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Storytelling without telling: The non-linguistic nature of narratives from evolutionary and narratological perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, ‘storytelling’ has become a popular term in the evolutionary sciences. However, this notion lacks a systematic and nuanced definition. Treated intuitively, it has usually been seen as a verbal enterprise. By approaching storytelling from a cross-disciplinary perspective, this paper aims at showing that, contrary to the common assumption, the human ability to tell stories is not restricted to the verbal medium. To show this, I define storytelling and provide a set of minimal criteria for a narrative act. Then, I proceed to identify these conditions in different semiotic resources – pictorial and gestural – to demonstrate that narrating can also transpire non-verbally and with the use of different modalities, mainly the visual, but also the vocal-auditory. I also point to the directions for further discussion of non-verbal narratives in the context of language evolution and the need for evolutionary research on storytelling to have a firm foundation in disciplines such as narratology.

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1. Introduction

This paper looks into one of the assumptions about storytelling from an evolutionary perspective, supplemented with insights from the branches of literary studies such as narratology. So far, in these contexts, storytelling has been for the most part seen as confined to language. Such a supposition is the consequence of too intuitive a treatment of the concept of ‘storytelling’, which is usually not defined in the evolutionarily oriented analyses and automatically seen as anchored in verbal semiotic resources, which culminates in a substantial narrowing of its scope. I argue, firstly, that it is possible to “tell” stories also without language; and, secondly, that acknowledging this different angle to the story of stories – taking into account also their non-verbal aspect – may help us appreciate the importance of storytelling as communicative and social activity in our ancestors, implicated in their planning skills, cooperation and mind reading, or bonding (cf. [Boyd, 2009](#); [Gazzaniga, 2008](#); [Gottschall, 2013](#)).

The unique function of fiction in human evolution has also been stressed by scholars from the language evolution field (e.g. [Cuskley et al., 2016](#)). However, they have hardly adopted any kind of a definition of storytelling. They have also often assumed it to be, to a lesser or greater extent, a verbal enterprise. [Cuskley et al. \(2016\)](#) examine collaborative stories, starting from the supposition that “[s]tories are unique products of human culture *enabled principally by human language*” (emphasis mine). [Victorri \(2002\)](#) claims that syntax, including for instance verb aspect, is crucial for narrating. For [Von Heiseler \(2014\)](#), narration is synonymous with “an *utterance* that refers to a past action” (emphasis mine). [Wiessner \(2014\)](#), in turn, points to

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the importance of fire talk narration,¹ which is verbal and oral. McBride (2014) is an exception to this tendency, as he treats storytelling as much broader and sees its origins in mime; however, he also does not take the effort to define what he means by storytelling, and thus his argument why stories could be told by miming is not fully clear. Finally, also Ferretti (2016) argues that “narrative abilities precede (logically and temporally) language”, acknowledging a broader, not-only-verbal nature of storytelling.

In the structure-oriented sub-disciplines of literary studies – i.e. literary formalism, structuralism, or narratology, which I will mainly refer to – language has also been given almost unquestionable primacy as a narrative medium (see e.g. Ryan, 2012). The main reason for such an assumption is that it is only language that allows for the complex anachronies that are an intrinsic part of any narration (cf. Genette, 1980, 2002; Ryan, 2012). With the cognitive turn, the study of literature has shifted from structure toward describing its cognitive aspects (e.g. Turner, 1996; Herman, 2007), and characterising it as an evolutionary adaptation (e.g. Boyd, 2009). The disciplines that were born on these grounds, such as cognitive poetics and cognitive stylistics, cognitive narratology, and the so called Darwinian Literary Studies (DLS),² though they acknowledge different forms of storytelling, they also see its prototypical instances as managed mainly by means of language (cf. Gottschall, 2013).³ For example, Hernadi, in his analysis, concentrates on protoliterary activities, which consist in “verbalising” concepts (2002); Sugiyama considers language “an obvious prerequisite” for them (2001: 233); Collins sees storytelling as “a verbal artifacture” and connects its earliest forms with the linguistic skills of hominins:

Verbal artifacture – poetry, broadly defined – has language as its instrumental medium. It is this communicative code of arbitrary symbols, its origins, and its preliterate uses that I investigate ... (Collins, 2013: 22)

Systematising our knowledge on storytelling and developing its definitions, also those acknowledging their non-verbal aspects, are essential to addressing this gap in the evolutionary research. Indeed, language is well cut out for telling stories, but it is not – and probably was not – the only medium fitted for that purpose. In order to illustrate this possibility, I provide a definition of storytelling, determine its basic, universal components, and demonstrate how these can materialise in both visual and auditory modalities, also via non-verbal media, such as pictures and pantomime.

2. What is storytelling?

In order to understand why storytelling is not confined to language – though it is most certainly connected to it – it is crucial to define storytelling on the basis of the disciplines primarily preoccupied with it, such as narratology. The terms “story”, “storytelling”, “narrative”, and “literature” have often been used intuitively and also interchangeably. The differences between those are central for understanding storytelling in a context broader than the one of verbal media, though. A story cannot be understood as one and the same as a narrative; the two are only partial synonyms (e.g. Ryan, 2007: 22). To keep it simple and cut a very long story short, I stick to the set of definitions, one among many available, according to which:

- a *story* is a conceptual arrangement of events,
- a *narrative* is the material product of transmitting a story to somebody else, and
- *storytelling* is the process of composing narratives, i.e. translating the conceptual into the material via a given medium.

A story “exist[s] in the mind as pure patterns of information” (Ryan, 2007: 27), “not tied to any particular medium, and [...] independent of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction” (Ryan, 2007: 26). Importantly, as has been noticed for instance by Russian Formalists or narratologists, a story is essentially chronological (Richardson, 2002: 10). It is what comes to the mind of the storyteller and what is conceptualised by their audiences as they listen to, read, or watch the story “told”. It is also what survives in our collective consciousness as, for instance, the story of a Little Red Riding Hood (which will serve us as an example also in one of the subsequent sections).

But *La finta nonna* by Italo Calvino, *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* by Charles Perrault, or *Rotkäppchen* by the Grimm Brothers are all narratives – in this case verbal materialisations of more or less the same story of a little girl confronted with a big bad wolf. They are the story’s “representation[s] through the signs of a specific medium” (Ryan, 2007: 27), usually aimed at communicating the story to somebody else. They do not need to be chronological and usually are not: most stories, as they are told, start in the middle of things, *in media res*, and are supplemented with some explanatory flashbacks – the so called ‘elucidatory analepses’ (Genette, 2002: 26; Currie, 2007: 29). Further, in a narrative, the events of the plot can be arranged and rearranged into more complex patterns, which include, for instance, prolepses (references to the future and to the actions that have not yet taken place in a story) or stases (moments of freezing a story, during which the narrator goes on and, for instance, addresses the audience).

¹ Referring to research on the Ju/'hoan, Wiessner says that 81% of hunter-gatherers' evening and night conversations centered around fire consist in telling stories, and that this tendency could have evolved in early humans.

² Understood as both an evolution-oriented reading of literature and its themes as well as looking at the phenomenon of literature through the prism of evolution theory.

³ Gottschall refers to daydreaming or reality TV as example of telling stories; however, his main focus and point of reference are stories transmitted verbally (2013: 8–12).

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