

Indeterminacies and Inferencing

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Confronting indeterminacies in narrative discourses necessarily triggers attempts to come to terms with what Ingarden called *Unbestimmtheitsstellen* in der dargestellten Gegenständlichkeiten – “places of uncertainty in represented objects.” This paper will address the role of such places of uncertainty in narrative meaning-making through the lens of two complementary frameworks, one semiotic, the other functionalist. Eco’s inferential model of textual communication, based on Peirce’s triadic concept of the sign, favors semiosis over signification. Eco adapts Peircean inference – deduction, abduction (or hypothesis), induction – to a textual semiotics within a theory of cultural representation: overcoded abduction (deductive inference from general rule to particular case); undercoded abduction (selection of a probable or plausible alternative rule), creative abduction (conjectures or hypotheses where no plausible alternative is available); “meta-abduction” (testing of hypotheses through induction). In the process of actualization of narrative contents, overcoded abductions (e.g. the plot structure of a love story) require low levels of inferential reasoning whereas the other types, particularly the latter two, entail increasing degrees of abduction. It is here that indeterminacies in narrative discourse are likely to be encountered.

If the focus of Eco’s textual semiotics is on the actualization of narrative contents, contents which, on occasion, will find themselves in quest of responses to questions such as “How many children did Lady Macbeth have?” that remain in suspense, places of uncertainty of another variety are addressed in Sternberg’s “means-ends” functionalism. Gaps are encountered in the confrontation of two sequentialities: that of “the absolute dynamics of causally propelled action” (fabula) and that of “the variable dynamics of the reading process” (sjuzhet). Out of this “interplay between temporalities,” a process irreversible in time that occurs in the “intersequential relations” between telling/reading (discourse) and told (action), calling for a strategy of prospection, retrospection, and recognition, there emerges a dynamics of suspense (what will happen next?), curiosity (why did such-and-such occur?), and surprise (how do the parts tie together into a whole?). The gaps generated in this dynamic process of intersequentiality act as generators of sense-making inferences that are peculiar to narrativity.

Indeterminacies propel narrative discourse in a number of ways. In a process of “heuristic” reading (from beginning to end), prospection engages overcoded abductions, although at moments of uncertainty or suspense, undercoded abductions will come into play that may or may not culminate in full recognition by tying things together. Left unresolved, this indeterminacy will stimulate curiosity, first by seeking answers retrospectively, then, in a process of “semiotic” reading, through the triggering of progressively higher-order abductions that may leave gaps which are in themselves meaningful.