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Narrative

The key term *narrative* has appeared in analyses of myths, legends, life histories, conversational analysis, as an exemplar of discourse, as a pragmatic entity, and as a tool of political rhetoric. For anthropologists, and linguistic anthropologists in particular, narrative has often meant a form of oral literature, but its contemporary use has included a written form, divulged by speakers who provide tokens of their culture through speech and by interpreters of those tokens.

In its most basic usage, narrative is a genre that can be created or elicited. The type of narrative is defined by the roles of the narrators and listeners. Narratives can be personal: they can be autobiographical. Narratives can be fictional or non-fictional. They can be traditional folktales that include mythic or fantastic elements, as well as other types of traditional tales that include "real" elements. Depending on the narrator's interpretation of the genre, one can find, for example, disembodied narratives, first-person narratives, contextualized narratives, and romantic and particularistic narratives. Narratives depend on an audience and, for an appropriate response, require a variety of techniques that at times indicate implicit or explicit evidence of the narrator's preconceptions and aims. They also represent some kind of interaction, which results in the concomitant use of a variety of verbal and non-verbal communicative modes. Themes for these narratives are culturally determined.

Different types of narratives may display different types of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexical properties. Linguistic repertoires utilize different combinations of these grammatical properties to suit the function of the narratives.

There may be specific linguistic forms that transform simple narratives into more elaborate ones, and the retellings result in a revelation of what are obligatory and optional narrative elements.

Narratives tend to have core structural features such as an introduction or preamble, permission to speak, overview, main body of narration, including

Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9(1–2):167–169.

divisions into episodes, conclusions, and codas. And although there may be distinctions in the structure deriving from the skill of the narrator, the distribution of rhetorical devices, or grammatical resources, we may say that these are part of the universal characterization of narratives.

In much contemporary anthropological writing, narrative involves ethnography and the latter's definition. The greatest conflict in the use of the appropriated term *narrative* occurs in ethnography because postmodern literary critics judge ethnographic writing as lacking analysis. These critics have trouble seeing how the recounting of the story that is central to the ethnography is simultaneously the anthropological product and project. For them, narrative must have an analytic point. It must be self-reflexive.

So how can we explain the link between the use of narrative by anthropologists as well as by practitioners of other disciplines? One way is by acknowledging the issue of the ownership of the narrative, thereby offering a way of dealing with the appropriations of the term *narrative* by literature and by anthropology.

For any given "narrative" or "well-known story," different versions may exist, some of which may be more valued. In the telling and retelling of narratives, the narrator claims his or her distinctive style of narrative authority as well as the strategy for narration. Counter-narratives are created. That narratives have a life and/or function beyond their simple essence or creation has led to further discussion of narratives as tokens of the discourse of the dominated, discourses that are often in narrative form and that are an aspect of contemporary ethnographic narrative.

In response to the general loss of confidence in the truth-value of representations by social scientists, anthropologists have increasingly turned to narrative analysis. By making stories out of fieldwork data, anthropologists avail themselves of a unique way of making the facts comprehensible. Narrative order links anthropological and literary narratives. And it is precisely the order and style of their narratives and texts that suggest a narrative future. This projected future is articulated in their narratives in the retelling of past stories and the creation of the narrative present. But it is also structurally suggested in the overt temporal dimension that the narrative imposes on its narrator, its listeners (and implied audience), its stories. For if narration is the linking of events and elements in a construction of meaning, that linking is equally a spatial and temporal ordering of those elements or events. The narrative designates and systematizes.

Furthermore, narratives do not contain within them a measure for their truth-value. A narrative gets truth value from being conscious of the conditions of its production, and being cognizant of, and able to learn something from, its own evolution.

Narrative remains deeply problematic, and different disciplines continue to argue its meaning at the same time as they utilize the term. Historians over the last twenty years have debated the value of narrative historiography over non-narrative approaches. Ethnographers are now confronted with similar value judgments between narrative and non-narrative approaches to writing about the individuals, societies, or cultures they study. And literary critics have developed a rather sophisticated understanding of how

data—utterances, actions events, and happenings—are incorporated into structures of meaning and are then transformed into narrative form.

(See also *genre, grammar, poetry, style, truth, voice*)

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