

## A Comprehensive Survey and Innovative Synthesis of Unnatural Narratology: A Review of a Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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### Abstract

**A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative is a milestone achievement of the major project of the National Social Science Foundation of China, “Translation and Research on the Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology”, which holds significant academic value. In terms of compilation style, this work employs a systematic research method to comprehensively categorize and organically integrate the representative achievements in the field of unnatural narratology, thereby facilitating theoretical interpretation and the comparison and integration of research paradigms in this field. At the level of specific exposition, the selected literature in this work presents a logical progression that is rigorous. Through multidimensional and multilevel analysis and argumentation, the work has formed a persuasive theoretical interpretation system. In addition, by virtue of its precise translation, A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative accurately conveys the core connotations of the theory’s key concepts and terms, serving as an important bridge for the construction of a localized research paradigm based on the theory. The publication of this achievement will significantly promote the dissemination of the theory of unnatural narrative in Chinese academia and the vigorous development of academic research.**

### Keywords

**A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative; Unnatural Narrative; Literary Studies.**

### 1. Introduction

As a vital branch of post-classical narratology, “Unnatural Narratology”—pioneered by scholars such as Brian Richardson [1], Jan Alber, and Henrik Skov Nielsen—has triggered a surge of scholarly interest within Western academia in recent years. After more than a decade of theoretical accumulation and paradigm construction, unnatural narratology has become “one of the most exciting new paradigms in narrative theory” [2], forming a comprehensive theoretical system and approaching maturity. A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative, which collects classic texts on the theory, “touches on all of the relevant research fields and all of the important theoretical texts” [3], standing as a definitive work in the field. Since being translated and introduced into China through the Major Project of the National Social Science Fund of China led by Professor Shang Biwu, titled “Translation and Research of Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology”, this book has attracted widespread attention in the domestic academic community. A comprehensive review of the Chinese translation of A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative reveals that it constructs an interpretive system of unnatural narrative theory through its comprehensive perspective, authoritative interpretation, and rigorous logic,

laying a cornerstone for the theory's future development. Moreover, the publication of this translation in China not only facilitates a more thorough understanding of unnatural narrative theory among Chinese scholars but also provides a significant reference for the construction of Chinese literary theory.

## 2. A Comprehensive Perspective: Foundational and Integrative Attributes

The literature included in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* combines both depth and breadth, primarily reflecting the editors' emphasis on and contemplation of foundational aspects. In the opening chapter titled "Unnatural Stories and Sequences", Brian Richardson, a foundational figure in unnatural narratology, states at the outset: "A fundamental standard for identifying unnatural narrative lies in the violation of mimetic conventions, which govern oral natural narratives, nonfictional texts, and realist works that attempt to mimic the conventions of nonfictional narrative" [2]. His formulation provides apparent reference coordinates for addressing the most fundamental question of unnatural narratology—"what constitutes an unnatural narrative"—thereby establishing a solid foothold for readers to comprehend more in-depth theoretical concepts. Centering on "unnatural narrative spaces and the narrative world", Jan Alber proposes the concept of "narrative space" and identifies the unnatural mimetic functions of space in fictional narratives. This inquiry deepens the understanding of narrative space and offers unique insights into the definition and characteristics of the poetics of unnatural narrative [2], thereby enabling readers to gain a comprehensive grasp of unnatural narrative from the very outset. In subsequent chapters, Stefan Iversen elucidates the connection between unnatural narrative approaches and existing scholarship in cognitive narratology through an analysis of dimensions such as "the definition of unnatural minds", "mind-reading", and "metamorphic minds", thereby enabling readers to grasp the whole landscape of unnatural narrative theory quickly.

In terms of content construction, the book organically integrates the included literature on unnatural narrative into a systematic theoretical framework, endowing the work with both foundational and integrative attributes. As Qiao Guoqiang observes, "it (unnatural narratology) attempts to reflect certain understandings of literature itself by defining the relationship between the 'unnatural' and the 'natural' (the real world)" [4]. However, the intricate interrelationships and distinctions among concepts such as "unnatural narrative", "antinarrative", and "natural narrative" serve as both a foundational issue for scholars in understanding unnatural narratology and a significant challenge encountered when applying the theory to research. To help scholars dispel potential confusion, following the theoretical exposition, the book selects Alice Bell's "Unnatural Narrative in Hypertext Fiction" and Brian McHale's "Unnatural Narrative in Poetry" as case studies. It demonstrates the pathways for integrating unnatural narrative theory with diverse genres, pointing out that "narrative theory can utilize these texts as rich resources for research" [2]. Such case studies not only aid in the exploration, summarization, and abstraction of "unnatural" textual features but also serve to construct interpretive paradigms for unnatural narrative theory. Moreover, they provide exemplars for the deep integration of theory and research practice, thereby thoroughly preparing learners to comprehend and apply unnatural narrative theory.

Within the existing body of knowledge, this book offers original insights by exploring the multidimensional nature of "unnatural narrative" from diverse perspectives. While focusing on the core issues of narratology, it heralds the broad prospects for research in unnatural narrative. Unnatural narratologists point out that "unnatural narrative theory often analyzes the dimensions of fictional narratives that exceed the boundaries of realist conventions and theorizes them" [2]. This perspective primarily affirms the connection between unnatural narrative theory and other narrative theories. It also elucidates the fact that unnatural narrative

theory breaks through the boundaries of traditional narration—particularly manifested in its transcendence of realist narrative conventions—thereby underscoring the theory’s characteristic of being rooted in tradition yet transcending it. Henrik Skov Nielsen’s “Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing Reading Strategies: Focalization Revisited” explores the complexity of unnatural narrative from the perspective of reading strategies [2], reflecting the theory’s incorporation of critical thinking and interdisciplinary methodologies. Meanwhile, James Phelan ingeniously focuses on “Implausibilities, Crossovers, and Impossibilities: A Rhetorical Approach to Breaks in the Code of Mimetic Character Narration”, revealing the structural innovations and diverse rhetorical devices of unnatural narrative [2]. Thus, the book groundbreakingly broadens academic horizons and offers new approaches to resolving research challenges, standing as both a theoretical crystallization of academic research and an exemplary model of interdisciplinary integration.

### 3. Meticulous Logic: Rigorous and Scientific Attributes

In constructing its chapter structure, the book demonstrates a high degree of rigor and a scientific nature. Regarding its scientific nature, the academic consensus holds that “unnatural narratology, as a relatively emerging school of narrative research, contains numerous internal divergences of opinion” [5]. With an objective attitude, the book straightforwardly outlines the focal points of debate in the field: “the definition of the unnatural”, “the choice of methodologies and research tools”, and “interpretive issues” [2]. Furthermore, it provides a scientific abstraction of these controversies: “These approaches all focus on the basic features and qualities shared by narrative fiction: impossible, antirealistic, unusual, deviant, extreme, parodic, and insistently fictional” [2]. Moreover, the preface provides a concise and systematic overview of the existing controversies. Furthermore, the chapters in the main body adopt an open stance by including representative texts from narratologists with divergent perspectives, thereby demonstrating an objective, rigorous, and convincing scientific nature. It must be emphasized that these divergences do not imply fundamental theoretical disagreements among scholars; instead, they are manifested in differences regarding the understanding of the conceptual categories of unnatural narrative. To deepen readers’ understanding, the opening chapters of *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* systematically present the expositions of core unnatural narrative theories by prominent theorists. Subsequent chapters present case studies that apply the theory to specific texts, thereby facilitating a natural transition from theoretical exposition to research practice.

In terms of content coherence, the chapters are closely interconnected, and the argumentation unfolds progressively, presenting a comprehensive landscape of the advancement of unnatural narrative theory from its foundations to its frontiers. Specifically, the opening chapters focus on the foundational concepts and theoretical frameworks of unnatural narrative. In these chapters, the contributions by Richardson, Alber, Nielsen, and Iversen focus on theoretical exposition. In contrast, Maria Mäkelä draws upon the works of realist writers, such as Dickens, Tolstoy, and Flaubert, to place the research emphasis on the integration of theory and text. She advocates for a dynamic interpretation of unnatural narrative [2], proposing a broader interpretive framework. Phelan’s article emphasizes “reader participation” [2], arguing that “theories based on reader response ought to supersede narratological concepts that take no account of it” [2]. By doing so, it integrates textual nuances, reader response, and unnatural narrative, thereby broadening the space for critical practice within unnatural narrative theory. Subsequently, the final two chapters of the main body present two specific research case studies. Taken as a whole, the book exhibits a clear, logical trajectory, characterized by a structural chain of “why”, “what”, “what to do”, and “how”, with natural transitions. In essence, the arrangement of content coherence and transitions not only underscores the editors’

rigorous scholarly attitude but also establishes a clearly structured and logically cohesive knowledge framework, fully embodying the rigor and scientific nature of the work.

Centering on unnatural narrative theory, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* employs meticulous logic and scientific arrangement to delve deeply into its development from both vertical and horizontal dimensions. On the vertical dimension, the book unveils the developmental trajectory of unnatural narrative theory from its inception to maturity. Spanning from early theoretical explorations to recent innovations, the theory has undergone an evolutionary process from the periphery to the center and from obscurity to clarity. The book not only threads through the key junctures and significant events within this evolution but also synthesizes unnatural narrative theory with literary theories such as Postmodernism, Deconstructionism, and Cognitive Narratology, thereby demonstrating its robust vitality. On the horizontal dimension, the book primarily conducts a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences among various theoretical schools, offering readers multidimensional theoretical perspectives and critical insights. It showcases an inclusive academic landscape that seeks common ground while acknowledging and respecting differences. Furthermore, through detailed and nuanced analysis, the book clarifies the complexity and diversity of unnatural narrative concepts—including elements such as unnatural time, space, character, and plot—thereby revealing the extensive applicability of unnatural narrative theory. Through its meticulous and scientific editorial logic, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* ensures structural coherence and the academic rigor of its content selection, while also providing scholars with systematic and authoritative analytical frameworks and interpretive paradigms.

#### **4. Authoritative Translation: Accuracy and National Character**

Although Chinese narrative works boast a time-honored historical lineage, “original insights with international influence in the theoretical realm remain scarce” [6]. Against this backdrop, the Chinese academic community needs to construct literary theories with a distinctive Chinese ethos, while also drawing upon the methodologies and pathways of foreign theoretical innovation to accelerate the realization of this goal. Although Chinese unnatural narrative works predate their Euro-American counterparts, this field has long been neglected by academia [7]. This phenomenon not only restricts a comprehensive understanding of the unique value of Chinese unnatural narrative works but also hinders the in-depth development of literary exchange and dialogue between China and foreign countries. In light of this situation, Professor Shang Biwu has called for a “transnational and comparative turn in unnatural narrative theory” [8]. However, the transnational comparison of literary theories and research paradigms—particularly for scholars with limited foreign language proficiency—inevitably necessitates a bridge between language and culture: translation. Regarding unnatural narrative theory, if specific abstruse yet pivotal technical terms in foreign literature are not adequately translated, it will not only impede scholars’ absorption and understanding of relevant theories but also hinder the dissemination of unnatural narrative theory in China, as well as its application in specific analyses. Relying on the support of a team from a Major Project of the National Social Science Fund of China, the translation is spearheaded by Professor Shang Biwu, one of the earliest scholars in China to conduct in-depth research on unnatural narratology, robustly guaranteeing the quality of the Chinese translation.

The Chinese translation aims to authentically convey the original features of the theory while also prioritizing the dynamic integration of foreign and indigenous cultures, thereby aligning with the requirements of cultural adaptability and expressive accuracy. As Wang Shouren points out: “For foreign literature studies in China to achieve innovation and vitality, they must incorporate Chinese elements” [9]. Similarly, the introduction of literary theory necessitates

transforming complex foreign interpretive frameworks into Chinese modes of expression while strictly adhering to academic norms, which is essential for facilitating the widespread dissemination of foreign theories in China and for making them more accessible to the Chinese academic community for study and reference. The “transformation” mentioned here implies neither distorting the original author’s intended meaning nor taking concepts out of context, rather, it signifies achieving a natural transition from the source language to the target language. In this regard, the Chinese translation of this book has achieved this goal. For instance, the term “narratological investigations”, which appears in the introduction of the English edition, might cause hesitation among a considerable number of readers, potentially leading to deviations in comprehension. The translator, however, judiciously rendered it as “narrative studies” [2], a choice that is both concise and expressive while conforming to idiomatic Chinese usage. Similarly, the phrase “temporal complications and complexities” in Chapter 2 could also be a source of confusion. The translator, however, aptly rendered it as “intricate time” [2], aptly capturing the essence of the original text. Such renderings fully demonstrate the translator’s profound academic scholarship and his thorough command of the relevant theories.

The translator’s treatment of English sentences in the book also complies with Chinese expressive habits, offering many praiseworthy aspects. There are numerous differences between Chinese and English; the most apparent being that Chinese expression relatively prefers short sentences, whereas English expression—primarily academic English—habitually uses complex sentences. If the translation process were to disregard the disparities between the Chinese and English languages, focusing solely on linguistic conversion, the resulting text would be stilted and abstruse. Consequently, this demands sophisticated linguistic processing techniques from the translator. Consider the following original sentence, “The narrative bits accumulate to the point where we can indeed place several episodes into a causally related temporal sequence and thereby construct a partial, fragmentary, episodic narrative”. Although the original sentence is not lengthy, it involves intricate word order and compound sentence structures, rendering it difficult for learners with limited English proficiency to grasp. The translator ingeniously rendered it as follows: “When narrative fragments gradually accumulate to a certain degree, we can organize some scenes into a sequence with causal connections and chronological order, thereby constructing a partial, fragmentary, and episodic narrative.” [2] In this way, potential comprehension issues are effectively resolved. Similar translation strategies abound throughout the Chinese translation. They not only precisely render the key terms of unnatural narrative theory but also ensure a natural transition between languages, thereby making it more likely for the theory to take root in Chinese soil and providing new research perspectives and methodologies for China’s cultural development.

## 5. Conclusion

A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative stands as a monumental compendium in the field of unnatural narrative research. It aggregates the research findings of numerous unnatural narratologists and encompasses the classic literature of the field. The book not only provides a comprehensive and authoritative interpretation of Western post-classical narratological theories but also systematically surveys major academic viewpoints. Furthermore, conducting an in-depth analysis of the developmental trajectory and phasic characteristics of unnatural narrative theory offers pivotal insights and directions for the in-depth study of unnatural narratology in China.

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