Form and Content of Historical Accounts: Studying the (Re)construction of Past Events Through Different Narratives and Identitarian Positionings

IGNACIO BRESCÓ
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

In this paper we aim to show some initial results of a study focused on how people interpret and narratively (re)construct a controversial episode of the past. Specifically, participants with different identitarian positionings on the Basque Country conflict gave their own narrative versions upon the last and failed peace process carried out three years ago between the Basque terrorist group ETA and the Spanish Government. The main aim of this study is to flesh out a recently proposed theoretical framework (Brescó, 2008) regarding the narrative construction of historical events. Thus, in analysing some sampled versions collected we will consider both the role of narrative forms in the construction of historical events and the moral content these very narrative forms express. In this respect, an adaptation of the *positioning theory* (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) will be used in order to study the different clusters of rights and duties expressed through the story-lines employed by the participants according to the way they come to thematize the Basque conflict.

Since the publication of Maurice Halbwachs's works at the beginning of the last century, it has been widely assumed that the way we reconstruct the past is strongly shaped by the groups we live and identify with. In turn, as many scholars from different fields point out, the past constitutes at the same time a key symbolic resource through which the very sense of identity—whether personal (Ricoeur, 1991) or collective (Schlesinger, 1992)—can be generated. As far as national identity is concerned, the wide and public use of historical narratives has been extensively underlined as a key factor for the creation of a shared sense of the past and consequently for the generation of a collective feeling of belonging (e.g. Hobsbawm, 1990). As Liu and Hilton (2005) put it, "a group's representation of its history will condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be, and is thus central to the construction of its identity, norms, and values" (p. 537).

The ubiquitous presence of national histories and symbols within society has made the very existence of the nation become something taken for granted, even banal (Billig, 1995), being part of people's common sense and nature to the point that, as Gellner (1983) remarks, "a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears" (p. 6). As a result, one of the main outcomes of what Mosse (1975) terms the *nationalization of the masses* is that individuals tend to identify themselves with a virtual entity or an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983), thus assuming in first person plural the nation's envisaged goals, its virtual rights as well as its historical enemies; something that is in turn rhetorically argued and justified by a certain way of appraising both the past, the present and the future by means of a narrative plot or story-line. In this respect, the *triadic structure* of

nationalist rhetoric suggested by Levinger and Lytle (2001) constitutes a good example of how particular ways of narrating the past can be used as mobilising tools aimed at both apprising the present and claiming different rights to be reached in the future.

NATIONALISM AND HISTORY: RIGHTS AND DUTIES IN DISPUTE

National histories, apart from being indispensable for national groups to be imagined, constitute in turn a powerful symbolic artefact aimed at legitimizing the very existence of nations by attributing to them a set of supposed historical rights according to a certain way of reconstructing the past. As Billig (2001) points out, "when groups declare themselves to be national groups, they are making particular political statements, evoking an ideological history of entitlements and rights" (p. 219). Out of these rights, Gellner (1983) highlights a political principle, inherent to any kind of nationalism, according to which the political and the national unit must be congruent, or to put it in other words, every nation should be politically sovereign and consequently should have their own state. In fact the present worldwide assumption of the nationalist outlook has made this principle become natural and commonsensical. However, problems begin to arise when it comes to flesh out this abstract principle, specifically, in defining the very idea of nation and delimiting its corresponding territory. Thus, together with manifold ways of characterizing national groups and theorizing on their supposed defining traits[1], we typically find contrasting partisan accounts aimed at historically justifying the attribution of certain political or territorial rights to such imagined communities[2].

In considering the relationship between *state-politics* on the one hand and *nation-people-ethnic group* on the other, Hedetoft (1995) distinguishes three modalities of nationalism. The first one, termed *imperative modality* corresponds with the initial phase of the nation-building process, where the idea of national community has not yet fully reached the population. Hence, the discourses uttered by the elites are typically characterized by "a dogmatic-imperative [...] rhetoric, since at best they can speak from a position of power or promise, but not from one characterized by the confidence and security provided by established and recognized legitimacy". By contrast, the *indicative modality* "is based on precisely such a situation of recognized legitimacy and trusting relations between state and nation" (Hedetoft, 2007, p. 595). At this stage the idea of national community would be completely assumed by the entire population, becoming in this way something taken for granted as part of the everyday background. This modality would correspond to some extent with Billig's (1995) *banal nationalism* which typically characterizes the great majority of consolidated national states. Yet, such a stable panorama can

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[1] For a discussion of the different theories on nationalism see e.g. Smith (2001).
[2] As one can expect the distinction between theoretical and partisan approaches on this matter is far from being clear-cut, since sometimes the former is in the service of the latter. Thus, Fitche's classical *Discourses to the German Nation*—considered one of cornerstones of what is known as the cultural or ethnic nationalism—were intended to arouse the German feeling of cultural identity against the backdrop of the Napoleonic occupation. More than fifty years later, Ernest Renan—in his lecture *What is a Nation?*—coined what is probably one of the most representative statements of the so called civic nationalism, namely "a nation is a daily plebiscite"; a statement which was made precisely against the ethnic based arguments in favour of the German annexation of Alsace and Lorene after the Franco-Prussian war.

be challenged whenever a minority group—with a sense of identity at odds with that of the rest of the population—perceives itself as a fully-fledged nation and, consequently, does not feel legitimately represented by the overarching structure of the state. In these cases, corresponding with the *subjunctive modality* of nationalism, this group would be disposed to strive for independence and to form their own national state.

As one can imagine, such a situation typically translates into different degrees of political unrest since the very conception of "nation-state unit" referred above would be in dispute. Putting it in other terms, we could state that the coexistence of two national identities under the same state overarching structure usually leads to competing positionings claiming different assignments of rights and duties. Specifically, where in the *indicative modality* the right to preserve the integrity of the existing national state would imply the duty to defend it against any separatist attempt, in the *subjunctive* one the very consecution of the same nation-state unit principle by a minority group would involve the duty of the existing state to recognize the right to self-determination for such a group, who in turn might undertake the duty to fight for such a right even by resorting to force[3]. Yet, previously to this extreme recourse, the deployment of a wide range of symbolic weaponry is expected by both sides, resulting in a particular use of narratives aimed at historically defining and thematizing the conflict according to the different political interests at stake. In such cases, historical narratives simultaneously underpin and are underpinned by the positioning held by each actor who, in demanding certain rights for themselves, tends to attribute different duties to the other. In addition, the very thematization of the conflict provides a set of story-lines to be used as symbolic tools for interpreting and rationalizing forthcoming happenings according to each side's point of view, thus making positionings—and so conflicts—endure throughout time. In considering this point, it could be said that the existence of different and competing story lines constitute the core of many conflicts (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

The *positioning theory* is defined by Harré (2004) as "the study of the way rights and duties are taken up and laid down, ascribed and appropriated, refused and defended in the fine grain of the encounters of daily lives" (p. 4). Throughout such encounters actors make apparent their positionings—that is, their own presumption about rights and duties—through the social significance of what they say or do, while both their positionings and their actuations are influenced by and influence the situation's story-line interpreted by each actor. Conceived as a starting point for reflecting upon different aspects of social life (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), this framework has been used to analyse manifold personal interactions where the distribution of different rights and duties are constantly negotiated, e.g. those related with Alzheimer' Disease sufferers (Sabat, 2003) or with polemic episodes within multicultural classrooms (Rosa, González, & Barbato, 2009). However, this theoretical approach also has been applied to situations and conflicts of greater temporal scale where diverse claims to rights and duties on the part of different collective actors—such as groups or states—are analysed vis-à-vis

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[3] Moghaddam and Riley (2005) underline what they term the *replaceability* of rights and duties, pointing out the fact that "most, and perhaps all, rights can be reconceived as duties, and most, if not all, duties can be reconceived as rights" (p. 88).

the discourses and actions together with the way the warring factions come to define the very nature of the conflict (see, e.g. Moghaddam & Kavulich, 2008).

In this paper we have resorted to *positioning theory* in order to study those conflicts caused by the coexistence of different national identities within the same state. In this case we have centred on the nationalist based conflict which takes place in the Basque Country[4]—a region situated in the northern part of the Spanish state—, focusing in particular on the failed peace process carried out in 2006 between the Basque armed group ETA and the Spanish Government. However, the attention will not be directly paid to the positionings held by the political actors which took part in this episode. We are rather going to centre on the way different subjects—more or less identified with those actors' positionings, i.e. the distribution of rights and duties they claim—thematize the Basque Country issue and, on the basis of that, give an account of the peace-process episode by interpreting a set of journalistic documents referring to that period. In analysing the stories recollected we aspire to put in practice a recently proposed theoretical framework (Brescó, 2008); a framework concerned with the way past events are constructed and endowed with meaning by means of different narrative forms which in turn convey diverse ways of thematizing, rationalizing, and ultimately, moralizing the past. In this case we aim to apply this framework by taking into account the subjects' *identitarian positioning* on the Basque issue, that is to say, how participants, in identifying with a specific actor's positioning—thus adopting its political claims regarding certain collective rights and duties—come to narratively (re)construct the mentioned peace-process episode.

THE NARRATIVE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST: A BRIEF THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Representing Events or Reading Stories?

As stated at the beginning, the way in which individuals imagine their past is strongly affected by the groups or communities they identify with, the past being in turn an essential symbolic means through which these very communities can be imagined as genuine collective actors endowed with certain rights.

As it becomes evident, this reciprocal and somewhat organic connection between past and identity contrasts with the objective perspective classically upheld by those disciplines concerned with what Lowenthal (1985) regards as the two majors routes to the past, i.e. memory and history. In History this viewpoint was clearly posed by Leopold von Ranke in the 19th century when this discipline was

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[4] The Basque Country autonomous community—endowed with a high level of political autonomy—constitutes a good example of Hedetoft's *subjunctive modality* of nationalism, since a significant number of its population, which does not feel part of the Spanish nation, would like this region to be an independent country. This scenario is strongly marked by the presence of the Basque terrorist group ETA—the acronym for *Euzkadi ta Azcatasuna*, Basque for "Basque Country and Freedom". Since its first terrorist action in 1969—at the end of Franco's dictatorship—this group has caused nearly 900 casualties—including politicians, civilians and military men—, the last one being during the writing of this paper on the 19th of June, 2009. However, after fifty years of violence, along with some failed peace processes, ETA has been losing strength in terms of both their operational capacity and social support even among those who used to justify their actions.

aspiring to become a fully-fledged science. According to the classical positivist prescription defended by who was the official historian of the Prussian state at that time, historical accounts should merely show how the past actually was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). As for Psychology, this realist notion has prevailed specifically within memory studies where events are usually considered as "real entities that memories (of every kind) represent" (Neisser, 1988, p. 371). Thus, according to Tulving (1972), "a perceptual event can be stored in the episodic system solely in terms of its perceptible properties or attributes" (p. 385). In sum, authors identified with this realist viewpoint tend to regard events as ready-made entities, charged with their inherent properties, which would be stored whether in the form of historical documents or memories waiting to be retrieved and accurately represented by means of language.

Following Brockmeier and Harré (2001) we could refer to this notion as *representation fallacy*, which consists of "supposing that there is one and only one human reality to which all narratives must in the end conform" (p. 48). This approach entails two related epistemic difficulties. The first one would consist of finding the most accurate and aseptic way of translating reality into narrative accounts; something that points to the delicate question concerning language, the very use of which, according to Edward Carr (1961/2001), would "forbid [the historian] to be neutral" (p. 19). However, this leads to another question, i.e. as long as it is impossible to reproduce the infinity of happenings that have taken place, a criterion based on relevancy or significance is required; a criterion that in Carr's opinion would have very much to do with events' future consequences. So, from this standpoint, the significance of a particular event would not stem so much from any of its supposed inherent qualities but from the way we relate that event with later ones; something that usually calls for a narrative plot.

But, does reality come into view in the form of ready-made plots? Some authors as David Carr (2001) or William Dray (2001) seem to reckon so. According to the latter "the task of historians (as of reporters) is to 'find the story', implying that it exists before the historian (or reporter) is in a position to tell it" (p. 177). Brockmeier and Harré (2001) refer to such a standpoint as *ontological fallacy*, which would consist of thinking that "there [is] really a story 'out there', waiting to be uncovered, prior to the narrative process" (p. 48). Likewise Norman (2001) refers to the authors committed to this approach as *plot-reifiers* inasmuch as, in their view, narratives would "give voice to a past that is already narratively structured" (p. 183). Norman singles out MacIntyre as one of the main representative figures in this vein. In MacIntyre's view narratives are "not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer" (p. 211).

Historians such as Louis Mink (1987) or Hayden White (1986) strongly disagree with such a standpoint. Thus, the former, in replying to MacIntyre's assertion, states that "stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends" (p. 60). The latter in turn puts the stress on the creative or *poietic* role of historians. In his opinion, far from identifying a supposed ready-made historical drama, they would *emplot* the documented facts in the light of a certain literary genre, therefore giving a narrative form to the past. Furthermore, this constructive

role would involve two related dimensions inasmuch as the aesthetic choice of the narrative form tends to convey a particular moral or ideological content; something that White (1986) refers as *the content of the form*. Accordingly, the past would not become apparent in the form of a narrative plot, from which a moral could be directly learned. Far from that, it is the historian—or the lay person—who in *narrativizing* the past inevitably draws a certain moral to be considered in the present. In White's (1980) own words: "narrativity certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality" (p. 18).

The Narrative Construction of Historical Events: A Controversial Matter

In view of the two fallacies above discussed, we could conclude that events are not pre-existent entities waiting to be correctly identified, translated and represented by means of language. Nor would they become apparent in the form of ready-made narrative plots which can be read straight from reality. On the contrary, they need to be constructed through the mediation of the set of cultural artefacts (Cole, 1996) people have on hand, principally of narratives. In this way, narratives constitute decisive meaning-making artefacts which permit us to give sense to happenings by grasping them together into a plot which in turn develops a certain theme. Accordingly, happenings would come into view as signs in a given semiotic actuation, the theme being an interpretative means through which initially meaningless happenings would acquire significance vis-à-vis their contribution to the narrative plot, thus becoming events endowed with a specific meaning. Quoting Ricoeur's (1981) words, it could be stated that "to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot" (p. 167).

Events are narrative mediated products whose meaning stems from a certain way of thematizing the past according to different possible standpoints. In this sense, they are the result of a meaning-making process carried out by a certain agent; a process which usually takes an abductive form. Thus, on one hand the historian has to supply an account of the different signs the past has left on the present—such as documents or other historical remains—, endowing them with meaning in the light of a certain thematic narrative. But on the other hand, the very form of thematizing the past becomes the criterion which makes the historian—and the lay person—select, interpret, appraise and even infer facts in a way that they can be fitted into the story-line. This leads us to draw attention both to the role of the theme—as an essential framework upon which past accounts come to be constructed—and to the fact that the theme of the story does not stem so much from the happenings that took place but from the perspective adopted by the historian. As Edward Carr (1961/2001) notes, such a process "rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an *a priori* decision of the historian" (p. 5, italics in original). This view is to some extent comparable to that put forward by Bartlett (1932) who conceived of remembering as an *effort after meaning* by means of which we would (re)construct and rationalize the past upon the basis of a certain attitude.

Thus, the way the past is thematically narrativized would imply a certain way of positioning vis-à-vis a polemical matter where different rights and responsibilities are at play. It goes without saying that under these circumstances narrative accounts can not be neutral. As Bruner (1990) remarks, "they have rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are not merely expository but rather partisan, designed to put the case if not adversarially then at least convincingly on behalf of a particular interpretation" (p. 85). This makes the construction of historical events an inherently controversial activity which take place within an argumentative context (Billig, 1991) where different positionings compete to impose their own way of thematizing history and thus reaching the canonical form of rationalizing the past; a form that, as said previously, usually conveys a moral content resulting in a certain distribution of excuses and justifications (Scott & Lyman, 1968) together with a set of rights and duties among the main protagonists of the story. Here it is worth pointing out that such a struggle for the past is not motivated by an aseptic interest in its accuracy. Rather the interest is usually put in providing the necessary symbolic resources to orienting the action towards diverse future scenarios. Hence, this disputed (re)construction of the past takes place with a view to the future, aiming at *proleptically*[5] channelling the present into a certain political goal; a goal which is frequently presented as the solution to a given historical conflict.

Such an argumentative context leads us to take into account the *multivoicedness of historical representations* (Luczynski, 1997) when it comes to studying the way people (re)construct the past, thus paying attention to the fact that every historical account forms part of a broader dialogue between multiple voices identified with different positionings. As Wertsch (2006) points out, this implies a *hidden dialogism* inasmuch as every version of the past constitutes, in one way or another, a response to a competing interpretation of a given episode. Consequently, it could be said that every historian "argues in diametric opposition to [an] 'invisible speaker'" (Wertsch, 2006, p. 104) whose account of the past would be answered back through a new alternative version. It is precisely in view of this dialogue that the term *(re)construction* is used in this paper. Thus, far from referring to an accurate and complete reproduction of what actually happened, we mean to highlight that the past is always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed by multiple positioned agents through different narrative forms; something that we aim to show in the following study.

STUDYING THE NARRATIVE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LAST PEACE-PROCESS IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

The main purpose of this study is accounting for the way people (re)construct a controversial episode by means of contrasting thematic narratives. As said before, this episode deals with the last and failed peace-process between ETA and the Spanish Government[6] which in turn stems from a quite longstanding conflict

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[5] According to Michel Cole (1996), the term *prolepsis* refers to the process by which an imagined final cause turns into an efficient one for current action.

[6] The controversy began right after the declaration of a truce by ETA that led to the subsequent peace-process. From that moment and throughout the entire process the Spanish right wing Popular Party accused the Socialist Prime Minister (José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero) of having secret deals with the

where different collective identities and nationalist projects are at stake. In particular, what we intend to study is how subjects—identified with different positionings—come to thematize the conflict and how, in the light of it, they give sense to and select different documents related to the peace-process period, giving rise to the construction of distinct events and therefore, to contrasting versions of the episode. Putting it in other words, we are interested in how "the narrator's perspective and predilections shape his choice and use of historical materials" (Lowenthal, 1985, p.216). In this respect, it is worth remarking that this is not a problem-solving task, since there is no solution to be reached, but one aimed at somehow grasping the abovementioned effort after meaning which Bartlett identified in his studies on remembering. Finally, we are also interested in how the thematization of the Basque issue corresponds to a certain attribution of rights and duties to the main actors involved in the episode; an attribution that is expected to be aimed at legitimizing both certain nationalist goals—whether the consecution or the preservation of a given sovereign state—and the means employed to attaining these goals.

Subjects

Sixteen undergraduate students participated in this study—eight from the Autonomous University of Madrid and the other eight from the University of the Basque Country—of which only three have been included in this paper. These three cases can be considered as 'ideal types' in relation to the present study's theoretical goals inasmuch as they show a clear identification with the respective positions taken by three of the main political actors involved in the peace-process episode.

Materials and Procedure

The main task of the study was intended to reproduce somehow the role of historians when writing accounts of the past on the grounds of a given set of documents. To that end a more simplified task was designed—eliminating fundamental aspects such as the verification of the sources—in which participants had to make-up a narrative account with a previously selected set of journalistic documents about the peace-process episode. These documents, extracted from diverse Spanish journalistic sources[7], supply a chronological account of different happenings which took place throughout the nine months the truce lasted (see Appendix below). This material is composed of five pictures, ten broadsheet headings and eight statements delivered by the main political actors involved in the peace-process[8]. All the documents were balanced so that the major standpoints upon the Basque issue were equally represented.

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terrorists and surrendering the country to ETA. In turn, a large majority in the Basque Country blamed Zapatero for his lack of audacity to push forward with the process up to its ultimate consequences. Finally, after nine months of political unrest, the fragile process was destroyed when ETA planted a bomb in Madrid's Barajas airport causing two casualties.

[7] The selected sources are: "El Mundo" and "ABC" (centre-right wing newspapers, close to the Popular Party), "El País" (centre-left wing newspaper, close to Zapatero's Socialist Party), "Gara" (newspaper close to Batasuna—ETA's political arm—, and "La Vanguardia" (a Catalan centre-right newspaper).

[8] These actors are: the Spanish Government (formed by the Zapatero's Socialist Party), ETA and its political arm Batasuna, the right wing Popular Party (the main group of the Opposition), and the Basque

Participants were asked to observe carefully the handed out material in order to write down a short account of the peace process episode. At this point it was emphasized that there were neither good nor bad stories, thus highlighting the fact that we were primarily interested in collecting their own version of this episode. Subjects were allowed to use the material in a completely free way, taking those documents which better suited their versions, omitting those others they found irrelevant, and adding whatever extra information they reckoned appropriate. Before handing out the material and starting to perform the task, participants were asked to give a brief definition of the Basque conflict—in order to recollect the way they thematize it—followed by some suggestions for its future resolution.

RESULTS

Green

Let's name the first subject "Green". Green studies psychology in the Basque Country University and identifies with Batasuna's positioning. His outlook on both the Basque conflict and its possible solutions is the following one:

Thematization of the Basque conflict: *"It is a conflict between an oppressed nation and two oppressor states (Spain and France) which refuse to recognize the right all democratic states have: the right to self-determination. This situation has led to an armed conflict".*

Conflict solution: *"Negotiations should involve all political options. The mentioned states should give Basque citizens the right to decide on their own future. Then ETA would declare another truce. Nevertheless, whenever ETA has declared a truce the Spanish state has always kept on repressing, detaining and banning political parties".*

Green clearly takes Batasuna's positioning and makes it his own. Accordingly, he thematizes the conflict by highlighting the oppression of Basque People caused by both the Spanish and French state. So from this identitarian positioning, the following distribution of rights and duties would be at stake: to begin with, the Basque nation would have the right to be listened to and to decide on its own future. By the same token, it is the duty of the Spanish state to listen to the Basque People and to recognize their right to self-determination. Finally, as far as these conditions remain unfulfilled ETA would have the right to take up arms.

Now if we look into Green's peace-process account, we can observe that it is rather a rationalization of the way he understands the conflict:

Peace-process account: *"ETA declares a truce and stops all its actions. The Government says that it is willing to meet with ETA. Batasuna shows its willingness to negotiate the future of the Basque Country. The Spanish state keeps on*

Nationalist Party (a centre right wing party which has been holding the Basque Autonomous Government since the return of democracy in Spain up to the last Basque elections held in March of 2009, the results of which led the Socialist and the Popular party to form a coalition government in that region).

imprisoning, torturing and oppressing the Basque People, and especially Batasuna and its supporters. Given the course of events and the Government's incapacity to take a step forward, ETA decides to warn the Government by planting a bomb in Madrid airport. The Government doesn't react and the truce comes to an end. Then ETA returns to the armed struggle".

As this version shows, despite ETA's good intentions, the Spanish Government would have failed in its democratic duty by not listening to the Basque People, therefore causing ETA to exercise its right to resume the armed struggle. Furthermore, it is worth noting that to underpin his version Green omits any documentation—included in the handed out material—referring to ETA's violent activities committed during the truce while including information about detentions and torture made by the Government. Likewise, here it is the Government who is the responsible for the truce's failure by not responding to ETA's warning in the form of a bombing-attack. This is in turn a peculiar way of constructing this event; a way which conceives violence as a form of dialogue.

Red

The second participant named "Red" studies psychology in Madrid. He sympathises with Zapatero's Socialist Party and with his positioning on the Basque issue. Red's standpoint on both the conflict and its corresponding solution goes as follows:

Thematization of the Basque conflict: *"It started as a conflict centred on the Basque collective identity and rights. However, nowadays it is an armed conflict centred on political, economic and social interests".*

Conflict solution: *"Arms must give way to words. More dialogue and consensus among all the political parties (including both Batasuna and the Popular Party) is required. The Basque language and identity must be preserved".*

As can be noted, Red thematizes the conflict as one that arises out of different economic and political interests where arms prevail over words, though he also recognizes its identitarian origins. From this positioning we can infer that the Government has both the duty and the right to look for dialogue and consensus. It is also its duty to preserve the Basque cultural identity, this being by the same token a right of the Basque nation. In turn, it is ETA's duty to change arms for words. Thus, contrary to Green's thematization of the issue, the armed struggle is not regarded as forming part of its solution but as one of its main problems and also the major impediment to dialogue, which in turn is thought of as a necessary ingredient for a way out of the conflict. In accordance with such a standpoint, it is both Batasuna's and the Popular Party's duty to support dialogue and consensus.

From this way of understanding the conflict, Red provided the following account of the peace-process episode:

Peace-process account: *"ETA announces a cease-fire which is followed by a peace-plan based on dialogue which is supported by all political parties except the right*

(Popular Party). From the very beginning there is a constant opposition by the right which jeopardised the process. In fact, the right organized several demonstrations with the sole aim of making the peace process fail. They tainted the Socialist Party with conspiracy theories and accused Zapatero of yielding to ETA's claims despite the fact that during those days the Government made more detentions than any other previous cabinet. In turn, ETA kept on using violent means. Given the impossibility to reach an agreement (where you have to first lose in order to win), ETA broke the ceasefire, thus ruining any possibility of maintaining the dialogue. But, despite the failure, it was worthy trying it, wasn't it?"

As we can observe, the truce's failure is attributed both to the Popular Party and ETA. As for the former, this version highlights the conspiracy theories put forward by the right and the accusations of surrender made against the Government, which Red contrasts with the great number of arrests made during those days. As can be noted, this event is quite different from that included in Green's version where reference to detentions was to prove the Government's failure in its duty to give voice to the Basque People. By contrast, in Red's version this event is to defend the Government against the accusations of not fulfilling its duty of going after the terrorists. As for ETA's role, this version, unlike the previous one, includes the violent activities carried out by this group which in turn appears as the main culprit for destroying the truce.

Blue

Let's look at our final subject, called "Blue". She also studies Psychology in Madrid and sympathises with the right wing Popular Party. She defined the conflict and its possible solutions in the following terms.

Thematization of the Basque conflict: *"There is a group of people from that region who don't feel Spanish so they use violence"*.

Conflict solution: *"To increase police involvement, to toughen the laws and to eliminate the anti-Spanish feelings inculcated in their schools"*.

According to Blues' positioning, the violence exerted by a supposed anti-Spanish faction constitutes the main problem at stake. This way of thematizing the conflict is based on a supposed connection between not feeling Spanish and resorting to violence; a standpoint which clearly results in a de-legitimization of those who feel Basque instead of Spanish. In the light of this argument, such an "anti-Spanish" group would lack any rights, whereas the Spanish state would have both the right and the duty to strengthen the fight against those who use violence, dismissing the idea of dialogue with them. Finally, it is worth observing that Blue does not even mention the name of the region she is talking about—i.e. the Basque Country. This distant, if not unfriendly, attitude towards this region is, furthermore, indexed through the use of the third person plural when she refers to "the anti-Spanish feelings inculcated in their schools", thus expressing the above mentioned *Us vs. Them* logic which somehow fuels every nationalistic standpoint.

Her version of the peace-process was the following one:

Peace-process account: *"Thanks to a series of secret agreements between ETA and the Socialist Party plus lots of concessions made by the later, a truce was achieved. During the supposed truce period, the Government was completely willing to talk with the terrorists while they kept on committing terrorist actions. Thousands of Spaniards marched demanding Zapatero stop yielding to ETA's claims. In turn, the Popular Party broke with the Government due to Zapatero's erroneous strategy. This episode reached its end with the terrorist attack on Madrid airport which caused two casualties (this is, in fact, the only way ETA understands dialogue). After this attack, we are still supposed to believe that the Government has dropped the negotiations with ETA"*.

In looking at Blue's story-line, we observe that, unlike the other versions, she appraises the truce in quite a negative way relating it with a supposed plot—termed as a conspiracy theory in the previous account—between the Socialist Government and ETA; a plot that, judging from her own words, could be still working. So viewed, the position taken by the Popular Party throughout the peace-process is no longer regarded as a failure in their duty to support the Governmental peace initiative, but rather as a patriotic duty against an immoral agreement. In turn this is the only participant that explicitly mentions the terrorist-attack and the two resulting casualties. Interestingly enough her comment on this event, referred to ETA's way of understanding dialogue, seems to point to Green's version where such an attack was conceived as a mere warning. Lastly, it is worth stressing that, according to this story-line, the failure of the process would support the uselessness of dialogue as a solution to the conflict and therefore the rightness of the Popular Party's positioning, consisting of de-legitimizing the government's attempt to reach a peace agreement.

DISCUSSION

Throughout these three samples we have seen how the way in which participants thematize the Basque conflict has led to a diverse selection and interpretation of the journalistic documents, thus yielding different narrative (re)constructions of the truce period according to distinct positionings the subjects identify with. As pointed out above, this process has a lot in common with Bartlett's concept of rationalization according to which, individuals would reconstruct the past from a certain general idea or attitude, trying to offer a plausible account by emphasising some facts while omitting and downplaying others. According to this viewpoint, subjects in remembering an episode from their past would say to themselves something of this sort: "This and this and this must have occurred, in order that my present state should be what it is" (Bartlett, 1932, p. 202). Here, inasmuch as we are not dealing with autobiographical accounts but with ones referred to past actuations carried out by different political actors, it would not make much sense to talk about individuals' present state but rather about their present standpoint on a given matter, or to put it in other terms, their specific way of thematizing it.

Table 1 shows the subjects' thematization of the Basque conflict together with their respective identitarian positionings on it. In observing this table we can note that to thematize an issue necessarily involves the assumption of a certain

positioning on it; a positioning that becomes apparent by means of a particular discourse attached to a story-line which typically imposes a form of narrating and interpreting different episodes. Thus, it could be said that the very act of narrating the truce episode would become itself an *actuation of identification* (Rosa & Blanco, 2007), since individuals identify with the actors' positioning on the conflict, justifying their actions in the light of a particular attribution of rights and duties. As Bruner (1990) points out referring to the role of narratives when it comes to recounting some polemical episode, they "become an instrument for telling not only what happened but also why it justified the action recounted" (p. 86). Echoing John Austin's famous book 'A plea for Excuses', Bruner goes on to say that "a justification rests on a story of mitigating circumstances" (p. 86); circumstances that would entitle certain actors the right to act in the way they did.

Table 1
Thematization of the Basque Conflict and Subjects' Identitarian Positionings.

	Thematization of the Conflict	*Identitarian positionings*
Green	Oppression and lack of freedom to decide upon the Basque Country's own future.	Right (and duty?) to fight for the Basque Country independence
Red	Conflict of interests (originally caused by identitarian motives) where arms prevail over words.	Right (and duty?) to find a dialogued way out to the conflict
Blue	Problem of violence caused by anti-Spanish feelings.	Right (and duty?) to impede any kind of concession to a terrorist group

In considering the way subjects recount the peace-process period from a specific positioning, we observe that, in the case of Green's account, ETA's terrorist actions become justified in the light of the oppressing circumstances which would surround the Basque People. Assuming ETA's positioning, Green thematizes the conflict in such a way that the armed struggle can only be considered as a community's right (perhaps a duty) to defend itself against oppression. As for Red's account, we can notice how the failure of the Socialist Government in leading the peace-process to a satisfactory end is somehow mitigated considering both ETA's actions and the disloyal attitude of the Popular Party. Yet, it is precisely the latter's attitude which is justified in Blue's account. Thus, consistent with the Popular Party's positioning on this matter, Blue depicts the opposition to Zapatero's peace initiative as a legitimated and duty-bound response to a supposed secret agreement and a series of intolerable concessions made by the Socialists to ETA. Conversely, in the light of Red's thematization, dialogue becomes an option every responsible Government has both the right and the duty to explore.

In looking at these divergent story-lines it becomes "clear that duties and rights exist in the discursive domain. They are key materials to be used in fashioning a convincing discourse" (Harré, 2005, p. 237). Now, if we regard them as a whole,

another significant aspect becomes quite explicit, namely the mentioned hidden dialogism that pervades all past accounts. As can be noted all these versions acquire a broader sense within a particular argumentative context where multiple political actors strive to impose their own story-line on the truce period and to cast a partisan rationalization on it by means of different narratives, thus leading to what Rosa and Blanco (2007) refer to as *na-rationalization*; a process through which the past would be politically domesticated (White, 1982). Yet, as stated above, the past is a rather thorny thing to tame inasmuch as different historical versions are always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed, underpinned and undermined due to the emergence of alternative accounts. However, this would be also applicable to the future, since the different ways of thematizing conflicts are aimed at paving the way for justifying alternative solutions and avenues for future actions (see Table 2). As Slocum (2008) states, discourses are used to create a social reality in which it becomes not only acceptable, but even a duty to undertake certain types of actions.

Table 2
Future Solutions to the Basque Conflict.

	Future Solution
Green	Negotiations involving all political options. Right of Basque citizens to decide on their own future
Red	Change arms for words. Dialogue and consensus among all political parties.
Blue	Reinforcement of policing and judicial actuations. Elimination of anti-Spanish feelings.

Finally, it is important to stress that these three selected cases can not be considered as representative of the diverse positionings on the Basque Country conflict that exist today. As stated previously, they have been selected since they illustrate quite well the way in which individuals narratively (re)construct a contentious episode according to their respective identitarian positionings vis-à-vis certain political actors. Note that such positionings have not been deduced straight from the political party that these three subjects sympathise or identify with, but from the manner they have thematized the conflict by implicitly attributing a set of rights and duties to warring factions. In this respect, we have proceeded "not by assuming a typology of persons […] prior to discursive action, but by assuming that activities of positioning indeed take place in discourse (Carbaugh, 1999, p. 175).

SOME FINAL REMARKS

Yet, these discourses do not come out of nowhere. In fact, they are on many occasions supplied—mainly through the media—by the very same actors who take part in the conflict. Such discourses would represent then the set of cultural tools that circulate through the *symbolic market* (Bourdieu, 1991), or putting it in other terms, the food for the very conflict to be thought of; a food whose consumption would contribute therefore to the (re)production and reinforcement

of the different competing positionings on that particular issue. However, this is not to assert that people repeat what they hear in a completely mechanic way. As Wertsch (1997) remarks, such cultural tools should not be taken as mechanistically determining consumption, since, in facing them, people enter in dialogue with their contents which in this way might be answered back, reformulated, rebutted or even resisted.

This leads us to consider the biological metaphor of digestion suggested by Beals (1998), according to which individuals would rather rework the incoming words and discourses into their own material, thus giving rise to new ones; something that takes place on the grounds of their respective discursive repertoire, that is, the acquired symbolic toolkit which would enable them to work on the incoming material. As Beals (1998) points out, discourse is both the material we appropriate and the means by which we appropriate further discourses. The result is an interwoven number of voices—a sort of *heteroglossia* (Wertsch, 2006)—which can eventually lead to the co-construction of a new discourse. As Bakhtin (1986) remarks, "this experience can be characterized to some degree as the process of *assimilation*—more or less creative—of others' words" (p. 89, italics in original). Yet, such degree of creativity will vary depending on the individual's own resources to establish a dialogue with others' voices and discourses. From this, it seems reasonable to assume that the possession of a rich symbolic toolkit will predispose individuals to adopt a more active role in dealing with public discourses, enabling them to add their voices to the incoming ones, thus gaining more agency when it comes to (re)constructing new discourses and bringing them back to the public sphere.

As can be expected, this creative process will socially translate into a wider range of—more or less creative—positionings open to dialogue, and therefore, to change. By contrast, the lack of necessary symbolic tools will result in a more passive appropriation of discourses. In such cases individuals are inclined to taking the words of others and making them their own in relatively an uncritical way. Consequently, they end up by repeating different prepacked scripts in such a manner that their voices become to a certain degree *ventriloquized* (Bakhtin, 1981) by other ones, e.g. those conveyed through the media. Such voices, in providing certain forms of interpreting particular issues, also transmit a moral content consisting of a specific attribution of rights and duties; something that can potentially impact on both the orientation of individual's actions and the way these actions come to be morally justified. Taking the model proposed by Schank and Abelson (1977), it could be said that in certain situations individuals would become mere actors attached to different ready-made scripts which in supplying a story-line for understanding the conflict, they would also set the plans and goals to be reached in a given scenario; a scenario that, needless to say, would be characterized by a poor and predictable gamut of voices and positionings which, in turn, will tend to be rather fixed and closed to establishing a proper dialogue capable of causing any significant change in the way the conflict is thematized.

There is not a definitive and impartial interpretation of the past to which we can turn to for obtaining the "true" historical causes of conflicts. We have inevitably to deal with different and even opposing ways of (re)constructing the past attached

to diverse positionings. Still, we can turn around on our own versions, establishing an internal dialogue with them and contrasting our position with that held by others so that initial scripts can be surpassed and new ways of looking at conflicts can be co-constructed. However on certain occasions individuals are somehow deaf to other positions as they refuse to listen to alternative ways of thematizing certain polemical issues. But it also happens that they are most of the times blind to the very form through which the different versions of the past are narratively constructed and prepacked, since such a form appears to be self-evident and therefore transparent.

In view of this fact we coincide with Rosa (1994) in pointing out the necessity of endowing people with the basic symbolic tools so that they can critically face the wide range of discourses which circulate through the public culture, and more importantly, reflect on their own narratives and positionings vis-à-vis a given conflict. The aim of this would be to prevent people from passively reproducing old argumentative forms, encouraging them instead to imagine new and creative ways of thematizing old and never-ending conflicts. Of course this is easier said than done and a fine grain discussion of how such a goal could be achieved would lead us beyond the scope of this paper. However, following up the same line of argument put forward in previous works (Brescó & Rosa, 2009), we reckon that an unavoidable step in that direction should include the consideration of narrative forms as far as past accounts are concerned. For that reason we think it would be worthwhile bringing the role of narratives to the fore, especially in the teaching of history, so that individuals can *de-naturalize* and "unpack" the forms through which historical accounts are made, thus becoming aware of their constructive or *poietic* nature.

In considering this aspect, we find it necessary to encourage what Perfetti et al. (1994) call *historical literacy*, that is, to go beyond the mere acquisition and memorization of simple stories, fostering instead the students' ability to analyze texts, to situate them in their context of production, and more importantly, to compare and contrast them with other possible competing accounts. In this way, far from transmitting a single and univocal version of the past in the form of authoritative utterances (Bakhtin, 1986) included in a text book—which is typically presented as a neutral artefact—, it would be worth considering other voices in order to identify the different positionings from which a given episode is thematized, making in this way explicit the hidden dialogism that links all the competing versions together with the argumentative context in which all of them are generated. In doing so it is hoped that students begin gradually to regard the content of historical accounts as something problematic, drawing at the same time their attention to the narrative form in which such accounts are constructed and noticing in particular the moral content the very form exudes. Thus, in construing historical texts as literary artefacts (White, 1978), we could conceive our proposal as a sort of literary criticism workshop, since students would be trained in the use of the necessary tools and techniques to perform a critical analysis of historical discourses.

The whole point would consist of laying stress on the abovementioned *multivoicedness* dimension of history with the aim of educating against what

Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) called *intolerance of ambiguity*. Yet, by ambiguity we do not mean a cynical, aloof or easygoing attitude towards history, open to any account that might come out. It is rather a kind of ambiguity that—in opposition to the conformity involved in the passive consumption of ready-made and univocal stories—endows us with more agency to confront the wide variety of versions that exist upon a certain matter (including our own), thus calling for a more active commitment to better ways of imagining the past, the present and the future within an open society.

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APPENDIX

Material used for the reconstruction of peace-process episode.

Date	Reported news	Source
03/22/06		*Television* [Declaration of truce by ETA]
03/22/06	"It was what ETA was expected to do given all Zapatero's concessions"	*Mª San Gil, (member of the Popular Party)*
03/24/06	"The main priority is to reach an agreement aimed at normalizing the political panorama in the Basque Country. Such an agreement should be ratified by a referendum to be held in the Basque Country"	*Ibarretxe (Basque Nationalist Party leader and President of the Country Basque Autonomy at that time)*
03/25/06	"The Popular Party's cooperation is key to achieving the end of violence"	*Zapatero (Spanish Prime Minister)*
03/31/06	"Batasuna is the only one who is putting everything into this peace-process"	*Otegi (leader of Batasuna)*
04/02/06		*Television* [Demonstration in San Sebastian (Basque Country) in support of the peace-process]
04/22/06	Arson is committed on a hardware property of José Antonio Mendive [a Popular Party member]	*La Vanguardia (Catalan newspaper)*
04/28/06	More detentions, reports of torture and prohibitions of Batasuna's demonstrations	*Gara (pro-Batasuna newspaper)*
06/04/06	Otegi boasts about the Socialist Party's willingness to discuss with Batasuna, but demands more compromises	*El Mundo (right-wing newspaper)*
06/06/06	The Popular Party breaks all links with the government	*El País (centre-left wing newspaper)*
06/11/06		*Television* [Demonstration in Madrid against the socialist government]

06/29/ 06	Zapatero states in the Congress that he will respect the decisions adopted by the Basque citizenry provided they conform to the legal framework.	*El País (centre-left wing newspaper)*
07/07/ 06		*Television* [Meeting between members of Batasuna and Socialist Party]
07/10/ 06	The Spanish Government and ETA reach an agreement with mutual compromises	*Gara (pro-Batasuna newspaper)*
07/29/ 06	A handcrafted bomb explodes in front of the Basque Government buildings	*ABC (right-wing newspaper)*
09/21/ 06	Home Office falsified documentation in order to conceal some links between the March 11th Madrid bombing attacks and ETA	*El Mundo (right-wing newspaper)*
10/23/ 06	ETA steals 300 guns with large amounts of ammunition in the southeast of France.	*ABC (right-wing newspaper)*
10/26/ 06	The Ertzaintza [Basque autonomous police] arrests Jon Enparantza and Estanis Etxaburu (Batasuna's spokesmen) for not appearing in court to declare.	*La Vanguardia (Catalan newspaper)*
12/30/ 06		*Television* [Terrorist attack on Madrid airport, Barajas]
01/02/ 07	"ETA has destroyed the peace-process. They has ruined it"	*Rubalcaba (Home Secretary of the Socialist cabinet)*
01/03/ 07	"There is no explicit proof which certifies that the ceasefire is broken as ETA has not stated so in any communiqué"	*Barrena (member of Batasuna)*
01/04/ 07	"We are not going to permit ETA to spoil the trust made by all the people who have been supporting this process"	*Imaz (member of the Basque nationalist Party)*
01/13/ 07	"Pretty soon the government will go back to its bad ways and will negotiate with ETA again"	*Acebes (member of the Popular Party)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ignacio Brescó is currently a PhD candidate in Psychology at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. He works on national identity in relation to the interpretation and remembering of national histories, focusing on the role of narratives as cultural mediators. Email Ignacio.bresco@uam.es.