The construction of elderly identity through conversational narrative

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Abstract

Drawing on data from authentic Greek conversations and using tools of ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, this paper examines the construction of elderly identity through naturally occurring stories told by older people. Such stories recount recent events that took place in the narrator's everyday life as well as events from the elderly narrator's distant past. It is argued that storytelling gives elderly people a chance to cast themselves in a positive light and project positive self-images. The paper explores some of the ways this self-enhancement is responded to both in "peer elderly" and intergenerational contexts and, consequently, investigates the identity-construction functions of these responses, too.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Membership Categorization Analysis, elderly identity, narrative, positive self-image, self-enhancement, storytelling

1. Narrative as an identity-construction process

Within the framework of ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis, identity has been treated as an interactional accomplishment negotiated and achieved by participants in everyday interaction. Conversation analysts distinguish between two concepts of identity: discourse identities and social identities. Discourse identities are the speakers' interactional roles "in relation to the ongoing production and trajectory of talk" (Georgakopoulou 2002: 428). Such identities are, for example, questioner, answerer, inviter, invitee, storyteller, story-recipient. These in turn can become the speakers' resources which will allow conversatio-
nalists to “make larger social identities visible in the talk” (Greatbatch and Dingwall 1998: 121). In this way, the conversational context becomes an index for the wider social context.

Conversation analysts focus on this indexicality of talk-in-interaction and try to explore the ways in which talk “index[es] or constitute[s] social and cultural identities, roles, relationships, stances and activities” (Lepper 2000: 4). A reference to a person’s social identity is, as Widdicombe (1998: 53) claims, crucially linked to a reference of their membership of a specific category. Sacks introduced the notion of Membership Categories to describe how “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society” (1992: 40) is organized in terms of membership categorization devices. These devices are sets or collections of classes of persons and their activities – i.e. membership categories and category-bound activities, respectively – which are systematically used by speakers “to assemble ‘inference rich’ recognizable actions and descriptions” (Lepper op. cit.) and to organize experience and knowledge of the everyday world.

This paper investigates the link between the discourse identity storyteller or narrator and the social identity old person. Following Georgakopoulou (1997), I focus on the indexing of the storyteller as a figure projected by the story, as a member of the category old person.

Storytelling is ideal for looking into displays of the storyteller’s aspects of self and identity since stories provide a self-portrait (Schiffrin 1996), a “linguistic lens through which we can discover people’s own views of themselves as situated in a social structure” (Georgakopoulou 1997: 169). Self-presentation lies at the heart of the narrative process and can indicate how the individual perceives and integrates cultural norms and expectations into his/her everyday life; on the other hand, it “provides resources for social actors to pursue their agendas, achieve interactional ends, and, generally, perform actions” (op. cit.).

What elderly storytellers can, and do, achieve through narrating personal experiences is self-enhancement and self-foregrounding (Georgakopoulou op. cit.). Before seeing how this is achieved in naturally occurring conversations, we should briefly consider why elderly speakers may want to present themselves in a positive light. Old people often find themselves restricted to the periphery of social life (Poulkos 2004a). They experience an exclusion or withdrawal from various social activities. This may be the result of the restrictions imposed by their poor health or, more commonly, by an ageist society which denies old age a legitimate social space while, at the same time, it projects unpleasant images of older people and highlights the advantages of youth (Scrutton 1990, Coup-
land 2001). Thus, it seems natural that older people need to cast themselves in a positive light during their everyday interactions.

This positive self-presentation can be achieved by referring to one’s past experiences through storytelling. Obviously, the discourse identity *storyteller* is a powerful identity since it allows the speakers to hold the conversational floor for long stretches of time. Elderly narrators exploit this power to construct positive self-images. In this way storytelling seems to serve therapeutic purposes for the elderly narrators since it gives them a chance to downplay all the potentially negative and face-threatening aspects of their everyday life by projecting praise-worthy identities in the process of narration.\(^1\) Such identities can be projected through stories recounting either recent events that took place in the narrator’s everyday life or events that took place in a more distant past and form part of what we call a narrator’s *life history* (cf. Linde 1993).\(^2\)

In this process of constructing a positive self-identity through storytelling, the most important role is played by the *evaluative component* and the *tellability* of older person’s narratives. In most of the narratives that I have encountered in my data, tellability – that is, the intrinsic worthiness of a story’s telling, why a story is interesting (Georgakopoulou 1994: 381) – does not depend on the unexpectedness of the narrated events. As Georgakopoulou argues, what really matters in these stories is “the projection of traditionally established cultural values and attitudes” (1994: 381). This point seems to be strengthened by the fact that the elderly have always been treated as carriers of traditions and moral values, which are naturally present in their stories. If the storytellers show that they succeed or have succeeded in living in accordance with such values and traditions, then they acquire status within the community and their positive self-image is strengthened.

As for the evaluative component of the stories – that is, the devices by which the narrator indicates the point of the narrative, why the story is felt to be tellable (Georgakopoulou 1997: 10) – Georgakopoulou has shown that evaluation in Greek stories is usually not explicit but is, rather, realized by two main formal devices: the historical present – i.e. “the use of the present tense to refer to past events in a narrative context” (op. cit.: 124) – and the constructed dialogue – i.e. instances of direct speech/thoughts and dialogues (op. cit.). She points out that the use of these formal devices enables the narrator to eschew explicit references to cultural values. Thus, the pleasure of this kind of narration

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2. Following Harweg’s distinction that is reported by Georgakopoulou (1997: 4), we may talk about experiencing narratives and memory narratives respectively.
“derives from the implicit reaffirmation of what is already accepted as a distinctive cultural identity” (Georgakopoulou 1994: 383).

In accordance with ethnomethodological principles, this paper approaches the identity-construction function of narratives as an interactional achievement. This means that the analysis examines how story-recipients respond to the elderly story; whether they accept the projected positive self-identity or not will be evident in their responses, which in fact evaluate the story that is being told.

2. The “here and now”

The fragments that will be analyzed in this section present elderly speakers telling stories about recent events that occurred in their everyday life. The first fragment offers a good illustration of the use of the two evaluative devices mentioned by Georgakopoulou (1997). In this conversation, N(ίνα)/D(ίνα), who is 72 years old, talks to Φ(ένια)/F(ενία), 23, and Τ(ούλα)/T(ουλα), 45, about her almost centenarian father’s recent death.

Fragment 1 (2A353)

1 (γ) Φ: Τον πατέρα σου ποιός τον κοιτάσας μέχρι τώρα, [εσύ-]
3 Φ: Α μικρό
4 (1.0)
5 N: ( ) μια κοπέλα. Αλλά πήρε μια γυναίκα όμως ( ) άσχημη ( ) την είχε σχιστήσει τόσο πολύ (που όταν την πήρε ήταν) έμορφη πολλά- πολλά: έμορφη, ( ) Κι είναι: στούγγα είναι. ( ) Τα 'νοσάφε δίλα ο πατέρας μου
6 Φ: Ωνχ
7 N: Και τα πουλάνε πώρα: ( ) σε τρεις μεριές τέσσερις στάτικα τους εί- χε μονοχα: ( ) ( ) Και τον εκλείπειν ξες πολύ; ( ) Αρρώστησε' ήταν στο χωριό; (1.0) Κι αρρώστησε και με πάρει εμένα τηλέφωνο τη νύχτα και με λέει Νίνα: ως εδώ ήταν πεθαίνω, Τι επαθής πα- τέρα μου του λέει; ( ) Τέτοια όρα τι να κάνω εγώ τον λέει; Με λέει: Μη φο- μη στεναχωριέσαι εγώ θα πάρω τον παπά-Σαράντη λέει και θα με παν στα Πλάκινα. Τον χώθικε τ' όντερο ( . ) [δώ:]
8 Φ: [Μμμ]
9 N: ‘Επαθής αλίο- κάπως το λέει αι[το

3 The notation utilized in the transcripts is based on Ten Have (1999: 213-214).
Φ: Είλεδο και τώρα ( ) και τον πήγανε στα Γάννενα μου λέει. ( ) Και το πρώτο απειλούσε μαίνωνα ταξί και πάω στα Γάννενα ( ), και με λέει με φωνάζει ο γιατρός και με λέει:: εσύ είσαι η χάος του Μαύρου; Ναι του λέω με λέει βάλτε υπογραφή γιατί σε μια ώρα ο γέρος χάνεται. (1.0) Παθαίνει λέει δηλητηρίαση μου λέει. Του λέω- σκέφτομαι σκέφτομαι ( ) του λέω: δεν βάνω υπογραφή ( ) μου λέει γιατί; (θέλετε) να πεθάνει δεν θέλω να πεθάνει αλλά μου φαίνεται θα υπογράψω την καταδίκη του του πατέρα μου και δεσποτόν του λέω έχει παιδικό. Δεν ξέρω τι να κάνω έχει αντίκριζε γιατί έγινε ενώ τα με π(όνο)

Φ: Ε βέβαια μη τη φορτώσουν ευθύνες βέβαια

N: Τι θα μου χάνει εμένα; Εγώ έχω δεκάξι χρονιά συνάντησε το οπίσθιο του πατέρα μου δεν φύλαξε αυτός ( ) αλλά: δεν λείψει να είναι πατέρας [αυτός]

(γ) T: Βέβαια τον πανάς

N: Τον πανάς λέει:: αλλάις θαίμαις το νοσοκομείο που πλήρωσα γυναίκα:: (;) τρεις μέρες που (κάθες στα Γάννενα ) απόδημη στη διαύλωση που ήταν η άντι το χαμηλό μας εγώ δεν ήξερα ότι ήταν απ' το χωριό μου ( ) από την ποπέλα ,hhh [...] Και μόλις τον είδο (του οδηγό, λέει) ο παπάς Σπαράντης η μέρα της κηδείας (;) Ντροπή; σου βρε γιάνδρε τον λέει ο παπάς ντροπή; σου βρε που σε όμορε 200 εκατομμύρια περιουσία και τον παράτης τον πατέρα σου. Δεν πάει να του δει καθώłu.

1 (f) F: Who had been looking after your father so far, [had you-
2 (f) D: ( )] Look uh: he got married twice, my father hhh and he had a child with that one, his second wife who died. He ((the child)) is almost forty years old.

3 F: Oh he's young enough

4 (1.0)

5 D: ( ) a young woman. But he married a woman ( ) an ugly woman ( ) he loved her so much (that when he married her she was) very beautiful very beautiful. ( ) And she is: a shrew:: she is( ) My father settled all his property (upon them).

6 F: Oh::

7 D: And now they are selling it off ( ) He had bought them houses in three or four places ( ) And do you know where they sent him? ( ) He fell ill when he was in the village. (1.0) And he falls ill and he phones me in the night and says to me, Dina, that's the end I'm dying. (1.0) What's wrong my father?, I tell him. ( ) What
can I do at this late hour? He tells me, don’t be sca- don’t worry, I’ll phone Father Sarantis, he says, and they’ll take me to Yannena. His bowel got into (.).

he:fre

8
F: [Mmm

9
D: It was el- how they call [it

10
F: [I:leus, ileus

11
D: Ileus and now ( ) and they took him to Yannena he tells me. (.) In the morning I get up and take a taxi and go to Yannena (.) and the doctor calls me and tells me, are you Mavros’s daughter? Yes, I tell him. He says, sign ((the approval for the operation)) because the old man will be gone in an hour. (1.0) His infection is spreading, he tells me. I tell him- I am thinking, I am thinking (.) I tell him, I will not sign. (.) He says, why? (Do you want) him to die? I don’t want him to die but it seems to me I will be signing his death sentence, and, moreover, I hell him, he has a child. I don’t know what to do, he has an adult son, I don’t know what they will tell me.

12
F: Sure, she wouldn’t want them to put the blame on her, for sure

13
D: What can he do for me? I have- It was my grandfather who looked after me since I was sixteen years old, it was not him (.) but he’s still me fa[ther

14
(f) T: [Sure, you feel compassion for him

15
D: Of course I feel compassion oh::: everyone in the hospital was impressed because I paid for a nurse (.) (I stayed in Yannena) for three days and the Head of the hospital marvelled at me, she comes from our village but I didn’t know she comes from my village ( ) this young woman .hha […] And when Father Sarantis saw him ((my brother)) on the day of the funeral (.) Shame on you jackass says the priest, shame on you, your father left you a property that’s worth 200 millions and you abandoned him. He never visits him at all.

Throughout this fragment, we see how the storyteller’s use of constructed dialogue and historical present (turns 7, 11, 15) contributes to the dramatization of her experience and the implicit evaluation of the actions she took when she was informed of her father’s illness. We can see how important it is for this elderly woman to stress what she did for her dying father, despite the fact that they hadn’t lived together for long and he had not supported her financially or otherwise. Notice how her narration revolves around the moral duties and rights that are associated with the standardized relational pair of the categories
parent-child, or, rather, parent-daughter, which has specific implications for the daughter’s caring duties, even when she is old herself (cf. Makri-Tsilipakou 1997: 79). Dina obviously takes pride in the fact that she stood by her father although he had never helped her as well as in that everyone praised her while they, at the same time, criticized her half-brother for his indifference to their father’s problems. Finally, notice how the two younger interlocutors respond to Dina’s construction of her positive identity by actively showing reciprocity of the story through minimal responses (turns 3, 6, 8, 10) and positive evaluations of Dina’s story (12, 14).

The deployment of the membership categorization device family is significant in the second fragment, too. Φ(απείρη)/Φ(otini), who is 67 years old, is telling P(ούλα)/Ρ(oula), 70, Τ(ούλα)/Τ(oula), 45, and Λ(ίτσα)/Λ(itsa), 40, about her nephew’s engagement. Prior to this stretch, Fotini informed Roula, whom she had just met, that she does not have any children of her own.

Fragment 2 (4A080)

1 (γ) Φ: Όταν αρραβωνιάσαμε το::: (.) τον μικρό: από τα τρία των Αθη-νάιν, (.) πήγαμε να κεράσουμε την νύφη; (.) η μάνα του ο πα-τέρας του (.) γεγο: ο Διονύσης ή να ση=

2 (γ) Ρ: [ ( ) ]

3 Φ: =αδελφός του και η αδελφή του και η Σούλα η μικρή (.) εμείς πήγαμε όστε τα αδέλφια της μάνας του κανένας δεν ήρθε. (.) Εμείς πήγαμε και τον αρραβωνιάσαμε λιγότερο η συμπεθέσα όταν είδα: (.) τον Διονύση να (κερνάει) λίρα την νύφη, δεν είναι το ποσόν

4 (.)

5 Ρ: Όχι χάριτι

6 Φ: Δεν είναι το ποσόν οι είκοσι εκατόπτεντα χιλιάδες που έχει μια λίρα

7 (γ) Λ: [χειρονομία]

8 Ρ: [Χάριτης ας πούμε σου λέει να

9 Φ: λιγότερο Κι είναι και πολύ: παλιάς κοπής (.) μπορεί να την έχει δεν ξέ-ρω πόσα χρόνια την έχει ο ανθρώπος μου (1.6) και:: (.) ε συγκοιν-θήκη η συμπεθέσα

10 (.)

11 Ρ: Μπράβο. Τα αγαπάτε τα παιδιά [του κόσμου (δεν θα ξελείτε)]

12 Φ: [( )] εμένα ανώρια μου είναι (.) και όταν ετούτα όλα είδα: για να: με η μορφή: που θα γεννήστανε, μαξιλάρια έπληξα δαντέλες (.) λίγα και έκανα σεντυ-νάκι με ( ) με αυτό κοφτό σουράκι ( ) και το πανιστήκτονο το
When we got him engaged the::: (.) youngest of the three ((nephews who live )) in Athens, (.) we went to offer gifts to his fiancée: (.). His mother, his father (.) [myself, Dionyssis=

Only us went, not even his mother’s brothers, nobody else came. (.) We went there to get him engaged. hh and when the bride’s mother saw:: (.) Dionyssis offering the bride a sovereign, it’s not the actual value that counts

It’s not the value, a sovereign costs twenty, twenty-five thousand drachmas

[A kind gesture

She was pleased in a way to see

And it’s a very old sovereign (.) I don’t know how long my husband has had it, (1.0) a::::: (.) well, she was moved the bride’s mother

Well done. You love the kids [of other people (you are not jealous)

they are my nephews. (.) And when I prepared all those things for the baby they were going to have, pillows, I knitted laces (.) hh I also made a small sheet with ( ) a tuck ( ) and I knitted the top sheet, too (.) I made six

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4 Greek currency which was replaced by the euro in 2000
nappies for the baby (with) a he:m[stitch and a design I drew =
13 R: [Oh:
14 F: =myself: at one cor:ner
15 T: [Mrs. Roula if I tell you who: these nephews
are you'll be [STU::NNED
16 F: [Also her mother was crying
17 (1.0)
18 F: She was crying, her mother, [she was
19 T: [They are the children of her former
sister-in-law
20 (1.0)
21 T: Do you meet such ki::nd souls nowadays?
22 ()
23 R: No: (:) no: way

Fotini refers to an old Greek custom: her husband Dionyssis offered the
bride a sovereign as a gift for her engagement to his nephew (1, 3, 6, 9). Al-
though she is not the mother of these young people, Fotini is proud of being
present during their engagement and of preparing clothes for their baby, after-
wards (3, 12). The obligations that are associated with the pair aunt-nephew are
not of the same kind as those associated with the pair mother-son. However,
Fotini presents herself as a second mother to the young man and this enhances
her self-image.

Notice throughout the fragment how Roula evaluates Fotini's story and
identity-construction efforts. Although she does respond positively (5, 8), she
obviously does not upgrade as much as Fotini would expect her to do (notice the
gaps in turns 2, 10, 17, 20). This is probably the reason why Toula intervenes and
explicitly characterizes Fotini as a praise-worthy person (15, 19, 21) thus con-
tributing to Fotini's own self-foregrounding.

Although older people may narrate past events to project positive self iden-
tities, their interlocutors need not always agree with this effort. This happens in
the next fragment. A(σπινιοί)/A(spassia) is 80 years old and tells her fiftyish
year-old daughter N(βη)/N(iki) about a conversation she had with her friends
in the church.
Fragment 3 (July98A065)

1 (γ) A: Η Αννα σήμερα μας λέει απ' την εκκλησία εγώ περίμενα να δώσει αντίτιμο ο πιστός και να διαβάσει τα νησίματα (1.0). Και λέει (.) Άντε έλε. (.) Λέει (.) πού να 'φθονο καλέ; Εγώ θα 'φθον οίκω; (.) Ακόμη εννιά μήνες δεν έχει [λέει ο Αλέκος]

2 (γ) N: [Σώπα καλέ θα πενθάς ( [ )

3 A: [Ναι λέει: ύστερα (;) Και λέει: η Βέτα (;) να λέει ξέρεις λέει; (;) Η Αννα μας είπε να =

4 N: = πάμε λέει να μας κεράσει για τον εγγονό της ((που πέτυχε στις εξετάσεις)) λέει. (.) Λέω όχι εγώ.

5 A: Ποιο να μην πως; Ο Αλέκος έχει τη γυναίκα του έχει τις αδελφές του δεν εσύ θα τον πενθήσεις; 'Εβδομε μαθήμα την ημέρα της ημεδέλες οπάνει

6 N: Come on, you're not going into mourning ( [ )

2 (f) A: Today after the Mass Anna told us- I was waiting for the priest to give out the holy bread and bless the offerings (1.0). She says (. ) come with us (. ) I say (. ) how can I come? How could I come? It's less than nine days, I say, since Alekos died

3 (f) N: [And then she say: ;s (;) And Veta say: ;s (;) you know what?, she says (.) Anna [told us= [Yes

4 N: = she wants to give us a treat because her grandson passed the exams. (. ) I tell her not me.

5 A: Why not go? Alekos has a wife, he has sisters, you're not- are you going into mourning for him? You put on black clothes on the day of the funeral and that's enough

In this fragment we notice again that the storyteller uses the narrative present and the constructed dialogue. Aspassia does not want to join her friends because she feels she must not have fun since her cousin, Alekos, has recently died (1, 3, 5). Once again, we see how duties that arise out of family relations shape an elderly woman's words and actions. Aspassia seems to be satisfied with her self-restriction but her daughter disagrees (2). She does not want to cooperate with her mother in this identity-construction effort and explicitly rejects her mother's view (6).

The fourth fragment contains two combined stories told by N(τις)/D(ina), who is 72, to M(αρία)/M(aria), 67, and Φ(έμη)/F(enia), 23. The first story is a
dream telling (turns 1, 3, 5, 7). As Ferrara (1994: 85) argues, reports of dreams should be recognized as a type of personal experience narrative, and, therefore, should attract the analyst’s interest. The second, very short, story is about how Dina’s son put an end to her dreaming and how Dina interprets her nightmare (1, 9).

**Fragment 4 (2A470)**

1 (γ) N: Με είχε κοινά του (το παιδί μου). Και τη νύχτα έσας δω καινά άστορ εκαστός και με λέει μάνα; τι είδες (τώρα ε;) (;) Σαν έστεκα το ποδάρι μου (δε) χρισε μου τι βλέπω; (;) στον ύπνο μου. (;) Μπορεί να είσαι μέσα στο σπίτι μου (;) (;) ψηλάς μέχρι το ταιμί (;) (καιοκουλουμένος) με μαύρο ράσο στη πρόσοψη του είδα ότι χέρια ότε πόδια ότε τίτσονα δεν είδα. (;) Ένα μαύρο ράσο στεκόταν (;) ορθός μπροστά (;) κοντά τού μακριά: από το κρεβάτι μου (;) τόσο μακριά από το κρεβάτι μου. (;) Και εγώ και κατέ και βγαίνω στο κρεβάτι.

2 (γ) Φ: Ο Χάρος; ποιος ήτανε;
3 N: Ο χάρος ήταν βεβαιά ή ο Χάρος ή ο μεγάλος σαιτανάς ήτανε. Αυτό λέω ήτανε. [Και]
4 (γ) M: [Κι εγώ έστεκα το χέρι μου φέτος το τραβήγια]
5 N: Και του λέω ΦΥΓΕ: και φάναξα δυνατά ΦΥΓΕ: και το παιδί μου στηρώντανκι ερχόταν τώρα κι (απομενόδιχτα) το παιδί μου και με κοιτάζεις: hhh Και (;) =
6 Φ: [Ναι;
8 M: [(Κι εγώ λέω) το «Πιστεύω»] μια προσευχή [(;)]
9 N: [Έκαε] [Έκαε με εξάπνησε το παιδί μου παι χάθηκε αυτός. (;) Σε τρεις μέρες έστεκα το ποδάρι μου εγώ.

1 (f) D: I live with my son in his house. At night if I have a bad dream he gets up and asks, mother? what have you dreamt (now)? (;) When I broke my leg, dear, do you know what I (.) dreamt? (.) Somebody comes into my house ( ) (.) (he was so) tall: he could reach the ceiling (.) (covered) in a black cassock I could see no face no hands no feet I could see nothing. (;) Just a black cassock, he was (.) standing in front of (.) (near) that far from my bed (.) that far from my bed. (.) And eh. I and I st- sat in the bed.
2 (f) F: Who was it? Death?
3 D: Of course it was Death, it was either Death or Big Satan himself. That's what I say it was [And
4 (f) M: [I also sprained my arm this year I pulled a muscle
5 D: And I tell him, GO::: AWA:::Y and I was screaming GO:::
AWA:::Y and my son would get up and come to my room (to listen) and look at [me :h:hh And ( )=
6 F::: [Yes?
7 D: =my bed) GO::: AWA:::Y, GO::: AWA:::Y I'm gonna kill you don't hurt me, don't you hurt me GO::: AWA:::Y, go away. Go:::d help me [help me
8 M: [( I also say) the Creed [or a prayer [( )
9 N: [At that [At that point my son woke me up and pop! he disappeared. (.) Three days later I broke my leg.

This dream-telling gives Dina the chance to project herself as a religious person who suffers in her sleep but is able to fight against evil forces thanks to her faith. Such superstitions linked with religious faith are important attributes of older women in Greece. We can understand how important it is for Dina to report her nightmare and construct her “heroic” identity from the fact that she treats Maria’s interventions (4, 8) as untimely and irrelevant.

The secondary story which provides the frame for the dream-telling concerns the fact that she lives in her son’s house and he is so attentive to her needs that he even comes to help her get over her nightmares. This story helps her construct her self-identity as a lucky mother who is looked after by her son.

3. “Those were the days...”

We will now look at what we termed life histories, that is, narratives concerning events that took place in a more distant past. Such narratives are part of the narrator’s personal biography. As Boden and Bielby (1986) claim, these narratives can show us how storytelling conveys identities to others and how it makes the past meaningful and relevant in the present.

In the following fragment, P(ενα)/R(ena), 73, and K(ωστας)/K(ostas), 23, have just watched on the TV news bulletin a video about the increase of crime rates in Greece. This gives Rena a chance to talk about the time when she was young and could have fun without being afraid of criminals.
I don’t know, I pity the young people (.) because they want to have fun, they want to dance, they want to come back laments at night with nothing to worry about (.) because we’ve been through these things Kostaki (.) we've experienced them (.) well, when I was young, we used to dance, (.) and sing (.) and go out late at night (.) and come back at four o’clock in the morning. (.) I will never forget one time we went to a village, (.) there was a fair, there was music and so on (.) I guess we had been invited (.) (and we walked at five o’clock in the morning) because there were no taxis and we didn’t own a car then (.) and we got to the bus stop and took the first bus to Perea at five o’clock. That was Charis, my sister, myself, my late brother and my brother in law. (.) So. Who harmed us? Nobody. (.) It was our weekly routine. Every Saturday evening we would dine at Krikelas, everyone was there, MOP:s, lawyers, the circle of our friends [We would come back at dawn. On Sunday=
Rena's narrative takes the form of what Norrick (2000: 151) terms "representation of recurrent shared experiences" but it also contains a brief reference to a specific past event. This narrative seems to be much more than a comparison of past and present crime rates. Rena has a chance to tell the young man about her glorious past when she was able to do things that she obviously cannot do any more. Her reference to all those category-bound activities associated with the category young person allows her to make up for her present restriction to the periphery of social life and also gives her a chance to boast covertly about her social status and her acquaintances.

The final fragment is a collaborative retelling of the past by two elderly speakers (cf. Norrick 2000: 154). Prior to this fragment, Γ(ιώργος)/Γ(ιώργος) who is 79, has disagreed with his 27-year-old nephew about the views of Greek journalist Elena Akrita, who has written satirical commentaries about the Greek people's recent wars. Giorghos remembers his own experiences as an adolescent during the Second World War. Α(σπασσία)/Α(σπασσία), 84, joins him and together they produce this collaborative narrative of shared past events.

Fragment 6 (Jan02/465)

1 (α) Γ: Δεν ξέρω εάν υπήρξαν περιπτώσεις άνθρωποι οι οποίοι δεν δέχτηκαν έκτακτα εκατό τόσο καλά που γράφουν τώρα (.) Εδώ πραγματικάς ο κάσμος οι φαντάσεις έφευγαν να ειδώ στην ηρόη της το αίμα μας έκτακτα με τραγούδια με χορούς έγιναν στην πλατεία και ξεκίνησαν να παν στην Αλβανία. Ήταν (πραγματικάς). (.) Και όλοι εμείς η νεολαία του Ματαξία υπήρχε και η οργάνωση αυτή και μέσα στο βορεινό διωγμό της διμερικής είχε ήταν τόσο ο μουσικός, είχαμε μαντολινιά. Κι εκεί όλα τα κορίτσια επέλεξαν πουλόβερ και αυτά. Και στα σπίτια οι γυναίκες επέλεξαν κασκόλ = [Όχι μόνο πουλόβερ. Και στο άλλο το=]

2 (γ) Α: =[γιατί τότε δεν υπήρχαν έτοιμα στο εμπόριο

3 Γ: =[δεν περίμενε καν και μας είχε χρειάσει θεωρία για το στρατό κάθε αξιωματικός (.) κάθε εβδομάδα και ένας αξιωματικός μας [είχε χρειάσει θεωρία]

4 Γ: =[Κι εδώ είχε μια μονάδα στο σχολείο και έπαιζας της σημαίας γινόταν και τις Κυριακές μαζεύοντας είχε για ένα πράγμα στους φαντάσους (.) ήταν πραγματικάς ξεπερνώθηκε όλοκληρος ο ελληνικός λόγος ήταν αλήθεια διηλαθή. (.)) Τώρα:: σκέφτοντα πώς αυτά μα Ελένα Ακρίτα τα διερευνά (.) και τα λέει ειρωνικά.]

5 Α: Στιγμ.

6 Α: Και ναι:: είναι μια μια μορφομενή ή μια παρουσιάστρια απλή (.). Δημοσιογράφος, δημοσιογράφος, είναι εκφράζεται;

7 Α: Αφού εδώ στο πάρκο είχε αντίστοιχα και [είχε και στρατό=}
The construction of elderly identity through conversational narrative

(9) G: [Όχι αντίστοιχα χαρακτήρα]

(10) A: =εγώ τους έκανα ένα ταψί κέικ και τους το πίνα με το ταψί. (.)
Λέω παιδιά φάτε όλοι τας κι ύστερα με το φέρεται και το ταψί.

(1) (m) G: I don’t know if there were any cases, any people who did not merit praise as they argue now. (.) Here people indeed—the soldiers would leave for the front—well here in Iraklia we witnessed these things. ((The soldiers)) were setting out for the front and people were singing and dancing in the square. That was (a fact) (.) And all of us who were members of the youth organization of Metaxas, there was this organization and in the northern room of the Town Hall where the mandolin orchestra and the conductor used to practise. In that room all the girls knitted jumpers and so on.
[And in the houses the women also other room an army—

(2) (f) A: [Not just jumpers. In the=]

(3) G: =knitted scarves because you could not find them in shops

(4) A: =officer would gather us and teach us theory about the army (.)
Every week a different officer would [teach us theory

(5) G: [There was an army unit here
in the school and they raised the flag ((every day)) and on Sundays people brought desserts to the soldiers (.) it was a real—-all the Greek people were really excited, that’s the truth. (.) Now, think of it, some Elena Akrita denies these facts (.) and mocks at them.

(6) A: Who cares about her.

(7) G: And i:f she were an uneducated person or a simple presenter. (.)
But she’s a journalist, a journalist, how can she talk this way?

(8) A: Here in the park there were tents [and soldiers and I baked them a=

(9) G: [Not tents, there were trenches

(10) A: =cake and took it to them in the baking pan. (.) I tell them, kids, this is for all of you (.) and after they had eaten it, they brought back the baking pan.

Although we can trace two instances of disagreement between the two speakers (turns 2,9) – which in all probability have to do with gender issues –, we see that they are both actively collaborating in the narration of common past experiences. According to Boden and Bielby (1986), the common past becomes a frame through which present meanings are both shared and collaboratively produced. Both speakers here rely on the narration of wartime experiences to refute the view of the journalist as well as of the younger interlocutor, who seems to share her views as he remains notably silent throughout the old people’s narrative.
Ghiorghos's contributions (1, 3, 5, 7) to the joint storytelling concern the duties that are associated with the category good citizen and national pride (even if under the auspices of the Metaxa fascist youth organization), a feeling that is not so strong in younger generations. Aspassia's contributions (8, 10), on the other hand, show her pride on the help she could offer the soldiers back then and helps boost her current image, as her old age does not normally allow for such active participation in common causes.

4. Concluding remarks

To sum up, this paper illustrated some ways in which elderly speakers attempt to construct positive self-identities through storytelling. It seems that this practice, which is encountered in other cultures too (see Myerhoff 1980), allows elderly narrators to enact their identity in a dynamic and powerful way by presenting positive images of themselves and fighting against the restrictions that are posed by old age and/or by the way society treats old age. It has to be stressed, though, that these images, which are treated by the storytellers themselves as positive, are not necessarily self-emancipating. Despite the potentially therapeutic purpose that storytelling seems to serve, the identities that older people choose to construct as positive may actually contribute to their own restriction by reproducing negative stereotypes or ageist assumptions. And whether their identity will be accepted, rejected or renegotiated will depend on the responsive action of the story recipients.

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