

Narrative closure and the functionalist approach to narrative. Dialogue with Eyal Segal¹

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Abstract

Eyal Segal argues for a functionalist approach to narrative studies. Commenting on his work on «narrative closure», he provides examples that show that the comprehension of texts' endings is enriched by rhetorical analysis and inevitably misguided by mimetic approaches.

Keywords

Narrative closure, narrative segmentation, functionalism, narrative effects, anti-mimetic theory

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1. The mimetic and anti-mimetic paradigms²

[F.P.] The first RRN conference was very illuminating in many ways; in our opinion one of the most thought-provoking aspects was the emergence of two main paradigms in considering narrative: representational and anti-representational, or mimetic and anti-mimetic. These two different positions are almost never undertaken in full in narrative studies: among those present at the conference, it is not possible to claim whether anyone is completely mimetic or anti-mimetic, apart from Sternberg and you, who clearly promote a functionalist and anti-mimetic definition of narrative (there are no immanent elements that can distinguish narrative from other discursive genres, so the same text could be a description or a narrative, depending on the reader-text relation). We regard this opposition as a very important theoretical issue that can hardly be ignored. A proof to that is that during the conference some difficulties and tensions between these two paradigms emerged in giving an account of narrative sequence in terms of events and events' properties (are they mental constructions or segments of reality?); using concepts like *fabula* and *suzjet* for all kind of narrative; defining the relations between the elements of the sequence and narrative effects.

Do you agree with our considerations? In your opinion, how do these two paradigms influence narrative studies? In this regard, do you think it is problematic to propose models and theories that do not accept throughout the implications and consequences of one of the two paradigms?

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[E.S.] Regarding your general question, I prefer the term «functional-rhetorical» to «anti-mimetic», which might have misleading connotations. As to the definition of «events» — are they mental constructions or segments of reality? — well, they are both, but this is actually not the differentiation that seems to me the most pertinent in this context. The one that I would focus on, from an analytical perspective, is that between the perception of events as the defining essence of narrative, within a mimetic or objectivist view («objectivist» in the sense of perceiving narrative in terms of the represented object), and the perception of events (and their structuring in the text) as *a means to an end* — that of generating narrative interest — within a functional view. Such a view adds an essential, and complementary, dimension to the usual analysis of plots in terms of the structure of events, namely, analysis in terms of the structure of interest. I may add that this type of analysis also provides an efficient framework for dealing with the influence of extratextual conventions on the reading process, since, in its functional terms, any operative convention (or system of conventions) may be taken — just like an event or any other world-element — as a means of achieving the fundamental rhetorical end of manipulating and controlling narrative interest. For example, familiarity with certain generic plot conventions may influence readerly expectations no less powerfully than explicit comments by the narrator about the narrative future, while the breach of a convention may produce a surprise as strong as that resulting from the revelation of a gap in the mimetic sequence of earlier reported occurrences.

Regarding how the concepts of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* are perceived and used (or, for that matter, any other version of this basic distinction which attempts to capture the temporal duality of narrative, such as story/discourse). Since mimetic or objectivist approaches are geared to the narrated sequence of the world-in-action as the defining characteristic of narrative, they refer narrativity to only one of the twinned sequences that constitute it — that of represented events. The latter sequence, in turn, is often perceived as constituting ‘raw material’ for various kinds of aesthetic manipulations on the level of narration, within a framework of what/how relations. On the other hand, within the rhetorical-functional perspective suggested by Meir Sternberg, both sequences or temporalities — the mimetic and the textual — are perceived as essential to narrativity, which hinges on the very interplay between them, an interplay that produces gaps of knowledge concerning the represented world, and thus narrative interest.

2. Narrative closure

[F.P.] Your research is focused, since your doctoral studies, on the problem of narrative closure: you claim that traditional narrative studies have not been able to manage this phenomenon, insofar they have been oriented towards both narrative «ending» and narrative «openness».³ Beyond that failure, we think that this specific case might uncover more general questions: in our opinion, how does narrative closure point out the restriction of those approaches centred on structure analysis rather than on effects and interest analysis? Do you think that those approaches could develop instruments suited to manage narrative closure in all its aspects or a radical change is needed? Take, for instance, Prince’s definition of narrative closure given in *A Dictionary of Narratology*: «a conclusion giving the feeling that a narrative or a narrative sequence has come to an end and provid-

³ Cfr. Eyal Segal, *Closure in Detective Fiction*, «Poetics Today», n. 31: 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 153-215.

ing it with an ultimate unity and coherence, an end creating in the receiver a feeling of appropriate completion and finality».⁴ Is there anything do you agree with? Moreover, are the qualities of unity and coherence and the idea of narrative as a whole to be considered as something given in the text or as effects related to the reading process?

[E.S.] You ask about the restrictions of approaches to closure that are not centered on «effects and interest analysis», which I would call «non-functional» or «non-rhetorical». I believe that inasmuch as a systematic theoretical outlook is concerned, such approaches are necessarily limited, or at least not as productive as a rhetorical approach («rhetoric» being understood as dealing with the entire communicative aspect of the discourse, viewed as a set of means chosen and organized with an eye to an audience). The point is that closure is, in essence, a rhetorical-communicative phenomenon: it is an effect, or a quality, generated by the text and perceived by the receiver. Consider the definition proposed by Barbara Herrnstein Smith at the beginning of her classic study *Poetic Closure*:⁵ «the sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or ‘clinch’ which we *experience* [at a text’s termination point]», as well as Gerald Prince’s definition: «a conclusion giving the feeling that a narrative or a narrative sequence has come to an end». It is quite evident that a study of closure has to explain how such a sense, or a feeling, is produced.

Moreover, I believe that from a narratological viewpoint, the main focus of the study of closure should be on the distinctive features of closure in narrative, as opposed to other types of discourse. And since, following Sternberg, I take narrativity to be a rhetorical phenomenon at its core, based on the arousal of narrative interest, I believe that an understanding of the distinctive nature of narrative closure requires an explanation in terms of the termination, or resolution, of narrative interest (or its irresolution, in case of openness).

I also think that a functional perspective, that is, viewing textual phenomena as means for the achievement of communicative ends, can provide a strong methodological anchor for the study of narrative closure, one that should prevent its fragmentation into an ad-hoc enumeration of closural devices, to which many analyses of closure are prone. Let me mention an example outside my own research: in my opinion, one of the best studies of closure in narrative to date is David Richter’s *Fable’s End*.⁶ It explores the problem of closure in the genre of the didactic novel (or *roman à these*), namely, a novel in which the elements of the represented world and their manner of presentation are subordinated to conveying a moral or a thesis concerning the extratextual world. This ‘didactic’ function, built into the genre’s definition, provides a very helpful focus to Richter’s study, since the narrative structure of the texts he analyzes — and the problem of creating closure in these texts — are constantly perceived in the context of achieving this goal. Getting back to the more general issue at hand, I would maintain that Sternberg’s approach to the definition of narrative allows us to provide a universal functional explanation to the issue of closure, one that makes basic narrative sense (and can thus serve as a basis to genre-specific or work-specific studies), in terms of how narrative interest is manipulated in order to produce closure or openness.

⁴ Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2003.

⁵ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure. A study of how poems end*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968.

⁶ David Richter, *Fable’s End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974.

Regarding Gerald Prince's definition, I accept the first part of the definition, however, I would like to note a certain reservation about the use of the terms «unity» and «coherence» at its end, since I think that these concepts should be separated from «finality», which is the distinctive quality that closure provides. If a text has an open ending, or weak closure, does it mean that it is necessarily less coherent and/or unified on that account? I do not think so, certainly if we take into account that coherence and unity can be created on the rhetorical level, where a quality of openness can certainly constitute part of a consistent (and thus unifying or coherence-producing) strategy.

3. Narrative segmentation and the dynamics of interest

[F.P.] You pointed out two main theoretical principles of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure*: the focus on the relation between closure and the text seen as a whole; the fact of keeping both qualities, openness and closure, at the same level, each having its own features and type of interest. Since it discloses the interplay between the two narrative sequences and its effects, how narrative closure (and his counterpart, openness) can help us to understand more generally the dynamics of narrative interest, and its relations with the universals of narrative?

[E.S.] I would say that from this perspective, the study of closure is especially thought-provoking because of its focus on the limits of narrative, so to speak: the termination of what generates narrative — that is, of interest. This provides an opportunity for a systematic investigation of (and reflection on) the basic mechanisms of narrative interest. Let me mention, in this context, an example of a specific issue that has lately caught my attention, namely, the problem of narrative segmentation. It seems to me that the study of closure may help us to understand not only the demarcation of the work as a whole from what lies outside it, but also the lines of demarcation within the work itself. The reason is that every plot structure contains, to a certain extent, 'local' closures resulting from the termination of local arcs of interest, which play a very important role in the perception of segmentation; it is instructive, for example, to study the interaction of such segmentation into units of narrative interest with the segmentation of a text into formal units, such as the chapter or the instalment.

The significant relation between segmentation and closure is dramatized by highly episodic plot structures, the kind of which I have studied in the generic context of the picaresque novel. Episodic structure is commonly conceived of in the mimetic terms of weak (or non-existent) causal relations between represented events; but in rhetorical terms, the crucial characteristic of this plot structure appears to be its privileging of *short-term* (i.e., 'episode'-length) interest, with each discriminated episode possessing a high degree of autonomy, in this regard, at the expense of the whole. This also means a relatively high degree of closure at the level of the episode, and thus a multiplicity of 'local' closures. Interestingly, this multiplicity goes a long way toward explaining the open-ended nature of such a plot structure, which has often been commented upon, since it creates an inherent problem with regard to the overall closure of the work: if the author desires to fashion a strong closure for the text as a whole, the main problem that s/he faces is not how to close the last episode per se, but, rather, how to turn this closure into a global one, thereby 'justifying' the cessation of the story (e.g., of the picaro's life) at this particular episode rather than at any other.