

The Narrative Turn in the Study of International Relations

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Abstract: *This paper reviews the narrative turn of international relations studies and the development of related theories, and summarizes narrative theories in international relations studies from the perspective of historical development. This study will further promote the development and deepening of narrative theories.*

Keywords: *Narrative Turn, Narrative IR studies, Narrative analysis, Discourse Studies*

1. Introduction

In what ways do actors in international relations perceive themselves and the other? In what ways do they construct their own identities and interact with others? Mainstream theories in international relations have not examined this question from a middle and micro perspective, thus leaving a theoretical 'vacuum'.

With the rise of the 'linguistic' turn in the social sciences, a 'linguistic turn' also emerged in the 1980s in constructivist theorizing on international relations. This marked the formalization of discourse analysis as a research agenda and methodology in the study of international relations, and opened up a new perspective on the study of cooperation between international actors.

The rise of linguistic studies, and narrative studies in particular, in international relations, moreover, points the way to the limitations of the analytical layers of mainstream theory that had been present in international relations studies. If mainstream international relations theory is a history of the gradual release of the actor's agency and a progressive focus on the 'human', then narrative studies in international relations is a fundamental return to a concern with the actor's self and agency. As Paul Ricoeur, a leading contemporary phenomenologist and hermeneutist, puts it, 'narrative is the fundamental meaning of human existence'. Narrative is also the fundamental way in which human beings distinguish ourselves from animals, human beings perceive themselves and read others through narrative or storytelling. Thus, it can be said that almost all actors must narrate in order to perceive the self and understand the other, and it is only through narration that actors can perform meaningful actions.

2. The Meaning of Narrative

Narratology began in the twentieth century and in its almost century-long development has never moved beyond the study of the novel. As the narrative nature of various ideological activities in social life (e.g., legal, political, educational, psychological, etc.) became more and more evident, a "narrative turn" in various disciplines began to emerge. The most prominent of these is the narrative turn in historiography in the 1970s and 1980s. In this regard, Louis Mink systematically summarized the basic points of the narrative turn in historiography in his book *Historical Understanding*. The influence of the narrative turn then spilled over into history and the humanities as a whole. However, there is no systematic consensus on the definition of narrative, but there is a common understanding: narrative means 'storytelling'. David R. Maines argues that people are homo narrans, that all socialized people are storytellers, and that narrative is therefore an essential attribute of human society. In fact, the 'narrative turn' in the humanities has forced narratology, with literature and fiction at its core, to open up its boundaries and emerge from the cocoon of fictional narrative to become a broad narratology, in order to seek the universal laws of narrative research.

So what is narrative? The definition of narrative in the broad sense of narrative is universally enlightening, as it is for the study of international relations. Narrative, in the broad sense, is the

organization by a subject of events involving characters into a symbolic text that can be understood by the recipient as having a temporal and meaningful orientation. Secondly, Bruner sees narrative as the various ways in which people 'tell events'. Carr argues that narrative is not only the way people describe events, but that narrative itself is part of the story. The broad definition of narrative, although brief, actually contains three main elements of narrative, namely the material, the narrator and the receiver. Narrative material is primarily the material of events or stories that have not been processed by the narrator and are the most authentic events. This is similar to the base text in the basic construction of narrative, which is a collection of alternative materials, a non-text that has not yet been reproduced by the medium, a 'real thing that happened'. Therefore, narrative materials are the "library of alternative combination of relevant elements" for narrators to narrate. Narrators will make choices according to their own conditions and purposes, form narrative texts with time and meaning dimensions, and spread them to the recipients, thus affecting the cognition and behavior of the recipients. In international relations studies, narrators are usually political subjects with narrative intentions, such as states, international organizations and domestic political elites, who selectively weave existing narrative materials (usually historical events and collective memories) in accordance with their own ideology, organizational culture or institutional environment, thus forming narrative texts with a temporal and meaningful orientation and influencing the recipient (the audience to whom the narrative is directed).

In humanities and social sciences research, there are two main ways of understanding the concept of narrative: one is narrative as a way of knowing, and the other is narrative as a way of interacting. In terms of narrative as a way of knowing, the famous French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard divided knowledge into narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge, and provided a pragmatic analysis of both. Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge is distinguished from scientific knowledge in terms of non-technical statements and non-indicative statements. In Lyotard's view, narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge are two equal kinds of knowledge, just two different kinds of language games. There is a special relationship between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge: scientific knowledge requires narrative for its own legitimacy, which means that it needs narrative to make clear the reasons why scientific knowledge is important. Therefore, we cannot deny the value of one kind of knowledge to another, and in fact, once we deny another kind of knowledge, we also deny this kind of knowledge itself. If Lyotard opens up the classification of narrative and scientific knowledge and clarifies the importance of narrative knowledge, the American psychologist Jerome Bruner further deepens the legitimacy of narrative knowledge and gives it a cognitive meaning as a form of knowledge that describes human experience. Under the influence of the dominance of scientific knowledge, it was widely believed that narratives such as poetry, drama, fiction and other storytelling could only serve to convey and generate emotion, but not to reveal the ideas and knowledge within them. Bruner's greatest contribution was to make clear that narrative knowledge not only conveys emotion, but is also a legitimate and effective way of knowing. For this reason, Bruner argues that there are two main modes of cognition in human society, which he calls paradigmatic cognition, based on logic-science, and narrative cognition, based on stories. The cognition is based on a story and a narrative cognition. Paradigmatic cognition operates by forming a system through categorization or conceptualization and establishing relationships between categories or concepts, and then exploring the common properties shared by members of the category or concept. In short, paradigmatic cognition seeks homogeneity. For example, when we conduct a complex study, we usually pre-determine measurement tools and observation instruments, pre-determine certain research categories, and then decide which things with common properties can be included in our research design and categories. In contrast to paradigmatic cognition, narrative cognition explores the uniqueness of human action. Past experiences, present situations and intended goals together constitute the source of human action, and therefore human action is unique and cannot be repeated exactly. Narrative cognition operates primarily through emplotted stories, which are intended to understand the richness and nuance of the meaning of human action. The elements of a story are linked by a plot, which constitutes an episode of life. Such episodes can, on the one hand, provoke emotional responses such as sympathy, anger or sadness, and on the other hand, provide us with a knowledge of why the people involved acted as they did, thus enabling us to understand and explain these actions. In short, narrative cognitive explanations are episodic in nature, exploring particular connections between events, whereas paradigmatic cognitive explanations are drawn out of their spatio-temporal context, exploring truth conditions that are universal in nature.

At the same time, narrative can also be used as a form of interaction. People tell stories to communicate, exchange, entertain and teach, among other things. Walter R. Fisher argues that humans perceive and understand the world through two main paradigms: the rational world paradigm and the narrative paradigm. The basic assumptions of the rational world paradigm are: 1). that humans are essentially rational beings; 2). that the paradigm through which humans make decisions and interact is

argument, with a clear structure of reasoning; 3). that the process of implementing arguments is governed by contextual rules, such as legitimacy, scientificity, publicness, etc.; 4). that disciplinary knowledge, the ability to argue and the skill to advocate rules in a given domain determine the degree of rationality; and 5). the world is made up of a series of logical problems that can be solved one by one through the application of appropriate analysis and the reasoning derived from argumentation. In short, argumentation as a result and a process is a way of becoming existential. Fisher argues that in debates on public moral issues, such as global warming and nuclear war, the general public has become a "layman" on these issues because experts and scholars generally use the rational world paradigm to explain these issues, and their reasoning and technicality are extremely rigorous and professional. One of the primary problems with such a rational world paradigm is that it does not lead the general public to know and understand these public moral issues, thus reducing the contribution of the general public to these public moral issues. In fact, however, Fisher found that although full understanding of issues such as global warming and nuclear warfare relied on a great deal of complex knowledge of physics or chemistry, people were still able to develop an awareness and understanding of these important issues and to discuss them. What are the factors that allow the general public to recognize and understand these issues? Fisher developed the concept of the narrative paradigm, which allows complex public moral issues to be understood and explained by the general public. The basic assumptions of the narrative paradigm are: 1. that humans are by nature storytellers; 2. that the paradigm of human decision-making and interaction is based on good reasons, i.e., that it accurately accounts for social reality, and that there are different reasons in specific interactions, contexts, factions and media; 3. that 'good reasons' are produced and practiced in specific histories, autobiographies, and cultures.⁴ Reason is determined by the person who exists as a narrative.⁵ The world is made up of a series of stories, and the world as experienced and perceived by the person himself is selected from these stories, so that our lives are in a process of continuous re-creation. In Fisher's view, rationality in the narrative paradigm is determined by people's judgements about the consistency and truthfulness of stories. Thus, when people hear stories such as nuclear war or global warming, they make rational judgements and narratives based primarily on whether these stories are inherently consistent and whether these stories are more truthful and credible. As a result, the general public is able to perceive and understand highly technical stories such as nuclear war or global warming through the narrative paradigm.

3. The narrative turn in the study of international relations

Indeed, Walter R. Fisher's introduction of the narrative paradigm coincided with the rise of the important role of narrative in the analysis of political science. In this way, political science began its narrative turn in the early 1980s, with the study of narrative in political science not only manifesting itself in the analysis of its cognitive and interactional roles, but also emphasizing the constructive role of narrative and its ontological significance, and the construction and maintenance of narrative for the identity and self-identity of political actors. John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister's 1996 collection of essays, "Literature and the Political Imagination," is a collection of essays on the role of narrative in political science. The collection uses mainly literary concepts to explain the role of nationalism, liberalism, utopianism and narrative in theories of political thought, emphasizing that fiction and narrative are an important source of political theory, both in form and content. The descriptions of characters' identities in fiction and the narratives of their moral emotions are metaphors for moral emotions and identity formation in political theory. Maureen Whitebrook then builds on Horton and Baumeister's programmatic summary to present the relevance of identity, narrative and politics in a more systematic and detailed manner. Whitebrook argues that the application and analysis of narrative frameworks has been developed in current political theory, but that most scholars still consider narrative to be merely a natural storytelling action and lack technical manipulation and discussion of narrative. For this reason, Whitebrook places narrative within identity and politics, focusing on the construction of identity by narrative and the related effects on politics. For Whitebrook, identity is a theme in storytelling, a story that the storyteller tells others about himself or herself, and can therefore also be called narrative identity. Identity thus means 'what the self presents to the world' or 'what the self is presented as' and 'what the self is recognized as by the world'. Identity is constructed through the narration of identity, through which the self is presented in the public sphere and a political role is presented. The political dimension of identity relies on an understanding of the social location of the self and of the social self. So in constructing identity, narratives, like novels, have plots, character descriptions, narrative structures, narrative genres (tragedy or comedy, etc.), all of which have an impact on the understanding of political identity.

As the narrative turn has become more embedded in political science, it has gradually spilled over

into the international relations research agenda. Indeed, Erik Ringmar, a scholar in international relations studies, has been aware of the importance of narrative studies in international relations since 1996, when the narrative turn in political science began to take place. One of the key questions Ringmar asks is, "In what sense can we say that states exist, and what constitutes the ontological condition of the state?". In international relations theory, both rationalism and constructivism share a central view of the state as a 'person' in order to understand the behavior of the state and to analyze its identity and perceived interests. At the philosophical level, the realists, represented by Hobbes, see the 'human' as the atom that precedes society, in which the two basic elements of desire and reason constitute the irreducible human in society. The ontological status of the state is therefore also transcendental ontological, where the identity and interests of the state are considered to be given and to exist prior to interaction with other states. On the other hand, empiricists, represented by Hume, see man as a bundle of perceptions or a collection of perceptions, preferences and wills in perpetual flow and movement. Yet if man as an individual is reduced to a bundle of perceptions or preferences, to whom do these perceptions or preferences belong in the end, and how should one answer for the existence of man? Hume's concept of the self is therefore full of emptiness and uncertainty. In this way, for the empiricist, the state is also a bundle of will, perception and sense of experience, so that if the ontology of the state or its existence is considered from the perspective of the empiricist, the state would 'disappear' in the world. In response to the shortcomings of atomistic and empirical approaches to the ontology of the state, Ringmar argues that all questions of being can be transformed into questions of being as, and narrative is the ontological place where this "being as" is constructed. Narrative is not only a cognitive tool that organizes and presents the basic way in which we perceive reality, but also constitutes our very existence, the basic way in which we exist and construct ourselves. The same is true of the state, which is able to support its identity and identification or claim ownership of specific economic, social and political resources by narrating how it has moved from the past to the present. Moreover, the self-narrative of the state can also influence and determine the way in which the country views the outside world and the distribution of power in the world.

Geoffrey Roberts formally introduced the 'narrative turn' in international relations in 2006. Roberts argues that narrative as a model of understanding and interpretation and its value and meaning are now commonly accepted and applied in academia and public discourse, and that the social sciences are experiencing a "narrative turn". "The 'narrative turn' is advancing and deepening in current research in the social sciences mainly because of its own strong 'vitality' and in line with the trend of disciplinary development. With the rise of the modern hermeneutic revolution, critical theory revolutions, and the shaking of positivism's own internal foundations, the crisis of positivism began to emerge in the early twentieth century, and its critics became increasingly vocal. At the same time, post-structuralism reasserted itself as an actor, focusing on individualism and emphasizing the role of 'storytelling' in identity politics movements. This has provided a solid foundation for the formation and development of the narrative turn. Roberts argues that the narrative research perspective in international relations studies is closest to the postmodernist definition of narrative. Postmodernism sees narrative as a structure that constructs not only the lives, identities and experiences of individuals, but also their own subjectivity. However, Roberts's 'narrative turn', which is primarily based on the study of history in international relations, sees actors in international relations as narrative in their own right, emphasizing that historians are able to understand and interpret the history of international relations through narrative itself, and that the phenomenological perspective of narrative allows for an objective and realistic interpretation of world history as it is. Although Roberts focuses only on the historiographical significance of the 'narrative turn' in international relations, his overview and summary of narrative studies in international relations as a whole and his groundbreaking proposal for a 'narrative turn' in international relations have added a new research agenda to international relations studies. It has contributed to the frontiers of international relations research in the social sciences as a whole, and will inevitably lead to the creation of a large body of related research.

In fact, the narrative turn in international relations is the latest part of the current 'linguistic turn' in the field of international relations. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the academic development of the 'linguistic turn' in Western philosophy and social sciences gradually emerged. At the same time, the truth and objectivity that the humanities and social sciences sought in their research and writing were severely challenged. The structural linguistics or semiotics initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure, together with the development of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstructive studies, gradually elevated language to an ontological status in the philosophical and social sciences. The "linguistic turn" is representative of the academic trend that the status and role of language precedes the world it forms, and that what we perceive empirically as "reality" is socially constructed, i.e., an artifact constructed by language, or a product of the particular linguistic system in which we are embedded. The development of the linguistic turn in Western scholarship, which emphasizes the crucial role of the language used by

society in our understanding of reality, has clearly contributed to the prevalence of narrative studies in various academic fields in the last two decades. From another perspective, one could also argue that narrative studies itself is a concrete practice of the linguistic turn.

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Author contributions

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