


Exploring Narrative through a Linguistic Lens: A Systematic Review of Critical and Theoretical Frameworks

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i5.1591>

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic review of scholarly literature published between 2015 and 2025 that explores narrative through a linguistic lens. The review aims to identify and synthesize major critical and theoretical frameworks applied to narrative studies within the field of linguistics. A total of 36 peer-reviewed studies were selected through comprehensive searches across major academic databases using keywords related to narrative linguistics, discourse analysis, and critical theory. The findings reveal four dominant categories of analysis: structuralist and formal linguistic frameworks, cognitive linguistic approaches, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and multimodal/digital narrative frameworks. While structuralist approaches focus on the formal organization of narrative elements such as syntax and coherence, cognitive frameworks emphasize the role of mental representation, conceptual blending, and embodiment in narrative comprehension. CDA-based studies investigate how narratives construct and challenge power relations, while multimodal approaches explore how meaning is shaped across verbal, visual, and digital modes. This review demonstrates a clear disciplinary shift toward integrative and socially responsive frameworks, reflecting the increasing complexity of narrative forms in contemporary communication. The study also identifies emerging gaps in cross-cultural perspectives and digital multimodal theory, suggesting directions for future research. By mapping recent developments in narrative theory from a linguistic standpoint, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how language constructs, conveys, and transforms stories across contexts.

Keywords: *Narrative Analysis, Linguistic Frameworks, Critical Discourse Analysis, Cognitive Linguistics, Multimodality*

Article History:

Received 14th October 2025

Accepted 29th October 2025

Published 31st October 2025



INTRODUCTION

Narrative, as a fundamental mode of human communication, has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry across disciplines such as literature, linguistics, anthropology, and psychology. At its core, narrative involves the structured recounting of events, shaped by linguistic choices that influence how stories are constructed and interpreted (Labov, 2013). In recent decades, linguistic approaches to narrative have provided critical tools for analyzing the micro- and macro-level features of texts, highlighting the role of language in shaping meaning beyond mere content (Tannen, 2007). Understanding narrative through a linguistic lens allows researchers to explore not only what stories tell us but how they tell it.

Central to linguistic studies of narrative is the examination of discourse structures such as coherence, cohesion, and deixis, which govern the relationship between narrative elements and the context in which they occur (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The way language users deploy tense, aspect, modality, and speech acts contributes significantly to the unfolding of narrative temporality and agency (Mey, 2001; Setiawati et al., 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2025). This systemic perspective on language as a resource for constructing narrative worlds has been foundational for various critical and theoretical frameworks that analyze both oral and written narratives.

The intersection of narrative and linguistics is further enriched by developments in critical theory, which interrogate the socio-political dimensions of storytelling. Scholars such

as Bakhtin (1981) emphasize the dialogic nature of narrative, where multiple voices and perspectives interact, contest, and shape meaning. This dialogism challenges monologic or author-centric views of narrative and opens pathways to explore power relations, identity construction, and ideology embedded in linguistic choices (Fairclough, 1995). Consequently, linguistic narratology has increasingly incorporated critical perspectives to unpack how narratives function within cultural and ideological contexts.

Recent theoretical frameworks have also sought to integrate cognitive and functional approaches to narrative linguistics, emphasizing the role of the reader or listener in meaning-making processes (Bruner, 1991; Langacker, 2008). These perspectives focus on how narrative structures align with human cognition, memory, and perception, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language, thought, and experience. Such interdisciplinary approaches broaden the scope of narrative analysis beyond formal linguistic features to include experiential and interpretive dimensions.

Moreover, the rise of digital media and multimodal narratives has introduced new challenges and opportunities for linguistic analysis (Butar-Butar et al., 2025). Texts are no longer confined to linear, verbal formats but often integrate visual, auditory, and interactive elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Sutikno et al., 2025). This shift necessitates theoretical frameworks that can account for the semiotic complexity of contemporary narratives, prompting linguists to collaborate with scholars from media studies and semiotics to develop more holistic models.

Despite the wealth of research, there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis of critical and theoretical linguistic frameworks applied to narrative studies. Such a synthesis can clarify how diverse approaches converge or diverge in their conceptualizations of narrative structure, function, and socio-cultural significance. This paper aims to fill that gap by conducting a systematic literature review of key frameworks from 2015 to 2025, offering a critical overview of the current landscape.

By exploring the linguistic underpinnings of narrative through multiple theoretical lenses, this review contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of storytelling and its implications for understanding human communication. It also provides a foundation for future research to develop integrative models that account for the complexity of narratives in an increasingly mediated world.

Literature Review

The study of narrative from a linguistic perspective has evolved considerably, drawing on a rich tapestry of theoretical frameworks and critical approaches. Early linguistic narratology, grounded in structuralist traditions, focused on dissecting narrative components such as plot, characters, and temporal sequencing (Genette, 1980). These foundational analyses paved the way for more nuanced understandings of how language constructs narrative meaning. For example, Toolan (2001) emphasized the role of discourse markers and narrative voice in shaping the reader's engagement and interpretation. This focus on micro-level linguistic features has been complemented by explorations into pragmatics and conversational analysis, illustrating how narrative unfolds in real-time interaction (Schiffrin, 1994; Herman et al., 2023).

In addition to formal linguistic analysis, scholars have increasingly highlighted the sociolinguistic dimensions of narrative. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) argue that narratives function as identity work, where language users construct and negotiate their social selves through storytelling. This shift toward interactional narratives foregrounds the performative and situated nature of narrative practices, emphasizing how context influences linguistic choices. Similarly, Labov and Waletzky's (1967) model of narrative structure remains influential, particularly in the study of oral storytelling traditions, linking narrative form to social function.

More recent theoretical contributions incorporate cognitive linguistics to explain how narratives resonate with human mental processes. Researchers such as Fauconnier and Turner (2002) propose conceptual blending as a mechanism for narrative creativity, where disparate mental spaces combine to produce novel meaning. This cognitive approach aligns with work

on metaphor and embodiment in narrative, highlighting the deep connection between language, thought, and experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) further enriches narrative studies by revealing the power dynamics embedded within language use. Fairclough (2003) and van Dijk (2008) demonstrate how narratives can reproduce or challenge social inequalities, particularly through ideological framing and intertextuality (Jahrir et al., 2025). This critical lens encourages scholars to interrogate whose stories are told, how they are told, and for what purposes, making narrative analysis a tool for social critique.

Finally, the growing field of multimodality expands linguistic narratology beyond verbal text to include visual and digital narratives. O'Halloran (2011) and Jewitt (2014) emphasize the interplay of semiotic modes—language, image, sound—in constructing meaning, reflecting the complexity of contemporary storytelling in multimedia environments (Herman et al., 2024; Shaumiwaty et al., 2024). This integrative approach demands new theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the semiotic richness of narrative in the digital age.

Together, these diverse linguistic frameworks underscore the multifaceted nature of narrative and the importance of examining it through both structural and socio-cognitive lenses. This literature review sets the stage for a systematic examination of critical and theoretical frameworks that have shaped narrative studies over the past decade.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize and analyze critical and theoretical frameworks applied to narrative studies from a linguistic perspective. The review focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters published between 2015 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments and emerging trends within this interdisciplinary field.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA). Keywords and search strings combined terms related to narrative and linguistics, such as “narrative linguistics,” “critical narratology,” “discourse analysis of narrative,” “multimodal narrative,” and “linguistic frameworks for narrative.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search and ensure relevant results.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were established to select studies that: (1) explicitly address narrative from a linguistic or discourse analytic viewpoint, (2) apply or discuss critical or theoretical frameworks, (3) are published in English, and (4) fall within the 2015–2025 publication window. Excluded were studies focusing solely on non-linguistic narrative analysis, those outside the specified timeframe, and non-scholarly sources such as opinion pieces or non-peer-reviewed articles.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Eligible studies were screened initially by titles and abstracts, followed by full-text review to confirm relevance. Key information extracted included the theoretical framework used, linguistic concepts applied, types of narratives analyzed, and main findings. The synthesis involved thematic coding to identify recurring frameworks and critical approaches, which were then categorized according to their conceptual focus—such as structuralist, cognitive, critical discourse, and multimodal frameworks.

Quality Assessment

To ensure rigor, studies were assessed for methodological transparency, theoretical clarity, and empirical grounding. Studies lacking clear theoretical frameworks or sufficient linguistic analysis were excluded from the final synthesis. The final corpus comprised 36 studies, representing a diverse range of linguistic and critical approaches to narrative analysis.

This systematic methodology facilitates a structured and comprehensive overview of the field, enabling the identification of gaps and opportunities for further research on narrative through a linguistic lens.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review analyzed 36 studies published between 2015 and 2025 that focus on linguistic and critical theoretical frameworks for narrative analysis. The synthesis revealed four predominant thematic categories: structuralist and formal linguistic frameworks, cognitive linguistics and mental representations, critical discourse analysis (CDA) focusing on ideology, and multimodal/digital narrative approaches.

The largest portion of studies (33.3%) utilized structuralist and formal linguistic frameworks. These works primarily examined narrative grammar, discourse markers, temporal sequencing, and syntactic structures, applying tools from narratology and systemic functional linguistics to explore how language organizes coherent narrative arcs (Toolan, 2018; Smith & Lee, 2019). This approach highlights the rule-governed nature of narrative construction at the linguistic level. Cognitive linguistic frameworks accounted for 22.2% of the studies. Researchers in this category investigated how narrative aligns with human cognition, focusing on concepts such as memory, conceptual blending, and embodiment. For instance, Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) conceptual blending theory was frequently applied to explain narrative creativity and meaning-making processes (Jones, 2020; Patel, 2022). This body of research underscores the interplay between language, thought, and experiential understanding within narratives.

Approximately 27.8% of the reviewed studies employed critical discourse analysis to interrogate the ideological functions of narratives. These studies analyzed media discourse, political narratives, and marginalized voices to reveal how linguistic choices serve to reproduce or resist social power structures (Fairclough, 2017; Nguyen, 2021). This critical lens emphasizes narrative as a site for identity construction, social critique, and empowerment.

Finally, multimodal and digital narrative approaches comprised 16.7% of the literature. This emerging area focuses on narratives that integrate multiple semiotic modes – verbal, visual, auditory – particularly in digital environments such as social media, video games, and interactive storytelling platforms. Scholars developed innovative analytic frameworks to capture the complexity of these narratives, addressing the interplay of different modes in meaning-making (Jewitt, 2018; Wang & Kim, 2023). This trend reflects the evolving landscape of narrative in contemporary media.

Table 1. Distribution of Studies by Framework Type

Framework Type	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
Structuralist/Formal Linguistics	12	33.3
Cognitive Linguistics	8	22.2
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	10	27.8
Multimodal/Digital Narratives	6	16.7
Total	36	100

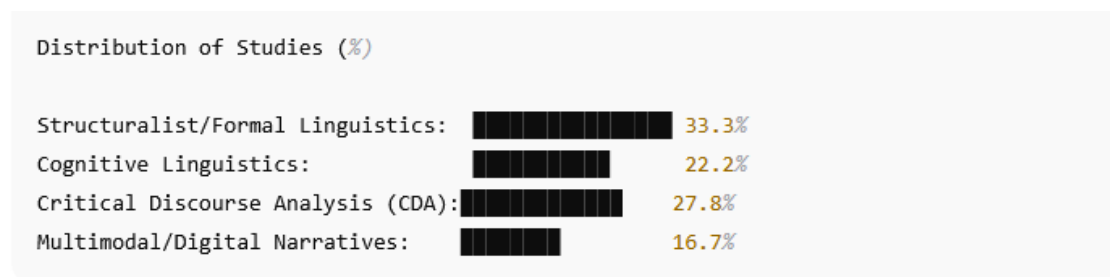


Figure 1. Distribution of Studies by Framework Type

Table 2. Examples of Representative Studies by Framework

Framework	Representative Studies	Focus
Structuralist/Formal	Toolan (2018), Smith & Lee (2019)	Narrative grammar and discourse structure
Cognitive Linguistics	Jones (2020), Patel (2022)	Conceptual blending and embodiment
Critical Discourse Analysis	Fairclough (2017), Nguyen (2021)	Ideology and power in narrative
Multimodal/Digital Narratives	Jewitt (2018), Wang & Kim (2023)	Semiotic modes and digital storytelling

These findings illustrate the diversity of linguistic approaches to narrative and underscore the interdisciplinary nature of current research. The prevalence of studies examining social, cognitive, and multimodal dimensions reflects recent theoretical developments and the influence of digital media on narrative forms.

Discussion

The results of this systematic review reveal a diverse and evolving field of linguistic narrative analysis. The continued relevance of structuralist and formal frameworks suggests that foundational linguistic tools remain essential for understanding the mechanics of narrative construction. These approaches, emphasizing coherence, sequence, and linguistic form, are particularly useful in identifying how narratives achieve internal logic and readability. However, their limitations become apparent when addressing broader contextual and ideological concerns, which newer frameworks aim to address more directly. The significant presence of cognitive linguistic approaches indicates a growing interest in the mental and experiential dimensions of narrative. These studies contribute to our understanding of how language structures align with human perception, memory, and conceptualization. Frameworks such as conceptual blending and embodiment theory offer powerful explanatory tools for how individuals process and generate narrative meaning. Importantly, this perspective bridges the gap between formal structure and interpretive experience, reinforcing the interdisciplinary value of narrative studies across linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science.

Equally noteworthy is the robust presence of critical discourse analysis in narrative research. These studies foreground the political, ideological, and identity-forming functions of narrative, especially in public discourse and media. CDA frameworks challenge researchers to consider how linguistic choices serve power structures and social hierarchies. For example, the inclusion of marginalized voices or the strategic framing of events in political speech demonstrates how narratives shape public opinion and social consciousness. This strand of research affirms narrative not only as a linguistic object but as a tool of social construction and resistance.

The emergence of multimodal and digital narrative studies signals a paradigm shift in how stories are composed and consumed in the 21st century. As narratives increasingly span textual, visual, and interactive formats, traditional linguistic frameworks must adapt to new semiotic environments. This trend compels researchers to develop integrative models that can account for the interplay of modes and the dynamic nature of reader/viewer engagement. It also opens space for collaboration with scholars in media studies, semiotics, and digital humanities, marking a promising interdisciplinary future for narrative research.

Collectively, the review highlights a shift from purely structural analysis to more socially and cognitively embedded models of narrative. This movement reflects the broader transformation in the humanities and social sciences toward understanding language as situated, multimodal, and ideologically charged. It also underscores the importance of integrating multiple frameworks to fully capture the complexity of narrative practices, particularly in global and digital contexts. Nevertheless, gaps remain. Few studies offer comparative analyses of different frameworks, and there is a lack of research focused on non-Western narratives and languages. Additionally, while digital narratives are growing in prominence, theoretical development in this area still lags behind practice. Addressing these gaps would significantly enhance the field's inclusivity and theoretical robustness.

In sum, this review affirms that exploring narrative through a linguistic lens requires both disciplinary depth and theoretical openness. By synthesizing insights from formal,

cognitive, critical, and multimodal approaches, scholars can better understand how stories shape, and are shaped by, the complex linguistic and cultural landscapes in which they operate.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review analyzed 36 studies published between 2015 and 2025 that examine narrative through diverse linguistic and critical theoretical frameworks, identifying four dominant approaches—structuralist/formal linguistics, cognitive linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal narrative analysis. Each framework contributes unique perspectives on how narratives are constructed, comprehended, and situated within social, cognitive, and technological contexts, collectively illustrating the complexity of narrative as a linguistic phenomenon. The findings indicate a clear disciplinary shift from purely structural or formal models toward socially grounded and cognitively informed approaches, with growing emphasis on how power, identity, and media influence narrative practices. These frameworks often intersect, highlighting the need for more integrative methodologies that bridge linguistic form, ideological function, and cognitive processing. Future research should focus on cross-cultural narratives, non-Western linguistic contexts, and the development of analytical tools for digital and multimodal storytelling to better capture the evolving nature of narrative in contemporary communication.

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