Abstract: Through using narratives as data and sociolinguistic narrative analysis and positioning theory as analytical tools, the paper shows the discursive resources through which the enactment of leadership and leader identity is achieved in narratives-in-interaction. The analysis centres on a narrative of personal AIESEC experience excerpted from a corpus of naturally-occurring oral stories generated during video-based fieldwork at an international AIESEC conference in 2016 with the aim of teasing out leader identity within the context of narrative practice. To achieve this, sociolinguistic narrative analysis (Labov & Waletsky 1967) has been coupled with positioning analysis (Bamberg 1997) at the backdrop of the discursive approaches to leadership affiliating with a social constructionist stance on (leader) identity and emphasizing the primacy of discourse as a medium for identity construction (Fairhurst 2007). These lines of investigation zoom in on the aspects of leader identity negotiated by AIESEC members in the narrative performance and indicate that leader identity is crafted through acts of identity at three interrelated levels: the narrative world, the narrative interaction, and the wider sociocultural context, i.e. master narratives.

Keywords: narrative discourse; leader identity; social constructionism; discursive leadership; positioning theory; sociolinguistic narrative analysis.

Introduction
The narrative mode has become one of the major objects of study in applied linguistics, social sciences, anthropology, literary studies, etc. The interrelated fields investigating leadership in organizations have been also increasingly embracing the discursive perspective and focusing on narrative discourse as a resource for untapping the enactment of leadership and leader identity. This paper explores the ways in which narratives-in-interaction can be seen as a discursive and social practice for the construction and negotiation of leader identity in a global community of practice, viz. the youth organization AIESEC (the French acronym of Association internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales, which has been redefined to a non-acronymous name, severing its link to the original term, since members no longer come from only these university backgrounds, AIESEC n.d.). Enshrined in narrative discourse, conference events in AIESEC have attracted the researcher’s attention as a discursive stage for the enactment of leader identity and a convenient discourse mode for communicating AIESEC’s worldview of leadership and leaders. In order to account for these discursive processes it is necessary to unveil the combination of positionings activated in narratives of personal experience which identify the members as leaders and serve as an emblem of group belonging.

The empirical research underlying the study aims at investigating how the members of the organization, with or without being externally appointed to a leadership status, craft and perform narratives in such a way as to talk into being their leader identity. The analysis centres on a narrative of personal AIESEC experience excerpted from a corpus of naturally-occurring oral stories generated during video-based fieldwork at an international AIESEC conference in 2016 with the aim of teasing out leader identity within the context of narrative
practice. To achieve this, sociolinguistic narrative analysis (Labov & Waletsky 1967) has been coupled with positioning analysis (Bamberg 1997) at the backdrop of the discursive approaches to leadership affiliating with a social constructionist stance on (leader) identity and emphasizing the primacy of discourse as a medium for identity construction (Fairhurst 2007, Clifton 2014). These lines of investigation zoom in on the aspects of leader identity negotiated by AIESEC members in the narrative performance and indicate that leader identity is crafted through acts of identity at three interrelated levels: the narrative world, the narrative interaction, and the wider sociocultural context, i.e. master narratives.

Theoretical underpinnings
The major psychological theories percolating the twentieth-century leadership studies have emphasized the functions and qualities of leaders but have lost sight of those aspects of leader identity which are achieved through social practice and naturally-occurring interaction (Fairhurst & Connaughton 2014; Clifton 2015). Resting on the essentialist view of identity as a pre-determined immutable essence situated within the self (Benwell & Stokoe 2006), these approaches have privileged the quantitative, rather than qualitative treatment of leadership and leader identity. Such quantitative framework, Conger contends, “fails to capture the great richness of leadership phenomena and instead leaves us with only a set of highly abstracted generalised descriptors” (118). A broader, more qualitative approach that will recognize the role of discourse for the accomplishment of leader identity and perceive it as a social outcome has been required.

In concert with the “linguistic turn” in social sciences (Rorty 1967), within the field of leadership, Fairhurst has become the harbinger of the discursive approaches with her seminal work Discursive Leadership: In Conversation with Leadership Psychology. Grounding her framework in the tenets of social constructionism, Fairhurst takes an interest in the actual process of doing leadership and seeks to show how “leadership is brought off in some here-and-now moment of localized interaction” (15). The social constructionist approach challenges the essentialist ideas and their focus on the innate characteristics of the individual by advocating a view of identity “as an interactional accomplishment, an identity continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and social performance” (Cerulo 387). In this stance, leader identity is conceptualized as “an in situ accomplishment”(3) and leadership — as a process of managing the meaning of organizational reality which is accomplished by those who have access to more powerful discursive resources and thus most influence in the management of meaning (Clifton 2012). Consequently, the social arena and actual interaction become the empirical field where organizations are shaped and leader identity — enacted and negotiated (Larsson 2017). Thus, to address this discursive challenge, linguists working within the organizational and leadership field have been increasingly using transcripts of naturally-occurring talk-in-interaction as their research data (Baxter 2014; Choi & Schnurr 2014; Clifton 2006, 2012, 2015; Holmes et al. 2011; Larsson & Lundholm 2013; Schnurr 2009; Svennevig 2008; Wodak et al. 2011). Despite the variety of methods and approaches (e.g. conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, narrative analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, membership categorization analysis, actor network theory, communicative constitution of the organization, discursive psychology), this wave of scholarship shares the same interest in discursive resources as a means for tapping into leadership and leader identity. Yet, little of these studies have engaged in analysis of narrative discourse. Therefore, calls have been made, within leadership research, for more studies embracing narratives-in-interaction as a resource for gaining access to the language of leadership as an in situ practice (Clifton 2014) and this paper attempts to respond to this call.
This study also situates itself within research traditions in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics giving voice to a social constructionist view on identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; Bucholtz & Hall 2005, Benwell & Stokoe 2006; De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006; Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin 2011; Archakis & Tsakona 2012). In the sociocultural arena, Bucholtz and Hall (587) argue that identity is ‘a discursive construct that emerges in interaction’ (587). Similarly, Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin define it as “constructed in discourse and negotiated among speaking subjects in social contexts” (178). A broader perspective has been incorporated in Archakis and Tsakona’s study (2012) which observes that

..identities are constructed in relation to people’s degree of participation in specific communities of practice, given that people (as core or peripheral members) may attempt ad hoc to manage their membership in various communities.

The present case study complements these lines of argumentation by considering how leader identity and leadership are accomplished in actual interaction within a transnational community of practice — the student-run organization AIESEC.

Methodological and analytical perspectives
The data and analysis presented in this paper are part of a larger ongoing study focusing on the construction of leader identity through narrative discourse in the youth-led organization AIESEC. The research setting of this case study involves international AIESEC conferences hosted by AIESEC Bulgaria in the period 2014-2016. The researcher was present as a non-participant observer throughout the conferences, the access to the venue being secured with the permission of the conference committee and the governing body of AIESEC Bulgaria. Thus, the researcher revealed her research role only to some of the participants in the research setting while staying “incognito” to most of the conference delegates. As observer, the researcher attended the open-access conference sessions and video-taped them by sitting among the delegates. The narratives constituting the data of the study were later extracted from the video-recordings. The narratives in the corpus share some important features: they are naturally-occurring, i.e. non-elicited by the researcher, and emerging in actual practice in organizational settings. Such type of research data has been largely underrepresented in qualitative linguistic studies which make use of researcher-elicited life stories in interview contexts (Labov 1967). Thus, the present study aligns with emerging research on narratives-in-interaction which focuses on small stories occurring in conversational contexts rather than on elicited life stories (Georgakopoulou 2007). More specifically, the narratives in the present study are unscripted, prepared and spontaneous; they are personal accounts of AIESEC (leadership) experience. Furthermore, they are monologic and embedded in the surrounding discourse, the narrative event involving an active narrator or performer and a relatively passive audience.

In order to analyse the doing of leadership in narrative discourse, positioning theory (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) and sociolinguistic narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972, Labov 1997) have been used to approach the data. The groundbreaking Labovian approach to narrative analysis has been used to identify the structure of the narratives in the corpus. It sets apart the canonical stories in the Labovian sense from other story types found in the data. According to Labov, “a narrative of personal experience is a report of a sequence of events that have entered into the biography of the speaker by a sequence of clauses that correspond to the original events” (397). The
prototypical Labovian narrative is a well-structured personal account with six elements — abstract (What is the story about?); orientation (Who, when, where, how?); complicating action (Then what happened?); evaluation (How and why is this interesting?); resolution (What finally happened?); and coda (How is the gap between the narrative event and the present time bridged?). Based on this definition, Labov further distinguished two types of narratives — “minimal” and “fully developed” ones (360). The former is “a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered”, while the latter comprises orientation and evaluation (and often times an abstract and a coda) as well. The story type that he worked primarily with — the personal experience narrative — included minimal narratives as well as more fully formed ones.

Though influential in its significance for narrative analysis, the Labovian framework fails to account for the interactional properties of the narrative, i.e. its local interactional surroundings, the relationship between the narrator and the audience, and the participation of the audience in the narrative event. Therefore the narrative excerpts in the present study have been further inspected through the lens of positioning analysis in order to highlight the mechanism of leader identity construction on the micro- and macro level of discourse. The framework of positioning theory proposed by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) includes three interrelated levels of analysis: the narrative world, the narrative interaction and the wider sociocultural context (i.e. master narratives). Positioning Level 1 explores how the characters are positioned vis-à-vis one another in the narrative world. Positioning Level 2 operates at the level of interaction: here narrators position themselves in relation to the audience. Discourse and situational identities emerge at this level of analysis. Positioning Level 3 is related to “how the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regards to dominant discourses or master narratives (i.e. pre-existent socio-cultural forms of interpretation such as those of masculinity, diversity, managerialism, etc.)” (Bamberg & Georgakoloulou 385), by which they discuss hegemonic discourses of gender, ethnicity, leadership, commitment, responsibility, “involving claims that they hold to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation” (Georgakopoulou 201).

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate how leader identity is enacted from a discursive perspective and how AIESEC members position themselves and others as leaders in the interactional space of narrative discourse by attuning their identity claims to the organization’s perceptions of leadership. While a variety of definitions of leaders and leadership have been suggested within different lines of research, this paper will use the definition provided by Hosking (1988), who saw leadership “as a certain kind of organizing activity”, influencing the constant development of organizations by means of leadership processes which “contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments” and “promote the values and interests of social order” (147). This definition has been further developed by Fairhurst who argues that “leadership actors are knowledgeable agents, who reflexively monitor the ongoing character of social life as they continuously orientate to and position themselves vis-à-vis specific norms, rules, procedures, and values in interaction with others” (14). Furthermore, the ways in which narrators accomplish leadership in discourse by positioning themselves to the master narrative or the worldview of leadership as perceived by AIESEC have been explored in the paper. According to the AIESEC vision there are essentially four characteristics of youth leaders that members strive to develop: the ability to empower others (a youth leader “communicates clearly, engages in meaningful conversations, and creates spaces that empower others to take action”). (AIESEC n.d.), solution orientation (a youth leader is “flexible, ready to take risks, and actively finds solutions to challenges”), world citizen (a youth leader is “aware of global events and enjoys
taking an active role in contributing towards making it a better place for everyone”), and
self-awareness (a youth leader “understands personal strengths, lives by his/her values and
constantly explores passions”).

Data and analysis
The data for the present paper consists of a narrative excerpted from a corpus of video-
recorded narrative events, generated during the EuroXPRO conference hosted by AIESEC
Bulgaria between 10th and 16th April 2016. The fieldwork during the event included, along
with video recordings of the open-access sessions, field notes and conversations with the
delegates. EuroXPRO was a six-day international AIESEC event hosted by AIESEC
Bulgaria and attended by 310 youth leaders from 50 countries in the CEE (Central and
Eastern Europe) and WENA (Western Europe and North America) regions of the organization
who came together to affirm their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals
(hereafter SDGs) agreed by the United Nations in September 2015. Espousing the SDGs, the
organization, whose vision is “peace and fulfillment of humankind's potential” (AIESEC n.d.),
has been motivating young people to unlock their leadership potential and contribute to the
development of the world by taking a stand on global issues.

The narrative under study was launched at the beginning of a 12-minute presentation
session delivered by an AIESEC alumnus who was currently the AIESEC partnership
coordinator of an international information technology company. The aim of this personal
account is to convey a perspective of the organization that will inspire its members to take
leadership responsibilities and shape their perception of AIESEC. At the same time, closely
linked to the aim of the narrative endeavour is the understanding that AIESEC experience has
implications beyond the international events and the organization itself, concerning one’s
personal development and professional path. The narrator is a female, aged 25+, presumably
Serbian. As far as anonymity issues are concerned, the narrator’s confidentiality has been
secured by substituting her name with an ethnicity-consistent equivalent (Milena) while the
initial has been preserved (Tagliamonte 2006).

In Labovian terms the narrative is a fully-formed one, starting with an abstract which
the narrator sets up by stating her epistemic authority to share a story:

Extract One

I’ve been in AIESEC for the past four years (...) so I’m gonna share a story with you, a
personal story that I feel it can be something you gonna feel at the end of your AIESEC
experience. So when I started my AIESEC experience, to be completely honest,(.) it was
a bit random(.) but, you know, as you go through the organization and you go further
and further and you realize what the organization is really about you actually feel
connected with (.)

In the abstract Milena talks about her confusion as a newly recruited member at the
beginning of her AIESEC experience. Thus, she voices the thoughts and feelings of young
AIESECers by generalizing her experience to address the audience through the use of the
generic you (Mildorf 2012) which creates emotional proximity between her and the audience.
As early as the abstract of the story, Milena’s positioning with regard to Level 2 of Bamberg’s
model lends validity to her storytelling rights and legitimizes her responsibility to the
audience for producing a highly tellable story. The narrator positions herself in relation to the
audience as someone who has something to share, a person who has had access to knowledge
in AIESEC and has assumed the right to tell about noteworthy events and experience. Thus,
Milena assumes the discourse identity of a storyteller, while at the same time she makes claims for herself with regard to her leader identity due to the “authoritative knowledge” (Larsson 183). This discursive mechanism of articulating both a discourse identity and a social identity has been described by Baynham, who points out that “taking on the right to tell a story implies taking on a public-speaking position, bespeaking a social role of leadership” (383-384). Furthermore, Milena claims and establishes for herself a leader identity consonant with AIESEC’s vision of leadership, foregrounding herself as an AIESECer who is able to “communicate clearly” through the storytelling endeavour and create narrative “spaces that empower others to take action”. She also presents herself as a self-aware person who knows her personal strengths and understands the process of leadership development in the organization.

In the orientation section of the story Milena introduces the audience to the background of the narrative:

**Extract Two**

two years ago I was sitting in your place, in Poland, on my EuroXPRO. It was an amazing experience, had a lot of new talks, met a lot of good people, got inspired from the speakers from just random talks between the sessions…

Here Milena makes relevant the master narrative of the organizational ethos by evoking the specific atmosphere of AIESEC conferences. Thus, both at Level 1 and Level 3 of the positioning framework, AIESEC emerges as an organization providing young people with the necessary experience to develop their leadership potential. On the other hand, in this section of the story young Milena, who is supposedly a peripheral member at that time, is positioned at Level 1 in relation to the core members of the organization who then facilitated EuroXPRO and provided newly fledged members with the inspiration that she, in her turn, now attempts to give her audience. In this early stage of her AIESEC experience the protagonist of the story — young Milena — is constructed as a person engaged in “meaningful conversations”(AIESEC n.d.) and “inspired by the speakers”, as a result of which she has been empowered to take action and support the mission of the organization. In this way, AIESEC vision of leadership has been voiced once again in the story, by foregrounding the first leadership quality — the ability to empower others. In the orientation the narrator does identity work that bring into relief her emerging identity of a young leader. In the complicating action she further reinforces this evolving identity by talking about a question that bothered her at that time:

**Extract Three**

But before I went to EuroXPRO I didn’t have that one question that came out later. The question was “Am I going to be able to find the organization that has the same purpose as AIESEC? Am I going to be able to wake up every day, go to the office and see the purpose in my job and that was one huge question and my entire EuroXPRO I was searching for that answer (. ) and basically going from one partner to another, one entity to another, talking to people from AI , from other entities…

Here the use of narrative present and direct thought dramatizes the protagonist’s transition to the status of a fully-fledged AIESECer, who has internalized the organization’s values. Once again the master narrative of AIESEC’s mission has been evoked with its core value of
developing its members’ potential and providing them with a purpose that spreads beyond organizational boundaries. By bringing into the story other organizational characters, viz. partners, entities, AI (the governing body of AIESEC International), Milena manages to position herself in the narrative world (Level 1 positioning) as an agentic person who seeks the advice of senior members and has the potential to become a leader. In so doing, she also introduces into her story the master narrative of agency that is considered constitutive of leadership (Clifton 2017) and thus, performs identity work also by means of Level 3 positioning. In the resolution of the story Milena tells the audience that during her EuroXPRO she found the answer to the question that bothered her, which made her able to bridge the gap between her AIESEC experience and her professional development:

**Extract Four**

I realized that if you know what is your purpose in life and what you strive for you can find the company that fits you and that’s how I found (…).

By the end of the presentation Milena gives the evaluation and the coda of the story which convey its meaning to the audience:

**Extract Five**

My question that I had at EuroXPRO two years ago is not a question any more (.) I am really confident with the fact that yes you can be in AIESEC and develop the values and attitudes that we have as AIESECers (.) and with those values go to the corporate world, with the same values, same attitudes and you can truly make a difference (.) in the company you are working for (.) you truly can bring additional value that this country, this world actually needs (.) and this is the answer that I got for myself, and try to think about it one thing that I would personally do to tackle one of the Sustainable Development Goals (…) My message for you is that be brave, think out of the box, find other ways for solving issues (.) and ask your partners to work with you (.) because we cannot do it by ourselves (…)

In the final sections of the story Milena once again engages in interactional positioning (Level 2) by affiliating with the audience through the use of generic you and animating their voice by means of constructed dialogue. In this one-teller narrative performance, with a relatively passive audience whose perceptions of Milena’s discursive positionings are impossible to determine, the use of these performance devices “simultaneously creates interpersonal involvement between speaker and … audience.”(Tannen 312). Thus, she position them as potential future leaders who have to face the challenge of the SDGs and contribute to the betterment of the world. At the same time, at the very end of her presentation Milena challenges the audience to tackle one of the SDGs — fighting inequality. In this way, she promotes the other two leadership qualities cherished by AIESEC: solution orientation and world citizenship and position the conference delegates in relation to the master narrative of AIESEC’s mission and its commitment to solving world issues (Level 3 positioning). In this way, the narrator displays agency, performs leadership and ascribes agency to the audience in terms of initiative and responsibility, which have become a key element of her leader identity, too.

In sum, through her presentation in general, and through the story she shares, in particular, Milena not only manages the meaning of the organization, but she also authors its reality by restating AIESEC’s commitment to the SDGs.
Concluding remarks
In the discussed narrative, the identity work performed by the narrator indicates that acts of identity are accomplished through a complex interplay of positionings at three intertwined levels: the positioning of the narrator to other organizational characters in the narrative world, the positioning of the narrator and the audience in the narrative interaction, and the positioning in relation to culturally accepted discourses of agency, leadership and the organization under study. In other words, the analysis shows that leader identity is achieved through positioning self, other and the organization in the narrative world, in the here-and-now of the interaction and in relation to hegemonic discourses. The narrator constructs her leader identity by using authoritative knowledge, displaying agency and giving advice to the audience. The narrative resources employed by the narrator to accomplish discursive positionings and display leader identity include generic you, narrative present, constructed dialogue, and direct thought. The narrator’s interactional purpose to promote AIESEC’s perceptions of leadership inevitably influences the way the story has been told and the leader identity — performed. Not surprisingly, the narrator adopts a leader identity commensurate with the four basic leadership qualities outlined in the AIESEC vision, while, at the same time, casting AIESEC members as potential future leaders who are able to develop these qualities. The analysis of the story also indicates that the narrator does rhetorical work, along with the identity positionings she has been engaged in, through challenging the audience’s commitment to the organization and attuning her story to wider organizational purposes. Employing narratives as data and sociolinguistic narrative analysis and positioning theory as analytical tools, the paper has shown that leader identity and leadership can be understood as discursive accomplishments in narratives-in-interaction.

Transcription conventions

(.) micropause
(....) omitted segment
Italicics constructed dialogue

References


