

Coherence

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1 Definition

As a technical term, as distinct from its use in cultural activities to denote a range of qualities deemed desirable (e.g. clarity, orderliness, reasonableness, logicity, “making sense,” and even persuasiveness), coherence has tended to be regarded as a textlinguistic (TL) notion. From its everyday senses, textlinguistic coherence has inherited some defining criteria, in particular the assumption that it denotes those qualities in the structure and design of a text that prompt language users to judge that “everything fits,” that the identified textual parts all contribute to a whole, which is communicatively effective. But there has always been a tension in the linguistic analysis of coherence, rooted in the recognition that TL “rules” for textual coherence (e.g. rules of anaphora, norms of paragraphing and paragraph structure) are inevitably general and therefore insensitive to the unique contextual pressures of the particular text, on the one hand, while on the other, judgments of coherence are very much based on what addressees assess as relevant and informative in the unique discursive circumstances of the individual text. This tension is often summarized as a distinction between (purely linguistic) cohesion and (contextualized) coherence: the former is neither necessary nor sufficient for the latter, even if it is normally a main contributory feature (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; Giora 1985). In broad terms, it is now widely recognized that coherence is ultimately a pragmatically-determined quality, requiring close attention to the specific sense made of the text in the cultural context. This might suggest that determining coherence is a simple matter of applying common sense in context; but narratives often go beyond common sense, that transcending being crucial to their importance and tellability, so that narratological studies of coherence suggest common sense is not a sufficient guide.

2 Explication

Although it is not usually foremost among the interests of narratologists, coherence is implicitly regarded as an important feature of narrative. All formalist, structuralist, or psycholinguistic modelings of story and discourse that propose any

kind of morphology or grammar (those of Propp, Barthes, Genette, Greimas, Mandler & Johnson 1977, Thorndyke 1977, Stein & Glenn 1979, to name only a selection) can be viewed as including elements regarded as essential to narrative coherence. For TL, it is often convenient to identify particular main subtypes of coherence, such as temporal, causal, and thematic coherence as well as topic-maintenance and -furtherance. Because of general expectations of unity, continuity and perseveration in story topic, coherent narrative seems to involve a healthy amount of repetition and near repetition (repetition with alteration), including forms of lexical repetition and semantic recurrence. Thus Chatman (1978: 30-1) mentions the assumption of perseveration of identity with respect to naming of characters (Jannidis → Character [1]) as a kind of coherence automatically relied on in narratives: if there is a sequence of mentions of Peter falling ill, later dying, later being buried, it is assumed these refer to one and the same Peter. Some sense of the continuity of existents—hence of assumed co-reference where there are multiple mentions of a single name—is the norm. On the other hand, abundance of quasi-repetitive language seems to be the cohesive corollary—in extended texts such as literary narratives—of the coherence requirement of unified connectedness. However, no simple standard of topic or thematic unity and continuity will apply generally. In actuality, in narratives as in other forms of discourse, the norm is for there to be multiple topics, complexly related to each other, so that the local absence of maintenance of topic A by no means creates incoherence (where topic B or C is being developed).

Perhaps more than anything else, narratological studies of coherence highlight the insufficiency of a “common sense” approach to the issue. It is perfectly true that stories that defy normal expectations about time, intention, goal, causality, or closure may fail to elicit interest and be judged incoherent or incomplete by some readers; but these departures from the norm, singly or jointly, do not invariably lead to incoherence. Similarly, narratologists recognize that a story that begins at the chronological end, then jumps to the chronological beginning, moves forward two years from that point, and then moves backward one month, and so on may be difficult to follow. Difficulties of reader-processing caused by achronological narration, or under-explained shifts in setting or character, even when extreme, do not invariably amount to incoherence, either. And, as McAdams (2006: 113) reminds us, norms concerning narrative coherence can vary considerably from one society or culture to the next; these expectations are also dependent on period and genre (cf. Jausss [1977] 1982 on “horizons of expectation” and Culler 1975 on “naturalization”).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

A history of the concept of narrative coherence must begin with mention of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which insists on completeness of plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end, unity of incident, the episode as central to tragedy, and structure by means of complication followed by unraveling or denouement: "the muthos must imitate a single, unified and complete sequence of action. Its incidents must be organised in such a way that if any is removed or has its position changed, the whole is dislocated and disjointed. If something can be added or taken away without any obvious effect, it is not intrinsic to the whole" (1416a 31-4). Other major landmarks in Western discourse on coherence in narrative or drama include promotion of the "three unities" in 17th-century neo-classicism (and put into practice in the plays of Corneille and Racine); Aristotle was invoked, but prescriptively, demanding unity of time, place, and action. In other dramatic traditions, however, such restrictive requirements were freely ignored (e.g. Shakespeare). In the modern period, Poe's ([1846] 1982) poetics of composition, with its advocacy of brevity, hidden craft, and unity of effect, can be mentioned with reference to narrative coherence, as can Propp's ([1928] 1968) morphological modeling of the folktale, Lämmert's (1955) "forms of narrative construction," Stanzel's ([1955] 1971, [1979] 1984) narrative situations, several of the articles in the landmark volume 8 (1966) of the review *Communications*, Prince's (1973) narrative grammar, van Dijk's treatment of text grammars (1972), and some work by Todorov ([1971] 1977, [1978] 1990) as well as his foundational narrative grammar of the *Decameron* (1969).

3.1 Coherence in Textlinguistic Studies

Halliday & Hasan's (1976) study of cohesion in English is often cited as a pioneering enquiry into the key resources in a language for underpinning textual coherence, indeed for the creation of genuine text. They look chiefly at inter-sentential grammatical mechanisms (e.g. means of co-reference via personal and indefinite pronouns, projecting of relatedness via retrievable ellipsis, use of sense-conveying sentential conjunctions), and they also comment, less systematically, on how texts display coherence by elaborate means of lexical collocation and association. Despite a generally enthusiastic welcome for their work, linguists were quick to emphasize that cohesion seemed neither necessary nor sufficient for textual coherence (particularly in the case of short, deeply situationally-embedded "texts"). More importantly, Halliday & Hasan, like other grammarians, do not fully address the specific demands of cohesion and coherence of narrative. De Beaugrande & Dressler (1981) remains an important and still influential overview of text structure which delineates seven standards of "textuality": (a) cohesion (mutually connected elements of the surface text); (b) coherence (the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text); (c) intentionality (instrumentalizing of

cohesion and coherence according to the producer's intention); (d) acceptability (use or relevance of the cohesive and coherent text to the receiver); (e) informativity (degree to which the occurrences of the text are (un)expected or (un)known); (f) situationality (relevance of a text to a situation); (g) intertextuality (presupposed knowledge of one or more previous texts).

There are many exemplifications, in the linguistic and discourse analytic literature, of discourse deemed to have cohesion without coherence, or the reverse. One of the better known comes in Brown & Yule (1983), where the doorbell rings at the apartment of a couple, A and B. A says to B: "There's the doorbell." B replies: "I'm in the bath." Here, the total absence of textual cohesive links between the two utterances does not prevent B's response being entirely coherent. Brown & Yule ascribe the coherence of the AB exchange above to assumed "semantic relations" between the utterances, which relations must lean heavily on familiar schemata or cultural "scripts." Such mental challenges seem quite slight, however, by comparison with the challenges to sense-making posed by contemporary fictional narration and dialogue by writers like DeLillo (e.g. in *Underworld*) and Mamet (e.g. the opening of his play *Oleanna*, in which just one half, highly elliptical, of a lengthy telephone conversation is accessible to the playgoer or reader). And these texts in turn are considerably more accessible, coherence-minded, than many narrative poems published during the last hundred years.

Innumerable linguists have grappled over the years with the topic of discourse coherence and its bases. One of the richer overviews remains that of Brown & Yule (1983), which contains many observations oriented to helping clarify what makes for discourse coherence (a more recent introductory text, also containing valuable discussion of coherence, is Georgakopoulou & Goutsos [1997] 2004). Brown & Yule emphasize the inherent contextualization that accompanies any verbal text and the role of normal expectations, shaping memories of past verbal material and the initial efforts at interpreting newly-encountered language.

The sections of Halliday & Hasan (1976) devoted to lexis can be seen as an early attempt to systematize Firth's collocational textlinguistic thesis; also relevant is the work of Sinclair & Coulthard (1975). Firthian collocational ideas have recently been elaborated in a different direction in Hoey's theory of lexical priming (2005), which argues that for a large number of texts conforming to one genre or another, language users are primed to expect certain patterns of word-choice, appearing at certain points (and not others) in the sentence, in the paragraph, and in the discourse structure. But as already indicated, linguistic form is not always necessary to achieve coherence: "part of discourse competence involves an ability to discover discourse coherence where it is not evident in the surface lexical or propositional

cohesion" (Stubbs 1983: 179).

Citing the doting parents of babbling infants as simply an extreme example of "interpretive charity," Brown & Yule (1983) emphasise the human bias in favor of assuming a coherent message amenable to coherent interpretation. Addressees "naturally" attribute relevance and coherence to any text or discourse until evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Echoing Grice (1975), they argue that a rational assumption of relevance has shaped any speaker's (or writer's) contribution. Where an utterance's relevance, orderliness, informativeness and truthfulness is not obvious, a search for their covert presence is warranted. A corollary of this is that a speaker or writer can be assumed to be continuing to speak or write of the same spatiotemporal setting and the same characters, unless a change is explicitly signaled. Most fundamentally, humans "naturally assume coherence, and interpret the text in the light of that assumption. They assume, that is, that the principles of analogy [things will tend to be as they were before: MT] and local interpretation [if there is a change, assume it is minimal: MT] constrain the experience" (Brown & Yule 1983: 66-7). For such reasons, Yaron has argued that analysts should calibrate texts in terms of their displaying "high or low degrees of *explicit* coherence. Differentiating thus would make it possible to include among coherent texts those that the reader has imbued with implicit connections" (Yaron 2008: 139). As Bublitz (1999: 2) recognizes in his somewhat negatively-phrased definition, coherence is "a cognitive category that depends on the language user's interpretation and is not an invariant property of discourse."

We should not overstate the contrast between those who study coherence as a linguistic property of texts and those who focus on the discourse reception and the addressee's attributing of coherence to a text, guided by cultural norms, cognitive scripts and schemata. There is often no fundamental opposition between the two approaches, but rather a division of labor and of disciplinary interest; some contributions attempt to combine TL and cognitive or receptionist concerns (e.g. certain approaches to narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [2]), Emmott 1997 on comprehension, Toolan 2009 on narrative progression). Ultimately, very much the same point can be made regarding coherence in narratives and narration as is made concerning narratological accounts of events and eventfulness (Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [3]). In the latter, the point is made that many accounts are vulnerable to the criticism that they appeal largely to textual structure, whereas ultimately cultural norms and expectations cannot be excluded from the calculation of eventfulness (see Hühn 2008). Similarly, an entirely text-immanent treatment (or grammar) of narrative coherence seems only locally possible, relative to particular genres or culture-specific types of narrative, rather than universally valid. And even here, like any grammar, the norms are susceptible to variation and change. Thus

anything approximating a grammar of narrative coherence will sooner or later fail, by virtue of its insensitivity to context. Lesser & Milroy (1993) make this point concerning discourse coherence generally: notwithstanding certain kinds of familiar scripts and stereotyped situations, top-down models which attempt to extend syntactic analytic methods, by postulating a set of rules by reference to which discourses can be judged ill-formed or coherent, have tended to fail. Discourse and discourse coherence is so often a joint production, influenced by context and assumed background knowledge, that decontextualized standards for the specifying of coherence are unsatisfactory.

For all the above reasons, we must conclude that coherence and full interpretation of a text often requires that we have access to more than the text alone. As Georgakopoulou & Goutsos ([1997] 2004: 16) note, we often need to know “who the text-producer is, what the intended audience is, what the time and place of text-production and reception are [...] and the purpose or function of the text in the speech community in which it has been created.” One of the challenges and interests of much literary narration, however, lies in the radical under-specification or unreliability of answers to many of these questions. Literary narratives give rise to much-debated uncertainty concerning “who speaks?” in particular stories or passages, where and when events are reported to have taken place (in which storyworld?), and for what purpose; much of this is dependent on genre and text-type conventions and their cultural and historical variation.

3.2 Degrees of Coherence

There are degrees of TL cohesion, and more importantly, according to addressee judgments, degrees of coherence, ranging from the minimal to the maximal. Additionally, broad user assumptions about the sub-type of text involved help to guide or constrain coherence norms and expectations. In the case of narratives, such generic norms include the presence of story or plot, of an inter-related event sequence, of focus on one or a few characters undergoing change, and of a situation of stability developing a disequilibrium following which a renewed but altered equilibrium emerges (closure).

As implied above, there are arguably minimal and maximal notions of coherence, as this concept has been developed and applied in linguistics generally and narrative studies in particular. Minimal or basic coherence is that property attributed to sequences of utterances or sentences, in a particular context of speaking or writing, which prompts participants or observers to judge that the full sequence “makes sense,” fits together, and forms a (spoken or written) text. The implied contrast is with randomly assembled phrases or sentences or utterances having no discernible

sense of connection between them, being merely the parts from which various (different) texts might be assembled. Any text is coherent or projects coherence if it is interpretable as parts comprising an effective or useable whole. The more particular interest here is in what constitutes a whole *narrative* text (as distinct from a text of no particular kind). An immediate complication, in the creation or designing for coherence in texts generally, and perhaps especially in narratives, is the elliptical, the implied, the unsaid but inferable or adducible (such that a text has a *covert* wholeness). Prototype theory (Rosch 1978; Bortolussi & Dixon 2003) has been shown to be relevant to projections of narrative coherence; typification as an interpretive resource is very important in Stanzel [1955] 1971; and many approaches to inferability and its putative steps or degrees have been proposed: see Ingarden ([1931] 1973) on reading as the creation of coherence; cf. also Schmid (2003) on narrativity and eventfulness.

A maximal notion of coherence is invoked where analysts demand that all the segments of a text (however that segmentation is imposed: e.g. sentence by sentence, or shot by shot or scene by scene in film, or in some other way) fit together in multiple respects, to the point that every segment is deemed an indispensable part of the whole. But such an absolute standard is neither usual nor even optimal. Longer or more complex narratives where every segment fits and is indispensable for coherence seem rare. In a novel or film of normal length, absence or presence of a few sentences or of a few shots—provided they are semantically congruent with adjacent material—rarely causes significant damage to the work's perceived coherence; this would accord with general linguistic principles of acceptable ellipsis and redundancy: not everything needs to be “spelled out” in communication (interpreters can tolerate reasonable gaps), but iterative statement is also often acceptable.

It may be that coherence is analogous to the main load-bearing structure of a house, by contrast with various walls and materials whose present or absence has little or no effect on the robustness of the main building. By that reasoning, where the wall between the lounge and the study is non-load-bearing, one might be inclined to say that “on coherence grounds” it does not matter whether the wall is present or is removed. And yet one might immediately make the rejoinder that, on the contrary, a study without a wall sealing it off from the noisy lounge, the site of informal sociality, is no longer a fully coherent or coherently-functional study. So the limits and scope of coherence, in buildings and in texts, is by no means a settled question.

3.3 Coherence in Psychological Studies

In the psychological literature relating to narrative representations, coherence is

viewed as established by means of a collaboration of the text (spoken or written) and the receiving mind of the listener or reader. But the reader's mental contribution is judged essential, so that coherence is in effect "a mental entity" (Gernsbacher & Givón 1995: vii). A text is deemed coherent if it is judged intelligible, with "no required material or information missing." Immediately a clarification is needed, however: by "missing" here is meant "total absence from the text" without reasonable possibility of retrieval by means of ellipsis-detection, inference, attention to relevant context and background knowledge, or similar textually-facilitated means. So the key contrast here, with respect to coherence, is between contextually retrievable relevant information, and contextually unretrievable relevant information: the more there appears to be of the latter, the less coherent the narrative will be. But there seems to be no possibility of a fully autonomous and generalizable set of prescriptions as to what will count as relevant but unretrievable in any particular case, even if addressee attention to prototypical narrative patterns, genres, sub-genres, scripts, and cognitive frames can help to delimit the problem space.

Narrative coherence is often regarded as the representation (or the possibility of producing a representation) of the narrative under scrutiny as conforming to a "grammar" for the presentation, in licensed sequence, of a series of related events and states. But under a second definition it is the representation (or possibility of representation, by the reader/listener) of particular relations between the segments of a narrative: e.g. seeing one segment as a consequence following a reported cause, a further segment as an emotional response to a reported consequence, and so on. Much psycholinguistic work on narrative is devoted to exploring the kinds and richness of inferencing that readers make in the course of interpreting stories (cf. Emmott 1997; Emmott et al. 2006; Gerrig 1993; Goldman et al. eds. 1999).

3.4 Creating a Storyworld

A more contemporary narratological approach to coherence might be derived from the cognitivist idea that for full understanding and experiencing of a narrative, the interpreter must reconstruct a storyworld (Ryan 1991; Gerrig 1993; Herman 2002, 2009) or mental model, a rich projection of the entire, developing situation in which events, characters and their variously motivated actions are embedded. Where such reconstruction or imagining is thwarted (e.g. by narratorial or character-derived vagueness, unreliability, inconsistency, or even self-contradiction), then the sense of coherence is undermined. In these respects, character is perhaps the most striking domain in which coherence within the storyworld normally needs to be protected by the author: recent work on characterization and narrative comprehension (Margolin 1983, 1990; Culpeper 2001; Emmott 1997; Werth 1999; Schneider 2001) has done

much to chart how interpreters draw on a text's characterizations, in interaction with the given or assumed background and non-specific real-world knowledge, to understand and evaluate characters.

Also relevant here is the cognitive narratological idea of a narrative storyworld (Herman 2002, 2009). But even the assumption of co-reference among uses of a proper name can be overridden, as in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, where there are two quite distinct Quentins (uncle and niece). As Chatman implies, much of this inferencing is basic interpretation; it may be that narrative coherence is threatened or damaged where "basic inferencing" of this kind cannot easily or obviously apply. Beyond consistency of naming, each character will be expected to be physically, emotionally and mentally self-consistent—within reasonable or narrated limits. Thus a character at the close of a novel may not be quite the same person disclosed, many years earlier in the storyworld, at the novel's opening; but the changes that are apparent are congruent with the experiences also narrated, and the ambient conditions within the storyworld (if those conditions are fantastical or magical realist ones, where a dead character can return to life in some other form, then coherence may well be maintained). In short, the criteria of coherence may change with genre, epoch, and culture.

3.5 The Pragmatics of Coherence: Cooperativeness and Relevance

Despite the steady advance in the descriptions of narrative coherence from TL, cognitive linguistics, and psycholinguistics, it is to pragmatics that many narrative analysts look for a general account of coherence, and to the seminal ideas of Grice in particular. Grice (1975) propounds the idea that participants in a conversation are predisposed to cooperate, making their contributions—all other things being equal—suitably truthful, informative, relevant, and orderly; and, knowing this, one party to a conversation is entitled and can be expected to derive what Grice called "conversational implicatures" where another's contribution seems intentionally to diverge from reasonable truthfulness, informativity, relevance, and orderliness. What Grice applied to idealized conversational meaning, others have extended with due qualifications and adjustments to other uses of language, including literature (e.g. Pratt 1977; Watts 1981) and narrative (Bhaya Nair 2002; Bortolussi & Dixon 2003). On a par with Gricean conversational implicature is the notion of narrative implicature: the reader of a narrative assumes the general cooperativeness of the teller, and draws on powers of inferencing to fill out the sense of the information conveyed by the teller where these seems calculatedly incomplete or indirect. Following Grice, but moving in a more explicitly cognitivist direction, Sperber & Wilson ([1986] 1995), and some attempts have been made to develop a specifically

relevance-theoretical account of narrative implicature (Walsh 2007).

If a coherent narrative is one in which there are sufficient overt or covert clues for the reader to see links, understand the text as a totality (i.e. the double logic of narration—a telling here and now of a unified sequence of events that happened then and there—is felt to be sustained), see a point and a tellability (Baroni → Tellability [4]), then an incoherent narrative is one in which such clues seem to be insufficient. And since coherence (like conversation cooperativeness) is such a strong norm, its absence in turn may give rise to strong reactions of frustration, annoyance, rejection of the text as “unnatural,” absurd, or valueless (irrelevant in the Sperber & Wilson sense, of yielding little or no benefits for the interpretive relevance-calculating efforts invested).

3.6 Narrativity, Tellability, and Coherence

Is narrative coherence essentially a matter of narrativity, substantially overlapping with the latter, such that a text that is judged high in narrativity will by the same token be high in coherence? Everything depends on how these terms are understood, and as one authoritative introduction states, discussions of narrativity can soon become “a tangled web” of differently emphasized elements (Abbott [2002] 2008: 25). For some, the focus is primarily on plot or event-progression, the sense of a narrative arc; others emphasize the creation of a storyworld; different again is Fludernik’s emphasis on narrativity as “mediated experientiality,” sourced in oral storytelling (for a recent overview of discussions of narrativity, see Prince 1999; for a thought-provoking rebuttal of narratology’s over-determining of progression, point, closure, etc., see Tammi 2005). Elsewhere, Fludernik treats narrativity as the quality of narrativehood that a reader can impose on a text by reading it as a narrative, calling that process narrativization (Fludernik 1996: 34). Abbott (Abbott → Narrativity [2]) discusses narrativity under four headings, and by implication four at least partly distinct aspects: as inherent or extensional; as scalar or intensional (perhaps the most widely-adopted conception); as varying according to narrative type or genre; and as a mode among modes. Mention should also be made of Pier & García Landa eds. (2008). The several understandings of narrativity on offer nevertheless suggest that it is a property of texts that is of a different order from coherence; texts can be high or low in coherence independently of their being high or low in narrativity.

Generic and cultural narrative norms concerning tellability, narrativity, event and eventfulness, and the nature of the narrator or implied author are crucial in the shaping of reception (on which the work of Iser [1976] 1978 was seminal). Norms of narrativity and narrative comprehension are discussed (in addition to the authors

cited above) by Kindt & Müller 2003; Culler 1975; Alber 2005; Emmott 1997. All the foregoing concepts are in part ways of addressing the issue of coherence in narrative, and all point to the difficulty of teasing apart what can be called the intensional and the extensional aspects of narrative coherence, or of making a distinction between what it consists in and how it is produced. Regarding the latter, reference can be made to patterns of grammatical and lexical cohesion at the level of *récit* or *discours*, and to the normal expectation of multiple connections in the projected storyworld and in the sequence of incidents (chiefly at the level of *histoire*); similarly, continuity in the schemata (frames or scripts) activated on the *discours* level and in the references to the context, is usual. But it remains controversial to claim that they are essential.

3.7 Challenges to Coherence

One form of challenge to coherence is, significantly, almost a design feature of modern literary narratives: free indirect discourse. Being “unspeakable” sentences, radically divided or indeterminate between two deictic centers of utterance or footing, free indirect discourse text is inherently problematic on first encounter. No less challenging is metaphor. Where metaphor is intended but fails to be detected by the reader or listener, the perception of coherence will be put to the test; on the other hand, a reader’s ability to interpret superficially unconnected entities or processes as metaphorical can enable the recognition of coherence. Besides metaphor, milder threats to coherence include hyperbole, litotes, irony, sarcasm, and metalepsis (Pier → Metalepsis [5]). Lying and misrepresentation often constitute an attempted counter-coherence, perhaps a coherence that seems more compelling or rewarding than the truth (cf. Iago’s wicked storytelling to Othello), so perhaps need not be covered here as a *threatening* of coherence, but a manipulation of it. Different again, and much more troubling for the reader/addressee, is the narration which is or is suspected of being unreliable. With unreliable narration, the reader is able to reconstruct two or more coherent versions of events and their motivation. But by their very nature, each coherent version implies the false coherence of the others. Another kind of challenge to perceptible coherence can come in a narrative centered upon the unfamiliar equipment and discourse of some specialist field or activity (neurosurgery, fly fishing, electronic engineering), to the point that the average addressee has only limited understanding of “what is going on.”

One of the most basic of all challenges concerns continuity of topic: the sense that whatever a narrative is judged to be “about,” it is consistently about that person or situation, without digressions or irrelevances. But typically, literary narratives are sufficiently multidimensional that, at any transition point, a multiplicity of relevant discursal continuations can reasonably be made and so must be chosen from.

Flouting of the simplest topic-continuity and -progression does not invariably lead to incoherence (cf. *Tristram Shandy* as an early novelistic testing of topic and narrativity expectations). Lack of inferrable topic-attentiveness, in subsequent narration, may be grounds for suspecting incoherence, but not conclusive grounds if, subsequently, some more global or macro-textual perspective can “repair” the textual situation by seeing a macro-thematic relevance among the seemingly unrelated material.

What is the opposite of coherence, the greatest challenge to narrative coherence? It is common to cite “texts” comprising randomly concatenated sentences, with perhaps equally random sequencing of unconnected words within those sentences, as exemplifying incoherence. By no reasonable means can the reader detect any covert sense in or behind the text; no hidden chain of unfolding events can be found. But another kind of coherence-challenge is presented by the narrative in which continuities of character, time, place, and event-chain are accompanied by “senseless” tragedy or comedy: the hero abruptly kills his lover without a shred of motivation or justification; or the wealthy main character is suddenly and inexplicably showered with untold wealth. These are such challenges to narrative expectation and norms of causation as to destabilize coherence-patterns concerning content, rather than form. What are at issue here are not forms of irrationality or immorality (there need be no lack of coherence—and plenty of interest and tellability—in narratives driven by these), but seemingly purely random unplanned, unplotted sequencing of events leading to an “unfitting” outcome. In such narratives containing absurd or “senseless” tragic or comic reversal, there is no *prima facie* incoherence, so they are often shunned on grounds of tellability and verisimilitude (even though we know that “inexplicable” tragedy or comedy are not uncommon in the real world).

One means of further exploring coherence and its apparent absence is by trying to pinpoint the source of “incoherence” (where alleged) in notorious cases, such as Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* or the films of David Lynch (e.g. *Mulholland Drive*), or e. e. cummings’s poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (Cummings 1991). This nine-stanza poem, despite its interpretive challenges to the reader, is widely felt to tell a coherent narrative about a generic young couple, anyone and no-one, and indeed the poem was adapted into a short film by George Lucas. But there are textual characteristics which at first seem to militate against narrative coherence, such as the listing and chanting, and a general uncertainty as to “what happens.” Despite various textual markers and cues which seem not to guarantee particularity of agentive existents (characters) or a clear sequence from opening lack to attempted final completion, skilled readers find enough here to impose just such a narrativity frame on the text, and thus to naturalize it as adequate and tellable narrative. The

naturalizing interpretive procedure is essentially probabilistic: given the kinds of genre-reflective clues in the poem, story or film under scrutiny, including particularity and continuity of settings, characters, events, and perceptibility of change of state, the whole is judged to make more sense when treated as a narrative than if not. Whatever the mode in which a narrative appears, more local coherence or processing challenges can be presented where the teller has opted for extensive narrative ellipsis, cutting, or gaps. Striking the most satisfactory balance between what is explicitly told or shown and what is left unsaid or unshown but to be inferred is as much an art as a science, and again will vary with audience, culture, and narrative literacy.

A different kind of challenge is presented by the following brief narrative: *The lone ranger rode off into the sunset and jumped on his horse*. This sentence is used in the pragmatics literature to exemplify the conventional sequential implicature of “and” (over and above its atemporal conjoining function, as in “eggs and bacon” or “buy and sell”). But if we judge the report to be narratively incoherent, on the grounds that the ranger must have jumped on his horse before riding off into the sunset, then this highlights the special coherence demands always created by the “double-logic” of narration (built on a sequence of events which are potentially reportable via a different sequence of textual or filmic segments). Because the narrative discourse, whatever its anachronies and shifts of voice or viewpoint, is ultimately matched to a projected (imagined) prior event-sequence story, it cannot radically misrepresent that story without risking incoherence.

3.8 Perceived Coherence

Coherence must be not merely local (i.e. appropriate anaphoric or cohesive links between sentences), but global (appropriate relevance of most if not all sentences to an overarching theme or purpose; cf. Reinhart 1980; Kintsch & van Dijk 1978; Goldman et al. eds. 1999). However, one must be guarded about assuming that continuity alone (however defined) is what differentiates a text from “a random sequence of sentences (a non-text)” (Charolles & Ehrlich 1991: 254). A large body of poetry with greater or lesser degrees of narrativity (and not just postmodern poetry) challenges our canons of continuity without being dismissable as non-text or incoherent. And as a rule of thumb, we can postulate that where some form of more global coherence is detectable, this will override or displace local discontinuities or incoherences. Furthermore, human language-users can be remarkably resourceful in making sense (global coherence) even where none is immediately apparent, e.g. by means of re-contextualizing or interpreting selected items or events metaphorically (a literary theoretical term for such processes is “naturalization”; cf. Culler 1975: 134–60; equally relevant is Fludernik’s 1996 conception of “narrativization”).

Like beauty, coherence seems finally to be perceptual, in the eye or mind of the beholder. We preferentially look for “just one thing” to be narrated, in all necessary detail, and “completely.” This may involve a shifting of attention among numerous different things (characters, places, times, etc.), provided they can eventually be seen to interrelate. By contrast, a seemingly unmotivated and unpredictable shifting of attention through a multiplicity of things is usually rejected as producing narrative incoherence. If at the ideational core of most narratives some kind of lack or problem is introduced, and an attempted resolution or completion of that lack or problem is then reported, then forms of narrative that are judged to move far from this core will tend to be seen as less than fully coherent. Narrative’s emphasis on a unifiable lack and its attempted resolution means that there is a natural place here for the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, as further standard measures of coherence (to be departed from where this is justified).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

What may have escaped notice is the borrowing of the more particular notion of “narrative coherence,” which is now frequently invoked in (inter alia) theories and practices of psychiatry (Fiese ed. 2001), human psychology (McAdams 2006), psychotherapy (e.g. Linde 1993; Roberts & Holmes eds. 1999), and work with high-functioning autistic or learning-disabled children and adults (e.g. Diehl et al. 2006).

Some of the most interesting use of the notion of coherence in narrative studies has focused on the macrothematic and the largest long-term consequences of a series of events. For example, life-story analyses often focus on the coherence within those stories (Linde 1993; Ochs & Capps 2001) in the course of understanding experiences which are problematic or painful: coherence is integral to the therapeutic or identity-affirming work undertaken (e.g. illness narratives: Hawkins 1993). And analysts of narratives who are most interested in the ideological, political or ecological positions depicted in life stories and many other public narratives evaluate their consistency and fairness by reference to coherence.

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