

# Understanding narratives and understanding minds: insights from the second person perspective

*Diana I. Pérez*<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that our capacity to understand narratives and our abilities to understand each other's minds are intertwined. To show the connection between these two abilities, in the first place I clarify what I mean by narration, and I present the central theses of the second-person perspective of psychological understanding as developed in Pérez and Gomila (2022). Then, I show how narrative comprehension is linked with the ability to understand minds. Finally, I discuss why this entanglement of narratives and psychological concepts leads us to simultaneously adopt multiple perspectives in the comprehension of every narrative, and how the second-person perspective can shed some light in narrative understanding through a couple of examples from the arts.

**Keywords:** mind-reading abilities, mental attribution, origin of language, second-person interaction.

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Buenos Aires, IIF-SADAF-CONICET, dianazerep@gmail.com.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo se argumenta que nuestra capacidad para comprender narraciones y nuestra capacidad para comprender la mente de los demás están entrelazadas. Para mostrar la conexión entre estas dos habilidades, primero explico qué entiendo por narración y presento las tesis centrales de la perspectiva en segunda persona de la atribución psicológica, tal como se desarrolla en Pérez y Gomila 2022. A continuación, muestro cómo la comprensión narrativa se entrelaza con la capacidad de comprender las mentes. Finalmente, señalo por qué esta interrelación entre narraciones y conceptos psicológicos nos lleva a adoptar simultáneamente múltiples perspectivas en la comprensión de cada narración, y cómo la perspectiva en segunda persona puede arrojar luz sobre la comprensión narrativa mediante un par de ejemplos tomados de las artes.

**Palabras clave:** lectura de mentes, atribución mental, origen del lenguaje, interacción de segunda persona.

Narratives are pervasive in our lives. We read news, listen to stories, follow the latest gossip in our neighborhood, think about what we are going to do tomorrow, watch fictional content through streaming, read novels, etc. For some philosophers and psychologists, even dreams, daydreaming, memories and the Self have a narrative structure. Narratives serve multiple functions in our lives: they allow us to share experiences, make sense of others' actions, and also make sense of our own experiences.

This drive to tell and listen to stories is connected to a feature of our humanity rooted far away in the Paleolithic. It was a key factor in generating our human way of living with others, because it is through narratives that we understand each other, that we can share plans with others, to constitute a community. I will argue that our ability to tell and understand narratives is ubiquitous in human lives, and I will try to explain how it connects with our mind-reading abilities. In fact, the thesis I will defend is that our ability to understand them is intertwined with our ability to understand each other. We are social beings, and human social life requires to understand one another, which is only possible by incorporating our actions and psychological states into a narrative framework. In Pérez (2013) and Pérez and Gomila (2022), I developed a proposal about how we understand our own and others' minds:

the second-person perspective (P2P). I believe this proposal contains the germ of what I want to develop here, which is the relationship between understanding narratives and understanding minds.

The aim of this paper is as follows. First, I will explain what I mean by narration; Second, I will outline the central theses of the P2P concerning psychological understanding. Third, I will show how narrative comprehension is intertwined with the ability to understand minds. Finally, I will argue why this entanglement of narratives and psychological concepts leads us to simultaneously adopt multiple perspectives in the comprehension of every narrative, and I will show how the second person perspective can shed some light in narrative understanding through a couple of examples from the arts.

### **1. What am I talking about when I talk about narration?**

First, most of the literature we find on narration focuses on written narratives, generally on fictional texts produced by professional writers, that is, literary works. On this occasion, I will not focus on this type of narratives. I will not focus on the world of art, literature, cinema, theater, etc. to develop my ideas. Instead, I will focus on the basic human ability that makes these artistic practices possible, but which also makes many other central phenomena in our lives possible, such as those I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. This human ability extends to many aspects of our lives and is phylogenetically prior to the capacity to produce literary texts or films like the ones we consume today. Linell (2009) proposes to fight the “written language bias in linguistic” and in the same vein I propose to give up the “written language bias in the study of narration”. So I will try to understand how human beings used to live before writing changed us, and to what extent the stories we tell each other were then at play in our human lives, to explore how we should understand storytelling from this point of view. Of course, my aim is that my proposal would be fruitfully applied to the arts, so I will analyze under this light two examples at the end of this paper.

Second, I will focus on narration or storytelling<sup>1</sup>, that is, a human activity that can be performed with varying degrees of skill (an activity based upon a narrative ability). The result of this activity is a narrative or a story<sup>2</sup> (oral or written, ephemeral or lasting in time due to some physical support). I want to emphasize that when I talk about this narrative ability, I refer to both the ability to produce and the ability to understand narratives. I believe these two skills are two sides of the same coin.

---

1 I will use both terms as synonymous.

2 I will use both terms as synonymous.

Third, I would like to clarify that the term “narration,” as I am using it, is an umbrella term that encompasses two distinct human projects. On the one hand, we have history as a scientific discipline, a kind of human practice that aims to recount past events with a focus on truth. On the other hand, all human beings have the ability to tell stories, to narrate real or fictional events and possible stories about existing or imaginary beings. I understand that the first form of narration is a particular case of the second. Thus, narration, as I understand it, involves plausibility or verisimilitude but does not necessarily aim at truth (a narration that aims at truth is a specific case of a more general ability). Of course, from the perspective of the consumer of the narrative, the intention of the author may be opaque. However, I do not want to focus on the issue of the adequacy between the narrated events and extra-narrative reality. I want to focus only on the human capacity to produce and understand these narratives, setting aside the issue of truth, and focusing on plausibility or verisimilitude, which is a general feature of all narratives.

Fourth, in every story, there are characters whose actions are interwoven into a plot. These are the two central elements in any narrative: characters and plot. Understanding the plot involves understanding the psychology of the characters, that is, the reasons that led them to act as they do. A narrative is a sequence of a specific type of events: human actions (even when characters are other animals or objects)<sup>3</sup>; actions that are interpreted through the lens of the characters’ reasons. Since they are actions, the events that make up the plot are always events under a description (Mink 1978), because they are precisely purposeful actions, and their interpretation depends on the attribution of prior intentions and other psychological states to the agent. Of course, there are cases of inner or public monologues in which the characters express linguistically their thoughts and reasons, but their words are also always subject to endlessly further interpretations. My starting point is the fact that every description of any action and every attribution of psychological states is fundamentally underdetermined by the evidence. How we describe their actions is always dependent upon the reasons we attribute to the characters. It is always a matter of interpretation; understanding is interpreting (Davidson 1984), these are not two independent tasks we can do separately.

Fifth, another central feature of narratives relates to the idea that, in addition to the meaning of each particular action of each particular character, the narrative as a whole also has meaning or significance that we should interpret as an audience. Storytelling is a human activity, and its product, the narrative we hear or read, has a meaning as a whole (which we also have to interpret). The meaning of the whole is usually seen as dependent upon

---

3 Fables are stories whose characters are animals, and in films such as “The Beauty and the Beast” we find kettles and cups of tea as characters. In both cases the characters have anthropomorphic features and behave and talk like humans, and their actions are intentional.

the intentions the author of the narrative had while creating the narration, but even if we have no information at all about the real author, a narrative is something that contains a particular point of view from which the meaning of the work as a whole should be interpreted.

We might think that the human actions of our fellows in our daily life lack this feature because there is no “author” with further intentions hidden behind them. However, I will argue that in our everyday life, to fully understand the actions of our fellow humans, we tend to incorporate them into a broader narrative framework than the one displayed in the specific action we observe. In such cases, it is the observer who creates a whole in which she incorporates the particular observed action. The attribution of intentional states to others is always holistic rather than atomic. In this sense, understanding any action involves incorporating it into a (perhaps sketchy) narrative structure. And the interpretation of the whole is co-dependent with the understanding/interpretation of the particular actions involved. I will elaborate on how psychological understanding involves narrativity in the following section.

In summary, narrations are always open to multiple interpretations (like all human actions) for three main reasons: (1) each particular action within a narrative can be interpreted in multiple ways; (2) the meaning of the whole is also subject to multiple interpretations; and (3) the scripts associated with the intentional states involved in the narration are always open and potentially contradictory, which contributes to this indeterminacy. This last point will be developed in the following section.

181

Finally, I would like to note that this narrative ability is prior to the development of language, according to some archaeological evidence. Let me briefly recall Merlin Donald’s (2004) proposal, which suggests that narrative abilities are related to language but are independent of and precede language. According to the author, the key to the emergence of language was the search for ways to self-initiate access to memory. In non-human animals, memory is always triggered by something present in the environment; humans, on the contrary, can retrieve memories without a present stimulus. And this capacity, essential for having a language, developed in three stages.

The first step towards the emergence of language was mimesis. According to Donald, mimetic hominid culture appeared in several species, starting with *Homo erectus* (more than 1 million years ago). It involves the capacity for motor control that allows us to use one’s own body as a means of communication with others. More precisely, it involves performing voluntary and systematic bodily movements by recalling past actions performed by the individual or observed in others, that is, it allows for the re-enactment of actions, with modifications and interruptions, under the voluntary control of

the subject in the presence of others, for various purposes such as coordinating actions.

In a very broad sense, this is “communication.” However, communication here should not be understood as merely transmitting information from one individual to another: the plurality of purposes for which these mimetic acts are performed is the key—coordinating joint actions, drawing attention to something, emotional engagement, enjoyment, etc. It is through these actions that memory is stimulated (self-stimulated and also stimulated in those who see the agent moving). According to Donald,

“mimetic skill logically precedes language, and remains independent of truly linguistic modes of representation. It is the basic human thought-skill, without which there would not have been the evolutionary opportunity to evolve language. Mimesis is an intermediate layer of knowledge and culture, and the first evolutionary link between the pre symbolic knowledge systems of animals and the symbolic systems of modern humans.” (p. 46)

Thanks to this mimetic ability, the body becomes a primary tool for representation and acquires social utility (p. 48). Donald refers to this behavior as “pure mimesis”; and without doubt it is something that actors and actresses, mimes and dancers still do.

The second step toward the emergence of language, according to Donald, is the development of mythical cultures, which appeared between 500,000 and 100,000 years ago. This gave rise to *narrative thinking* and integrative myth. (p. 49) In this stage, a process of labeling things and events with sounds began to emerge, as well as the first combinations of symbols (words). In his words:

“Like mimesis, language is at core a thought-skill, but rather than using the holistic, quasiperceptual strategy of mimetic motor skill, it employs true symbols and constructs narrative descriptions of reality. ... The natural product of language is narrative thought, or storytelling. Storytelling had a forerunner in mimetic event re-enactment, but is very different in the means by which it achieves its goal, and much more flexible in what it can express. Mimetic re-enactment is bound to imagery of the original event being depicted, but the quintessential narrative act – verbally labelling agents, actions and their relationships – lifts the observer outside of space and time, allowing the component parts of the story to be examined, reassembled and shared much more freely. Spoken language altered human culture not merely in the number and complexity of available words and grammars, but in the

Mimetic skills remained fundamental and continue to underpin human social institutions, such as crafts, athletics, dance, etc., although it is spoken language, in purely oral cultures, which provides the narrative framework governing social institutions. In Donald’s opinion, mythical thinking is what holds together the members of human societies. (p. 51)

The third cognitive-cultural transition, finally, is the one that occurs with the emergence of writing, which, according to Donald, enables the possibility of theoretical thinking. The key to this transition was the externalization of memory, the possibility of writing down in stones or papers with some sort of graphic notation the words of the spoken language.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I am interested in focusing on the abilities at play in the first two stages, prior to the development of writing. I believe these capacities still underlie our ability to write and read narratives today. Even if spoken and written language are entangled (Noë 2023, Pérez in press), I will set aside the written aspect of narratives and focus here on the capacities that make the existence of written narratives possible.

As I mentioned above, Donald claims that the self-stimulation of memory is what explains the emergence of narrative abilities. However, there are strong controversies regarding the evolutionary origin of storytelling. It all depends on the feature and purpose of storytelling that we stress. In the first place, considered as a form of art, its evolutionary origin could be likened to that of all forms of art, associating it, as Darwin (1871) did, with sexual selection. Second, if we associate storytelling with childhood play, we might consider it as another form of cognitive play, as Boyd suggests, related to the pleasure of perceiving patterns—a capacity for generalization (Boyd 2009 p. 27). Third, Oatley suggests that narratives have to be thought of as simulators: “stories are the flight simulators of human social life” (quoted in Gottschall 2012, p. 58), ie. ways of gaining experience without the real cost (an idea that is also associated to children’s playing). Finally, it has also been viewed as a kind of social glue: as mentioned above, Donald connects narratives with myths and institutions that consolidate social groups. For example, according to Havelock (1986), the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* -which encode what is known as primary orality of Ancient Greece- served as rules of behavior for various social circumstances. Dawkins and Dennett also support this view providing substantial evidence in this regard.<sup>5</sup>

In my view, it may be futile to search for a single evolutionary origin of storytelling, as there is not a single function it performs; in fact, it is a multipurpose ability, used pervasively in our lives. In any case, it is evident that our narrative ability is associated with the social world and with human

4 For more details about this step see Pérez (in press)

5 See Gottschall 2012, Ch. 6

interactions: whether to learn how to navigate social environments, or to bring people together for reproductive, pleasurable, or cooperative purposes. It seems that these narrative abilities are grounded in the world of human interactions—face-to-face and bodily encounters with our peers, as well as with the emergence of norms regulating these practices.

For this reason, it seems promising to associate the emergence of storytelling to understand one's own and others' minds and to make basic psychological attributions—from the interactive perspective of the second person—with mimetic communication and narrative abilities, and to suggest that these abilities co-evolved with linguistic abilities prior to the advent of writing.

## **2. How does the second person perspective contribute to understanding our narrative ability?**

In Pérez and Gomila (2022), we propose an account of Folk Psychology -ie. the practices and concepts involved in our understanding of human minds-, that we termed as “the second person perspective”. We focus on “second person interactions” - ie. face-to-face interactions - and we hold that we cannot make sense of human interactions without involving second person attributions of mental states. We defend two central ideas (among many others, these are the relevant for the purposes of this paper):

(1.) Second-person mental attributions are conceptually, phylogenetically and ontogenetically more basic than first- and third-person attributions

(2.) Everyday human interactions involve the ability to make all three types of psychological attributions: second person, first person and third person ones.

The paradigmatic case of a second-person interaction we have in mind is between a baby and her caregiver in the first year of life. But, on this occasion, I will focus on other kind of examples, such as the first meeting of a couple that later became an eternal love, like the one told us by Sinatra's song:

“Strangers in the night exchanging glances  
Wond'ring in the night what were the chances  
We'd be sharing love before the night was through  
Something in your eyes was so inviting  
Something in your smile was so exciting  
Something in my heart told me I must have you...”

In cases like this, we find:

- direct access to the other's mind through the expressive aspects of the body (your eyes invited me);
- reciprocity: each participant attributes a psychological state to the other, and in that very same act, each modifies their own mental contents (your smile makes me feel something in my heart);
- emotional engagement: both subjects are in some emotional states while involved in an interaction of this type. It is not necessarily that the emotion in each subject should be the same as in the other; but there are an emotional reaction to actions of the other person (you smile, I feel excited);
- no need for a “meta” activity (i.e a mental state about the mental state of another person), but a mental state caused by the state of the other person and so on;
- this process is linked to action in the sense that it involves emotional action (emotions are motivational states of mind) (in the song, this first encounter is followed by dancing and much more);
- the paradigmatic second person interaction involves a dyad, for example a 3 months-old-baby and her caregiver, but later –from 9 months-old- the dyad became a triangle: the world enters into the intersubjective relation, as the object of emotions and attention processes, such as shared attention, alternating gaze, gaze following, etc.;
- language is not required (as we can see in the example where we only find exchanging gazes and smiles).

185

As I said before, face-to-face interactions like these, we are making (at least implicitly) psychological attributions: we do not see a smiling face; we see someone inviting us to do something, for ex. to start a conversation or to dance. But what do I mean by a “psychological attribution”? In my view, a psychological attribution is a phenomenon that occurs when there are two individuals involved, one of which is the subject of attribution (S), to whom a mental state M is ascribed, and the other is the attributor (A). We claim that A attributes a mental state M to S when A perceives, judges, thinks or says that S is in M. For A to be able to attribute a mental state to S, A must possess the mental concepts involved in the attribution. For instance, if A attributes “being in pain” to S, A must possess the concept of pain.

Concept mastering involves various behavioral and cognitive skills that constitute the possession conditions of a given concept. These skills need not be acquired all at once, therefore mastery of a concept is not an all-or-nothing matter. Rather, one can have a partial or implicit understanding of a given concept (and linguistic skills are just one kind among others).<sup>6</sup> Let me

---

<sup>6</sup> For more details about mental concepts, see Pérez 2013.

clarify this point: we hold that some specific psychological concepts (very basic ones) can be used and understood before the child can express them linguistically, through linguistic behaviors. This does not mean that language plays no role in psychological understanding: on the contrary we assign two very specific and central roles to it: (1) it shapes our experience through the lexicon we acquire within the linguistic community in which we grow, this role of language is particularly clear in the case of emotions (Parkinson et al 2005); and (2) it is only due to language acquisition that we become able to express and ascribe propositional content and, hence, propositional attitudes to ourselves and others.

We can specify the minimal possession conditions for all psychological concepts –those that are deployed in the attribution of mental states. We say that A masters a psychological concept M when:

1) A can apply M to herself and to others appropriately.<sup>7</sup>

2) A recognizes the behaviors that are expressive of M as criteria / symptoms / signs of M

3) A has some scripts related to M, for example if M is “fear”, A knows that if someone has M then she will hide, run away, freeze or fight the enemy.

In this paper, I want to focus on these scripts: they are patterns of behavior typically linked to human situations. As we know in the case of “fear” there are several different patterns of behavior: freeze, flee or fight. Which behavior an individual chooses in each case is dependent upon the context, as well as the psychology of the individual, her personality, etc. Thus, the scripts associated with any given psychological concept can be contradictory (if I choose to flee, I cannot freeze or fight), and are always open to new options: I can learn to face some specific kind of scary situation with a certain acquired script, for example if I am a policewoman I learn different ways to face different kinds of threats, I may also learn how to inhibit some natural ways to behave under threat, for example to flee under certain situation, and face the dangerous situation even if I know I cannot win. As we can see, the connection between psychological states and behavior is complex and there are many factors involved in the attribution of mental states as in the understanding a certain behavior as an action under a given description or another.

### 3. The entanglement between narrativity and psychological concepts

---

<sup>7</sup> Unlike Goldman’s theory (Goldman, 1996) that contends that psychological self-attributions are prior to attributions to others; and unlike Ryle and the theory - theorists (paradigmatically Gopnik 1996), who claim that attribution to others is previous, we hold that the abilities to make both hetero- and self-attribution are among the basic possession conditions of every mental concept (Cf. Strawson 1959).

Both what counts as expressive behavior, and the scripts or frames associated with psychological concepts are normative in nature, highly contextual, and, to some extent, culturally variable. They are also variable in complexity. Some psychological concepts have very distinctive and universal scripts associated, such as pain. Some other concepts have more contextually variable (although universal) behavioral patterns associated, such as fear: as I mentioned, fear can be associated with a freezing, fighting, or a fleeting response. Finally, other psychological concepts have a much more complex and variable associated behaviors, such as belief; it depends upon the content of the belief, the other beliefs, desires and other mental states held by the agent and ,therefore, they can be associated with a very large and flexible set of behavioral responses.

These scripts are, in my view, the narrative component of our Folk Psychology, those devices which allows us to frame or schematize our experience. I follow Bruner (1990) in his understanding of the connection between Folk Psychology and narrativity. According to him “framing provides a means of ‘constructing’ the world, of characterizing its flow, of segmenting events within that world and so on” (1990, p. 56). He also holds that “the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form” (1990, p. 56).

In my words, our experience of human actions is framed and segmented as it is because it is conceptualized through psychological concepts, which are partly constituted by narrative scripts. As I understand Bruner’s proposal, our Folk Psychology is our way of dealing with our fellows in social life. It is not -contrary to what enactivists such as Gallagher & Hutto (2008, p. 11) hold- something we only use when our ordinary expectations are broken. Our Folk Psychology is used in every interaction and every observation of the actions of other human beings, as it encodes the canonical attitudes and behaviors that are typical in the community to which the agent belongs. According to Bruner “Experience in and memory of the social world are powerful structured ... by deeply internalized and narrativized conceptions of folk psychology.”(1990, p. 57)... “The very structure of our lexicon, while it may not force us to code human events in a particular way, certainly predisposes us to be culturally canonical.” (1990, p. 58). Later, he also holds, as the second-person perspective does, that “narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression” (1990, p. 77). In other words, the social information of the human group in which we live is integrated into our understanding of each other’s minds, ie. in the practices and concepts of our Folk Psychology, which have a narrative structure, because, as I mentioned in the last section, it is through these conceptual tools that we inhabit the human world. According to Bruner:

“Narrative requires ... four crucial grammatical constituents if it is to be effectively carried out. It requires, first, a means for emphasizing human action or “agentivity”- action directed toward goals controlled by agents. It requires, secondly, that a sequential order be established and maintained - that events and states be “linearized” in a standard way. Narrative, thirdly, also requires a sensitivity to what is canonical and what violates canonicity in human interaction. Finally, narrative requires something approximating a narrator’s perspective: it cannot, in the jargon of narratology, be ‘voiceless.’” (1990, p. 77)

The point I want to highlight is the third component: our folk psychology involves expectations of what is going to happen, yet these expectations can always be violated. Our understanding of other people’s mind is always open to multiple outcomes, because our folk psychological concepts involve various alternative scripts, and because people sometimes act in a way we did not foresee, and we have to make some additional work in order to understand their actions (including, of course, ask them in the case of a face to face interactions).<sup>8</sup>

Another thesis the second person perspective shares with Bruner is the idea that it is through the very first human encounters we experience during the first year of our lives that we acquire the ability to understand each other in face-to-face interactions, attributing mental states to ourselves and to others. However, I want to highlight that the first mental attributions we make involve simpler concepts, such as basic emotions and simple sensations. Second-person information allows us to attribute only certain type of mental states, those in which there are no modes of presentation involved, ie. those states that have no propositional content, and do not involve any specific conceptualization of the intentional object. Intentions directed at objects in the environment (eg. the intention to grasp something), basic emotions (fear of something present in the shared environment), and bodily sensations (like pain) are the paradigmatic type of second-person attributions (Pérez and Gomila 2022, chapters 3 and 5). The thesis we defend is that during the first 5 years of life we acquire both our linguistic competence and our more complex psychological concepts, including propositional attitude concepts. As they grow in complexity, these psychological attributions also increase in

---

<sup>8</sup> Ricardo Piglia (2007) adds another component: he understands narration as a means to register and share experiences, and acknowledges as a “good narration” those that are able to transmit emotions. The second person perspective also puts emotions at the center of our folk psychological understanding, but Bruner seems to keep aside this ingredient. I think that our affective life is an essential component of Folk Psychology, both of mental concepts and of their narrative structure. Actions, characters and plots can only be understood if we consider both the reasons as well as the emotions that motivate the behaviors of the characters, as we will see in the examples I will analyze in the last section of this paper.

opacity and indeterminacy. But all of them have some narrative components (and many of them also some expressive components), that are enriched with experience during our lives, including our engagement with narrative forms of art.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as we grow the multiplicity of forms of understanding increases exponentially, and multiple interpretations of a single action are allowed.

On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, the possession conditions of psychological concepts involve different criteria for the first-person and the third. In Pérez and Gomila (2022, chapter 7), we propose to distinguish between self-attribution and other people's attribution of mental states, including second and third person attributions as different cases of "other people's" attributions. We can even think that there is a continuum from the typical second-person's case attributions which include all the features present in a second person interaction, and the purely detached and observational ones which are the third personal ones. In any case, we can identify paradigmatic cases of first, second, and third-person perspective ways of attributing mental states. In Chapter 7, we argued that in typical adult human interactions, all three perspectives are simultaneously at play. Let me explain this idea.

#### **4. Multiple perspectives involved in every narrative**

Let us consider the case of the "strangers". He sees an invitation in her glance, but he does not know which exact invitation she is extending: Just sex? Just conversation? The possibility of eternal love? Of course, the context can help (for example the place where the interaction takes place), but only through a dialogue (a linguistic interaction) they can resolve their doubts (to some extent, because there is also indetermination in the interpretation of linguistic acts). Sometimes we need some conscious thinking to interpret the gestures and words of the person we are interacting with. Moreover, the emotional response to the other person's expressive behavior involves a first-person awareness of our feelings towards the other which is also at play in the interaction (what "my heart" tells me about what is happening).

In the end, in a typical adult human interaction, all three perspectives are at play. Many things occur simultaneously: emotional engagement, expressive behavior, reactive second-person information, contextual information, linguistic behavior, etc. Many times, we receive contradictory information from these different sources. Sometimes someone says one thing but acts in the opposite way. Someone smiles at us, but his tone of voice suggests anger. Someone promises something to us, but we know he rarely keep their promises. So, in cases like these, the shift to the third-person perspective can

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, as we grow, the multiple scripts that literature or films presents to us about romantic love, will be probably included in our concept of love.

occur in some (or all) of these dimensions, and not always in the same way. I might wonder why the other person is smiling in the specific way he does, or why he is using a specific tone of voice, making a specific pause, or turning suddenly. I might also feel he is not paying attention to me or feel his answer as cold. All these situations make me think about what is going on with them. I may recall some previous information about the person, some contextual information or some general knowledge that I apply to this particular case. All these inferential processes can lead me to some mental attributions which are more complex, and more detached from the present situation. So, many times we need some first, second- and third-person information in order for the interaction to proceed. In ordinary contexts, first, second, third person perspective attributions are simultaneously at play, because life, in human societies, is organized on this fluctuation between making us transparent and opaque, depending on the interest of coordination in each context.

If we take these ideas as the starting point for analyzing a given narration, such as Sinatra's song, we can see that there are multiple layers of understanding involving the different characters, the plot as a whole, the narrator/singer/actor (in performative arts), and the multiple perspectives in which we can get access to their minds.

Here we have the complete lyrics of the song:

Strangers in the night exchanging glances  
Wondering in the night  
What were the chances we'd be sharing love  
Before the night was through

Something in your eyes was so inviting  
Something in your smile was so exciting  
Something in my heart  
Told me I must have you

Strangers in the night  
Two lonely people we were strangers in the night  
Up to the moment  
When we said our first hello  
Little did we know  
Love was just a glance away  
A warm embracing dance away, and

Ever since that night we've been together  
Lovers at first sight, in love forever

It turned out so right  
For strangers in the night

Understanding the story conveyed by the song involves all these multiple interactions and perspectives. Let me explain. In the first two verses, the singer is talking about two people he is looking at (the “strangers”), but in the third verse, we realize he is talking about himself, and we understand that he is telling us his own love story. Therefore, we shift the perspective and put him at the center of the narrative. While doing so, we now hear his words as expressive of his own feelings, and we re-interpret the previous verses as describing, from a second- person perspective, the exchange of glances he mentioned before. The second-person perspective is clearer in the second stanza, but it also slightly changes, because at that point he adopts the second personal pronoun and now we hear him as singing the song to his lover, rather than to us - the audience. If the P2P is correct, this change also affects our understanding of the situation: we (for example, I, as a woman) might adopt the perspective of the person he is talking to, and put me in his lover’s place, feeling his words as his expression of love to me. Depending on the level of attraction I feel about the singer, I can also experience some specific emotions, produced by the fact that he is singing this beautiful love song to me. If I do not feel attracted to him probably I will just enjoy the song like any other, and will appreciate the music, the lyrics, the performance, in a more detached way. Finally, in performative arts, the narrator and the author can collapse. In this case, for example, they would collapse, if we did not know that it was not Frank Sinatra who wrote the song;<sup>10</sup> but it won’t happen if we know he was only a singer of other writer’s songs. In any case, we can wonder about the author’s intentions. We can ask ourselves about the meaning of the song as a whole: in this case it seems to be just to share a plausible love story, but it can also be understood as a defense of the idea of love at first sight, or of the idea of eternal (true) love, for example. And of course, my own personal perspective of the situation, my knowledge of the performer, of the writer, my own feelings towards them, my own beliefs about love, etc. all these factors are also at play in the appreciation of this song.

What I am trying to say is that there are multiple, crisscrossing perspectives at play in the understanding and appreciation of narratives, which can be factorize when we realize how narratives are tied to psychological concepts, and that they are at play in first-, second- and third-person perspectives to understand others even in a single situation. And all these perspectives are interpretative perspectives, where some indetermination is present. Moreover, the multiple levels of interpretations make even more indetermined the meaning of each narration. Of course, what the characters

---

10 The lyrics were composed by Charles Singleton y Eddie Snyder.

say they are doing, and what the author explicitly states about their minds can reduce the range of possible interpretations of the narration. Nevertheless, there is always room for indeterminacy in linguistic acts too.

I would like to conclude this paper by sharing my impressions about Wim Wender's film *Perfect Days*. I think it is a great example of what I want to show about understanding a narration. In this film, the events narrated are mainly shown to us through images; there are almost no dialogues in which the main character, Hirayama, is involved in the film; he says very few words in the two hours that the movie lasts. There is a succession of situations and relationships with various characters—some of them talk a lot, others hardly at all—but it is not through these dialogues that we understand what is happening to Hirayama. There is no voice-over narrator. We just witness Hirayama's everyday life. The events are insignificant, daily life tasks, rutinary and repetitive; every day, more or less the same things happen. But each day is different from the other, and the life of the main character is shown to us in the film. And there is a lot of expressiveness—in the faces, in the gestures, in the music, (which has lyrics, but in English), in the images of the skies, the sun, the trees.

For me, what is interesting is that the message of the film (its meaning as a whole) remains completely indeterminate. It is so indeterminate that one ends up wondering what the meaning of the film is. What exactly is the film narrating? What is the message the director wants to convey? And what is exactly Hirayama's situation? We do not have clear access to his thoughts. Through silent actions we see his life narrated, but we understand little of his situation. We are not informed why he works cleaning public toilets, if it was his choice or the product of personal or family problems, what his relationship with his father is, whether he is happy or not with the life he leads. Any interpretation of the events of the film is highly indeterminate due to the lack of dialogue. However, we have before us a life story. May be the indeterminacy is even higher for me due to the cultural differences between the character and me. And so, the result is an indeterminacy of meaning so great that it challenges us. Perhaps this openness to many different reading is what made this film so famous and well received. I should add that I noticed clearly the high degree of indeterminacy the film has, when I realized that all the people to which I asked about the film had their own interpretation of Hirayama's situation, and didn't doubt that the story as they interpreted it was exactly the story Wenders wanted to tell us. And in the cases of the people I personally know, they tended to fill the blanks in the story, the indeterminacies, with their own beliefs, desires and attitudes towards the meaning of life, family relationships, etc. I mean, each one found in the film what they wanted to find, what they projected in Hirayama (we always do this projection, but in this case is deeper than usual, due to the great degree of indeterminacy

that the lack of words produces). Sometimes we place ourselves in the life of one or another of the characters, and interpret the film from this point of view, sometimes we change the point of view we adopt during the film (as I claimed we are induced to do in Sinatra's song). Each of these points of view allows us to give different interpretations of what is going on, and the final interpretation we achieve depends upon all the points of view we adopted while watching the film.

In sum, our understanding of narratives is entangled with our understanding of human minds and actions, a process that is extremely complex, because first-, second- and third-person perspectives are at play, and an indeterminacy of interpretation is always present even if language is used to describe mental contents and actions. Yet, it seems to me that this fact is exactly what makes it so intriguing and exciting being with others and listening to and watching stories.

- Boyd, B. (2009). *On the origin of Stories. Evolution, cognition and fiction*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.
- Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquiries Into Truth And Interpretation*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Darwin C. (1871). *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. London, UK: John Murray
- Donald, M. (2004). "The definition of human nature," in *The New Brain Sciences: Perils and Prospects*. eds D. Rees and S. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 34–58. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511541698.003
- Gallagher, S. and Hutto, D. (2008). "Understanding others through primary interaction and narrative practice". In: J. Zlatev, T. Racine, C. Sinha and E. Itkonen (eds). *The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gottschall, J. (2012). *The Storytelling animal. How stories make us human*. HMH Publishing Compay, NY.
- Havelock, E. (1986) *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. Yale University Press. London.
- Mink, L. O. (1978). "Narrative form as a cognitive instrument," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, eds R. H. Canary and H. Kozicki (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 129–149. Linell (2009)
- Mithen, S. (2007) *The singing Neanderthals. The origins of music, language, mind and body*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge
- Parkinson, B. Fischer, A. y Manstead, A. (2005) *Emotion in Social Relations*. Taylor and Francis. Nueva York
- Pérez, D. (2013) *Sentir, desear, creer. Una aproximación filosófica a los conceptos psicológicos*. Prometeo. Buenos Aires
- Pérez, D. (in press) "Escribir, dibujar y pensar" *Boletín de Estética*

Pérez, D. y Gomila, A. (2022) *Social cognition and the second person in human interaction*. Routledge. Cambridge.

Piglia, R. (2007) “El arte de narrar” *Universum. Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 1, núm. 22, 2007, pp. 343-348 Universidad de Talca, Talca, Chile