

‘Story’ — An English cultural keyword and a key interpretive tool of Anglo culture

Anna Wierzbicka

Australian National University

This paper shows that *story* is an English cultural keyword and a key interpretive tool of modern Anglo culture and that it is linked with a family of concepts which have no semantic equivalents in other languages and are unique conceptual artefacts of Anglo culture. It argues that if we can pinpoint these concepts we can also pinpoint the shared values and assumptions reflected in them. It shows that this can be done with the help of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) methodology developed over many years by the author and her colleague Cliff Goddard — a methodology which has been previously applied effectively to many other semantic domains, across a wide range of languages. Further, the paper argues that because the uniqueness and centrality of the English *story* has until now gone unnoticed, many semantic components associated with it have been projected onto other languages, which has led to the positing of spurious human universals and to claims such as “story is a basic principle of mind”. The paper draws attention to the fact that a unique English cultural keyword (*story*) has played a significant role in the “narrative turn” in the humanities and social sciences, and discusses some of the implications of this fact.

Keywords: narrative turn, NSM semantic theory, Anglo culture, life story, cultural semantics, story vs. history, chirographic culture

Requests for further information should be directed to Anna Wierzbicka, School of Language Studies, The Australian National University, Baldessin Precinct Building (#110), The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. E-Mail: Anna.Wierzbicka@anu.edu.au

Story is the coin and currency of culture
Jerome Bruner (2002, p. 16)

Introduction: The use of 'story' in Günter Grass's novel *Im Krebsgang*

In his disturbing and wonderful short novel *Im Krebsgang* (2002a, translated into English as *Crabwalk*, 2003), German Nobel Prize-winner Günter Grass has told "the dramatic story [Geschichte] of the sinking of 'the Wilhelm Gustloff' in January 1945 and the effects of these events reaching into the German present" (blurb on the cover, my translation).

"Story" or "history"? In German, there is no lexical distinction between the two. The word *Geschichte* used by the cover blurb is polysemous and can be translated into English by either of these words. But while one of the meanings of *Geschichte* corresponds to the meaning of *history*, none of the other ones matches the meaning of *story*. Neither can *story* be matched semantically with the word *Erzählung*, which in some contexts is used to translate *story* into German. Grass himself introduces his story with the word *Geschichte*, but later in the same passage he uses the word *Story*, obviously a loan from English (spelled in German with a capital S):

Initially I didn't think a provincial burg that history [Geschichte] had crossed off long ago could attract anyone besides tourists, but then the starting place for my story [Story] suddenly acquired a presence on the Internet. (Grass 2002a, p. 8; 2002b, p. 2)

The sinking of the "Wilhelm Gustloff" by a Soviet submarine at the end of World War II was one of the greatest disasters in the history of seafaring. There were five to nine thousand women and children on board — German refugees, from East Prussia, flying in terror before the approaching Red Army whose reputation for killing and raping civilians travelled ahead of it. The book's narrator was at the time of the sinking an unborn child in the womb of a nine-months pregnant seventeen-year old German girl who was lucky enough to obtain a place in one of the lifeboats and who, improbably, survived the disaster. In describing this dramatic moment, Grass uses *story* not once but twice.

In another context, the word *story* appears in the book in the phrase *seine Story* 'his story', used in relation to the Nazi dignitary Wilhelm Gustloff, after whom the ship was named.

Why does Grass repeatedly use the English word *story* instead of the corresponding German word? The answer is simple: there *is* no corresponding German word. Grass uses the English word *story* in his German prose as he uses the English

words *fairness* and *okay*, because these are not just English words but unique English concepts.

This leads us to four questions: First, what does the word *story* mean in English? Second, when did the word *story* develop the meanings that it now has? Third, why did the unique family of concepts linked with the word *story* develop in Anglo culture? And fourth, how do these concepts connect — if they do — with other salient concepts of contemporary English discourse?

The different uses of the English word *story* in Grass' short novel and the interplay between *Story* and *Geschichte* ('history') allow us to identify, in a preliminary way, four major meanings of this word. Roughly speaking, *story* can be seen as an alternative to (1) history, (2) tale, (3) life (someone's life) and (4) experience (someone's experience).

Thus there is a whole family of concepts in modern Anglo culture linked with the word *story*, all unique conceptual artifacts of this particular culture, all inter-related, and all pointing to certain key values and assumptions. If we can pinpoint these concepts, we can also pinpoint, and offer evidence for, the shared values and expectations reflected in them. This cannot be done without a rigorous semantic methodology. As this paper will illustrate by sorting out and identifying several different meanings of the word *story*, such a methodology is available in the NSM approach (see next section).

NSM approach to semantics and cultural analysis

The acronym NSM comes from "natural semantic metalanguage". The NSM approach to semantic and cultural analysis is based on three premises: first, that to identify and compare meanings we need a *tertium comparationis*, a common measure; second, that such a common measure can be found in the shared lexical and grammatical core of all languages; and third, that this shared core can be used as a semantic metalanguage for the description of meanings across languages and cultures.

The NSM analysis of meaning is based on 'reductive' paraphrase, in the sense that complex meanings are 'reduced', in a systematic way, to simple or simpler ones. An NSM explication of a word or a phrase can be quite lengthy, because it replaces a complex meaning with the underlying configuration of all its semantic elements. It attempts to "say the same thing" in a paraphrase composed of maximally simple, intelligible, and translatable words (semantic primes), thereby laying bare the semantic content compressed in the original expressions.

A successful 'reductive' paraphrase which is consistent with native speakers' intuitions and which predicts/explains the boundaries of natural usage can be

regarded as a psychologically real conceptual model. It can represent an ‘insider’ perspective because it is carried out in non-technical terms, which are familiar to speakers and form part of their everyday linguistics competence. At the same time, it can be free of the terminological Anglocentrism which plagues other approaches to semantic and cultural analysis, that is, of the unwitting imposition of alien (Anglo) conceptual categories on other languages (Wierzbicka, 2006; Goddard, 2007). Even if the analysis is carried out through English (NSM), this can be done in words that have precise semantic equivalents in the languages concerned; and in fact it can be carried out in these languages themselves.

NSM researchers have sought over nearly four decades of empirical and analytical cross-linguistic investigation to identify this shared core of all languages. It is now believed that this core includes 64 elements — simple concepts (semantic primes) and their associated grammar (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard, 1998; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002). A sizeable bibliography is available on the NSM

Table 1. Semantic primes, grouped into related categories

| | |
|--|---|
| I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY | substantives |
| KIND, PART | relational substantives |
| THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE | determiners |
| ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW | quantifiers |
| GOOD, BAD | evaluators |
| BIG, SMALL | descriptors |
| KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR | mental predicates |
| SAY, WORDS, TRUE | speech |
| DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH | actions, events, movement, contact |
| BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/ SOMETHING) | location, existence, possession, specification |
| LIVE, DIE | life and death |
| WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT | time |
| WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE | space |
| NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF | logical concepts |
| VERY, MORE | intensifier, augmentor |
| LIKE~WAY | similarity |

Notes: • Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes) • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • They can be formally complex • They can have combinatorial variants or “allolexes” (indicated with ~) • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

Homepage: www.une.edu.au/bcss/linguistics/nsm/. The full NSM lexicon of universal semantic primes is set out in Table 1, using English exponents. (For equivalent tables in many other languages see Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; and Goddard, 2008).

This inventory has been discussed and justified extensively in the publications mentioned above and cannot be discussed in detail here.

In addition to semantic primes (“atoms of meaning”), many NSM explications rely also (in a limited way) on “semantic molecules”, built out of primes, especially in the area of concrete vocabulary. In particular, body part concepts often function as “semantic molecules” in the meaning of verbs of physical activity, such as *walk* (‘legs’, ‘feet’), *lick* (‘tongue’) *bite* (‘teeth’), and *eat* and *drink* (‘mouth’).

In this paper only two semantic molecules, ‘read’ and ‘write’, will be employed. Whenever they are used, they will be clearly marked as [m]. Otherwise, all the explications in this paper will be framed entirely in the vocabulary of semantic primes and in conformity with their specific rules of combinations (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002).

“The Story of English”

Melvyn Bragg’s 2003 book *The Adventure of English: the biography of a language* features a blurb on its back cover which hails it as a book with “much splendid intellectual firepower”, ... “told as an adventure story ...”. While the front cover calls the book “a superb new history of the English language”, it is intuitively clear why the author did not want to use a phrase like “A history of the English language” as the book’s title: the word *adventure* is more likely to attract the attention of a wide audience than the more scholarly word *history*.

It is less clear, at first sight, why the same should be true of the word *story*. There are many books with titles like “A history of the English language” or “A history of English”, but when the BBC produced its award-winning nine-part television series devoted to the history of English, it chose for its title the word *story*, not *history*: “The Story of English” (also the title of a companion book by Robert McCrum, Robert MacNeil & William Cran, 1986, second edition 1992).

Although the word *adventure* was not used in this case, there is little doubt that “The Story of English” sounds more exciting than “The (or A) History of English”. One expects of “the story of English” that it will be packed with action, well-paced, well-structured, and not too long. One can imagine “A history of English”, or “A history of England”, in many volumes, but not a “Story of English” of quite that length (although a nine-part television series is evidently feasible).

The preference for the definite article (“The story of English”, not “A story of English”) is also significant here: it suggests “definitiveness”, unity and coherence. “A history of English” could (in principle) go on and on, without presenting a coherent whole, but “The story of English” suggests a well-defined shape and a kind of internal logic, following from the logic of (well-chosen) events. Finally, and relatedly, “the story” suggests something of a kind that many people want to hear or to read (as it were, “a good story”), whereas “a history” does not.

All these implications of a title like “The story of English” would be lost in translation into other languages: while *history* has its close counterparts in other European languages, *story* does not, and as evidence suggests, it stands for a uniquely English concept.

Below, I will explicate the meaning of *story of*, comparing it with *history of*. To introduce the explication of *history of*, however, I need to first explicate the word *history* as such (without *of*), as in the sentence “we cannot reverse the course of history”.

[A] *history*

something

people can say what this something is with the word *history*

people can say something about something with this word when they think like this:

many things happened in many places before

because people did many things in these places

at some time some of these things happened

after this, some other things happened

after this, many more things happened

it is good if people know when all these things happened

it is good if people know how all these things happened

it is good if people know why all these things happened

because of this, it is good if someone can write (m) many things about all these things

According to this explication, the word *history* refers to what happened in some places in the past and links these happenings with what people did in these places. It implies a broadly chronological approach, but it goes beyond a mere chronicle of past events by promising to inquire into how and why these things happened. It also implies that the events in question are real, not fictitious, and thus can be the subject of knowledge, and moreover, that such knowledge is valuable. Finally, *history* refers to writing: it carries with it an expectation that someone might write about the past events and that having a written record of them would be of value.

Such an "objectivist" view of history has of course been contested in recent times, in particular, feminist historiography has contrasted *history* (interpreted as *his-story*) with *herstory* (the past presented from women's point of view). Nonetheless, it is the "objectivist" view which is still reflected in the normal use of the word *history* in ordinary language.

Moving now to phrases in which *history* is modified by a prepositional phrase introduced by *of* (*history of*) we will note that prototypically, they add to *history* a specification of the place which is the focus of attention. For example, the phrase *history of England* treats *history* as a general category of discourse and narrows it down to discourse about one particular place (England).

[B] *history of England*

something of one kind
people can say what kind with the word *history*
someone says something of this kind about one place
this place is England

The phrase *history of...* is of course not restricted to places: one can also speak about "history of English" or "history of jazz". Arguably, however, such use of *history of* is an extension from the prototype and involves an implicit reference to it. This can be represented as follows:

[C] *history of English/ jazz*

something of one kind
people can say what kind with the word *history*
someone says something of this kind about something now
like someone can say something of this kind about a place
this something is English/jazz

The phrase *story of* shares many semantic components with *history of* and brings in some components of its own. Unlike *history*, it is oriented towards a listener (or reader), and it replaces the emphasis on knowledge and analysis (when, why, and how) with an emphasis on interest and compositional structure. A *story of something* is something that many people want to hear, or read about (potential entertainment value) and something that forms a coherent whole, with a beginning and an end. A reference to potential knowledge is still there ("when someone says something of this kind about something other people can know some things

about this something because of this”) because normally *story of* (in contrast to *story about*) cannot be fictitious. But all the components in the frame “it is good if people know” which have been posited for *history of* are missing from the explication of *story of*: here, the emphasis is not on what it is good for people to know but on what many people want to hear or read about.

The reference to ‘writing’ in the explication of *history* has been replaced in the explication of *story* with a reference to reading: “many people want to read [m] things of this kind”. (Of course reading depends on writing, but writing does not depend on reading.) This difference between *story of* and *history of* is related to the difference in emphasis on knowledge in *history* and on interest in *story*: some knowledgeable person can be expected to write a *history of* (a place or something), while many interested people are expected to want to read a *story of* (something).

But perhaps the most interesting difference between the two explications, that of *history of* and that of *story of*, lies in the prototypes involved in the two cases. As discussed earlier, *history of* refers, prototypically, to a place, and when extended to *history of something* (e.g. jazz) it includes in its meaning a reference to discourse about a place as a prototype. Arguably, *story of* involves a very different prototype: not a place but a person’s life.

Judging by the material in the OED and other electronic databases, the phrase *story of someone’s life* is older in English than *story of something*. *Story of someone* is old, as Wycliff’s (1380) *A story of John Baptiste* illustrates, and is closer to *history of*. This use is now obsolete. *Story of something*, on the other hand, appears to be relatively new. This adds to the plausibility of the hypothesis that *story of someone’s life* may have served as a semantic point of departure for *story of something* and have become incorporated in its meaning as a prototype. In the explication below, I have highlighted some components in bold, to facilitate comparison between *story of* and *history of*.

[D] *the story of* [English, jazz; *a story of English/jazz; *stories of English/jazz]

something of one kind

people say something of this kind with words

people say things of this kind to other people

many people want to hear things of this kind

many people want to read [m] things of this kind

when someone says something of this kind about something,

other people can know some things about this something because of this

something of this kind has many parts

people say one of these parts before all the other parts
people say another of these parts after all the other parts

when someone says something of this kind about something,

 this someone says it like this:

 many things happened to this something before,

like many things can happen to someone when this someone lives

 these things happened like this:

 at some time, one thing happened

 after this, something else happened

 after this, some more things happened

A children's book titled *Children's Atlas of World History* (1982) bears the subtitle "The Story of Civilization from Early man to the Space Age". This juxtaposition of "history" and "story" suggests two messages that are meant to complement each other. *World history* suggests serious knowledge about an important subject, whereas *The Story of Civilisation* suggests that the book is interesting and that it has a kind of plot, analogous to the 'plot' of someone's life story.

'Story' vs. 'tale'

Story is a ubiquitous English word which plays a fundamental role in the way speakers of English think about the world, life and people.¹ It has often been suggested that 'story' is a human universal: all people eat, drink, light fires, marry, look after their young, and tell stories. "Stories in every culture both depict and inspire emotion" and "we tell and write stories every day", says Patrick Hogan (2003, pp. 1, 6) in his book *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*. But is it true that all people tell stories? And is 'story' itself a universal human concept?

It is certainly not true that all languages have a word matching in meaning the English word *story* (as in "telling a story"). In fact, the opposite is likely to be true: English may well be the only language in the world which has a word with this particular meaning. In particular, it is not hard to ascertain that there is no word matching *story* in English's neighbours and relatives in Europe, such as German, French, Italian or Russian, as Günter Grass's use of the phrase *meine Story* 'my story' (in this context, 'the story that I'm telling here') — instead of *meine Geschichte* or *meine Erzählung* — tellingly illustrates.

This is not to deny that all over the world, people often do something comparable to what in English is called "telling stories". But to say simply that they "tell stories" is to impose on a wide range of human activities, conceptualised and

practiced in many different ways, a perspective derived from English and Anglo culture.

Furthermore, to say that all over the world, people “tell stories” is not very informative, or verifiable, until we clarify what is meant by “telling stories”. For example, the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (2007) writes: “People tell stories. All over the world, and probably for as long as they have existed, people invent characters and recount their fictitious exploits” (p. 161). But is this what “telling stories” means in English? Inventing characters and recounting their fictitious exploits? If it did mean that then the claim that everywhere in the world people tell stories would be not just Anglocentric to some degree, but plainly false. For example, in Australian Aboriginal cultures people do have cultural practices which from an Anglo/English point of view could be called “telling stories”, but these “stories” are not about “invented characters” and their “fictitious exploits”. Rather, they are either about ordinary people or about the deeds of mythical ancestors and animals in a mythical past referred to in English as “dreamtime”.

Pinker (2007) describes “telling stories” (defined in terms of invented characters and their fictitious doings) as a human universal and he links it with evolution and evolutionary adaptation. He hails the birth of “evolutionary literary criticism” as a new era in literary studies and ponders the question of “the biological function of fiction” and “the scientific question of why we enjoy fiction” (pp. 173, 175). This is another instance of the widespread phenomenon of Anglocentrism dressed up as science (cf. Wierzbicka, 2008).

There may well be a human universal linked with something *like* what is described in English as “telling stories”, but we cannot say exactly what it is if we rely on English concepts such as ‘story’ and ‘fiction’. To identify this probable universal is a project with important implications for literary theory as well as anthropology and other disciplines.

In my view the scholar who has said some of the most insightful things on the subject is the psychologist Jerome Bruner. Bruner has tended to use “narrative” (rather than “story”) as his key analytical term, and it is “narrative” rather than “story” that he saw as a human universal. Trying to explain why “narrative” “has such a grip on the human imagination” (p. 43) Bruner singles out as key elements ‘sequentiality’, ‘human action’, and indifference to the distinction between real and imaginary events.

Perhaps its [the narrative’s] principal property is its inherent sequentiality: a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. (...) A second feature of narrative is that it can be ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ (...), [that is, its] indifference to extralinguistic realities (Bruner, 1990, pp. 43–44)

Following Bruner, we could propose, as a first approximation, the following human universal, manifested in English-speaking countries as "story telling":

[F] *A possible human universal*

in all places where people live, something like this happens at many times:
 someone says something for some time
 this someone says it to someone else
 this someone says it like this:
 at some time, someone did something
 at some time, something happened to this someone
 after this, something else happened
 after this, more things happened

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this possible universal in detail: our focus here must be the English *story*. I will restrict myself therefore to three observations.

First, in many languages of the world the closest counterpart of the English word *story* is, like *story*, indifferent to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. For example, in the Australian Aboriginal language Yankunytjatjara the word *tjukurpa* is applied to both "stories" about monsters and "stories" about ordinary people (Goddard, 1996).

Second, in many languages of the world the closest counterpart of the English *story* is a verb, rather than a noun. In fact, this is the case even in many European languages, for example, in German, French and Polish. The words which come closest to Bruner's combination of sequentiality, human interest, and indifference to the distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' are the verbs *erzählen*, *raconter*, *rasskazivat'* and *opowiadać*. Unlike the English *tell*, these verbs imply duration, and thus are closer to *tell a story* than to *tell*. They do not, however, imply a compositional structure with a beginning and an end, as the noun *story* does. There are also the nouns: *Erzählung*, *récit*, *rasskaz* and *opowiadanie*, which do imply some boundaries, but these are more literary and far less 'basic' words than the everyday verbs *erzählen*, *raconter* and *opowiadać*.² In fact, English is rather unusual among languages of the world in that it doesn't have a verb for 'human narrative activity' and derives the verbal phrase for this activity from a noun (*tell a story*). I will return to this property of English in the section titled "'Story' and the 'narrative turn'"

Third, taxonomies of speech genres embedded in different languages are notoriously culture-specific (Carbaugh, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1985, 1991/2003 Chapter 5). For example, the Australian English word *yarn* (comparable to *story*) is one

of the cultural key words of this variety of English. The idea that the Anglo English cultural key word *story* would somehow capture a human universal (anchored in human biology) rather than being a conceptual artefact of Anglo culture is simplistic and ethnocentric.

To my knowledge, neither the uniqueness of the English concept of ‘story’ nor the prominence of the word *story* in the English universe of discourse have ever been acknowledged, let alone explained. The concept of ‘story’ is usually taken for granted, as is also the importance of ‘stories’ in human life.

So what does the word *story* used in contexts like “tell me a story” or “I heard an interesting story” mean?

The first point to note, contra Pinker, is that *stories* (in the relevant sense) do not have to be fictitious. As the phrase *a true story* indicates, *stories* can be either true or not true, fictitious or taken from real life. In this respect, *story* is similar to *tale/tales*, which too can describe either what happened to real people, in real life, or what happened to invented characters. Beyond that similarity, however, there are many instructive differences between *story* and *tale* and the historical relationship between the two words can throw a great deal of light on the modern meaning and significance of *story*.

Evidence suggests that the rise of *story* in English went hand in hand with the gradual downfall of *tale*. For example, in Shakespeare’s works, *tale* was roughly speaking twice as frequent than *story*, whereas in the present-day Cobuild corpus, *story* is five times more frequent than *tale* (the figures for Shakespeare are *tale* 185 and *story* 97, and for Cobuild, *tale* 876 and *story* 5085).

Moreover, in contemporary English, *tale* is almost obsolete — it can still be used, of course, but it is often used jocularly, ironically, or as a conscious stylistic device distancing the speaker from what is being so described. Collocations such as *a sorry tale*, *a sad tale* or *a tale of woe* (which are not paralleled by *a happy tale* and the like) are good examples of such a distancing, almost quotative, use of *tale*. Beatrix Potter’s determined use of *tale* (rather than *story*) in the titles of her children’s books about animals (e.g. “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” or “The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher”) is also a good illustration here: these ‘tales’ are not to be taken a hundred percent seriously.

As for the meanings of the two words, *tale* and *story*, perhaps the clearest difference between them is that a *tale* is normally *told*, whereas a *story* is conceived of as something that can be written and read (as well as told and listened to). ‘Stories’ can be seen as something that ‘exists’ (usually on paper) and can be endlessly reproduced. A ‘tale’, on the other hand, is something that can be told just once. Normally, modern writers write ‘stories’ rather than ‘tales’, and they publish collections of ‘stories’, not collections of ‘tales’. A sentence like “she writes stories” sounds normal, but “she writes tales” sounds odd. Of course a ‘tale’ can be recorded in

writing, and a 'story' can be reproduced orally (as the collocation *to tell stories* indicates). Primarily, however, a 'tale' is conceived of as something told, whereas a 'story' is conceived of as something that can be, in addition, written and read. Thus, 'folktales', which can be collected and put in a book but which originate in an oral culture, are normally called just that: 'folktales', not 'folk stories'. By contrast, 'detective stories', which are normally read rather than told, are not called 'detective tales'.

The word *story* is of course used in contemporary English in many different ways. In particular, it is often used — both in ordinary language and in literary studies — with reference to human lives. The phrase "the story of my life" does not have to refer to a written account of someone's life. It seems clear, however, that when the course of someone's life is described in this way, it is seen as a sequence of events and actions that *could* be written up as a story.

The practice of referring to a person's life as 'a story', widespread in English in many kinds of contexts and genres, is particularly characteristic of the field of literature and literary studies known as life writing. For example, the distinguished literary scholar Paul John Eakin entitles one of his books *How our lives become stories*. In doing so he refers to a way of looking at a person's life that presents this life as a sequence of events and actions which is like a story and in principle could be written up in the form of a story. Needless to say one could not speak similarly about "how our lives become tales". Nor one can translate a title like "how our lives become stories" accurately into other European languages: there is simply no word in French, German, Italian or Russian which would correspond to *story* as used in this English sentence. I will return to the question of human life as a 'story' in the sections titled "'My story' and 'the story of my life'" and "Looking at life through the prism of 'story'". In the two explications below I have again highlighted some components, to facilitate comparison.

[G] *a story* (e.g. *tell us a story!*; *I heard an interesting story*; *a true story*)

something of one kind
people say things of this kind with words
people say things of this kind to other people
people can say one thing of this kind at many times
many people want to hear things of this kind, many people want to read (m) things
of this kind
something of this kind has many parts
people say one of these parts before all the other parts
people say another of these parts after all the other parts

when someone wants to say something of this kind, this someone says it like this:
 some things happened somewhere at some time (before)
 these things happened like this:
 at some time, one thing happened
 after this, something else happened
 after this, some more things happened

[H] *tale* (e.g. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*; *A Tale of Two Cities*)

something of one kind
 someone says something of this kind with words
 people say things of this kind to other people
 when someone says something of this kind this someone says something **for some time**
 this someone says something like this:
 many things happened to someone (?something) before
 I want to say many things about this
 some of these things happened like this:
 at some time, one thing happened
 after this, another thing happened
 after this, some more things happened

The explication of *tale* shares many elements of the explication of *story*, but it does not refer to reading, does not envisage repeatability (no “people can say one thing of this kind at many times”), does not stipulate that “many people want to hear things of this kind”, and does not imply a tight compositional structure with a beginning and an end (no “first part” and “last part”).

The main distinctive features of *story*, as explicated here, include the references to reading, potential wide interest, repeatability and a coherent structure, with a beginning and an end. The explication of *tale* does not include any of these, and instead of structure refer to duration: “for some time” (one even gets the impression that a tale could go on endlessly). The explication of *story* proposed here is supported, inter alia, by phraseology. Common collocations such as “one part of the story”, “the end of the story” and “the whole story” support the components referring to ‘parts’. Phrases such as “a story circulated” or “a story goes round” build on the component of ‘repeatability’. The phrase *short story* refers to something that is meant to be read. The phrase *a good story* supports the components “many people want to hear/read things of this kind”.

If we compare the concept of ‘story’ not with another noun like *tale* but with other verbal concepts such as ‘erzählen’ in German and ‘raconter’ in French, we will note one further significant difference: a ‘story’ is thought of as a distinct cat-

egory ("something of one kind"), whereas the verbs don't imply that. It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that in many languages the basic 'meta-narrative' term is a verb rather than a noun.

'My story' and 'the story of my life'

In his famous book *Awakenings*, on which a film with Robert de Niro and Robin Williams was based, Oliver Sacks (1973) explored the lives of several of his neurological inpatients. Anticipating accusations that he was exploiting his patients and violating their privacy or their autonomy, Sacks stressed that these patients *wanted* their stories to be told. They "have said to me from the first, 'Tell our story — or it will never be known'". Literary scholar and acknowledged authority in the field of life writing G. Thomas Couser (2004) comments: "If his patients have consented to having their stories told, there is no violation of their autonomy and no appropriation of their stories. And the communication of their stories, which counteracts the silencing effect of their condition, is a benefit to be weighed against any potential harms" (p. 77, emphasis added).

The kind of discourse in which 'stories' belong as it were to the individuals to which the events in question happened is thoroughly language-specific. It is impossible to accurately translate sentences in which *story* is used in this way into other languages. Yet in English, this use of *story* is very frequent, especially in titles (as noted by the OED). For example, the Amazon lists a staggering 17,000 entries with the title "My story". (In some cases this number includes multiple references to the same book, but even so, it speaks volumes of the cultural significance of the concept 'my story' in Anglophone countries.)

The salience of the 'my story' perspective on life in contemporary Anglo culture can be illustrated with the Australian weekly television program "Australian Story", and the way it is described by the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) website:

Stories are 'narrated' by the subjects themselves. The program aims to present a varied and contrasting picture of contemporary Australia and Australians from many different perspectives (...)

This program seeks to make Australians, in their diversity and individuality, more understandable to other Australians. It seeks to explore how Australians lead their lives through ordinary and extraordinary events. (...)

The aim of the program, and its success, will be measured by the degree to which (...) it can express the fullest meaning of being alive in Australia through the "ordinary" stories of our citizens. The program will (...) seek to elicit the ways in which different individuals are able to give meaning to their lives.

'Story' in this autobiographical, experiential sense does not imply that the account is totally trustworthy. Yet it does imply a unique access to reality, of a kind that no objective approach could ever provide. It is a limiting perspective, and an account based on it is necessarily subjective as well as limited, but it is also an account that in some ways can be more reliable than any broader historical description of the events in question. Or so the word *story* (in the sense discussed here) suggests. The concept encoded in this word links with the assumptions of modern Anglo "individualist empiricism" (Shapin, 1994), with the modern Anglo emphasis on the limitations of human knowledge (Wierzbicka, 2006) and perhaps even with the post-modern retreat from truth and embrace of epistemological relativism to be discussed in the next section.

The experiential "my story" discourse in modern English is closely related to the practice of 'telling the story of one's life', which is well-established in contemporary Anglo culture. For example, when the psychologist Jerome Bruner and his colleagues created a large database of autobiographies gathered from ordinary people to study autobiography as a genre they used a procedure described as follows: "we solicited volunteers and simply asked them: 'Tell us the story of your life'" (Bruner, 2001, p. 25). This simple procedure could not be used with speakers of languages other than English, for there is no way to say in other languages the equivalent of "Tell us the story of your life". "Tell us about your life", yes; "tell us the history of your life", perhaps; but not "tell us the story of your life".

The historical relation between the two practices, 'telling one's story' and 'telling the story of one's life', needs to be investigated. Here, I will only note that while both *the story of my life* and *my story* are attested already in Shakespeare, the meaning of these phrases has changed in modern times. For example, when Othello is questioned by Desdemona's father about, as he puts it, "the story of my life" (Act I. Scene iii. Line 130), he responds with an account which is more a "history" of his life than a "story" in the modern sense of the word, and when he subsequently refers to this account as "my story", again, this is not "my story" in the modern sense of the phrase, because the subjective, experiential components of the modern sense appear to be absent.

To its credit, the *OED* recognizes an evolution in the meaning of the phrase "my story" when it says that "in modern use" it implies "that the course of events referred to has the kind of interest which is the aim of fiction to create" and notes that it is often used in titles of books. The *OED* does not, however, identify the experiential and epistemological dimensions of the modern use of "my story" which I have included in the proposed explication. For comparison, I have also included here an explication of "the story of my life" (in modern usage). To facilitate comparison of the two explications, the distinctive features of each of them are shown in bold.

[J] *the story of my life*

something of one kind
people say things of this kind with words
people say things of this kind to other people
something of this kind has many parts
many people want to hear things of this kind
many people want to read [m] about things of this kind
I want to say something of this kind about something now
when I say this, other people can know **many things about me** because of this

I want to say it like this:

I lived for some time before
many things happened to me **during this time**
I did many things during this time
these things happened like this:
 at some time, one thing happened
 after this, something else happened
 after this, some more things happened

[K] *my story*

something of one kind
people say things of this kind with words
people say things of this kind to other people
something of this kind has many parts
many people want to hear things of this kind
many people want to read [m] things of this kind
I want to say something of this kind about some things now
when I say it, other people can know **some things about these things** because of this

I want to say it like this:

many things happened to me **before, I did some things before**
these things happened like this:
 at some time, one thing happened
 after this, something else happened
 after this, many more things happened
I know how all these things happened, because they happened to me
I know how I felt when these things were happening

As the two components in bold in the second part of explication [J] show, "the story of my life" refers to the period when the person lived, and to events which

happened during that period. By contrast, “my story” refers to some events which happened in the past, without specifying the period during which they happened and without mentioning “life”. It is compatible, therefore, with much shorter periods than a whole life. Furthermore, the two expressions differ in their topics: “the story of my life” is primarily about “me” and promises to provide extensive information (“many things”) about “me”, whereas “my story” is about “some things” and promises to provide information (not necessarily extensive) about these things, without necessarily focussing on “me”. At the same time, “my story” includes two distinctive ‘experiential’ components, referring to things that “happened to me” and to “how I felt when these things were happening”.

Management studies scholar Barbara Czarniawska (2004, p. 5) writes, in tune with many contemporary writers across many disciplines, that “in order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form” and that “‘Living is like writing a book’ is a saying known in many languages”. But of course such languages would be a small proportion of all the languages of the world, and in languages belonging to oral cultures such an idea would be inconceivable. Czarniawska adds: “This sounds as if people would tell stories as they please and, in so doing, shape their lives as they see fit”, and notes that “this is actually a typical criticism of social constructionism: that it conceives the world as a collection of subjectively spun stories”.

Czarniawska tries to fend off such a criticism by stressing that “we are never the sole authors of our narratives”. But whether one conceives the world in terms of stories that people spin individually or stories that they spin with others, the idea that our lives are like stories depends on the concept of ‘story’. The same applies to historian Hayden White’s (1978, p. 80) claim that “...we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories”, and philosopher Owen Flanagan’s statement that “we require that there be narrative connectedness from the first-person point of view, so that I be able to tell some sort of story about my life” (1996, p. 65). Such statements appear to disregard the fact that the idea of ‘coherence’ comes from the culture-specific English concept of ‘story’. As the philosopher Cora Diamond (1988) noted, we live with concepts. Speakers of English live with the concept of ‘story’. This facilitates certain ways of thinking which are not similarly encouraged by other languages.³

‘Story’ and ‘truth’: Whose story? and whose truth?

Four years after the murder of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a book of her dispatches for *Novaya Gazeta* appeared in an English translation as *Nothing but the truth: Selected dispatches* (2010). The phrase “nothing but the truth” (in

Russian, "odna pravda") is of course a quotation from Politkovskaya herself. From a postmodernist, relativist position the phrase is suspicious. A recent review of the book published in the Australian magazine *Review* (*Weekend Australian*, April 10–11, 2010, p. 22) starts with a question mark: "Nothing but the truth ... but whose truth? This book presents the world according to Anna Politkovskaya, an ardent critic of the Russian regime whose straight-talking provoked someone to kill her."

In other words, what Politkovskaya saw, and died for, as the truth, represents for the Australian reviewer not the truth but, at best, one person's version of the truth, or one person's "story" ("the world according to Anna Politkovskaya"). The phrase "whose truth?" is ironic: if used without irony, the word *truth* does not normally combine with a possessive pronoun. For *story*, on the other hand, this is a standard combination: "her story", "his story", "your story".

The emergence of 'story' — someone's story — as a key phrase in modern English, and the gradual downfall of 'truth' (for example, in terms of frequency and scope, see Wierzbicka, 2002, Bromhead, 2009) are an indication that the ways of thinking characterized by 'relativist scepticism' have become deeply entrenched in modern English. The emergence of the concept of 'someone's story' is not a development in *Western* culture, but in *Anglo* culture. It is in Anglo culture (reflected in English usage) that 'truth' has been transformed, to a considerable extent, into 'someone's story'.

'Truth' remains of course part of modern English discourse, but it no longer has the pride of place in the language of values and in the speech routines that it once had in English and which it still preserves, in varying degrees, in other European languages (Wierzbicka, 2002, 2006). In everyday speech, 'true' has lost a great deal of ground vis-à-vis its modern English competitors 'right' (as opposed to 'wrong') and 'real'; and 'truth' has lost a great deal of ground vis-à-vis 'story' ('someone's story').

"The pursuit of truth has been a long-standing widely shared project of mankind. Now a lot of us seem to have abandoned it", writes Oxford historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, the author of *Truth: A history* (1998, p. x). In a wonderful semantic puzzle of a sentence juxtaposing *truth*, *story* and *history*, he adds: "The retreat from truth is one of the great dramatic, untold stories of history" (p. 165). Fernandez-Armesto himself calls this "retreat from truth" "one of the great puzzles of the modern world" (p. 165) and comments: "The thrashing of truth began as an academic vice, but the debris is now scattered all over society" (p. 165). "It is spread through classroom programs, worthy in themselves, designed to equip students (...) with social virtues such as tolerance and mutual respect. Like many admirable aims, these can have evil consequences" (p. 165).

The potentially evil consequences that Fernandez-Armesto has in mind here include the substitution of different people's 'stories' and opinions for one objective

truth. This chimes well with the idea that the human world is made up of a multiplicity of stories — each of them arising from someone’s experience, each representing a particular perspective, and none of them anchored in any ‘truth’ valid for all. Given this intellectual climate of our times, it is perhaps not surprising that an Anglophone critic like Francesca Beddie, used to looking at the world through the prism of the English concept of ‘story’ (*someone’s story*), can be tempted to problematize a murdered Russian dissident’s “truth” (“*whose truth?*”) and to interpret it as one person’s “story”.

Needless to say, many contemporary champions of epistemological relativism are not Anglophone. Some of the most prominent and influential ones — like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes — were in fact French. But the fact is that there is no word in modern French with a semantic range corresponding to that of the English *story*. In particular, there are no equivalents of *my story*, *your story*, or *her story* (with all the implications that these phrases can have in English).

It would of course be absurd to suggest that English forces its speakers to be epistemological relativists. The word *truth* has not been relativised out of the English lexicon and is still available to anyone who wants to use it. But it does not seem absurd to suggest that the availability and indeed ubiquity of the word *story*, with all its different grammatical frames and interrelated meanings, can encourage speakers of English to look at the world, and at human discourse, through the prism of this word and of the phrase “someone’s story”. For many speakers of English this will mean that they will see the world, on one level, in terms of truth, and on another, in terms of multiplicity of stories; others, however, may opt primarily for this latter level.

Looking at life through the prism of ‘story’

The closer one looks at the many different ways the word *story* is used in contemporary English, the clearer it becomes that ‘story’ has now become a prism through which speakers of English tend to look at human life, and increasingly, at the world in general.

First, the idea that a person’s life can be seen as a ‘story’, the pre-history of which we saw in Shakespeare, has now become deeply entrenched in Anglophone thinking. Book titles like “The story of my life” are common in modern English. Their counterparts in other European languages are, for the most part, either ‘My life’ (e.g. *Ma vie* in French and *Mein Leben* in German) or ‘The history of my life’ (e.g. *L’Histoire de ma vie*), and there is no counterpart of “The story of my life” in those other languages. For example, the famous spiritual autobiography known in English as *The story of a soul* (by St. Thérèse of Lisieux) has in the French original a different title, with different epistemological implications: it is *L’Histoire d’une âme*, ‘The history of a soul’.

In addition to books there are also many English songs, and many albums of songs, with the untranslatable title "the story of my life", and those too, bear witness to "telling-the-story-of-one's-life" as an important cultural institution, as well as an important idea, in modern Anglo culture.

What is more, however, human life as such is now often spoken of as "a story", and English speakers move imperceptibly from *story* as an account of someone's life to *story* as this someone's life as such. For example, when Paul John Eakin (1998) speaks about the life of a young American adventurer Christopher McCandless, who starved and froze to death in the Alaskan wilderness in 1992, he mentions "Chip Brown's profile story about McCandless in the New Yorker" (p. 63) (i.e. a *written* story about McCandless' life and death), but he also speaks about "Chris McCandless' story" with reference to the young man's transcontinental adventures and wanderings which ended in his death in an abandoned bus in Alaska (i.e., a *lived* story).

There is also the common expression "the untold story of...", which refers to what some people have lived through. By calling a series of events in these people's lives a 'story', the speaker implies that these events lend themselves to a description in the form of a 'story' (i.e. something of a particular kind that people say, with words, to other people). Once again, then, it is life seen as a subject for 'storytelling' (and story-writing). It is also interesting to note that in scholarly discussions, the word *story* is now often used in a sense close to *theory*: to call someone's theory this someone's "story" is to express some scepticism as to the objective justification of a particular set of explanations.

Furthermore, *story* has now spread in many uses to refer to events in general, so much so that "What's the story?" is now often used in a sense close to "What happened?", or even more broadly, as in this example from the Cobuild corpus: "So what's the story? Is she hard of hearing, or what?" Such usage is now acknowledged in the OED. The "Draft additions" of 2004 include an entry for "What's the story?" with a triple explanation: "What are the facts?", "Tell me what you know", "What's going on?" Using NSM, we can explicate this new meaning more accurately, as follows:

[L] *What's the story?*

someone says something about some things
 these things happened a short time before
 I want to know more about it
 I want to know what happened
 I want to know how it happened

'Story' and the "narrative turn"

Arguably, the rise of 'story' in English as a prism through which to look at the world, is one of the sources of the much discussed "narrative turn" in humanities and social sciences, manifested in the rise of "narrative psychology", "narrative sociology", "narrative philosophy", "narrative medical ethics", "narrative theology", and so on. In the words of the editorial introduction to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), "the past several decades have seen an explosion of interest in narrative, with this multifaceted object of inquiry becoming a central concern in a wide range of disciplinary fields and research contexts" (online). As discussed in the ample literature on the subject, "narrative theory" first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in literary studies, and was "a child of French structuralism and a grandchild of Russian and Czech formalism" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001, p. 4). It is widely accepted that the publication in 1958 of the English translation of Vladimir Propp's classic work "Morfologija Skazki" (1928) (*Morphology of the Folktale*) imparted a great impetus to this new field. In the following decades, "narratology" developed into a vibrant interdisciplinary theory and practice, making a huge impact on humanities and social sciences, and beyond, and came to be seen by many as "a new theoretical approach, a new genre of philosophy of science" (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 39) and "a new model for the human sciences" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 16).

What is particularly significant from the point of view of the present inquiry into the story of 'story', is that the English word *story* appears to have played a crucial role in these developments and is very much at the centre of all the new fields which call themselves "narrative".

Thus Brockmeier and Harré (2001, p. 40) write: "the point of departure of the new narrative interest in human sciences seems to be the 'discovery' in the 1980s that the story form, both oral and written, constitutes a fundamental linguistic, psychological, cultural and philosophical framework for an attempt to come to terms with the nature and conditions of our existence". The psychologist Kevin Murray, the author of *Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (1986) writes: "Narrative psychology is a burgeoning field of research into the way stories shape lives" (Murray, 1995, online). Ronald Berger and Richard Quinney (2004), the authors of *The Narrative Turn in Social Inquiry* make similar remarks in relation to sociology. Kenneth Plummer (1996) seeks to develop "a sociology of stories". Anthropologist Richard Bauman (1986) undertakes to show "the general role stories play in creating and fashioning societies" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 130). In the medical journal *The Lancet* medical scholar Brian Hurwitz (2003) writes about "the narrative turn in medical ethics" and reviews a book by

medical scholars and ethicists Rita Charon and Martha Montello (2002) titled *Stories matter: The role of narrative in medical ethics*. And so on.

It is easy to agree that stories matter. But 'stories' in what sense? And to whom exactly do they matter? They clearly matter a great deal to contemporary Anglophone scholars in the humanities and social sciences, whose claims can sometimes be puzzling to native speakers of languages other than English.

For example, the political scientist and communication expert Walter Fischer (1987, p. xiii) claims that "All forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories". The psychologists J.W. Pennebaker and J.D. Seagal (1999, p. 1243) affirm that "the act of constructing stories is a natural human process", and indeed call this their "guiding assumption". Another psychologist, T.R. Sarbin (1986, p. vii) affirms that "storymaking, storytelling, and story comprehension are fundamental conceptions for a revived psychology". Cognitive scientist Mark Turner (1996, Preface) affirms that "*story* is a basic principle of mind". The psychologists Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier (2001, p. 97) suggest that "in the end, there is no life apart from the stories told about it".

Statements of this kind can sound good in English: they have a certain rhetorical appeal. It is good to bear in mind, however, that the thoughts they seek to convey cannot be expressed in other languages, not even geographically and culturally close ones like French and German. When Jerome Bruner (2001, p. 280–29) uses phrases like "what happened to one" and "the order in which things happened" (i.e. what happened after what), or when the literary theorist Shoshana Felman (1992, p. 93) says (with reference to Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1980)) that "'something happened' in itself is history" whereas 'someone telling someone else that something happened' is narrative", a non-Anglophone reader can readily understand what she is saying. The same cannot be said, however, of sentences like "story is a basic principle of mind" (Pinker, 2004) or phrases like "the storied nature of human conduct" (Sarbin, 1986 in the Introduction to *Narrative psychology: the storied nature of human conduct*).⁴

One wonders whether the meaning of such sentences, baffling to non-Anglophone readers, can be really fully clear to native speakers of English, and whether that meaning could pass the test of translation into simple and universal human concepts. It seems clear that having at one's disposal the word *story*, with its seductive aura of simplicity and naturalness, greatly facilitates the kind of talk associated in Anglophone literature with the "narrative turn". Since *story* is a very common, everyday word in English it can seem natural to speakers of English to formulate their thoughts and even their theories with the help of this word. It can also seem natural to use this word in a variety of contexts as a metaphor which doesn't require any explanations. In fact, however, *story* can be a slippery analytical tool. The impression that it is linked with a concept which is simple, neutral

and self-explanatory, and that it allows us to identify a universal of human cognition, is deceptive. As already mentioned, other languages may not have words which would imply the coherence, the neat self-contained nature of a *story*, with a beginning and an end, the human interest, the possibility of re-telling (and so a certain stability). Yet all these features of the English concept of *story* appear to add to the appeal of the narrative worldview in contemporary Anglophone literature and scholarship.

None of this is to question the value of the “narrative turn” in the humanities and social sciences. Rather, the point is that the claims about the human mind, and about much else, inspired by this turn need to be clarified, and that this can be done through simple and universal human concepts (such as ‘happen’, ‘before’, ‘after’, and ‘someone’).

‘Story’ as a ‘chirographic’ concept

If the account developed here is right, then the most remarkable aspect of the English ‘story’ is its “chirographic” character: the reference to reading (and therefore, implicitly, writing) included in the meaning of this ubiquitous English word. There are certainly no such references in the meaning of the word *tjukurpa*, the closest counterpart of *story* in the Australian language Yankunytjatjara (cf. the section on “‘Story’ vs. ‘tale’”) or in analogous words in other languages linked with oral cultures.

Equally, there are no references to reading (and, by implication, writing) in the meanings of verbs like *erzählen*, *raconter*, *rassказыvat’* and *opowiadać*, which are the basic words for human ‘narrative’ activity in German, French, Russian and Polish, even though these languages have been associated for a very long time with writing. They do, however, appear to have become incorporated in the English word *story*, which is now the basic English word used in relation to human ‘narrative’ activity. Thus, even a word like *storyteller*, which refers overtly to oral performance rather than to reading, in some of its semantic components invokes a kind of human activity which can also be carried out in writing and which can produce something that can be read.

According to Walter Ong (1982), cultures can be broadly divided into oral and chirographic (writing-based) ones. At the same time, Ong suggests, many modern cultures that have known writing for centuries, e.g. Arabic culture and certain other Mediterranean cultures, have “never fully interiorized it” (p. 26). The concomitant claim is that different cultures which have known writing for a long time have interiorized it to different degrees. If this is so, then a culture that has

come to view human lives as 'stories' would appear to have interiorized writing to a particularly high degree.

There is indeed a great deal of evidence that modern Anglo culture is a 'chirographic' culture par excellence — a culture which has moved further away from orality than any other, at least among European cultures. This evidence cannot be discussed here for reasons of space (see, however, Wierzbicka, Forthcoming).

If the interiorization of writing brings with it, as Ong affirms, deep changes in ways of thinking, and if indeed modern English has interiorized writing to a higher degree than other European languages, then we can expect to discover many differences between English and those other languages reflecting a more pronounced "chirographic mentality" of speakers of modern English. Arguably, this is precisely what we find, as the story of 'story' illustrates.

Concluding remarks

The story of 'story' is complex and multifaceted and it has far-reaching implications. I have tried to show that the word *story* is not only a cultural keyword of modern English, but also the cornerstone of a large linguistic and conceptual edifice and one of the likely sources of the "narrative turn" in the humanities and social sciences.

There are many threads in the web of this story: the modern Anglo "individualist empiricism" (Shapin, 1994), the emergence of 'experience' as a major cultural theme in Anglo culture (Wierzbicka, 2010b), the 'chirographic' trend in Anglo culture (Ong, 1982), the end of "the reign of truth and faith" (Bromhead, 2009), the shift from 'truth' to 'facts' in the British Enlightenment (Shapiro, 2000), followed by the postmodern suspicion of 'facts' and "the crisis of the modernist episteme" (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 39), the spread of epistemological relativism in English-speaking countries (Fernandez-Armesto, 1998), the rise of life writing as a major cultural practice and as an academic discipline in Anglophone countries (cf. Eakin, 2004),⁵ the emergence of a global culture of media, with its hunger for newsworthy 'stories' and the blurring of news and entertainment (Wykes, 2007), and the dependence of this culture on global English.⁶

But to establish these connections with any precision we need to identify the many meanings of *story* and to determine when they became entrenched in English usage. The experience of NSM-based cultural and historical semantics allows us to approach these tasks with some confidence and rigour.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Cliff Goddard, who discussed all the explications in this paper with me in great detail and helped me to improve them in many ways. I would also like to thank Mary Besemeres, Anna Gladkova, Carol Priestley, and Zhengdao Ye, who read an earlier version of this paper and offered many valuable suggestions.

Notes

1. To give just one example, in a short book review (McKernan, 2004, p. 12), the author uses this word no fewer than 12 times, in many different contexts and senses (e.g. “the veterans’ stories”, “these stories”, “our national story”, “the story of Kokoda”, “tells the story”, “learned the story”). These senses are so closely interrelated that English speakers don’t even notice the polysemy. Yet to translate these different phrases into, for example, German, one would need to use a range of very different words. For example, *veterans’ stories* might be rendered with the word *Erinnerungen* (roughly ‘memories’); *our national story* with *Legende* or *Mythos* (‘myth’); and *learned this story* with *Geschichte* (not in the sense of ‘history’ but roughly ‘the course of events’).
2. I am grateful to Carol Priestley for drawing my attention to the significance of the difference between nouns and verbs in relation to Tok Pisin and Koromu (Papua New Guinea).
3. The idea that a human life has a certain unity and coherence is also present, albeit in a very different form and context, in the Russian concept of *sud’ba* (‘fate/destiny’) (Wierzbicka, 2010a).
4. The material cited in the OED suggests that the modern meaning of *story* is a relatively recent conceptual construct of English. It is all the more ironic that this construct should now be reified and regarded as a product of human evolution rather than of semantic and cultural history of English.
5. The recent upsurge of interest in biography and especially autobiography goes far beyond the English-speaking world. But the new English concept of ‘life writing’ does not (yet) have a counterpart in other languages. Nor does ‘life writing’ as an academic discipline, with specialized higher degrees (Masters and MAs) and university programs appear to have counterparts outside the ‘Anglosphere’.
6. The wide use of the word *story* in English is often puzzling to speakers of other languages, as is illustrated by the comment from my colleague Zhengdao Ye, whose native languages are Shanghainese and Mandarin (personal email):

Your paper solved a puzzle that has baffled me since 1996 when I first heard foreign journalists in Shanghai talking about writing a story about something (how can journalists who are supposed to be objective write ‘stories’, in Chinese, journalists can only ‘write a report’). Your analysis provided answers. Indeed, *story* is very specific to English. Obviously, my thinking was influenced by the Chinese concept *gùshi*. In Chinese, *gùshi* (the closest counterpart of ‘story’ in English) is largely fictitious (although one can say *yige zhenshi de gùshi*, ‘a true story’), and it is for *jiang* (‘tell/recount/narrate’) and *ting* (‘listen to’), not for *xie* (‘write’) and *kan* (‘read’). In Chinese ‘wode gùshi’ (‘my story’) is not very natural exactly because

it contradicts the fictitious nature of *gùshì* (although in contemporary Chinese, I see more such uses with the influence of the English language.) One can only say *wode jingli* ('my experiences').

References

- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beddie, F. (2010, April 10–11). Review of "Nothing but the truth: Selected dispatches". *Weekend Australian*.
- Berger, R. J. & R. Quinney. (2004). The narrative turn in social inquiry. In R. J. Berger & R. Quinney (Eds.), *Storytelling sociology: Narrative as social inquiry*. Boulder, CO: Lynce Rienner Publishers.
- Bragg, M. (2003). *The adventure of English: The biography of a language*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Brockmeier, J. (2001). From the end to the beginning: Retrospective teleology in autobiography. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.), (pp. 247–280).
- Brockmeier, J. & D. Carbaugh (2001). Introduction. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.), (pp. 1–22).
- Brockmeier, J. & D. Carbaugh (Eds.). (2001). *Narrative and identity: studies in autobiography, self and culture*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Brockmeier, J. & R. Harré. (2001). Narrative: Problems and promises of an alternative paradigm. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.), (pp. 39–58).
- Bromhead, H. (2009). *The reign of truth and faith: Epistemic expressions in 16th and 17th century English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (2001). Self-making and world-making. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.), (pp. 25–37).
- Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. New York: Farrar, Shaun, Giroux.
- Carbaugh, D. (1989). Fifty terms for talk: A cross-cultural study. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*, 13, 93–120.
- Charon, R. & M. Montello. (2002). *Stories matter: The role of narrative in medical ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Children's Atlas of World History: The story of civilization from early man to the space age*. (1982). London: Ward Lock Limited.
- Cicero, M. T. (1963). "De oratore" in Cicero rhetorica. Vol. I (De oratore) (Ed.). A. S. Wilkins. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Concordance of Shakespeare's complete works online. <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/>
- Couser, G. T. (2004). *Vulnerable subjects: Ethics and life writing*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Diamond, C. (1998, January). Losing your concepts. *Ethics*, 255–277.
- Eakin, P. J. (1999). *How our lives become stories: Making selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Eakin, P. J. (2004). Mapping the ethics of life writing. Introduction to P. J. Eakin (Ed.). *The ethics of life writing*. (pp. 1–18). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Felman, S. (1992). *Camus' The Plague, or a monument to witnessing*. In S. Felman & D. Laub (Eds.). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Fernández-Armesto, F. (1998). *Truth: A history and a guide for the perplexed*. London/New York: Bantam Press.
- Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Flanagan, O. (1996). *Self expressions: Mind, morals, and the meaning of life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeman, M. (2001). From substance to story: Narrative, identity and the reconstruction of the self. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. (pp. 75–99).
- Freeman, M. & Brockmeier J. (2001). Narrative integrity: Autobiographical identity and the meaning of the “good life”. In Brockmeier & Carbaugh (Eds.). (pp. 75–99)
- Goddard, C. (1996). *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary [Revised 2nd edition]*. Alice Springs: IAD Press.
- Goddard, C. (1998). *Semantic analysis: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goddard, C. (Ed.) (2008). *Cross-linguistic semantics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Goddard, C. & A. Wierzbicka (Eds.). 2002. *Meaning and universal grammar: Theory and empirical findings*. Vols. I & II. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grass, G. (2002a). *Im krebsgang*. Göttingen: Steidl.
- Grass, G. (2002b). *Crabwalk*. Translated from the German by Krishna Winston. London: Faber & Faber.
- Herman, D., M. Jahn & M. Ryan (Eds.). (2005). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Herrnstein Smith, B. (1980, Autumn). Narrative versions, narrative theories. In *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1) On Narrative, 213–236.
- Hogan, P. C. (2003). *The mind and its stories: Narrative universals and human emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurwitz, B. (2003, 12 April). The narrative turn in medical ethics. *The Lancet*, 361(9365), 1309.
- McCrum, R., R. MacNeil & W. Cran. (1986[2nd ed. 1992]). *The story of English*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- McKernan, M. (2004, August 7–8). Demystifying history for the masses. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Weekend edition.
- Murray, K. (1986). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- NSM Homepage: www.une.edu.au/bcss/linguistics/nsm/
- Ong, W. (1982[2002]). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen.
- Peeters, B. (Ed.). (2006). *Semantic primes and universal grammar: Empirical findings from the Romance Languages* (Studies in Language companion series). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pinker, S. (2007). Critical discussion: Toward a consilient study of literature. *Philosophy and Literature*, 31, 161–177.
- Plummer, K. (1996). *Telling sexual stories*. London: Routledge.
- Politkovskaya, A. (2010). Trans. by A. Tait. *Nothing but the truth: Selected dispatches*. London: Harvill Secker.

- Propp, V. (1986). *The morphology of the folk tale*. Rev. ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Sacks, O. (1973). *Awakenings*. London: Duckworth; New York: Doubleday.
- Sarbin, T. R. (1986). Introduction. In Theodore R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: the storied nature of human conduct*. Westport CT: Praeger.
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A social history of truth: Civility and science in seventeenth-century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapiro, B. (2000). *A culture of fact. England 1550–1720*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, M. (1996). *The literary mind: The origins of language and thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- White, H. (1978). *Tropics of discourse: Essays in cultural criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1985). A semantic metalanguage for a crosscultural comparison of speech acts and speech genres. *Language in Society*, 14, 491–514.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1991[2003]). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. (Expanded second edition).
- Wierzbicka, A. (1996). *Semantics: primes and universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2002). Philosophy and discourse: The rise of *really* and the fall of *truth*. In C. Béal (Ed.), *Langue, discourse, culture* (Special issue of *Les Cahiers de Praxématique* 38, 85–112).
- Wierzbicka, A. (2006). *English: Meaning and culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2010a). Cross-cultural communication and miscommunication: The role of cultural keywords. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 7(1), pp. 1–23.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2010b). *Experience, evidence and sense*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (Forthcoming). From a Jewish Jesus to an Anglo Jesus: The cultural legacy of English reflected in modern translations of the New Testament. In Terttu Nevalainen & Elizabeth Traugott. *Handbook of History of English: Rethinking Approaches to the History of English*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, D. S. (2005). Evolutionary social constructivism. In J. Gottschall, & D. S. Wilson (Eds.), *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the nature of narrative* (pp.20–37.) Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press.
- Wykes, M. (2007). Constructing crime: Culture, stalking, celebrity and cyber. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 3(2), pp. 158–174.