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First person singular and plural

Narrative strategies in hand-written newspapers

The term “first person writing” leaves open the question of the singularity and plurality. The relationship of individual, social and collective experiences and narration is important in the analysis of ego-documents. My paper is based on a long-term research project on hand-written newspapers, which were a popular tradition in Finnish schools, families, student organizations, popular movements in late 19th and early 20th-century. (Salmi-Niklander 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009.)

My special interest lies in local event narratives, which along with parodic news and advertisements are genres typical to hand-written newspapers. They depict recent events in local communities: meetings, trips and social evenings. I have observed complex means of narration in these apparently simple stories: first person plural (“we”) is much more common in local event narratives than first person singular (“I”). Even in local event narratives told in the first person the narrator takes the position of a commentator or an observer and seldom refers to his or her individual experiences. According to my observations, local event narratives can express hidden tensions and slow historical processes, which are rather acted out in apparently trivial events of everyday life rather than formulated in ideological statements. One of these processes was the changing position of women and in late 19th-century Finland.

I have discussed these questions in my doctoral thesis “Self-education and rebellion” (2004) and in 2004 and in my post-doctoral project “Hand-written newspapers as an alternative medium in 19th- and early 20th-century Finland” (Academy of Finland 2007–2009, Kone Foundation 2010). I started a five-year post as Academy Research Fellow in September, focusing on authorial and narrative strategies in oral-literary traditions. By **oral-literary local tradition** I mean those expressive genres which involved both oral and written communication. Another key term in my research is a **conversational community**, by which I mean a group of people in close interaction, who create, adapt and interpret texts presented in oral and literary form.

Hand-written newspapers are an excellent example of oral-literary tradition. Most often they were produced as one single copy, and published by being read out aloud in meetings and get-togethers. Oral performance was an important part of their publication, and sometimes the writers would rather point their words for the readers than to the listeners of the paper. Writers of hand-written newspapers utilized a great variety of genres and motifs adopted from literary culture (essays, poems, short stories) and oral tradition (proverbs, folk songs, folk legends).

I have outlined **fictionalization** and **localization** as two main narrative strategies in hand-written newspapers. Local events and personal experiences are fictionalized with various literary methods: narration, metaphors, literary citations, irony and parody. Localization, on the other hand, includes different means of rewriting and re-interpreting printed texts in a local context.

Small stories and local event narratives

In folklore studies, “personal experience narrative” has been defined as a genre of oral narration which does not fit into the traditional folkloristic genres. Sandra Dolby Stahl (1989, 12–13) defines personal experience narrative as a prose narrative referring to a personal experience, told in the first person and with untraditional content. Moreover, she argues that personal experience narratives have a dramatic narrative structure, the truth of the narrative is consistently implied and teller of the story is identical with the narrator (Stahl 1989, 14–15).

The plots of local event narratives are usually simple and undramatic, and it is difficult to apply William Labov’s narrative models in their analysis. In the closer analysis, I have observed in local event narratives complex various narrative positions, which the writers utilize in order to fictionalize their own experiences. Although local event narratives follow the literary models of parallel genres in printed newspapers, they also take a parodic distance to these models. The literary style in local event narratives varies from matter-to-fact reports to a collective stream of consciousness, in which even the narrator seems to be unaware of what is going to happen next. The first person plural is much more common in local event narratives than the first person singular. An omniscient narrator appears in many local event narratives, in which the narrator predicts the events or describes the emotions, even the dreams of the characters – even though these characters would be real people living in the same community with the writer. I have also observed the use of unreliable narrator in some local event narratives, which I have called “pseudo-personal-experience-narratives”: the unreliability of the narrator is pointed out by his/her ignorance or dubious morals.

I have applied the narrative methodology oriented to “small stories” (Georgakopoulou 2007; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) to local event narratives in hand-written newspapers. Modified for historical archive materials, the small stories -methodology provides possibilities for innovative new readings. The small stories -methodology comes close to my own observations on local event narratives, even though Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou base their methodological observations on contemporary interview materials. The focus of the “small stories”-research is on how people use stories in everyday situations “to create a sense of who they are”. “Small stories” can also be called “narratives-in interaction”, which Bamberg and Georgakopoulou define “as the sites of engagement where identities are continuously practised and tested out”.

Based on the methodological observations of Michael Bamberg and Angela Georgakopoulou, I have outlined a three-phase model of analysis for local event narratives. I focus on (1) the content of the narrative (characters, events, time and place, means of narration), (2) on the processes of text production, publishing and authorship and (3) on the relations of the narrative with historical events, ideologies and master narratives.

“Small stories” can be about very recent or still unfolding events, events that may or may not have actually happened, and they can even be “stories about nothing”. These are features that I recognize in the local event narratives in historical archive materials: meta-narratives in which the narrators attempt to tell a coherent story or to find a suitable subject for a story, but don’t succeed. And this is not because of their lacking literary skills, since often these “pseudo-narratives” are told in quite coherent and elaborated language.

One of my main questions in the analysis of local event narratives is: Is it possible to reach the everyday practices of identity work, if I have only have fragmentary literary documents available and cannot interview the people who have created them – or in many cases I don’t even know who they are and if the clues they have given me about their identity and the events would be totally misleading?

Picnics and walking tours

As an example I analyse some local event narratives written by young men and women in Helsinki in 1893. These stories were published in the hand-written newspaper of the conversational club of the temperance society known as “The Star” in Helsinki. It was a meeting place for men and women

as well as for members of different social classes. The society belonged to a nation-wide organisation, *Friends of Temperance*, which was established in 1883. The amount of members varied between 100 and 200 during the 1890s. A volume of *Kehitys* with ca. 500 pages written during the years 1891–1893 has been preserved at the National Library. (Salmi-Niklander 2005, 2006.)

Kehitys was edited by young male students and artisans, who discussed the temperance ideology, philosophical, and scientific matters. The Finnish historian Irma Sulkunen (1986) has outlined the temperance ideology as a new “religion of citizenship”, which looked for alternatives to the Christian world view. The writers of *Kehitys* wanted to create a synthesis of Christianity, the idealistic ideals for self-education and the new achievements of natural sciences.

It is difficult to identify the individual writers of *Kehitys*, since the minutes have not been preserved and most texts were written anonymously or under a pseudonym, which was a common habit in hand-written newspapers. The first story (see handout) was published in *Kehitys* in January 1893, entitled “Features on young people’s lives” as the first part of a series of similar stories. I have not been able to identify the writer, who uses the initials F.W. and obviously was a young man.

The other story (see handout) was published in July 1893 in two parts, and the writer was a young woman under the pseudonym “Enne”. She was one of the few female writers of *Kehitys*, who published a few reports and poems in 1893. Based on small idiosyncrasies in her texts I can estimate that “Enne” probably had only passed elementary schooling. She could have been one of the four seamstresses or three female servants who belonged to the society in 1890.

Both stories are quite typical examples of narrative strategies in local event narratives: narrators merge into a group of young people, men and women by using the first person plural or the passive tense. In both stories, the narrator never uses the word “I” nor refers to his/her own emotions and experiences.

The first story turns upside down the ideological goals of the temperance movement: the meeting is only boring and low-spirited preparation for the spontaneous and joyful walking-tour. The variation of past and present tenses is typical to local event narratives: the reader (or the listener) gets the impression of immediate events, as if even the narrator would not know what would happen next. The lively group of young people occupies the street and the other pedestrians have to “creep in the

sewer” to get by. One of them (probably a young man) whose words are cited suggests that they all would accompany home miss Ida X, who lives a few kilometres outside the city border. The spontaneous walking tour is described such detail that I have been able to estimate that Miss Ida X, the only named and individualised person in the story, lived near the Annala manor in Eastern Helsinki. The tour proceeds quite slowly, since as soon as they get outside the town gates they start a popular party game in the snow, “leskisillä”, because “nobody wanted to walk without a companion”. They meet a group of Salvation Army soldiers and a policeman. The narrator merges to the collective emotions of the group: “Now we forgot all the troubles and the reprimand we would get at home for a late arrival, it was most important that we had fun now.” Then it turns out that the group is not quite unanimous: the young men would like to go on with the party games but the women start to be tired. Only at the end of the story the narrator reveals that he is a man, but this only in relation to the collective of “male human beings”, who decide to accompany all the women home together. It is obvious that the collective male subject makes the decisions and initiatives. However, the comment on the reprimand to be received at home rather relates to the young women.

The picnic report by the pseudonym “Enne” is another simple story: a group of eight young men and women makes a short trip by train and continues on foot 13 kilometres to the seaside. The narrator proceeds in “the collective we”, merging first into the group of four young women, who get up early on Sunday morning to be in time on the railway station. They are worried since the rest of the group (young men) are late:

The whole trip started to look suspicious [for us], one thing and another was said about people who break their word. Only 5ve minutes were left for the departure of the train when at last arrived 4r more people, these still was not all but we could not wait any longer, we rushed to the train which soon blew the sign for the departure.

“Enne” received a critical response from the male members of the choir for her apparently innocent picnic report. The reason for this reply, which was published in the next issue of *The Progress*, were some quite mild critical remarks she had directed at the young men about their behaviour during the picnic: she made remarks for their almost missing the train and not carrying the coats and lunch bags of the girls right from the beginning. The close reading of the picnic report suggests a collective jealousy as a possible reason for this aggressive response: after the young men have courteously carried the luggage of the young women during the hike, the girls neither see nor hear anybody else than young Mikael Nyberg, who is courteously referred to as “Our Director”. The picnic provides a possibility for collective intimacy between him and the guests. It was also an unique event for “Enne” and the other members of the choir, since they could drink coffee on the

veranda with members of a well-known intellectual family as if they were one of them. “Enne” never refers to herself as in individual actor, nor to her own emotions or experiences, but her emotions are reflected in the romantic tone of the depiction of the scenery, in which the narrator refers to herself and her friends in with the collective third person: “The inlet rested smooth as grall, the ancient birches offered cool in the shadow of their thick-growing branches, the aspen leaves quivered, and the birds sang songs of praise of their Creator, everything, everything was full of serene peace, which created new emotions in the heart of a traveller from Helsinki.”

Two months later, 7 September 1893 two stories were published in *Kehitys*, which depicted a summer retreat in previous July (see handout): a group of six (obviously) young men take the train to Kerava and continue by a horse cart to a farmhouse, where they spend their summer vacation fishing, enjoying the nature and by making friends with local “men of temperance”. The gender of the travellers is never openly stated: the narration proceeds whole the time in the first person plural, and the members of the group are referred to as “persons”. I have estimated in the indirect references to the other “men of temperance” that the travellers actually are all men – but why is this fact so carefully avoided? The writer behind the initials J.S. was probably Jaakko Saha, a construction worker and later an engine driver. His wife had joined the society before him, and it is quite probable that there were other wives and fiancées of the travellers among the listeners of this story. Comparing this to Enne’s story, the narration has feminine tone with conventional nature observations. It was important to convince the female spouses that their husbands had actually spent their holidays properly.

There is also another story on this same summer retreat, which follows more clearly the Grand Tour model: one of the travellers (probably a young pressman Karl Skogster) is a passionate cyclist and takes his bicycle (which is ironically referred to as his “horse”) to the retreat. He gets the mail and newspapers to his friends by his “horse”, and in the middle of their vacation he starts his own, individual journey. Unlike the narrator of the retreat story, this narrator uses the narrative I whole the time. He depicts in great detail his day’s journey, which is quite an achievement considering the condition of roads at that time. The individuality of his experiences and emotions makes this story a counter-narrative to the retreat story, in which all the emotions and experiences are strictly collective.

The ambiguous relation between individuality and collectivity is one of the continuities in the local event narratives written by young adults in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. This ambiguity can

be observed in these stories: To which extent can the writers and narrators separate their individual emotions and experiences from those of the collective? And how are the emotions and experiences related with the generic and intertextual conventions?

Time and space are important aspects in travel stories and in local event narratives in general. Anne Ollila has observed the experience of time in the personal writings of young middle class women in late 19th-century Finland (Ollila 2000). One of the key experiences brought by the new technical development, especially the trains, was the importance of exact time. The bicyclist carefully documents times, spaces and place names of his travel. As a contrast local event narratives include sequences where “the time vanishes” in the collective experience of the beauty of the nature.

An important although difficult question in the narrative analysis is: why? Why does a young man writing a story on an apparently innocent summer retreat so carefully hide the simple fact and he and his companions were men? Why did Enne’s apparently innocent picnic report get such a critical response? Hidden or neutralized gender seems to be a new convention in the conversational communities of young men and women, which started to be established in late 19th century. Young women initiated the depiction of small, local events and experiences in their own stories. The analysis of local event narratives makes visible the slow processes and hidden power struggles.

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Handout: Citations of texts discussed in the paper

***Kehitys* (“Progress”), Speakers’s club of the temperance society “The Star” (Helsinki); Finnish National Library, Manuscript Department**

(Translated by Kirsti Salmi-Niklander)

F.S: Features on young people’s life I (*Kohtauksia nuorison elämästä I*)

Kehitys N:o 1, January 12th 1893

It was a beautiful winter evening. The earth was covered with a few inches of new snow, and the weather was not very cold. We were a large group of young people sitting in a meeting. The spirits were quite low, since here and there somebody opened their mouths wider than usual and the others looked frequently at their watches. The meeting seemed to last longer than usually, but finally when it was over, and it was over 10.30. p.m. A little before the meeting was ended, the young people rushed out making a lot of noise. Little by little we gather on the pavement, where we have a little meeting without paying attention to the pedestrians, who have to creep in the sewer to get by. This time when the ardour was at its height, a voice was heard above others saying: “Wouldn’t you all agree with my suggestion?”[--]

After we had come about ½ kilometres from the city we once again turned down to a by-road and after walking some time we come to the home gate of one of the women in the company; we male human beings had already decided to accompany together all the women home. Here we sang a few songs in a mixed choir (it was well past midnight, so singing was admissible for us), after which we continued our way back to the city.

Enne: A Delightful Summer Day in the Countryside, July 1893

The whole trip started to look suspicious [for us], one thing and another was said about people who break their word. Only 5ve minutes were left for the departure of the train when at last arrived 4r more people, these still was not all but we could not wait any longer, we rushed to the train which soon blew the sign for the departure. [--]

The inlet rested smooth as grall, the ancient birches offered cool in the shadow of their thick-growing branches, the aspen leaves quivered, and the birds sang songs of praise of their Creator, everything, everything was full of serene peace, which created new emotions in the heart of a traveller from Helsinki.

Memories on summer holidays (J.S.), 7.9.1893

It felt so sweet to travel on a beautiful summer evening surrounded by the singing birds, and in the good smell of all fruits of the earth. – When we got to our destination we could enjoy the hospitality of the house people. Later in the evening we were accommodated in two buildings close to each other, where we got comfortable dwellings, on the first morning we woke up early in the lovely singing of the birds and in the gentle smile of the morning sun. After eating our breakfast we went to see the village sceneries and in the afternoon we went fishing.

On a bicycle tour (K.M.)

On 22 July started my proper journey I left from Tuusula at 6 in the morning and rode without resting about 35 km then I made a stop at a small tenant farm in Nurmijärvi after having some breakfast I continued to Wihti making a few stops at some houses to drink milk or water whatever was available, until about noon, after riding 80 km made a stop at the Paksela inn to have a dinner and to dry my clothes since it rained several times, after having a rest for an hour I continued almost without a stop through Pusula and Somerniemi to the Söderkulla manor in Somero, where my brother was staying. There I rested for 3 days after riding on one single day 120 km. [--] Travelling in general felt very joyful although I was alone without a companion, but the new sceneries attracted me so much that having a companion did not even come to my mind [--].