Chapter 6
The Power of Stories

Abstract In this chapter we discuss a special form of discursive structure, narrative, and its effects. Metaphors and open concepts are analysed as concepts that have effects amplified in narratives. These effects can vary from closing the narrative to opening it, from linking by suggesting similarity to disconnecting by suggesting dissimilarity. Ideologies are then presented as embedding narratives.

6.1 Narratives

What often gives objects, actors and institutions more stability and power, is their embedding in narratives, which can in turn be embedded in ideologies (Zizek 1989). Narratives provide frames to interpret situations, they can link objects, actors and institutions in preferable or understandable manners, and they can produce objects, actors and institutions (Abu-Lughod 1992; Bal 1985; Sandercock 2003).

A narrative is a conceptual structure that can render discursive materials more real and more compelling by introducing temporal, spatial and emotional order (Czarniawska 1998). It is an assemblage of concepts, subjects, objects and events. It articulates, criteria and values, events and episodes, flights and climaxes, heroes and villains, foreground and background. In line with Levi- Strauss, we say that it is the structure of the narrative that has the effects (Lévi-Strauss 1968). What narratives share is that structure, and this is what apparently explains the similar effects narratives can have in terms of emotional grip, reality effects, and entertainment. It is the structure that distinguishes it from other forms of discourse. Narrative form can be found and used in any aspect of social life, including law, science and economy (Austin 1962; Czarniawska 1998; Gabriel 2000; Mackenzie et al. 2007). Either discourse there itself takes on narrative form, or it assumes other narratives or incorporates concepts that derive their meaning from narratives.

Narratives are discursive structures consisting of other discursive structures and embedded in others. They have a stabilizing effect by applying structure to

materials otherwise less interesting and less easy to grasp and convey. They consist of actors that do things, operating in a world consisting of things. A narrative is embedded in a continuously shifting discursive environment, and this is affecting its content, structure and effect. In this discursive environment, it can link or not with values, criteria, concepts characters and events in figuring in other discourses/narratives. The potential for a certain narrative to become widely accepted, shared and spread in a community depends on the structure of this discursive environment (Van Assche et al. 2012). The environment represents the potential of transformation of the narratives through the formation of discourse coalitions, coalitions of actors that share a similar discourses or narrative, that re-assemble and re- appropriate narratives or narrative fragments (cf. Hajer 1995).

The attraction of narratives as persuasive models of explanation makes them more likely to travel between governance contexts than other discursive structures. The traveling can be done as a whole or in fragments of structure, content or a combination of both. One can say that narratives invite and encourage *discursive migration* (Kooij et al. 2013). The presence of narratives in a discursive environment makes it likely that the modes of seeing and understanding embodied in the narrative move to other domains of discourse, to other topics, genres, function systems, organizations, groups and places. The stabilizing effect of a certain narrative, naturally tends to de-stabilize its environment, where other interpretive schemes can be affected by the success of this narrative. As falling domino blocks, successful narratives can alter a whole discursive landscape (Beunen et al. 2013; Rap 2006; Van Assche et al. 2012).

Narratives of self and group, of group and place, of place and history are interwoven (Van Assche et al. 2008). They are interwoven in manners that recall the discussion on boundaries and the construction of objects, subjects, places and times. Individual identity can be considered a narration and re- narration of life history, a history including other people, places and events (Elias and Scotson 1994; Elliot and Du Gay 2009; Seidl 2005; Van Assche et al. 2009). Beyond such narrative, we elude ourselves, and simple self- descriptions can be understood as stabilizing fictions rooted in more complex narratives involving history and environment. People do belong to various groups and narratives of self and group therefore entwine in intricate ways. Sometimes individuals are subsumed by groups, by one group, but in most cases, narratives of identity derived from membership serve only certain occasions and certain function in psychological and social life (Elliot and Du Gay 2009; Delanty 2003). Certain tropes, figures of style, topoi and commonplaces, can signal membership, can function as signs of social identities and their importance under certain conditions.

With all this mutual constituting going on, one should not expect that the narrative constructions of self, group, place and time are seamless or that they can be added up to a cohesive semantic universe. On the contrary, the psychological order itself is a whirlpool of competing narratives and loose discursive materials that is only apparently stabilized, and largely thanks to a social order. Narratives of self indeed serve certain functions, but these functions are not always clear to, not always understood by the individual. They do not simply exist next to each

other, in a neat row of functions together making up a balanced and healthy life. Secondly, the gap between psychological and social order will alter in shape and depth all the time and can never be filled in or fixed completely by narrative means. If one can spend more time with people, one can observe that the cracks between individual and group are always there, that narratives on self never coincide with narratives of groups (or places as communities), even when references to groups and places are abundant in the self- description. Narratives can be used to create cohesion in segments of the internal and external world, and they can be used to render invisible the gaps, cracks and disjunctures always present in the collage of segments.

In governance, narratives can thus expected to be prevalent and serve many purposes. Around the metaphorical table are individuals representing interests, topics, organizations, groups, and themselves. Understanding them as actors or stakeholders representing something or someone, is certainly productive for a theory of governance, but one cannot forget that these descriptions rest on narrative schemes that have impact on observers and participants. One cannot forget that everyone around the table makes sense of herself, of the others, of the governance situation, of topics, objects and subjects in terms of narratives (Van Assche et al. 2011). Stakeholders never truly know what is at stake. Stakeholders never truly know what is their angle and who they are representing, and citizens outside the governance situation, who are not designated as 'actors', can never know if, how, in which respect, with reference to which identity they are represented. They will never know which of their incompatible narratives leads a life in collective decision- making and they will never know how they are narratively transformed by the ones 'representing' them and in the dialectical maelstrom of governance games.

In keeping with our earlier analyses of governance and discursivity, we now add that governance paths connect sites of narration, of narrative reconstruction, and of discursive migration and transformation. In governance, new narratives are produced, consciously and unconsciously, in adaptation to each other. Understandings of self, group, others and world are almost certainly transforming in the pressure cooker of governance, where confrontation with other understandings cannot be avoided and where what is persuasive can be experienced and observed directly (Van Assche et al. 2011).

In governance, it is also likely that several levels of nested narrative or several layers of discursive context, are at stake. These levels affect each other, as their boundaries are also constructed in the narratives, in the discursive context, and they are permeable. Stories about the past influence the present, stories about politics in general affect the image of the correct handling of issues in this specific governance situation, larger issues determine the perspective on smaller issues, but also the other way around. The discursive boundaries around certain objects, subjects or issues can be harder than for others, and the same is true for scales or levels. Certain narratives on the good life are more open to change from below, from series of examples or real life situation, whereas others harden themselves by explaining away the details of what can be observed as trivial. The structure

and content of narratives thus affects the hardness of boundaries and therewith the potential for discursive migration, for the moving, sharing and transformation of understandings that can accompany it.

6.2   Metaphors and Open Concepts

Narratives are conceptual structures that amplify the impact of its elements, as structures that can engender discursive migration and shared understanding. Within governance particular attention should be paid to two special types of concepts: metaphors and open concepts (Bal 2002; Barnes and Duncan 1992; Eco 1976; Kooij et al. 2013; Beunen and Hagens 2009). These concepts can amplify effects and enable migration. Their own effects can be amplified by use in narratives, and they can migrate themselves, making things look more similar or more different than before, introducing new sets of similarities and differences and changing perception and valuation accordingly. Just as the narratives can be embedded in other narratives, open concepts and metaphors can be embedded in other open concepts and metaphors. For the case of metaphors, we will speak, in line with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, of *nested metaphors and root metaphors* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

In ancient rhetoric, *metaphors* were presented often simply as comparisons where the 'as if' is dropped (Aristotle 1954; Aristotle and Lucas 1972). Society is a body, a family is a ship. Some of the Greek and Roman authors already perceived that metaphors allow a shift in perspective. They enable perceiving new features of an object, a person, or a situation and a new connection between these features, a new unity of the object. We can speak of a transformation of the object, a redrawing of the boundaries. Once a metaphor is adopted and spreads in a community, it tends to be stretched up. The brain is a computer, the mind is a computer, the body is a computer, organizations are computers and society as a whole might be a computer. With the over-application of the metaphor, the underlying comparison become weaker and weaker, and the shift in perspective minimalizes. Few new features are discovered, and the fact of prevalence itself makes it less likely that a new application of the prevalent metaphor will open the eyes of many.

Metaphors can have offspring. They can engender new metaphors. Once a family is a ship, the dad or mom can be the captain, financial problems can be a storm, and lower taxes can be a windfall. If a brain is a computer then the eyes are visual sensors and the visual centre is a video- card. This reproductive faculty of metaphors can lead to nested metaphors. The nesting can have other sources however. It is possible that several existing metaphors become compatible in the production of a new perspective. A community can be a beehive, its members bees playing a role, but the beehive can also be in a forest and the world can be a forest, life finding a way in, carving a habitable niche in, the forest. Societies can be marked deeply and thoroughly by root metaphors, metaphors with a remarkable longevity, a high level of abstraction, and a high level of compatibility with many

other metaphors. Metaphoric concepts of man, society, God, knowledge, truth and value are prone to becoming root metaphors. They are powerful because unexamined, and because of their permeation of many discursive worlds by means of compatible metaphors. This understanding of root metaphors comes close to what Foucault called an *episteme*, a manner of knowing, a set of interpretive schemes that marks an era and a civilization (Foucault 1973). It makes a difference whether man is God, the slave of God, similar to God, or whether God is a mystery to man, especially in communities where religion is important, where functional differentiation has not fully developed, and where God is important in the organization of life, knowledge and politics.

Metaphors are devices that can link different discursive fields, and make the interpretive schemes of one field available and useful for the other one. This can generate discursive shifts in one field, the starting point of the comparison ('society is…') and it can shed a simultaneously a new light, because of the connection, on the other side of the implied comparison ('… a beehive'). The metaphor of society as beehive can refocus attention and change understanding of both the beehive and society. As always in discursive activity, subjects are entwined with objects. A new entwining of objects by means of metaphor can never be fully mapped because the subject, acquiring a new understanding of objects, cannot remove itself from the equation, cannot deduce itself simply from the new entwining, assuming that nothing changed on the subject side. The new link forged between distinct discursive fields can restructure these fields in different ways. New accents in a largely unchanged object can be placed, e.g. by emphasizing the inescapable character of roles in society. New blind spots are simultaneously introduced (the beehive makes one forget that people can change roles, or mess up a function). The metaphor can cause new associations with other objects, new assemblages, and the newly perceived unity of these can supersede the older object boundaries. Whole objects can be forgotten in this way. They can be erased by changing the internal structure of larger objects. If a family is an organization instead of a ship, it is easy to forget the wind and the storm and the impossibility to control the elements. If a person is a bee and society a beehive, then it is easy to forget the character of persons, which might have been highlighted in older sets of metaphors -man is an animal, this one a wolf, that one a sheep, another an ant. If the brains are a computer, and the mind can be reduced to the brain, then this metaphorical development has probably been prepared by a series of broader metaphorical shifts, allowing us to disconnect man from community, from God, and body from soul -to forget all these connections, and concomitantly, to forget the idea of soul and the idea of God, communicating to our souls.

Since metaphors are producing new insights by connecting semantic fields, they can have governance effects. If metaphors change, are used, connect with other metaphors, produce new metaphors, objects can form and disappear, boundaries can be redrawn, narratives can lose or gain persuasiveness, new narratives can be crafted -starting from the new metaphors and the perspective they generate. The set of discursive changes induced by changes in metaphorical activity is called a *metaphoric slide*. A metaphorical slide can amplify the effects of narratives, or

it can make them lose their lustre. It can open existing concepts and narratives for re- examination and allow them to play new roles in policy discussions. It can also close them, sealing hitherto existing cracks in the boundary, rendering them less open to interpretation. Regarding the interpretation of roles in society: if society was a body where all need each other, and the village a big family, then it is a duty to help each other, but there is still much freedom of choice. If body and family are replaced by a single metaphor of beehive, the more mechanistic model ignores free will and freedom. New metaphors bring new interpretive schemes to governance, new sets of similarities and dissimilarities within and between objects. New similarities can forge new discursive connections, new dissimilarities can break them, and new patterns of (dis)similarities have their own higher order effects on making and breaking discursive bonds. A different colour might make something not a strawberry, while colour plus shape plus taste might make it a new type of pomegranate.

Such restructuring of (dis)similarity can also be observed with a second special type of concepts, *open concepts* (Kooij et al. 2013; Gunder and Hillier 2010). They too, can be embedded in narrative, be amplified in their effects by narratives, and travel with narrative. They too, have their own tendency to migrate, and to shift discursive configurations in faraway places. Yet, other than metaphors, open concepts do not produce perspectival shifts and object transformation because of imported interpretive schemes or because of new structures. Rather, they break open the local discursive structure with an emptiness that invites continuous reinterpretation. Open concepts are seemingly vague concepts that play neverthe-less crucial roles in the reproduction of governance, one could think of concepts such as sustainability, spatial quality, identity, creative economies and innovation. Often, scientists and governance actors alike complain about that vague character, not recognizing the importance of the openness. At the same time, the impression of precision cannot only undermine the positive functions of open concepts; it can also veil the openness and allow it to function unexamined. What are those positive functions?

At a first level, seeming emptiness is also fullness. Just as a vague poem can mean many things, an extremely vague poem very many things and a white sheet of poetry paper everything. So vague concepts mean ever more when they get vaguer and potentially everything when they are empty. The limit of discursive fullness is thus emptiness, an emptiness where presence and absence paradoxi-cally coexist. Sustainability for example, can mean many things; the absence of precise discursive articulation enables the coexistence of many different meanings (Gunder and Hillier 2010). Such coexistence has many advantages in governance situations: one can pick and choose, one can pretend to agree while each pick-ing a different meaning, and one can keep the discussion going by hiding behind the open concept, by glossing over differences, avoiding hard confrontations and maybe the grinding halt of governance. This buys time and preserves social and political capital. Over time power/knowledge configurations might shift and unlock the situation. Open concepts migrate easily, since they can accommodate the hybridization and transformation caused by travel well (Bal 2002). But they

also play the role of pinning down knots of discourses which tend to move in different directions. In Lacanian terms, one can speak of a *point de capiton* (Lacan 1977). A new school with green roof, a shallower ditch, more trees, a story on local creative economies, a story of support for local farmers, a story on maintaining community identity, all can huddle together for specific purposes (a project, a policy) under the flag of sustainability. The pinning down, the precision of it, has to be partly fictitious to remain functional. The appearance of precision (hence discursive closure) has to be de facto discursive openness. The arrogant architect, for example, asserts that 'nobody needs to tell him what quality architecture is'; he recognizes it when he sees it. He probably changed his idea on quality architecture hundreds of times in his career, but his arrogance, the impression of certainty and precision hide an openness that allows the practical process of design and development to continue.

Open concepts *can* but not necessarily do play the role of *master signifier*, as a signifier of a totality, a wholeness and completeness that cannot exist in reality, but is nevertheless desirable (Stavrakakis 1999). This for example becomes visible in the narrative about the new building proposed by the architect that will strengthen local spatial identity and restore community spirit and unity. While a unified community is necessarily a fiction, and a stable and single spatial identity, linked to such fictitious community is just as impossible. Yet each of the invoked fictions is productive. 'Community' can be considered the master signifier, the grounding trope of a desired unity in the social body, which has to ground every aspect of governance. Striving for community has effects; the presence of the master signifier in governance can bring about a striving for consensus that would otherwise not exist. It can make policies and plans more realistic, but it can also, if the hopes are too high, make real bumps on the road to policy implementation invisible, as it can ignore real cleavages in the community that have to be acknowledged and dealt with in the open.

So open concepts serve as a crystallization point of various discourses and enabler of their reproduction (Asimakou 2009; Gunder and Hillier 2010; Jeffares 2007). Since governance paths and sites are par eminence occasions where discourses meet, compete and have to come to accommodations, open concepts are likely to play an important role there. They can function as a middle ground where consensus can be achieved or pretended, where goals can be mentioned but suspended. Governance deals with small and big issues in a context that politicizes them and that can transform them by seeing them in the light of grander narratives and their differences. Within such situation open concepts can enter their role of master signifier easily. A discussion on school lunches can end up in a discussion on the community; a discussion on one tree can become invested as a fight over sustainability principles. As governance looks forward, as it has to deal with the issue of more or less desirable futures for the community, open concepts prove very useful in mediating the uncertainty of the future and adjusting it to the continuously produced present. If we would fully submit ourselves to the idea that the future is unknowable and that it is not possible to steer a community by means of policies and plans, then governance would be virtually impossible. Open concepts

enable the capturing of desires of society in the face of an uncertain future. They allow projections of a good future, a means to get to our desires, even if this is impossible.

Open concepts, then, can be seen as productive fictions; fictions that are simply necessary in governance. Because of the multifaceted nature of governance, the versatility and various functions of open concepts can be easily observed. They can allow the governance process to continue even when there is no basic agreement, they allow actors to feign agreement or commitment, and allow them to make promises that cannot be kept. We can also speak, with Zizek, of disavowal (Zizek 2006): we might know better, but if all actors continue as if the newly introduced concept represents agreement it can actually produce that agreement.

6.3 Ideologies

With Zizek, we see ideologies not as veils over an objective reality, but rather as the discursive infrastructure of our political imagination (Zizek 1989). They are the narrative answers to the questions of good society, the values embedded, the modes of organisation and participation, the distribution of roles, and the forms of knowledge that bring such society closer. Ideologies in this view are narratives that might contain root metaphors and master signifiers. They are narratives that might produce many other narratives, metaphors and open concepts. Ideologies can delineate a discursive realm in which concepts and narratives, objects and subjects can travel without undergoing extreme transformations. They can amplify the effects of embedded narratives and concepts, and have, more than the embedded metaphors and open concepts, the power to open and close other narratives. They have the power of linking and disconnecting, because the similarities and dissimilarities suggested by them have much greater impact on a variety of discursive worlds and on society.

In governance, also in local governance, ideologies can transform everything. If new ideologies arrive, if new conflicts between existing ideologies arise, if the boundaries of ideologies harden for some reason, this can affect literally everything, up to the most minute detail in the most local governance arrangement. Objects can be transformed by ideological shifts or clashes, as can the functioning of metaphor, narrative and open concept. Everything can appear in a new light, in a re- politicization that makes restructuring of power/knowledge configurations necessary, and spurs new and more strategizing. What appeared as natural looks contingent and what appeared as consensus topics shows to be bones of contention.

In the next chapter we reflect on the reality effects of discourse, with emphasis on the role of discursive activity in governance on the construction of realities. Concepts, open concepts, metaphors, root metaphors, master signifiers, objects and subjects have effects on each other, on power relations, on what is experienced as reality. That our worlds are discursively constructed and that governance

contributes to this, does by no means entail that every construct proposed in governance will be believed and that it will have reality effects in the community at large.

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