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Cognitive Narratology of Politics

A basic and very simple principle of cognitive science concerns three recurring functions of cognitive processes. Whether we are speaking of basic sensory perception, object recognition, or semantic interpretation, our minds commonly do three things to the inputs they are given. First, they select from those inputs; not all incoming information is processed. Second, they segment the stream of information; continuous information is not processed as continuous. Third, they provide structure to the selected and segmented units. Consider visual perception. Visual neurons have receptive fields. For example, some neurons fire maximally for a particular linear orientation. When faced with such a feature of the world, those neurons may be said to select that feature and to segment it, reducing it to a unit of neuronal activity. At the same time that a particular neuron sends activation to visual cortex, it reduces the activation of nearby neurons through ‘lateral inhibition.’ At the end of the perceptual process, this inhibition has the effect of making lines appear sharper, thus giving edges greater salience. This is a form of structuring.

Above the level of sensory neurons, we find similar processes with the operation of, for example, schemas and prototypes in object recognition. Instances would include seeing a figure as a duck or a rabbit, a vase or two people facing one another, and so on (to draw on some famous illustrations of visual ambiguity). In these and other cases, schemas or prototypes orient our selection of perceptual information (already formed through sensory processing, etc.), our segmentation (what part goes with the ears of the rabbit or the bill of the duck), and our structuring of the image.

When we go to still more general or abstract levels, our selection, segmentation, and structuring may operate through larger, more complex and variable structures, prominently metaphors and narratives. Often, the metaphors themselves involve a sort of tacit narrative. For example, as Lakoff discusses, one might use the metaphor of ‘rape’ to characterize a particular series of events. Clearly, this metaphor suggests a sequence of actions undertaken by agents. Though unstated, a brief narrative is implicit in the metaphor. We may therefore include metaphors and more prototypical, fully developed stories together under the shorthand of ‘narrative.’

As the preceding example already suggests, the targets of our minds’ narrative structures (i.e., the topics we are seeking to understand through narrative organization) involve complexes of agents and actions—people doing things. These complexes range from intimate personal relations to broad social and political events. The latter are particularly complex and beyond the control of individual choice.

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Nonetheless, they are shaped by the multiple, interacting understandings of their participants. In other words, participants' ongoing cognitive organization of social and political events orients the development of those events. It follows that an analysis of cognitive processing is a crucial part of the analysis of social and political events. More exactly, it follows that a cognitive analysis of metaphorical and narrative organization is of great importance for understanding such events. That analysis, in its various forms, is the concern of this issue of *Cognitive Semiotics*.

More precisely, we may say that there are three broad areas in which it is valuable to examine the narrative processing of politics. The first and second areas are standard sub-fields of narrative discourse theory: emplotment and narration. To explain this distinction, we need to begin with the more basic division between story world and discourse. The story world is, so to speak, the events themselves. Discourse is how those events are recounted. Discourse, again, has two components. The first is emplotment. This is the selection, segmentation, and structuring of elements from the story world. The second component of discourse is narration. This is the communicative aspect of the narrative: roughly, who is speaking to whom. The third and final area of importance for the narrative processing of politics extends out from narrative proper (thus emplotment and narration) to the real world conditions surrounding the production and reception of narratives. This includes such matters as the nature of communications media and their political economy.

Emplotment is the aspect of narration that most obviously bears on politics, since we organize our understanding of everything from social programs to election campaigns, from scandals to wars, as narratives. Here, some further subdivisions are important. First, we have already distinguished between the micro-narratives of metaphor and the more macro-narrative structures of emplotment proper. This special issue begins at, so to speak, the foundations of the narrative organization of politics with a reprint of George Lakoff's classic essay on metaphors of war. In this essay, Lakoff argues persuasively that our acceptance or rejection war is profoundly affected by the patterns of metaphors we use to think about war. In consequence, as he says, the choice of metaphors made by political leaders can have life or death consequences—and not just metaphorically.

Turning to emplotment proper, we may draw two further, related distinctions. The first is between direct and modeled emplotment. Specifically, we may emplot a particular political situation itself or we may propose a narrative of some other situation as a model – in effect, an elaborated form of metaphor – for the target events. For example, a government official may directly shape a narrative about Saddam Hussein or may tell a story about Hitler and invite listeners to organize world events related to Hussein by reference to the story about Hitler. The second essay in this collection takes up the modeling function of narrative, thus serving as a transition between the analysis of metaphor and the treatment of direct emplotment. Specifically, Richard Gordon considers a film that emplots part of Brazilian history along with some present-day fictional events to create cognitive models for thinking about the abstract issue of

Brazilian national identity. Thus that national identity comes to be organized and understood in relation to particular narratives, used as models.

After Gordon's essay, the collection turns to direct emplotment (an approach already begun in Lakoff's discussion of 'The Fairy Tale of the Just War'). Here, too, it is important to draw a distinction. Direct emplotments may concern narrative structures that are standard and recurrent or relatively specific. Standard and recurrent structures would include, for example, heroic tragi-comedy, with its threat/defense sequence in which the homeland is endangered by an invasion and must protect itself through military force. Relatively specific structures derive from particular authors or even individual works, though they almost certainly have some common features with recurring structures. The third essay in the collection, by Corinne Bancroft, takes up two levels of standard or recurrent structures in the emplotment of illegal migration, particularly across the U.S./Mexico border. First, she considers the cross-cultural threat/defense sequence. Second, she examines the more limited, liberal emplotment of border crossing. In both cases, it is clear that the emplotments have significant consequences for government policies, and therefore human lives.

Per Aage Brandt's essay isolates a more particular emplotment. This is the fascist narrative of Spain's history and imagined future by José Antonio Primo de Rivera. Of course, here as elsewhere, the emplotment is not entirely unique. As Brandt explains, there are connections with the cross-cultural sacrificial tragi-comedy. Moreover, there are recurring features of fascist emplotment. But this narrative prototype takes a particular form in the writings of Primo de Rivera and thus in the policies of the Spanish fascists.

In his focus on a particular author, Brandt's essay serves as a transition between emplotment and narration. Again, narration comprises the communicative components of narrative. These are generally divisible into implied author, narrator, narratee, and implied reader, with the real author and real reader standing just outside the narrative, but giving it a source and result in the real world. In his examination of emplotment in the writings of a single author, Brandt is in effect undertaking an examination of the implied author – an implied author who was apparently not at odds with the real author in this case.

Brandt's essay necessarily suggests how an implied reader is constructed in Spanish fascist writings and how this had an impact on real readers. However, this is not his main concern. The topic leads to the fifth essay. Joseph Darda takes up the issue of readers. Specifically, he considers the increasingly important case of new media and the ways in which the new media situate readers in relation to narratives of political consequence. Outlets such as Facebook place readers in the position of both receivers and transmitters of ideologically consequential narratives. Though Darda does not make this connection (and he may well reject the analogy), the new media in some respects recall the allegorical figure of Rumor, spreading valid and invalid emplotments throughout global communities.

Clearly, Darda's essay serves as a transition as well. It moves us from the world of narration to issues of real world context. While Darda treats the 'mediatization' of narrative (i.e., its embedment in particular media of communication), Hogan turns to the encompassing political economy of storytelling. Hogan argues that economic globalization has consequences for storytelling traditions and the diversity of those traditions in much the same way it has consequences for languages or other aspects of culture. Hogan stresses threats to storytelling diversity in this context: threats that are not only aesthetic, but bear on the ways in which we think about ethics and politics. However, he points out that there are more hopeful possibilities inherent in this situation as well – possibilities that are in part connected with new media.

All the essays in the following pages indicate that the cognitive operation of narrative in politics is theoretically significant and practically consequential. They differ in the aspects of that significance and consequence that they consider. In putting together this collection, we have sought breadth of coverage, treating the major areas in which cognitive narrative theory and political analysis overlap, or should overlap. However, it is clear that these essays only scratch the surface of the complex and extensive interconnection of cognition, narrative, and politics. Our hope is that they help to spur the development of cognitive and narrative political analysis, a form of study that has already made important advances, but remains in its early stages.