

1 Narrative definitions, issues and approaches

1.0 Introduction

More than numerous objects of inquiry, *narrative* resists straightforward and agreed-upon definitions and conceptualizations. Instead, its study tends to be a minefield of multiple and at times competing perspectives in a wide array of humanities and social science fields. This is a sign of richness and refreshing pluralism for some, while a sign of deplorable fragmentation for others; but the fact remains that any attempt to present and pull together different strands in the area involves delicate issues of selection and representation. It is with this acute awareness that an exhaustive and evenly balanced overview is close to impossible that we will approach in this chapter the complicated yet fundamental issues of “What is narrative?” and “How is it studied?” That said, two principles have guided our selection of materials in the discussion to follow:

- a. The inclusion of approaches that in more or less explicit ways have influenced the assumptions and tools of what will form the main focus of this book, namely socially minded linguistic approaches to narrative.
- b. The need to extract and bring to the fore aspects of convergence and even overlapping interests from traditions that on the face of it may have developed separately.

In this attempt to pull threads together, we have seen it fit to pose a working distinction, by no means dichotomous, between views of narrative as a *type of text* and views of narrative as a *mode, epistemology and method*. We will thus map each of the poles of this distinction with specific approaches and what we see as distinct assumptions and ways of analyzing narrative in them.

1.1 Narrative as text-type

Seeing narrative as a text-type inevitably involves a commitment to clear-cut definitional criteria coupled with a belief in the verbal/linguistic aspects of narrative as holding the key to those criteria. This main assumption leads almost by implication to other views too: for instance, a view of narrative as a structured

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activity with a beginning, middle and an end, and with clearly identifiable units that are amenable to analysis. It is thus no accident that structuralism has been closely associated with approaches to narrative as a text-type. The assumption that strict textual criteria are the main guide to defining narrative and setting it apart from other types of text also goes hand in hand with a belief in the universal properties of narrative. Very simply put, narrative is seen as having textual properties that apply across contexts, and the task for the analyst is both to uncover those and to shed light on what may be culture-specific. Another affiliated focus is on the ways in which the knowledge of how to tell a (good) story is acquired and in turn how stories are understood and processed: this makes some of the approaches here cognitive in epistemological orientation. But let us examine the main approaches to narrative as text-type in more detail.

1.1.1 *Narratology and the issue of defining a story*

Narratology is one of the most important approaches to narrative as text-type. Below we present a typical definition:

Narratology is the study of narrative as a genre. Its objective is to describe the constant variables and combinations typical of narrative and to clarify how the characteristics of narrative texts connect with the framework of theoretical models (typologies). (Fludernik 2009: 8)

As is evident from the above, the focus is on the story as a type of text that can be set apart from other genres. It is therefore hardly surprising that the issue of defining what a story is should lie at the center of narratology. Narratologists also generally assume that the definitional criteria of narrative are universally applicable and that narrative can be theorized as such. Narratology is, for the most part, devoted to the study of literary texts, but its influence on linguistic studies of narrative is undeniable. In the light of this, our discussion here will mainly concern itself with issues within narratology which are relevant to the linguistic study of narrative as well.

Most of the classical narratologists¹ (Bal 1985; Genette 1980; Prince 1973) conceived of the story as their object of study and basically defined it as a series of temporally and causally ordered events. Specific definitions varied, but the basic idea that events are the stuff of which a story is made was shared by most researchers in the field. Such a predominance of the action aspects over other story elements in the theorizations about narrative can be traced as far back as Aristotle. The Greek philosopher stated in his *Poetics* (52, VI.14): “The plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place.” But the succession of events that a reader encounters in a story constitutes just one level of analysis of a story. Classical narratologists inherited from Russian formalists such as Shklovsky and Propp

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a distinction between what is told in a story (its basic events) and the way it is told. The Russian formalists named the events represented in the story, the *fabula*, and the story as it is put together and narrated by the author, the *syuzhet*. This distinction was later revisited by narratologists who, based on Genette (1980), adopted a distinction between *narration* as the act of narrating, *discourse* (*discours* or *récit*) as the narrative text and *story* (*histoire*) as the basic sequence of events (see Toolan 2001: 15 on this point).

The distinction between *story* and *discourse* is designed to capture the fact that there are some basic stories that do not change even if the circumstances of the telling and the medium through which they are told change. It could be said, for example, that *Snow White* has a basic set of elements that make it look like the same story no matter whether it is written or told in the form of a movie or a series of newspaper strips.² These elements constitute its plot, but the ways in which the plot is told will vary according to authors, media and contexts of performance. Of course, the basic tenet that the plot of a story is represented by a set of temporally ordered and causally connected events is in itself highly debatable, but let us take it at face value for the moment. The point is that the distinction between *story* and *discourse* also reflects a basic conception, present in many structuralist treatments, that posits the existence of a surface level (the level of the text as it is accessed by a reader) and a deep structure (the most basic level of actions and roles from which the story is derived).

As we discuss in detail in section 3.1, structuralist studies of literary works (see Barthes 1977; Bremond 1973; Greimas [1966] 1983; Todorov 1969)³ constituted the immediate precursors not only of narratology, but also of story grammars, and for this reason an analysis of stories based on a rigid division between levels is common to those later developments as well.

Following Vladimir Propp (1968), who had attempted to capture the fundamental structure of Russian folk tales in terms of basic roles and action functions, literary structuralists tried to describe the deep structure of fictional works as a very abstract model from which the narrative was derived. Indeed, structuralists were not so much interested in the surface level of texts as in their deep structure. The latter was described in different ways by different authors. For example, some characterized it in terms of the basic relations between a few concepts such as “love” and “prohibition” (see Greimas 1983), while others saw it as a system of relations between actions, roles and functions (as in Propp 1968 or Barthes 1977). But the common ideal was to find certain basic elements that would allow researchers to reduce the deep structure of stories to a minimal set of universal elements in order to derive from them any surface realization of narratives in any language. In this sense, structural studies of narratives resembled structural linguistics in its quest for minimal units of analysis, in its rigid separation of levels and in its attempt to distinguish between competence and performance. But of course, every time analysts tried to define

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the basic elements of deep structure, they ended up proposing symbols that were not devoid of meaning but were semantically and culturally loaded (e.g. “life,” “death,” “love,” “prohibition,” etc.).

As noted by Herman and Vervaeck (2005), there are significant problems with structuralist narratology. These have to do with the ambiguity of the categories used in the analysis of stories, the rigid separation between levels (such as deep and surface structure) and the lack of specificity on how transitions between them work. The authors conclude (p. 100) that

the creation of unambiguous and generally accepted categories remains a utopian enterprise. Any classification proposed by structuralist narratology gives rise to borderline cases and problems that have yet to be – and probably never will be – solved. In many cases the structuralist is forced to acknowledge that concrete stories always upset the theoretical demarcations.

Of particular interest here is the problem of the definition of a story as a text, which has occupied narratologists for decades and which has been inherited by all text-based approaches to narrative. As already mentioned, for narratologists, a story has to comprise a series of related events. Chatman (1990: 9) pointed to chronological ordering as the main criterion to distinguish stories from other texts or, to put this more specifically, proposed the criterion of double chronology. For a text to qualify as narrative, it has to entail movement through time, not only externally (i.e. through its telling, cf. discourse time) but also internally (through the duration of the sequence of events that constitute its plot, cf. story time). In his *Dictionary of Narratology*, Prince proposed instead that such a link was not only chronological, but also causal. He thus characterized a minimal story as a set of “two states and one event” that are chronologically ordered and causally connected in that the second state is a “reversal” or “modification” of the first state. Thus, the following was classified as a minimal story:

John was happy, then he saw Peter, then, as a result, he was unhappy. (Prince [1987] 2003: 53)

As is evident from these definitions, structuralists and narratologists alike have had little interest in storytelling contexts, given their focus on the text-internal properties of narrative. This lack of interest in the context is not shared by more recent narratological approaches as we will discuss below.

1.1.2 Narrative and cognition

The basic idea that the story is a series of temporally and causally connected events is echoed in story grammars, another set of approaches to narrative as a text-type. Such approaches, however, are not so much focused on the production

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as on the comprehension and processing of narratives. Researchers in the field look at narrating as a cognitive activity and their main interest is discovering how people understand and remember stories and what criteria determine their judgments about story well-formedness. According to de Beaugrande (1982), although at the beginning of the story-grammar movement it was difficult to distinguish amongst different trends, later on two approaches became identifiable: the story-schema approach (Rumelhart 1975) and the story-grammar approach (Mandler and Johnson 1977, 1980; Mandler 1984). In the story-schema approach a story is defined in cognitive terms as an abstract representation about story structure and content or, in Mandler's terms, as: "a mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the way in which stories proceed" (1984: 18).

Story-schema theories derive from cognitive models of text processing (see, for example, Schank and Abelson 1977) that regard text comprehension as a process of decoding new information based on previous knowledge. The latter is stored in memory through schemas, frames and scripts representing either constellations of meaning relations (schemas and frames) or stereotypical situations (scripts). Such schemas allow people to make inferences about what they are reading or hearing. In the case of stories, according to story grammars, they are formed by sets of basic components (such as SETTING, THEME, PLOT, etc.) and sets of relationships amongst them.

For some (see Stein and PolICASTRO 1984), story schemas are prototypes (Rosch and Mervis 1975), i.e. kinds of general models with stereotypical characteristics that people keep in mind when judging whether a text is a story. In this view, stories may be closer or further away from the prototype, and in that sense narrativity may be a matter of degree.

Story-grammar models focus more than story schemas on the description of the internal structure of a story and present a type of syntax of story organization based on the combination of the basic story components and their internal ordering. Thus, for example, a story would consist of a combination of elements such as SETTING + INITIATING EVENT + REACTION + ENDING and would specify the position and content of each of those elements. According to de Beaugrande, however, these two approaches are compatible as:

A comparison of the literature indicates that a story grammar can be viewed as a rule-set for relating the ordering of surface-text categories to the underlying schema (cf. 1.13). Thus, the grammar is a theoretical formalization that operates upon the knowledge organized within the schema, with major focus on the arrangement of categories in sequences. (1982: 410)

Thus, there is no contradiction between the conception of a story as a mental schema and its conception as a grammatically well-formed string, since the grammar is a concrete realization of the mental prototype that we have about

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stories. It is worth noting the recurrence of certain definitional criteria of narrative in the approaches we have seen so far. We have already pointed to the chronological criterion as the *sine qua non* of definitions. Here, we will single out the idea of an initiating (see above) or a complicating event as another pivotal ingredient. The view that to have a narrative, a disruption of sorts is needed, that is, an event or series of events that will introduce some kind of a complication to an initial state of affairs or an equilibrium, is not new. It goes back to Aristotle's notion of *peripeteia* and has been variously described since then (cf. "trouble" in Burke [1950] 1969).

These definitional criteria in story grammars are essential in their aim to construct abstract models of narrative so as to account for the kinds of information that people would expect to find in a story and for the type of organization that characterizes it (see Johnson and Mandler 1980: 51) in order to explain people's comprehension of stories. Thus, story grammars try to represent or even simulate cognitive processes that accompany story comprehension and test them through experimental work.

However, as noted by de Beaugrande and others, such abstract models are fraught with problems. First, the status of the rules created by story grammarians is not clear. Are they true representations of mental processes or are they models devised and used by the analyst? Are they all causally ordered with respect to one another?

Second, story grammars and schema theories (like narratology) have attempted to come up with basic features that need to be present in order for a story to be considered such, but they have not really been able to empirically demonstrate the validity of their hypotheses.

Some of these features have been summarized by Stein and PolICASTRO (1984) who claim that they have found twenty different descriptions of stories. However most of them share the idea that a story

1. represents a series of temporally and causally related events;
2. introduces some form of a complication or disruption;
3. presents (more or less) goal-directed actions and reactions to deal with this disruption;
4. has an animate protagonist.

The last two criteria are related in that definitions that do not consider goal-directed behavior to be a necessary feature for stories (such as Prince 1973) do not include the presence of a protagonist as a defining feature either.

The abstraction and context-independence of many of these definitions has led to different reactions within both story grammars and narratology. Many have also noted that experiments conducted as part of the testing of hypotheses regarding the characteristics of stories have not provided definitive answers. Unsurprisingly, there is still a great deal of controversy about which texts can

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be regarded as stories. For example, Stein and Policastro (1984) were not able to show in their experiments with children and adults that goal-directed behavior was essential for recognizing a text as a story. In general, they found that “not all constituents of a goal-based episode need be included in a text for it to be classified as a story” (p. 149) and that no definition of story accurately predicted their subjects’ behavior.

One point that many within the story-grammar approach have raised is that stories cannot be defined or understood in abstraction from users, and without a consideration of the relative status of narrator and audience in storytelling. Indeed, according to some researchers (in particular Brewer and Lichtenstein 1981, and de Beaugrande and Colby 1979), story-like qualities do not depend exclusively on structural properties of the stories but are attributed to them by audiences. Therefore, for a text to be seen as a story, the audience needs to be emotionally involved and the action must deal with difficulties and obstacles to be overcome, i.e. it must be able to arouse interest and affective participation.

1.1.3 Stories and mental models

This more central role accorded to the reader and the process of interpretation can be seen in recent so-called *post-classical* narratology (see Dolezel 1998; Herman 2002; Ryan 1991; Werth 1999). Recent narratological approaches have started paying more attention to context in the sense that they recognize the role of the reader, in particular of people’s knowledge and beliefs in the interpretation of the text. In this respect, they have started to converge with cognitive theories about text processing. Contrary to story grammars, in which text comprehension was conceptualized as the process of integration of information into a stereotypical schema or script, in more recent cognitive theories, text comprehension is viewed as the creation of “mental models.” Such mental model theories derive from original work by Johnson Laird (1983) and Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) in which understanding was not conceived as a mental representation of the text itself, but rather as a process of creation of mental or situational models of the world described in the text. In Van Dijk and Kintsch, text comprehension implied three different mental representations of the text: a verbatim representation, a semantic representation in terms of propositional content, and a situational representation. In later applications (see Zwaan and Radvansky 1998), text comprehension is related to the construction of coherent mental models. Such models are seen as complex multimodal mental representations containing spatio-temporal, causal relations, and information about objects, persons and motivations. They are continuously updated and change at different moments in time reflecting different stages in the process of text understanding. In these later developments, the interest for stories as texts has

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given way to a preoccupation with stories as a suitable site for the study of mental processes of understanding and of memory retrieval and storage.

These cognitive approaches have greatly influenced recent narratology. Herman (2002), for example, talks about *story world* as a concept that should replace that of *story* and equates story worlds with mental models that readers create, about who did what to whom, where, why and in what fashion in a particular story. According to him, narratives build their own possible worlds, which are different from the world in which readers live. Such worlds have their own rules so that their logic and their events make sense within them, even if they deviate from the laws of the real world. Thus, for example, in a magic realist novel such as Garcia Márquez's *One hundred years of solitude*, it is possible for children to be born with a pigtail or for rain to last for years or for events that have not happened yet to influence the protagonists' behavior. Readers understand these possible worlds by relating them to their own experience of the natural world, and this happens through the activation of schemas and scripts that they derive from such experience.

Fludernik's approach is similar to Herman's in that she also claims that narratives are representations of possible worlds, but she argues that the primary function of narrative is communicating human experience, thus rejecting a vision of narrative as a simple recapitulation of events and downplaying the importance of action as the criterion for narrativity par excellence. In her definition:

A narrative ... is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at the centre of which there are one or more protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal or spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal directed actions (action and plot structure). It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists. (Fludernik 2009: 6)

In such a perspective, conversational and literary narratives are not as distant as they may seem, since the focus in both is not on events and actions per se but on the way humans experience and react to them.

The concept of narrativity has also undergone important changes. Narrativity can be seen as the property that defines the difference between a narrative and a non-narrative.⁴ In traditional narratology, the criteria for narrativity included the features that we have discussed above, i.e. temporal ordering of events, complication, the presence of human characters, goal-directed action, etc. In more recent approaches, however, narrativity has been redefined not as a property of texts, but as something that is attributed to texts by readers. It has also been anchored to the existence of mental schemata that represent basic features of human experience. Fludernik, for example, defines narrativity as "the representation of experientiality" (1996: 20), that is, the ability to capture

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human reactions and emotions in the face of life events. In accordance with Prince's ideas, narrativity is also increasingly regarded as a scalar predicate, something that can be present in greater or lesser degree in a text. In this way, different narrative text-types are described in terms of high or low narrativity: e.g. "reports" are typically seen as low-narrativity texts, on account of their lack of evaluation (Fludernik 1996: 52–3). This distinction has not been devoid of evaluative judgment. It has in point of fact helped establish specific kinds of narratives as the "canon," and the natural consequence of this has been that these narratives have been researched more. We will come back to this point in Chapter 4.

Within a scalar conceptualization of narrativity, Herman (2002: 91) proposes that while "narrativehood" involves binary oppositions (either a text is a narrative or it is not), narrativity is a matter of degree such that a story may be more or less story-like. Story-likeness depends on the equilibrium between stereotypicality and breach of expectation in narratives. If a story has too many or too few stereotypical cues, its narrativity diminishes. In other words, a prototypical narrative works on expected patterns but also on their breach by creating suspense and interest.

Another strand of latest narratological research involves revisiting a long-standing preoccupation with the place of media (e.g. cinematic) and visual narratives in the remit of narratology, and even the extent to which these can be considered as narrative. The recent move away from strict textualist criteria, as we have outlined it above, has renewed this interest. For instance, in one of the few large-scale attempts to examine narrative through a comparative lens in the media, Ryan (2004a: 22) starts off with the observation that

the comparative study of media as means of expression lags behind the study of media as channels of communication; individual media have been studied with well-developed analytical tools and methodologies, but we do not have a comprehensive and widely accepted theory of the importance of the medium as material support for the form and content of message.

Ryan puts forth a program for what she calls "a transmedial narratology," which is undoubtedly a desideratum. Her vision has an obvious cognitive orientation and a lingering emphasis on narrative as defined on the basis of abstract textual criteria. That said, some of the questions that Ryan (p. 35) claims should be addressed can be adapted and extended to more socially and interactionally inclined studies of narrative too. For instance, how narrative gets transposed from one medium to another and how each medium encourages or prohibits specific ways of narration. Also, what the applicability is of concepts and analytical modes that have been developed with regard to the study of narrative in one medium across media. Ryan rightly stresses the point that the examination of such questions should "avoid the temptation to attribute

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features and findings to the medium solely” (p. 34). She also warns against the other extreme, that is “media blindness,” which often involves an indiscriminate transfer of concepts designed for the study of narrative in one medium to narratives of another medium.

Narrative as a text-type in different media is already attracting the interest of researchers in increasing ways. Closely related to this is the focus on the interrelationships between the new ways to present stories in different media, in particular in digital media, and what these implicate for the involvement of “audiences” or “users.” Above all, exactly what counts as a story, particularly in new media environments, remains a focal concern in narratology. For instance, in a comparative study of interactive drama, hypertext, computer games, web cams and text-based virtual realities (role-playing or adventure MOOs), Ryan (2004b) reports that the role of narrative in these cases differs from central to intermittent (e.g. in MOOs where dramatic action and storytelling alternate with small talk) to instrumental (e.g. computer games). The role of the user also varies in terms of how much interactivity is allowed: in computer games, for instance, the users become an integral part of the fictional world as main characters.

It is worth noting again that textual criteria, in particular the temporal ordering of events, remain as the main guiding principle in terms of what constitutes a narrative in narratological studies that are venturing out to the “transmedial” terrain. We will however revisit the issue of narrative in digital media in Chapter 4.

The evolution of narratological approaches from a rigid structuralist perspective focused on defining the abstract properties of stories toward a more flexible understanding of narrative as interaction between text and reader as well as of narrative across media has undoubtedly been positive. The recognition, within narratological studies that have traditionally focused on literary narratives, of the fact that everyday narratives may be the basis for as well as being closely related and relatable to literary narratives is also important. Within linguistic analyses too, the literary qualities of everyday narratives have often been documented (see Polanyi 1982; Tannen 1989; Wolfson 1978). Devices and strategies such as characters’ reported speech, tense alternations between past and present, and performance devices are only a few amongst these. As we will see in the following chapters, questions about the stories’ voice and authorship, their spatio-temporal anchoring, and the embedding of different worlds within story worlds are at the center of linguistic studies of narrative as much as of literary ones and constitute areas where interaction and enrichment between the two camps is possible and desirable. However, the problems deriving from a text-oriented vision of narrative are not easily overcome, as we will see below too. We will come back to this question in Chapter 2.