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# **The Role of Language when Writing and Communicating Scenarios and Narratives**

## **Narratives in a linguistic perspective**

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→ Language has two major functions:

**communication**



**and thinking (cognitive,  
epistemological)**



→ Discourse linguistics asks: How does language shape our thoughts and actions?

# *„Narratives, I can't hear that anymore...“*

(Hans Peter Doskozil, Governor of the Austrian province Burgenland)

From a linguistic perspective cultural studies and social sciences use the term *narrative* frequently in a very broad and inflationary sense that lacks analytical accuracy.

Examples:

- „the narrative of climate change“ (Wolfgang Müller - Funk)
- „the narrative of green economy“ (di Giulio et al., 2020)

From a linguistic perspective „climate change“ and „green economy“ are no narratives, but scientific terms based on theories, data collection, explication, and argumentation.

*→ In the following, I hope to demonstrate that narratives have no place within scientific discourse - but can help support scientific causes.*

## 5 basic generics patterns

### Linguistics distinguish between 5 generic patterns:

**1) Description** referring to objects or processes, e.g. reports, news

Descriptions form the basis of every empirical science. Whatever processes are described, it is clear from a linguistic perspective that these descriptions are not narratives, even though they may represent changes in the past.

**2) Explanation** making sth. understandable, e.g. textbooks, essays, reports

Explanations, particularly causal explanations, are often confused with argumentation, since both can be an answer to a why-question. The central difference is that in an explanation, the initial assertion about a causal relationship is not disputed, whereas an argumentation grows from a claim that seems to be doubtful or has been questioned and should thus be justified by arguments.

## 5 basic generic patterns

**3) Argumentation** aims to convince persons , e.g. commentaries, commercials

Argumentation has the function to challenge or justify validity claims such as truth and normative rightness, to convince listeners or hearers that an assertive claim is true or that a directive demand is appropriate and acceptable.

**4) Instruction** offers guidance, advice, e.g. instructions for use

The main function of instructions is to offer guidance to people in order to enable them to act in a specific way. As a basic generic pattern, instructions prepare for and accompany action.

**5) Narrative** tells a story from memory.

- It is told by a narrator: subjective perspective /is potentially fictitious
- It arranges events in chronological order.
- It refers to remembered events (past).
- It has a beginning, often with a climax and a conclusion.  
(e.g novels, fairy tales, personal narratives about the past)

## Benefits of narratives from a linguistic perspective

- Narratives have their place in the communication about energy policies and scientific results, but not as part of scientific discourse based on theoretical and practical validity claims.

### Examples of narratives:

-biographical and anecdotal narratives: A researcher tells personal motives and biographical experience associated with his/her research. *Ex: When I was a boy my grandfather used to chop wood in the backyard. ....*

- documentary storytelling told by people of the past *Ex: In his autobiography, Carl Zuckmayer tells us how he saved energy. He writes....*

- Narratives are essentially subjective and told by a narrator (a storyteller). They can provide human interest aspects that accompany research.
- Narratives offer orientation. They inform and entertain.

→ For many people this is more appealing than statistics and graphs.

## shortcomings and dangers of narratives

- Narratives invite a laid-back attitude (relief from action),
- They have no theoretical validity.
- They are subjective and possibly fictitious.
- Therefore: They have no place within scientific discourse. When used within scientific discourse they undermine scientific validity claims.

Ex: Calling climate change a *narrative* undermines the scientific claims of truth relating to the existence, the causes and consequences of global warming.

# Narratives, scenarios, storylines: an example from energy research

Marcuccio et al: CROSS Scenarios and Drivers Definitions, 2022:

*We consider two distinct **narratives** concerning the integration and access of Switzerland to European and global energy markets:*

*1. **Moderate integration**: Switzerland is well integrated into the European and global energy markets. Imports of electricity and low-carbon or carbon-free energy carriers and fuels are secured via agreements between Switzerland and the EU and bilateral agreements between Switzerland and other countries. (...)*

*2. **Low integration**: Signing agreements between Switzerland and the EU or other countries regarding imports of electricity and other low-carbon or carbon-free energy carriers is a formidable task. This is due to export restrictions from other countries that need these resources to meet their own demands. In such a world, Switzerland opts for its “energy independence”.*

*The resulting four CROSS **scenarios** are summarised in Figure 2.1. The labels for each dimension in the table refer to the **storylines** described above.*

*→ Linguistically, 1) and 2) are condition dependent projections of possible future developments based on empirical data, recorded by descriptions that are integrated into argumentation and explanation. They are neither narratives nor storylines (terms that are occasionally used synonymously).*



## Scenarios, policies

- **Scenario:** hypothetical sequence of events construed by observation of causal processes (Duden)
  - I suggest that in energy research many so called *narratives* can be named **scenarios**, possibly distinguishing between *quantitative and qualitative/verbal scenarios*. (See previous slide: points 1) and 2))
- **Policy:** a set of ideas or plans that is used as a basis for making decisions, especially in politics, or business (Collins)

### Discussion points:

- 1) What is your experience in communicating scientific results of energy research? (within disciplines, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary)
- 2) What do you think of my suggestions?

## Literature

For a more detailed explication of my argument see Martin Reisigl's article cited below.

1. Reisigl, Martin (2021). "*Narrative!*" *I can't hear that anymore*'. A linguistic critique of an overstretched umbrella term in cultural and social science studies, discussed with the example of the discourse on climate change, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 18:3, 368-386, DOI: [10.1080/17405904.2020.1822897](https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1822897)
2. di Giulio, Antionetta, Defila, Rico (2022). *Bedeutung von Narrativen für Umwelt und Nachhaltigkeit*. Basel: Universität Basel. doi: 10.5451/unibas-ep88066