Mind, Brain and Narrative

Narratives enable readers to experience vividly fictional and non-fictional contexts. Writers use a variety of language features to control these experiences: they direct readers in how to construct contexts, how to draw inferences and how to identify the key parts of a story. Writers can skilfully convey physical sensations, prompt emotional states, effect moral responses and even alter the readers' attitudes. *Mind, Brain and Narrative* examines the psychological and neuroscientific evidence for the mechanisms which underlie narrative comprehension. The authors explore the scientific developments which demonstrate the importance of attention, counterfactuals, depth of processing, perspective and embodiment in these processes. In so doing, this timely, interdisciplinary work provides an integrated account of the research which links psychological mechanisms of language comprehension to humanities work on narrative and style.

ANTHONY J. SANFORD is Emeritus Professor and Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of Glasgow.

CATHERINE EMMOTT is Senior Lecturer in English Language at the University of Glasgow.

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Anthony J. Sanford

Catherine Emmott

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To Alison Sanford and Paul Emmott

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Preface

The aim of this book is to provide an interdisciplinary bridge between humanities research on narrative, and psychological and neuroscience work on language processing and comprehension. Narrative requires readers to produce rich and complex mental representations. It offers one of the major means through which the experiences of other people, different cultures and distant times may be conveyed, and expands our virtual experience of the world. Typically, narratives manipulate not only our knowledge of things, but also our impressions of how people feel, judge and react in a multitude of situations. Writers encourage the production of such complex representations through subtle linguistic devices.

It is clear that to understand these many aspects of narrative comprehension, an interdisciplinary approach is required, and that is precisely what we offer here. Alone, humanities and scientific studies have much to say about language and how it is understood, but together, it is possible to make greater progress in examining its use in narrative texts. Thus humanities research has led to many important observations and conjectures about the nature of narrative, and how narrative results in various impressions in the minds of readers, but only a small amount of this work has a real empirical basis. In psychology, much empirical work and theory has been concerned with understanding particular language constructions, but rather less with the global aspects of real narrative. A combined approach means that both disciplines benefit, and our overall understanding of narrative comprehension is much improved. So, the humanities work can provide psychologists with insights into how to handle more realistic and often more complex phenomena than they usually deal with, while psychologists can provide appropriate scientific experimentation and processing theories that make the claims of humanities researchers about reading narratives more tangible and solid. This is the main philosophy behind the present volume.

Our study incorporates an examination of relevant recent work in neuroscience. Apart from the general question of how the brain supports narrative comprehension, there are two specific issues to which we draw attention. First, while many processes of understanding are purely ‘cognitive’, having to

do with using or manipulating a reader's knowledge, writers on narrative have made much of the 'experience' of reading, such as sensory 'feelings' about what is being described, or having emotional responses – so-called 'narrative immersion'. Obviously a purely cognitive model could not accommodate such phenomena, but neuroscience can, because the brain mediates sensory impressions and emotions. Secondly, narratives often deal with matters of social content, where it is important to have empathy with characters and make social judgements. The burgeoning field of social neuroscience is concerned with just such issues, and serves as a means of bringing social dynamics into the study of how narrative affects the reader.

Of course, how a writer portrays things determines how we respond as readers. A lucid description of a scene may highlight the experience of 'feeling' some sensation, or having some image, while an alternative description may suppress such sensations. The writer's rhetorical control over how we process narrative determines what we attend to during reading, what we consider to be important or not, and what images and sensations we have. This is central to the approach we take in this book and is why we describe our model as the 'Rhetorical Processing Framework', offering it as an account of many major phenomena.

The book contains our own original contributions as well as reviews of relevant research by others. Primarily, we hope that it will be of interest to researchers in all disciplines that concern themselves with narrative comprehension. We present material that is also appropriate for courses on the psychology of language at both the advanced undergraduate and specialized graduate levels, and for humanities courses on narrative at these levels.

While much has been written on the psycholinguistic and humanities approaches to narrative, the present book provides an integrated approach. The authors, Sanford, a psychologist with an interest in language processing from both a psychological and neuroscience perspective, and Emmott, a humanities researcher specializing in linguistic aspects of narrative, have worked together for ten years on the project leading to this book, supported primarily by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and also by the British Academy. We have found it to be a fascinating interchange of ideas, and hope that the rich interdisciplinary insights that this collaboration has given us will also be experienced by our readers.

ANTHONY J. SANFORD
CATHERINE EMMOTT
Glasgow, October 2011

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