

Introducing the 'linguistic turn' to history education

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Research studies aimed at exploring how secondary school students engage in doing history, develop historical reasoning and understanding often times neglected the theoretical frameworks that ahistorians of different orientations use to study the past. As a result of this oversight, some historical concepts are sometimes weakly defined, ambiguously used, or confused with other concepts. In order to contribute to the effort to provide students with rewarding and meaningful experiences in doing history, this article aims to enhance teacher educators' and teachers' understanding of different modes of historical writing by bringing into attention a recent school of historical thought's conceptual framework, methods, principal concepts, ideological positions, and pre-eminent practitioners. It also maps out the key debates, criticisms, and arguments that historians of different historical orientations engaged in.

History education, historiography, historical writing, linguistic turn

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has observed a growing body of research on what is said to be 'doing history' in schools. Although teacher educators and teachers have engaged students in doing historical inquiry in recent years, little attention has been paid to the theoretical frameworks that different schools of historical thought have employed to bring history to life. This shortcoming manifests itself in the questions framed, concepts explained, argument made, and conclusions drawn. For instance, some studies examining teachers' understanding of history either extrapolated or mixed the features of competing historical traditions. In order to give an example from a study done in the United States, in Evans's (1988, 1989, 1994) successive exploratory studies, five categories of teachers were identified as 'storyteller', 'scientific historian', 'relativist or reformer', 'cosmic philosopher', and 'eclectic' in terms of their conceptions of history and beliefs about the purposes of history instruction. When his typology of social studies teachers is subjected to the critical scrutiny in the light of the knowledge base on historiography, it is revealed as vague and in need of clarification. For instance, the two categories, 'scientific historian' and 'cosmic philosopher', are basically the same in terms of their definitions of how historians approach the past. 'Scientific' or positivist historians like psychohistorians do search for general laws and patterns in history – as a 'cosmic philosopher' does – in addition to placing a doubled emphasis on the importance of a rigorous research methodology in investigating the past. In other words, Evans described teachers' conceptions of history by inappropriately employing the concept of scientific historian. If one is describing his or her categories by using what is intrinsically a historical concept, it is unacceptable, from scholarly point of view, for him or her to use that concept without taking into account its purported meaning and implications in the discipline of history.

Teachers need to know the nature of history to plan effectively, implement and assess their instructional activities. The importance of an adequate understanding of the nature of a given discipline on the teachers' part in the teaching and learning process has been recognised in science education. This recognition manifests itself in the efforts to help science teachers and students develop a sophisticated understanding of the nature of science which is deemed to be a major goal in science education and a central component of scientific literacy by science

education organisations and science educators who stress the role that a nuanced understanding of the nature of science plays in fostering higher levels of scientific literacy (NSTA, 1982; AAAS, 1993; NRC, 1996; Alters, 1997; Bybee, 1997; Bell, Lederman, and Abd-El-Khalick, 2000). For this reason, science teachers are expected to be cognizant of varying positions on the nature of science along with accompanying conceptual frameworks with their methods, goals and theories (Loving, 1997).

The same emphasis on the importance of the nature of subject matter has not been realised in history education in the United States yet. However, as Lee (1983) argues, drawing on what insights historical frameworks provide for studying the past is crucial not only to develop a rational way of teaching history but also to address adequately the fundamental issues in history education. Wineburg and Wilson (1991) stress that if the goals for teaching history are to be realised, it is indispensable for teachers of history to understand the nature of the discipline. Likewise, Seixas (2002) stressed that being familiar with the different ways through which the past was made accessible, meaningful, and comprehensible was a must for advancing historical consciousness at schools and confronting the complexity of the past. Unless models in the discipline of history are identified and used in history teaching and learning, any framework for exploring students' thoughts about history was destined to remain murky (Seixas, 2001, p. 546). Alternative forms of history need not be viewed as burdensome or overwhelming for students to cope with, but as Pomson and Hoz (1998) stated, need to be considered as "cognitive agents fielding the rival attentions of different views of the past."

Awareness of how historians of different historical orientations construct differing interpretations of the past is one of the preconditions for history teachers to understand the complexity of the past and set the stage for their students to develop an increasingly complex and fine-grained understanding of the past events, people, institutions and processes. The purpose of this article is to bring a recent but rather contested historical orientation to the attention of both teacher educators and school teachers in order to contribute to the effort to bring about the more sophisticated and meaningful teaching and learning of history. The assumption underlying this article is that if social studies teachers become familiar with, recognise, and appreciate the multiplicity of historical explanations, along with the assumptions and ideologies that lie behind each orientation, they can help students not only to enjoy more freedom of choice in constructing their own historical understanding, but also to come up with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the past. The past research on doing history in schools did not satisfactorily address this crucial issue in history education. Aimed at addressing this gap in the literature, this article provides an overview of the linguistic or discursive turn in history.

THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN HISTORY

The linguistic or the discursive turn¹ – sometimes called cultural and aesthetic turn as well – began to affect historical writing around the mid-1960s (Vann, 1995; Iggers, 1997; Cohen, 1999; Jenkins, 1999). The recognisable influence of linguistics on historiography came by means of literary criticism with a theoretical bent that tended to emphasise the issues related to the epistemological aspects of historical writing and autonomy of language as a symbolic system (Monas, 1993; Iggers, 1997).

Based on constructivist epistemology, the linguistic turn puts forward a conception of history as a constructivist enterprise based on a textualist conception of the relation between language and reality (White, 1987). Textualism presumes that whatever is taken as the real is constituted by

¹ Instead of the 'linguistic turn', Hayden White prefers the term 'discursive turn' to call this movement in that he thinks the object of the past is not perceivable (done with, dead), thus the historian can approach the past only "discursively" (personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005).

representation rather than pre-exists any effort to grasp it in thought, imagination, or writing. According to the literary theorists such as Derrida, it is the language that shapes or constructs reality but does not refer to it (Iggers, 1997, p. 9). When applied to history, the implication of these epistemological assumptions is that the idea of objectivity in historical research is deemed to be impossible because there is no object of history. The historian is considered as the prisoner of the world in which he thinks and his thoughts and perceptions are inevitably conditioned by the categories of the language in which he or she operates (Iggers, 1997).

Language is seen as the reason for historical relativity. The relativity of the historical representation, White asserts, stems from “the function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding” (White, 1997, p. 392). Stressing the nature of texts as nonreferential and ambiguous in terms of their meanings, White and other literary critics contend that every text can be read in innumerable ways. The author’s intention no longer matters, because it is multilayered and contradictory (Iggers, 1997).

Regarded as a revolution in terms of its effects on the approach to the study of history, the linguistic turn has placed an emphasis on the roles of rhetoric, the topics of narrative, and the poetics of history in historical writing or representation (Fay *et al.*, 1998; Cohen, 1999). Since historical studies are based primarily on written sources that are the product of verbal portrayal and human communication, they are deemed to be linguistic documents. As a result, the linguistic turn has been concerned with the consequences of this aspect of historical sources. The semiotics of text production, how meaning is made in text, how readers take meaning from text are what the linguistic-oriented historians reflect on and take into account in their historical writings (Cohen, 1999, p. 66). For this reason, the analytical attention of historians is shifted from the object (or referents) of historiographical research to the products of that research, so to speak, the written texts in which historians presented their findings (White, 1987). Pointing out the change in the nature of historical explanation and the theoretical dimension of reading, Cohen (1999, p.66) says:

The [linguistic] turn has induced some groups of historians to develop a framework for practicing history in which language is considered an event or action, as real or material as any nonlinguistic event or action, in which language systems become the basic unit of historical investigation and in which language generally – its use, production, diffusion, and appropriation over time – is moved to the center of the historian’s concern. The linguistic turn has forced historians to rethink traditional ideas about the nature and function of language, and the relationships between language and historical representation, between author and text, between text and reader.

The linguistic turn is also seen as a methodological alternative in opposition to essentialist and positivist traditionalism in historiography in that its mode of historical writing is assumed to be an attempt to replace essentialism and positivism for a more adequate understanding of society and a more refined methodology. Opposing essentialist assumptions, historians affiliated with the linguistic approach aim to illustrate the historical construction of the social through language or the cultural and linguistic method. They also take into account the political aspects of history, the inclusion of dispossessed groups as subjects of history, and implications of postmodernism and feminism (Fay *et al.*, 1998). The linguistic turn competed with the previous modes of historical writing (i.e., materialist and social explanations of the 1960s) in order to turn historians’ attentions from social and quantifiable material explanations to the questions of language, identity, symbols and social constructions. This ultimately became an established school with its own conception of history. Both historians of the positivist school of thought devoted to traditional approaches as well as those social historians dedicated to studies of culture and language refer to the linguistic turn as a novelty (Ekman, 2001).

The linguistic turn in historiography is used synonymously with the narrativist historiography informed by theoretical elaborations of literary critics such as White. This approach provides guidance for “how to read and interpret texts” rather than setting rules for “how to write history”

(Domanska, personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005). Narrativist historiography assumes that historical narratives serve as social transactions and are produced by the historian for the audience in a special situation such as a pre-existing or ongoing debate, argument, and discourse (Cohen, 1999). Since historians intentionally try to persuade as well as to inform their audiences with some sociopolitical or ideological aim in mind, histories have a performative dimension. By means of rhetorical conventions and strategies, historians intend to persuade readers that their accounts of the past are truer, more objective, and worthier than another version and this in turn leads readers to develop a particular attitude toward the past and the present and to take a particular course of action in the present (Cohen, 1999, p. 69). The form itself or the plot structure of a historical account shapes content and allows the historian to pinpoint the system of thought that authorises the terms of the debate. White (1987) contends that rather than the evidence, the historian's conscious and unconscious choices about the categories of historical poetics are what provide him or her with vision in historical enterprise.

Having explained the characteristic features of the linguistic turn in historiography, I will narrow my focus on this movement by bringing to the fore the scholarly writings of the key literary figure who has played a pivotal role in initiating and directing the discussions about the implications of the linguistic turn for historical thinking and writing. It is White who, as one of the leading pioneers in introducing the linguistic turn to the study of history, has greatly contributed to the debate among historians about the nature and methods of historical studies by enriching historiography with the possibilities and implications of literary criticism for history.

As the most vociferous and articulate proponent of the theory on the rhetorical dimensions of historical writing (Kelley, 2003, p. 341), White explored "the relevance of literary theory for the writing and reading of historical narratives" (Cohen, 1999, p. 67). That is why he is considered to be a pioneer in initiating the linguistic turn in history, so to speak the turn toward "mediums and modes of representation" (O'Brien, 2004). Through an in-depth philosophical and theoretical critique of conventional historiography, White brought unexamined or taken for granted assumptions of traditional historiography to the forefront of historians to be discussed. The illustration of White's narrativist theory of history through his and other historians' works is considered next.

Trained as a medieval historian, White saw it necessary to have a strong command of literary studies and discourse analysis in order to "learn how to read works written by historians as historiography or writing" (White, personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005). He resorts to literary criticism and cognitive relativism to address problems in historiography and emphasises the importance of the problem of language, of rhetoric, and of theoretical self-reflection in the writing of history (Lacapra, 1983; Thompson, 2000). He employs the narrativist-rhetorical conception of historiography and ascribes primacy to literary tropes and verbal structures in historical thinking (Zagorin, 1997). He attempts to "make interpretative and explanatory strategies – which remain implicit in traditional historiography practiced as a craft – explicit, self-conscious, and subject to criticism" (Lacapra, 1983, p. 75). Claiming that historians of professional training programs haven't yet theorised the historical method or the form of their own discourse, White (1995) urged historians to inquire into the nature and implications of interpretation in the reconstruction of the past. His basic purpose was to have historians reflect on the invidious distinction between those who engaged in historical research and writing and those who wrote about writing history. White's core argument started with his questioning of the traditional boundary between history and literature (Cohen, 1999). According to White (1987, p.27), traditional historians assumed that:

What distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. The content of historical stories is real events rather than imaginary events. This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed....A true narrative is less a product of

the historian's poetic talents than it is a necessary result of a proper application of historical method...For the narrative historian, the historical method consists in investigating the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence.

By questioning these assumptions, White counter-argued that historical narratives had much more in common with literary narratives than historians thought. Since "the historian is dealing with an object that is no longer perceivable" (personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005), White saw historical text as a literary artifact (Jenkins, 1999, p.117) and accordingly argued that "historian's writing must be analysed first and foremost as a verbal artifact" (personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005). He asserted that most historians fell short of analysing the discursive aspects of their writing due mostly to their rejection of the existence of such a dimension (White, 1995). He then drew attention to the constructed nature of historical narratives (Lacapra, 1983, p. 76), "the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (Cohen, 1999, p. 68).

White, therefore, expected the historian to recognise that historical facts were not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asked of the phenomena before him (White, 1987, p. 26-57; Vann, 1995, p. 62-63). For this reason, he also suggested that historians to recognise that there was not a single correct view of any historical event or process under study, but there were many equally plausible versions or correct views, each requiring its own style of representation via narrative plot structures (Vann, 1995; Jenkins, 1999, p. 118). Accordingly, White urged historians to tell many different kinds of stories from various perspectives, with which many voices, emplotted diversely, without employing the "meta-story" to legitimatise their own discourse and downplay others' (Passmore, 2003, p.25). In brief, White stressed that historical writing was a form of narrative prose discourse (Cohen, 1999). In addition to the constructivist view of historiography, White was identified with a presentist approach as well. This was because, according to White, the only reason why we ought to study the past was to "transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from the burden of history" (as cited in Vann, 1995, p. 62).

White's critical engagement with historical theory culminated with his theory of a poetics of historiography based on Vico's ideas (Giovanni Battista Vico was considered to be the first philosopher of history by some historians). He (1973) elaborated on it in his book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, where he dealt with the thinking styles of four historians and four philosophers of history. He identified four modes of a theory of tropes, four structures of emplotment, four argumentative models, and four ideological strategies. The theory of tropes -aiming to illuminate how historical texts are the way they are – constituted the gist of White's position on the debate on the nature and function of historical explanation (Jenkins, 1999, p. 120).

The theory of tropes was intended to uncover the deep structural forms of historical thought through the four literary figures metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, each of which had its own unique way of organising parts into wholes (White saw irony as the trope of historical reality). Since the function of the four tropes was to describe the logically possible relationships between part and whole, tropology constituted the backbone of the study of narrative. Due to its ability to describe how discursive choices were pre-figured by one dominant trope, tropology served as a powerful tool for historians to be able to distinguish modes of thought (Zagorin, 1999). By employing tropes as tools of persuasion, the historian overcame the uncertainty involved in all interpretation that is fundamentally rhetorical (Zagorin, 1999).

Emplotment, which White defined as "encodation of the facts contained in a chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures", helped historians to make sense of historical events by enabling them to arrange selected facts and events into a particular narrative plot

structure, that is, a story (Cohen, 1999, p. 68). It was emplotment that produced an interpretation of the facts (White, 1997, p. 393). Roth stated that emplotment had a crucial role in endowing the past with meaning because it had none in itself (as cited in Jenkins, 1999). The historian needed to make use of a narrative plot structure “because the past is formless, or at least it does not have rhetorical forms that alone make it meaningful in communication” (as cited in Jenkins, 1999, p. 117). As White (1987) concisely expressed, “it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning” (p. 44). According to White (1987), real events were not intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but could be constructed as such only by the historian’s imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events. Through different narrative accounts, the historian might present the same set of events in the form and meaning of either a tragic story or a farce with equal plausibility, without violating the factual record (White, 1997). The conflict between any given set of competing narratives did not result from the facts of the matter in question but from the different story-meanings with which the facts could be endowed by emplotment (White, 1997, p. 393).

White elaborated on the function of narrative history in terms of the implications of the nature of discourse in general. He (1987, p.40) pointed out that it was possible to transmit different types of messages with quite different aims in view (i.e., communicative, expressive, or conative) and every discourse was likely to have aspects of all these three functions. Most of the proponents of narrative approach who saw narrative as a legitimate mode of historical representation highlighted the communicative function. According to this view of history as communication:

A history is conceived to be a “message” about a “referent” (the past, historical events, and so on) the content of which is both information (the facts) and an “explanation” (the narrative account). Both the facts in their particularity and the narrative in its generality must meet a correspondence, as well as a coherence, criterion of truth value.... The narrative form of the discourse is only a medium for the message, having no more truth value or informational content than any other formal structure. (White, 1987, p. 40-41)

White (1987) continued to elucidate his own narrativist approach and suggested that instead of viewing every historical narrative as ‘mythic’ or ‘ideological’ in nature, historians saw it as “allegorical, that is, as saying one thing and meaning another” (p. 45). Since a narrative account was always a figurative account or an allegory, “a historical narrative can be said to be an allegorisation of the experience of “within-time-ness” the figurative meaning of which is the structure of temporality” (p. 53).

Where does the narrative history stand among other schools of historical thought? How do historians of different orientations view it? White addressed these questions. He succinctly summarised the discussion of narrative in historical theory by identifying four principal strains in these discussions.

First, certain analytical philosophers considered narrative as a kind of explanations especially appropriate to the explication of historical, as against natural, events and processes. Second, certain socially-scientifically oriented historians such as the French *Annales* regarded narrative historiography as nonscientific, even ideological representational strategy. Third, certain semiologically oriented literary theorists viewed it simply one discursive “code” among others, which might or might not be appropriate for the representation of reality. A fifth category would be the defenders of a craft notion [history as an art] of historical studies who view narrative as a perfectly respectable way of “doing” history. (White, 1987, p. 30-31)

What has been written in preceding paragraphs about White’s epistemological and theoretical thinking in conjunction with history may give an impression that White denied the knowability of the past. However, this is not the case (He is suspicious of the idea of historical truth, though). Even though many historians such as Marwick mistakenly associate White’s philosophical orientation with postmodernism, he is not a postmodernist theoretician either. He is identified with the structuralist mode of thinking as acknowledged by himself (Ankersmit, 1998). As

opposed to the postmodernists, he did not reject the assertion that history was capable of revealing the past facts (Cohen, 1999, p. 68; Jenkins, 1999, p. 116-119). Furthermore, emphasising that he had never denied the possibility of historical knowledge (White, 1985, p. 23), White stated that “competing narratives can be assessed, criticised, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain” (White, 1997, p. 393).

Is the linguistic turn welcomed, widely celebrated, and practised by contemporary historians? Is White's narrativist theory of history accurately understood and interpreted? As is the case in other types of historiography, the linguistic turn or White's narrativist approach to history can not escape poignant criticisms and be misunderstood. Zagorin (1997) declared that most philosophically-inclined historians had either simply ignored or decidedly criticised it.

Just as they opposed Hempel's scientism as a damaging misconception of the character of historical knowledge, so they have likewise tended to reject White's linguistic turn and its rhetorical approach for its disregard and distortion of certain essential characteristics of historical inquiry and writing. (p. 263-264)

Even though White does not deny the knowable past, Zagorin unfairly and unwarrantedly criticised him for discarding the concept of a real and knowable past.

In response to Zagorin's criticism, White said that instead of basing his criticism on “original sources,” which was the act that a historian was supposed to do, Zagorin resorted to a secondary source “in a work that was also critical of his enemy, and then he uses that,” thereby betrayed his own principles in practice. That is, Zagorin violated the canons of historical research that he advocated. White gave a specific example to support his claim. “Zagorin repeats the canard about Derrida, who is supposed to have said, ‘There is nothing outside the text.’ But Derrida never said this...When he cites this statement, he quotes, not Derrida, but someone else.” White also contended that Zagorin did not recognise the point that “he is critical of professional historians on account of their lack of philosophical and ideological self-consciousness” (personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005). Pointing out many historians' misinterpretation of rhetoric and ungrounded criticisms against his ideas, White continued to clarify his position:

Many historians, Zagorin included, think of rhetoric as simply persuasion. They do not understand that rhetoric is a theory of the public and more specifically the political use of language and/or speech. Therefore when someone says that the historical narrative is a rhetorical construction, many people are offended....Most historians simply ignore or reject on dogmatic grounds my arguments rather than answer them.

White was also accused of wiping out the boundary between fictional writings and historical narrative (Vann, 1998), and of developing an extremely constructionist narrative theory of history which underestimated the variety of histories and overestimated the role of narrative by identifying historiography entirely with the narrative mode (Zagorin, 1999). Referring to White's emphasis on the relativity of historical representation which stemmed from a so-called ‘part-whole’ view of the relationship between reason and fantasy as opposed to a view based on ‘binary opposition’ (Domanska, 1998), Chartier pointed out that the complex methods historians employed to investigate the past would be totally pointless if historical and fictional discourses were identical (as cited in Zagorin, 1999). Agreeing with Chartier's comment, White stated:

Yes. It might very well be pointless. But maybe it is pointless or a manifestation of a certain period of history itself. There was once a time when alchemy was regarded as a science, then it was discredited, and the alchemists (like the astrologers) had to pack up shop. There may come a time when the kind of historian that Zagorin is, one who goes over and over again the same documents and writes more and more stories about the same events, trying to get it right, will see that the solution to his problem is to change the way he does history. (personal e-mail communication, January 31, 2005)

Will there be an era in the future in which historians stop practising traditional historical methods that Ranke established in the nineteenth century? Will future historians embrace the discursive turn in its entirety which remains on the margin of contemporary historiography? Time will answer these questions. It will show whether White's prophecy will manifest itself in the future generations' historical writings.

CONCLUSION

The subject matters and methods of historical writing have expanded greatly since the inception of history as an academic discipline. Historiography has become more pluralistic today than it had ever been. The kind of history we have today is the one with "the multiplicity of versions competing for attention and emphasising alternatively elites or nonelites, men or women, whites or nonwhites" (Gilderhus, 1987, p. 125). Different conceptual frameworks used to explain the past "may contradict, compete with, or complement one another, but this means that students should be equipped to deal with such relationships" (Lee and Ashby, 2000, p.200). For this reason, history departments should emphasise training in historiography, by means of which students can stay away from accepting any historical claims at face value.

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