
Fictionality and language of historical testimony and historical representation

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According to Searle (1975), true statements refer to the real world while fictional statements refer to the world presented in a given text, and therefore they are neither true nor false. However, such approach seems to be problematic in case of historical discourse which by definition tells the truth about the past, yet at the same time it refers to a reality which no longer exists in the moment when the statement is formulated. Therefore, some thinkers propose to consider historical statements beyond the classical oppositions of truth-and-falsehood/fiction. For instance, Ankersmit (2002) distinguishes between: a) language which performs a typically cognitive function, as it connects words and things and b) language which does not refer to reality but only replaces some (past) reality, as in the case of historical discourse which functions as a sort of aesthetical representation which is expressed in narrative substances or Nss (Ankersmit 2002; 1983). Thus, there is not a great difference between historiography and a historical novel written by a professional historian, which is a practical application of historical knowledge.

Yet, there is still a difference between an “official” narrative concerning the past and the first-person testimony of a witness of historical occurrences. While historical discourse has a typically narrative character, testimonies are usually formulated in the reflexive voice, which is characteristic for modernistic novels in which occurrences are less important than the personal experience of the narrating subject (Ankersmit 1997). Referring to Ankersmit’s theory, to H. White’s concept of historical discourse as literature, and to some classical theories of fiction (e.g. Genette 1993, Cohn 2000) I will discuss the relationships between the language of historiography and the language of historical novels on the one hand and the relationships between the language of first person testimony and the language of historical discourse created partially on its basis on the other. I will analyze the most important “signposts of fictionality” in historical truth-telling and examine what in fact lets us distinguish between historical fiction and historical truth.

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