

Emerging Vectors of Narratology: Toward Consolidation or Diversification? (A Response)

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Abstract

This is a response to the questions asked by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Pianzola as a follow-up of the 2013 ENN conference. The discussions that originated at the conference were rich and thought-provoking and so the editors of this special section of «Enthymema» decided to continue the dialogue about the state of the art and the future of narratology.

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1. *Do you think that narratology has entered a phase of consolidation? If yes, what does this consolidation consist of? What do you consider to be the most important aspect to pursue with the aim of consolidation?*

I am not convinced that narratology in the sense of a theory of narrative has entered a phase of consolidation. The main reason for this standpoint is that narratology, once defined by Todorov as «la science du récit», the science of narrative, has not in its actual form, or rather forms in the plural, made clear what it is a science *of* ('science' interpreted in the widest possible sense). Up to now narratology has not distinguished itself for penetrative *meta-theoretical reflection*, and the lack of such reflection I see as a serious shortcoming. In natural science one can point at the material world and state that here is the object; and the unequalled success of this enterprise provides a kind of answer to what is meant both by 'science' and 'the material world'. The narratological enterprise, on the other hand, is operating within the realm of *intentionality*, the domain of *meaning* rather than of *matter*. The terms that constitute its nucleus, *narrative* and *story*, do not denote material things, i.e., such things that are unaffected by how they are talked about; instead, what these words mean is entirely up to how speakers *use* them in actual contexts. Recognizing this condition might help us come to a better understanding of what would possibly consolidate narratology as a discipline.

What labels such as «the science of narrative» or «the theory of narrative» really stand for may be rather obscure. To come to some insight the best one can do is looking at practice. By contemplating what the narratological pioneers actually did in their reasoning from chosen concrete examples, one can get a fairly good idea of what they intended by *narratology*. Its scope was rather limited, as it appears. One can make out from their practice that the aim was mainly to develop the project of *poetics* in a more systematic way than had been done earlier. The opening paragraph of Roland Barthes' "Introduction", with its examples of the «innombrables récits» (countless narratives), has by narratologists again and again been quoted as an argument for the *general* scope of the

narratological approach. But looking at what Barthes is actually saying reveals that his topic was nothing less than what can be associated with the *popular* (not the technical) notion of *story*. These «innombrables [...] récits du monde» (countless narratives of the world) are such exciting, entertaining, imaginative semiotic creations that we appreciate with an attention that is obviously closer to *aesthetic pleasure* than to, for instance, assimilation of factual information.

Even if these early narratologists did not explicitly reflect on the difference between a theory whose object is the external world and one whose aim is to characterize sets of *rule-governed human activities* within the internal world of meaning, their choice of method came to be in harmony with such an insight. Making the study of stories more systematic was to make the implicit 'grammar' of such meaning-systems explicit. In my view it wouldn't be unreasonable to think of such an enterprise coming to a state of consolidation at least as a sub-discipline of some subjects covering a wider area of topics. Comparisons with the rules constraining other systems would give opportunities to broaden the perspective. One may, for example, ask whether the 'grammar' of an informative report of actual events *differs* from the 'grammar' that constrains the type of stories narratologists had as their primary object. Language use is not of much help here, because in some contexts both types of discourse might be referred to as *narrative*. But if one discourse is taken to be a verbal account about the thing and the other just a construction about the saying, it could be expected that their rule-systems display significant differences. And if such differences are also shown by good arguments to be there, one might regard such an insight as a contribution to a 'theory of narrative'.

However, a strategy like the one described as being open to the narratological pioneers was not taken on by the theorists representing the next step of narratology's evolution. Instead the theory went into a 'definitional' phase, obviously motivated by a feeling of the obligation to match up to the label «a science of narrative». *Science* was now taken in a more literally sense than Todorov had intended. One obviously had the feeling that something claiming the status of a science should at least have a definable object. Narratology, it was now argued, should demonstrate «what all and only narratives have in common». By taking on that attitude, one got to embrace a strategy that tended to treat narratives and stories as *things*, as 'natural kinds', made up by their inherent constituting properties. Theorists embarked on a kind of reasoning about what constituted 'narrative kinds' as if it were something analogous to how, for example, organic matter is constituted by cells built up by carbon composites. The task became to lay bare such stuff as stories are made of. It's true that 'grammar' talk did not stop – but it was one 'grammar' that was stipulated as ruling *all* narratives, (and the category should be understood as including a lot more than what the pioneers had attended to), namely the grammar regulating informative referential accounts: telling what happened. From that paradigm one stipulated a whole catalogue of question-begging technical concepts taken to be constitutive of the narrative theory as such.

However, this strategy involved as a necessary consequence that one turned one's back to the approach I have seen implicit in the pioneers' way of doing narratology, that is, as an attempt to make narrative poetics more systematic. Instead of regarding that stance as limiting, I took it as opening towards other rule-systems which could be compared and contrasted with the focused one. Such a method would be congenial with the view that the object of a 'theory of narrative' should not be thought of as something *thing-like* with inherent constitutive properties but rather as *human rule-governed actions* in social and cultural contexts. As having their right place in contexts of intensionality, not extensionality, the core terms of narratology, *narrative* and *story*, should be construed as

patterns of *discursive processes*, which explains why they are context-dependent. Therefore, one of the pitfalls we should avoid as narratologists is to borrow strategies and ways of reasoning from domains foreign to the nature of the kind of subject we are trying to elucidate. This could also be understood as my answer to question 3b.

What do you consider to be the most important aspect to pursue with the aim of consolidation?

As I have tried to explain above, it would be to consider the *nature* of the kind of questions that constitute the topic of an enterprise calling itself a theory of narrative. And the thesis is that we should recognize such enterprise as attempts to theorize on something that has to do with *discursive action* and not with discourse-independent *things*. This suggests that there is not much point in constructing definitions, if this should mean just stipulating constituting properties.

2a. Does diversification imply more double entry narratologies (cognitive n., feminist n., unnatural n., etc.)? If yes, what is still missing for a more complete account of narrative phenomena?

In my view, a double entry narratology of the type *unnatural narratology* brings in a side-track within standard narratology as a theory of narrative in general. My impression is that the 'unnatural' narratologists start from a position where the standard theory is taken for granted and then argue that it should be supplemented by the addition of analyses of some motifs and techniques to which it has paid little attention. If anything should speak in favour of that impression, one can say that what is questioned is not the attribute *unnatural* but the word qualified by it, namely *narratology*. If it is just certain motifs and techniques that are characterized as 'unnatural' in comparison with some more common types taken as the 'natural' choices, then the very theory of narrative seems to be left untouched. However, *narratology* should be interpreted as a theory of narrative as such, not elements of narratives' content. Accordingly, *unnatural narratology* as it is practiced would rather be interpreted as a study of unnatural contents of narratives than as the claim that narrative theory presupposes an unnatural logic.

As to cognitive narratology a rather different question is at issue. Looking at how the cognition theorists argue, I can rather quickly see that neither *narrative* nor *theory* could possibly have the same meaning as that I ascribed to the early narratologists' reasoning. The object of cognitive theorizing seems to be some modern variant of what Immanuel Kant once saw as a priori intuitions, for instance the ideas of space and time, by which we organize our sensory inputs into knowledge. Such intuitions represent the *form* of experience rather than its content which is given practical comprehensibility through that form. In modern cognitive theory it is often argued that one such experience-shaping form stands out as being of particular importance for us as humans; most of our experiences appear to be organized through its agency, and in some sense we also seem to have our very 'humanity' defined by it. Whatever such a form might be, cognitive theorists refer to it as *narrative* and *story*, obviously suggesting that we shall associate it with the meaning these terms have in contexts like those I took to be relevant for the early narratology. The idea is that the characteristic way in which we as humans make sense of the world reveals that we are 'storytelling animals', ruled by a 'literary mind'.

However, if having taken one's point of departure in the hypothesis that the main aim of these theorists is to explain the functions of our cognitive abilities and processes,

there doesn't seem much of a point in giving the terms *narrative* and *story* the meaning they are given in the narratological context. Cognitive theory should not be understood as walking hand in hand with poetics. If we took it for granted that we could use the meaning we associated with the narratological context here, the result would certainly be consternation. In consequence, a cognitive narratology and a narratology starting from the perspective of poetics could not reasonably be parts of something regarded as a consolidated theoretical unit.

2b. Or does diversification, perhaps simultaneously, involve a look at the various scientific cultures underlying research programs in narrative theory, past and present, but also non-Western?

I don't know how to interpret this question to do full justice to it. An expression such as «the various scientific cultures underlying research programs in narrative theory» seems to me to be question-begging. If a practice could be described as indicating a 'culture', it sounds contradictory to describe it simultaneously as 'scientific', if one's point of departure does not happen to be sociological. But if it so were, then the term *narrative theory* will not be taken *de re*, that is, as something one is prepared to seriously recognize as such a thing. It will only be taken *de dicto*, as a quotation of what people within this or that 'culture' are prepared to call 'narrative theory'. This ambiguity would be a reflection of what I have seen as the problem with the whole question discussed here of the consolidation of narrative theory as one consistent unity.

As theoreticians address issues of cognition and context in narrative, in what ways should the role of poetics and rhetoric in narratology be rethought?

The core of my discursive approach with regard to topics especially in the humanities has been that we should accept the consequences of the insight that such topics are regulated within the realm of meaning. The object of modern cognitive theory, though, is not just the mind as the domain of thoughts but also the necessary material condition of thinking, namely the neural system. But however far research in what happens in that system in an individual's constructing and receiving acts of storytelling will come, it will not, as it seems, overthrow the intentional talk by which we in appreciations and in discourse make sense of such performances. There is nothing indicating that it would be possible, without un-informative reductionism, to convincingly argue that one has found a discourse type where descriptions of neural processes on the one hand, and analyses of how themes are suggested by plot construction in a story on the other, are really interchangeable.

3a. With respect to question 2, what contributions can each narratology or narrative theory bring to the others? To what extent can concepts and methods travel and be shared among different theories? And between narratology and other disciplines?

With regard to topics within the humanities and related fields, a main theme of my discussion has been that there is incompatibility between theories because their concepts and methods are strictly context-dependent. In this there is a significant difference between natural science on the one hand and scholarship in the cultural disciplines on

the other. Science has one consistent object, the material universe, and what are formulated as hypotheses in chemistry, for example, should be expected to be compatible with theories of physics. In scholarly discussions of topics like narrative theory, traveling of concepts between systems is rather to be regarded as something which creates typical pitfalls. What cognitive theory refers to as *storytelling* will not make sense if we take it to mean what it means in the context of poetics. In my opinion, what can contribute to insights is the possibility of *contrasting* one practice to others. In the more internal discussion of narratology, there is much to get from seeing the contrast between a reasoning built on the aesthetic paradigm of poetics and one that is built on the paradigm of informative reports of actual events and circumstances (that which I have claimed is the paradigm preferred by standard narratology). In other words, possible insights could be expected to come into view, not by having different systems to merge into one superior arrangement, but from the distinctions we can make between them. In this operation of getting meaning by differences, we can see the analogy with how *language* operates as a system; and we can suggest that this operation is typical of human discursive practices in general as contrasted with the condition of matter. And, after all, from this analogy the narratological pioneers started their project.