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Keywords for Today

Both Keywords projects tell us stories about the history of words and their meanings. These go beyond the definitions and etymologies provided by the OED, and beyond the collocation patterns and analyses of frequency that form part of the methodology of the work. Inspired by this, and because of my interest in it (I teach a module on it), I chose *narrative*. As the Keywords entry notes, this term has become much more commonly used recently. Because of this, I thought it would be interesting to look at the use of the term in places other than its own entry, obviously wondering how far the ideologies that the Keywords volume indicates are associated with its recent use would make themselves felt when it was not the focus of the discussion. Beyond the entry itself, the word *narrative* turns up on 14 pages, sometimes more than once on a page.

Its first occurrence suggests that the term has been regarded with suspicion for quite a long time. It appears in the entry AUTHENTIC, where we learn that ‘One impulse towards redefinition [of the term *authentic*] may have been the spate of C18 autobiographical and travel writings entitled **Authentic** Accounts/ Narratives/Memoirs, etc. We further discover that ‘One problem was that while some of these accounts were written to satisfy natural science’s demand for “authentic facts and unquestionable evidence” (*Geographical Magazine*, 1782), others fed the growing appetite of circulating libraries and their readers for the imaginary worlds of the novel’. This is very suggestive, and I wanted to hear more about the connection between authentic narratives and the desire for prose fiction though the link seems to be correlation rather than cause as one reads on in the entry.

Narrative is mentioned next in the entry GLOBALIZATION, where we are typographically alerted to its being a Keyword: ‘What **globalization** means, in such varied contexts, appears a matter of conflicting ideological NARRATIVES’. What is pointed to in the discussion here (as in the entry itself) is idea that we might think of as factual information is actually an account, as we know from the OED definition 2c ‘**a representation of a history, biography, process, etc., in which a sequence of events has been constructed into a story in accordance with a particular ideology**’. The first citation accompanying this definition dates from the late 1970s and the last is from 2000.

The next three occurrences (leaving aside the entry itself for a moment) combine in one sentence an unadorned use and one highlighted to the term’s entry. Is this something to do

with the house style? Can a term only be used once per entry in its highlighted format? In the entry for HISTORY we find that ‘In its earliest uses **history** was a narrative account of events [...]. [T]he sense has ranged from a *story* of events to a NARRATIVE of past events’. This makes it seem as if the true version is the narrative. In the entry for MODERN we discover ‘The specific contrast between past and present that **modern** promises implies both a NARRATIVE and a teleology. Both are contested by the notion of the **post-modern**, which contrasts a past that believes in narratives and endings to a present that has abandoned all such certainties’. The third is in SUSTAINABILITY: ‘The newest global metanarrative of **sustainability** is a pious platitude that demands unequal and skewed responses from the global North and South, and yet its domination of international discourse and technical forums as the progressive grand narrative of globalization par excellence has left developing nations with few alternatives to compliance’. If I was going to be critical I might be tempted to say that academic-speak, or at least a predilection for polysyllabic words has got the better of the writer of this entry. These usages suggest that there may be something loaded about the term (as we might expect, given that it’s a Keyword), but that this is not true in every context.

The final reference comes in the entry on THEORY and comments on the possibility that attempts to produce the structural analysis of narrative, for example, found their basis in an appeal to a notion of **scientific theory** borrowed from the natural sciences.

These references set us up nicely for the entry itself, which begins with recent sharp rise in the frequency of the term’s use over the last 20 years ‘especially in such phrases as “change the narrative” and “take control of the narrative,” which have become unavoidable in political commentary’ (241). As often, we are offered a journey from etymology via the establishment of the sense in the Early Modern period (OED sense 2a: ‘An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account’) and the development of narratology (looking to the Russian formalists and aiming for linguistic rigour -- I was sorry to see that Mieke Bal didn’t get a mention here among all the men who are cited, though they are earlier than her). I would also have liked mention of the first definition in OED, which tells us that the earliest use of the term *narrative* in English is found in Scots law. This definition states that narrative is ‘A part of a legal document which contains a statement of alleged or relevant facts’. This would have prepared us for the Lyotardian notion of skepticism with regard to the grand narratives (*grands récits*, mentioned by Williams and in OED definition 2c) of the Enlightenment and

Marxism. Mention of this leads back to the use of the term in political commentary. The entry concludes, even-handedly, by focusing on the value of the idea that ‘there is more than one way to articulate an understanding of particular events or arguments’ and of a consciousness about the roles of narrators and positioning of audiences. This is set against the notion of ‘a cynical and genuinely terrifying postmodern relativism’ in which it is possible to “‘control the narrative’” by buying a share of the media in order to spread lies. I guess we can see why ‘control the narrative’ is put in scare quotes. I would like to query the idea of *the* narrative, given all we have learnt about contested accounts but from the perspective of current events, the entry seems to be putting it mildly.