

The first RRN Conference. Redefinitions of the narrative sequence

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Abstract

This is a brief report of the first conference organized in Fribourg (CH) by the Réseau Romand de Narratologie (RRN). The title of the conference was *Redefinitions of the Sequence in Postclassical Narratology*.

Keywords

Narrative sequence, narrativity, narratology, narrative theory, Réseau Romand de Narratologie

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The first conference organized by the *Réseau Romand de Narratologie* (RRN)¹ has been very interesting in many ways. The convergence of so many great scholars in the same place to discuss about a topic central to all narrative studies has generated a very sparkling debate around many issues and problems.

The choice of narrowing the focus of the discussion on the key concept of «narrative sequence» offered the occasion for a tight confrontation on some issues that inevitably concern every approach to narrative. This one concept was at the heart of the meeting and everybody had to face the tasks of defining it, explaining its role in narrative and evaluating its potentials and limits. We think that this thematic constraint was the catalyst for a clear emergence of the most important differences among the various narrative theories proposed: different epistemological grounds have been highlighted, as well as the assumptions underlying each narrative model and the (dis)agreement on terminology.

At the very beginning of the conference, Gerald Prince clearly pointed out what one of the main and necessary tasks of narratology should be: the characterization of narrative sequences. The central question is: what do all and only narratives have in common? The great amount of literature on the subject and the sparkling discussions at the RRN conference confirm that this is a central and difficult task and that a lot of work still has to be done. The abundance of examples provided by all speakers and the various nature of the narratives taken into consideration is indicative of the growth in complexity of the field during the last decades. Brian Richardson and Mary-Laure Ryan showed that post-modern narratives force us to reconsider the notion of «sequence». «Linear, multi-linear and variable» are the three different forms that a *sjuzhet* may have and we can find *fabulae*

¹ See <http://www.narratologie.ch>.

which are «standard, unended, self-negated, variable and multi-linear» (Richardson). Furthermore, the progression of some hypertext-like stories may be represented as a network, while others display a tree-shape, and others yet are very difficult to represent in a graphic form (Ryan).

The overlapping of terms is very frequent: «sequence» sometimes stands for «sjuzhet», sometimes for «fabula», some other times it has different specifications.² Thus, besides the widening of the range of pertinent phenomena, it was acknowledged by all that a thorough problematization of the concepts is necessary. Quoting many other examples, Eyal Segal tackled the notion of «sequence» in a different way: he focused on the closure/ending distinction and relationship, thus questioning one of the elements of the sequence in particular, the final one, and arguing for a functionalist definition of narrative that could account for the ‘openness’ of some story endings.

A further challenge came from Peter Hühn, whose narrow definition of «event narrative» addresses straightly the problem of what an «event» is and what kind of feature «eventfulness» is. Hühn’s remarks may be considered as regarding the nature of the elements of the narrative sequence, the fundamental properties they should have to be considered part of a narrative (or even to produce «narrativity»), rather than what set of elements is necessary to define narrative or what constitutes a sequence. The so called «non-events» can perfectly be eventful and therefore contribute to the tellability of a narrative; events which are announced in advance or which are awaited for other reasons can play a crucial role even if at last they do not happen. Analogously Alain Boillat and Françoise Revaz showed how an expected event can determine the structure of the sequence: in the comic strip *Little Sammy Sneeze*, «la destruction souvent disproportionnée que l'éternuement occasionne fait office d'élément perturbateur qui garantit la narrativité de l'ensemble».

In considering how to treat events in narrative, some of the participants have underlined the fundamental role of the interpreter. For Emma Kafalenos «functional polyvalence is the main attribute of an event. The event is subject to interpretations that shift according to the content of other events in relation to which it is perceived». Gerald Prince insisted that «narrative sequences are semantic and not semiotic in nature, contrary to signs they are not recognized but apprehended as such». Therefore only considering our relationship to narrative as a pragmatic comprehension we can account for our ability to retrieve implicit information and answer correctly to relevant questions about the meaning of a narrative. On the other hand, according to John Pier «sequence is postulated as a semiotic hypothesis, a diagrammatic icon» in Pierce’s terminology, «sequences have no autonomous existence but exist only by virtue of the network with other aspects of narrative». Apparently, ideas that are very similar may present some problems when they are compared, due to their reference to different theoretical frameworks: Sternberg’s functional approach for Kafalenos, Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory for Prince, and Pierce’s semiotics for Pier. Such diversities may even rest on more serious incompatibilities regarding the epistemological grounds of the referred framework,³ and despite a mutual comprehension of all the terms, the different ways in which

² Cfr. John Pier, *On the Semiotic Parameters of Narrative: A Critique of Story and Discourse*, in T. Kindt, H.-H. Müller (eds.), *What is narratology? Questions and answers regarding the status of a theory*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, New York, pp. 73-98.

³ As Raphaël Baroni pointed out too in his report of the conference; http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport_colloque_RRN2011.pdf.

they are used bring us on a thorny path if they are not clarified before any definition is given.

Presenting his work, Jean Michel Adam stated straightaway that according to him «sequence» is not a concept regarding the «script actionel», the represented content of the narrative, but rather a «complex linguistic structure». Adam moves from the tradition of textual linguistics proposing a discourse analysis of narrative texts, which are conceived as a set of «macro-propositions interactives». Adam's narrow conception of «sequence» is an outstanding example of the problems that arise when using this notion in narrative theory: Raphaël Baroni expressed his disagreement with such limitation to the *sjuzhet* because it would not take into account the dynamics of narrative interest. According to Baroni, textual linguistics aims at attributing to specific discursive elements the communicative functions of narrative, but these cannot be individuated univocally within a text. The «dénouement», for instance, is strictly connected to the «tension narrative» of the text, and it is impossible to ignore how narrative interest is generated and how the reader reacts to how a story (*fabula*) is told. In this occasion, Baroni considered in particular «les virtualités de l'intrigue», claiming that the force of a plot depends on the virtual alternatives to which a narrative gives space and that are «actualisables sous forme d'hypothèses interprétatives».

Along the same line, Meir Sternberg, whose functionalist framework widely influenced Baroni's proposal, noted the frequent failure to distinguish «textual suspense» from «narrative suspense». The former being the «experience of the sequence, not of meaning but of grammatical construction, the fulfilling of the pattern», and the latter being the proper «dynamic of prospection». Sternberg does not privilege one sequence over the other: narrative suspense is a matter of interplay between sequences, this is what gives the special intensity of narrative suspense; two sequences go together interacting and intensifying each other. All considered, despite the diversities among theories, the concept of «sequence» is undoubtedly present in every definition of narrative/narrativity.

Michael Toolan undertook a very thought-provoking speculation, trying to confront some widely popular principles of narratology with a form of representation not usually explored by the discipline: music. Notably, «music may have sequences and events, but is sufficiently removed from semiotic or iconic representation (as in texts and mimes or film) to function with plot, and the plot-reorderings sometimes called anachronies». So, are we willing to treat music as a kind of narrative? «Does music have, in addition to temporal extension and sequence, something akin to 'events'?». Is that specific type of sequence called «plot» a necessary requisite of narrative? Taking music into account in order to test narrative theories might be misleading to some extent, but such operations may also be fruitful in that we are led to set the boundaries of the concepts that we use and their pertinence.

Many are the questions that have been explicitly or implicitly raised during the conference: shall we consider sequence as a linguistic complex or in regard to the representational content of narrative? Shall we use the same criteria (e.g. temporal and causal links) for the definition of different kinds of sequence? Which of the two sequences is necessary for a text to be called a narrative? What is the logical dependency between the two sequences? Many other questions entangle the concepts and the terminology that we

use,⁴ but great efforts are continuously made and some remarkable goals have been achieved. The organizers of the first RRN conference deserve praise for the choice of a fundamental topic and for having offered a great occasion for mutual critics and dialogue.

⁴ For a deeper investigation of some issues discussed in the RRN conference and for a possible rethinking of some questions, see Franco Passalacqua and Federico Piazola, *Continuity and break points. Some aspects in the contemporary debate of narrative theory*, «Enthymema», IV (2011).