Narrativity and Textuality in the Study of Stories

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate some of the defining elements of narrative. The underlying assumption of my discussion is that the terms "narrative" and "story" do not refer to clearly defined, self-enclosed genres. Rather, they are part of a spectrum which embraces all forms of texts. Similarly, narratives and stories are not independent discourses but rather are an integral part of virtually all forms of discourse, be it day-to-day conversation or more specialized discourses. In order to analyze the relationship between narratives and other modes of discourse, we introduce the concept of narrativity. Narrativity refers to a collection of textual attributes. All texts exist along a continuum of greater or lesser narrativity, depending on the number and prominence of the narrative attributes they contain. When we refer to a text as a story, we mean that it contains a critical mass of narrativity. Most theorists of narrative have defined narrativity purely in terms of "dynamism"–that is, the extent to which a text portrays transition and change. To this I have added the quality of "specificity". Specificity refers to the extent to which a text focuses on a particular time or place, a unique event, or individual people and objects. Many if not most texts contain a certain degree of narrativity. We established, however, that in order to be considered a story the text must present a sequence of at least two interrelated events that occurred once and only once in the past. In other words, a story must have a certain degree of dynamism in that it portrays the transition from at least one event to another. It must also have specificity at least to the degree that the text narrates events that happened at a fixed time in the past. This theoretical framework allows us to chart the relationship between different types of texts within a single discourse. It also gives us a vocabulary for discussing different parts of more complex narratives which often contain elements of varying narrativity. The paper then goes on to discuss the concept of narrative structure, arguing that narrative structure is not an inherent attribute of narrative texts but a framework that the reader imposes on the text in order to make it intelligible in terms of other narratives. The structure which the reader abstracts from a given narrative will be heavily dependent on the context of the narrative with in a wider discourse.

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1 Introduction

In this paper I would like to share with you some of my conclusions about the nature of narrative that have emerged from my work on narratives found in the Mishnah, the 3rd century CE Jewish legal compilation.[1] Some of the key features of Mishnaic narrative

[1] My work on this topic if fully presented in my book [21].

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make my ideas particularly relevant to efforts to model the process of story comprehension. First, stories in the Mishna are very short, many no more than a single sentence. Such brief narratives allow us to focus on the most fundamental elements of narrative, without getting distracted or confused by elements present in more complex stories. Second, Mishnaic narratives are embedded within a larger discourse, that of early rabbinic law. This allows us to consider the relationship between stories and other linguistic forms and the way in which stories, outside of autonomous literary creations, tend to integrated into some larger discourse. Finally, Mishnaic stories fall into a particular category of brief, embedded narratives, namely, anecdotes. Anecdotes are accounts that are used as rhetorical tools to reinforce a particular point. One of the fundamental problems of discussing the process of narrative comprehension is the fact that it is difficult to talk about the "meaning" of a particular story. Stories are by definition indirect means of conveying meaning. Most stories possess multiple potential meanings and implications. Which meanings any given reader will perceive in a story is highly dependent of perspective and context. This makes it very difficult to define a "correct" understanding of a story and its implications. Since anecdotes are generally deployed within a wider discourse for a specific purpose, it easier to fix a single primary meaning to a given anecdote. This in turn makes it easier to set a standard of what constitutes "understanding" a given story. I would like to deal with two main narratological issues, the definition of narrative as a linguistic product and the role of narrative structure in understanding stories.

2 Defining Narrative

Narrative is perhaps the most ubiquitous and multifarious of all literary forms. Stories, be they epic poems or modern novels, hold prominent places in the literary canons of virtually every culture. Yet storytelling is hardly the sole preserve of the belles lettres. Narratives are also an important feature of many other forms of discourse, including the study of law, medicine, history, and philosophy. William Labov went so far as to argue that "narratives are privileged forms of discourse which play a central role in almost every conversation" [15, p. 396]. We all tell stories in our day-to-day speech. Small children learn this craft as part of the normal process of language acquisition. Indeed, the potential for creating stories may well be one of the fundamental, universal characteristics of language [6, pp. 96–97]. A definition of the terms "narrative" and "story" must thus take into account the fact that these forms are often enmeshed with other linguistic structures and modes of discourse. On the other hand, such a definition must also allow for the richness and complexity of more developed, "literary" narratives. In order to understand how narrative relates to other forms of discourse, it is important to realize that the terms "narrative" and "story" do not refer to clearly defined, self-enclosed genres. Rather, they are part of a spectrum which embraces all forms of texts. This spectrum can be charted on the basis of what I call "narrativity". Narrativity refers to a collection of textual attributes. All texts exist along a continuum of greater or lesser narrativity depending on the number and prominence of the narrative attributes they contain. When we refer to a text as a "narrative" or a "story", we mean that it contains a certain critical mass of narrativity. However, the precise line between "narratives" and "non-narratives" is inherently arbitrary. I will present one possible definition of the term "story" as marking a key point of transition along the continuum of narrativity to be found in texts. Narrativity emerges from the confluence of two distinct elements in a text which I call "dynamism" and "specificity". "Dynamism" refers to the fact that narratives are fundamentally about transition, transformation, and change. "Specificity" indicates that narratives are rooted in the particular, focusing on individual characters and unique events,

and occur at demarcated points in time and space. Narrativity thus inheres in texts to the extent that they describe change and transition while at the same time focusing on the concrete, the specific, and the time-bound. In their definitions of narrative, narratologists overwhelmingly tend to focus on dynamism at the expense of specificity. For example, E. M. Forster, in his classic work Aspects of the Novel, suggests the following sentence as an example of a minimal story:[2]

> The king died and then the queen died of grief. [10, p. 116]

In his analysis of this text, Forster focuses exclusively on its dynamic aspects. For him, the salient qualities that make this text a story are that it is a "narrative of events arranged in their time sequence ... the emphasis falling on causality". [10, p. 116] This statement succinctly encapsulates all of the formal traits that collectively define the minimum requirements for dynamism in a narrative or story. First, Forster presumes that the constituent elements of narratives are "events".[3] For a text to be dynamic, something has to happen. Narratives are first and foremost the representation of happenings. Events are thus the fundamental building blocks of narratives. To be sure, it is not always a simple matter to break down a story into discrete events.[4] However, in relatively simple narratives such as those found in the Mishnah, a definition of "event" is possible. In such narratives, each time a narrative presents a verb that describes some action or change of state we have a representation of a narrative event. The complete event is represented by the entire clause in which the verb appears. See [17, p. 17]. Narrativity can thus be associated with the presence of dynamic verbs in a text.[5] In the case of Forster's story, we have two events each centered on the verb "died". The first event is "the king died". The second is "the queen died of grief". Returning to Forster's statement that a narrative consists of "events arranged in their time sequence", the next operative word in this phrase is "time". The dynamic nature of narratives demands that they portray the passage of time. This is done through the representation of at least two events in sequence, creating the illusion of a seamless continuum of time moving inexorably forward. In the case of the death of the king and queen, the reader does not merely experience two discrete events. Rather, through the phrase "and then", the reader follows the passage of time from the death of the king through the death of the queen. Finally, we come to the element of narrative which Forster calls "causality". Forster argues that the sentence "The king died and then the queen died" is not, despite its narrative elements, a narrative. In order to transform this text into a narrative, we must add the final clause, "of grief". True dynamism requires not only that the events follow each other sequentially but also that they be inherently interrelated. It is not sufficient that the death of the queen chronologically follows that of the king. The queen's death must follow from that of the king. This is what

[2] Forster makes use of a different set of terms than I do. Forster calls this text a "plot", in contrast to a "story", which for him refers to a set of events that lack causality. For the sake of clarity, I have replaced Forster's terms with my own.

[3] Aristotle already declared that "the plot is the mimesis of the action–for I use 'plot' to denote the construction of events". [12, p. 39].

[4] Suzanne Fleischman presents a useful survey of the critical discussion surrounding the question of "events" in narrative [8, pp. 97–100].

[5] However, as I argue in greater detail in my book, stative verbs still have a place in narratives. This is because, first, some stative verbs can be used to describe changes in state or status such as in the sentence "The king died and the queen was very sad.". Here the verb "was sad" clearly indicates that the queen only became sad after the death of the king and hence describes a change or transformation. Furthermore, sentences with little to no narrativity can certainly play a role in more complex stories. See [21, pp. 17–18, 20–21].

Forster and others call the need for "causality" in a narrative.[6] The term "causality" suggests a degree of inevitability and determinism that does not necessarily reflect the contingent manner in which narrative events often unfold. A better formulation of this requirement is presented by Binder and Weisberg, who state that a narrative must present "one event as standing in some relation of significance to a later event such that one is made meaningful by the other". [4, p. 221]. The authors make this statement in explicating the position of Arthur Danto. Taking my cue from these scholars, I will refer to the interrelationship of events in a narrative rather than using the more problematic term "causality". Taking Forster's definition we might thus posit that in order to be considered a "story" a text must possess the following "dynamic" characteristics: (1) It must be a representation of events (2) It must present two or more events in sequence and (3) these events must be inherently interrelated in such a way as to portray some change in the world represented by the text. Something is missing however. This quality of dynamism does not sufficiently describe the characteristics of texts we call "stories" or "narratives". To illustrate the problem, let us alter slightly Forster's paradigmatic story as follows:

> Kings die, and then their queens die of grief.

This text also fits Forster's definition of a story and it contains all of the dynamic elements that we have established as necessary for our definition of a story as well. Yet, most readers would agree that this text is in some way less of a story than Forster's original formulation. The missing element in this text is the quality that I call "specificity". Rather than referring to a specific, if totally anonymous king and queen like Forster's story, this new text purports to describe a general phenomenon which applies to any number of monarchs and their consorts in different times and places. Though we are not told either the names of the king and queen described by Forster, or when and where they ruled, the story clearing indicates that it tells of one and only one king and one and only one queen . The events described clearly happened once and only once. Stories thus need to do more than portray change. The must portray change taking place in a specific context in time and space, rather than in a generalized situation. It is not necessary that the time and locale of the story be disclosed. The important thing is that the story portrays one-time events regarding a definable group of individuals or objects. On the basis of this criterion we can fine tune our previous definition of a story as follows:

> A story is any representation of a sequence of at least two interrelated events that occurred once and only once in the past.[7]

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[6] Aristotle anticipates the need for causality at the end of Book 9 of his Poetics [12].

[7] Fleischman presents two similar definitions of a story which compliment my own. First she defines narrative in strictly linguistic terms. She defines the "constituent properties"of narrative as being "past time reference, perfective aspect, and a distanced, objective perspective on events that are realis, semelfactive (unique occurrence), and sequentially ordered". [12, p. 55]. Later, Fleischman quotes Susan Herring's previously unpublished description of a "prototypical narrative":

> The prototypical past tense narrative is concerned with events rather than static description, and the events are not narrated in random order but rather in a sequence which is iconic with the temporal order in which they actually occurred. ... Further, the completion of one event is implied by the inception of that which follows, a fact, which may give rise to an interpretation of aspectual perfectivity for the (simple) past tense where no other value is specifically indicated. ... The prototypical narrative is factual and time-bound, in that it chronicles a unique set of events, which took place at a specific point (or over a specific bounded interval) in time. There is also a sense in which the ideal narrator is objective, maintaining distance between him or herself and the events narrated in order to relate them as they actually occurred, in linear order with a minimum of personal evaluation or digression. It is this complex of features which, in the absence of indications to contrary, the "narrative past" typically evokes [8, p. 101].

Most stories contain more than this bare bones level of specificity. Stories in which the characters and their motives, as well as the setting and background of the story, are described in great detail would thus be considered to have a greater level of narrativity then less descriptive narratives. Similarly, stories that focus on specific individuals contain more specificity than those which portray large groups. One of the genre that presents the greatest level of specificity is certainly the novel. It is therefore hardly surprising that critics tend to identify specificity as a distinguishing feature of modern realistic fiction, rather than as a fundamental aspect of narrativity (see, e.g., [14, pp. 19–27] and [2, pp. 11–17]). However, the fact that we intuitively differentiate between Forster's example and my more general text demonstrates that specificity is something that we associate even with some of the simplest of narrative texts. One of the most important indicators of specificity is grammatical tense. Numerous critics have pointed out that the past tense, or more specifically the preterit, is the primary tense for storytelling.[8] Events in stories must happen once and only once at a definable point in time. Only the past tense can fully provide the sort of concreteness and specificity necessary for stories. Another way of further defining the need for specificity is that a story must recount events using verbs in the realis mood (see [15, p. 400]). That is, the events described by them are represented as having been realized in the material world. The reality portrayed by realis verbs may be fictional, nonfictional, or some combination of the two. The important thing is that the reader is called upon to imagine an actual situation, event, or story (see [20, pp. 98–99]). Realis accounts are to be distinguished from irrealis accounts, which "are verbalizations of experience that is unrealized either because it is predicated on taking place in the future or because it is in some sense hypothetical". [8, p. 104]. Unlike the need for dynamism, which is emphasized in one form or another by virtually all narrative theorists, the need for specificity has generally been minimized or even ignored by most students of narrative. Gerald Prince and Wendy Steiner are among the few narrative theorists who emphasize the need for specificity in narrative ([18, pp. 61–76] [22]).[9] I am aware of only one writer who presents a definition of narrative that focuses on specificity almost to the exclusion of dynamism; G. A. Gaballa writes: "A story is a specific event carried out by particular characters in a particular place." [11, p. 5]. It is hardly a coincidence that both Steiner and Gaballa are interested in narrative expressed through painting. Steiner emphasizes that, as an essentially atemporal medium, painting can possess only limited dynamism. The flip side of this is the clichéd observation that a picture is worth a thousand words. It is precisely a painting's ability to simultaneously present a vast number of details that makes it especially suited to the expression of specificity, even beyond that of written texts. The notion that a still life or landscape painting might possess narrativity might seem to stretch the normal uses of the word "narrative" and "story" beyond recognition. It is precisely my intent to provoke the reader to rethink conventional understandings of these terms. Ultimately narrative is about more than action and change. It is also about representing and engaging the particular and unique aspects of individuals, objects, and

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Both Fleischman and Herring add an additional narrative attribute to the two I propose, namely, that the events be narrated in an objective manner. This opens up the possibility of a third general category of narrative attributes, namely, that narratives are narrated. See also [13, pp. 209–32].

[8] Perhaps the earliest systematic attempt to demonstrate the integral relationship between the past tense and narrative was undertaken by Emile Benveniste with regard to the French language in [3]. Fleischman offers a more thorough, cross-linguistic study of the role of tense in narrative and the past tense in particular. See [8]. See also Roland Barthes' comments on the French passé simple in [1, p. 34]. Barthes emphasizes the role of the past tense in what I have called the dynamic nature of narrative.

[9] Fludernik's concepts of "narrativity" and "narrativization" are also ultimately rooted in the specific nature of the narrative experience, though she works from very different premises, [9, pp. 20–43].

situations. On the basis of these definitions it is possible to chart the relative narrativity of a set of texts along the axes of dynamism and specificity using primarily linguistic markers. Verbs that suggest action and change, especially when they coordinate the relationship between two nouns, or when they come in series, tend to mark dynamism. Specificity is marked by realis forms which limit time and place and the use of terms that reflect individuals or narrow categories. Closely related to stories are texts which contain dynamism but lack sufficient specificity to be stories, such as iterative narratives that tell of events multiple times and non-realis descriptions of interconnected events, such as hypothetical scenarios on the one hand and texts which are specific but lack dynamism such as detailed descriptions of static situations on the other. At the low end of the narrativity spectrum, we have general laws and principles which define general statuses and are meant to transcend time and place. Such an approach could have important implications for the study of how people identify and understand stories. By identifying the characteristics of stories in linguistic terms, we should be able to isolate those processes which are used to understand stories and the narrativity which inheres in a wide variety of texts that do not qualify as stories. The comprehension of stories thus becomes a sub-set of a wider problem. Similarly, it should be possible to teach a computer to recognize stories and to determine the relative narrativity of a text on the basis of these criteria, and perhaps, to interpret the text accordingly as well.

3 Narrativity in the Mishnah

In my book, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah*, I use the above definitions of narrative, story and narrativity to chart the range of forms used by the Mishnah, the early third century CE rabbinic legal text, to present legal rulings and principles. This Mishnah is distinguished by the way it intermixes forms of varying levels of narrativity within a single passage. I argue that this has significant implications for the way in which the Mishnah conceptualizes law and jurisprudence. To give the reader a sense of how my concept of narrativity can be applied to an individual text, I will present and give examples of the basic categories of mishnaic formulations in order from least to greatest narrativity. Many of these examples are quite technical and space does not allow for a full explications of the legal concepts that stand stand behind them. I believe however, that these text's basic lingiustic forms and their significance will still be accessable to the general reader. Mishnaic formulations break down into two basic categories, irrealis texts and realis texts. Irrealis texts are those that present hypothetical situations or actions. Since stories must be realis texts, which refer to an actual event in the past, irrealis texts are inherently limited in their narrativity. At most they can be narratives, representing a hypothetical sequence of actions. This category in turn divides into two subcategories: apodictic and casuistic formulations. Apodictic formulations state the law in an absolute manner, such as: "It is prohibited to do X" or "Y must be done." They generally contain only a single verb, and hence are generally not narratives. Their exact level of narrativity depends on a variety of factors, primarily the specificity and dynamism reflected in the verb forms used in the individual statement. A few examples of apodictic formulations from the tractate Shabbat, dealing with the laws of the Sabbath include:

1. The standard of one who bleaches, hackles, dyes, or spins [wool] is a full double sit (*Shabbat* 13:4).
2. Any knot that is not permanent entails no culpability (*Shabbat* 15:2).
3. [We] may tie a bucket [over a well] with a strap (*Shabbat* 15:2).
4. Aristocrats may anoint their wounds with rose oil (*Shabbat* 14:4).

Note that the first two examples state general principles and do not describe any sort of action, while the second two declare the permissibility of a specific action. Since they describe a hypothetical event, the latter two examples possess a higher level of narrativity.

The other primary form of irrealis formulation is the casuistic statement. These are "if ... then ... " statements that establish the law in a given situation. By definition they consist of two parts, the description of the case and the ruling. These two parts almost always constitute two interconnected events and are therefore narratives. Once again, the exact level of narrativity will depend on the verb forms used and other factors. Examples, once again from the laws of the Sabbath include:

1. [If] a fire broke out on a Sabbath night / food for three meals may be saved (*Shabbat* 16:2).
2. [If a gentile] made a stairway [on the Sabbath to descend by it [from a ship] / an Israelite may descend after him (*Shabbat* 16:8).

These texts can easily be transformed into stories by making a few changes in tense and mood.

Realis texts possess an inherently high degree of specificity since they refer to a specific event in the past. Not all realis texts, however, refer to a onetime event or events. The Mishnah sometimes presents individual events that occurred repeatedly such as,

> R. Eleazar ben Azariah's cow used to go out with a strap between its horns [on the Sabbath] (*Shabbat* 5:4).

More frequently, the Mishnah will present a series of events that were repeatedly enacted in sequence. I call these "ritual narratives" because they generally portray cultic procedures in the Jerusalem Temple. Such texts are often indistinguishable from actual stories on the grammatical level. It is only context that allows the reader to determine that the Mishnah is presenting events that took place repeatedly and not a series of one-time events.

Sometimes, the Mishnah presents a single one time event such as,

> It once happened that R. Gamliel said to his servant Tevi, "Go out and roast us the Passover offering on the grill" (*Pesahim* 7:2).

These texts have a high level of specificity but lack significant dynamism since they do not portray a chain of interrelated events.

Finally, we have full-fledged stories. Mishnaic stories portray the rabbis as issuing rulings and legal enactments or establishing precedents through their own public behavior. Examples include:

1. It once happened that R. Gamliel and the elders were traveling on a ship, when a gentile made a stairway for going down, and R. Gamliel and the elders descended by it (*Shabbat* 16:8).
2. It happened that the people of Tiberias placed a cold water pipe into a channel of hot water. The sages said to them: "On Shabbat, water heated thus is like any other water heated on Shabbat—it is forbidden to use it for washing or drinking. On festivals, it is like any other water heated on festivals—it is forbidden to use it for washing but permitted for drinking" (*Shabbat* 3:4).
3. Originally, they received testimony of the new moon from anyone. When the sectarians became corrupted, it was ordained that testimony should be received only from persons known [to the court] (*Rosh Hashannah* 2:1).

Note that the first story presents a precedent set by the actions of a great rabbi, the second presents a ruling regarding a specific case, while the third tells of a decree issued by the rabbis in response to a particular historical circumstance. In all of these cases, stories embed the law in specific human and historical contexts and ground it in the individual judgment of specific rabbis. This contrasts sharply with laws presented using low narratvity forms, especially apodictic formulations. These abstract forms present the law as being rooted in timeless principles rather than contingent circumstances and individual judgment.

Throughout the Mishnah these different types of formulations are juxtaposed and interwoven, creating an environment of constantly shifting narrativity and internal dialog between forms. Stories and narratives in the Mishnah are part of a larger discourse which contains a full range of narrativity. They can only be fully understood within this wider context.

4 Narrative Structure

One thing the above framework does not account for is the role of structure in narrative. The question of narrative structure has been central to the endeavor of narrative theory going back to the early twentieth century (see especially [19]). Traditional narratologists have generally viewed structure as a fixed attribute of the narrative text. In fact, virtually any text can be described using a variety of structural models.[10] Narrative structures are artificial devices that we use, consciously or unconsciously, in order to interpret stories. They are a way of retelling the story, focusing on those aspects of the story on which the interpreter sees as most important. The purpose of abstracting a structure from a narrative is to establish a basis of comparison with other stories. Comparing and contrasting stories with each other is perhaps the primary way through which we interpret them. Establishing a narrative structure is a process of removing the specificity from a text to a certain degree, leaving behind a series of interrelated events or sets of events described in a more general manner. By reducing the specificity of a narrative, we potentially reveal its wider significance or meaning. Take for example the following story:

> I was driving on Highway 1 from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv at 160 kilometers per hour. I was stopped by the police and given an 800 shekel ticket and had my license suspended for three months.

This story can be reduced to the following structure: (1) driving from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, (2) speeding, (3) being stopped by police, and (4) receiving a large fine and a suspended license. This structure establishes a causal relationship between speeding on the Jerusalem–Tel Aviv highway and being stopped by the police and punished. The moral of this story can thus be expressed as: “Don’t speed on Highway 1 in Israel; you risk being pulled over, getting a hefty ticket, and having your license suspended.” This story could also be translated into a less specific, more abstract structure such as: (1) driving well above the speed limit, (2) being stopped by police, (3) receiving a ticket. Reading the story through this structure, we receive a much broader lesson that applies far beyond a single highway in a particular country: “If you speed, you may be pulled over and fined.” Finally, we can remove all specificity from the story with the following structure: (1) violating the law, (2) getting caught, (3) being punished severely. Now the moral of the story is even broader: “Crime doesn’t pay.” As it stands, this anecdote carries all of the meanings listed above and more. However, when individuals tell anecdotes such as this in the course of a conversation or some

[10] On the priority of text over structure in the study of narrative see, [7, pp. 27–37]. See also [5, pp. 3–36].

other discourse, they usually have one meaning in mind as the primary one which they seek to communicate. Identifying which meaning is relevant is crucial to properly understanding a story in its context. The context tells the listener or reader which narrative structure to impose on the text. Thus if the context is “driving in Israel” the first structure would be appropriate. The second structure might be activated if the story were found in the midst of a discussion of speeding or traffic tickets in general and so on. It could also be that this story is not meant to make a more general point but rather serves to explain a state of affairs, such as the fact that the teller is in a bad mood. In such a case the interpreter would need to understand that this narrative is incomplete. The fact that the teller is in a bad mood, which was revealed before the story was told, is in fact is the final event of the story. By configuring the story in this manner the interpreter comes to understand that there is a causal link between the events described in the story and the teller’s mood. In the case of the anecdotes in the Mishnah which I studied, things were a little more complicated. Read in their immediate context these stories serve to teach a particular legal ruling or principle. Yet, when we consider these stories in the context of each other, they express a different message based on a different narrative structure. These stories all portray rabbis as teaching and handing down authoritative rulings. Viewed in this light, the stories collectively give a message that the rabbis are the authoritative transmitters and interpreters of the law. This illustrates the way in which applying multiple narrative structures to a single story can be neccesary to gain a full appreciation of the place of a story in its wider context.[11] On the whole, stories told in the context of a larger text, speech or conversation are deployed to make a specific point. Understanding that point by abstracting the proper structure from the story is crucial to competence in understanding narrative. It seems to me that it might be valuable for researchers seeking to understand or model the process of narrative comprehension to focus on anecdotes as they appear in the context of everyday speech. This would clarify what is meant by “understanding” a story. In the case of anecdotes, first and foremost, narrative comprehension means understanding the role of the story in the wider discourse in which it appears.

5 Conclusion

In sum, I would like to suggest the following postulates about stories:

1. The categories of “story” and “narrative” are essentially artificial. All texts exist along a continuum of narrativity.
2. Narratives and narrativity cannot be understood by focusing solely on the way in which they portray change. The fact that stories focus on the specific, on individuals and events bound by time and place is equally important to the concepts of narrative and narativity.
3. Stories very frequently appear as part of larger discourses. Understanding how stories function in these contexts is an import part of understanding how stories work.
4. Stories are inherently polysemous. They can be reduced to multiple different structures of meaning. Context provides the cues for knowing which structure was primarily intended by the storyteller.

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[11] The issue of context has played an important role in post-classical narratology and social scientific study of narrative. For a survey of some of the literature, see [16].

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