

## LIFE AS NARRATIVE: A BRIDGE BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SEMIOTICS

Valdur Mikita

*University of Tartu*

**Abstract.** This article attempts to find an answer to the question why people sometimes attempt to build up their biography according to the typical canons of an artistic text. This article analyses the nature of such a literary autobiography in the light of the ideas of Eric Berne, Mikhail Rozin, Yuri Lotman and Jerome Bruner. Berne believes that this situation conveys negative psychological reactions, for usually an individual is unable to accomplish the life scenarios worked out by himself in co-operation with his closest friends and relatives. Rozin states that the organisation of one's own life according to the distinguishing principles of a work of art is a manifestation of the creative element in the human being. Lotman analyses human biographies from the point of view of cultural semiotics, pointing out that an autobiography as a work of art is not determined by psychological, but rather by cultural factors. Jerome Bruner discovers connections between models of cultural psychology and the narrative description of human life.

### 1. Introduction

Interactions between semiotics and psychology have a long history. It is a well-known fact that the outstanding Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky established the first engagement between semiotics and psychology. Though developmental psychology was his more narrow speciality, Lev Vygotsky has named W. von Humboldt, M. Bakhtin and F. de Saussure, among others, to have been his direct influences. (Davydov and others 1985:54)<sup>1</sup>

Vygotsky established a research direction, usually named cultural-historical psychology. (Tulviste 1984, Bruner 1985) Vygotsky was one of the first researchers to lay emphasis on the importance of the sociocultural approach in psychology. His main idea was that all the higher human psychic reactions are mediated by the existing sign systems of a culture. Therefore it is impossible to

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<sup>1</sup> Of the opposite opinion is the Vygotsky scholar James Wertsch in his book "Voices of the mind", who affirms that Bakhtin is never mentioned by Vygotsky.

draw a clear distinction between individual and sociocultural influences. Analogically to tools which amplify operations performed by hand, signs amplify inherent human psychic functions (Vygotsky 1984).

The idea of a sign as a psychic tool is one of the most often quoted examples of employing semiotic ideas in psychology. This is also considered to be one of the greatest services performed by Vygotsky (Tulviste 1984, Davydov and others 1985) The rediscovery of Lev Vygotsky has taken place through the adaptation and interpretation of this idea.

Having been probably influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas, Vygotsky claimed that a meaning as such always assumes a dialogue and is a social phenomenon. A human inner dialogue is developed as a result of the internalisation of normal speech. Speech and action are at first inseparable for a child. This is the reason why children so often talk to themselves when they are doing something. Speech and action later become separate, and a child learns to talk about things absent. This process is mediated by signs in cultural circulation and precisely those mechanisms establish the grounds for an inner dialogue and later the beginning of reasoning. (Vygotsky 1984, Wertsch 1991)

A second great man in psychology whose works contain a mentionable amount of semiotic ideas, was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. In his works about children's intellectual development, Piaget uses the term *semiotic functions*. Semiotic functions develop during the second year of life, and before this the period of sensomotoric intellect is dominant in a child's development. Semiotic functions appear in different spheres of activity. Piaget distinguishes the following semiotic functions: imitation, symbolic play, iconic representation, fantasy and speech. Of the functions mentioned above, imitation appears first and speech last. Piaget emphasises the role of the imitation function as an antecedent to other semiotic functions. On the basis of the imitational function a child begins to perform symbolic operations. Analogical thinking as one of the key factors in intellectual development can, on the basis of appearance, be traced back to an imitational function (analogical thinking as the constant imitation of a certain scheme in one's mind). The development of symbolic functions gives a person the chance to think about faraway things, and this kind of action leads to the formation of language. Thus the intellectual development of a person moves from the individual to the collective, since the carrier of linguistic experience is the collective consciousness. (Piaget 1963) Although the last one seems exactly opposite on the claim of Vygotsky, both have right in his context of discussion.

The greatness of Piaget and Vygotsky lies primarily in their success in solving a problem insoluble to many other researchers – that of uniting positive features of Gestalt psychology with the ideas of development and change. (Zintshenko 1987)

One of the most outstanding scholars who tried to combine semiotics, psychology and cultural theory in his works was the French ethnographer and founder of structuralism Claude Lévi-Strauss. While researching the affinity

systems of traditional cultures, Lévi-Strauss came to the conclusion that universal dividing principles may be found in any culture, and that these are used to arrange the surrounding world. In Lévi-Strauss' opinion the material collected during research into affinity systems serves as a good example because these boundaries are very universal, and are present in every culture, even though their appearance differs from one nation to another.

Generalising his conclusions to other cultural texts, Lévi-Strauss said that binary oppositions may be found in all cultures. Upper and lower, right and left, male and female, one's own and that belonging to others are opposed. According to Lévi-Strauss, in principle any text can be reduced to binary opposition. Lévi-Strauss sees the universality of binary oppositions in the fact that the physiology of the human brain and the psychical processes resulting from it are subject to binary mechanisms. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 1986)

The main question presented by Lévi-Strauss has always stressed two important facts: the fundamental equality of all cultures (and equal complication); and the essential connectedness of the psychological mechanisms of human thought and the cultural texts created by them.

After the glory days of structuralism there occurred a short pause in the exchange of ideas between semiotics and psychology. Little by little it became clear that although binary oppositions play an important role in human culture, we cannot create a universal explanatory model based on them. We must also admit that even though the ideas of the three above-mentioned scientists were applied in an interdisciplinary manner, in semiotics and psychology their thoughts diverged. We cannot speak about one coherent theory in which we could accommodate the thoughts of the above-mentioned scientists.

## **2. Eric Berne and Game Theory**

The new contact between psychology and semiotics emerged in a completely different field – psychotherapy. Transaction analysis (which was later developed into game theory), created by Eric Berne, an American psychotherapist, can be seen as the first step in this direction. Naturally Eric Berne's intention was not to synthesise semiotics and psychology (he does not use the term "semiotics" in his books), but instead to untangle peoples' everyday psychological problems. Berne found out that they cannot be explained well enough by the one-phase cause and effect model. Berne said that the original reason for several personal problems was often the quite harmful and inadequate narrative scheme by which people attempt to lead their lives.

Searches for a narrative as an extremely important factor in human mental life start here. During the last years the "narratological" manner of treatment of the human psyche has gained new supporters and has interestingly come to represent a considerable opportunity for the interaction of different humanitarian sciences in

precisely the field of methodology. Before we reach this question, let us have a closer look at some “classics” of narratological treatment, as it is known.

As has already been mentioned, one of the first detailed attempts to investigate the background of human behaviour by means of cognition deriving from art was Eric Berne’s theory of transactional games. Eric Berne suggests that in almost every social group there develop norms differing from the norms generally accepted in society. Such a very complicated subsequence of mutual transactions between individuals was called a *game* by Berne. Berne suggests that the greatest part of human life is passed in playing such games, because in most cases, human communication takes place between friends rather than strangers. The reason why people play derives from the fact that play provides more emotions in the temporal and spatial dimensions than does ordinary life. (Berne 1964)

In a sense we can find some similarity between Berne’s ideas and Mikhail Bakhtin’s treatment of the “memory of genre”. In his main essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, Bakhtin explores various aspects of the relationship between author and his characters. Bakhtin asserts that as we interact with others, our consciousness is transformed by this experience of “other”, and later we return into our isolated selves with the new understanding of the world (Bakhtin 1979). According to Berne’s treatment, a play has also to do with additional information that consists of the social role, if switched into a more general system of social relationships by means of a certain game. The most fascinating problem for Berne is the negative status of the above-mentioned games. Berne suggests that a large number of games between humans are negative according to their initial trend. Participating in such games brings along many psychological problems. It is difficult to interrupt play because most of them are actually unconscious. The majority of games derive from childhood. Children have a tendency to play games similar to those preferred by their parents. Berne also draws a distinction between the historical, cultural, social and individual meanings of games. Games are passed from generation to generation. It is typical that different social groups also play different games. When we recognise the game, we will not only grasp more about the concrete situation, possible participants, course of the game, punishments for breaking the rules; but also about the character of the players and the pursuits they are trying to realise with the help of the given game. (Berne 1964)

The second fundamental concept used by Berne in addition to the game, is the *script*. A script is a plan for an ideal life which a human tries to realise. The script will determine which role a person will prefer in his life-games. Berne suggests that scripts have been frequently composed according to all of the rules of drama. The ideal chain of events that should lead to the realisation of the script has been set in the human consciousness. The time to realise a script comes when a society gives a person evidence of maturity. Berne discusses that if in traditional cultures the initiation is such a turning-point, then American culture has other characteristics and a turning-point in American culture is getting one’s driver’s licence. Berne claims that through the realisation of their scripts, people should be classified into two

groups: winners and losers. To put it briefly, some people are always sure that they will win; some people, on the contrary, are sure that they will lose. Losers know that they are unable to perform the role that has been written in their script and at the same time do not have enough strength to create a new script. (Berne 1964, 1972)

The last idea about scripts is very typical of Berne. He understands scripts in a predominantly negative manner. For Berne the ideal attainment of inner wholeness in human life is to become exempt from scripts. Since in real life this is almost impossible, for Berne the only solution is to try to “improve” a poor script. (Berne 1972)

### **3. Mikhail Rozin and Creative Scripts**

Berne’s treatment of the art-like biography has been elaborated by the Russian psychologist Mikhail Rozin. Whereas Berne connected scripts with subconscious psychical structures and treated them as negative constructs, Rozin understands scripts as the forming of an announced process which refers to the appearance of the germs of creativity in an individual. Whereas Berne deals mainly with the concept of script in an indirect sense, Rozin uses this concept in a literal sense and proceeds to a thorough “literary” analysis of human biography. Although Berne already had an idea that games can be similar to the artistic text in terms of their structure, he did not pay particular attention to that idea. Rozin, however, clearly states that a human being looks for such episodes in his life which will match the principles of the structure of the artistic text. With the latter opinion Rozin expresses the idea that events are “real” for an individual only if they are joined into a certain plot. There must be a prologue, an accumulation of events, a culmination, a solution, and an epilogue. (Rozin 1992)

Rozin claims that it is a very widespread phenomenon that if something remarkable happens to humans, they are used to thinking about how to tell others about it. Such a subordination of life to the narrative is one of the most widespread ways in making one’s biography more ‘artistic’. It is a general rule that more gifted individuals also have more artistic stories about their life. Therefore, although it sounds quite strange, one of the most fundamental human dreams is the yearning for a life story that would be interesting to tell. Whereas every narrative text requires a hero, it is self-evident that in such a situation the hero is the man himself. The hero need not be positive throughout; his artistic destiny is a criterion only. The hero needs a series of events to shape his story. A human being is not disturbed in case something really fails, but if something works against his script. Here Rozin refers to the symbolistic period when artists often strove to almost ruin their individual lives and looked for a misfortune to form their destiny according to the rules of art. (Rozin 1995:99)

Yuri Lotman claims the same about romanticism. In the case of romanticism, biographical details such as poverty, persecution and banishment, consumption,

untimely death due to despair or the cold-heartedness of neighbours referred to the favour of the gods. Trials, serious diseases or unhappy love were looked upon as something poetic. Such facts were emphasised because they determined the semiotic status of the human being as a poetic individual. And on the contrary – good health and success in love were to be concealed as unpoetic. (Lotman 1990:355)

Whereas according to Berne, a human being tries to follow his scenario subconsciously all the time, Rozin suggests something else. Just in case companions have unravelled a person's script and they are sure of his next step, a person can act in an irrational way. By means of unexpected actions the person breaks the natural course of events – as usually happens in every accurate artistic text. The main “purpose” of irrational behaviour is the quest to bring more events into a human's biography. This kind of behaviour derives from a pursuit to organise a life according to the principles of an artistic text. Personality cannot develop in conditions where nothing happens. Artistic biography, like an artistic text, functions as a generator of information, and a good script itself guarantees such biographical creativity. Rozin calls our attention to the fact that if too few events happen in somebody's life, several psychological mechanisms which will try to compensate the lack of events will come into operation. People may react to the lack of events in different ways. According to Rozin, there are three basic ways to negotiate the lack of information: to bring more risk into one's life, to change the state of consciousness and to render all events absurd. In Rozin's opinion, the absurd is one of the simplest ways of making events out of completely insignificant situations. Rozin's final conclusion is quite similar to Berne's idea: many psychological problems arise because real life tends to break down the canons of the artistic text. The only outlet from this consists in striving to create better scenarios in which the destructive behaviour of the protagonist has been reduced to minimum. (Rozin 1992)

#### 4. Yuri Lotman and “Persons with biography”

Yuri Lotman has treated similar problems from the point of view of cultural semiotics. Like Berne and Rozin, he claims that there are many individuals whose biography can be dealt with as a conscious act of creation, although not all people in culture have the right to create their own biography. Every type of culture works out its own models of “persons with biography” and “persons without biography”. From Lotman's statement, we can conclude that not all persons have an equal tendency to make themselves autobiographical scripts, as Berne and Rozin presumed. Lotman suggests that only in extreme cases, for instance Pushkin and Byron, can we speak of life as a form of creation and about biography as a work of art. (Lotman 1990:357)

Lotman, like Rozin, refers to the importance of breaking the scripts and also to the generative function of this fact in culture. Lotman suggests the ambivalence of cultural memory: this fixes rules, and deviations of it as events. Whereas the first are abstract, the latter are concrete and have been connected with certain persons. If we compare two extremely different cultural epochs like the Middle Ages, which was oriented toward the ideal of the following of norms; and romanticism, which pointed to maximal individuality and the deviation from norms, then we can yet find one fact uniting them. In both cases a person tries to realise not a routine but unusual pattern of behaviour, the execution of which demands a great effort from the person himself. (Lotman 1990:366–67)

Lotman answers the question of what an event is, in the following manner. He suggests that we can imagine the event in the text as the procession of a character over the boundaries of the semantic field. The foundation of the composition of the text is one certain semantic structure, and action represents an effort to negotiate it. Regarding the boundaries of the semantic field, an actor acts as the breaker of this field, and the frontier is related to him as an obstacle. No single description of action has been defined as an event until we have solved the question of its disposition in the secondary structural field which is determined by the type of culture. (Lotman 1990:109)

Both Berne and Rozin proceeded from the idea that everyone usually has only one script. Such a starting-point is quite problematic. Lotman claims that depending on the text (in this context on the script – *V. M.*), the same state of affairs may or may not have the nature of an event. (Lotman 1990:107) One and the same fact may have been joined into two diametrically opposite scripts at the same time. It is precisely in such cases that the actual complexity of human behaviour becomes evident. This refers also to the fact that in cultures which have rigid value systems, a person falls easily into conflict with society, but in democratic cultures with himself, because realising one and the same motive from the point of view of different scripts often assumes completely different behaviour.

## 5. Cognitive Fields

There is a very interesting problem connected with this topic: why is a person's cognition during his mental history divided into so many different cognitive fields? Among others, one reason evidently consists in the fact that in such conditions more events take place in a person's life. In a condition of homogenous cognition, human life should be imagined as a sequence of different occasions where the weight of events has been determined by contingency. But the possibility to apply semiotically heterogeneous experiences gives humans an ability to themselves determine the weight of events and to create new scripts which will place past cases in fundamentally different cognitive realities.

Let us briefly observe the relationships between two different domains of cognition – religion and art. A peculiarity of art finds its expression in an ability *to increase* the weight of events. The falling of snow or the swinging of a branch in the wind are not events at first sight, but inserting these into artistic language may increase their meaning considerably and they may appear as a basic element determining the whole composition of the work of art. Religion, on the contrary, has an ability to minimise the weight of events. Such important events for an ordinary person as disease, failure, enrichment or pauperisation, birth and death will decrease to almost zero in the religious context, becoming equal with the falling of a leaf in a gust of wind.

The separation of art and religion is a relatively contemporary phenomenon in cultural history. This process, as we know, began in the Renaissance. In earlier cultural epochs it arose because of the coexistence of, at first glance, a strange and contradictory way of perceiving the world: all things were very valuable and completely insignificant at the same time. Such a means of experience was also an ideal of human biography, referring to the individual as an uniting link in the connection between micro- and macrocosm.

It is true that in actuality we do not realise the full potential of human thought but only that part of it which will find expression against the background of certain cultural norms. The situation is complicated because things which are not expressed in culture are in a sense a part of culture as well. We can treat an event in culture as an intersection between different systems of which one is explicit, but the other has an implicit meaning. It is clear that such states of affairs will also occur in the consciousness of a single person, where during the actualisation of different scripts there will arise for the individual the problem of choice. Auto-communication actually starts from such a situation. The impression that a conflict of motives is something negative is apparently wrong from the semiotic point of view. The penetration of ideas and emotions beyond the boundaries of the field of semantics is one of the preconditions of any mental development. Such a situation is one of the most important assumptions for the establishment of inner communication.

In speaking of individual human cognition, intellectual and emotional events can conventionally be distinguished. Whereas the first lead to the genesis of new semantic structures and understandings, the consequence of the others is the formation of new emotions. It is remarkable that some emotions are much richer than others in their potential variety. For example – happiness is an “open” emotion: against the background of happiness, the inner world of the human being can easily be occupied by many other emotions. Sorrow, on the other hand, is a “closed” emotion, and its potential openness towards other emotions (this is what the informativity of an emotion is about) is considerably lower compared to that of happiness. It is possible that it is precisely on the basis of this feature that positive and negative emotions differ for a human being. A person treats as positive such feelings which potentially include more events for him. The ability to combine different ideas is not in the least more important than the ability to

synthesise different emotions. The latter mechanism can also appear to be a central factor in the compilation of artistic texts.

It is also remarkable that a tendency towards the division of emotions in both time and space is known in almost all the cultures we are familiar with. They are connected with traditions and calendar rituals which among others have the role of guaranteeing the diversity of human emotions. This cultural universal can also be observed as a collective aspiration to give emotions some kind of a “plot” colour.

## 6. Jerome Bruner and Narrative Models

But let us come back to the functioning of narratives. Based on the material given above, it is possible to draw some more general conclusions in the area. In his cultural-psychological book *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner discusses changes in the *concept of Self* during the last twenty years. He finds that a shift has taken place towards “discovering” narrative models. A human being who understands himself and the world around him is a narrative process of sorts. Or – like James Wertsch puts it – thinking (and in some ways the whole of human cognition) is an unbreakable dialogue between the Self and the world around it. (Wertsch 1991) According to Bruner’s statement, this shift of meaning in psychology (which could conventionally be called a humanitarisation of psychology) is best characterised by the fact that whereas the earlier concept of the Self was based on the understanding “from the outside in”, meaning that the Self was something whose components came from the direct social environment (family, friends, school etc.), the new treatment of Self is much more focused on culture and history, departing rather from the motto “from past to present”. The Self is a historical construction and its components lead back to a very ancient past through language and culture. Bruner also speaks of the “dialogic” character of human cognition, arguing as follows:

Is not Self a transactional relationship between a speaker and an Other, indeed, a Generalized Other? Is it not a way of framing one’s consciousness, one’s position, one’s commitment with respect to another? Self, in this dispensation, becomes “dialogue dependent”, designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purposes. (Bruner 1995:101)

Although Bruner is speaking here in the language of Mead and Cooley, not that of Bakhtin or Vygotsky, he asks the same question – what does the Self mean from the aspect of communication? Bruner finds that the anticultural (anti-historical) problem of psychology is that within its framework one can never ask about the *meaning*. Its schemes of debate are built up so that the definition of a phenomenon that interests us is deduced from the procedure of investigating it, for example: *intelligence is something measured by means of intelligence tests* etc. (Bruner 1995:101) Definitions of this kind are merely operational and the tradition of using these lacks the need to give them a deeper semantic meaning.

In the light of a narratological or more precisely – a discursive definition, the imagination of a specific human being changes into something dispersed and indefinable. Bruner asks:

Is Self to be taken as an enduring, subjective nucleus, or might it too be better conceived as “distributed”? (Bruner 1995:107)

The definition of a human being contains both for its genesis (the historical dimension of cultural texts) and the complicated actions of an individual aspiring to narrativity. We tell others about ourselves, ourselves about others, others about others and ourselves about ourselves. Or like Donald Polkinghorne claims:

We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipates what one will be. (cit. by Bruner 1995, pp. 115–16)

A great number of different cultural texts, each having an individual history, collide in a specific human being. In semiotic tradition, such a situation is referred to as an intertextuality. Roland Barthes defines intertextuality as follows:

Intertextuality is the impossibility of living outside the infinite text [- - -] the book creates meaning, the meaning creates the life. (Barthes 1973:36)

Text and extra-textual reality are interlaced - or even more radically – an extra-textual world is nothing but another kind of text. (Still & Worton 1990:33) It is obvious that if texts exist, both knowledge and models for reading those texts must exist. In other words *an interpreter* must exist. Deducing from this, Jerome Bruner argues as follows:

A cultural psychology is an interpretive psychology, in much the sense that history and anthropology and linguistics are interpretive disciplines. But that does not mean that it need be unprincipled or without methods [- - -] It seeks out the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings in cultural contexts

[- - -] Cultural psychology insists that the “methodology of causation” can neither capture the social and personal richness of lives in a culture nor begin to plumb their historical depth. It is only through the application of interpretation that we, as psychologists, can do justice to the world of culture [- - -] The program of ?? cultural psychology is not to deny biology or economics, but to show how human minds and lives are reflections of culture and history. There is no one “explanation” of a man, biological or otherwise. In the end, even the strongest causal explanation of the human condition cannot make plausible sense without being interpreted in the light of the symbolic world that constitutes human culture. (Bruner 1995:137–38)

## 7. Summary and Conclusion

In his book Bruner refers, among other things, to the point that such a “narratological” shift in psychology could not have taken place without the participation of literary science, hermeneutics and other humanitarian disciplines. (Bruner 1995:11) By means of that relatively self-evident remark we can return to the main idea of this article, which is: *the functioning of a text in a culture and the mechanisms of human thought are in some ways similar categories*. At least they are phenomena which in large part coincide. This trivial recognition allows one to understand that these models and ways of explanation born in linguistics, literary science or cultural semiotics can turn out to be far more significant and actual than could be assumed within the framework of an ordinary imagination and that *through these* it is also possible to model the everyday cognition of a human being. In the light of the present article, it should be clear in which manner psychology and semiotics have taken a step towards each other: many fundamental terms for psychology like “Self”, “personality”, “roles” etc. have gradually acquired a discursive (textual) substance. This idea actually belongs to Charles Peirce. Peirce’s semiotics is a “cognitive semiotics”, it is closely linked with the theory of consciousness. By Peirce all thinking is dialogic in form. (see Colaprieto 1989) But this also means that for investigating textual substances it is fundamentally possible also to use the existing methods and means of cognition of those branches of science which are occupied with the analysis of texts and narratives. Perhaps we can even hope that by means of the so-called “semiotic crunch”, psychology will return to those questions during the discussion of which this branch of science was born: *what are thoughts, where do they come from and what do they do in our consciousness?*

Address:

Department of Semiotics

Tiigi 78

Room 312

50410 Tartu

Estonia

E-mail: val@uninet.ee

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