

What is Narrative? Cognitive, Rhetorical and Semiotic Approaches

Mari Hatavara
Professor of Finnish Literature
University of Tampere, Finland

Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies

What is Narrative?

Brian McHale: “theory-building depends partly on determining what counts as a **prototypical object** of a particular theoretical discourse.”

- “Afterword: A New Normal?” in *Narrative Theory, Literature and New Media. Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*, eds. Mari Hatavara, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä & Frans Mäyrä. Routledge 2016.

Cf. Roland Barthes: narrative is pervasive, “simply there, like life itself”

- Barthes, Roland. 1977. “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives.” In *Image-Music-Text* (transl. S. Heath.). London: Fontana, 79–124.

In narrative studies, prototypical objects for long were novels or everyday oral storytelling.

More recently, a multiplicity of narrative environments, modes and media.

- It was perhaps a decade ago that psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of **constituting reality** – Jerome Bruner, 1991
- [Narrative is] **a basic human strategy** for coming to terms with time, process, and change. – David Herman, Manfred Jahn & Marie-Laure Ryan, 2005
- [W]e might conceive of narrative discourse most minimally and most generally as verbal acts consisting of **someone telling someone else** that something happened – Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, 1981
- [Narrative is] **somebody telling somebody else** on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened – James Phelan, 2005
- [A]ny narrative . . . is **a linguistic production** undertaking to tell of one or several events “I walk.” “Pierre has come” are for me minimal forms of narrative. – Gérard Genette, 1980
- [Narrative is] **the representation** of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other – Gerald Prince, 1982
- [Narrative is] **the mental or textual representation** of a causally linked sequence of events involving individuated and human-like agents – Marie-Laure Ryan, 2004

Definitions of narrative

- Cognitive (processual): narrative is a fundamental way of organizing human experience and a tool for constructing models of reality
- Rhetoric (situational): narrative is the act of somebody telling somebody else that something happened
- Semiotic (textual): a text represents a narrator telling about characters experiencing something in a storyworld

Definitions of narrative – and their main emphasis

- Cognitive (processual): narrative is a fundamental way of organizing human experience and a tool for constructing models of reality; the receiver
- Rhetoric (situational): narrative is the act of somebody telling somebody else that something happened; the sender
- Semiotic (textual): a text represents a narrator telling about characters experiencing something in a storyworld; the sign

Narrative is cognitive, rhetoric and semiotic

- Narratives as the objects of study are multiple
- Therefore, there is no unified narrative theory or definition, but a multiplicity of narrative studies

[A]ny narrative inquiry should be fully informed by both **the manifold nature of narratives** and **the richness of theoretical and methodological approaches in narrative studies**. Narratives infuse our lives as medium-specific types of semiotic objects from novels to jokes, from advertisements to social media updates and beyond. Even though narrative modes such as certain linguistic resources used to represent the minds of others travel between narrative environments, we should always pay attention to the **semiotic qualities and conventions used in any articulation of a story into a narrative in a specific medium**. The text that represents cannot be isolated from the represented, and therefore **interpretation both as attention to signs and as recognition and reshaping of cognitive schemas** requires scrutiny.

- Hatavara, Mari & Jarkko Toikkanen. 2019. "Sameness and difference in narrative modes and narrative sense making: The case of Ramsey Campbell's "The Scar." In *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5(1), 130–146.

Narrative is cognitive, rhetoric and semiotic

- Narratives as the objects of study are multiple
- Therefore, there is no unified narrative studies, but a multiplicity of narrative studies

Finally, a word about the possible significance of the kind of research that produces **detailed textual analyses of interview and social media materials**: why would this matter to research on social action? Our suggestion is that teaming up with narratologists may help social scientists analyze and interpret the layers of intentions in their materials, and to gain a more encompassing picture of **the dynamics of narratives**. Conversely, when narratologists with a background in literary studies wish to turn their attention to non-literary narratives they encounter in multidisciplinary settings, their research can crucially benefit from the expertise that social scientists have on empirical work with informants, data handling, research ethics and qualitative methods.

- Björninen, Samuli, Mari Hatavara & Maria Mäkelä. 2020. "Narrative as Social Action: A Narratological Approach to Story, Discourse and Positioning in Political Storytelling." In *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 437–449.