

Present-tense Narration and the Buberian Idea of “I–Thou” Dialogue

1. Martin Buber’s philosophy of encounter: *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations
2. With or without manipulative intent
3. Applications:
 1. Issues about Passive observer
 2. Non-narrative approach
 3. Fictiveness (*irrealis*) approach, *etc.*



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Types of present-tense narration (Damsteegt [2005])

- simultaneous narration
- internal focalization (IF)
 - adeictic; actorial perspective**
 - interior monologue
 - camera eye
 - direct quotation of words or thoughts
 - IF of sensory perception
 - free indirect discourse (to some extent)
 - IFA
 - the “epic present”
 - character-motivated retrospection
- performing narration
 - narratorial perspective**
 - emotive (sincerity effect)
 - emotive-affective
 - affective (e.g. jokes)
 - often indistinguishable from autonomous interior monologue
- myths
- dreams and visions
 - including flashbacks vignettes (“a standstill of the plot”)
- narratorial comments
- similes
- description of background scenes and situations
- introduction to citations
- summaries
- instructions
- stage directions

Approaches to Present-tense Narration (1950s – 2020)

Based on Gebauer's typology (2021)

Approaches	Perspective	Scholars	Keywords	more details
Linguistic	Synchronic	Hamburger Weinrich (← Benveniste) Fleishman	the historical present → more vivid, more immediate than the epic preterite discursive/narrative tenses antinarrative	atemporal quality signals for readers; “tense metaphor” closer to drama/lyrical poetry
	Diachronic	Meisnitzer	filmic impression	a direct response the medium of film
Narratological	Synchronic	Genette (← Stanzel) Casparis Cohn classical	simultaneous narration camera-eye neither the historical present nor interior monologue	story content anterior to narrative discourse; tenses as different ways of perceiving events highlighting (radicalizing) fiction-specific artificiality: “artificiality” (Cohn 105)
		Fludernik postclassical Huber Petersen	adeictic/multifunctional tense retrospective present-tense narration fictionalizing present/epic present	blurring of various dichotomies
	Diachronic	Avanessian & Hennig Huber	the asynchronous present a self-justifying signpost of fictionality	modernists' denial of “event before narration” discarding the principle of retrospective narration
Philosophical	Synchronic	Ricoeur Bourne & Caddick Bourne Currie	preconfiguration/configuration/reconfiguration reader's inability to identify a fictional present <i>nunc movens</i> in the tensed view of time	denial of “the epic preterite” yet, a fictional present can exist reading process makes

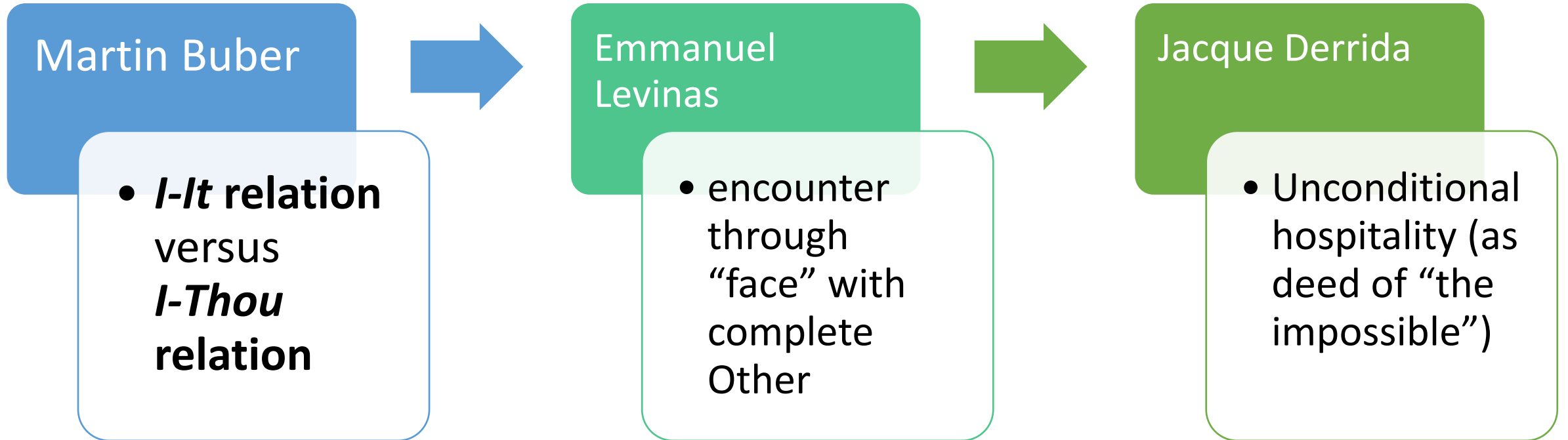
“Tense metaphor (*Tempus-Metaphorik*)” resolutions

⇒ attitudinal marker set by the narrator

- ① **the “discussing/discursive” attitude** in contrast to **the “narrating” attitude** (Weinrich 1964)
- ② **the “*discours*” mode** in contrast to **the “*histoire*” mode** (Benveniste 1966/1971)

In the discursive situation, all communications which take place on a day-to-day basis directly or indirectly affect the language user ‘I’ either as a sender or a receiver, while in the narrative situation the narration is remote and does not affect the user. (Ikeo 2022, 4)

Philosophy of encounter (dialogical philosophy)



I and Thou (Ich und Du [1923]) by Martin Buber (1878-1965)

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of **the primary words which he speaks**.

The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*.

The other primary word is the combination *I-It*; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* and *She* can replace *It*.

Hence the *I* of of man is also twofold.

For **the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It***. (Buber, *I and Thou* [trans. Ronald Gregor Smith] 3)

***I-It* relation**

- The primary connexion of man with the **world of *It* is comprised in *experiencing*, which continually reconstitutes the world, and *using*, which leads the world to its manifold aim, the sustaining, relieving, and equipping of human life**. In proportion to the growing extent of the world of *It*, ability to experience and use it must also grow. The individual can, to be sure, more and more replace direct with indirect experience, he can “acquire items of knowledge,” and he can more and more reduce his using of the world to specialised “**utilization**”; [. . .] the development of the ability to experience and use comes about mostly through the decrease of man’s power to enter into relation [of *I-Thou* . . .]. (Buber, *I and Thou* 38-39)
- [. . .] that which has become *It* is left as *It*, **experienced and used as *It***, appropriated for the undertaking to “**find one’s bearings**” in the world, and then to “**conquer**” it. (41)

***I-It* relation**

- He [Man] perceives **what exists round about him** [. . .] **as** things; and what happens round about him [. . .] as events; things consisting of qualities, events of moments, things entered in the graph of place, events in that of time; things and events bounded by other things and events, measured by them, comparable with them: he perceives **an ordered and detached world**. It is to some extent a reliable world, having density and duration. Its organisation can be surveyed and brought out again and again; gone over with closed eyes, and verified with open eyes. It is always there [. . .]. It is your object, remains it as long as you wish, and remains a total stranger [in the sense that it has nothing to do with your becoming your true self], within you and without. **You perceive it, take it to yourself as the “truth”** [. . .]. **But you cannot meet others in it.** (Buber, *I and Thou* 31-32).

I-Thou relation

- The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with **the whole being**.
The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being.
(Buber, *I and Thou* 3)
- Measure and comparison have disappeared [when *I-Thou* relation happens]. (32)
- The world which appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it takes on a continually new appearances; you cannot hold it to its word. (32)
- Between you and it [your *Thou*] there is mutual giving: you say *Thou* to it and give yourself to it, it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you. (33)

Buber's metaphor of temporality: *I-Thou* relation = the present

The present, and by that is meant not the point which indicates from time to time in our thought merely the conclusion of "finished" time, the mere appearance of a termination which is fixed and held, but **the real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist. The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present.** (Buber, *I and Thou* 12)

The *I* of the primary word *I-It*, that is, the *I* faced by no *Thou*, but surrounded by a multitude of "contents," has no present, only the past. Put in another way, **in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content.** He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been. (12-13)

True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past. (13)

I-Thou relation = present

I-It relation = past

- [The world of *I-Thou*] is your present; only while you have it do you have the present. You can make it into an object for yourself, to experience and to use; you must continually do this—and as you do it you have no more present. (Buber, *I and Thou* 33)
- **Buber’s philosophy of dialogue radically shifts the whole ground of ethical discussion by moving from the universal to the concrete and from the past to the present—in other words, from I-It to I-Thou.** (Friedman, “The Basis” 178)

tenses and the Buberian dichotomy

present-tense passage



***I-Thou* relation** between
narrating subject and the scene described

past-tense passage



***I-It* relation** between
narrating subject and the scene described

with utilitarian or
manipulative intent

I-Thou relation

- The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being. (Buber, *I and Thou* 3)
- This does not mean a giving up of, say, the *I*, as mystical writings usually suppose: the *I* is [. . .] indispensable to [. . .] every relation, since relation is only possible between *I* and *Thou*. It is not the *I*, then, that is given up, but that false self-asserting instinct that makes a man flee to the possessing of things [. . .]. (78)

simultaneous narration → narrator as a passive receptor

present-tense narration

emotion-laden events that [the narrators] have experienced or witnessed but have not come to terms with and that continue to surprise them (Damsteegt 43)

- **camera-eye**

“lacks arrangement and manipulation and has not been invented” (Casparis 43)

scenes depicted “as raw material, unreflected by a plot-conscious mind” (Casparis 82)

Narrator endows the status of *Thou* to the event she is facing

- **interior monologue**

obliterating the last traces of the narrating instance and giving the floor to the character right away (Genette 173-74)

I-Thou relation

- The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being. (Buber, *I and Thou* 3)

“with a candid heart and the courage to pledge it [an *I-Thou* relationship]” (130)

everything which just this moment in play ran through the perspective must be obliterated (10)

He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself (10)

“The act includes a **sacrifice** and a **risk**” (10)

⇒ something more than the Heideggerian ‘*Fürsorge*’

“sacrificing” of the “whole being”

→ immediacy/unmediated-ness, directness

→ passive receptor

- “the suspension of all partial actions, and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitations, is bound to resemble suffering” (Buber, *I and Thou* 76-77).

“*Passion*” in original German
= “**passivity**” in Walter Kaufmann’s translation

The “intersubjective” sphere of “the between” (*das Zwischen*)

- Relation is **mutual**. My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it. (Buber, *I and Thou* 15)
- The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man. What is peculiarly characteristic of the human world is above all that something takes place between one being and another the like of which can be found nowhere in nature. Language is only a sign and a means for it, all achievement of the spirit has been incited by it. [. . .] It is rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular being, in order to communicate with it in a sphere which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each. I call this sphere, which is established with the existence of man as man but which is conceptually still uncomprehended, **the sphere of “between”**. (Buber, “What Is Man?” 203)

“sacrificing” of the “whole being”
abandoning the “undertaking to find one’s bearings”
→ adeictic present tense

Fludernik

- not “real” narrative
- In accordance with [the] definition of the epic preterite as a past tense deprived of its deictic significance, an “epic” *present tense* should be understood as an adeictic tense (Fludernik, 1996, 252)

Petersen

- “*episches/fiktionales Präsens* [the epic or fictional present]” (Petersen 1992)
 - a timeless tense that constitutes a hermetic fictional space (Gebauer 43)

[*Thou’s* body] emerges from the flow of the spaceless, timeless present [. . .].
(Buber, *I and Thou* 14)

In the “two-in-one constellation *I-Other*,” “the character-*origo* as a ‘time-space of an other (I)’ is “‘prepared’ to amalgamate with the reader-*origo*.” “[A] reader put (sic) himself in relation with a linguistic *time-space of the other*” (Avanessian and Hennig 148)

Narrativity = I-It

“Non-narrative/anti-narration” = I-Thou

scenes and sequences as the objects of *using* and *experiencing*

narrative = a world of “emplotment” and its outcome

- the world of *It* = “a continuous and organised sequence”
(Buber, *I and Thou* 30)
- “Causality has an unlimited reign in the world of *It*” (51)
- the “I” of the *I-It* “sets things in space and time, in causal connexion, each with its own place and appointed course, its measurability and conditioned nature” (30)

Narrativity = *I-It*

“Non-narrative/anti-narration” = *I-Thou*

- the world of *Thou* = “neither connected with nor coloured by any causality” (Buber, *I and Thou* 51)
- “The *Thou* knows no system of co-ordination” (31)
 - The *Thou* resists “**narrativization**”
 - Genette on interior monologue: “**emancipated [...] from all narrative patronage**” (74)

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