



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Cognitive Status of Textual Voice

Manfred Jahn

New Literary History, Volume 32, Number 3, Summer 2001, pp. 695-697 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2001.0038>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/24584>

## Commentary: The Cognitive Status of Textual Voice

Manfred Jahn

**A**S PRACTICALLY ALL CONTRIBUTORS to this issue rightly point out, talking of voices in written texts involves a certain amount of metaphorical slippage. What happens is perhaps best expressed in Aczel's words as a hearing and over-hearing of voices (possibly even of ventriloquizing voices), a formula which opens up a rich spectrum of philosophical speculation and at the same time usefully stresses the constructivist readerly activity that creates ("hypostatizes," Fludernik says) both textual voices and textual speakers in the absence of real (materially present) voices and speakers. While it is entirely appropriate to scare-quote such hearing, such voices, and such speakers (as Gibson does in his text and in his commentary), I would nevertheless argue that it may be too easy to follow one's first impulse and condemn the voice metaphor as a conceptual weakness. As has been established in a number of cognitive studies, the input of written text goes through a level of phonological processing both before and after it is conceptually understood. At one or more stages in the processing of text, words when being read are sounded in internal speech. This is how we can hear narrators and characters speak—not because they actually do so but because we access voice and the mental auditory processors connected to it in order to read the text. What follows is a matter of projection: we project onto "the world out there" what we have ourselves constructed in here. This is how a voice gets "into" a text, indeed, as Roland Barthes said, the only one who speaks in the text is the reader (quoted approvingly by Gibson in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*; in his present essay, Gibson suggests that the proper answer should be "no one, ever").<sup>1</sup> Of course, Barthes's *voix du lecteur* is just another condensed metaphorical description; but at the same time it is also an enlightening shortcut to the cognitive facts of the matter. Understood in this manner, the voice metaphor is virtually a "metaphor we live by" (to use Lakoff and Johnson's title phrase),<sup>2</sup> and it would be foolish to toss it overboard for the sake of some ill-conceived notion of theoretical purity. However, as I argue in my essay, one can be a narrator without speaking or writing a single word; hence as far as I am concerned, the truly

distortive metaphorical transfer happens when we use “voice” and “speaker” with reference to a narrative agency that represents, quotes, and arranges but has no actual text to speak. This is the area where the concept of “narrative voice” is in urgent need of qualification after all.

Fludernik’s essay commendably places an unjustly neglected author (Garrett) into the field of literary debate, and it also presents a welcome elaboration of the intriguing subject of what she terms reflectorization. Doing so, her essay tangentially touches on what are, to me, two bothersome issues: the narratological usage of the term “illusion,” and the “illicit transferral” argument that plays such a major role in the conception of “natural narratology.” Fludernik begins by saying that the standard Genettean model fails to “take into account the mimetic illusion” usually generated by narrative texts. Recognizing the “illusionism” of written texts, she argues, we must separate a level of narratological analysis unburdened by concepts like speakers, voices, and communicational settings from a level of ordinary interpretations that spontaneously invoke these concepts in order to produce ordinary (naturalized or narrativized) readings. Of course, natural narratology, too, utilizes the natural frames for the purposes of its own—characteristically distanced—type of cognitive analysis (nicely exemplified in Fludernik’s discussion of Garrett). At the same time, Fludernik strongly warns us not to repeat “readers’ interpretative moves on a theoretical level”: narrators, voices, and so forth are strictly relegated to the nontheoretical or folk level of natural interpretation.

So far so good. The problematic nature of these stipulations becomes apparent when Fludernik begins her discussion of Stanzel’s figural narrative situation. According to Stanzel, figural narrative is predicated on an “illusion of immediacy,” that is, the perceived *absence* of the teller figure. Now, if we handle the illusion of figural narration—the illusion of narratorial absence—in the same manner as Fludernik suggests to handle the illusion of narratorial presence, then we must apparently assume that in the case of figural narrative there *is* a narrator function on the level of theoretical abstraction. But if we affirm the theoretical existence of a narrative agency in figural narrative how can we possibly deny its existence in authorial and first-person narrative? Evidently, our predicament is mainly due to the fact that we are unhappily using “illusion” in two senses: (1) as a deception that must be refuted on the theoretical level, and (2) as a real-enough aesthetic effect that it is our business to explain. Unfortunately, “illusion” proves to be debilitatingly ambiguous in this context and significantly clouds that clarity of exposition on which narratology normally prides itself.

While there is no simple remedy to this, I would submit that an illusion amounts to seeing something as something else, to seeing X as Y,

let us say. This is a good and a bad thing. On the one hand we fail to see reality (X) as it really is (not so good); on the other hand, we must see X as Y in order to see something at all (not so bad). Perhaps this is the point to admit that we have no direct access to any real facts, either of the world at large, or of a text, or to any “objectively given” linguistic indices, markers, signposts, whatever. In the final analysis, a text is not even the proverbial arrangement of black marks on paper because it needs only a moment of reflection to realize that this description, like all other seemingly neutral descriptions, is wholly suffused by a host of presuppositions about cultural artifacts and standard human points of view, assumptions that we use without thinking (yet use in order to think). On this view, the truly unwarranted move is to hypostatize a corrective level of narratological abstraction that is somehow superior to what the reader sees a text as being, doing, and meaning. Certainly, there is no procedure for proving, as in the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion, that the two lines in question are really equal in length. Let me add that the illusion of seeing X as Y has a twin brother called hearing X as Y. As it happens, I am currently engaged in a project of analyzing the discourse of theatrical reviews, and it is hardly surprising to find that one British reviewer hears the words spoken in a performance of Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* as “prissily Teutonic like an ultimatum from Brussels,” while another perceives them as a “pointedly witty translation which deserves maximum clarity.” I take it this does not exactly prove Gibson’s point (made both in his essay and in his commentary) that a voiced text amounts to a stable entity with determinate outlines and no room for play. Certainly the destabilizing devices found by Richardson in his analysis of postmodernist drama do not get lost in a play’s performance.

## NOTES

- 1 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970), p. 157; Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 151.
- 2 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980).