

Rhetoric of remembrance/oblivion

Retoryka (nie)pamięci

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Contemporary prolepsis in digital rhetoric: the roles and functions of proleptic cues

Współczesna prolepsis w retoryce cyfrowej: role i funkcje wskazówek proleptycznych

Abstract

This article explores the adaptation of Gérard Genette's concept of narrative prolepsis in the realm of social media as the proleptic technique, demonstrating its effectiveness as a tool for anticipatory rhetoric in digital communication. By analysing selected instances from Twitter and Facebook, the study illustrates how digital utterances employ proleptic cues to capture audience attention and potentially engage audiences. The concept of prolepsis, traditionally associated with narrative foresight in literature, is shown to be effectively transposed into the digital context, where it functions as a mechanism to attract user attention. This adaptation highlights the dynamism of rhetorical strategies in the evolving landscape of digital communication, underscoring the continuity of classical rhetorical principles in new media environments. Future research should incorporate a corpus study, which would allow for an in-depth examination of the diverse array of proleptic cues employed by social media influencers. Furthermore, an exploration into the persuasive efficacy of prolepsis, along with its potential links to reasoning fallacies, could provide intriguing insights. Additionally, an analysis of audience reactions to these cues could contribute to a more holistic understanding of their impact.

Autorzy analizują adaptację koncepcji *prolepsis* narracyjnej, stworzonej przez Gérarda Genette'a, w kontekście mediów społecznościowych, ukazując jej efektywność jako narzędzia retoryki antycypacyjnej w komunikacji cyfrowej. Badanie ilustruje, w jaki sposób cyfrowe wypowiedzi wykorzystują sygnały proleptyczne do przyciągnięcia uwagi i potencjalnego zaangażowania odbiorców, na podstawie analizy wybranych przykładów z Twittera i Facebooka. Koncepcja *prolepsis*, tradycyjnie związana z przewidywaniem narracyjnym w literaturze, okazuje się skutecznie funkcjonować w kontekście cyfrowym, gdzie pełni rolę mechanizmu przyciągania uwagi użytkownika. Ta adaptacja podkreśla dynamikę strategii retorycznych w ciągle ewoluującym krajobrazie nowych mediów, podkreślając ciągłość klasycznych zasad retoryki w nowych mediach. Przyszłe badania powinny uwzględnić studium korpusowe, które pozwoliłoby na dogłębne zbadanie różnorodnych sygnałów proleptycznych stosowanych przez influencerów w mediach społecznościowych. Dodatkowo, analiza perswazyjnej skuteczności *prolepsis*, wraz z jej potencjalnymi związkami z błędami logicznymi, mogłaby dostarczyć fascynujących wniosków. Wreszcie, badanie reakcji odbiorców na te sygnały mogłoby przyczynić się do bardziej kompleksowego zrozumienia ich wpływu.

Key words

prolepsis, anticipatory rhetoric, attention attraction, social media influencers, rhetorical strategies
prolepsis, retoryka antycypacyjna, przyciąganie uwagi, influencerzy w mediach społecznościowych, strategie retoryczne

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1. Reinventing prolepsis

In the digital age, where anyone could potentially become an author of a public message, the competition for attention is very high. The rewards are correspondingly high, as a social media post that receives attention can potentially be shared by millions¹. Building outreach on social media is a key performance indicator for brands, celebrities, politicians, and other key opinion leaders. This leads, among other things, to a renewed focus on strategies of message design at the micro-level. These strategies are adapted to the short messages of social media, aiming to captivate the audience with compelling content².

In this discourse, we broaden the concept of ‘digital rhetoric’ to include all types of communication within the digital sphere. This broad definition can potentially introduce ambiguity, as noted by various scholars (see Bendrat 2019, Eyman 2015, Lanham 1993, Welch 1999, Verhulsdonck and Limbu 2013, Zappen 2005). However, within the context of this article, we specifically limit ‘digital communication’ to concise textual formats such as posts or tweets found on the feeds of new media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Our primary focus is on communications that possess an ‘annonce’ character, defined as those that “preemptively reference an event that will be fully narrated in its appropriate context” (Genette 1972, 126).

1. For instance, Twitter sees over 10,000 tweets sent per second, which equates to approximately 602,000 tweets per minute and 867 million tweets per day (Business DIT 2022). Simultaneously, Facebook users publish more than 510,000 comments and like 4 million posts every minute (Datareportal 2022).

2. The attention grabber, often known as a “hook,” is the first line that the reader sees and serves the objective of capturing the reader's attention (see Garrett 1996).

Many message design techniques in the social media rediscover, adapt or invent anew concepts and strategies that are well known to the rhetorical tradition, spanning from argumentative invention to the use of tropes in the verbal or the visual semiotic modes.

This article suggests that anticipatory digital utterances adapt and integrate Genette's concept of narrative prolepsis, thereby creating a new form of proleptic cue specifically designed for the digital media landscape. The traditional understanding of prolepsis is reimaged into a modern version, optimized for contemporary platforms. Initially, we will investigate the connection between prolepsis and human anticipation as a cognitive function. Following this, we will examine the relationship between a digital narrator and their digital audience. The characteristics of prolepsis in Genette's narrative theory will then be applied in a specific digital media context, with a focus on future anticipation. The application of Genette's concept is enriched with carefully selected examples of digital expressions from specific platforms (Twitter and Facebook). These examples demonstrate how the prolepsis of the classical narrative model is adapted by the unique attributes of a new medium, incorporating current digital communication practices. This research paper aims to demonstrate the applicability of Genette's model through a narrative approach that can adapt to emerging phenomena often neglected in academic literature. The methodology used is an initial conceptualization, which will be further refined for future linguistic-rhetorical research on proleptic techniques in digital media.

2. Imaginative scaffolding: anticipatory ability to follow prolepsis

Anticipation acts as a pivotal catalyst in narrativity. It finds expression in a variety of genres and narrative modes, encompassing counterfactuals (Dannenberg 2008), novels set in the future - both utopian and dystopian (Morson 1994), autobiographies or life-writing (Bamberg 2011), and anachronic or polychronic fiction characteristic of the postmodern era (Bal 2009, Richardson 2002). Fundamentally, the reader's ability to anticipate or foresee subsequent events propels narrative comprehension (Brooks 1984). Key elements involve the methods by which narrators and readers interpret the alternate realities portrayed in the narrative (Ryan 1991), and their approach to narrative prolepsis, which pertains to anticipations and projections of the future within the storyline (Genette 1980).

At their core, human actions are essentially various forms of anticipation, aimed at comprehending and adapting to our surroundings. A considerable amount of our time is devoted to predicting future occurrences. As highlighted by Gilbert and Wilson (2007, 1351), humans uniquely possess the ability to predict the emotional

outcomes of unencountered events by mentally simulating them. This capacity to ‘pre-experience’ the future through mental simulation, known as prospection, underpins our foresight (Gilbert and Wilson 2007, 1352). These pre-experiences require imagination, termed as an ‘expansion of experience’ (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013), which accounts for our pleasure in reading fictional narratives. In most instances, imaginative scaffolding enables us to sufficiently comprehend the nature of an unfamiliar event (Kind 2020). However, predictions made through prospection often fall short. Gilbert and Wilson (2007) attribute this to the frequent oversight of potentially significant differences between contextual factors by individuals (Gilbert and Wilson 2007, 1354). Consequently, due to these omissions in people’s simulations, we often observe more than we anticipated (Gilbert and Wilson 2007, 1354), resulting in prediction failures.

A literary simulation, much like any form of abstraction, is fundamentally a simplification. Although fiction isn’t devoid of complexity, it is markedly less intricate than the human social realities it aims to depict. Our real-world experiences are unquestionably more elaborate than what can be fully expressed in words (Mar and Oatley 2008, 176). Despite this inherent simplicity, the application of proleptic solutions to literature yields distinct cognitive experiences for the reader. These “mental blueprints of future actions, built in response to the overt textual hints of prolepsis, serve as ‘a component of a wider range of anticipatory and speculative activities by the reader’” (Bridgeman 2005, 130). Considering that anticipation is a fundamental aspect of human life and can be found in almost every situation, readers are well-equipped to navigate a narrative that employs prolepsis.

Genette explicitly links the reader’s ability to anticipate with the interpretation of narrative prolepsis. He draws upon Augustine’s concept (Confessions 11.28.38; c.f. 11.30.41), where the reader’s memory reflects the past, and suggests that attention is focused on the present, while anticipation is directed towards the impending future. This anticipatory ability is a narrative skill, enabling readers to recognize and respond effectively to prolepsis, empathize with characters, and experience either tension or a sense of reassurance and relaxation in response to the anticipatory cues embedded in the text. In the realm of social media writing, these cues could subtly suggest future events that the author of a post or tweet ambiguously announces (just like a prophet), thereby prompting readers to foresee potential outcomes.

Furthermore, this cognitive processing during reading has an impact on how readers anticipate real-life scenarios (Liveley 2019, 907). Social media utterances referring to actual events, as opposed to fictional ones, provide excellent examples of situations where users discern potential risks or opportunities in

digital declarations. These declarations or questions, made by individuals such as politicians, business leaders, social activists, or celebrities, require the use of imagination to bolster future anticipation (see Table 1). This process also utilizes anticipatory logics and emotions, with all their associated benefits and drawbacks (Anderson 2010, 792). On one hand, prolepsis is molded by humans' anticipatory capabilities; on the other, proleptic cues stimulate these anticipatory capabilities by engaging the imagination.

Tab.1. Exemplary utterances that trigger user anticipation.

User	Utterance	Date of publication
@VentureBeat	What's next for artificial intelligence? ³	January 14, 2024
@harari_yuval	How can we break free from the curse of history and embrace a peaceful future? ⁴	November 7, 2023
@futureshift	AI-powered job replacement. ⁵	December 7, 2023
@Adbusters	AB161 (June 7th) lays out twin visions of our future. Will we get it together and act – or run this experiment on Planet Earth aground? ⁶	June 1, 2022
@HillaryClinton	Happy birthday to this future president. ⁷	October 26, 2016

Source: Own elaboration.

Clauss (2007) reexamines Levine (2003) concept of individuals who utilize psychological strategies to imply that they have special knowledge or skills, even when this may not be the case. Clauss (2007) contends that this is exactly how prolepsis functions. If prolepsis can be employed to deceive in this way, it suggests that both authentic experts and non-experts (like celebrities) could potentially engage the attention of social media users by skillfully using a proleptic utterance, irrespective of whether they have any significant insights to contribute. For instance, some fallacious uses of prolepsis may involve anticipating future scenarios for which no justification is given, based on the current state of knowledge. Such misuses of proleptic devices may involve: i. Citing authorities who allegedly made predictions about future events that they never actually stated; ii. Employing unjustified fear appeals with the aim of eliciting negative emotions about criticized future actions; iii. Presenting audiences with fallacious cause-to-effect arguments, often in the form of 'slippery slopes'. Slippery slope arguments draw a chain of consequences to argue against taking the first step, trying to persuade an audience to believe that a seemingly harmless first step will inevitably lead to disastrous consequences. These types of prolepsis are related to (mis)uses of argumentation

3. <https://twitter.com/VentureBeat/status/1746624500651655583> [Accessed on January 31, 2024].

4. https://twitter.com/harari_yuval/status/1721906561164169408 [Accessed on January 31, 2024].

5. <https://twitter.com/futureshift/status/1732671357169586238> [Accessed on January 31, 2024].

6. <https://twitter.com/Adbusters/status/1532101657743396864> [Accessed on January 31, 2024].

7. <https://twitter.com/HillaryClinton/status/791263939015376902> [Accessed on January 31, 2024].

schemes (see, e.g., Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008), and connections between proleptic cues and typical patterns of reasoning can be explored in the future.

Oakley (2011) underscores the significance of Genette's concept of prolepsis, which is described as the representation of future events in the present context. However, it's not merely a linguistic tool. It's a cognitive process that involves attention and memory, enabling a dialectical interplay between the current moment and future possibilities (Oakley 2011, 283). Prolepsis is particularly effective in rhetoric, where it's used to guide another's attention towards a past, present, future, or hypothetical situation. This concept, while not new and building upon the work of rhetorical scholars like Kenneth Burke, Chaim Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, offers a novel perspective when applied to new media communication. It suggests that prolepsis could be considered a specific form of narrative.

3. Digital narrator and its digital readers

Before delving into the concept of a proleptic cue in social media, it's essential to underscore a fundamental distinction between the audience addressed by an author in a text and a speaker in a speech. Ede and Lunsford (1987, 321) characterize the audience of a written discourse as a 'constructed fiction' fabricated by the writer. The writer, while recognizing the tangible existence of readers, cannot know them in the same intimate manner as a speaker can, according to Ede and Lunsford. As a result, the writer's primary responsibility is not to appease the audience's demands and modify the discourse to suit their preferences. This situation is also applicable to a digital author who disseminates a tweet, post, or comment, likely with the intention of shaping people's attitudes and actions.

The author of a digital utterance is aware of the physical existence of social media users who will interact with it. However, like a novelist, the author may not possess personal familiarity with these individuals. Instead of conforming to the users' expectations, the author narrates their story, designed to be captivating and engaging. The author, much like a writer, outlines "the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (Ede and Lunsford 1987, 321), acting as a call-to-action.

As suggested by Ratcliffe and Ratcliffe (2015), Savage and Sales (2008), Vettorello and Burke (2021), prolepsis is frequently utilized in the discourse of leaders who motivate others to envisage the future and incite them to undertake particular actions. The application of prolepsis in their digital communication can empower these leaders to wield influence over others by inciting them to foresee certain preferred behaviors, even amidst seemingly inconceivable situations.

The digital author, like the ‘narrator-as-protagonist’ (Bridgeman 2005, 127), alludes to the emergence of something new and unforeseen, something that may not be comprehensible now but will be in the future. Individuals are guided to foresee the outcomes of future events, led by someone who introduces a series of novel, unspoken assumptions. The incorporation of proleptic cues impels the audience to visualize the changes and plans that the digital author proposes. Especially in times of complexity and uncertainty (e.g., Bauman 2000, Beck 1996, Floridi 2014), individuals are often tasked with anticipating what’s next and contemplating scenarios. Those who tap into people’s anticipatory abilities, aiming to predict and manage the unknown, can readily captivate a global audience eager to adapt to an unpredictable future by “preempting, preparing for, or preventing threats” (Anderson 2010, 777). An utterance that incorporates a proleptic cue sparks this anticipation.

4. Utilizing Gérard Genette’s prolepsis as a basis for proleptic analysis of digital communication

Genette (1980) revitalized the concept of prolepsis, defining it as a narrative technique that involves the premature narration or mention of an event that will occur later. He observed that three epic poems – the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid – all commence with a form of “anticipatory summary” (Genette 1980, 67). For example, in Homer’s “Iliad,” moments such as a Trojan mother awaiting her son or the prophecy of Achilles’ death imbue the narrative with a poignant sense of anticipation (Liveley 2019, 906).

Genette (1980) revitalized the concept of prolepsis, defining it as a narrative strategy that involves the early narration or mention of an event that will transpire later. He noted that three epic poems – the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid – all begin with a form of “anticipatory summary” (Genette 1980, 67). For instance, in Homer’s “Iliad,” instances such as a Trojan mother awaiting her son or the prophecy of Achilles’ death infuse the narrative with a poignant sense of anticipation (Liveley 2019, 906).

Prince (1987) provides a detailed explanation of Genette’s concept of prolepsis, defining it as an “anachrony that leaps forward from the ‘present’ moment to the future. It’s the anticipation or foreshadowing of one or more events that will occur after the ‘present’ moment... it’s a flashforward, a prospection” (Prince 1987, 79). In the realm of storytelling, prolepsis serves as a tool to pique reader interest by providing hints about future developments. This technique fulfills two main purposes: i. engagement: It captures the reader’s attention and maintains their interest. This aspect can be adapted to modern forms unique to social media, such

as engaging a reader of a post or tweet; ii. foreshadowing: It provides a glimpse into a variety of future scenarios, encouraging the social media user to react to the proleptic cues given by the author. Thus, prolepsis is a powerful narrative device that can be effectively utilized in both traditional storytelling and contemporary social media contexts.

In the realm of digital rhetoric, prolepsis, akin to a narrative device that hinges on anticipatory capabilities, is a form of ‘*annonce*’ (Bridgeman 2005, 126). This technique evokes future events (such as an expectation, a flashforward, a prospection, a presage, a portent, a forewarning, or even a prophecy), which the audience accepts due to a potent sense that something significant, either positive or negative, is imminent.

The contemporary prolepsis, an adaptation of Genette’s narrative prolepsis, reveals the anticipatory character of rhetoric in social media (see Figure 1). In other words, rhetoric evoking to think and act towards future. This proleptic technique seems to involve a process where future events are anticipated, and actions are expected to be taken based on those anticipations. This technique empowers the digital reader [referred to as the recipient agent 2] to respond dynamically to a digital utterance [termed as act 1] issued by the digital narrator [referred to as the agent 1], by generating a corresponding response [act 2].

The digital utterance, manifested as a post or a tweet [agency 1], may be identified by its use of a proleptic cue. This cue, referencing a future event, captures the audience’s attention by invoking anticipation [sub-act 1a] and potentially prompting action [sub-act 1b]. The digital reader’s response, which could take the form of a comment, a like, or a share [agency 2], stems from the anticipation of future scenarios [sub-act 2a] and, if the cue includes a call-to-action, by taking immediate action [sub-act 2b]. While the primary objective of the digital narrator is to garner attention [purpose 1], the aim of social media users is to adapt to anticipated scenarios [purpose 2].

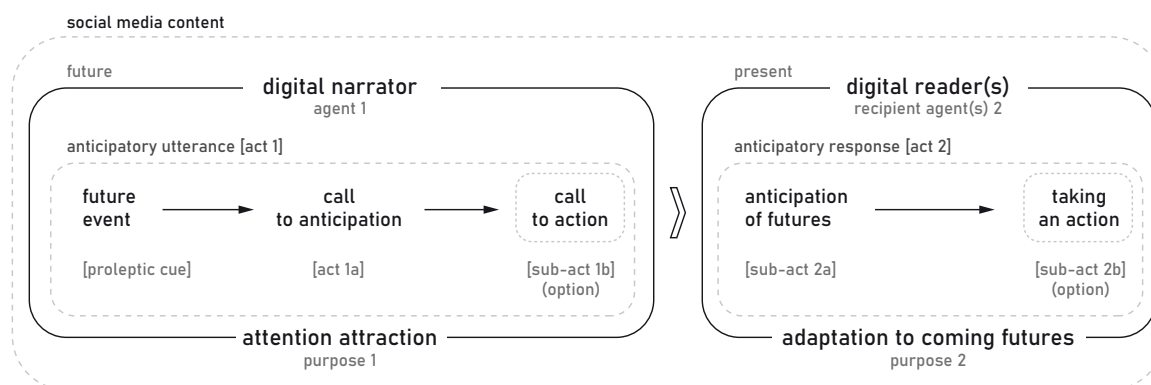


Fig. 1. Structure of the proleptic technique in digital context derived from Genette’s narrative prolepsis. Source: Own elaboration.

The anticipatory response functions on dual levels: firstly, it provides valuable feedback to the digital narrator, and secondly, it shapes the digital reader's future projections, thereby facilitating their adaptive responses. In contrast to the passive "audience" mode observed in conventional communication forms, digital media foster a more engaged "end-user" mode (Lieberman et al. 2006). The proleptic technique can be examined at the granularity of individual sub-acts, with its implementation possibly differing based on the specific proleptic cue. Echoing Genette's prolepsis, these cues can embody a wide range of characteristics. This underscores the dynamic and flexible nature of prolepsis in the digital domain.

4.1 Narratorial or actorial proleptic cues

Genette makes a distinction between prolepsis initiated by the narrator, termed as "narratorial prolepsis," and that initiated by the character, referred to as "actorial prolepsis" (1980, 54-68). In the context of digital communication, it is the digital narrator who introduces these proleptic cues. Drawing a parallel to a novelist who utilizes the semantic and syntactic resources of language to guide the reader (Ede and Lunsford 1987), the digital narrator crafts "cues" for social media users. These proleptic cues do not necessarily disrupt the chronological order of the digital narrative. Rather, they represent any narrative technique, known as Genette's manoeuvre, that foreshadows an event that will occur later, without specifying a date (Bridgeman 2005). For example, consider Bill Gates' tweet (1), where he subtly hints at a return to normalcy following the global vaccination against COVID-19. This serves as an effective instance of narratorial prolepsis.

(1) Bill Gates, one of the former leaders of BigTech sector, on Twitter on April 30, 2020:

Humankind has never had a more urgent task than creating broad immunity for coronavirus. It's going to require a global cooperative effort like the world has never seen. But I know we'll get it done. There's simply no alternative.

The digital utterance, [act 1], foretells the future event of "creating broad immunity for coronavirus". From the context of the discussion, it is assigned to the "vaccination" of the entire human population that has had no prior experience comparable to that. The digital author calls the social media users to anticipate the future in which everyone is vaccinated by expression "[it's going to require a global cooperative effort] [sub-act 1a] and he is also calling on the digital readers to get vaccinated by saying "I know we'll get it done" – which sounds like "considering it done" [sub-act 1b]. Proleptic technique allows here the presumed "vaccination" [proleptic cue] to occur earlier in time; it somehow serves as future anteriority.

Anticipation of “the vaccinated futures” by the digital readers [act 2a] requires using of imagination what will happen next – returning to previous life that people have been missing a lot. Within an anticipatory response [act 2], the social media users should get vaccinated [sub-act 2b] following the narrator of the tweet.

The narrative type of proleptic clue dominates in digital rhetoric, where the author of a post or a tweet is the one who introduced “the event” that signals some undefined future.

4.2 External or internal proleptic cues

Genette (1980, 54-68) distinguishes between internal prolepsis, which pertains to events within the timeline of the main narrative, and external prolepsis, which refers to events outside this timeline. In the context of a novel, prolepsis arises from chronological displacements in the story, leading to a blend of past, present, and future experiences (Brooks 1984, 94). However, the manifestation of chronological disorder in new media texts differs. This could be attributed to the brevity of digital rhetorical texts (for instance, a tweet is limited to a maximum of two hundred and eighty characters) and their transcendence of the traditional narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end. It takes an average of twenty-four minutes for a tweet and fifty minutes for a Facebook post to receive half of its total engagement such as likes, shares, and comments (Graffius 2022). After that half-life point, posts start to get further down in the news feed.. Foretelling future events on social media can function as a prophecy delivered by an omniscient narrator and appears to align with Genette’s concept of ‘external’ prolepsis, as illustrated by Amy Webb’s tweet (3). The proleptic cue here is the future in the next 100 years, which forms the basis of the utterance and is external to Webb’s narrative composed of other tweets.

(2) Amy Webb, the futurist, on Twitter on October 10, 2022:

We are standing on the precipice of a modern-day Cambrian explosion. Within the next 100 years much of human life could look radically different from today’s world. This has profound impacts on business, governing and society. We should prepare now for alternative futures.

The author boldly predicts significant changes, stating that “human life could look radically different from today’s world,” without providing specific details, merely suggesting that “[t]his has profound impacts on business, governing and society.” Instead of elaborating, she prompts readers to envision various scenarios for these “alternative futures” [sub-act 1a] and advises preparation for them. The creation of visions of the distant future [sub-act 2a] is intended to stimulate the readers’ imagination. Beyond anticipation, no further action is required from a social media user.

While proleptic cues of an external nature are likely to be prevalent on social media, internal ones might be harder to identify. The narrative of digital rhetoric tends to be inconsistent, and authors seldom reference their previous posts or tweets or clarify their meanings.

4.3 Partial or complete proleptic cues

Genette (1980) distinguishes between two forms of prolepsis: partial and complete. Partial prolepsis often begins and ends abruptly, while complete prolepsis extends the anticipation within the narrative's timeline up to the denouement for internal prolepses, or up to the moment of narration for external or mixed prolepses (Genette 1980, 77-78). He proposes that due to the difficulty in identifying clear instances of complete prolepsis, they might all be considered as partial.

This concept is also evident in digital communications, where a snapshot of the future is embedded within the current narrative, as demonstrated in instance (3). In this tweet, the proleptic cue is an unspecified future moment when "all the ice melts".

(3) Leonardo DiCaprio, actor and environmentalist, on Twitter on January 30, 2014:

What will the world look like if all the ice melts: <http://bit.ly/1ewrIbG> via @TreeHugger #climate

DiCaprio encourages social media users to anticipate or flash forward to potential future scenarios [sub-act 2a], which are grounded in the existing narrative of climate catastrophes. His warning about ice melting is aimed at preventing actions that contribute to this outcome. This tweet serves as a brief introduction to the concept of a partial proleptic cue.

4.4 Explicit or implicit proleptic cues

Genette (1980, 206) identifies two forms of prolepsis: explicit and implicit. De Jong elaborates that explicit prolepsis can be characterized using future tense, comments such as "little could I know that this would turn out very differently", or the use of future-oriented verbs like 'hope', 'fear', 'expect', and so on (De Jong 2014, 85). On the other hand, implicit prolepsis is associated with inadvertent or unintentional actions that occur, and for which the narratees have been subtly forewarned (De Jong 2014, 85-86).

Genette's concept of explicit prolepsis is readily identifiable on social media due to its distinct forms that signal an orientation towards future. However, internal prolepsis can be more challenging to discern. This concept comes into play when a digital author prompts social media users to momentarily leap into the future, creating a direct flash-forward effect.

Two interconnected tweets from Elon Musk, labeled (4) and (5), serve as examples. In tweet (4), “the future” acts as a proleptic cue, while “believe in” serves as an invitation to anticipate “the future” [sub-act 1a].

(4) Elon Musk, Big-Tech leader, on Twitter on January 19, 2022:

Believe in the future!

Through experience, individuals come to comprehend that “the future” is a progression from the present. However, they are unable to shape the future precisely in their present, leaving them to merely anticipate it [sub-act 2a]. Musk’s foreshadowing instills a potent sense of positivity looming in the future. This, in turn, prompts social media users to envisage optimistic future scenarios.

Tweet (5) echoes the theme of “the future” initially introduced by Musk. The proleptic cue in this context, which is explicit, is anchored in the exploration of the cosmos and the foresight of potential challenges [sub-act 1a].

(5) Elon Musk, on Twitter July 27, 2022:

A new philosophy of the future is needed. I believe it should be curiosity about the Universe – expand humanity to become a multiplanet, then interstellar, species to see what’s out there.

Social media users are thus encouraged to envision themselves journeying through space and anticipating what might lie ahead [sub-act 2a].

Another example, instance (6), showcases an explicit type of prolepsis with a hint of “[l]iving in the future”. Although this hint is embedded in the present, it will only be fully comprehended in the future when it materializes (de Jong, 86). The tweet, which refers to the broader concept of the “metaverse”, announces forthcoming virtual and augmented reality tools and invites people to speculate about the future of the Internet [sub-act 1a].

(6) Mark Zuckerberg, one of the leaders of BigTech sector, on Facebook on February 15, 2022:

[...] Live in the Future guides us to build the future of distributed work that we want, where opportunity isn't limited by geography. This means operating as a distributed-first company and being the early adopters of the future products we're building to help people feel present together no matter where they are [...]

Zuckerberg’s message, Instance (6), “Live in the Future”, does not disclose any specific scenario. Instead, he motivates social media users to eagerly anticipate innovative “future products” [sub-act 2a]. As with previous instances, the author

anticipates that readers will share their projected ideas, a response he would not expect if he did not publicize his post.

4.5 Falsified proleptic cue

Genette introduces the concept of an “insignificant seed” – elements whose importance is only recognized retrospectively (Genette 1980, 76). These include “false advance mentions,” “snares,” and “false snares” for advanced mention readers. De Jong (2014, 85) further explains that this “false prolepsis or misdirection” occurs when narratees are misled into believing that certain events will transpire.

Liveley (2019) reinterprets Genette’s seeds as “red herrings” and “false red herrings,” terms frequently used in “classic detective fiction,” and “black swans” in real-world contexts. These “black swans” symbolize events whose future importance may not be immediately discernible (*ibid.*, 206). Although these various forms of prolepsis seem to function prospectively, they actually carry a retrospective significance. The identification of true or false red herrings or black swans can only be achieved from a temporal standpoint (*ibidem*). This “anticipation of retrospection” rooted in prolepsis encapsulates the essence of narrative function, as highlighted by Brooks (1984, 23, see also Currie 2006, Kermode 1967, Iser 1978). This notion resonates with the “fabula in fabula” effect from Eco’s theory (1979).

Both red herrings and black swans manifest in digital rhetoric, notably in political or business communications, akin to false prolepsis. For instance, an unpredictable event like a cyberattack, as seen in instance (7), serves as a “false advance mention.” Rather than prompting anticipation, the digital narrator outlines a probable scenario [sub-act 1a], leading social media users to erroneously expect the event’s occurrence. Readers adopt these anticipated scenarios [sub-act 2a] and take preparatory actions [sub-act 2b] within the framework of anticipatory response.

(7) A quote from Klaus Schwab, CEO of the World Economic Forum, on Twitter in 2022:

We all know, but still pay insufficient attention to the frightening scenario of a comprehensive cyberattack which would bring to a complete halt to the power supply, transportation, hospital services, our society as a whole. The COVID-19 crisis would be seen in this respect as a small disturbance in comparison to a major cyberattack. We have to ask ourselves in such a situation, how could we let this happen?

A quote, when taken out of context and perceived by the social media audience as an impending threat, can trigger a digital panic beyond social media platforms.

5. Conclusion

Social media platforms, with their global reach, serve as key channels for announcing upcoming events across various domains, including social, political, and business sectors. The deployment of anticipatory rhetoric, underpinned by proleptic cues, proves particularly effective when a digital message needs to stand out and elicit user reactions such as sharing, retweeting, and liking. This approach serves a twofold function: it attracts the attention of social media users and prompts them to envision a range of future scenarios in response to the proleptic hints.

Genette's theory of narrative prolepsis offers a blueprint for shaping the proleptic method and tailoring it to a digital context. The digital utterances examined here constitute only a small portion of anticipatory rhetoric instances on social media platforms. However, they exemplify how contemporary prolepsis, frequently employed as a proleptic hint, might seize the interest of social media users and instruct them on how to "use-the-future" (Miller, Poli, and Rossel 2018, 52). Most characteristics of Genette's prolepsis are discernible, to varying extents, in the chosen digital examples. Elements like partiality, explicitness, and falsification are easily recognizable, while other forms such as internal, implicit, and external prolepsis are more elusive. Regardless of the prolepsis type, its ability to draw attention and its predictive functions are evident.

Looking ahead, there are several promising ways for further research. One such direction is the application of the conceptual framework presented in this paper to a future corpus study. This study could delve into the diverse array of proleptic cues in the context of digital communication. A specific area of interest could be the strategies employed by social media influencers, providing an empirical exploration of the rich rhetorical potential of proleptic strategies. Such an investigation would not only enhance our theoretical understanding of prolepsis but also offer practical insights for digital communication practitioners. We believe that our conceptual framework can serve as a robust foundation for these empirical inquiries, thereby extending its reach beyond theory into the realm of practical application.

Incorporating the annotation of prolepsis (and possibly its specific types) into general annotation schemes for other communicative phenomena (see, for example, Visser et al 2020; Visser et al. 2021) could enhance existing models used in corpus creation by including tools for capturing references to the future signalled by certain types of proleptic cues. Such an initial corpus study could provide valuable empirical evidence regarding the frequency of prolepsis instances in digital media and the distribution of their specific types.

Further research should measure the empirical assessment of users' responses to proleptic cues. This essentially involves quantifying the impact of these cues on user behavior and decision-making processes. Such an endeavor could potentially leverage the power of crowdsourced experiments, providing a robust and diverse dataset for evaluating the persuasiveness of proleptic cues. The significance of this research direction cannot be overstated, as it holds the potential to deepen our understanding of user behavior and to refine the design of more effective proleptic cues.

Additionally, further research could explore the persuasiveness of contemporary prolepsis, particularly when it fosters anticipation or introduces extra uncertainty through tactics like misdirection, diversion, or choice limitation. The connections between prolepsis and two types of reasoning fallacies, namely presumption and ambiguity, could also be further elucidated.

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