

Narrative as a Cognitive and Social Tool: A Literature Review

La narrativa como herramienta cognitiva y social: una revisión de la literatura

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a literature review on narrative, exploring its conceptualization, functions, and applications across diverse contexts. Through an analysis of literature published in Spanish and English over the past ten years, this review synthesizes findings from major narrative theories, ranging from classical narratology to post-structuralist and cognitive approaches. The main findings reveal that narrative fulfills key social, psychological, and epistemological functions, acting as a cornerstone for community cohesion, the construction of personal identity, and the organization of knowledge. Additionally, the article discusses the evolution of narrative in digital and transmedia environments, highlighting its adaptability and ongoing relevance in contemporary communication. The study concludes that narrative is a dynamic field that requires greater theoretical integration and deeper exploration of its manifestations in the digital era, with this review serving as a roadmap for future research.

Keywords: Narrative, narratology, identity

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una revisión de la literatura sobre la narrativa, explorando su conceptualización, funciones y aplicaciones en diversos contextos. A través de un análisis de la literatura publicada en español e inglés durante los últimos diez años, esta revisión sintetiza los hallazgos de las principales teorías narrativas, desde la narratología clásica hasta los enfoques post-estructuralistas y cognitivos. Los hallazgos principales revelan que la narrativa cumple funciones clave a nivel social, psicológico y epistemológico, actuando como un pilar para la cohesión comunitaria, la construcción de la identidad personal y la organización del conocimiento. Adicionalmente, se discute su evolución en medios digitales y transmedia, destacando su adaptabilidad y su continua relevancia en la comunicación contemporánea. El estudio concluye que la narrativa es un campo dinámico que requiere una mayor integración teórica y una exploración más profunda de sus manifestaciones en la era digital, sirviendo esta revisión como una hoja de ruta para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Narrativa, narratología, identidad

1. Introduction

Narrative, in its purest essence, is the fundamental tool humanity has used to understand itself and the world around it. From ancestral myths to the personal stories we share daily, narratives are the backbone of our culture and identity.

The act of storytelling is a universal phenomenon that transcends geographical and temporal boundaries. As Arias Cardona and Alvarado Salgado (2015) point out, narrative is not a mere ornament but an intrinsic necessity that allows us to construct meaning and shape our experience. This universality is manifested in the capacity of stories to connect people, since, as Ripamonti (2017) suggests, through them we can empathize with others' experiences and understand perspectives different from our own.

Moreover, narrative plays a crucial role in the construction of individual and collective identity. According to Quintero Mejía (2018), the stories we tell about ourselves and our social groups define us and situate us in the world. It is not only about memory but also about projection into the future, since, as Estupiñán Mojica and González Gutiérrez (2015) affirm, narrative shapes our expectations and aspirations, influencing the decisions we make. In this sense, narrative is not merely a reflection of reality but an active agent in its construction.

For the purposes of this article, narrative is understood as a fundamental way of organizing human experience over time. It is not simply a sequence of events but a structured framework that gives meaning to actions and occurrences. As Josselson and Hammack (2021) note, narrative involves a process of providing coherence and meaning to a person's life, linking past events with the present and projecting a future. Through this process, we construct our personal and social identity.

This definition distances itself from mere anecdote, elevating narrative to a deeper tool of understanding. As Smith (2016) argues, narrative is a means of making the chaos of life intelligible, turning a series of disconnected facts into a story with a beginning, development, and conclusion. This temporal structure is crucial to its function. Ntinda (2018) also emphasizes that narrative is not only a representation of what happened but an active interpretation, in which certain events are selected and organized to convey a particular message or truth.

In its essence, narrative is both a product and a process. It is the text or story that is told, but also the dynamic act of telling and reinterpreting it. This duality is fundamental, since, as Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016) indicate,

narrative operates at the intersection of individual experience and collective expression, allowing personal stories to intertwine with broader cultural narratives, thus creating a complex and meaningful fabric.

The importance of narrative in the current context is undeniable, especially in a world characterized by complexity, constant information flow, and social polarization. Understanding how narratives operate is crucial to navigating these challenges.

In the field of research and decision-making, narrative has positioned itself as a fundamental tool. As Greenhalgh et al. (2016) note, stories and case studies are often more persuasive and memorable than abstract statistical data, facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and the implementation of effective policies. Similarly, narrative is vital in healthcare and psychology. Sharp et al. (2019) argue that patients' personal narratives are key to understanding their illness experiences and designing holistic, person-centered treatment interventions.

Furthermore, in a saturated media environment, narrative is the primary vehicle for identity construction and opinion formation. Herman and Vervaeck (2019) highlight how media and digital narratives influence our perception of reality, from politics to everyday life. Understanding the structure and rhetoric of these narratives enables us to be more critical consumers of information and less susceptible to misinformation.

Finally, narrative is essential for self-reflection and personal development. Clandinin (2019) asserts that by telling and reinterpreting our own life stories, we can make sense of our experiences, overcome challenges, and project a more meaningful future. In an era of uncertainty, the ability to construct a coherent personal narrative is a source of resilience and empowerment.

The central question guiding this review was: *How is narrative conceptualized in contemporary research, and what are its main functions and applications across different fields of knowledge?* This question sought to unravel the complexity of the concept, transcending its basic definition to explore its real impact and methodological relevance today.

To address this question, the article set out three specific objectives. First, to identify the main theories and approaches that define narrative, examining the perspectives emerging from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Second, to analyze the key functions of narrative, from identity and memory construction to its role in persuasion and decision-making. Finally, the objective is to map the application of narrative across different media

and disciplines, such as qualitative research, education, medicine, and marketing, illustrating its versatility and practical importance.

To achieve these objectives, the article is organized in a clear and coherent structure. Following this introduction, the review begins with a detailed analysis of the main narrative theories, presenting the most influential conceptual frameworks. Subsequently, the functions of narrative are explored, with a section dedicated to each to understand its role in different contexts. Next, a mapping of the practical applications of narrative is presented, illustrating with examples its use in various fields of study. Finally, conclusions are offered, summarizing the most important findings and suggesting future lines of research. In this way, the text guides the reader from theoretical conceptualization to practical application, offering a comprehensive view of the narrative phenomenon.

2. Methodology

This literature review is based on a systematic and rigorous process to ensure the relevance and quality of the sources consulted. The first phase of the research focused on an exhaustive search of academic literature across various databases. To this end, highly prestigious platforms such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were used, considered essential tools for accessing high-impact scientific publications. As Bethel and Rogers (2019) highlight, the combination of multiple databases is crucial for a comprehensive review, as it allows researchers to overcome the coverage limitations of a single source and ensures a broader overview of existing knowledge on the subject.

Subsequently, the search terms that would serve as the key to identifying relevant publications were defined. Keywords such as “narrative,” “narratology,” “narrative analysis,” “function of narrative,” and “applications of narrative,” as well as their English equivalents, were employed. To maximize results, these terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR), which allowed the search to be refined and focused on the intersection of key concepts. The search strategy was designed to be as inclusive as possible, since, as Fowler and Jewell (2022) note, precision in search terms is fundamental to retrieving the most relevant literature and avoiding the loss of valuable information.

Finally, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to select the documents that formed part of this review. Review articles, empirical studies, and book chapters addressing the conceptualization, functions, or applications

of narrative in various fields were included. To ensure the currency of the information, the search was limited to publications from the last ten years. Conversely, conference abstracts, editorials, or works lacking a rigorous academic focus were excluded. This selection process aligns with systematic review methodology, which, according to Bramer et al. (2017), requires clear and transparent criteria for literature selection, ensuring the validity and replicability of the findings.

3. Results

Fundamental Theories of Narrative

Narrative, as an object of study, has been approached from multiple theoretical perspectives, giving rise to a rich and complex conceptual framework. This section delves into the main schools of thought that have sought to unravel its nature, from underlying structures to its impact on human cognition. The following are the fundamental theories that have shaped the academic understanding of narrative.

Classical Narratology

The formal study of narrative was consolidated with classical narratology, which, under the influence of structuralism, sought to identify the universal structures underlying every story. Authors such as Greimas and Genette focused on the constituent elements of narrative, such as plot, characters, and time. This school is characterized by its emphasis on the “grammar” and “syntax” of stories, searching for recurring patterns that could be applied to any narrative text, from an ancient myth to a modern novel (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). This ahistorical and formalist approach was fundamental in establishing a systematic framework of analysis, enabling scholars to decompose and understand the internal mechanisms of storytelling in a way that had never been done before.

The Transition to Postclassical Narratology and Critiques of Structuralism

Subsequently, this perspective was enriched and, at the same time, subjected to criticism. Postclassical narratology emerged as a response to the limitations of structuralism, questioning its “obsession with taxonomies” and its “addiction to formalism.” Unlike its predecessors, this new school opened itself to broader analysis, considering ideological, social, and historical factors that classical narratology had overlooked. The revision of basic structural concepts, such as “actants” or the roles played by characters, became central to understanding the dynamics of stories from a more holistic perspective (Coste, 2017). This stage marked an openness to interconnection with other disciplines and a relaxation of formal rigor in

favor of a richer and more contextualized understanding of narrative.

Narratology in the Digital and Cognitive Era

In the digital era, narratology has found new avenues of exploration. Classical structural principles have proven their relevance by being applied to the computational analysis of large volumes of narrative texts (Piper et al., 2021). This application demonstrates how twentieth-century theoretical tools can be adapted to examine narrative in emerging formats such as hypertext and video games. Moreover, the rise of cognitive narratology has taken the study of narrative a step further, focusing on how the human brain processes and organizes stories. This perspective considers narrative as a basic modality of cognition, an essential tool for storing and transmitting vital information, and analyzes how certain structural constants determine the way we organize the plot of any story (Moss-Wellington, 2019).

The Legacy of Structuralism in Current Narrative Studies

Despite recognized limitations and the new directions the discipline has taken, the legacy of classical narratology endures. The work edited by Fludernik and Ryan (2019) demonstrates that, although structuralism is not the only path, its basic concepts continue to be essential starting points for any rigorous narrative analysis. These concepts provide the fundamental tools to break down the internal construction of a story, offering a metalanguage that allows scholars to dialogue and compare narratives from different eras and cultures. Ultimately, contemporary narratology has evolved to integrate formalist rigor with historical, digital, and cognitive perspectives, creating a more dynamic and comprehensive field of study.

Post-Structuralist Approaches

In contrast to the search for universal structures, post-structuralist approaches challenged the idea of a fixed and unique meaning in narrative. This school of thought, influenced by deconstruction and reception theory, focused on the instability of the text and on the active role of the reader in creating meaning. As Fleming (2020) notes, deconstruction questions traditional binary oppositions and reveals the internal tensions and contradictions of texts, showing that narratives are often less coherent than they appear at first glance.

Intertextuality, another key concept of this approach, emphasizes that no text is an isolated entity. As Malik et al. (2020) explain, narratives are always in dialogue with other narratives, creating a complex network of references and allusions that enrich their meaning. This approach

recognizes that stories are built upon a vast cultural archive of texts and genres. Leone (2022) has explored, from a post-structuralist perspective, how digital media amplify intertextuality, facilitating the remixing and reinterpretation of stories in ways never seen before.

Cognitive Narratology

Cognitive narratology marks a fundamental shift in the study of narrative, moving from a focus on text structure to an interest in the mental processes of the reader or narrator. This school conceives narrative not only as an arrangement of textual elements but as a fundamental way of organizing human thought and experience. Narratives, from this perspective, operate through mental “schemas” and “frames,” which are pre-existing knowledge patterns activated to understand and process the stories we hear or read, as noted by Babelyuk et al. (2021). This approach situates narrative at the heart of our cognition, viewing it as an essential tool for making sense of the world.

Narrative and Empathy

One of the most significant contributions of cognitive narratology is its ability to explain how stories influence our emotional and social lives. Vercauteren (2021) elaborates on the idea that narratives allow us to simulate experiences, helping us to understand the intentions, desires, and beliefs of others. This process, known as “theory of mind,” is crucial for the development of empathy. By immersing ourselves in the mind of a character, we practice the ability to see the world from a perspective different from our own, which has profound implications for social interaction and morality. In this way, reading a novel or watching a film is not merely a passive activity but an active mental exercise that refines our social skills.

The Role of the Active Reader in Constructing Narrative Reality

Cognitive narratology has also transformed our understanding of the reader's role, revealing that their mind actively participates in constructing the narrative world. Ogata (2019) has explored how cognitive narratives influence our perception of time and space in fiction. When reading, we do not simply receive information; we actively fill in gaps, infer causal connections, and construct imaginary worlds. This mental construction becomes even more evident in complex and participatory narrative formats. Alber (2025) extends this line of research by analyzing how these mental structures manifest in the reception of narratives such as video games or television series, where the agency of the player or viewer is crucial for the development and interpretation of the story.

An Expanding Field

Cognitive narratology has established itself as a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study, drawing from linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience. Its ability to analyze how basic mental processes such as memory, inference, and categorization shape the production and reception of stories makes it a vital area of research. The exploration of how these cognitive structures operate across multimedia formats, from oral myths to transmedia narratives, testifies to its relevance. Cognitive narratology not only helps us better understand stories but also provides insight into how our own minds function in making sense of reality through narrative.

Functions of Narrative

Narrative, beyond being a simple form of expression, fulfills diverse essential functions that impact both social and individual levels. This section explores the main functions attributed to it in academic literature, highlighting its role in the construction of realities, personal identity, and the organization of knowledge.

Social Function

Narrative acts as a fundamental pillar for social cohesion. Through it, communities construct and transmit the myths, ideologies, and values that define them. As Chang (2019) points out, collective narratives, such as national stories or foundational accounts, provide a shared framework of meaning that reinforces belonging and group identity.

Moreover, narrative is a key mechanism for social coordination and cooperation. Bouzigarene et al. (2024) argue that shared narratives are crucial for establishing mutual expectations and regulating social behavior. These stories, by articulating what is acceptable and what is not, guide interactions and solidify the norms that hold society together.

Psychological Function

At the individual level, narrative plays a vital role in the construction and maintenance of identity. The ability to tell the story of our own life—an “identity narrative”—is fundamental for giving coherence and meaning to our experiences. Dailey and Browning (2014) explain that this personal narrative is not static but is constantly reinterpreted and rewritten throughout life, allowing us to integrate past events and project our future.

This function also has an important therapeutic component. The “illness narrative,” for example, enables individuals to make sense of their suffering, process trauma, and find a path toward healing. Reorganizing life events

into a meaningful story can be an empowering process that promotes psychological resilience.

Epistemological Function

Finally, narrative fulfills an epistemological function by helping us organize and understand the world. The human mind tends to perceive reality narratively, structuring events into sequences of cause and effect. According to Green (2019), this mode of thought allows us to transform fragmented information into coherent and meaningful knowledge.

Narrative is, in essence, a model for reality. By telling stories, we not only describe what happens but also explain why it happens, establishing relationships among events, characters, and ideas. This function is crucial for learning and knowledge transmission, since stories are easier to remember and understand than data without context.

Narrative Across Multiple Media and Contexts

Narrative is not limited to literature or oral tradition; its adaptability has allowed it to thrive across a wide range of contemporary media and contexts. This section explores how narrative has been transformed and diversified in the digital era and how it fulfills specific functions in fields as diverse as science and journalism.

Digital Narrative

The advent of technology has redefined the ways of storytelling. In the digital realm, narrative has evolved to harness the interactivity and connectivity inherent in new media. For example, De Fina (2021) explores how social networks have democratized the creation of personal narratives, allowing users to construct and share their identities through fragments of stories, photographs, and videos. This form of storytelling is characterized by being fragmented, collaborative, and often ephemeral.

In the world of video games and interactive formats, narrative goes beyond mere contemplation. According to Magliano, Higgs, and Clinton (2019), in these media, the user becomes an active participant in the story, making decisions that influence the development of the plot. This deep immersion generates a more intense emotional connection and a way of understanding narrative as an experience rather than as a static text.

Transmedia Narrative

Transmedia narrative is a particularly interesting manifestation of the evolution of stories in the digital era. This concept refers to the expansion of a single story across multiple platforms, where each medium contributes a new fragment and a different perspective to the narrative

universe. As Wilde (2019) explains, the goal is not simply to replicate the story but to enrich it, so that each piece of the narrative (a film, a comic, a video game, a web series) stands on its own but gains meaning when consumed together.

Punday (2019) elaborates on how this interconnectedness creates an immersive experience for the audience, who become explorers of the narrative universe, moving from one platform to another to assemble the complete picture of the story. This approach not only fosters active participation but also prolongs the life of the story and its characters far beyond the original format.

Scientific and Journalistic Narrative

Even in fields that prioritize objectivity and data, narrative plays an essential role. Scientific narrative, for example, is crucial for disseminating complex knowledge to the general public. Glozer et al. (2019) note that by framing scientific findings within a story, researchers can make abstract concepts more accessible, memorable, and ultimately more persuasive to non-specialist audiences.

Similarly, in journalism, narrative is a powerful tool for contextualizing events and connecting with readers. Hinck et al. (2019) argue that narrative journalism, by giving voice to personal experiences and contextualizing facts within a larger story, can generate deeper understanding and greater empathy. Instead of limiting itself to cold data, journalistic stories can reveal the human impact of events and provide a more complete meaning to the news.

4. Discussion

The literature review on narrative reveals a vast and multifaceted field of study, where diverse disciplines converge to understand this fundamental phenomenon. Through the synthesis of findings, the analysis of research gaps, the exploration of implications, and the suggestion of future directions, a deeper understanding of the power and versatility of narrative is consolidated.

Narrative emerges as a concept that transcends the mere definition of a story. From the classical narratology of Genette and Greimas, which focused on the formal structures of the text (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019), to cognitive narratology that conceptualizes it as a mental model for organizing experience (Babelyuk et al., 2021), the literature shows an evolution in the understanding of narrative, shifting from being an object of analysis to an active process. These approaches, although distinct, are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other. Classical structural principles (Piper et al., 2021) remain essential tools for understanding how the mind processes

and gives coherence to a story, as suggested by the cognitive perspective (Alber, 2025).

Furthermore, narrative has been shown to fulfill essential functions across multiple domains. At the social level, it fosters community cohesion and transmits values (Chang, 2019). At the psychological level, it shapes our identity and serves as a therapeutic tool (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Epistemologically, it helps us organize the world and make sense of knowledge (Green, 2019). In the media sphere, narrative has evolved from linear forms to interactive and transmedia formats, where narrative universes expand across platforms (Punday, 2019; Wilde, 2019), challenging traditional conceptions of authorship and reception. Narrative, even in fields such as journalism and science, acts as a vital bridge between information and human understanding, making data more accessible and meaningful (Glozer et al., 2019; Hinck et al., 2019).

Despite the richness of the literature, there remain areas requiring further exploration. A notable gap lies in collective identity narrative in the digital era. While research has examined how social networks enable the construction of personal identities (De Fina, 2021), less attention has been given to how shared narratives on these platforms shape group identities in real time, particularly in the context of polarization and misinformation.

Moreover, although cognitive narratology has advanced in understanding how the brain processes linear narratives, research on the mental processes behind non-linear and interactive narratives (such as those in video games or virtual reality) is still incipient. Greater understanding is needed of how user agency affects narrative memory and immersion in these new formats.

The findings of this review have significant implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the fusion of structuralist, post-structuralist, and cognitive approaches could lead to a unified theory of narrative that integrates form, context, and mental process within a single framework. Such a theory could provide a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

Practically, the findings are relevant to various fields. For strategic communication, understanding how narratives shape collective beliefs is crucial for designing more effective and ethical campaigns. In education, the use of narrative could enhance knowledge retention and critical thinking. In mental health, the narrative approach could strengthen therapies, enabling patients to restructure their life stories in a more empowering way.

This literature review is limited to academic publications from the last ten years, which, while ensuring the currency of the analysis, may exclude classical theoretical and conceptual developments that laid the foundations for narrative studies. Likewise, the review was restricted to sources

in Spanish and English, meaning that perspectives from other linguistic and cultural traditions were not included. These methodological decisions, although necessary to maintain coherence and feasibility, imply that the discussion presented is not exhaustive and represents only part of the vast global field of narrative research.

Based on the identified gaps, several lines of research are suggested. Empirical studies examining the influence of viral narratives on social networks and their impact on group identity formation are recommended. It would also be valuable to investigate the cognitive processes of transmedia narrative, using neuroscience tools to understand how the brain integrates information from multiple platforms to construct a coherent narrative universe. Finally, exploring the effectiveness of narratives in promoting social change in fields such as sustainability or human rights could offer new perspectives on how to harness the power of stories to address global challenges.

5. Conclusion

This literature review has explored narrative as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond its superficial definition, revealing its fundamental role in human experience. Throughout the analysis, it has been demonstrated that narrative is not merely a form of expression but a key mechanism for the construction of reality, identity, and knowledge.

The journey through different narrative theories, from classical structuralism to cognitive approaches, has made it possible to understand how narrative is simultaneously a formal structure and a mental process. Its power in fostering social and psychological cohesion, as well as in organizing information in a data-saturated world, has been reaffirmed. Finally, it has been illustrated how narrative has evolved and adapted to new digital and transmedia media, demonstrating its versatility and ongoing relevance in contemporary communication.

This review contributes significant value to the field of study by offering a comprehensive and updated synthesis of the diverse conceptualizations, functions, and applications of narrative. Unlike other works that focus on a single theory or discipline, this article has succeeded in integrating perspectives from narratology, psychology, sociology, and media studies, providing a holistic vision and connecting points that are often studied in isolation.

Moreover, the identification of research gaps—such as the study of collective narratives in social networks or the cognitive processes in interactive formats—opens new and promising lines of inquiry. By proposing these future directions, the review not only summarizes current

knowledge but also serves as a roadmap for future academic exploration, consolidating narrative as a dynamic and constantly evolving field of study.

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