject matter spoken about. Gricean pragmatics' focus on fulfilment of the maxim of Quality was argued to be neither necessary nor sufficient to generate an impression of narrative truth. It was found that a relevance-theoretic approach accounts more easily for the importance of both form and content in shaping a meaningful and believable non-fictional narrative. A relevance-theoretic perspective is therefore a better starting point for a pragmatic investigation of narrative truth. However, the paper also observed that the very criterion of 'relevance' poses a complication, as what constitutes relevant information differs across speakers according to differences in their cognitive environments. Ultimately, the paper leaves open an ethical question – as speakers and hearers in a multilingual, multicultural and historically divided country such as South Africa, how are we to avoid the unjust figurative silencing of those who speak 'strangely'?

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