

**Interdisciplinary approach to remembering modes:  
The case of Defoe's fictional autobiographies**

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**Abstract**

All Defoe's fictions are written in a first-person autobiographical form, in which he skillfully uses different modes of remembering in real-life situations, or what Warner (2009) calls 'our natural schema of REMEMBERING'. This paper examines how different types of the REMEMBERING schema are evoked in reading his fictional autobiographies.

Critics in different disciplines have pointed out that there are two ways of remembering experiences. In terms of stylistics and narratology, Warner (2009) argues that the REMEMBERING schema is divided into two narrative modes: the displaced mode of 'REMEMBERING AS RECOUNTING' and the immediate mode of 'REMEMBERING AS RELIVING'. Their main concern is the linguistic representation in these different narrative modes (e.g. deixis, modality). In the same vein, cognitive psychologists distinguish two different modes of remembering: people may take the position of a detached observer ('observer' perspective) or re-experience the event as if they were in the original situation ('field' perspective) (Nigro and Neisser, 1983). Unlike stylisticians and narratologists, however, they are primarily concerned with 'psychodynamic implications for understanding memory' (McIsaac and Eich, 2002), and seek to identify psychological factors for choosing a particular perspective when remembering events. Their empirical studies show that people tend to choose either an observer or a field perspective according to the psychological attitudes towards the recalled experience (e.g. emotionality, self-awareness).

Integrating these concepts in stylistics, narratology and cognitive psychology, this paper investigates what kinds of psychological factors encourage the narrator to shift the remembering modes and how the shifts are linguistically represented in Defoe's fictional autobiographies. This interdisciplinary study reveals that he applies 'our natural schema of REMEMBERING' to his narratives to present the personal memories of his characters to readers as if they actually happened to them.

**Keywords**

stylistics, narratology, cognitive psychology, remembering, Defoe

## **1 Introduction**

Daniel Defoe, who is often considered to be one of the earliest novelists, writing in the early eighteenth century, wrote most of his fiction in the first-person autobiographical narrative style. The greatest advantage of this narrative style is closely associated with *authenticity*, which is presupposed in the early-eighteenth-century literature. Authenticity is concerned with the factuality of narrative and verisimilar representation of memories. The first-person autobiographical form makes the truth claim ‘structurally more plausible’ (Hunter, 1990: 312), because it contains ‘the person who was engaged in the action, actually telling us [his or her] experiences’, and also because it ‘directly show[s] the central character responding to external reality’ (Konigsberg, 1985: 21). What is also significant in this narrative style is that it is based on our natural cognitive act of remembering. We turn our autobiographical memory into autobiographical narrative through our natural cognitive act of remembering, or ‘our natural schema of REMEMBERING’ (Warner, 2009: 16). The ways in which we remember may vary – or in other words, we have different remembering modes – depending on various psychological factors in recollection.

The main theme of this paper is the relationship between the first-person autobiographical narrative style and authenticity. It explores the ways in which we remember our past experiences, analyses the linguistic representations of different remembering modes in autobiographical narrative texts, and examine the relationship between Defoe’s imitation of natural remembering modes and authenticity. Section 2 introduces the two distinctive natural storytelling schemas suggested in stylistics and narratology. Section 3 explores the natural distinction in remembering modes discussed in cognitive psychology. Section 4 examines the linguistic indices of different remembering modes in narrative discourse, focusing especially on the use of tense. Section 5 observes Defoe’s use of different remembering modes in relation to authenticity, and the last section gives a brief summary.

## **2 ‘Natural’ storytelling schema: REMEMBERING AS RECOUNTING and REMEMBERING AS RELIVING**

In the field of stylistics and narratology, Warner (2009) argues that there are two types of narrative mode which are based on ‘our natural schema of REMEMBERING’ (2009: 16). In storytelling, our natural REMEMBERING schema is divided into ‘REMEMBERING AS RECOUNTING’ and ‘REMEMBERING AS RELIVING’. In REMEMBERING AS RECOUNTING, according to Warner, the present, narrating self recounts what it remembers from its present perspective, ‘providing commentary on the past’ (2009: 17). In contrast, REMEMBERING AS RELIVING is ‘associated with the

*unmediated authenticity*' of autobiographical narratives (Warner, 2009: 17, italics original). The narrating self psychologically goes back to the past, and relives past experiences through the consciousness of the experiencing self.

The following is a passage from Verena Stefan's autobiographical novel *Shedding* (1977 [1975]) quoted in Warner (2009: 15), by which she illustrates the use of the two different narrative modes within the REMEMBERING schema. The scene represents Stefan's first sexual experience:

'Can you today?' he asked.

I hadn't even thought about that. i nod, calculate feverishly, did i even make a record of my menstruation of the last months in the calendar? whatever, surely nothing could happen the first time.

Dampness and coolness between the legs. is that wet from him or from me? as he sleeps, I slide stealthily to the side, examine the sheet. the moon, the only thing that can still be depended on, gives me light. i see the dark flecks. it appears to have happened. yet, the pain continues into the following night. does it always last so long?

(Stefan, 1977[1975]: 14, qtd. in Warner 2009: 15)

According to Warner's analysis, the narrating self's act of telling is linguistically indicated in the first sentence ('Can you today?' he asked.') by the use of the past tense ('asked'), 'which positions the speaker in a different temporal plane than the "he" who is posing the question and the former self who is receiving it', and by the use of textual deixis, that is, 'the use of direct speech notation including quotation marks' (2009: 15). The second paragraph initiates the shift in point of view. It represents the consciousness of the past, experiencing self through free indirect thought, a narrative technique to weave the past self's subjectivity into the narrative. So, the past tense still dominates in this paragraph ('hadn't even thought', 'did i even make'), but the subjectivity of the experiencing self is indicated notably by the interrogative mood, subjective expressions ('whatever', 'surely', 'could'), and the present tense ('nod', 'calculate'). Stefan here seems 'to be recounting the experiences from a position perceptually located within the events' (Warner, 2009: 15), or in other words, she is recounting the experiences while reliving them. The reliving quality is then further enhanced in the third paragraph, in which the narrative tense is completely shifted into the present tense ('slide', 'examine', 'can', 'gives', 'see', 'appears', 'continues'). The words 'semantically related to physical sensation' ('dampness', 'coolness', 'pain') also underline 'the immediateness of the experience' (Warner, 2009: 15). The narrative mode is shifted from RECOUNTING to

RELIVING in this passage.

What these narrative modes signify is the relationship between the REMEMBERING schema and its representations in narrative discourse. Therefore, the linguistic representations and narrative effects of the RECOUNTING and RELIVING mode are investigated in stylistics and narratology. These two narrative modes are regarded as the natural storytelling schemas, but why are they ‘natural’? Drawing on the study of remembering modes in cognitive psychology, the subsequent section confirms that these narrative modes closely imitate our natural distinction in point of view in autobiographical memory.

### **3 Point of view in autobiographical memory: Observer perspective and field perspective**

In cognitive psychology, it has been pointed out that we often remember our experiences either from ‘observer perspective’ or from ‘field perspective’ (Nigro and Neisser, 1983). Observer perspective, according to Nigro and Neisser (1983), refers to the remembering mode in which one sees past experiences as an observer or spectator might, whereas field perspective refers to the remembering mode in which one remembers past experiences as one might see them in the original field:

In some memories one seems to have the position of an onlooker or observer, looking at the situation from an external vantage point and seeing oneself “from the outside”. In other memories the scene appears from one’s own position; one seems to have roughly the field of view that was available in the original situation and one does not “see oneself”. (Nigro and Neisser, 1983: 467-468)

The main concern for cognitive psychologists is to investigate ‘a qualitative characteristic of personal memories’ (Nigro and Neisser, 1983: 467) in relation to our REMEMBERING schema. The observer/field distinction is important, because it has ‘important psychodynamic implications for understanding memory’ (McIsaac and Each, 2002: 146). Cognitive psychologists, therefore, seek to identify psychological reasons for choosing a particular perspective in remembering. Their observations are based on actual human memories, which are not generally linguistic or narrativized data.

The following passage illustrates the different perspectives in real-life autobiographical memory:

I see myself dancing at a party at the university. I remember my clothes and my legs (the way they moved). Suddenly, I am “inside my own body” looking out. A

guy I know a little walks by me and says as he passes: You look good today’.

(Berntsen and Rubin, 2006: 1193)

This is the transcription of the memory of a female student who participated in the study of Berntsen (1996)<sup>1</sup>, the only narrativized data I could find in the published articles in the field of cognitive psychology. Berntsen and Rubin explain that ‘[i]n the first part of the memory, she remembers the event from an observer’s point of view, that is, she “imagines the scene as an observer might see it”<sup>2</sup> and observes herself dancing’ (2006: 1194). The phrases like ‘I see myself dancing’ or ‘I remember’ show that she is conscious of her act of recollection. ‘In the second part of the memory, when the young male enters the scene’, they continue to argue, ‘she recollects the memory with a field perspective, that is, she seems to remember the scene from her “original point of view, not as an external observer would see it”<sup>3</sup>’ (2006: 1194). The sentence, ‘I am “inside my own body” looking out’, indicates that the rest of the passage renders the past events through the physical sensations of the past self. As this short passage shows, the observer/field distinction is meaningfully related to psychological factors.

As in the first part of the recollection quoted above, the observer perspective is more likely to be found in memories with a high level of self-consciousness or self-awareness (Nigro and Neisser, 1983; Robinson and Swanson, 1993; McIsaac and Eich, 2002). Observer memories are likely to be concrete reports of objective circumstances from the distant past (Nigro and Neisser, 1983; McIsaac and Eich, 2004), and tend to include third-person accounts (McIsaac and Eich, 2002; Eich et al., 2009). In contrast, the field perspective is more likely to occur when one attempts to recall emotions and feelings (Nigro and Neisser 1983). In general, field memories include more accounts of physical sensations and psychological, subjective states of the recent past (McIsaac and Eich 2004), and first-person accounts (McIsaac and Eich, 2002; 2004; Eich et al., 2009) than observer memories. What is important about the observer/field distinction is that these perspectives occur *naturally* in real-life situations. Also important is that, as Berntsen and Rubin point out, they ‘need not be stable during the same memory, but may change as the remembered event unfolds and changes’ (2006: 1194, see also Sutton, 2010).

In cognitive psychology, there is little reference to linguistic indices that characterize the observer/field perspective. The only exception is the reference to the distribution of personal pronouns in observer and field memories. The empirical data in cognitive psychology show that the third-person accounts tend to be found in observer memories and the first-person accounts in field memories. Cognitive psychologists, therefore, simply regard the observer perspective as the third-person perspective, and

the field perspective as the first-person perspective (cf. Eich et al., 2009: 2239). Moreover, drawing on literary theory, they equate the observer perspective with the third-person objective narrator perspective, and the field perspective with the first-person participant narrator perspective (cf. Berntsen and Rubin, 2006: 1209-1210). In point of fact, Berntsen and Rubin argue that the observer/field distinction is ‘consistent with well-established knowledge of narrator perspective in the field of literature’ (2006: 1210). It seems to me that they jump a little too quickly to this simple correlation, but it is worth noting that cognitive psychologists are also interested in ‘[t]he relation between narrator perspective, field/observer perspective and reliving qualities in autobiographical memory’ as ‘a topic for future research’ (Berntsen and Rubin, 2006: 1210).

#### **4 Linguistic indices of different perspectives: Tense usage in autobiographical narratives**

Temporality in narrative is complex. As Fludernik argues, ‘[t]ense needs to be located among the linguistic phenomena on the textual surface structure, on the level of narrative discourse’ (2003: 121). This section examines how the tense forms vary in narrative discourse depending on the kind of narrative mode. In the RECOUNTING mode, tense usage is deictic in relation to the narrating self’s deictic centre. Roughly speaking, the deictic past and present tense are used in the RECOUNTING mode (cf. Pascal, 1962; Chafe, 1994; Fludernik, 1991; 1992; 1996; 2003; 2012). They become the linguistic indicators for the apparent presence of the narrating self. On the other hand, special tense forms such as the epic preterite and the historical present tense are used in the RELIVING mode (cf. Hamburger, 1973; Stanzel, 1984; Fludernik, 1996; 2003; 2012). They signify the illusionary non-presence of the narrating self.

In the first part of the female student’s memory quoted earlier, which is remembered from the observer perspective, the present tenses ‘see’ and ‘remember’ are used. These present tenses designate the narrating self’s telling consciousness. The past tense ‘moved’ in the parentheses is used deictically, signifying the pastness of the represented event. Such use of tense forms means that the narrative schema of REMEMBERING AS RECOUNTING is foregrounded in that part. The sentence ‘Suddenly, I am “inside my own body” looking out’ literally tells that the narrating self psychologically identifies herself with her past self, and is now going to represent her memory from the point of view of the past self. In fact, the following part, remembered from the field perspective, does not contain any deictic present tenses that represent the narrating self’s consciousness, or any deictic past tenses that signify pastness in relation to the narrating self’s deictic centre. Instead, the narrating self uses the so-called

historical present tense to refer to the past events, such as ‘walks’, ‘passes’ and ‘says’, and this stresses the immediateness of the represented events. Consequently, the latter part of the memory gives us the impression that the narrating self is reliving past experiences as if she were in the original field. In other words, the narrative schema of REMEMBERING AS RELIVING is foregrounded.

The observer/field distinction is well reflected in the language used in narrative discourse. In the passage of the female student’s memory, for example, the switch from the observer to the field perspective and the different tense usage in the RECOUNTING and RELIVING mode correspond to each other. This implies that the distinction in narrative modes closely imitates the natural distinction in point of view in autobiographical memory. It also explains why the RECOUNTING and RELIVING mode are said to be ‘natural’ storytelling schemas.

### **5 Representation of remembering modes in Defoe’s fiction**

We can similarly find the distinction in remembering modes in fictional autobiographical narratives. In Defoe’s fictional autobiographies, for example, the first-person autobiographical form is used as the most appropriate narrative technique for creating an authenticity effect, and the natural observer/field distinction is effectually imitated. As a case study, I will look at some passages from Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* to see how he imitates the natural distinction in remembering modes, and why it contributes to authenticity.

In the RECOUNTING mode, it is the narrative past tense that represents the past events, though the pastness signified by it is unspecified, in that it cannot be located in the real-life time axis, and is not based on real-life precedency. The deictic present tense, on the other hand, represents the present consciousness of the narrating self in the RECOUNTING mode. The representation of the narrating self’s consciousness is crucial in Defoe’s narratives: as G. A. Starr argues, ‘everything and everyone mentioned matters to the narrator, and it makes for a certain kind of realism that all should be so plausibly filtered through the narrator’s consciousness’ (1974: 294). In the following passage, Moll tells us her relationship with the gentleman she met while she was staying in Bath. This gentleman financially takes care of her, but one day he gets sick, and she takes care of him. The passage mainly represents how her mind is affected in such a situation and her present mentality:

- (1) I was indeed sensibly affected with his Condition, and with the Apprehension of losing such a Friend as he was, and was like to be to me, and I us’d to sit and Cry by him many Hours together: However at last he grew Better, and gave

hopes that he would recover, as indeed he did, tho' very slowly.

Were it otherwise than what I am going to say, I should not be backward to disclose it, as it is apparent I have done in other Cases in this Account; but I affirm, that thro' all this Conversation, abating the freedom of coming into the Chamber when I or he was in Bed, and abating the necessary Offices of attending him Night and Day when he was Sick, there had not pass'd the least immodest Word or Action between us. O! that it had been so to the last.

(Defoe, 2011 [1722]: 95-96)

In the first paragraph, Moll's past experiences in dismal moments are all rendered in the deictic past tense ('was', 'us'd to sit and Cry', 'grew', 'gave', 'would recover', 'did'). As Warner (2009: 15) argues, this clearly shows that the events are represented through the deictic centre of the present self in the RECOUNTING mode. The purpose of telling this part is not to represent immediately how she felt and took care of him, but to imply that this intimacy eventually led her to the physical affair with him which she had decided not to have. This is indeed explicitly implied in the next paragraph. In the second paragraph, the past events are also rendered in the deictic past tense ('was', 'had not pass'd'). At the same time, the consciousness of the present, narrating Moll is rendered in the deictic present tense ('am going to say', 'is', 'have done', 'affirm'), in which she tells her mixed feelings to recount her vicious behaviour which follows. The affected feeling of the narrating Moll is especially clear in the sentences in the subjunctive mood such as 'Were it otherwise than what I am going to say, ...' and 'O! that it had been so to the last'. They stress the fact that the narrating self is *recounting* the story as she remembers past experiences.

As such, in the RECOUNTING mode, the narrating self represents her past memories from a detached, observer-like perspective, and at the same time represents her present consciousness. This reminds us of the presence of a narrator figure who remembers past events. The RECOUNTING mode contributes to authenticity in the sense that we are more likely to believe in 'the existence of the voice talking to us because we hear it' (Konigsberg, 1985: 21).

On the other hand, in the RELIVING mode, the so-called epic preterite is used in the context of free indirect style or the reflector mode. The morphological past tense itself may signify pastness, but its deictic quality is lost when used in the representation filtered through the consciousness of the experiencing self. Also, the so-called historical present tense, although it is morphologically the present tense, does not refer to the narrating self's present moment, but signifies the co-temporality with the moment of experience in relation to the figural deictic centre. It is as a rule used in alternation with



the past tense (cf. Schiffrin, 1981; Wolfson, 1982, Fludernik, 1991; 1992), which implies that the use of the historical present needs a narrator figure. However, when it is used successively without shifting back to the past tense, this static use of the historical present blurs the presence of a narrator figure and becomes a marker of a continuous reliving quality (cf. Fludernik, 1992; 1996; 2012). For example, in the following passage, Moll tries to steal the valuables from the mistress whose house is on fire, pretending to help her. Of all the historical present tenses used in Defoe's quasi-autobiographical narratives, the series of instances of the historical present tense here is the most consistent use:

- (2) Away I went, and coming to the House I found them all in Confusion, you may be sure; I run in, and finding one of the Maids, Lord! Sweetheart, *said I*, how came this dismal Accident? Where is your Mistress? And how does she do? Is she safe? And where are the Children? I come from Madam — to help you; away runs the Maid, Madam, Madam, *says she*, screaming as loud as she cou'd yell, *here is a Gentlewoman come from Madam — to help us*: The poor Woman half out of her Wits, with a Bundle under her Arm, and two little Children, comes towards me, *Lord, Madam, says I*, let me carry the poor Children to Madam —, she desires you to send them; she'll take care of the poor Lambs, and immediately I takes one of them out of her Hand, and she lifts the tother up into my Arms; *ay, do, for God sake, says she, carry them to her; O thank her for her kindness*: Have you *any thing else to secure, Madam?* says I, *she will take care of it*: O dear! ay, says she, *God bless her, and thank her, take this bundle of Plate and carry it to her too; O she is a good Woman; O Lord, we are utterly ruin'd, utterly undone*; and away she runs from me out of her Wits, and the Maids after her, and away comes I with the two Children and the Bundle.

(Defoe, 2011 [1722]: 171-172, italics original)

The paragraph begins with the use of the past tense ('went', 'found'), and the sentence contains a parenthetical discourse marker, 'you may be sure'. They clearly signify the narrating self's perspective of detachment from the original experience. In the rest of the passage, however, the past events are all rendered in the present tense – except for 'said' in the second line – and there is no switch back to the past. This consistent use of the historical present underlines 'the immediateness of the experience' (Warner, 2009: 15). The passage therefore represents the tense situation of the fire and Moll's dexterous techniques of stealing immediately as if she were in the original situation.

As Warner argues, ‘in order for the work to feel authentic to the reader the gap between the act of narrating and the embodied experience of that which is being narrated must be eroded’ (2009: 20). One way to do this is to use the RELIVING mode as in this passage. However, in the early eighteenth century, when authenticity as indicating the factuality of narrative was much expected, it was also important to feature a distinct teller figure, and in this sense, the RECOUNTING mode plays an important role in combination with the RELIVING mode.

## 6 Summary

The apparent presence of the narrating figure in the RECOUNTING mode and the immediateness of represented experiences in the RELIVING mode make the authenticity claim more credible in autobiographical narrative. The greatest advantage of analysing remembering modes in narrative discourse, drawing from narratology and stylistics as well as cognitive psychology, is that this interdisciplinary approach can demonstrate that the RECOUNTING/RELIVING distinction closely imitates the observer/field distinction which naturally occurs in a real-life schema. The observer/field distinction is natural and automatic, and so, imitating this distinction using different narrative modes underlines, by itself, the authentic quality of the narrated memories. In fact, as illustrated in Section 5, Defoe’s imitation of this natural schema is so effectual that his autobiographical narratives, though fictional, can seem authentic to the reader.

## Notes

1. Berntsen D (1996) Involuntary autobiographical memories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 10: 435-454.
2. Berntsen and Rubin here quotes from Nigro and Neisser (1983: 470).
3. Same as Note 1 above.

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