

Guoqiang Qiao and Gerald Prince

Narratology as a Discipline

An Interview with Gerald Prince

Gerald Prince: Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania; Chair, French Section; Undergraduate Chair, French Section. He is the author of several books, including *Métaphysique et technique dans l'œuvre romanesque de Sartre*, *A Grammar of Stories*, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, *Narrative as Theme*, and *Guide du roman de langue française (1901-1950)* as well as many articles on narrative theory and on modern French literature. Professor Prince is the General Editor of the “Stages” series for the University of Nebraska Press as well as a member of the editorial or advisory board of over a dozen journals (including *Narrative*, *Style*, *Diacritics*, *French Review* and *Roman 20/50*). He is currently working on the second volume of his *Guide du roman de langue française (1951-2000)*, regularly teaches courses on narrative poetics and on modern French fiction (from Proust and Gide to Sartre and Camus; from Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet to Ernaux and Houellebecq), and has recently directed dissertations on visual representations in the postmodern French novel, on the reproductive body in contemporary fiction, on the writings of children of collaborators, and on Jean-Philippe Toussaint.

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Qiao: Professor Gerald Prince, very nice to meet you at the 3rd International Conference on Narratology in Changsha, China 2011. I feel quite honored to be the Chinese translator of your *Dictionary of Narratology*. I know that your *Dictionary of Narratology* was well received in American and European countries when it was published. I believe that Chinese students of narratology will also like it very much.

Prince: I am delighted to have been part of the 3rd International Conference on Narratology in China. It was a real pleasure to be among so many members of my narratological tribe and the very number of participants was an eloquent sign of the dynamism of narratology and of the interest it evokes throughout the world. I am also delighted and honored that my *Dictionary of Narratology* was translated into Chinese by a skilled and experienced narratologist.

Qiao: I understand that the compilation of a dictionary is a pretty hard job. Most dictionaries are the product of collaboration but yours is done all by yourself. Quite amazing, isn't it? It must have taken you years of reading piles and piles of books. May I say that you are basically a professor of modern French literature? So why are you interested in narratology and why did you decide to compile a dictionary of narratology?

Prince: Writing a dictionary, even a modestly sized one, does take time. But it can also be a lot of fun. For the past twenty years, I have also been engaged in writing a kind of dictionary of the twentieth-century French novel. The first volume—*Guide du roman de langue française (1901-1950)*—was published a few years ago and I hope that the second volume will be published by 2020. In all, I plan to have characterized and discussed more than one thousand novels. As you pointed out, I am a professor of modern French literature. That is the area I know best and what has always most interested me in it is not the history of literary works, or their functions, or their meanings, but their form. As a graduate student, I enjoyed reading Jean-Paul Sartre and my first book was a study of the links between his narrative techniques and his world vision. Whence my interest in narratology. Given that narratological terminology was very varied—sometimes I felt that there were as many terms for one narratological notion as there were narratologists—I thought that a dictionary might be useful.

Qiao: I worked as Leverhulme visiting professor at the University of Leicester, U. K. this spring and planned to give a lecture on a narratological issue; (un)fortunately, my English colleague advised me not to do it. He believed that few students would like narratology, because for them narratology is functional. What is your comment on this 'incident'? Have you ever met this kind of reaction in America?

Prince: I never quite met this kind of response in the United States. Still, after the vogue of our discipline in the 60s and 70s, narratology did go out of fashion. It did experience a kind of eclipse. But, after a few years, it experienced a rebirth and, for the past couple of decades, it has proven remarkably dynamic and it has become, like its object of study, transcultural and international. There are thriving narratological societies in France, in Germany, in Switzerland, in the United States, in China, and there are narratologists even in England.

Qiao: Professor John Pier gave a very interesting talk on classical and postclassical narratology, reflecting the origin of classical and postclassical narratology. I notice that you didn't comment on this in your dictionary or even mention the terms "classical narratology" and "postclassical narratology". Perhaps you could explain why?

Prince: Postclassical narratology began to make a mark as early as the 1980s but the category and the distinction classical/postclassical were explicitly discussed for the first time in 1997, in a *PMLA* article by David Herman entitled “Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology.” Postclassical narratology was still not quite well established by the time the second edition of my dictionary was ready for publication. When it acquired mainstream status a few years later, I wrote a couple of papers on the subject: one in French—“Narratologie classique et narratologie post-classique”—which came out in *Vox Poetica* (2006) and then one in English, “Classical and/or Post-Classical Narratology,” which appeared in *L’Esprit Créateur*.

Qiao: What do you think of Professor James Phelan’s talk on the character part of the narrative communication? The question I asked him at the conference is about the summary of his talk. He said: “once we ask ‘why characters are not part of the narrative communication model,’ we end up with a radically different model, one that is far more flexible than Chatman’s and thus far more adequate to the myriad ways in which narrative communication works. But even as the model contains this *flexibility*, it is based on the firm principle that narrative communication is ultimately about a specific somebody, an *implied author*, using whatever resources he finds appropriate to achieve his purposes in telling his tale to somebody else, an *actual audience*” (Italics mine). What do you think of this summary? Do you think that Phelan might end up with a myriad of models?

Prince: James Phelan’s paper, too, was very interesting. I think that his reworking of Chatman’s narrative communication model is not necessarily more flexible than Chatman’s but more precise and more “complete.” There is no doubt that characters and their words, thoughts, actions, etc. play an important role in narrative communication and that this role should be taken into account. I even think that characters function as narrators and narratees much more often than they are usually given credit for. Chatman characterized a general “situation” (his term). Phelan is interested in characterizing something like a reading experience. One problem that he began to address in his talk and that he will surely continue to explore is the level of specificity of this reading experience.

Qiao: Phelan also mentioned the “implied author.” What do you think of his remarks on that figure?

Prince: As you know, the figure of the “implied author” has proven very influential but continues to be problematic and even controversial. Phelan seemed to use the term in one of Wayne Booth’s original acceptations: the implied author is the real author’s “second self,” the persona the real author adopts in a particular text. For me, the implied author is an inferred author:

whatever its ties with the real author may be, the implied author is a figure (re)constructed by real readers, real receivers, on the basis of the text.

Qiao: I agree with you there. But back to my earlier question: Do you think Phelan made a jump when he mentioned “an actual audience”?

Prince: He seems to be making a kind of jump when he speaks of an implied author telling his tale to an actual audience. Metalepses aside, I prefer to think that the lines of communication established in and through a narrative go from real (actual) author to real (actual) audience, implied author to implied audience, narrator to narratee, and character to character.

Qiao: So many questions about Phelan’s speech! I hope he won’t mind my asking them “behind his back.” Now let’s come back to your dictionary. Since “narrative” is one of the most important terms in narratology, I believe you must have given it quite a lot of thinking. I notice that you defined the term “narrative” differently in the two versions of your dictionary, namely, you defined the term “narrative” in your first version as “the *recounting* (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or *fictitious* events ...” while in your second version as “the *representation* (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or *fictive* events....” (Italics mine) My question is about why you made these changes, why you used different words to define the same term, such as “recounting” and “representation” or “fictitious” and “fictive.”

Prince: There have been, as you know, different definitions of narrative. For instance, some theorists and researchers define narratives as *verbal* productions recounting (narrating) one or more events while others define narratives as any kind of representation of events (including non-verbal ones relying on still or moving pictures, for example, on gestures, or on a combination thereof). In the first version of my dictionary, I favored the first, more restrictive definition; but I gradually came to favor the second, more expansive, definition and therefore adopted it for the second version. As for *fictitious* and *fictive*, they are synonymous and I probably switched from *fictitious* to *fictive* simply because the latter was shorter.

Qiao: Another question on the term “narrative”. It is pretty “new” in English. I think it was first used some time in the 16th century. But Chinese scholars used a similar term as early as the Tan Dynasty, i.e., around the 9th century, denoting something a bit different—referring more to historical writings. I wonder if there are any scholars you know who have ever made a comparative study of the term or, rather, the notion of narrative.

Prince: I don’t really know of any systematic and sustained comparative study of the notion. It would be fascinating and very welcome.

Qiao: Nowadays, quite a few people would like to regard narratology as an “independent” discipline. What is your opinion about that? Do you think narratology has become a kind of systematic or complete body of knowledge?

Prince: I think that narratology is an independent discipline though one can trace its origins to a number of scientific and scholarly fields: literary studies, folklore, linguistics, anthropology ... Narratology is a theory of narrative which studies what all and only possible narratives (verbal and non-verbal, fictive and non-fictive, extant or not) have in common as well as what allows them to differ from one another *qua* narratives and which aims to characterize the narratively pertinent set of rules governing narrative production and processing. While it draws on many disciplines to achieve its ambitions, while it is enriched by these disciplines, and while it enriches them, it transcends them all. It has certainly become an autonomous body of knowledge.

Qiao: Could you say something about the future of narratological studies in America? What do you expect from narratological studies in China? Could you give us some advice on narratological studies?

Prince: I think that the future of narratological studies in America is very bright. There are many talented students of narrative in the United States and the International Society for the Study of Narrative Annual Conference, for instance, attracts hundreds of them. Judging by the attendance at the 3rd International Conference on Narratology in Changsha, the conversations I had with some of the participants, the papers (in English!) I had the opportunity to hear, and the work of scholars like Shen Dan or like yourself, the future of narratological studies in China seems equally promising to me. Like narratologists everywhere, Chinese narratologists should continue to explore the nature of narrative, the necessary and sufficient conditions for narrativity. They should continue to examine and revise or refine narratological features and categories, narratological concepts and devices, so as to enable more accurate descriptions of narratives and their functioning. They should investigate the links between narrative and cognition as well as emotion. And, along with studying the “what” and the “how” of narrative, they should study the “why” and, in particular, the way narrative and its diversification fit within evolutionary theory. Finally, perhaps Chinese narratologists could study the Chinese tradition of inquiry about and commentary on narrative. Their results would enrich us all.

Qiao: It's a pity that I haven't got and haven't read your books *Narrative as Theme* and *A Grammar of Stories*. The titles are very interesting. Would you please say a few words about them? Is *Narrative as Theme* a book concerning thematic studies about narrative? What is *A Grammar of Stories* about? Is it something similar to Propp's morphological study?

Prince: Narrative as Theme does, indeed, concern thematics. It examines the notion of theme. More particularly, it focuses on narrative itself as a theme and as a privileged theme of various narratives. It illustrates various structurations, various elaborations, of the theme of narrative by discussing canonical French narratives from the seventeenth century to the present. As for *A Grammar of Stories*, it is certainly inspired by Propp but it is very different from his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Noting that many people have the same intuitions—or have internalized the same rules—about the nature of stories, I proposed to build a generative-transformational grammar describing these rules or capable of yielding the same results. Though this grammar had many weaknesses, which, of course, I would rather not discuss and which led me to modify some of its features (for example, in one of the chapters of my *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* and in a couple of later papers), it did manage to achieve a number of objectives: assigning a structural description to stories, for instance, pointing to their hierarchical nature, specifying various relations between some of their constituent elements, and showing how stories with different information content can have the same structure whereas stories with the same information content can have different structures.

Qiao: I notice that, in your book *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, you defined the term “narratology” as the study of that form and functioning. And you said that “although the term is relatively new, the discipline is not”. I understand that narratology as a discipline is not new, but I wonder why you characterized the term as new.

Prince: Oh! simply because at the time I was writing the book, which appeared in 1982, the term “narratology” was not more than ten or twelve years old. As you know, it was in 1969 that Tzvetan Todorov coined the term (in French) and defined it, in his study of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (*Grammaire du Décaméron*), as “the science of narrative.” But there had been sustained engagement with the systematic study of narrative well before the term was invented: among the Russian Formalists, say, or with Henry James and his descendants. In the Western tradition, such engagement even goes back to Plato and, especially, Aristotle.

Qiao: You wrote a whole chapter in your book to formulate a “narrative grammar,” a formal model accounting for those features of narrative which allow us to characterize its possible manifestations. Could one say that what you did is more deductive than inductive in terms of the grammar of narrative? Perhaps you could comment on the inductive and deductive methods in narrative study?

Prince: I think that one way of doing narratology or, more generally, of engaging in similar scientific endeavors, is first to arrive at generalizations or hypotheses about a particular entity (narrative, for instance), generalizations based on ob-

serving and studying various examples of this entity, and then to deduce other pertinent principles allowed by these generalizations. In other words, I think that one way of proceeding is to use induction and then deduction. In my *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (and in my earlier *Grammar of Stories* as well) I presented a definition of narrative arrived at by induction and then I attempted, through deduction, to construct a grammar satisfying the definition and (some of) its implications.

Qiao: The questions I asked above are a bit discursive. Perhaps we can we can “get down to details”? I read an essay of yours entitled “On a Postcolonial Narratology.” The issues you discussed in this essay are very interesting and I would like to ask you some questions about it.

Prince: I will enjoy them, I’m sure. And I will also enjoy trying to answer them.

Qiao: At the beginning of your essay you refer to Michel Mathieu-Colas, who says that the boundaries of narratology have evoked a lot of discussion, and you write that “no consensus has obtained and [that] in recent years, there has been an increasingly frequent recourse to modified and ‘hyphenated’ expressions (structuralist narratology, postclassical narratology, postmodern narratology, socionarratology, psychonarratology) or to the adoption of a plural (as in ‘narratologies’).” Do you think that, at the end of the day, there might be no boundaries at all for narratology? One day there is structuralist narratology, the next day postmodern narratology, and the day after ...

Prince: It is possible, of course. Many things are possible. But, though there are no narratological boundaries that are set once and for all (who knows what the future holds and how the field will evolve), I believe that there will be at least some narratological boundaries for some time to come.

Qiao: I understand that the above-mentioned “modified and ‘hyphenated’ expressions” do not pertain to verbal fiction and nonfiction only, but also to other forms of “narrative”, such as film, drama, sculpture, music, etc.? What do you think of these expansions? Can we regard them as extensions of so-called classical narratology or are we dealing with more “independent” narratologies? These questions are closely associated with another one. You are very optimistic when you say at the end of your essay that “the future of narratology lies in the future too and in a number of endeavors that narratologists should continue to pursue or that they ought to undertake” and you even call for “a thousand narratologies [to] bloom!” I do appreciate your open-mindedness, but I also worry that this proliferation might go to extremes and undermine the discipline itself (we have agreed that narratology is an independent discipline).

Prince: Like David Herman himself, I think that these modified and hyphenated narratologies are basically extensions of so-called classical narratology. Re-

member that the latter not only undertook significant explorations of areas different from verbal fiction and nonfiction (I am thinking of the work of Seymour Chatman on film, Thomas Pavel on drama, or Mieke Bal on painting) but also was inspired by many different disciplines. As for my writing “Let a thousand narratologies bloom!” you know that this phrase is a kind of parodic rewriting of “Let a thousand flowers bloom!” (which is itself based on Chairman Mao Zedong’s call for “a hundred flowers to blossom!”). Like you, I sometimes marvel (O.K.! I sometimes worry) about the multiplication of narratologies. I think that, whatever their more immediate goals may be, all of the new modified or hyphenated narratologies (cognitive narratology, postcolonial narratology, animal narratology) should be integrable into a comprehensive, coherent, and systematic narratology accounting for all and only narratives. They should be attentive to the general and the particular, the universal and the singular, the global and the local, “grammar” as well as “style.”

Qiao: Often, when we talk about the expansion of narratology, we refer to the expansion of its domain rather than something else. But I think that you don’t confine yourself to matters of domain, since you regard narratology as a “task” and as a discipline with empirical dimensions. In other words, might one say that you take the basic discoveries and conclusions of narratology to be “tools” applicable in criticism or even in “realistic” practice?

Prince: Yes, I believe that these discoveries and conclusions make up a useful tool kit for the exploration, in literature and in life, of specific (narrative) texts (in the broadest sense of the term “text”). Narratology can help to characterize the distinctiveness of any narrative text, to compare any two (or more) sets of narratives, to set up narrative classes according to narratively relevant features, to illuminate certain reactions to texts, and to establish or support various interpretive conclusions. Besides, by illuminating narrative, which is a singularly human way of *making* sense, narratology illuminates human beings themselves.

Qiao: Before I ask questions about narrativehood, narrativeness, and narrativity or about narratological criteria, corpora, and contexts, etc., etc., I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to you for having very kindly sent me by mail photocopies of some of your essays. They reached me just in time. I note that the essay entitled “Narrativehood, Narrativeness, Narrativity and Narratability” was published in 2008, so that it probably represents your recent views about some narratological issues. Let’s begin with the definition you offered in the essay—you say that “an object is a narrative if it is taken to be the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other.” I think your definition is different from some old “prescriptions,” as you point out in the essay. Perhaps you could comment on why you specify that there must be “asynchronous events” or why the “asynchronous events” must not “presuppose or imply each other”?

Prince: There have been, as you say, many definitions of narrative and I must have contributed at least half of them! I insisted on asynchronous events to indicate that something like “John ate, Mary read, and Jane played,” where the events do not seem to be asynchronous, is more like a description than like a narrative. And I said that at least two events should not presuppose or imply each other to indicate that something like “She raised one arm after the other,” which implies “She raised one arm and then she raised the other,” is more like a simple action description.

Qiao: You believe that your definition has many virtues because it distinguishes between narratives and the mere representation of an event or activity, between narratives and the mere description of a process or state of affairs, between narratives and so-called antinarratives, etc.

Prince: Yes, it seems to me that these kinds of distinction are important to make when one is trying to characterize the specificity of one’s object of study and, by extension, the boundaries of one’s discipline. According to the definition, narrative is not quite equivalent to mere event description. Similarly, narrative is logically coherent whereas antinarrative—which looks very much like narrative—is not.

Qiao: In your discussion of narrativity, narrativehood, and narrativeness, you mention that they are affected by “quantitative factors” and “qualitative factors” and you say that “qualitative factors more or less significantly foreground the narrative identity of a given text [...]” Could you perhaps give a couple of examples of such factors?

Prince: Some qualitative factors consist in explicit evaluative comments on the significance or interest of the situations and events depicted, comments like “I have a great story to tell you” or “This battle was stupendous” or “These actions were really fascinating.” Other factors pertain to such aspects of event representation as the positiveness of the events depicted, since narratives are representations of events and not of their mere possibility or of their negation. After all, narratives live in certainty: this happened and then that; this happened because of that; this happened and it was linked to that. Or else the qualitative factors may have to do with the discreteness of asynchronous events, since the more such discreteness obtains, the more asynchronism is emphasized. For example, think of “She ate and then she went to bed” as opposed to “She went to bed after eating,” or “She had a million dollars and then she lost it” as opposed to “She lost the million dollars she had.”

Qiao: You believe that your discussion of the notions of narrativehood, narrativeness, narrativity, and narratability can not only address basic questions regarding the character, form, and functioning of narratives, but can also generate many other questions worth exploring, such as the nature, weight, and in-

teraction of the factors affecting narrativity. Have you done any work exploring the interaction of the factors affecting narrativity? Or, rather, can you give some advice on how to do the exploration?

Prince: I haven't done any such work. I would require the help of psychologists or psychonarratologists and much more. I imagine that one could compare the reactions of a number of receivers to narratives featuring, say, narrativity factor x and narrativity factor y with their reactions to narratives featuring factor x only. Or perhaps one could ask a number of receivers to rank narratives featuring factor x, narratives featuring factor y, and narratives featuring factor z in terms of degree of narrativity. But I really wouldn't know how to begin.

Qiao: Thank you very much for this candid answer. In your essay "On Narratology: Criteria, Corpus, Context" (1995), you discuss Susan Sniader Lanser's work and her interesting arguments in favor of a feminist narratology. I agree with Lanser that sex and gender are important issues but I also agree with Nilli Diengott, who argued, against Lanser, that "gender is not a *differentia specifica* of narrative." I wonder whether it is necessary to establish a sex- or gender-conscious narratology, since narratology is "a theory of narrative *qua* narrative." Also, do you believe that incorporating/integrating feminism into narratology or vice versa leads to the "positive transformation" of both? I think you already discussed those issues in your essay, but perhaps you wouldn't mind revisiting or even developing some of your arguments now.

Prince: Like you and like Nilli Diengott, I don't believe that gender is a *differentia specifica* of narrative. Any more than race, ethnicity, class, or religion are. But, like the latter categories, gender is an important one and it no doubt affects narrative. Moreover, through its focus on gender matters, feminist narratology has increased our knowledge of narrative. I am thinking of the work of Lanser herself on narrative voice and person, of Robyn Warhol's work on engaging and distancing narrators, of Alison Case's work on gender and mimetic authority, and so on and so forth. I myself was influenced by feminist narratology in sketching a postcolonial narratology: just as feminist narratology looks at narrative through a feminist lens, the postcolonial narratology I characterized wears postcolonial glasses to look at narrative and it inflects narratology through its focus on matters commonly associated with the postcolonial (hybridity, for instance, diversity, fragmentation).

Qiao: I agree with what you say at the end of your essay, namely that "narratology can and must be cognizant of context." How did you mean the word "context" to be understood? And could you also elaborate on the following sentence: "there remains a significant distance between the exploration of contextual features to understand what is 'properly narrative' or to construct a model in which the pragmatic dimension is not forgotten and the kind of 'expansive' narrative poetics that Lanser, for instance, calls for"?

Prince: I mean context in the usual sense of the word. Narratology can and must be cognizant of the set of conditions obtaining where and when narratives are produced and processed. That set is indefinitely large, of course, as underlined by Lanser's call for feminist narratology to "study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political." Fortunately, I think that certain aspects of the context of narrative production and processing are narratologically more relevant than others. For example, they make some objects more readily viewable or processable as narrative(s). Consider a text like "Jane was very rich and then she developed a passion for poker and then she lost all her money" as a response to "Tell us a story about her" or as a response to "Give me an English sentence made up of three conjoined sentences." Similarly, spatiotemporal contextual factors make some narratives more or less tellable. "Thomas Jefferson died on the 4th of July and John Adams died a few hours later" functions differently in 1826 America and in 2011 Australia. In general, I think that an adequate model of narrative must include not only a syntactico-semantic component accounting for all and only narratives but also a pragmatic component specifying the (cognitive, communicational, and representational) contextual factors which affect their production and processing.

Qiao: I have asked you so many questions! Thank you very much indeed for your kindness in accepting to do this interview and taking time to answer my questions. I look forward to seeing you again in the near future.

Prince: I look forward to it also. It was a great pleasure.

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