

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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Whether we now have «entered a phase of consolidation» in narratology I cannot say. I would certainly welcome it, but it is hard to tell how the winds are blowing at this moment. Instead I will briefly present my view on diversification and, in particular, consolidation in narrative theory. In this context I take the consolidation approach to mean striving for finding interesting common denominators that justify the very idea about a unified object of study (a thing as narrative, or a property as narrativity, or an activity as narration). I'll come back to the third and final partial question under 1.: «What do you consider to be the most important aspect with the aim of consolidation?».

Some problems with the consolidation attitude lurk behind the second question, about diversification. Obviously, narratology diversifies in the sense that there are several competing theoretical approaches. Some important such approaches are hinted at by question 2b: «past», «present», «non-Western», «cognition», «context», «poetics» and «rhetoric». By itself this is no catastrophe for the consolidation approach. David Herman talks in the foreword to *Narratologies* about how views critical of classical narratology may be seen as complementary to the achievements of the golden era of French structuralism, and he argues that the post-classical reorientations could rather be labelled a Renaissance than a defeat of narratology. I agree. A harder problem is the lack of conceptual coherence: crucial terms like *narrative*, *narration*, *story*, *telling*, *tale* and others are differently used by different users (not only scholars), in different contexts, and – still worse – the majority, maybe all, of these different uses defy definition. This incoherence seemingly threatens the very project of narratology.

However, the threat is not necessarily fatal. Firstly, this condition is generally acknowledged in many scientific contexts – most projects and disciplines face similar definitional shortcomings. Biology does not perish because of the lack of a generally accepted definition of life. This is an interesting, illuminating, maybe embarrassing fact, but it is no fatal blow to the vitality of biology. Secondly, conceptual analysis does not point at what was meant by a certain term before it entered science. Physics picked up the term *energy* and changed its meaning beyond recognition. Other aspects than

conformity to prescientific use are decisive: theoretical coherence and applicability. Within narratology this means how well the chosen term cooperates with the rest of the theoretical fabric, and how well the term (and the rest of the vocabulary) fits the narrative practice. Thirdly, the choice is not between giving complete definitions and giving up – less definite criteria than necessary and sufficient conditions (such as narrative universals, see below) may be available.

This does not mean that the consolidation attitude is secured. It might still be true that our selection of exemplary narratives is biased. We might unreflectively lay too much stress on literary narratives, or European literary narratives, or European literary narratives from the last two centuries, or we might overemphasize the role played by oral narratives produced as answers to the pragmatic linguist's questions. Critical examinations of narratological theory from such vantage points may be the best strategy for adherents of diversification approach, but it is also an indispensable part of the consolidation method: as soon as a hypothesis about a narrative universal is established, we should as good Popperians try to find not supporting evidence but counterexamples. Our failure to do so is the best argument for the validity of our general narratological assumption. Thus, the consolidation theorist should seek the company, not so much of others of the same camp, but of adherents of diversification.

However, this does only mean that the consolidation hypothesis might be correct, that there might be a narrative universal. This is indeed an insufficient answer to the question «Why consolidation?», and it gives no hint of what could be meant by the expression «*interesting* common denominators» used above.

My own far from original view on this matter starts with the idea of the ubiquity of narrative: in all known societies people have told and listened to narratives. If this is true, our interest in finding and formulating narrative universals becomes more seriously motivated. However, not everything true about every narrative is an interesting universal in this perspective – for instance, not the fact that narratives take time, or that ordinary spiders don't understand them. We should look for those common features that play an explanatory role with respect to the immense spread of narrative. Functional ideas about narratives as cognitive instruments in the training of spotting causal relations, or in elaborating the individual's skill in mind-reading, or in conveying information and construing understanding about changes belong here, that is ideas about what the use of narrative is, what they are good at and good for. However, such theories are usually, maybe always, open to diversification attacks. Another functional approach is this: what narrative properties make narration easy – easy to produce (very young children tell stories), easy to understand, easy to attend to, easy to remember? Such inquiries are neutral to the question of the use(s) of narrative, and they are more foundational. To me this is «the most important aspect with the aim of consolidation» – to find out what and how narrative features have contributed to the cultural success of the narrative irrespectively of the particular purpose of any narrative.

Bibliography

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