Joint Attention, Semiotic Mediation and Literary Narrative

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Abstract   In this paper I discuss the importance for narrative theory of the concept, drawn from developmental psychology, of "joint attention".[1] In the first part, I explain the basic concept and its significance for the emergence of narrative in young children. In the second part I draw out the implications of this genetic approach for our understanding of the nature of narrative signification: where classical narratology is based on a chain of representational and "communicative" dyads (signifier/signified and sender/receiver), joint attention integrates these functions into a triadic semiotic by which the sign *mediates* between three poles: the producer of the sign, the receiver of the sign and the object of their joint attention. In the third part, taking Boccaccio's *Decameron* as an example, I illustrate how this approach to the semiotics of narrative elucidates aspects of literary narrative that are obscured by the classical semiotic. Joint attention offers affordances for quasi-recursive re-contextualization, since the object of joint attention may consist of another act of joint attention: *literary* narrative can create complex joint attentional structures by which the story is "seen" through nested perspectival prisms of embedded narrative and character.

1. Joint Attention and Narrative in Child Development

Joint Attention is an intersubjective mental process involving interaction both with another mind (or with the same mind at another time) and with an object (which itself may be physical, or itself mental and symbolic). First identified and described in the context of developmental psychology (Scaife and Bruner 1975; Bruner 1983; Moore and Dunham 1995),[2] it has also been explored in an evolutionary context (Tomasello 1999) and in contexts of adult interaction (Eilan et al 2005). The basic developmental phenomenon of joint attention, here described by Michael Tomasello, has been widely observed:

> Six-month-old infants interact dyadically with objects, grasping and manipulating them, and they interact dyadically with other people, expressing emotions back and forth in a turn-taking sequence. . . . But at around nine to twelve months of age a new set of behaviors begins to emerge that are . . . triadic in the sense that they involve a coordination of their interactions with objects and people, resulting in a referential triangle of child, adult, and the object or event to which they share attention. (Tomasello 1999: 62)

As an early indicator of the onset of this "Nine Month Revolution", the child will, during joint attentional episodes, alternate its gaze from the object to the parent/carer's eyes, monitoring the attention that the parent/carer is giving to the object (Tomasello 1995: 110-11). Such interactions involve, crucially, a "tuning in" to the intentionality of the adult – in other words, a developing understanding that in contexts of joint attention, intentionality is directed not just to the object, but to the other's intentionality to the object. (As Lev Vygotsky writes: "The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person" (Vygotsky 1978: 30).) It is at this age, and in the context of such joint attentional episodes, that children

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[2] An early formulation of the concept of joint attention was put forward by Heinz Werner and Bernard Kaplan (1963), who use the phrase "primordial sharing situation" for "early forms of interaction which have the character of 'sharing' experiences *with* the other rather than of 'communicating' messages *to* the Other" (Werner and Kaplan 1963: 42).

start using "proto-imperatives" (pointing) and "proto-declaratives" (showing) which

seek to change the other's intention towards the object to one of attention to it, or

towards a particular aspect of it (Tomasello 1995: 110-11; Tomasello 1999: 62).[3]

Joint attention is crucial for the development of language. In the first place it

establishes the basis for *reference*, the initial labelling that is the basis for later

language development (Bruner 1983: 67-88). As Werner and Kaplan write in their

early version of a theory of joint attention:

> Within [the] primordial sharing situation there arises *reference* in its initial,
> nonrepresentational form. . . . the act of reference emerges not as an
> individual act, but as a social one: by exchanging things with the Other, by
> touching things and looking at them with the Other. (Werner and Kaplan
> 1963: 42-3)

At this level, words "point" to things, but the pointing is done not with reference to

the object, but with reference to another person:

> When children hear new language addressed to them . . . they must determine
> not the adult's intention to the object, as many theories of reference assume,
> but rather the adult's intention with respect to their attention. Reference is not
> directed to an object but to a person. (Tomasello 1995: 115)

"The problem of how reference develops," as Bruner writes, "can . . . be restated as

the problem of how people manage and direct each other's attention by linguistic

means" (Bruner 1983: 68).[4]

Two features of the relationship between language and joint attention are of

particular significance for the special and intimate connection that I propose

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[3] For Vygotsky, the *indicative* function of language, by which attention towards the object is regulated, is primary in development, preceding the *symbolic* function by which decontextualized, conceptual "meanings" of words emerge (Wertsch 1985a: 96-9).

[4] There is a congruence between the radically interactional view of language outlined here and "discursive psychology" as it has been developed by Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and others. Underlying this line of research is a performative, enactivist and interactional view of language (e.g. narrative discourse) as "*situated*, *action-oriented*, and *constructed*" (Potter and Edwards 2001: 104): even "factual" reports, according to this view, are "constructions, versions, laden with theory and interpretations, pragmatically formulated within conversational contexts" (Edwards and Potter 1992: 49).

between narrative and joint attention: its *perspectivalism* and its *dynamic context*. In the first place, language does not merely refer to an object, but implies, with increasing specificity and sophistication, perspectives or "construals" of the object. As Michael Tomasello observes: "The perspectival nature of linguistic symbols multiplies indefinitely the specificity with which they may be used to manipulate the attention of others" (Tomasello 1999: 107). Tomasello here cites Ronald Langacker's "cognitive grammar": according to Langacker, grammatical constructions are "imagic in character", they always imply a construal of the situation in that "[w]hen we use a particular construction [. .] we thereby select a particular image to structure the conceived situation for communicative purposes" (Langacker 1991: 12).[5] This structuring of the perceptual field by the perspectives afforded by language is, in the language of Vygotsky, "internalized" by the child. This can be seen even in the basic act of labelling by which a child singles out a specific object from within an entire situation. This act "overcom[es] the natural structure of the sensory field and form[s] new (artificially introduced and dynamic) structural centers": as a result, "the child begins to perceive the world not only through his eyes but also through his speech . . . the immediacy of "natural" perception is supplanted by a complex mediated process; [. .] speech becomes an essential part of the child's cognitive development" (Vygotsky 1978: 32).

As Vygotsky alludes to above in the context of the formation of new "structural centers", the restructuring of thought and perception through language is not only

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[5] Comparing sentences such as "Joe broke the window./The window was broken by Joe./It was Joe who broke the window./It was the window that Joe broke." etc highlights how grammatical constructions such as actives and passives imply varying imagic construals in the form of different configurations of "figure" and "ground" (or "trajector" and "landmark", as Langacker revises *gestalt* terminology): moreover, the imagic construals afforded by grammatical constructions are dynamic and enactive in that their cognitive processing will follow specific "compositional paths" (Langacker 1991: 10).

perspectival but *dynamic*, in that language develops in contexts of coordinated sequences of actions shared between the child and another. In games of passing and hiding objects, we see the basic face-to-face dyadic relation supplemented and partially subsumed by "a rich triadic person-person-object style of play" (Trevarthen and Hubley 1978: 211). Such play involves, crucially, a tuning in to the intentionality of the adult; the infantile "joke", for example, involves a "sharing of pattern and coincidence in intentionality, i.e. the formation of a climax or paradox in mutual intentionality" (ibid: 189). As the child develops and is integrated more fully into the physical and social world around it, these formats will take more varied and practical forms - "meal time" formats, for example, or "greeting" and "farewell" formats. The particular construals of the perceptual situation thus take place in a dynamic context of unfolding interactive, intentional sequences, in what Tomasello calls "the flow of social interaction" (Tomasello 1999: 112).

These perspectival and dynamic aspects of the joint attentional situation are mirrored in two crucial aspects of narrative that have been differentiated by developmental studies. If narrative is defined as *story*, in the sense of a representation of a sequence of events with an internal structure (in Aristotelian terms, with a beginning, a middle and an end), then children cannot be said to have attained narrative "competence" till, typically, between five seven years of age (Engel 1999: 158-59). But Susan Engel gives the following (from a transcribed dialogue between two four-year-olds) as an example of the kind of discourse that is left out of purely plot-based definitions of narrative:

> Wasn't that funny, Harry, yesterday when Lizzie slipped in the mud?
> Hahahahaha. She had mud all over her pants and she looked like she pooped
> in her pants. Hahahaha. And she really looked like a poopy head. Hahahaha.
> And she looked like a poop on the face. She looked like a shcmoop on the face.
> Hahahaha. (Engel 1999: 72)

As Engel observes, although this may not have any clear narrative "structure" (and quickly digresses into word-play), "[i]t nonetheless conveys an experience (albeit elliptically described) occurring in space and time, and it suggests the author's view of the event, a meaning to the story. It has a narrative voice" (ibid: 72). Developmental psychologists have differed in their definitions of "narrative" (Nelson 1996: 185-89), with some emphasizing the linear structure of narrative, its "story grammar", with others emphasizing its "experiential" or "perspectival" quality – and as Susan Engel points out, these differences in emphasis generate somewhat different versions of the developmental history of narrative, since, as we have seen, children's use of the "experiential" markers of narrativity develop earlier than their ability to construct a "story" (Engel 1999: 70-1).[6] But for all the differences of emphasis, there is a broad consensus that narrative has these two aspects: a linear sequencing of events, and some perspective or construal of those events. For Katherine Nelson, "narrative structure has two essential dimensions: temporality (its syntax), theme or meaning (its semantics)" (Nelson 1996: 189). Bruner has formulated the distinction in terms of two simultaneous "landscapes" of narrative - a "landscape of action" and a "landscape of consciousness" (Bruner 1986: 14).

We saw above how the emergence of language through the joint attentional situation is characterized by its *perspectival* quality and by its *dynamic context* of ongoing actions that embody a particular intentionality towards the object. In its two landscapes, of action and consciousness, narrative brings these two elements to awareness in a new way, through semiotic mediation. Children's first encounters

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[6] This point could be construed as lending support to Monika Fludernik's (1996) argument, with reference to literary narrative, that it is not the representation of action that is fundamental to narrative, but the representation of experience – that "all narrative is built on the mediating function of consciousness" (Fludernik 1996, 49).

with narrative language are characteristically geared to the "landscape of action" aspect of narrativity, taking the form of carers' verbal commentaries on, or retrospective summaries of, routine events and sequences such as getting dressed, meal-times, travelling outside the home, bed-time etc. These "scripts" tutor the child both in how to negotiate the physical and social world and in the meaning of language. "Raw experiential material," as Engel writes, "is mediated from the start by parents' use of storylike language to translate the world for their children" (Engel 1999: 33). This mediation through storylike language provides affordances for repetition, and this iterability makes of the action or experience a mediated, semiotic object of joint attention:

> When the parent . . . describes experience, she is creating an object of contemplation and inviting her child to share in this contemplation. As the mother describes an excursion she and the child have recently made together, she is painting a verbal canvas. Having finished, she stands back and invites her child to consider it with her. Now they not only have the verbal painting (the story), but they can look again and again at it, comment on it, even change it in the light of new understanding. (Engel 1999: 118-19)

The internalization of this process of repetition and changing construal is vividly illustrated in the volume *Narratives from the Crib* (Nelson 1989).[7] In this longitudinal study, "sequential narrative accounts" were observed to play a "central role" in the bedtime monologues of a young child, Emily (Nelson 1989a: 42). Here, a paralinguistic framing is employed that recapitulates and internalises this social iterability:

> It is notable that a highly salient characteristic of Emily's first crib monologues at twenty-one months was her use of an appropriated 'story voice' to mark her nascent narratives, with raised pitch and extended contours,

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[7] This volume was based on a research project in which a group of developmental psychologists studied tapes and transcriptions of the bed-time and nap-time monologues of a little girl, Emily. These tapes had been made over a fifteen-month period from the ages of twenty-one months and seven days to thirty-six months and nine days.

easily differentiated from the 'play voice' that she used in discourse with and around her toys. (Nelson 1996: 193)

These observations, she concludes, are evidence that "prosody and other metalinguistic markers set narrative off from other types of discourse for the child" (Nelson 1996: 193).[8]

Through repetition-with-variation, a narrative landscape of consciousness is opened up alongside its landscape of action. In their contribution to *Narratives from the Crib*, Jerome Bruner and Joan Lucariello show how Emily's monologues develop along several "dimensions" of narrativity – not just towards more complex forms of sequencing (from simple connectives such as "and/then" to more complex and causal ones such as "when/before/after" and "because/so"), but also towards differentiations of *perspective* (through, for example, time-frames (e.g. past tense) and markers of epistemic uncertainty ("maybe/I don't know") or affectivity (the emotional response of figures in the narrative: "Danny wasn't frightened when the clown came down")), and towards differentiations of *canonicality* (the degree to which an action or event is registered as usual/appropriate or unusual/inappropriate, and, crucially, whether it represents the thwarting of a goal) (Bruner and Luciariello 1989: 80-94). For Bruner and Luciariello, Emily's increasing sophistication in differentiating a variety of perspectives, both on and within the narrative, demonstrates the important role that narrative plays in emotional development. Narrative serves a crucial "cooling" function for Emily in that it

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[8] As Rukmini Bhaya Nair writes, narrative is "a dynamic structure that converts 'talk' into 'text'. Its function is to make some parts of a communicative loop or chain . . . both detachable and iterable" (Nair 2003: 5).

"distances" her thought and language from immediate affect and action (Bruner and Luciariello 1989: 76).[9]

Thus in Emily's narratives we find *internalized*, in Lev Vygotsky's terms, the social process, observed by Engel, of "holding up" the narrative as an object of joint attention: the interpsychological recontextualization of narrative (repetition and hence variation of perspective) has become intrapsychological. The narrative, as something detachable and iterable, becomes an object of joint attention, either interpsychologically or intrapsychologically. As Bruner and Luciariello observe with reference to Emily's monologues, the differentiations of perspective and construal afforded by the narrative's de- and re-contextualization are integrated into the texture of the narrative itself: the narrative comes to replicate within itself the perspectival and (since perspective is a matter of the flow of intentionality towards and through the object) the dynamic dimensions that we have seen characterise the original joint attentional situation.

In the final part of this essay I will briefly discuss some implications of this joint attentional perspective for the poetics of literary narrative: here, my argument will be congruent with recent research by Vera Tobin, Todd Oakley and David Herman which has begun to recognize the importance of this interactional, joint attentional dynamic for literary narrative.[10] First, though, I will draw out its

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[9] Daniel Hutto writes that folk psychological narratives (i.e. narratives that make sense of intentional actions) "serv[e] as exemplars and complex objects of joint attention [. .] [that] familiarize children with the normal settings and standard consequences of taking specific actions" (Hutto 2008: xii). Hutto's (2008) "Narrative Practice Hypothesis" proposes that our understanding of the minds of others is based not on propositional mental representations or a modular Theory of Mind, but on the enactive practice of narrative.

[10] Herman's (2013) focus is on how joint attention grounds the *intentionality* of narrative, such that stories become psychological tools for organizing experience into "intentional systems" (a term that he adopts from philosopher Daniel Dennett). Vera Tobin connects joint attention to the notion of "conceptual blending" that has emerged from cognitive linguistics, examining how modernist texts disrupt such blends (Tobin 2008) and how printed texts operate as objects of joint attention (Tobin 2014): there is a significant congruence between the model of narrative communication offered in this

implications for our understanding of the nature of narrative signification, making explicit its difference from the representational/communicative model, based on the dyads of signifier/signified and sender/receiver, that underlies classical narratology.

2. Situated Semiotics: Joint Attention and Triadic Mediation

To set the model underlying classical narratology alongside the joint attentional perspective outlined above is to highlight the radical difference between two conceptions of semiotics. According to the first, signification consists of a chain of dyads: a concept, image or object is *represented* verbally (first dyad), and this representation ("message") is then *communicated* directly to a second party (second dyad). According to the second conception (that suggested by the joint attentional perspective), on the other hand, the two linguistic functions of representation and communication, rather than being dispersed along a dyadic chain, are integrated into a single triad: the linguistic sign *mediates* between the producer of the sign, the receiver of the sign and the *reference* or object of their joint attention.

The difference between the two models is thus that between a schema of the type

Sender → Message → Receiver[11]

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chapter and Tobin's argument that "readers of published texts function in many ways more like overhearers than addressees" (Tobin 2014, 179). Tobin and Todd Oakley have extended the joint attentional approach to a consideration of the manipulation of perspective in film narrative (Oakley and Tobin 2012). Also pursuing a broadly joint attentional perspective, John Sutton and Evelyn Tribble have explored the role of "[e]mbodied interaction and mutual alignment" between characters in Lloyd Jones' novel *The Book of Fame* (Sutton and Tribble 2014, 146).

[11] The model can be extended by communicative chains of dyadic relations – as in the following, familiar from "classical" narratology:

Author → Implied Author → Narrator → Narratee → Implied Reader → Reader
(Chatman 1978, 151)

and a schema of the type

Reference

Sender   Receiver
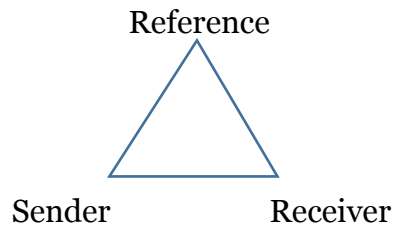
This latter model is conceived as what Charles Peirce would call a "genuine triad" (Peirce 1955: 99-100), in the sense that a connection between any two points of the triangle is only possible *via* the third. The receiver's access to the reference is mediated by communication from the sender, and the sender's by the communication he or she sends to the receiver. And the communication between sender and receiver is mediated by the attention that they share towards the reference. The key term here is *mediation*: the sign *mediates* between sender, receiver and reference.

The first model of language, as a chain of dyadic "communication", has its origins in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, where it is illustrated with a schema of the "speech-circuit"
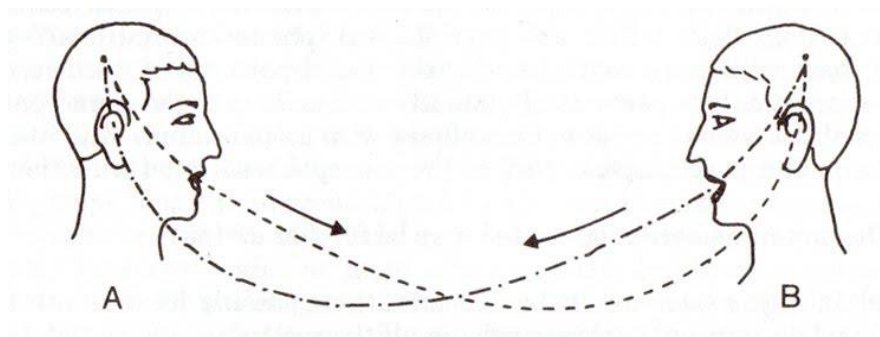
Figure 1 The Saussurean Speech Circuit (Saussure 1966 [1915]: 11)

In A's brain, a "concept" "unlocks a corresponding sound-image in the brain" (11). This first dyad, the translation between concept and sound-image (or as he will come

to call them later, *signified* and *signifier*), Saussure describes as a "purely psychological phenomenon". It is followed by a "*physiological* process" whereby, firstly, the brain transmits "an impulse corresponding to the image" to the organs used in producing sounds, and, secondly, the sound-image is transmitted by sound-waves to the ears of B. When the sound-image reaches the ears of B, "the order is reversed: from the ear to the brain, the physiological transmission of the sound-image; in the brain, the psychological association of the new image with the corresponding concept" (Saussure 1966 [1915]: 11-12). If B speaks, the cycle is reversed.

This model of language has informed narratology profoundly, moulding it into an array of characteristically Saussurean dyadic relations and binary oppositions.[12] Alternative views of the nature of the sign and of the process of signification – views congruent with the joint attentional perspective proposed in the first section of this paper – have been passed over by narratology, the light that they shed on the semiotics and poetics of narrative neglected: these are *instrumental* or *functionalist* views of language which take the *context* of language-use to be intrinsic to its semiotic structure. Here I draw on three examples from the period immediately following Saussure: C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), Karl Bühler's *Theory of Language* (1934) and the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934).

Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (1946 [1923]) was an attempt to lay the foundations for a new "science of Symbolism" by sweeping away centuries

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[12] As David Herman writes of classical narratology, taking Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" as emblematic: "Barthes identifies for the narratologists the same object of inquiry that (*mutatis mutandis*) Ferdinand de Saussure has specified for the linguist: the system (*la langue*) from which the infinity of narrative messages (*la parole*) derives and on the basis of which they can be understood in the first place" (Herman 2005: 573). See also, for example, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, where *histoire* is defined as "the signified or narrative content" and *récit* as "the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (Genette 1980 [1972]: 27).

of philosophical obfuscation about language, establishing the study of "meaning" on the grounds of the newly emerging behaviourist psychology. It opens with a trenchant attack on Saussure's theory, taking issue in particular with his "neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand" (Ogden and Richards 1946 [1923]): 6). For Saussure, the association between sound-image and concept (or *signifier* and *signified*) is "arbitrary" in the sense that the signifier has "no natural connection with the signified" ((Saussure 1966 [1915]: 69). Rather, for Saussure, this connection is forged by the total linguistic system, *la langue*. *La langue* is a self-enclosed system of social convention which generates meanings within itself out of its own internal differentiations: "language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (ibid: 120). For Ogden and Richards this is, considered as a guiding principle for the young science of semiology, "fantastic" (Ogden and Richards 1946 [1923]: 5): it represents a prime example of hypostatization – "the primitive impulse to infer from a word some object for which it stands" (ibid: 4). Words, for Ogden and Richards should be seen, rather, as above all "instruments" which serve different "uses" or "functions" according to context (ibid: 10). As John Russo summarizes their approach: "the symbol is an absence that receives its meaning from its reference outward to the world. A symbol is *of* something; an emotive sign is *of* some feeling, attitude or unconscious trace" (Russo 1989: 139).

Though Ogden and Richards would suggest other "functions" by which language connected to the extra-linguistic, their main focus throughout *The Meaning of Meaning* is on the symbolic use, which involves a triadic relation whereby one passes "from symbols to reference and so to referent":

THOUGHT OR REFERENCE

CORRECT *
Symbolises
(a causal relation)

ADEQUATE *
Refers to
(other causal relations)

SYMBOL   Stands for   REFERENT
            (an imputed relation)
                * TRUE

Figure 3 Ogden and Richards' "Triangle of Interpretation" (Ogden and Richards 1946 [1923]: 11)

The references to "causal relations" on the left and right legs of this reflect the behaviorist viewpoint with which Ogden and Richards framed their theory. To take the left leg: the use of particular referential symbols is caused "partly by the reference we are making and partly by social and psychological factors – the purpose for which we are making the reference, the proposed effect of our symbols on other persons, and our own attitude" (Ogden and Richards 1946 [1923]: 10-11). And equally, on the part of the hearer, "the symbols both cause us to perform an act of reference and to assume an attitude which will, according to circumstances, be more or less similar to the act and attitude of the speaker" (ibid: 11). There is a clear congruence between this account of language and the account given by the "joint attentional" perspective: in the joint attentional situation, too, language mediates the triadic relationship between speaker, hearer and object in such a way that, through the words, the speaker causes the hearer both to "perform an act of reference" to the object, and "to assume an attitude" toward the object "more or less similar to the act and attitude of the speaker".[13]

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[13] As John Russo notes, Ogden and Richards' "triangle of reference" reflects the influence of Charles Peirce (Russo 1989: 116-17). As Russo writes of the close dependence of Ogden and Richards' ideas on

Karl Bühler, too, rejects the automatic "association" that Saussure sets up

between the binary pair of "acoustic image" and "concept", describing it as "this most

disastrous of all material fallacies" which confuses conventional association with "the

experience of meaning itself" (Bühler 1990 [1934]: 68; emphasis in the original). The

latter, for Bühler, includes not just the social, conventional aspect on which Saussure

focusses, but also the individual's "meaning-conferring acts" (ibid: 79). This concept,

which Bühler draws from Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, he understands as the

"different *acts of meaning* in which the 'object we mean' is constituted" (ibid: 256).

In these meaning-conferring acts, language plays the role of an "Organon" (an

instrument or tool) that mediates between speaker, listener and "things" (Bühler

1990 [1934]: 30).[14] The simplest illustration of this, Bühler writes, is when the "one"

and the "other" share a sensory stimulus in the same perceptual field:

> Thus for example: two people in a room – the one notices a drumming, looks
> to the window and says, "it's raining" – the other, too, looks to the window,
> whether directly on hearing the expression or because his gaze is directed to it
> by looking at the speaker. (ibid: 32)

Bühler identifies three factors that come into play in this joint attentional situation:

the sender of the communication, the receiver, and the referent (the object/state of

affairs/event(s) that are being talked about). Corresponding to these factors Bühler

identifies three "semantic functions" of language depending on which of these factors

the words are oriented to: the *referential* or *representative* function is oriented

towards the object; the *expressive* or *emotive* function is oriented towards the

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those of Peirce: "[t]he triadic nature of sign interpretation in Peirce entails the principle of mediation: 'A sign mediates between the *interpretant* sign and its object'; even 'private' thinking involves the triadic process of mediation. [Ogden and Richards] everywhere insist on the mediation of thought or reference in the relation between words and things" (Russo 1989: 117).

[14] Bühler takes the term "Organon" from Plato's *Cratylus*, where Socrates suggests that "a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web" (Plato 1961: 426).

sender; and the *appellant* or *conative* function is oriented towards the receiver (ibid:
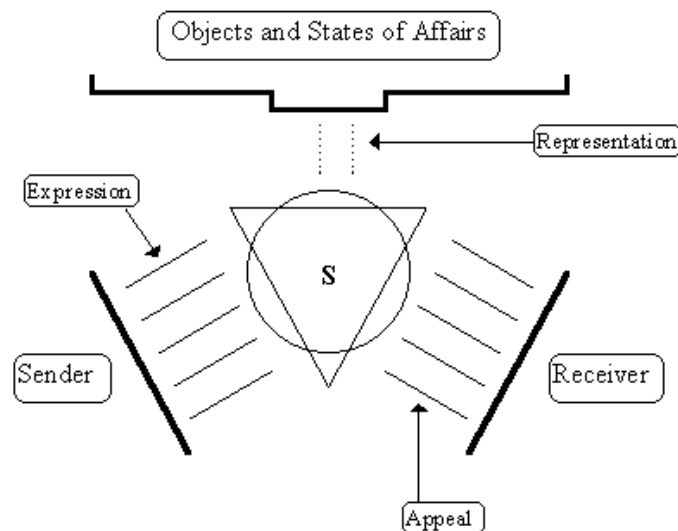
35*)*:

Figure 6: Bühler's "Organon" model of language (Bühler 1990 [1934]: 35)

The sign (indicated by the circle S) encompasses these three facets or "semantic

functions" of language, according to whether it functions as a *symbol* (in

coordination with objects or states of affairs), as a *symptom* (an "index" of the state

of the sender) or a *signal* (an appeal to the receiver "whose inner or outer behaviour

it directs") (ibid: 35).

The idea of language as a tool or instrument that can serve different functions

is central, too, to Lev Vygotsky's concept of semiotic mediation (Wertsch 1985: 77-

128; Wertsch 2007). For Vygotsky – influenced in part by Marx's idea of

consciousness as mediated by practical activity (Lee 1985) – language, like any sign,

is shaped by its origins as a device for influencing others: the carer, for example, uses

language to direct the attention of the young child to a particular feature of the

environment. A "technical tool" such as a hammer and a "psychological tool" such as

language *mediate* between the user and the material on which he or she works –

except that in the case of the psychological tool, the material which it affects is not

nature but the mind and behaviour. Just as the technical tool "modifies the process of natural adaptation by determining the form of labor operations", so the use of psychological tools (above all, language) modifies "the entire course and structure of mental functions" (Vygotsky 1997: 85).[15] And crucially for Vygotsky's key concept of internalization, the psychological tool has the key attribute of *reversibility*: the developing child learns that the signs the carer has used to modify *her* behaviour can be turned around to modify the carer's behavior. In the "egocentric speech" of the young child (the child talking to herself – as in the example of Emily's monologues discussed above), and in the fully internalized form of the "inner speech" of adult thought, we see a further extension of this capacity of language to modify mental functions: here the individual uses language to modify his or her *own* mental processes.

As we saw in the case of Emily's monologues, language's use as a psychological tool to modify one's own thought and behaviour is closely linked to the affordances that narrative language offers for de- and re-contextualization – for removal of thought about experiences and events from the immediate existential situation, and the embedding of those experiences in new construals. In the final part of this essay, having now made explicit the triadic, situated semiotics implied by the joint attentional approach to narrative, I consider further extensions of this interaction between de- and re-contextualization, in particular through the decontextualized semiotic mediation of written, literary narrative.

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[15] David Herman draws on Vygotsky for his instrumentalist view of narrative as a psychological tool (Herman 2013, 228-30): in this context, he draws attention to the important role played by contextualized, embedded narrative (263-81).

3. The Realization of Context in Written Narrative: Joint Attentional Structures in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

To take up once more the argument pursued in Section One: narrative structures, I suggested, offer affordances for decontextualization and embedding in new contexts (either interpsychological or intrapsychological). As children grow older, they encounter and use narratives in a wider variety of "contexts of use" (Sutton-Smith 1986: 67-68). In the hothouse of family- or school-life, for example, "telling tales" can become a multi-functional tool. "Narrative accounts," as Jerome Bruner observes, "are no longer neutral. They have rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are not merely expository but rather partisan, designed to put the case . . . in behalf of a particular interpretation" (Bruner 1990: 85).

Older children, exposed to wider social worlds beyond the family, may discriminate between genres of narrative appropriate to different contexts (narratives between peers, for example, as against those with different categories of adult). Narrative "competence" cannot be abstracted from its "performance" in a particular situation. The shaping of narrative by its contextual motivation can be seen clearly in the way that socio-cultural expectations of what constitutes a "good story" are grounded in conceptions of the social function of narrative, what stories are *for* – as is illustrated in Shirley Brice Heath's classic study of language-use and storytelling in neighbouring black and white communities in the American South (Heath 1983).

The writing down of narrative, the creation of a literary narrative, translates narrative onto another plane of semiotic mediation and introduces a radically different form of decontextualization. As Wolfgang Iser observes:

> The parting of the ways between literary and ordinary speech is to be observed the matter of situational context. The fictional utterance seems to be made without reference to any real situation, whereas the speech act presupposes a situation whose precise definition is essential to the success of that act. (Iser 1978: 63)

One important element of oral language that is not easily accommodated in written form is its illocutionary force. Where illocutionary force can be expressed in oral language through voice and gesture, its written representation requires the development of new vocabularies and concepts.[16] David Olson notes, as an example of the effect on a language of widening and deepening literacy, the massive borrowings that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Latin into English, a conspicuous part of which consisted of "speech act and mental state verbs" – words such as "assert" (1604), "concede" (1632), "contradict" (1570), "criticize" (1649), "explain" (1513), "infer" (1526), "predict" (1546) and "suggest" (1526) (Olson 1994: 108). The recovery of words' illocutionary force becomes "a fundamental problem in reading", according to Olson, "and specifying it a central problem in writing" (ibid: 93) – hence the development of hermeneutics and rhetoric as arts/sciences of the *written.*

In the case of written *narrative*, the imperative towards the realization of context and illocutionary force can be seen in the emergence of the narrator as an explicit figure:

> With the development of self-conscious tellers in non-traditional, written narratives . . . the disparity between the narrator's view of the characters and their views of themselves and each other, which is a constant in fiction, is augmented by a disparity between the narrator's view of the story and the audience's view of it. . . . The traditional oral narrative consists rhetorically of a teller, his story, and an implied audience. The non-traditional, written

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[16] Another Saussurean precept that has deeply informed narratology is the assumption that writing is merely a derivation (a transcription or "image") of spoken language, which constitutes the true "linguistic object" (Saussure 1966 [1915]: 23-24).

narrative consists rhetorically of the *imitation*, or *representation*, of a teller, his story, and an implied audience. (Scholes et al 2006 [1966]: 52-53)

This making-explicit and thematization of the act of narration, of the *mediation* of the narrative, is a particular characteristic of the historical transition from the oral to the literary. "Author and narrator," writes John L. Grigsby, "are particularly distinct in the Middle Ages. If there is any coincidence between them in medieval literature, we are powerless to find it" (Grigsby 1980: 165; see also Davenport 2004: 53-4). Evelyn Vitz, in a critique of the applicability of structuralist narratology to medieval narrative, has argued that in the latter, narrative elements cannot be treated in isolation from "the broader rhetorical *discours* of a text": "this bracketing-off procedure", she writes, "is especially impoverishing with respect to medieval literature, where *why* the story is being told – for what purpose, to what audience – is often . . . crucial" (Vitz 1989: 8).

The clearest case of such thematization of the narrator and narrating in medieval literature is the tale- or novella-collection, in which stories are represented as told by characters occupying a framing situation or narrative (Clements and Gibaldi 1977; Gittes 1991). This making-explicit of illocutionary force, this folding in of context into text, deepens the semiotic mediation of the narrative through new levels of joint attention. As Tony Davenport writes of the *Canterbury Tales*:

> Chaucer [. .] turns his pilgrims into critics as well as narrators and it is through the dynamics of the process of narrating and recording audience response that Chaucer creates his complex layers of narrative illusion. (Davenport 2004: 250)

In Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-53) the immediate frame for the tales is an idealised vision of joint attention: the figure of the ten young women and men seated in a circle and each telling a story, every day for ten days. But this idealised vision of communal contemplation and entertainment is itself framed by the story of the

young people's escape from plague-stricken Florence. This latter narrative, in contrast to the idealization which it encloses, is characterised by a grittily documentary description of disease and social breakdown. And this narrative is in turn framed by prefatory material in which Boccaccio, the author, addresses his readership.[17] The different frames constitute a series of nested prisms through which, semiotically, the reader perceives the individual tales.

This dynamic of joint attentional embedding extends down into the substance of the tales themselves, where it can become a generative principle of the narrative. Many of the stories in the *Decameron* are stories about stories – stories in which the pivot-point of the narrative is the telling of a story, the speaking of a particular phrase, even the uttering of a single word. In such cases, the re-telling of a story in a different context is more than just a re-framing, for the relation with context becomes an interactive one, whereby the re-telling itself changes the nature of the context, encompassing and altering that which had previously framed it.[18] Such stories make up the entirety of the First Day, and the theme is made explicit on the Sixth Day, when the young people are instructed by their "Queen" for the day to tell stories concerning "those who, on being provoked by some verbal pleasantry, have returned like for like, or who, by a prompt retort or shrewd manoeuvre, have avoided danger, discomfiture or ridicule" (Boccaccio 1972 [1349-53]: 481).

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[17] Including the various forms of prefatory and interpolated "authorial" material, Joy Hambuechen Potter has identified five distinct levels of formal "framing" making up the *cornice* of the *Decameron* (Potter 1982: 120-51).

[18] "[I]n the *Decameron* not only is action often a product of speech, but speech can be the only action of narrative interest. More precisely: 'comedic rhetoric, technique of discourse, the articulation of a dialogue, may mark the turning point of a plot or define the nature of a plot or define the nature of a character; but they also constitute at times the essential structural nucleus of a story.'" (Forni 1996, 89; quoting Mario Baratto, *Realtà e stile nel* Decameron)

The celebrated first tale of the *Decameron* illustrates both this thematic concern with the re-contextualization of utterances, and the way in which the *Decameron*'s layers of textual framing interact to ironic and ambiguous effect with joint attentional perspectives embedded deep in the narrative itself. The narrator, Panfilo, tells how a notary called Ciappelletto – a murderer, blasphemer, rapist, robber, glutton and drunkard – is sent on business to Burgundy by a wealthy merchant, and lodges in the house of two Florentine brothers who know of his reputation. Soon after arriving at the brothers' house he falls ill, and, overhearing the two brothers discuss their fears that his death will bring disgrace on their house (either because he would die unconfessed, or because he would confess and thereby reveal their guest's true nature), announces to them that they have no need to worry: they should go ahead and send for a friar, and he will "set your affairs and my own neatly in order" (Boccaccio 1972 [1353]: 73). The friar arrives to take the confession, and the brothers, not trusting Ciappelletto to keep his word, hide behind a partition to listen. Ciappelletto paints a picture of a blameless life in which the sins are so trivial that they merely serve to highlight the virtue that surrounds them. At the funeral, the friar repeats Ciappelletto's story, and this story of the dead man's virtue is passed on and repeated until he becomes "Saint Ciappelletto".

In his commentary on the story, Franco Fido has pointed to the comic effect of "speeches that grow in concentric circles around the bed of the dying, and then dead, notary" (Fido 2004: 62). The reader passes through a succession of contextualizations and re-contextualizations: the textual framing of the narration; the narrator Panfilo introducing and narrating his tale to his listeners; Ciappelletto overhearing the Florentine brothers discussing their dilemma; the Florentine brothers overhearing Ciappelletto's confession to the friar; the reader and Panfilo's

listeners "overhearing" the friar's address to the parish congregation. At each level, the communicative situation of the next level (a narrative, a conversation, a confession, a sermon) is held up as an object of attention and interpretation. The relationship between the levels is not directly "communicative", but interpretative.[19]

But this progression through levels of joint attentional framing is not a straightforward linear one. There is also a non-linear, destabilizing oscillation between inside and outside that is an important part of the tale's openness and indeterminacy. The heart of the tale is the celebrated comic scene of Ciappelletto's confession. Listening to the confession are the Florentine brothers, who are amazed by the insouciance with which he hoodwinks the friar:

> [T]hey were so amused that every so often they nearly exploded with mirth, and they said to each other:
>   "What manner of man is this whom neither [. .] fear of the death which he sees so close at hand, nor even the fear of God, before whose judgement he knows he must shortly appear, have managed to turn from his evil ways, or persuade him to die any differently from the way he has lived?" (Boccaccio 1972 [1353]: 79).

As Marcus has observed, this innermost circle of the Ciappelletto story projects back to "the demystified perspective" of the reader (Marcus 1979: 22): the outside of the tale's many layers of joint attentional re-contextualization is to be found, too, at its inner core.

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[19] The *Decameron* is full of instances of characters listening-in or overhearing one another (and spying on one another). In a different context, Vera Tobin has argued that readers of written or printed texts "function in many ways more like overhearers than addressees" (Tobin 2014: 179). As José Landa writes of the role of "overhearing" in narrative: "Reading narrative involves interpreting and articulating a number of complex hierarchical structures of communicative address" (Landa 2004: 192).

Conclusion: Narrative Mediation and Joint Attention

This brief review of the role of joint attentional framing and contextualization in the *Decameron* illustrates how these processes have the potential to create of the narrative a *non-linear* dynamic structure. With the development of the novel, these dynamic structures of framing and (re)contextualization become more complex, and closely tied to the notion of character.[20] In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes builds a complex and dynamic perspectival structure based on different and interacting acts of joint attention – not just in the framing "story of the story" (the various acts of interpretation, translation and compilation by a variety of "authors", "translators" and "narrators") (Dudley 1997: 195), but also through the embedded perspectives of characters or groups of characters themselves sharing joint attention (what Alan Palmer (2010) terms "social minds"). To take an example central to the development of Cervantes' novel, the attention shared by Quixote and Sancho towards the world around them unfolds as a dynamic and interactive process of mutual influence: during the course of the novel, as numerous commentators have noted, Quixote becomes to some extent "sanchified", and Sancho "quixoticized" (Segre 1979: 181-6). Through its perspectivalism, in *Don Quixote* we see fictional character emerge as what one might call (as with the textual framing of the whole narrative) a semiotic *prism* – something that we both perceive (a conceptual object to which attributes can be given) and at the same time something that we perceive *through* or *with*.[21] René

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[20] Though coming from a very different theoretical perspective to that offered in this paper, both Alan Palmer (2004) and Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) describe characters as "embedded narratives". Palmer has since abandoned the term "embedded narrative" in favour of "cognitive narrative" for fear of confusion with the use of the term for framed narratives (Palmer 2010, 12): it is precisely this "confusion" that I am advocating here.

[21] Terence Doody (1998) argues that "a character is also a sign", pointing out that, etymologically, "character" denoted a *sign* – "a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise formed" – long before it became "a description, delineation or detailed report of a person's qualities": character is a sign in that it is both "something we read and something we read-with" (104).

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Girard (1965) has drawn attention to the important role played by "mediated desire" – where desire and perception are channelled through the desires and perceptions of others – for the development of the modern novel.

Other examples of the central role played by such narrative mediation in development of narrative fiction lie beyond the scope of this paper. Here, my principal aim has been to point to the origins of this narrative mediation in the mediational nature of language – as presented in different ways by Ogden and Richards, Bühler and Vygotsky, and as exemplified in what developmental psychologists today term the joint attentional situation. This conception of language and narrative stands in contrast to the Saussurean conception of classical narratology. Where the latter focusses exclusive on what I have called the "representational" and "communicative" aspects of language, the joint attentional approach opens up for view the full multi-functionality of language, and also provides a tool for understanding the complex non-linearity of embedded perspective essential to the development of literary narrative.

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