

TELLING STORIES

A THEORETICAL
ANALYSIS OF
NARRATIVE FICTION

Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires

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Telling Stories

A theoretical analysis of
narrative fiction

STEVEN COHAN AND LINDA M. SHIRES

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Theorizing language

This book introduces a theoretical framework for studying narrative fiction. A *narrative* recounts a story, a series of events in a temporal sequence. Narratives require close study because stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives. Our culture depends upon numerous types of narrative: novels, short stories, films, television shows, myths, anecdotes, songs, music videos, comics, paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies, and news accounts. All tell a story. This definition of narrative provides the central premise of our book: the events making up a story are only available to us through a telling.

Today narratives tend to be in prose, although that has not always been the case by any means. Homer's epics, for example, are poetic narratives, and so are Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Harry Chapin's song "Taxi": each tells a story in verse. The term "narrative" is often taken to exclude poetry simply because many poems are lyrics. Akin to song, a lyric is a monologue about feeling or a state of consciousness. Narratives give expression to feelings, but within the framework of a story and its telling. Whereas the lyric can be read as a private utterance, narrative must be taken as a public utterance; telling a story about characters' emotions mediates private experience to make it public. In this respect, narrative resembles drama but with one important difference: a play presents an action – Hamlet's duel with Laertes, say – directly,

and a narrative does so indirectly, through the words which recount or describe the action. That narrative recounts and drama enacts persuades some critics to propose a strict definition of narrative as a purely verbal medium. Other critics, ourselves included, believe that the term "narrative" applies to the visual medium of storytelling as well. In a film, for instance, the camera recounts – because it records – events no less than a novel does. In both cases, the story is mediated by its telling – its medium of communication – so that the two are inseparable.

We can arrive at a working definition of narrative easily enough. The term *fiction*, on the other hand, poses much more of a problem. In its most common usage "fiction" means "not true." The typical disclaimer in films, which is also implicit in novels, that "any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental," opposes fiction to fact and, thus, to truth or non-fiction. According to this view, the terms "fiction" and "non-fiction" designate two contrasting sets of expectations about language use: non-fictional language re-presents reality in a transcription, whereas fictional language represents it in a facsimile. Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* takes place in London, a real place in Britain, but is called a "novel," so one assumes as a matter of course that the book's language does not refer to anybody who actually lived or tell a story that actually happened. By contrast, when reading a biography of Charles Dickens or a history of London in the nineteenth century, one assumes just the opposite, that in this work of non-fiction language accurately recounts events as they happened.¹

The seemingly obvious distinction between fiction and non-fiction is never quite so clear-cut. A few years ago, for example, the *Washington Post* ran a feature story about drug abuse by children. This story recounted the experience of one child in particular; following an accepted procedure in such types of stories, the author in the beginning of the article noted that she had changed the name of this child to protect his identity, and readers did not take the story to be any less factual. After this article won the Pulitzer Prize, it was discovered that the story's central figure was a composite portrait; the fictional name for the child did not refer to a real person after all. The writer was fired from the *Post* and the Pulitzer Prize committee rescinded the award, charging that the author had misrepresented the

article. That disclosure changed the way the story was read. Once its status altered from being a case study to a composite – and thus fictional – portrait, so did its linguistic claim of being a re-presentation or transcription of an actual situation as opposed to being a representation or facsimile of one.

Like narrative, then, the term “fiction” also directs our attention to a story’s medium of telling: language. Far from being a special or exceptional use of language, fiction, we propose, more accurately indicates how words mean than is normally thought. The relation between language and meaning, between words and what they refer to, is a highly complex one. To start explaining this complexity, we are going to look first at a type of language that does not rely on words at all and so does not immediately raise questions about referentiality: the language of driving. This example can help reorient the way we think about language; it can guide us to conceive of language as a powerful *system* of meaning-making. Then we shall look at some uses of language drawn from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to show how verbal language works as a system similar to driving. With these examples we are laying the ground for discussing a theory of language and the production of meaning.

The language of driving uses shapes and colors more than words, but it is just as much of a language as English or Chinese. It consists of signs, colors, and shapes which have no material referent (and, in this respect, are fictive). Yet they communicate understandable meanings all the same. Such signs regulate traffic, describe conditions of the road, and so forth – as symbols. On traffic lights, for example, red specifically means “stop,” green specifically means “go,” and each color bears this symbolic value only within the context of the driving system.

Red and green signify these meanings on traffic lights because of *convention*. Conventions are cultural agreements about the relation of a sign and its meaning. In the traffic system the structuring of meaning through color has become so familiar that it is easy to forget “red” means the idea of stop but is not the same as that idea: red is a stand-in for the idea. As a symbol of “stop,” furthermore, red is as arbitrary as the conventional practice of driving on the right-hand side of the road in

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America as opposed to driving on the left-hand side in Britain. In other contexts, red can just as easily mean "blood" or "communism" or "Valentine's Day" or, for that matter, "cherry flavor." If our culture's conventions for traffic "grammar" differed, red could signify "go" just as easily as it now signifies "stop," and it could be placed at the bottom of traffic lights and green at the top. The conventionalized location of the two colors places them in an oppositional relation to each other: red means "stop" as the opposite of green, which means "go," and vice versa.

Syracuse, New York, offers an excellent example of the procedure by which the system of driving gives the colors red and green their distinct value as signs. An area of the city called Tipperary Hill with a large population of Irish descent has a traffic light which reverses the conventional locations of red and green colors (red is at the bottom and green at the top). Once this traffic light matched every other light in the city. But the neighborhood population kept shooting out the red light because it was over the green one. In this instance, the color symbolism of driving crossed that of political representation. Green traditionally signifies Ireland, while red signifies – on maps, say, or on army uniforms – Britain and the British Empire. Every time the city replaced the broken red light, someone in the neighborhood smashed it out again, until finally the city yielded and placed the green light at the top, the red light at the bottom. To a stranger in this neighborhood, that traffic light could pose a problem of interpretation because it does not follow the conventional alignment of color and location. In order to read the signal, one has to observe how other drivers read it, to see whether they follow the conventional meaning of the color alone or the color's unconventional location. In either case, interpretation is a public act; it involves knowing the system of conventions *and* negotiating the meaning of the sign with other drivers.

Red and green lights work as meaningful signs for the system of driving much as the words of any language do. Like driving, a verbal language such as English is also composed of signs that need interpretation. English does not use colors as its fundamental units of meaning, of course; it uses words, which do not function as consistently as colors do for driving

and which therefore involve much more intricate acts of interpretation. But, like colors, words mean something only through convention and only as part of a communal system.

This last statement has considerable implications for understanding the relation between meaning and language, which we can begin to illustrate by looking at some examples of that relation's breaking down. Since its publication in 1865 Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has fascinated people interested in language. The world of Wonderland, as typified by such odd characters as the Cheshire Cat and such odd situations as the Mad Hatter's tea party, seems strange, childlike, and unfamiliar to adult logic. But the real strangeness arises from the use of language in Wonderland. Alice's adventures are, in fact, *linguistic* misadventures. Not taking the linguistic system for granted, *Alice* offers vivid examples of the breaking down of language as a system of communication.

In Wonderland Alice has enormous difficulties understanding the creatures she meets, and they have just as much difficulty understanding her, because words seem to slip and slide into each other. For example, the Mouse begins to tell her "a long and a sad tale" (Carroll 1960: 35), but she hears "a long tail" and wonders why and how a *tail* can be sad. Further, when the Mouse contradicts something she has said by exclaiming, "I had *not*," Alice, thinking he has a "knot" in his tail, offers to undo it. Her gracious offer, however, actually offends the Mouse, who walks away saying, "You insult me by talking such nonsense!" (36). Her conversation with the mysterious Cheshire Cat also results in misunderstanding. The Cat first vanishes but then returns to ask Alice if she meant "fig" or "pig" when describing the transformation of the Duchess's child (64). Here the Cheshire Cat draws attention to a problem with words that compounds the earlier one. "Tail" and "tale" sound alike but are spelled differently. "Fig" and "pig," on the other hand, almost sound the same, just as they are almost spelled the same; what distinguishes one sound and spelling from the other is the initial consonant.

Similar words like "tail" and "tale," "not" and "knot," and even "fig" and "pig," mean something only so long as the form of one word can be distinguished from that of the other. The

phonetic slippages which occur in these examples blur that difference to result in Alice's misunderstanding. Such slippage is not limited only to a word's phonetic form, since in Wonderland a word's meaning can even be transformed into its own negation. At Alice's trial before the Queen of Hearts, the King asks her what she knows. "Nothing," Alice replies, and the King instructs the jury, "That's very important." The White Rabbit, however, interrupts: "*Unimportant*, your Majesty means, of course." The King reverses his previous statement but is now unable to distinguish one word from the other: "'*Unimportant*, of course, I meant,' the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, 'important – unimportant – important – unimportant – important –' as if he were trying which word sounded best" (109). Not surprisingly, the jury is now very confused; some write down "important," some "unimportant." But no one seems more confused than the King himself. After reversing his original statement, he can no longer distinguish one word from the other; the meaning of either word depends upon an opposition between them which has disappeared. The presence of the negative prefix "un-" in one word and its absence in the other indicates this opposition, as the White Rabbit indirectly points out when he accents the prefix. In refusing to recognize the significance of that prefix – in making its importance unimportant, so to speak – the King collapses the crucial difference between the two words which allows them each to mean. And, once that happens, "important" ceases to exist as a concept of value for the King because it has been erased from his language.

These instances of misunderstanding all exemplify how an isolated word gains or loses meaning. Alice's misadventures with language also show how a word's meaning depends upon its placement in a sequence alongside other words. Slowly tumbling down the rabbit hole, she asks herself, "Do cats eat bats?" and "Do bats eat cats?" (19). For all the similarity of these questions, each asks something different. Depending upon the syntactic placement of the word "cats" or "bats" as the subject and not the object of her question, Alice could be asking about the eating habits of cats or about those of bats. Her confusion occurs because she cannot recognize this difference; since she "couldn't answer either question, it didn't matter

much which way she put it" (19). The order does matter, of course, if she wants an answer.

The blurring of syntactic difference in Alice's question exposes as well the arbitrary relation between words and meanings. "Cat" and "bat" each refer to different types of animals. It makes all the difference in the world to the Mouse, for instance, that Alice is speaking of her cat, an animal he hates, and not her bat. All the same, even though cats and bats do not at all look alike, the words designating them resemble each other in sound and spelling to the point that Alice can exchange one for the other in her question.

The arbitrary attachment of words and referents becomes even more of an issue when the Cheshire Cat explains to Alice why he's mad:

"To begin with," said the Cat, "a dog's not mad. You grant that?"

"I suppose so," said Alice.

"Well, then," the Cat went on, "you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now *I* growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad."

"*I* call it purring, not growling," said Alice.

"Call it what you like," said the Cat. (63-4)

This conversation between Alice and the Cat makes the relation between a word and its referent very problematic. What the Cat hears as "growling" is what Alice thinks of as "purring." "Call it what you like," the Cat responds. Although, as far as the Cat is concerned, the relation between a word and its referent is simply an arbitrary one, it does not necessarily follow that the word used is irrelevant. "Growling" and "purring" may refer to the same phenomenon – the same noise made by a cat – yet each word determines a different meaning for the noise. Calling it "purring" makes it appear as "normal" behavior for the animal, whereas calling it "growling" makes it appear as "mad" behavior.

In either case, to make sense of the noise, Alice and the Cat use a word that places it in a comparative framework. The Cat's word "growling" establishes a similarity between dogs and cats in order to point out the difference: if "growling" describes what

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a dog and the Cheshire Cat both do, then what is "normal" behavior for one animal is a sign of "madness" in the other. Alice's word "purring," on the other hand, places the noise in another kind of comparative framework, that of a dog's and cat's emotional states. "Purring," a word associated with cats, establishes the difference between the two animals in order to point out an underlying similarity: a dog wags its tail when happy and a cat purrs, just as a dog growls when angry and a cat switches its tail.

If not placed in such a comparative framework, a structure made possible by language, then the noise to which Alice and the Cat are both referring would simply remain a meaningless phenomenon, something indefinite because inarticulated. The Cat says, "Call it what you like," as if all possible words for this noise were the same, even a matter of personal choice. Yet call *what* what you like? Without a word, what does "it" refer to in the Cat's sentence? Language enables us, no less than it does Alice and the Cat, to distinguish the meaning of one sound from that of another. It is language which provides the structural framework that enables the noise to be conceived and thus perceived not as noise but as a distinct sound, growling *or* purring, and a meaningful sound at that, a sign of the Cat's madness or normality.

In still another instance of misunderstanding, Alice and the Mad Hatter talk to each other about time, but they each use the word "time" to refer to something different.

Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."

"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting *it*. It's *him*."

"I don't know what you mean," said Alice.

"Of course you don't!" the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. "I dare say you never even spoke to Time!"

"Perhaps not," Alice cautiously replied; "but I know I have to beat time when I learn music."

"Ah! That accounts for it," said the Hatter. "He won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock." (69)

Because Alice and the Hatter each take literally a different figurative expression of time, neither understands what the other one means. To Alice time is a concept, so she uses the pronoun “it,” whereas to the Hatter time is a person; he not only uses a different pronoun – the personal “he” – but also shows how that pronoun creates an entirely different conception of time.

Wonderland as a whole appears strange to Alice because the users of language there challenge the logic of common sense, which assumes that cats purr and that time is not a person. Alice thinks that sense is “common” because it transcends language; but, as both the Hatter and the Cheshire Cat demonstrate, sense is inseparable from language. What Alice calls the Cat’s behavior determines its meaning and, moreover, assigns it a normative value. Likewise, her concept of time is not described by language but produced by it. For all her mastery of familiar linguistic patterns, the slipperiness of words like “tail” and “tale,” “fig” and “pig,” “important” and “unimportant,” “cat” and “bat,” “growl” and “purr” illustrate various ways in which words mean something only in relation to each other.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss professor of linguistics at the turn of this century, proposed a theory of language which, as developed further by a number of scholars in the last four decades, addresses the linguistic problems we have been raising in our discussion of *Alice*. Saussure outlined his theory of language in a series of lectures at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911; these were eventually written down by his students and published as *Course in General Linguistics* (1915). Saussure argued that language is a system of signs. “The linguistic sign,” he explained, “unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image” (Saussure 1966: 66). Placing special emphasis on the *sign* as the basic element of meaning and on *structures of differentiation* as the fundamental principle by which signs mean, Saussure explained that language is a system which structures relations between signs, and that these relations are what enable the articulation of a meaning. “Semiology,” he proposed, “would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them” (16). Towards this end, he