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## Narrativity : Individual and Collective Aspects of Storytelling

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Göran Sonesson & David Dunér

## Introduction

### The Cognitive Semiotics of Cultural Evolution

Until only a few centuries ago, most people, scientists and scholars alike, took it for granted that human beings were special, and in no way to be compared to (other) animals, and if they were asked about why they had this conviction, they most probably would have pointed to the Bible or some other holy script. Early Enlightenment (dated by Jonathan Israel (2001) to the middle of the seventeenth century) sustained, and Charles Darwin finally brought home, the idea that the culture and history of human beings are very much connected to the evolution of all animal species on earth. This certitude, once recognised, has prompted a series of endeavours, the most recent of which is Mainstream Evolutionary Psychology (also known as Socio-biology), to reduce the history of humanity to just another ethogram of an animal species staking out its life in its more or less unvarying niche. Nevertheless, such undertakings do not obviate the necessity of finding out why human beings alone have created a culture that is inherited over numerous generations, and thus a history. Viewed from an extra-terrestrial position, the observation that human history has occasioned numerous, and far-reaching, changes of habitat may not appear too remarkable. However, already the fact that human beings have been able to write down the history of all these changes (and, before that was possible, no doubt reflected on it and, by oral means, gave these reflections in heritage to later generations) should be sufficient to make us special, even from such an otherworldly perspective.

Perhaps nobody has been more acutely aware of the contradiction between the evolutionary point of view, and that of the common sense world, than Darwin, but, unlike his contemporary Herbert Spencer, and unlike latter-day evolutionary psychology, he never found an easy way out. If, as we have suggested above, human behaviour, including human cultural production, is different from that of other animals (which is not to deny that there are intermediary cases, notably in case of the apes) in being a kind of

perception. Accordingly, it might be fruitful to give greater attention to those biological/perceptual as well as evolutionary preconditions that appear to be significant in this context. It is far from unreasonable to suppose that hominines have developed some kind of visual input system (among other perceptual systems) that, to a considerable extent, functions independently of conventionalised frameworks and which has emerged because of its survival value. Iconic or mimetic pictures are visual artefacts that have been adapted and developed – along with other cognitive abilities and due to changing environmental circumstances – in order to correspond to our perceptual presuppositions.

### 5.6. Artification and Mimesis on the Background of the Sign Function

In concluding this chapter, I thus argue that any attempt to understand art and aesthetics should not only take into account historical and aesthetic narratives as suggested by e.g. Carroll. The story has to begin at a much earlier stage, including the evolutionary and phylogenetic development of the hominine species. And within this development, our species' deep-rooted concern with, and our highly evolved capacity for engaging in mimetic activities of various kinds, such as gesture/bodily mimesis and the subsequent acquisition of speech, language, and other symbolic means of communication, has played a crucial role. Mimesis, so it seems, indeed constitutes as one of the key foundations of art-making (probably together with other aspects such as “artification” attempts), and the production of iconic images is clearly one of the earliest manifestations of this general predisposition contributing to the hominine evolution. Ancient theories of art (or image production) with their stress on mimesis should certainly not be easily dismissed.

Anna Cabak Rédei & Michael Ranta

## Chapter Six

### Narrativity: Individual and Collective Aspects of Storytelling

Within the humanities, narratology has been a standing research area during the last 50 years, notably among literary analysts, linguists, and semioticians. Most of the time, narration has been associated with verbal discourses, whether written or oral, where, briefly put, events or situations are represented as temporally ordered. Moreover, within cognitive science, narrative-like structures have figured prominently in two ways. Probably inspired by the notion of memory schema propounded by Bartlett (1995 [1932]), early cognitive science introduced notions such as frames, scripts, or event schemas (e.g. Schank & Abelson 1977; Mandler 1984). According to this view, we acquire through previous experiences a large amount of culturally based stereotypes of events and scenes (along with idiosyncratic variations), either due to direct familiarity with instances of events, or due to our acquaintance with written, oral, and of course pictorial descriptions of them (e.g. religious or mythological tales). More recently, it has been claimed that narratives play a key role in human evolution and child development. Donald (1991) sees narrativity as prominent during the penultimate “mythic” stage of human cognitive development, and as a key factor in the evolution of culture and language. Nelson (2003, 2007) and Zlatev (2013), in their discussions concerning language acquisition and narrative, present the latter as a significant factor in child development. Moreover, it has been argued that narratives play a substantial role as to the establishment of human personal identity and self-consciousness (cf. Bruner 1990; Neisser & Fivush 1994; Fireman et al. 2003) as well as in the constitution of group identities (cf. Bartlett 1932; Schank 1995; Pennebaker et al. 1997; Hutto 2008, 2009).

There are many reasons for taking narratives into account in the study of human cognitive specificity, notably as it emerges in ontogeny, phylogeny, and history. In this chapter, we outline and discuss some proposals having to do with the role of narratives from an individual human, as well as from

an intersubjective cultural, perspective, pointing to the crucial importance of narrativity within hominine cultural evolution. More specifically, we argue that these two perspectives are mutually interdependent, although they, on the other hand, also diverge. The latter fact, to which we intend to point as well, is sometimes not sufficiently emphasised among narratologists. By studying a particularity of narratives, namely their endings, and the importance of these for the perceiver's cognitive perception of the whole, we attempt to shed some light on these divergences.

### 6.1. On Narrativity

Unquestionably, narrative is a cross-cultural phenomenon, as well as something occurring basically across all individuals within cultures. In spite of all cultural variations as to subject matters, the capacity and practice of storytelling seems to be prevalent even among the most isolated societies. Moreover, it has sometimes even been argued that we have an innate disposition to narrativise events, to impose narrative-like meaning on people's actions, revealed already in early childhood, especially after language acquisition has occurred (Bruner 1990). From the point of view of content, moreover, many successful stories seem to be concerned with more or less universal human preoccupations, such as sex, danger, life and death, deception, violence, power, wealth, and so on (cf. Schank 1979). Many stories, in various kinds of semiotic modalities (whether oral, written, or pictorial), appear to touch upon human existential interests, fears, and hopes, and thereby contribute to giving structure to the instability and vulnerability of human existence. They tell us something about the world (or some of its aspects) and about possible or recommended ways of interaction with, or manipulation of, the world. Thus storytelling is an important means of creating ontological, existential, or social orders as well as reminding us of existent ones (of which we may not always be consciously aware), thereby playing a part in their reproduction (see Ranta 2013).

However, the exact nature of what constitutes narratives has been, and still is, a much-debated issue within contemporary research. A minimal condition for something being a narrative has, for example, been claimed to be "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (Prince

1982, p. 4). No particular requirement is imposed on the expression side, opening up for the possibility of narrative being enacted in media other than language, and even in such media which do not permit any (clear) temporal division, such as static pictorial representations (see Sonesson 1997). Quite frequently, narratives have been delineated from non-narrative texts (e.g. arguments, explanations, or chronicles) by a set of defining criteria, such as temporal sequentiality, employment, eventfulness, causality or causal agency, and particularity (rather than generality). Since all of these features are not necessarily found together, narrativity may be regarded as a prototype-based category, i.e. centering on clear-cut "stories" experienced as reference points, though as a whole constituting a category with fuzzy boundaries. Narratives, one could argue, may be intertwined with, or at least include, non-narrative texts; narratives may be manifested in various genres or media, and meaning bearers of various kinds may be more or less narrative.

The psychologist Jerome Bruner, whose concern with narrative and cognitive processing will be discussed later on, has also stressed the inherent sequentiality of narratives: "a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. [...] Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole – its plot or fabula" (Bruner 1990, p. 43). Another approach, suggested by the narratologist Monika Fludernik, has also emphasised the relationship between "experientiality" and narrativity. Rather than focusing upon formal properties such as event structures or plots, Fludernik defines narratives as representations of possible worlds in a linguistic and/or visual medium, involving (acting, thinking, and feeling) "protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions" (Fludernik 2009, p. 6; cf. also Fludernik 1996, pp. 28–30); these representations, in turn, are ideally experienced as emotionally and experientially significant by the recipient. Thus, Fludernik suggests that an appeal to the prototypical existential interests and concerns of human beings demarcates genuine narratives from simple narrative reports of event sequences.

In summary, then, what kinds of functions or needs might narratives fulfil? As various scholars have suggested (see, for example, Ryan 2005, p. 345; Korthals Altes 2005), narratives may function as:

- Fundamental means for organising human experience and for constructing models of reality;
- Means for creating, consolidating, and transmitting cultural traditions, and building the values and beliefs that define cultural identities;
- Vehicles of dominant ideologies and instruments of power, designed to influence recipients' attitudes and behaviour;
- Instruments of individual or collective self-creation;
- Repositories of practical knowledge and means for experiential learning, providing knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of particulars;
- Moulds for shaping, modifying, and preserving individual and collective memories;
- Sources of education and entertainment;
- Scenarios for thought experiments;
- Means for fostering empathy and understanding others.

After these introductory remarks, let us have a closer look at how narratives might have an impact on, and indeed be, crucial for establishing and consolidating individual and collective memories. A significant denominator for various kinds of narratives at all levels seems indeed to be the ability to represent temporal structures. Insights from a phenomenological perspective regarding our sociocultural context (i.e. the cultural Lifeworld, our daily life and the world we take for granted and live in – physically, practically, and together with others), tell us that it is vital to us in every single moment to be able to anticipate the next moment (“protentionally” in Husserl’s terms), as well as to presuppose or at least imagine the continuation of our existence (“retentionally” in Husserl’s terms; see Chapter 1 in this volume). To believe that “the world” will end, or radically change, within a near future would certainly influence the role of narratives in our society.

The child is from the start incorporated within the Lifeworld, with its specificities and generalities when it comes to communication, action schemas, and emotional responses (facial expressions being particularly important in this connection). The Lifeworld constitutes the frame within which we form our memories, as individuals and as members of a sociocultural environment. Thus, our autobiographical memories are intertwined with collective memories as they are mediated in forms of stories, history books, films, literature, and so forth. In this respect, narratives make up specifically

important forms of communication, both in the development of the individual and within a sociocultural framework. In the following section, we consider the role of narrative for the developmental history of individuals within their own lifetime.

## 6.2. Individual Aspects of Narrativity

Katherine Nelson’s approach to the development of narratives in children, and eventually in culture, is particularly fruitful in this context, because it suggests that narrativity emerges from the child’s experience early on within the specific human Lifeworld:

We have good evidence that children can understand and represent the sequence of familiar repeated events, which involves several related actions by 1 year of age. They understand the scripts of their own worlds, in terms of general event representation, and will protest if an action is omitted [...]. By 3 years of age they can verbalize a number of familiar scripts in reliable sequence [...]. These event representations derived from personal experience then may form the basis for the *canonical events* from which narratives are made (Nelson 2003b, p. 25).

Besides the ability to represent events evolving in sequences, the child’s growing awareness of being a self (around 32 months; Nelson 2003b, p. 32) is important to the emergence of stories of an autobiographical or self-experienced nature. Thus, the growing awareness of a self implies a growing awareness of *contrast* (Nelson 2003b, p. 32), i.e. the awareness that there are *others*, which in turn have stories of their own.

In order to focus on philosophical aspects of narrativity important for deepening our discussion, we may also turn to Paul Ricœur (1990, 1992), who likewise points to the importance of contrast for the emergence of a sense of identity. However, the contrast involved is of another kind, dealing with closures and continuities. Thus, in congruence with Ricœur, who underlines the phenomena of “distinction” or “rupture” between one frame of mind and another in cognition, we seem to put basic dialogic prerequisites into play as soon as we start to communicate with others. Once a communicative distinction is made, either between the self and the other, from the infant’s perspective, or in an adult’s existential reflections pondering continuity and ending, a dialogic rupture is inevitable, but so is an objective of transgressing, or surmounting, this distinction.

In the latter, “existential” case, otherness may be physically of an “absolute” nature, in the sense of being out of reach for personal experience. A concrete example of this would be that the other does not exist in an absolute sense, in a here and now; it is the other that one could not even in principle physically encounter. This could be a historical, non-existent person, for instance, or a hero from a novel. An other of that kind might only be possible to talk about, and not with, if we hereby mean the possibility to be engaged in a dialogue, a communicative act with a sender and a receiver and, moreover, with these two parts being able to change position in the act. In the former case, the other is within the range of personal experience, interaction, and *dialogue*, that is, being possible to get into contact with, physically (in an extended sense here, also including social media, phone calls, and the like), and who is even appreciated to a certain degree. This distinction, of being in or out of range of communication in dialogue, has an analogous function in cultural semiotics, where a distinction is made between two types of “Otherness” (see Chapter 1 in this volume): (i) *Alter*, with whom we may have a dialogue, and, (ii) *Alius*, with whom, or *what*, we cannot have a dialogue (Sonesson 2000; Cabak Rédei 2007). In the latter case, an *Alius* may – in an almost ontological sense (because the respondent is no longer alive) or in a communicational sense – be estimated as unreachable. Thus, *Alius* may take the shape of a completely ignored or detested other living being, or a thing, like a doll, a flower, a car, but still be subject to a pseudo-dialogue. But in a strict sense, it would be a monologue, and only an imaginary dialogue.

Moreover, theories of cultural semiotics might be integrated with the concept of Lifeworld as defined in phenomenology (see Schütz 1964), focusing on the interaction between persons in a here and now (a “we” experience; see Chapter 1 in this volume). As we have seen, in a present ongoing dialogic moment the “*Ego*” and the “*Alter*” may change positions (as both may oscillate between the position of speaker and listener), and this is impossible in the relation between the author and the hero in a fictional text, for instance (cf. Sonesson 2000). This fact is clarified by Alfred Schütz (1964) when he discusses the Lifeworld and the status of the predecessor (a historical person), enclosed in verbal texts in the same way as the hero in a novel, for instance (cf. Bakhtin 1986). “We may only get information about the predecessor via sources such as, for instance, books, or other textual source

materials, consequently the predecessor cannot change position with the ‘*Ego*’ (here the reader subject)” in a communicative act (Cabak Rédei 2007, p. 56). Thus, from the perspective of the “I,” the other which is enclosed in texts, or otherwise impossible to get in *direct* contact with for various reasons, or being from a culture that is being perceived as not worthy of getting in contact with, is an *Alius*. Thus, the *Alius*, in contrast to the *Alter*, is the other that the “I” cannot, or does not wish to, have a direct contact with.

In his account of identity, Ricœur (1990, 1992) stresses the importance of a closure for the sense of unity of life, this closure being given by narratives, in particular, if we understand narratives as (internal or external) representations of event sequences, which are causally intertwined in some way. Thus, a narrative about the life of a protagonist (fictional or factual) needs to have some sort of closure in order to be fully comprehended by the reader. Moreover, the ending in itself determines the understanding of the whole story in some important aspects that will be dealt with below. In that sense the human way of narrating life stories consists of two elements in interplay: cognitive and cultural, the latter including literary conventions and canonical ways of narrating for instance.

The psychologist and Nobel laureate (for his work on behavioural economics) Daniel Kahneman expresses something similar to Ricœur, claiming that there are two selves: (i) the experiencing self (present) and (ii) the remembering self (maintaining the story of the individual’s life).<sup>1</sup> The latter is a “storyteller,” that is: “Our memory tells us stories” (Kahneman 2010). And a very critical part of the story is how it ends, he continues, referring to empirical evidence provided by some studies he conducted on different perceptions and memories of patients’ experiences of their colonoscopy (i.e. the endoscopic examination of the large bowel and the distal part of the small bowel with a camera). For instance, it turned out that if the pain occurred at the end of the colonoscopy, this experience influenced the patient’s memory to a higher degree than if the pain had occurred earlier on. Thus, in the former case the memory gave rise to a “worse story,” because the experience of the pain was more recent in memory. Notwithstanding the

1 This is clearly reminiscent of the classical distinction between “I” and “me,” first suggested by William James and elaborated by George Herbert Mead (cf. Aboulafia 2012).

fundamental experiential difference between an act of colonoscopy and an act of listening to a story, we will further on point to an analogy concerning early or late interruptions of a narrative, when readers took part in short biographical accounts of other persons.

At this point we might ask: what are the connections between narratives and life? And in what way may narratives help us in the process of understanding ourselves and our embeddedness in the world? With reference to Ricœur and Kahneman, one way to approach the topic would be to focus on the ending of the narrative for comprehending the content as a whole, for both the author and the reader. We may suppose that precisely the ending of a story is indeed fruitful for an inquiry aiming at scrutinising *differences* between life and narratives. How is it possible to represent the continuous flow of life in a narrative, which is necessarily constructed and limited? These questions become perhaps most obvious when it comes to, for instance, (auto-)biographies; how does one close the narrative of a self in the midst of the ongoing time flow that constitutes life?

Another reason for focusing upon (self-)narratives, in order to elucidate the links between written narratives and life, might be their connections to *memory* (Nelson 2003). According to Kahneman (2010), the main task of memory is to be a “storyteller.” And in Schank and Abelson’s (1995, p. 28) words, which – although perhaps somewhat strongly put – might have a kernel of truth: “Storytelling is not something we just happen to do, it is something we virtually have to do, if we want to remember anything at all.” There are stories that “memory delivers for us” and those “that we make up” (Kahneman 2010). Both are partly subject to the same criteria of storytelling, such as for instance, sequencing and contrast (“theory of mind,” differentiation between self and others). And both are more or less subject to (re-)construction.

In fact, following Kahneman, the problem of time comes to the fore not in experiencing, as time is not thematised in the experiencing moment, but in remembering, because “[w]e actually don’t choose between experiences, we choose between memories of experiences” (Kahneman 2010). To clarify: in the experiencing moment, we perceive outer stimuli through our senses, and these are, according to cognitive psychology (cf. Sternberg 2006), influenced by our attention; a drastic example of this is formulated in the so called “weapon-focus effect” (Loftus, Loftus & Messo 1987) or

more generally expressed in the notion of an “affective attitude” (cf. Bruner 1990). The basic idea of the former is that an eyewitness/a perceiver of a crime will mainly remember the weapon, at the expense of other details present in the scene (and subsequently leading to memory impairments for those details): “Weapon focus refers to the concentration of some witness’s attention on a weapon – the barrel of a gun or the blade of a knife – during a crime, leaving less attention available for viewing other items” (Loftus, Loftus & Messo 1987, p. 55). In a more general sense, we may also speak of the human tendency to attend to what is relevant in a specific situation, or for a problem-solving task. Schütz was especially interested in the problem of the mind’s selectivity. According to Schütz, an agent is not indiscriminately oriented to the world; he selectively “organizes the world [...] in strata of major or minor relevance” (Schütz 1970, p. 227). Any perception itself involves the problem of choice of elements that may become subject to “interpretations.” They are driven by local estimates, guesses, and by an individual’s rather specific “hopes” or “expectations,” which may or may not be fulfilled, that the current heading of her attention and action will not lead her to failures or dead ends.

Returning to the topic of narratology, we may also formulate the idea as follows: due to the fact that we cannot narrate the present moment while being in and experiencing it, the “present” must always be (re)constructed reflectively in memory, in short-term memory (generally up to 20 seconds; Passer & Smith 2007, p. 237) or long-term memory (large pieces of information for up to a life time; Passer & Smith 2007, p. 239) – the principle is the same. As to perception in general, we might argue that our memories indeed play a crucial role, as we need to match them with what we perceive in order to make sense of the world. Narratives are involved in what is called the top-down processing of sensory inputs (for example, when watching a film), making use of experiences made in a sociocultural context in order to comprehend what is perceived, in contrast to the bottom-up processing of “lower-order multimodal physical/sensory input” (Cohen 2013, p. 119). Thus, there may be a match between these two types of processes, and the optimal match steers consciousness (Cohen 2013, p. 119).

Kahneman carries on the discussion in claiming that not only is the fundamental task of memory to narrate, but narrativity also starts straightaway: “we don’t only tell stories when we set out to tell stories. Our memory



tells us stories, that is, what we get to keep from experiences is a story" (Kahneman 2010). Put in another way, what we are left with after any experience is the memory of it. And to make sense of memories we need to have a narrative (coherent) format for them, a format that Kahneman, for instance, claims is embedded in remembering itself. Nelson also points to the relations between memory and storytelling and the influence of affections on this mechanism. An "epistemic value" may be imputed to memory as it keeps track of new and old events, forming a "platform for actions" in the present as well as in the future, not least in order to provide for future needs (Nelson 2003a, p. 126). In fact, Kahneman says something similar when stating that we think about the future "as anticipated memories." Nelson writes:

Although this claim has been contested, it seems probable that memory for temporally sequenced events or activities – a characteristic of episodic memory – may have evolved as functional for certain kinds of knowledge: how to build a nest, for example, or how to locate and dig out termites (Nelson 2003a, p. 126).

According to this view, one function of long-term memory, we might add, seems to include the idea of a specific goal-directedness in learning. Narrativity also becomes relevant here, as a function of memory, since the structure of episodic memory has similarities with narratives. Episodic memory is the memory of "*personal experiences: when, where, and what happened in the episodes of our lives*" (Passer & Smith 2007, p. 246), and where the emotions associated with them, are stored. And this seems to share some important properties with narratives: temporal sequentiality, also stressed by Kahneman, defining a story as something characterised by "changes, significant moments and ending," the latter being indeed "very, very important," sometimes even altering the narrative structure as a whole (Kahneman 2010).

Another way of underlining the importance of narratives is put forward by Jerome Bruner, in his influential work *Acts of Meaning* (1990), where he states that one of the most global and important dialogic forms of human communication is narrative: "Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression" (Bruner 1990, p. 77). For Nelson, however, narrative is not an "inherent mode of thought." In her view, "narrative form is a cultural invention, one that

may be adopted by individuals in organising their own autobiographical memories" (Nelson 2003, p. 129).

Be that as it may, memory seen as a platform for actions and perception of events is in its turn subject to affects. In this conjunction Bruner (1990, p. 58) refers to the psychologist Frederick Bartlett who

insists in *Remembering* that what is most characteristic of "memory schemata" as he conceives them is that they are under control of an affective "attitude." Indeed, he remarks that any "conflicting tendencies" likely to disrupt individual poise or to menace social life are likely to destabilize memory organization as well. It is as if unity of affect (in contrast to "conflict") is a condition for economical schematization of memory.

To the discussion of the affective attitude and its influence on the schematic memory underlying any narrative (as a construct, or as an inherent feature), we might add some insights formulated by the Russian philosopher of language, literary scholar, and cultural semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, who writes about the biographical literary genre, based on empirical studies of a number of important works: "The conception of life (idea of life) that underlines a biographical novel is determined either by life's results (works, services, deeds, feats) or by the category of happiness/unhappiness (with all of its variations)" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 17).

Important in this connection is to keep in mind that Bakhtin did not make any distinction between autobiographical and biographical texts, which makes his conclusions interesting in connection with Paul Rozin's and Jennifer Stella's (2009) findings in their study of cognition, perception, and biographical storytelling, to which we will turn below. The importance of some sort of "result" or of an affective attitude (happiness/unhappiness) is very much in line with their results from experimental psychology.

Rozin and Stella (2009) set up an experiment in order to study how posthumous events change the way readers first conceive of a biographical account. They focused their study around questions dealing with, for example, altered understandings of happiness and unhappiness respectively of the life they just read about. The results of the experiment showed that when given a posthumous ending, the "meaning" of the previous ending which might have been favourable is reversed to the opposite in concordance with the posthumous version. Thus, Rozin and Stella show the importance of the (posthumous) ending for the reader's conception of the protagonist's

life, especially for the evaluation of “goodness of life” (in comparison with “happiness/unhappiness” of life). As Rozin and Stella put it:

posthumous events affected judgments of the goodness of lives, and even the judgment of the happiness of lives. The effect was always in the direction of moving the total life evaluation in the valence direction of the posthumous event. The mean change for posthumous effect size for happiness/unhappiness is about one half of the change for goodness of life (Rozin & Stella 2009, p. 275).

To sum up: the closure of a narrative, in our case a life story, seems to be decisive for the reader when making sense of the protagonist’s experience, as for instance the “goodness of life.” In that sense, the narrative seems to share some important features with some functions of long-term memory: to (re)construct, give form and closure (coherence) to experiences made by an individual. On a cultural level, narratives may function as cultural tools, and as such give additional formats to individual stories, determined not so much by episodic memories, but by what the social psychologist and cultural semiotician James J. Wertsch calls “collective memories” (Wertsch 2002). In that sense, individual and cultural narratives interact, but diverge as well, the latter being foremost a result of episodic memory tied to personal experiences.

### 6.3. Collective Aspects of Narrativity

After having considered narrative’s significance from an individual perspective and its relation to memory, let us now address its possible bearing from a sociocultural and, to be more specific, from a cultural evolutionary point of view. It seems hardly controversial to regard narrative as a human species-specific capacity, involving a number of advanced cognitive mechanisms, such as causal reasoning, language (and other semiotic resources), intersubjectivity, temporal structuring, and an awareness of self and others, among other things. And if this seemingly universal capacity might have had an adaptive function, we should ask to which selection pressures it could have been a response.

As we have seen, narrative skills develop early and spontaneously in children, though they emerge within a sociocultural context, already developing during parent/mother-infant interaction, where children successively “grow into” narratives provided by the family and, by extension, a

larger community. Due to the development of social communicative skills, narrative frameworks are established which contribute to the child’s self-awareness, understanding of the world, and his/her role within it. Subsequently, an expansion into large-scale narratives occurs, involving general cultural, explanatory frameworks and goal-settings within larger public spheres (cf. Nelson 2003b, pp. 19–22).

Cognitive psychologists, such as Jerome Bruner (1990, 1991) and Roger Schank (1995, 1999) already mentioned, have argued that narratives are indeed crucial and essential cognitive instruments or tools, which sustain or enhance intelligence itself. According to Schank, intelligence involves to a considerable extent the storage and retrieval of scripts, that is, generalised sets of expectations about what will happen in well-understood situations. Furthermore, such memory structures may occur on various levels of abstraction. On lower levels there will be scenes – general structures that describe how and when a particular set of actions takes place, such as a restaurant scene, classroom scene or surgery scene. Each scene defines a setting, a goal, and actions in attempting to reach a specific goal. Scenes can point to scripts that provide the details concerning stereotyped actions that take place within a scene. They may then be organised into wider “memory organization packages” (MOPs) which are directed towards the achievement of a major goal; in the cases referred to above, getting a meal, learning from a lecture, and receiving treatment for an illness (Schank 1999, pp. 123–136). On a still higher level, there are “thematic organization packages” (TOPs), which allow us to connect events-in-scenes to abstract principles or new contexts.

Now, it is hardly controversial to suspect that social identities of cultures (and sub-cultures) are based to a considerable extent upon the sharing of such low- and high-level narrative structures – and, as we might say, of more or less specific constituents of “world views” (see below), such as distinctions between self and others, temporal and spatial conceptions, and so forth. As a matter of fact, as Schank has claimed, although the sharing of certain stories actually defines a (sub-)culture, their members are often unaware of their existence; they are rather tacitly taken for granted and appear in highly abbreviated forms, e.g. as “skeleton stories,” proverbs, or as “gists.”

But let us now return to the question whether and in which way(s) narrative might have been evolutionary advantageous and which task(s) it may have accomplished in our hunting-and-gathering past. Evolutionary epistemology, as a term coined by Donald Campbell (1974), could be described as the approach that addresses questions in the theory of knowledge from an evolutionary point of view. It includes, in part, deploying models and metaphors drawn from evolutionary biology in order to characterise and resolve issues arising in epistemology and conceptual change. Thus, evolutionary epistemology also attempts to understand how evolution develops by interpreting it through models drawn from our understanding of conceptual transformations and the development of theories, and vice versa, to understand conceptual change in evolutionary terms.

One influential approach to conceptualise various levels of knowledge from an evolutionary perspective has been put forward by Merlin Donald (e.g. in Donald 1991; see also Chapters 1 and 5: Art in this volume). According to Donald (1991), early hominine culture based on mimesis, which evolved about two million years ago, was followed by a slow cultural accumulation of knowledge, presupposing improved communication skills which allowed for better social coordination as well as shared knowledge. In contradistinction to mimicry (the literal attempt to duplicate in action perceived events) or (motoric) imitation (a less literal and more flexible duplication of events with closer attention to their purpose), mimesis involves communicative intentions where an audience is taken into account (see Chapter 2: Mimesis in this volume): "Mimesis is fundamentally different from imitation and mimicry in that it involves the invention of internal representations. When there is an audience to interpret the action, mimesis also serves the purpose of social communication" (Donald 1991, pp. 168–169).

A mimetic culture then made possible the so-called mythic culture (c. 500 ka – present) and the emergence of symbolic language, a further major shift in the human cultural development, accompanied by and enabling a rapid acceleration of cognitive skills. At this point, narrative becomes a crucial factor. The ability to narrate, according to Donald (1991), was a skill that humans acquired during the mythic culture built upon the mimetic skills established earlier.

Narrative skill is the basic driving force behind language use, particularly speech: the ability to describe and define events and objects lies at the heart

of language acquisition. Group narrative skills lead to a collective version of reality; the narrative is almost always public. Thus, "the adaptive pressure driving the expansion of symbolic capacity, the usefulness of symbolic invention, and the value of a high-speed speech mechanism with a huge memory capacity all depend upon the ability of the mind to harness these abilities toward the reconstruction of reality" (Donald 1991, p. 257).

As Donald further claims, a supreme product of narrative would be the construction of myths (religious, historical, social, among others) which consolidate (not least preliterate) societies, regulate behaviour and channel the perception of the world (Donald 1991, p. 258). In general, we might say, narratives have a vital function as to the establishment and consolidation of wider world views (cf., for example, Kearney 1984), such as:

- The awareness and distinction between the Self and the Other (that is, the surrounding environment, other beings, gods – in other words, anything that is "not-self").
- Ways of categorising reality, for example, what should count as "real" versus "unreal" or "natural" versus "supernatural."
- Concepts of causality (the relationship between acts or causes and their [desired] ends or effects).
- Concepts of space and time (e.g. linear/unidirectional or oscillating images of time).

Apart from these basic functions of narrative, we might also add some more pragmatic aspects (cf. also the suggestions listed in Section 6.1). Storytelling is basically a social action (or has emerged from social interaction), which involves a storyteller and a recipient. Human beings seem to enjoy this way of social exchange, almost for its own sake. But certainly narrative may also function as a means of manipulating and deceiving others, in order for the teller(s) to serve his (their) own end(s). As Donald claims, in "conquering a rival society, the first act of the conquerors is to impose the myth on the conquered. And the strongest instinct of the conquered is to resist this pressure; the loss of one's myth involves a profoundly disorientating loss of identity" (Donald 1991, p. 258; see also Scalise Sugiyama 1996; and Chapter 10: Encounters in this volume).

Wertsch (2002), in line with Bakhtin (1986), Ricœur (1990, 1992), Bartlett (1997), and Hutto (2009), underlines that narratives, from an individual

as well as from a sociocultural perspective, organise the past into intelligible units. In doing that, narratives – at the same time – also reduce the past, because narratives are selections and (re-)constructions of a past and as such restricted to the medium used to tell about it, which, most of time, primarily involve verbal means with all its possibilities and limits. Thus, narratives are both referential and, to use a term from Bakhtin, dialogic:

In contrast to the referential function, which concerns the relationship between narratives and the settings, actors, and events they depict, the dialogic function concerns the relationship between one narrative and another. From this perspective, it is essential to recognize that narratives do not exist in isolation and do not serve as neutral cognitive instruments. Instead, they are embedded in concrete discourse characterized by dialogic and rhetorical opposition (Wertsch 2001, p. 59).

From Wertsch's point of view, the double function of narrative creates an equally double function of memory: to give a true image of the past, on one hand, and to give the group a useful narrative around which it can construct an identity on the other hand. Moreover, narrative may be an efficient means for information acquisition and transmission, that creates virtual realities and provides knowledge useful to the pursuit of fitness without the risks and efforts involved in first-hand experience (cf. Scalise Sugiyama 2001). Narratives are efficient renderings of events, i.e. informational storage devices which are remarkably memorable and easy to spread within a community. As pointed out by e.g. Dan Sperber, a story such as "Little Red Riding Hood" is far more complex than a 20-digit number; still, the latter demands considerably more effort to remember (Sperber 1985; see also Scalise Sugiyama 2001). Narratives are constructed in order to transmit complex information chunks, involving glue-like ingredients, we might say, such as (easy comprehensible and memorisable) causal and enabling connections, universal fitness goals and obstacles, commonly known plot-structures, and so forth. Storytelling traditions may comprise domains of information that, from a hominine evolutionary perspective, have had a considerable survival value. As Scalise Sugiyama (2001, p. 229) puts it:

[f]olklore motif indexes (used by folklorists to classify folk tales by their plot contents) employ classification categories that consistently correspond to adaptively relevant domains of information: social relations (e.g. kinship, marriage, sex, social status, plants, geography, weather, and the cosmos...).

Further, to borrow a term introduced by Donald, narratives may be regarded as exograms, that is, "external memory record[s] of ideas" or external symbolic devices linked to the present context of remembering that allow us to extend and enhance our bio-memory systems and significantly augmenting the working memory capacity. Such exograms are, for example, quasi-permanent, exceeding one's life span; they have a virtually unlimited storage capacity; they are crafted; they are easily retrievable and, not least, they may be manifested in various media. The oldest known written story, the Epic of Gilgamesh, dates to the eighteenth century BCE, but of course we may reasonably suspect that there have been long-standing oral traditions of storytelling before, in accordance with Donald's theory. Storytelling did not suddenly "pop up" when written languages were developed. Furthermore, orally told stories would also seem to fulfil some of the requirements for exograms, or at least more generally, for embodiments if they are intersubjectively widespread, well-known, and have a historical continuity or stability (see Sonesson 2007a). But in addition to language and storytelling, successively other forms of symbolic-representational expression evolved, such as cave paintings, Venus figurines, etc., dating back to at least 40 ka (see Chapter 5: Art in this volume). The emergence of language, storytelling, and pictorial representations became probably increasingly interrelated. And we should certainly not easily dismiss the possibility that pictorial representations at an early stage of the hominine evolution were used as at least narrative props or "gists;" in this respect they also might have had adaptive functions and survival values, a full discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

#### 6.4. Narratives as Distributed Cognition

In this chapter, we have accounted for research according to which (verbal and non-verbal) communication seems to start out in the first interactions between the child and the caregiver or/and other significant others. This initial differentiation between self and other/*Alter*, in the infant, develops and matures in the course of life and yet another differentiation of the other emerges, *Alius*, the insight of an absolute other which/who cannot respond (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

Narratives are strong contributing factors to the formation of our identities and memories – the child’s, the adult’s and the group’s. Stories appear also to play a crucial role as cognitive tools or “exograms” for understanding and manipulating the varying environmental conditions which we as humans encounter. As representational units within a wider network of “distributed cognition,” narratives help to structure and coordinate social interaction. In all these respects, then, the impact of narratives on the cultural formation and evolution of the human species should by no means be underestimated, and they also have an impact on how collective “sense making” is formed in socio-cultural contexts, since the latter of course are made up of individuals. In that sense, there is a connection between the individual as formed on the one hand by the context, and on the other participating in forming the very same context he or she is a part of. In cultural semiotics we may define the problem as the “Ego’s” interaction with the “Culture,” both shaping each other. Moreover, the (semiotic) artefacts produced by the “Ego,” in this case narratives, play an important role in a wider network of distributed cognition – they contain memories, stories, worldviews made and produced within the culture they are in “dialogue” with, for any addressee who is interested to take part in a certain culture at a certain moment in the socio-cultural evolution of humans. Thus, narratives viewed as distributed cognition function as generative mechanisms of culture, in time and space.

Andreas Nordlander

## Chapter Seven

### Religion: The Semiotics of the Axial Age

“Religion is more than anything a way of making sense of the world.”

Robert Bellah

What would a theory of religion look like if it took with utmost seriousness the deep evolutionary history of humanity, as well as the cognitive resources with which this history has equipped our species, but without thereby becoming reductionist? This chapter engages such a question in the attempt to understand some of the intriguing features specifically of the religious developments of the so called Axial Age – the formative period of many of the still living world religions, roughly occurring in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE – and how these features are made possible by the unique semiotic skills of human beings.<sup>1</sup>

#### 7.1. An Evolutionary Cognitive-Semiotic Approach to Religion

An unobjectionable definition of “religion” is notoriously difficult to produce, and is for most purposes unuseful. However, we do need a basic idea of what we are talking about when we are talking about religion. Simply to get started, then, I shall draw on Clifford Geertz’s notion of “the Problem of Meaning” (1973, chap. 4) and understand religion as the complex process and result of the unique meaning making skills of human beings – members of the species *Homo sapiens* – both collectively and individually, with respect to questions of ultimate meaning, such as the “why” of existence, the burden of suffering, and the quest for moral order. As such, it is by no means to be understood exclusively as a set of intellectual beliefs about superempirical realities, even though such are often involved; rather, it is an intricate web

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