

# Narrative: An Introduction

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1960s there has been a huge amount of interest in, and speculation about, the nature of narrative. This may well be a function of our information society, where communication and the means of communication have become increasingly important to societies, organizations, and individuals alike. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies (e.g. Chafe 1980; Levi-Strauss 1972) suggest that narrative is a basic and constant form of human expression regardless of ethnic origin, primary language, and enculturation. This ubiquity is famously described by Barthes:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes 1977, p.79)

Reflecting this ubiquity, research and discussion papers have been published on narrative in disciplines as diverse as Management and Organizational Studies, Anthropology, Gender Studies, Medicine, History, Psychoanalysis, Art, Multimedia (particularly Virtual Reality environments), Museum Studies, Sociology, Literary Theory, Law, Cultural Studies, and New Media Theory. It is an important topic in Discourse Analysis and Semiotics. In Education, narrative methods have made significant inroads in teacher training and professional development, in schools, and as a research methodology. There has also been interest in using narrative as a device for structuring e-Learning materials.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of narrative studies there is no definitive theory, no paradigmatic definition of what a narrative actually is.<sup>1</sup> Study in this area is fraught with semantic problems as different disciplines use the same sets of words but attach different

meanings to them, or use different sets of words when talking about the same thing. Much of the literature is concerned with fictional narrative which, whilst interesting, is not necessarily relevant to real-world contexts. My aim is to try and avoid as much of this specialist language as possible.

### **The Function of Narrative**

It would seem that we humans are irrevocably locked into a perception of the world encountered as a linear series of experiences. Although we assume these experiences are ‘analogue’—continuously variable and seamless—we nonetheless parse them into ‘events’, some of which have their origins in the cyclic nature of the environment (night and day, seasons, years) and some of which are largely cultural constructs (holidays, weekends, lunchtime, lectures, semesters, weddings, etc.). Time may also be divided-up in more personal, outwardly arbitrary ways:  $x$  amount of time in a certain job,  $y$  amount of time living at certain address,  $z$  years married to someone. *Narrative is our fundamental means of comprehension and expression for this time-locked condition.*

Following on from this initial premise, it is clear that the way we manage time with narratives is not as straightforward as it first seems. Einsteinian deliberations aside, at a human level we behave as though time is a constant. In fact we live in a heavily regulated and clock-dependent culture where many of the things we take for granted occur at predictable and measurable intervals (we all know when to turn on the 6 o’Clock News). However, *psychologically* time is far more flexible—it ‘stands still’ or ‘flies past’—and this is the time scale of narratives. Events that take years may be summarised and briefly disposed of in a narrative, whilst crucial events taking milliseconds could be blown-up, pored over, described in meticulous detail, to form the bulk of the telling. These two time streams are always implicit, and recognition of this is one of the main ways in which we can claim that a narrative must always be subjective.<sup>2</sup>

This subjectivity, this *point of view* of the narrator shapes every element of the narrative. The psychological weighting of time is itself reciprocally related to the processes of:

1. Event selection. No matter what actually went on ‘in reality’ only those events necessary to the narrative should be included. The choice of events—what is actually deemed necessary—relates directly to the point of the narrative, what message the narrator is trying to express. The effectiveness of this choice can be measured against criteria such as coherence and internal consistency.
2. Event sequencing. Events need not be narrated in the order they happened but can be recombined in an infinite number of ways (many of which may be medium specific). As Jean-Luc Godard has said, the narrative must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order (Chandler 2002, p.90).

The selection of events, the relative importance attached to each, and the way in which subjective time is managed are all entirely dependent upon the point of view of the narrator. A narrative is a *re-presentation* of reality from a particular perspective. It is a whole, an internally consistent, self-contained unit of expression; reality reconfigured in order to create meaning.

I do not believe this description of the basic function of narrative is any way problematic or contentious. For example, Bruner (1986, 1990, 2002) has written extensively on narrative. In *Acts of Meaning* he says :

Perhaps its principal property is its inherent sequentiality: a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not, as it were, have a life or meaning of their own. Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole... (Bruner 1990, p.43)

Abbott (2002, p.3) says that narrative “is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” and that the ability to manage time “fluidly” within a narrative allows “events themselves to create the order of time.” Polkinghorne’s definition of narrative (1988, p.13) is that it “is the fundamental scheme for linking individual<sup>3</sup> human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite.” Chatman has said that the common features of all narratives are “order and selection” (1978, p.28) and, based on work by Piaget, discusses how narratives display three structural properties: wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation. It is *whole* because although “events and existents are single and discrete, [...] the narrative is a sequential composite” and “unlike a random agglomerate of events, they manifest a discernible organization.” *Self-regulation* “means that the structure maintains and closes itself” and *transformation* refers to the process of selection and ordering itself i.e. the way in which events may be combined and recombined in different ways (Chatman 1978, pp.20-22). Finally, Dickinson and Erben (1995, p.255) have said that:

The meaningful framework of narrative and its organization of temporality are points so fundamental that they may best be regarded as two aspects of the defining characteristic of a narrative.

This is not to say that there are no contentious issues within narrative studies: there are indeed many. However, most commentators would agree on a basic functional description of narrative as laid out here.<sup>4</sup>

### **Oral Narratives**

Walter Ong has written that:

... despite the oral roots of all verbalization, the scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention. (Ong 1982, p.8)

Narrative studies are no exception: the vast bulk of the literature on narrative is derived from an analysis based on ‘texts’, particularly novels, historical writing, and film. However, in 1967 Labov and Waletzky published a seminal paper (reprinted with commentary, 1997) showing there was a common structure embedded in all verbal narratives. This finding was astonishing not least of all because they deliberately set out to analyze narratives of “unsophisticated speakers”:

In our opinion, it will not be possible to make very much progress in the analysis and understanding of these complex [written] narratives until the simplest and most fundamental narrative structures are analyzed in direct connection with their originating functions. We suggest that such fundamental structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experiences: not the products of expert storytellers that have been retold many times, but the original production of a representative sample of the population. (Labov and Waletzky 1997, p.3)

In this paper Labov and Waletzky identified five structural features which they term Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda (which would prototypically occur in that order). The *orientation* sets the scene, the *complication* would be the main body of the narrative describing the action or events that occurred. At the narrative approaches its climax an *evaluation* section is inserted which “reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units compared to others” (Labov and Waletzky 1997, p.32). The evaluation would be followed by the climax of the narrative, the *resolution* or outcome. Labov and Waletzky point out that the insertion of an evaluation section at this crucial point in the narrative is an important structural marker without which “it is difficult to distinguish the complicating action from the result” (ibid, p.30). The *coda* “is a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment” (ibid, p.35). In a later paper Labov adds a sixth element, the Abstract, which begins the narrative and briefly states “not only what the narrative is about, but why it was told” (Labov 1999, p.234).

However, in everyday conversational use this structure is not rigidly adhered to, and in fact the “simplest possible narrative would consist of the single line of complication, without a clear resolution...” (Labov and Waletzky 1997, p.37). Sometimes the structure may be determined by the complexity of events being represented, or the evaluation may be widely dispersed throughout the narrative and “embedded” to a greater or lesser extent (ibid, p.34); at other times the social situation may determine the inclusion, exclusion, or weighting of certain elements. Recent commentators have noted that:

Labov collected his stories in interviews. In other words, the stories did not occur spontaneously in conversational settings. This context of occurrence is in many ways responsible for their fully-fledged structural pattern. When we look at non-prompted conversational stories, there are certain notable differences. Since such stories are triggered by the surrounding conversational text, they very often dispense with non-obligatory categories such as abstract and coda. [...] In addition, the narrators of conversational stories usually possess a higher degree of familiarity and share more assumptions with their interlocutors than an interviewer does with an interviewee. As a result, they are more likely to dispense with long orientation sections. (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2004, p.63)<sup>5</sup>

So when we tell someone what happened to us on the way to work, what we did at the weekend, what happened down the pub, all of these events are likely to be re-presented in a narrative form that will be a spontaneously-improvised derivative of the prototypical six-part structure described by Labov and Waletzky. Furthermore, we can say that if we tell

two different people the same story we will almost certainly generate two different narratives, each tailored—each *designed*—to suit a particular listener at a particular time and in a particular place. In other words, looking at narrative this way highlights its importance as a means of generating *socially situated* meaning. The extent and complexity of the factors we consider when doing this are summed up by Gee:

Situated meanings arise because particular language forms take on specific or situated meanings in specific contexts. The word “context” here refers to an ever-widening set of factors that accompany language in use. These include the material setting, the people present (and what they know and believe), the language that comes before and after a given utterance, the social relationships of the people involved, and their ethnic, gendered, and sexual identities, as well as cultural, historical, and institutional factors. (Gee 2005, p.57)

In fact without this ability to fluidly and expertly manage narrative in ‘real-time’ (whether as narrator or as listener), it seems unlikely we would be able to function socially at all.

### **Narrative, Memory, and Simulation**

Narrative is often implicated in the functioning of memory. In oral cultures myth, poetry, and storytelling all have uses over and above mere entertainment: without writing, they are the store of the culture’s knowledge about itself:

Most, if not all, oral cultures generate quite substantial narratives or series of narratives, such as the story of the Trojan wars among the ancient Greeks, the coyote stories among various Native American populations, the Anansi (spider) stories in Belize and other Caribbean cultures with some African heritage, the Sunjata stories of old Mali, the Mwindo stories among the Nyanga, and so on. Because of their size and complexity of scenes and actions, narratives of this sort are often the roomiest repositories of an oral culture’s lore. (Ong 1982, p.137)

In the West this need for cultural memory is now largely served by print and electronic media. In fact, I am tempted to say that these media have *amplified* the effect of narrative for, as Brooks has said, we are now “immersed” in it (Brooks 1985, p.3). From our parents, from our friends, and from strangers; in school, at work, and at home; in newspapers, novels, advertising, film and TV; factual, fictional, or somewhere inbetween, the number of narratives we are exposed to even in a single year must run into many thousands. As Bruner points out, these narratives provide—as they do in oral cultures—a set of behavioural models, a set of norms for “conventional” or “canonical” behaviour (Bruner 1990, Ch.2). In this sense, these narratives absorbed and internalised from the culture are an indelible part of our identity.<sup>6</sup>

On a personal level we use narrative to describe—to ourselves and to other people—who we are, where we have been, and where we are going: our *life stories* (Linde 1997, p.283) or *life-scripts* (Polkinghorne 1988, p.18). We may tell and retell the story about how we caught a 10-pounder using only a bent pin and a crust of bread; we may tell and retell the story of a divorce, a great success, a terrible failure. We will tell them different ways in different situations to different people, and over time they will change as we too change.

We do not only use narrative to re-present our past: Gee has described how we also use narrative to predict and plan our future actions using *simulations*. These simulations “help us prepare for action in the world. We can act in the simulation and test out what consequences follow, before we act in the real world” (Gee 2005, p.75). Like all narratives they are selective in what is re-presented, perspectivized, and fluid: we may run several different ‘what if...’ versions to evaluate possible outcomes, or run the simulation from another person’s (imagined) perspective. They are, in other words, related to planning and problem solving.

Much of this “inherent inclination to narrativize” (Freeman 1997, p.175) can be explained if we look at the functioning of memory itself. Briefly then, memory is not a store of ‘raw’ experience: sensory data is always organized, ordered, contextualised, and encoded. Miller’s classic paper (1956) talks in terms of “chunking” data in order to overcome the limitations of short-term memory, and researchers now typically talk of these processes in terms of *schemas*, *schematas*, or *frames* (e.g. Bruner 1990, p.56; Samuel 1999, p.56; Dijk 1980, pp.233-236).. In Dijk (1980) the author suggests that the large-scale semantic units he calls *macrostructures*—a particular form of which is narrative—aid memorization in three ways. Firstly, they allow global organization and the imposition of coherence on the raw data: “Without this kind of global organization in memory, retrieval and hence use of complex information would be unthinkable” (ibid, p.14). Secondly, encoding in terms of these macrostructures allows for a reduction in the amount of data that needs to be remembered: this increases efficiency. Related to this, the process of actually deriving a macrostructure from the mass of raw data “may involve the *construction of new meaning* (i.e., meaning that is not a property of the individual constitutive parts)” (ibid, p.15. Italics in the original). He sums this up by saying:

Fast and efficient processing of complex information in cognition, communication, and interaction therefore mainly takes place at the macrostructural level. This holds not only in processes of understanding but also in production and planning, control, and the execution of very complex tasks. (Dijk 1980, p.15)

From an educational point of view this is clearly very suggestive. For example, the National Research Council have suggested that expertise in an area of knowledge requires three basic conditions. Fundamentally, there must be a suitable depth of factual knowledge. In addition to this, however, these ‘facts’ must be organized into a conceptual framework which, in turn, must be organized to allow fast and fluid retrieval:

A pronounced difference between experts and novices is that experts’ command of concepts shapes their understanding of new information: it allows them to see patterns, relationships, or discrepancies that are not apparent to novices. They do not necessarily have better overall memories than other people. But their conceptual understanding allows them to extract a level of meaning from information that is not apparent to novices, and this helps them select and remember information. Experts are also able to fluently access relevant knowledge because their understanding of subject matter allows them to quickly identify what is relevant. (National Research Council 2000, pp.16-17)

They go on to describe the knowledge of an expert as *conditionalized*, and that it “includes a specification of the contexts in which it is useful” (ibid, p.43). They also relate factual knowledge to states of activity or inertia: if it is not conditionalized it will be “inert” even though it may actually be relevant to the problem at hand (ibid, p.43). Gee also emphasizes the importance of *pattern-recognition* and contextualisation in the learning process (Gee 2005, p.66). Finally, a deep “approach to learning” has been specifically linked with “relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience” and “looking for patterns and underlying principles” (Entwistle 1997, pp.18-19).

So the evidence from cultural studies, psychology, discourse analysis, linguistics, and learning theory all point towards narrative—when viewed as a cognitive tool for structuring and ordering experience—as being an important functional element in the organization and encoding of memory and central to our abilities to plan and problem-solve. This in turn implicates it directly with the process of learning.

### **Narrative: a Summary**

- 1: Narrative is the primary means of comprehension and expression for our experience of events changing over time.
- 2: Narrative time is subjective, not objective; elastic, not metronomic.
- 3: Event selection and event sequencing are two crucial functional elements of narrative construction, and they are reciprocally related to the subjective experience of time described in the narrative.
- 4: A narrative is re-presentation of reality from a particular perspective: reality reconfigured to express meaning.
- 5: Oral narratives always have structure. The prototypical six-part structure as described by Labov and Waletzky includes Abstract, Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda.
- 6: In practice this structure is subject to reconfiguration as meaning is socially situated.
- 7: Narrative is implicated in the efficient organization and encoding of memory.
- 8: Narrative is implicated in planning and problem-solving abilities.
- 9: Following from the two points above, we can locate narrative at the heart of the learning process.

One final point not mentioned so far, but implicit at every level of the discussion, is that expression through the means of narrative is a *creative* or *imaginative* act. When we say that events are selected, ordered, and reconfigured we are talking about a creative activity. When we say that oral narratives are spontaneously redesigned to suit specific social situations we are talking about a creative act. When we say that experience is organized for encoding in memory we are talking about a creative act. Planning, problem-solving, and simulation are primarily imaginative acts. In each case it is *meaning* that is created: sense, order, and design imposed upon raw experience or even, as Dijk suggests, new meaning that is “not a property of the individual constitutive parts” (Dijk 1980, p.15) i.e. original thought, *invention*.

### **Conclusion**

I have tried to make clear what narrative does and to do so in a way that eschews as much of the specialist language that surrounds this interdisciplinary subject. I have concentrated on establishing narrative as a meaning making structure, and described research that shows

how sophisticated and highly developed our capacity for narrative is. In doing so we have seen how it plays a crucial role in the establishment of socially negotiable meaning, identity, and memory. We use it imaginatively for planning and problem-solving.

## Notes

- 1: For a recent overview of these issues see the Introduction to (Ryan 2004).
- 2: Certain disciplines place more emphasis on this aspect of narrative. The historian Hayden White suggests that narrative is “intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize” (White 1981, p.14). He talks elsewhere of the power of narrative to confer “authority” on a certain interpretation of events (ibid, p.13). His position is certainly borne out of his discipline, and others see this as an overstatement of the inevitable subjectivity of narrative. See Mink (1978, 1981). Bruner basically agrees with White, but softens the position (Bruner 1990, pp.50-51).
- 3: I would question the use of the word ‘individual’ in this context. A narrative does not *by definition* have to be centred on an individual. Many historical accounts are not: there are narratives about plagues, wars, art movements, institutions, products, and even raw materials such as paint and glass.
- 4: This is not to say there are not different ways of thinking about narrative. Turner (1996) conceives of it in terms of *parables*, which function as metaphoric objects.
- 5: This quote highlights the semantic problems in narrative studies. Firstly, Georgakopoulou and Goutsos use the word ‘story’ interchangeably with ‘narrative’. Most commentators would not: *stories* are the basic linear elements which are then instantiated in a particular medium by a particular narrator i.e. *narrativized* (e.g. Chatman 1978; Abbott 2002; Copley 2003). However, even this basic distinction is not universally accepted (e.g. Bal 1997).  
  
Secondly, note the use of the word *texts* here includes the spoken word. Many definitions of this word “privilege” written or recorded sign systems (Chandler 2002, pp.244-255).
- 6: At a broader cultural level, Lyotard (1984) talks about the “grand narratives” we absorb from culture: Communism, “Progress”, Religions, the American Dream, etc..

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