

# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 207

### Chronotopes, synchronization and formats

by

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# Chronotopes, synchronization and formats

Jan Blommaert

*Commentary, AAAL 2018, panel “Chronotopes and Chronotopic Relations” (convenors: Anna De Fina & Sabina Perrino).*

- *Anna De Fina, Guiseppe Paternostro & Marcello Amoroso, "Odysseus the traveler: appropriation of a chronotope in a community of practice"*
- *Zane Goebel & Howard Manns, "Chronotopic Relations and Scalar Shifters"*
- *Farzad Karimzad, "Metapragmatics of Normalcy: Mobility, Context, and Language Choice"*
- *Sabina Perrino & Gregory Kohler, "Chronotopic Identities in Northern Italian Executives' Narratives"*
- *Paul Prior, "Becoming a biologist: A lifespan case study of chronotopic lamination, disciplinarity and semiosis"*
- *Kristina Wirtz, "Mourning as political action: Chronotopes of encounter with the dead"*

All of us, at some point in our training, must have been told that sociolinguistics is the study of who can say what to whom, when, where, how and why. For decades, this set of variables was loosely categorized under the label of ‘context’ in actual research, usually as part of a synchronic and local (i.e. situated) descriptive analysis of bits of real-live language-in-situ.

This did not do justice to the handful of scholars who saw context (and situation) as a dynamic, scaled and practice-based evolving feature of meaning-making – think of Gumperz, Hymes, the Goodwins and Cicourel. But this snapshot view of context took some time to be replaced by a laminated and complex one. Language ideologies made us realize that the formal structures of language-in-situ were always pervaded by informal, implicit ones providing layers of historicity to moments of communication, and turning Gumperz’s notion of contextualization into what Silverstein called an ‘indexical metric’ not just organizing talk, but dynamically and dialogically organizing (‘constructing’ in the sense of social constructivism) the situation (i.e. the context) and the participants’ roles and identities as well, in a world of indeterminacy and mobility of people, the resources they could draw on, and the situations they could become involved in.

I see chronotopes and scales as potentially useful instruments for adding accuracy to this laminated and complex understanding of the old sociolinguistic question. Of fundamental importance to Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope, in my view, is the social-historical dimension of social action he inscribes into it – an effect of his dialogue with Marxism, and something that underlies almost any other of his key concepts (think of heteroglossia). Utterances always

‘come from somewhere’, they draw on histories of use and abuse in a way that marks them (indexically) as potentially configuring chronotopes, activating them as represented, embodied and inscribed meaning potential, and enabling heteroglossic ‘lamination’, as Paul Prior beautifully illustrates in his paper.

Prior also gestures towards one of the Catch-22’s of Bakhtin’s social-historical approach in his paper: reading texts as embodying history and historically configured social positions always risks a certain degree of determinism – something we see, for instance, in Bourdieu’s *La Misère du Monde*. The stories that make up and define a life can, certainly for a discourse analyst, historian or biographer but also for a judge in a criminal court and an immigration officer, be given a dimension of linear continuity, consistency, coherence and ‘logic’, if you wish, absent from the experiential world of the narrator whose accounting practices travel through (as Prior points out) multiple semiotic remediations, including rescaling work – from stories to lives, from moment to history, from individuals to communities.

I found the presence of coherence, continuity and consistency both as a chronotope in its own right, and as a cross-chronotopic connection, strikingly present in the papers of this panel. And before I move into a closer discussion of this issue, let me just point out one thing. It would be quite stimulating, I suppose, to reread for instance Goebel & Manns’ paper using a vocabulary drawn from sentence- and text-grammatical or -pragmatic work on coherence and cohesion (one could try Halliday & Hasan). Such work, needless to repeat, is having a revival of sorts currently due to the automated use of big data corpora. This rereading exercise should show us the different games we are playing. While big data analysts robustly stick to language as a *linguistic* system, Goebel & Manns (and the others in this panel) approach it as a *sociolinguistic* system. In so doing, we have taken fundamentally different epistemological and ontological positions. Chronotopes and scales can only occur in a sociolinguistic paradigm, not a linguistic one. And it is good to remind ourselves that this is the universe we are operating in.

But this was a mere footnote situating what we discuss here in a larger frame of intellectual development. I now return to the point about consistency, coherence, continuity.

The idea of consistency, coherence and continuity is of course most clearly present in the papers of Wirtz, Perrino & Kohler and Prior. Wirtz’s description of rituals of commemoration all include – even literally, as in Raul Castro’s speech about his brother’s speech – cross-chronotopic continuity as a trope. The dead can be made present by invoking their ‘legacy’ as part of contemporary lived history. Not just the dead can be present, but the DNA of a metaphysical Italian society can be turned into the currency of today’s identity work, as Perrino & Kohler’s case showed. In both papers, we see how such invocations of continuity, coherence and consistency have powerful political effects: both manage to carve out, isolate and appropriate specific layers and chunks of history presented as *theirs* and *unique to them*, and in that sense as a denial or reversal of the hegemonic histories imposed on them.

Consistency, coherence and continuity are the stuff of a chronotope here, while of course in so doing several chronotopes are diachronically (and/or metaphysically) connected as one. Grandfather’s pioneering efforts of the 1920s are inseparable from those of the present leader of the family enterprise in Italy, just like Fidel’s speeches from the late 1950s are elementary ingredients of today’s political soundtrack for all Cubans. Of course, invoking the 1920s and 1950s involves chronotopic displacement – an imagination of a past and of dead people – but

such chronotopes are, one could say, *synchronized* as a new one, valid for the present. I called this phenomenon ‘layered simultaneity’ a while ago.

In Prior’s analysis of Nora’s becoming a biologist, we see the layering in such simultaneity. Sequencing work needs to be done in which episodes are connected. Formulated differently, we see elaborate accounting practices stretching from the present towards the past, semiotically remediating stuff that can – only from the present – be seen as a prefiguration of what followed. A ‘logic of action’ (to borrow Bourdieu’s words for a moment) that is produced and articulated in the present but is in effect timeless: a chronotope of tradition, authenticity or (as Karimzad writes) ‘normalcy’ appears here as a cross-chronotopic synchronized bricolage of signs all made to point in a general direction: the present, me/us, and the future of me/us. The indexical vectors of diffuse chronotopic fragments have been discursively reoriented towards meaningfulness in a here-and-now.

I would think that any moment of synchronization involves such indexical vector reorientations, and I will try to elaborate that a bit in what follows. But before I can do that, I need to make another small side-step.

I used the term ‘accounting practices’ just now, and I used it in as ‘making meaningful in the here-and-now of social action’, much in the sense of Garfinkel. I should mention two things now that have kept me busy lately in my own rethinking of chronotopes and scales: (1) an action-theoretical perspective, and (2) continuous moralization.

To start with the first: a quite radical action-theoretical perspective appears inescapable, I believe, if we wish to avoid the degree of determinism mentioned earlier when we mentioned Bakhtin’s sociohistorical view of chronotope. There is much in the moment-to-moment evolving of social action that defies a priori about identity, community and action itself, and the Goodwins reminded us two decades ago that “there are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized”. They themselves were inspired by Garfinkel’s radically action-centered approach in which (following George Herbert Mead and in line with e.g. Strauss and Goffman) whatever we consider to be identity in interaction cannot be formulated in terms of stuff that is *already there* – resources, social categories, opportunities and constraints on action – but needs to be seen as concrete, actual social *effects* of such situated interactions. I believe this is a sound principle, but it needs to be handled with care.

The reason for that is my second concern: moralization. We see that such effects are invariably constructed and construed interactionally by invocations of *available and accessible moral criteria*, projected onto equally available and accessible behavioral scripts. So, one could say that there are a priori’s (and in fact, this was a bone of contention between e.g. Cicourel and conversation analysts in the Schegloffian school), but at the same time only as a latent, potential and unequally distributed interpretive resource, which needs to be dialogically co-constructed in social action. So: it’s a priori and not a priori; a resource but also an action; a given and a created thing. Karimzad’s paper captures this excellently by using the term ‘chronotopization’, referring to the way in which people do not just ‘step into’ existing chronotopes but build them anew while drawing on existing, intertextual and pretextual *moral* indexical arrangements. Identity judgments are – here, I borrow older pragmatic terminology once again – judgments of *appropriateness*, of things that fit a script and are seen as enabling the social enactment of such scripts. And appropriateness is a moral judgment with its feet firmly planted into social history (variously labeled as ‘tradition’,

‘customs’ or – Karimzad – ‘normalcy’). Such patterns of chronotopization, thus, involve what Perrino & Kohler call ‘solidification’: chronotopically organized social action needs to be ratified in order to be made consequential, and this is done on the basis of ‘solid’ invokable intertexts and pretexts.

While I apologize to my audience for the overly technical tone of my comments at this point, I shall continue along this line for a brief moment. For now, I need to fold my two concerns together and apply them to what has been presented in this panel.

The solid invokable intertexts and pretexts are, I would suggest, *indexical vectors*: general indexical valuations attached to sets of indexicals, turning them into positive, negative or anything in-between evaluative pointers. This is the mechanism of what Bakhtin called ‘evaluative response’, and it brings us, I believe, to the heart of what Garfinkel saw as the essence of social order: *recognizability*.

There is a long tradition, of course, of using recognizability as linguistic identifiability (‘I recognize your words as English’; ‘this is [recognizable as] 11<sup>th</sup> century Swahili’); I suggest we see it as a primarily *moral* concept capturing (1) the relative stability of judgments about social and cultural appropriateness, combined with and in spite of (2) the tremendous variability in which such appropriateness can be actually encoded semiotically. In an older (Whorfian) jargon, it’s about stability of functions and diversity of linguistic structures, but (as Hymes told us) this form of relativity is bidirectional. We are talking here about specific sets of sociolinguistic resources tying (dialogically) the practice of communicative action to moral judgments, creating what Garfinkel called ‘autochthonous order properties’ of behavioral scripts or ‘formats’ – where ‘order’ is a moral notion. In a very vulgar rewording, we’re talking about the moral economy of communicative practice.

When I now turn to the papers in this panel, I begin to see examples of this almost everywhere, most emphatically in the papers by De Fina, Paternostro & Amoruso; by Goebel & Manns and by Karimzad.

In the paper by De Fina, Paternostro & Amoruso, the Odyssey is used as the input for creating ‘order’, if you wish, in the narratives of young refugees in Italy. The key phrase here, expressed by one of the subjects, is ‘practically everybody knows it’. By using this widely known (and thus recognizable) frame into the moments of narrative production, these moments get ‘autochthonous order properties’, they are ‘formatted’; more precisely they are given clear indexical vectors organizing the valuations in the narratives. It is no surprise that one of the subjects identifies the warm and hospitable Nausicaa as a ‘good’ figure in the story, and identifies with her. Like Fidel Castro for contemporary Cubans and the Italian DNA for contemporary fashion entrepreneurs, cross-chronotopic synchronization is enabled here and it involves an indexical vector reorientation of almost everything, in ‘figures’ of good, bad, and anything-in-between. The power of the paper by Anna and her colleagues lies in the demonstration of how exactly such a cross-chronotopic synchronization can trigger substantial pedagogical, therapeutic and healing effects. We already saw that it provokes or enables political effects too, and taken together, what we see is that such forms of synchronization – remoralization, so to speak – could prove to be massively important for our understanding of social life.

Like Karimzad, Goebel & Manns emphasize the emerging and contingent nature of chronotopes – ‘chronotopes are always under construction’ – and perhaps more so than in

other papers, we can observe the step-by-step construction work of synchronized cross-chronotope constructs in Goebel & Manns' paper. There is no hocus-pocus to chronotopic solidification, no mental map suddenly unfolding: it is hard interactional work to be performed by participants in social actions. Which is why it is often strongly ritualized, as in Wirtz's examples: yes, the dead can be present perpetually in someone's life, but their actual co-presence in social events requires a ritualized platform and ritually ratified participants.

It is significant, in Goebel & Manns' paper, that metapragmatic commentary on language choice is a locus of scale-shifting. We can reformulate this slightly: it is a locus of the renegotiation of indexical vectors attached to specific sociolinguistic resources in such a way that they enable specific chronotopic work to be done. In Karimzad's examples, I also noted how language shifts accompany topical moves: a densely moralized person, moment or account is surrounded by careful metapragmatic work, organizing the moral universe in which this *specific* piece of information needs to be set. In Perrino & Kohler's examples, I observed the ethnopoetic patterning – repetitions, parallelisms – surrounding the cross-scale moves and the foregrounding of core motifs such as tradition and authenticity. And briefly returning to another topic: a closer look at the examples presented in the papers would, I anticipate, show that the crucial actions in the search for continuity, coherence and consistency would all be marked by significant discursive-formal and narrative-structural features. If we need examples of the moral economy of communicative practices and the specific moral load interactionally attached to specific sociolinguistic resources, look no further: the papers from this panel are replete with them.

What these papers jointly demonstrate, I believe, is the power of profound ethnographic and case-based analysis of 'big' issues. Chronotopes and chronotopic relations are big issues connecting situated moments of interaction to the very large patterns of social order. I already mentioned the way in which an obsolete notion of coherence and cohesion currently regains momentum due to the deployment of hi-tech onto colossal textual corpora. I have heard people in that field predict that they will soon make predictions – predictions about human social behavior, interactionally established social order, and of course human nature. My confidence about predictions of predictions is generally speaking quite low; I tend to attach more value to a mode of analysis in which one assumes that – to paraphrase Cicourel – people make sense of society by making sense of situations. A mode of analysis, in other words, in which we assume that the big things can be found in a much more accurate way in very small things. The papers in this panel demonstrate the lasting value of this approach.

And so I can conclude. I believe that I have tried to formulate two substantive points in these comments. One was about chronotope as a primarily moral notion; the other was about chronotopic relations as forms of synchronization, where the latter was understood as revolving around indexical vector reorientation towards 'formats'. None of what I formulated here was formulated before I saw the papers of this panel. I am deeply grateful to the presenters and the panel convenors for offering me the thing that makes every academic happy: an opportunity to think new things.