Taking Collaborative Stances to Tell the Story.

A Socio-linguistic Approach to Nick Hornby's

A Long Way Down

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Abstract

In the present study, I seek to examine narrative in consideration of three of its most important dimensions: the social (others' narratives), the cognitive (acquisition of knowledge through stories), and the linguistic (acquiring and producing knowledge through language). There is no point of contention that 'narrative' is essentially communicative and dependent on a sociolinguistic and cultural context. Yet, with regard to fictional narratives, recent studies on text processing challenge the view of text as communication in its conventional sense. I explore the way(s) in which fictional worlds communicate from the constructivist standpoint and set out to develop the notion of narratorial stance. I then make use of the concept in the close reading section of the paper in order to examine and exemplify the modes in which Hornby's homodiegetic narrators represent themselves and the others in their 'turn-at-talk' or stance-taking acts.

Keywords: (narrative) communication, narratorial stance, stance taking, plurality, intersubjectivity, socio-linguistics

1. The Narratorial Stance and Communication in Fictional Narrative

From a very basic premise, particularly of rhetorical narratology, 'narrative' is 'someone' telling someone else about 'something.' In this sense, narrative is, undoubtedly, a communicative act. Communication, in its general understanding, is a two-way process, whose effective

realisation depends on a generic addresser and addressee. This perspective of communication as reliant on a 'feedback loop' in an oral context raises problems in the case of written discourse. This is because, as Dixon and Bortolussi argue, "the writer and the reader do not share perceptual information as is usually the case with oral communication, and the writer cannot anticipate with any precision the knowledge and background of the reader" (2001: 4). As they suggest elsewhere, in order to approach a text as communication, the reader has to "construct a mental representation" of the narratorial stance (1996: 408).

Before proceeding to the actual analysis of how the stance-taking acts in fictional narrative contribute to a unifying view of the storyworld[i], it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the concept of 'stance' – from the socio-linguistic standpoint here – and its aptness for the proposed approach to the novel under discussion. The general definition refers to a speaker's internal psychological state, a subjective 'perspective' or, simply, 'stance.' As the concept of 'perspective' has been a major concern of narratological studies, I shall use the term 'stance' further on in order to avoid the ambiguity that an overlapping usage of terms may create. A notable point is that 'stance' does not refer to an isolated subjective dimension of language. On the contrary, as Kärkkäinen argues, the act of stance-taking involves the interaction between co-participants in the conversational context, entails "a joint activity between participants in story reception sequences" and emerges "as a result of joint engagement in evaluative activity" (699). Within fictional discourse, the co-participants in the communicative context would be the narrator(s) and the narratee(s) or, more generally, readers.

The concept of narratorial stance is apt for the analysis of Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* (*ALWD*), because, as I hope to demonstrate, it may provide further illumination on the discussion of communication in fictional narratives, especially when authors employ a more experimental mode of narrative transmission and communication and 'populate' the storyworld with more than one narrator. This kind of technique has been termed as multiple-perspective narration and it is not a completely new phenomenon. It is, however, at the turn of the 21st century that authors start experimenting more with this form of narrative presentation through

multiple perspectives for various purposes. In their discussion of multiperspectivity, Nünning and Nünning identify some possible functions that this technique can serve: a narrative tension heightener, "a medium for poetological or aesthetic reflection," or a "didactical" means "to illustrate a philosophical position" (123). In this case, it seems more of a philosophical position, namely that the individual (real or fictive) is in a socially determined relation and interaction with the others via narrative praxis.

Furthermore, V. Nünning remarks the tendency of a number of contemporary novels to resist the "defamiliarising devices of postmodernism" by coalescing the "postmodernist alterity and indeterminacy" with realists devices" (372). Notably, she classifies contemporary British novels according to the emphasis they place on "seeing," or "telling"; the former is a modernist device "highlighting the perceptions of the character," whereas the latter is a postmodernist device "highlighting the presence of a narrative voice" (373). With regard to multiperspective novels, the "mode of telling prevails" here, as she continues her argument (378). It is particularly the aspect of "telling" which opens up the opportunity for what Nünning calls "a new departure" in the analysis of Hornby's multiperspectivity. On the other hand, in terms of narrative communication from the sociocognitive and linguistic tenets, 'stance' significantly contributes to the understanding of the communicative feedback loop. Therefore, I proceed from the assumption that 'stance' can also illuminate how this loop functions in the fictional world, especially in the novels with a more challenging way of narrative transmission, as is the case with Hornby, when multiple narrators 'take the floor' to tell or add to the story.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the enterprise of 'telling' makes narrative communicative and interactional in scope. Technically, *ALWD*'s four alternating narrators would represent what Dixon and Bortolussi term as "the constant shifting of narratorial location" (1996: 429). As they continue their line of argument, such constant shifting challenges the reader because of the confusion it is likely to create in his/her mind "as to what attitudes and beliefs should be attributed to the narrator and what stance they should be attempting to rationalise overall" (ibid. 429). In

consequence, the reader would view the narrator/character in more flexible rather than "black-and-white terms." More precisely, the storyworld would bear resemblance to the real world, where, as Ricoeur perceptively remarks, "with the person alone comes plurality" (224). In the social context, we co-exist with others and develop as individuals according to the constant contact and self reference to other individuals because this how "the intersubjective constitution of nature obliges us to think" (Ricoeur 323). Similarly, the world of *ALWD* is under the sign of plurality of individualities who 'tell' the story together. Instead of depending on the traditional single narrator's version of the story, the reader now has access to multiple protagonists' stories. This undoubtedly adds to the ethical dimension of the story and provides more objectivity for the reader's judgments on the story's events and participants.

Hornby's narrators do not represent mere subjective views of the world because, for the global achievement of meaning, the reader needs to 'listen' to all the viewpoints in the story. Hence, the reader constructs his/her own mental representation of the tellers' points, and engages with them as if in the real world. In correspondence with the fictional world, this mechanism of perception and analogical transfer, as Mar and Oatley explain, become possible in the fictional world due to the brain's capacity to simulate experience during abstract cognition; hence, fictional protagonists "create an experience that has some of the attributes of actuality" (180). Indeed, human action is liable to gain, what Crossley calls "shared meaningfulness" only in its societal institutionalised form, which is ensued by an intersubjectively-constituted dialogical context (23-25). Likewise, in their constant search for a new sense to their miserable lives, Hornby's protagonists interact and establish a dialogical context. The narrating subjects "transcend their inviduation" (Crossley 8), and instead of providing a subjective and exclusivist view of the world, they jointly engage in the enterprise of sharing their story, as initiated by Jess, one of the four narrators in the novel:

> So I was like, Maybe we should talk, and Martin goes, What share our pain? And then he made a face, like I'd said something stupid […] So I tried again. Oh, go on, let's talk, I said. No need for pain-sharing. Just, you you know, our names and why we're up here. Because it might be

interesting. We might learn something. We might see a way out, kind of thing. (*ALWD* 27-28)

This joint engagement, however, cannot take place under the auspices of the spontaneity that real-life conversation usually entails. Readers grasp the narrating subjects' successive stances of communicating their personal experiences. Accordingly, the storyworld as a mimetic model of the real world is also mediated through a plurality of voices or narratorial stances.
 I shall now turn to Du Bois's seminal work on stance in real-life conversation and adapt his model to the analysis of narrative tridimensionally with the focus of interest in its social, cognitive and linguistic realisation. However, given the economical limitations and theoretical complexities, the present undertaking represents only a brief overview of the major aspects that each dimension involves, and focuses more on the actual exemplification of how such dimensions manifest themselves in the fictional world, as represented here by Hornby's novel.

2. Du Bois' Triplex Model

John Du Bois develops the concept of stance as a "triplex act," which is carried out all the way through communicative means. Generally, participants in a conversational act undertake a threefold task: evaluate something, and consequently, position and thereby align themselves with co-participants in interaction. Furthermore, Du Bois places great emphasis on the dialogic and intersubjective nature of the stance-taking act. As the main thrust of his enterprise is to explore participants' turn-by-turn negotiation of stance in conversations, he examines various conversational instances to illustrate the major types of stances and the linguistic expressions associated with certain attitudes that speakers want to convey to their interlocutors. According to his model, they do so by engaging in three essential activities: *evaluation*, *positioning* and *alignment*.

    In Du Bois's terms, evaluation is "the process whereby a stancetaker orients to an object of stance and characterises it as having some specific quality or value" (2007: 143). Positioning is composed of both affective stance and epistemic stance, or claim to variable degrees of certainty or knowledge, whereas alignment stands for "the act of

calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers" (ibid. 144). Du Bois and Kärkkäinen place great emphasis on this third element because, as they argue alignment is "a subtly nuanced domain of social action" that results from the constant negotiation among stance-takers (2012: 440). As their argument goes on, "co-participants in interaction construct the socioaffective and sociocognitive relations that organize their intersubjectivity, via collaborative practices of stance taking" (ibid. 445).

My study, however, will not formalise and limit the discussion of narrative to its realisation through sentences and utterances, or other linguistic markings in the fictional discourse. Such analysis, I reckon, would become a daunting and never-ending task in the case of fiction. Therefore, I draw upon Du Bois's toolkit as it promisingly yields a more non-restrictive understanding of the fictional narrative in its dynamic intersubjective achievement on the level of the two landscapes that constitute the story[ii]. Hence I shall focus on this particular interaction in light of the three-fold task entailed by the co-participation of the stance-takers in sharing experiences and hence generating a meaningful construction of the fictional world. However, such generation of meaning is dependent on the reader's mental representation, in its turn, based on the personal, (inter)subjective input of cultural and socio-affective 'baggage' that each individual brings along in his/her judgments of the narrative.

Let us now have a closer look at the ways in which Hornby's novel manages to maintain a very dynamic structure through the multiple narratorial stances. The homodiegetic narrators are, on the one hand, in action when they are narrating an event in the story. On the other hand, in readers' minds, due to the alternative turns at talk, narrators' 'sides' of the story interact and converge towards a holistic and objective picture of the story. In their search for a new sense to their miserable lives, Hornby's protagonists constantly interact and establish a dialogical context. Instead of providing a subjective and exclusivist view of the world, the narrating subjects jointly engage in the enterprise of sharing their story, as initiated by Jess, one of the four narrators in the novel:

So I was like, Maybe we should talk, and Martin goes, What share our pain? And then he made a face, like I'd said something stupid […] So I tried again. Oh, go on, let's talk, I said. No need for pain-sharing. Just, you you know, our names and why we're up here. Because it might be interesting. We might learn something. We might see a way out, kind of thing. (*ALWD* 27-28)

From this point on, the narrating subjects take successive stances to communicate their personal experiences. As I see it, it is this practice of sharing that the subjects undertake to relate both reflexively and reflectively to and through one another, which enables the making of intersubjectivity. As Crossley argues, 'intersubjectivity' gives a sense of unit of the more or less organised "multiple overlappings and intertwinnings" which members of a community stand for (173). In fiction, this phenomenon becomes evident in novels with multiple narrators. Meaning, as I hope to illustrate in the next section, emerges intersubjectively, out of the dynamic interchange and collaboration of the multiple acts of stance taking. In this vein, the reader gains a more objective and global understanding of the story only after s/he has 'heard' all the telling instances involved.

3. Multiple Narratorial Stances, Worlds of Shared Realities, One Novel

Martin: If she hadn't tried to kill me, I'd be dead, no question. […] If I'd known it was Maureen, if I'd known what Maureen was like, then I would have toned it down a bit, probably […]. But you have to admit it was a unique situation. (13)

Maureen: And then I saw Martin, right over the other side of the roof. […] And he smoked and he smoked and I waited and waited until in the end I couldn't wait any more. I know it was his stepladder, but I needed it (11).
Jess: I knew what the two of them were doing up there the moment I got to the roof. You don't have to be like a genius to work that out. (17-18)

JJ: So it was real shocking to discover that Maureen, Jess and Martin Sharp were about to take Vincent Van Gogh route out of this world. (And yeah, thank you, I know Vincent didn't jump off the top of a North London apartment building.) (24-25)

The first aim of a block entry like this is to provide a brief introduction of the four protagonists of Hornby's homodiegetic narrative in their own words. Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the structure of the narrative as it unfolds from the very first pages. Surprisingly, it is not only Martin narrating events in the storyworld, as the traditional literary practice has been. In this sense, the novel captures the reading interest from the very first page begining with "Martin." Once the reader turns the page, the next section is entitled "Maureen," and it goes on like this for a few more pages until Martin makes two more announcements: a "lunatic came roaring" (17) into the scene, and "we three became four." Thirdly, the excerpts above also provide evidence for the "I-thou-we" way of reference among the narrators, which establishes the intersubjective organisation of the novel. Understanding the text in its intersubjective construction evidently requires consideration of the four narrating subjectivities not only as individualities with their personal drama, but simultaneously, in their co-existence within the group/community of "potential suicides" that they form.

Martin, Maureen, Jess and JJ, the four protagonists of Hornby's novel, share their subjective view on the event that brings them together, that is their attempt to commit suicide by jumping off the roof of Topper's House in North London on New Year's Eve. Martin used to be a famous TV presenter, whose life radically turns upside down when he is misled by a young woman's mature physical appearance and has a sexual relationship with her. However, things get complicated even more dramatically when her true age is disclosed. As she was only fifteen years old, he goes to prison, and loses both his public privileges and family. Maureen, reveals herself as a sensitive and very lonely person, whose feelings of loneliness and despair are deepened by her son's irreversible physical and mental disability, which left him in a complete vegetative state. Jess initially appears, as a frantic lunatic who keeps swearing and wants to die because of her boyfriend's decision to split up with her. However, as their interventions within the conversational context of the novel continue to build up, she comes as a surprise to everyone when they find out from the newspapers that she is the daughter of the Minister of Education. As it turns out, she has kept the secret not only with regard to

her identity, but also to her elder sister's existence, whose tragic disappearance shattered her whole family and, implicitly, her life. JJ's reason to die may seem the least 'serious' in comparison to the others,' as he himself admits it. When he hears how serious the others' reasons to die are, he invents an incurable disease story to impress.

The four protagonists engage in interpersonal evaluation, positioning and alignment in an interdependent process of continuous revision and addition of new elements. Even if they do not have direct access to their interlocutor's responses (the other narrators or narratees), each narratorial stance is achieved communicatively in its basic *I-and-You* form of addressing. The implication is that by presupposition they infer meanings, intentions or reactions that the Other may typically have in a context similar to the event they set out to tell about:

> (Martin) "Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block. I'm not a bloody idiot" (3); (Maureen): "You don't expect Americans to be delivering pizzas, do you? Well, I don't, but perhaps I'm just out of touch (19); (JJ): "OK, you don't know me, so you'll have to take my word for it that I'm not stupid." (22)

Narratorial instances like this considerably contribute to increasing both the sociocognitive and affective relations that the reader mentally represents and develops during his/her engagement with the text. On the other hand, Jess's metareflection below transfers meaning outside the fictional world to a more complex level of communication as she appears to be addressing the reader directly, from the same communicative level. Not only does she take a stance of her own, but she also invites the reader to take one as the narration continues:

> I don't know you. The only thing I know about you is, you're reading this. I don't know whether you're happy or not; I don't know whether you're young or not. I sort of hope you're young and sad. If you're old and happy, I can imagine that you'll maybe smile at yourself when you hear me going, He broke my heart. You'll remember someone who broke your heart, and you'll think to yourself, Oh, yes, I can remember how that feels. (34)

Such instances of interactive engagement and collaborative activities of sharing a personal worldview are highly effective in achieving a communicative context, in which the reader is invited to sympathise with the narrator and make a judgment about a particular event. For objectivity to be accomplished, the narrators also give the verbatim account of the conversations they have with the others, with no subjective interference. The basic communication addresser-addressee set-up grows in complexity in this way because it moves to a higher level, the extratextual reception of the novel, at whose end there s/he is, the reader with his own set of beliefs, worldview and socio-cultural-affective constitution.

By their way of reporting the events and an *I-you-we*' address, the subjects initiate and invite to an *evaluation* of themselves and the others, in reciprocity. Knowledge about the narrating subjects emerges from their co-existence and engagement in the collaborative task of telling the story with other participants in the hope of "learning" something from it, as Jess expresses her hope *vis-à-vis* the utility of such activity. This joint action also fluctuates in intensity on affective and epistemic scales, in accordance with their personal sensitivities, traits, experiences and beliefs. Their decision to share why they wanted to commit suicide – which triggers other painful memories – has consequences for the socio-affective context of their encounter.

Each subject provides the other participants' stances through, direct reporting[iii] of actions, feelings and the actual dialogical exchanges during the other meetings at the time they set for their next suicide attempt. Their *I*-intervention resembles a 'take the floor'-instance, and this is evidently an opportunity to *position*, and simultaneously, *align* themselves with regard to both the previously displayed perspective-takings, and the particular aspect of the story on which the stance is taken. However, as the nature of the transaction resides in possessing and using language interactively in its intersubjective context, some exemplifications of the general syntax of the novel are also noteworthy of mention because they are both suggestive and symbolical of the joint interaction of the stance-taking acts.

On the language plane, the *inter*subjective dimension of this particular fictional narrative constitutes itself through the richness of

linguistic markings that stand for a dynamic reception of the text; language is the instrument which meaningfully mediates the stance-taker's perception of the world in the communication continuum in which s/he has to engage as social requirement. What is more, it also provides the ground for social and cultural reference, and hence the possibility to achieve "a kind of solidarity" with the Other (cf. Bruner 1986: 63). Paradoxically, protagonists in *ALWD* express solidarity with the others through their shared inability to adapt to social life.

Martin feels he cannot endure the public opprobrium and family repudiation any longer: "Wanting to kill myself was an appropriate and reasonable response to a whole series of unfortunate events that had rendered life unlivable" (8). Maureen seems to have been influenced by her son's vegetative state, as she has no social life at all: "I knew I would have to repeat the sin, the lie, over and over as the year came round to an end. Not only to Matty, but to the people at the nursing home, and…Well, there isn't anyone else really" (4). Jess's behaviour is most of the time anti-social, and she uses foul language whenever she can and the moment requires her to be aggressive: "I don't know why I say half the things I say. I knew I'd overstepped the mark, but I couldn't stop myself. I get angry, and when it starts it's like being sick. I puke and puke over someone and I can't stop until I'm empty" (52). Finally, JJ feels he has failed to live himself up to society's expectations: "The life I was leading didn't let me be, I don't know…be who I thought I was. It didn't even let me stand up properly. It felt like I'd been walking down a tunnel that was getting narrower and narrower, and darker and darker, and started to ship water, and I was all hunched up" (24).

As for how we get to know and express through language, this is evident in a variety of ways at the text level. For example, the sentences are structurally longer in the *I-You* interaction in the absence of a spontaneous intervention of an interlocutor for further clarifications as would happen in a real conversation. However, as exemplified below, the dialogic dimension of the novel is not affected. The protagonists' replies sound as if they really 'heard' their interlocutor's reaction to what they say:

> No, you see, that's not right. I knew where my life was, just as you know where your money goes (9) [Martin]; You don't expect Americans to be delivering pizzas, do you? Well, I don't, but perhaps I'm just of touch (19) [Maureen]; And yeah, thank you, I know Vincent didn't jump off the top of a North London apartment building" (25) [JJ]; I know you'll think, Oh, she's just saying that because it sounds good but I am not." (27) [Jess]

The whole *I-You* relation continues to build on similar constructs throughout the whole novel.

Conversely, the verbatim account of the *I-we* dialogues resides in sharp retorts, interjections, and shorter sentences as in spontaneous conversations, and are recorded as such with the help of inverted commas, for objectivity to be maintained. Overall, there is an evident abundant use of tag questions, adjectives and verbs related to the mind (standing for the epistemic stance) or to feeling (affective stance); these are suggestive of how the novel's language significantly adds to the intersubjective construction of the story. Du Bois and Kärkkäinen (2012) actually situate 'emotion' or 'affect' at the heart of interaction, as the actual motivating elements that trigger the act of stance taking itself. The emotional input is evident throughout the novel, covering a wide range of emotions. The four stance-takers characterise and take a certain position toward the value of the object of their stance as their emotions urge them to. Interestingly, the subjects' alignment with the others' stances does not occur in competition with or in attempt to discredit the others in any way.[iv] The initial decision of a 'shared' communication of the events continues to maintain the whole novel within a 'shared' context. Consequently, the four narrators remain on equal terms, first toward one another, and then toward the narratee.

On the phenomenological plane, the four subjectivities' experiential accounts arise both distinctively, as marks of 'individuation,' and intersubjectively, as marks of their belonging to a social group. These stance-taking acts progressively merge toward a 'shared' meaning of narrative under the auspices of *togetherness* as triggered by their (inter-) action of making sense of personal experiences, states of mind and attitudes about different events. The suicide attempt scene acts as a junction point towards which the four stances keep gravitating, and generating new meanings once the suicidal action is postponed until

Valentine's Day (another popular day for suicides), and hence the reasons behind such radical decision are being revealed. Then, when the moment comes, they find another person on the roof, with the evident intention of committing suicide as well. However, he refuses to talk about his problem when they urge him to, and simply jumps off the building. The implications are profound, as Martin confesses: "The guy who jumped had two profound and apparently contradictory effects on us all. Firstly, he made us realize that we weren't capable of killing ourselves. And secondly, this information made us suicidal again" (181). However, they decide to give themselves more time for thought, and put off their decision to an indefinite date in the following six months.

As Hornby's novel stands proof of, narrative communication can reach an even more complex level when more narrators are involved. There is no sign of ambiguity or confusion as one might have expected with multiple alternating turns at talk. On the contrary, Hornby's narrators manage to convince; this is also due to their resemblance to human agents with all its social manifestations and implications, such as suicide, despair, loneliness, friendship, love, to mention but a few. Importantly, the variety of emotional states they go through also triggers readers' sympathy and interest in the storyline. The closer reading of Hornby's novel in the text analytical section of this paper aimed to account for the ingenious narrative strategies that make the reading of this particular fictional narrative an enthralling experience. Besides the all-pervasive instances of outstanding sense of humour and astute observation of human nature, the novel also renders a more extensive picture of fictional agency through the unfolding of narrative under the auspices of a 'shared' stance-taking enterprise of the human subjectivity, which does not manifest itself privately, "divorced" from the outer world.

Notes:

[i] In *Story Logic*, D. Herman introduces the concept of "storyworld" to better capture, as he explains, "the ecology of narrative interpretation" (13). In his definition, "storyworld" is "mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and

imaginative response, encompassing sympathy, the drawing of causal inferences, identification, evaluation, suspense, and so on" (17).

[ii] In Bruner's terms, one landscape belongs to action, that is, to an agent who has his ways of expressing intentions in a given situation, whereas the other one belongs to agent's consciousness and the experiences of knowing or not knowing, thinking or feeling (14). As a matter of course, the two landscapes merge and provide the ground that mediates the negotiation among subjective perspectives, which again is fully and objectively grasped in their intersubjective relation.

[iii] As M. Niemelä explains, direct reportings are "instances of situated action that serve the purpose of taking a stance" in that "the participants in the storytelling event constantly readjust their orientation to the surrounding social environment in an attempt to uphold social solidarity" (30).

[iv] Du Bois and Kärkkäinen suggest that alignment should not be categorised according to agreement or affiliation, in the sense that "*you're either with me or you're against me*" (440).

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