

*Review Article*

## **A Systematic Literature Review of Narrative Analysis in Recent Translation Studies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As early as the 1980s, the narrative has been redefined by sociologists and communication theorists as a way to constitute social identity; however, to date, it has not been specified how far narrative analysis has reached into translation studies because of the different understandings of the term. Therefore, it is essential for researchers to carry out a literature review of narrative analysis in this field in a more complete way. This study reviews the body of literature that uses narrative analysis in recent translation studies. The method used in this study is a systematic literature review, which involves pre-set criteria in selecting academic articles to be surveyed within a five-year period (1 January 2014 to 31 December 2018) and a qualitative synthesis of the findings. Through description and analysis of the titles, abstracts, keywords, and full papers (when necessary) of the selected 92 academic articles, based on a revised PRISMA flow, this study arrives at a holistic and systematic assessment of this approach over the past five years to guide future research in translation studies. The main findings reveal that narrative analysis has not yet become a mainstream

approach in translation studies. The focus of studies in this field should be shifted from empirical research in how narrative analysis is used as a tool towards theoretical reflection on what narratives are. What is more, new fields still await examination concerning research methods and subjects.

*Keywords:* Narrative analysis, PRISMA, systematic literature review, translation studies

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## INTRODUCTION

Narrative was long recognised as a rhetoric mode of discourse like argumentation, exposition, and description until scholars such as Somers and Gibson, Baker, and Fisher took the sociology turn in narrative studies and pointed out that narratives exist everywhere and by essence not only constitute ‘our social identities’ (Somers & Gibson, 1993) but also shape people’s opinions. In this sense, any text, written or spoken, personal, public, or conceptual, can be viewed as a form of narrative. Narrative analysis, as a research methodology, is a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form (Kohler Riessman, 2005). This approach theoretically renders a fresh perspective in various areas of social science studies.

However, it has not yet been determined whether narrative analysis has been given due attention in translation studies because of the cross-subject nature of the discipline. The extent to which narrative analysis has reached current work in translation studies is also unclear. Questions such as ‘what is the status quo of narrative analysis in translation studies?’, ‘what are the trends in narrative analysis in this field?’ and ‘what are the gaps that require further research?’ arise, indicating that an overview is required of all studies in this area.

To answer these questions, a complete, rigorous, and comprehensive overview of the present studies cannot be extrapolated from a smaller group of samples or from sampling influenced by the researchers’ subjectivity. Traditionally, literature reviews

are conducted by selecting materials mostly based on the researcher’s subjectivity because the identification or analysis of landmark or classic literature relies heavily on the researcher’s own understanding. Therefore, in order to maintain objectivity in research, this study adopted a systematic literature review with pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria to fully evaluate research on narrative analysis in translation studies within the last five years (2014-2018) and analysed these studies to draw findings concerning the above three research questions.

## Literature Review

**Narratives as Translation.** Regarded as a literary genre, the narrative has attracted people’s attention since as early as 1500 BC in the form of epics. The narrative style later expanded to drama, fiction, and even poetry, but the broader sense of the term ‘narrative’ changed when scholars agreed on a sociological turn in the narrative study. First brought forward in Aristotle’s *Poetics* with six main elements, the notion of the narrative was developed by philosophers like Mikhail Bakhtin who focused on the relationships between text and interpersonal communication, opening the door for narratives to join communication (White, 2015), and Foucault, who linked power with discourse (Sahni & Sinha 2016), paving the way for the evolution of narrative study in sociology.

According to sociologists and communication theorists such as Bruner, Fisher, Somers and Gibson, and Baker,

the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ can be interchangeable. Narratives ‘are public and personal stories that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour’ (Baker, 2006). Narratives are more than a mere mode of communication or a kind of rhetoric device. They construct reality and facilitate communication between people. In this sense, any text, written or unwritten, from personal diaries, government documents, advertisements, to film making, can be viewed as a kind of narrative.

There is no doubt that translation is also a form of narrative because translation is ‘a rewriting of an original text’ (Venuti, 2017). No matter whether the text in translation is literary or non-literary, it has all the features of narrative from the sociological perspective: it is a way of ‘story-telling’, it guides people’s construction of experiences, and communicates with readers (Stapleton & Wilson, 2017). However, the relationships between source texts and targeted texts and between original authors, translators, and target readers add more layers to the ‘story-telling’ process of narrative and make translation texts unique samples for narrative analysis.

With respect to the text types, in 1995 at a translation seminar held at the University of Warwick, Laura Salmon-Kovarsky proposed a model identifying three translation types in terms of the hierarchy of translatability, from the least difficult to be translated to the most difficult (as cited in Kuhlwezak, 2003). In this hierarchy, the easiest texts to be translated are highly specific texts, the literary texts are

in the middle, and the most difficult to be translated are hybrid texts. Highly specific texts are texts in conventional forms with a great proportion of ‘specialised lexical terms’ conveying important information. Academic articles, government documents, and the like are highly specific texts. Literary texts include both texts ‘written in literary languages’ and texts written in ‘the language of literature’. Fiction and poetry are literary texts, as are aphorisms, even though the latter are sentences containing less important information written in ‘the language of literature’. Hybrid texts are a mixture of both highly specific texts and literary texts. Travelogues are a case in point (Kuhlwezak, 2003).

**Narrative Analysis.** As the evolution of the definition of ‘narrative’, narrative analysis is a research frame that is constantly progressing; starting by presenting an analysis of literary works, it is now used to examine every part of the social world - from literature, religion, and history to public services. Accordingly, approaches in the narrative analysis have been shifting towards sociology. In 1969, Labov proposed the application of the structural analysis of narratives with a focus on story grammar (Labov, 1969). Later scholars like Plummer turned to sociological approaches and enlarged the scope of analysis from the story itself to the cultural, historical, and political contexts of the story (Plummer, 2002). Bruner took another step forward and explored the functions of narratives, that is, the ways in which narratives construct

reality and influence people's lives (Bruner, 1991). Narrative analysis has become increasingly popular since the 1990s, but there is no unified method for its application because of its 'interdisciplinary' nature (Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). Various tools for narrative analysis are borrowed from other fields as long as they are applicable for the analysis of 'texts' and their contexts as data or evaluation. For example, quantitative longitudinal study of narrative type interviews is employed in analysing the junior-to-senior transition (JST) in Swedish athletes (Franck & Stambulova, 2019); listening guide analytical from psychology is used for capturing the subconscious expressions in personal narratives (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2016).

The central methods through which narrative analysis is conducted can be grouped into two basic categories: research *on* narratives (examining what is said, including the meaning of the words or features of the text) and research *with* narratives (how narratives work to construct reality and to communicate). The latter is 'built on, and follow[ing] the insights gained from' the former (Bamberg & Cooper, 2012). Specifically, in translation studies, the two basic categories refer to studies of narrative features in translated texts and narratives as strategies in the process of translation, both of which inform each other and work with together to reach an interpretive conclusion. In other words, studying the features of narratives in translation can help improve or analyse the ways in which these narratives are used in real social communication.

**Systematic Literature Review.** Systematic literature reviews were first and primarily implemented in healthcare interventions (Eden et al., 2011). The method aims to provide a comprehensive overview of current literature relevant to particular research questions, as well as a presentation and synthesis of the findings. It is distinguished from traditional literature reviews by being 'objective, systematic, transparent, and replicable' (Siddaway, n.d.). Its origin dates to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Cochrane (1999) and Mulrow (1987) provided detailed guidelines for carrying out systematic literature reviews in medical studies (as cited in Durach & Wieland, 2017). In recent years, it has been applied in fields such as social work or business management in addition to medical or biological studies (Sahni & Sinha, 2016). However, because of the 'idiosyncrasies' of each field, 'the retrieval, selection, and synthesis of relevant literature' (Durach & Wieland, 2017) in the present process of systematic literature review designed for medical and biological studies need to be adjusted to fit new fields.

To conduct a systematic literature review, four steps should be taken. First, clear and specific research questions must be proposed. Second, the databases must be clearly defined under the guidance of well-structured questions and the inclusion and exclusion criteria must be pre-specified concerning research questions, definition or conceptualisation, measures/key variables, research design, participants, time frame, and data (for meta-analysis) (Siddaway,

n.d.). Third, a thorough search for relevant research must be performed with minimal bias. Last but not least, all samples must be checked according to the pre-determined criteria for findings relating back to the research questions (Eden et al., 2011). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [PRISMA] (2015) and Cochrane are two commonly used systems that offer standardised methods for systematic literature reviews. In order to maintain minimal bias, samples are taken from a major database as well as one or more supplementary databases. The screening of these samples should be done by at least two abstractors to avoid subjectivity in reviewing. In this study, the PRISMA workflow has been followed to carry out the review.

PRISMA originated from the QUOR (Quality of Reporting of Meta-analysis) Statement, a guideline used for systematic literature reviews of healthcare interventions in 1999. It includes a flow chart delineating different phases of systematic literature review: identification, screening, eligibility, and qualitative or quantitative syntheses (Liberati et al., 2009). Quantitative syntheses were excluded in the review because quantitative synthesis is based on meta-analyses, which are more suitable for identifying common effects or reasons for variations ‘when the treatment effect (or effect size) is consistent from one study to the next’ or ‘varies’ from one study to the next (Biostat. Inc, n.d.). For example, a meta-analysis could be used to test the effects of new drugs in a pharmacy to

check whether a single case is consistent with others. As the narrative analysis in translation studies is examined with no effect involved, the focus of the review is on the descriptions of studies. In this case, meta-analyses of quantitative measurement are not appropriate here, and a qualitative synthesis as the last phase of the flow is preferable.

## **METHODS**

In this study, a systematic literature review was carried out on the trends (in the last five years), the status quo, and the gap of narrative analysis in recent translation studies. Research types, subjects, objectives, and methods of each study were reviewed according to the pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria, by screening their titles, abstracts, and keywords in the first round and then the full papers if the components were not stated clearly.

### **Databases**

In view of the availability and coverage of the bibliographic databases, two databases were selected from which to retrieve eligible literature for this study which were Proquest Central served as the primary database, while Scopus was used as a supplementary database. Proquest Central is ‘the largest, multidisciplinary, full-text database available in the market today’ (‘LibGuides: ProQuest Central: About’, n.d.) covering ‘all major subject areas, including business, health and medical, social sciences, arts and humanities, education, science and technology, and

religion' ('Products - ProQuest Central™', n.d.), which is congruent with the scope of translation studies as a transdisciplinary subject. Furthermore, more full texts can be retrieved in Proquest Central than other databases. It is essential for this review because full papers will be screened if titles, abstracts, and keywords fail to provide the components required in the first round of screening. Scopus 'is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature' ('What is Scopus Preview? - Scopus: Access and use Support Center', n.d.), which may guarantee us a more thorough search of peer-reviewed literature. The keywords used for locating articles in Proquest and Scopus were 'translation' and 'narrative'.

Google Scholar and Web of Science are two popular databases which were not included in this review. According to rigorous literature research, Google Scholar lacks 'advanced search features', which renders difficulty in launching a screening process of abstracts, titles and keywords in a systematic literature review. It is difficult to replicate Google Scholar's searches as well because of 'lack of stability over time' (Bates et al., 2017). Web of Science (hereafter WoS) was excluded in this review in that 'Scopus includes most of the journals indexed in WoS' except journals in Natural Sciences and Engineering (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Therefore, Scopus has been chosen over WoS to avoid redundancies.

However, Scopus has a limitation in its coverage. There is 'an overrepresentation of certain countries and languages to the detriment of others' in this database

(Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). A study shows that English-language journals from countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States are overrepresented in Scopus. What is more, English is 'the only language that is constantly and strongly overrepresented' (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016) in Scopus. Similar biases exist in other popular databases like WoS as well.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Before launching the review, the inclusion and exclusion criteria have been specified according to the research questions, research design, definition, measures/key variables, participants and time frame. The inclusion criteria are:

1. The publication must be a publicised scholarly article, conference paper, or conference proceeding.
2. The publication must contain 'narrative' and 'translation' in its title, abstract, and keywords.
3. The publication date must be within the range from January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2018.

The exclusion criteria are:

1. Publication on subjects of public health, patients, and healthcare, because 'translation' in these subjects means different things like biology conversion or transfer ('Translation | definition of translation by Medical dictionary', n.d.).
2. Publication with words like 'translation' and 'narrative' in the

abstract but that does not include the two as its research objectives or research methodology, or publication in which the two words are used irrelevantly.

**PRISMA Workflow**

Figure 1 below is the revised workflow diagram of PRISMA that depicts the flow of information through the different phases of this systematic review. The review involves four phases: identification, screening, assessing of eligibility, and finally what is included.

It is important to note that even though the search was initially launched based on titles, abstracts, and keywords, some articles

lacked sufficient data in these sections, so it was difficult to decide whether to exclude them or not. In such cases, the reviewers turned to the full papers to assess their eligibility for inclusion. Each step taken in this review can be seen in the flow chart in Figure 1, which provides a detailed map of the number of records identified, included, and excluded, and the reasons for exclusions. The identification and screening phase were conducted by two independent abstractors for a less-biased collection of literature.

As can be seen in Figure 1, 220 samples from Proquest and 205 from Scopus have been retrieved in the phase of identification. The total number was reduced to 295 after

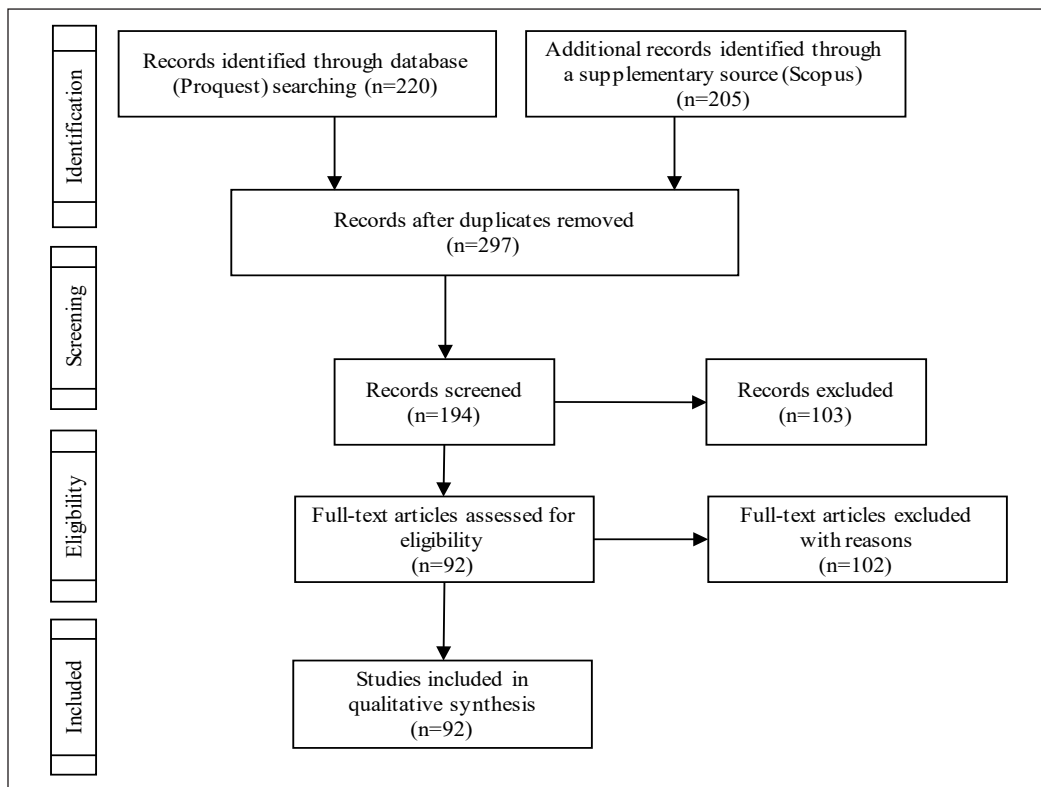


Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart for systematic literature review

duplicates have been removed. However, with regard to the exclusion criteria that had been set previously, 103 papers on public health, patients, and healthcare were removed because in these fields, ‘translation’ is a medical term, which does not fit into the inclusion criteria. The number of remaining papers with both ‘translation’ and ‘narrative’ in their title, abstracts, or keywords was 194. However, this did not ensure that all of these papers would be useful for this review because the two words may not have been related to each other in these studies or they may not have been a part of the research objectives or methods. They may have been just individual words that happened to be included in the paper or referred to as a part of the research background. The next step was to assess the full articles of the 194 papers to determine their eligibility. Those articles without narrative analysis as methodology and translation or texts in translation as research objectives are excluded. After the four phases of identification, screening, and

eligibility-assessing, 92 samples were left for a qualitative synthesis of this study.

## RESULTS

After collecting enough samples, data were reviewed and arranged according to different components of the studies: research types, research subjects, research objectives, and research methods. Inductive methods are adopted in analysing the results because no hypothesis or speculation had been set before the literature review. The results are based upon observations.

Figure 2 presents the yearly trend in the distribution of research types of these studies. Two findings can be identified here. First, narrative analysis in translation studies has not always been on the rise during the past five years. It is fluctuating over the years. In 2014, there are 13 papers that adopted narrative analysis. In 2015 and 2016, the numbers are 18 and 24. However, in 2017, it suffered a setback in quantity; only 16 papers of the two databases are

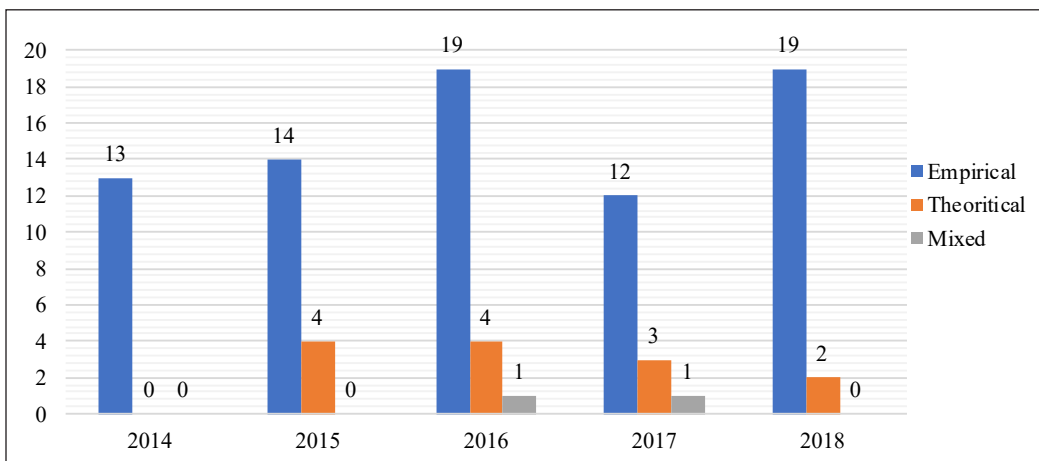


Figure 2. Yearly distribution of research types (2014-2018)



found, less than the previous two years. In 2018, the number rose again to 21. The second finding shows that papers covering empirical studies outnumber those covering theoretical studies in this area every year.

The narrative exists everywhere around us. The samples collected to cover a wide range of subjects in almost every part of our lives - literature, history, religion, media, art, politics, business, and entertainment. The samples were categorised in accordance with Laura Salmon-Kovarsky's model of translation types (as cited in Kuhiwczak, 2003) into three groups, from the easiest to be translated to the most difficult ones which are highly specific texts, literary texts, and hybrid texts.

A clearer and more general understanding of the trends of subjects is shown in Figure 3 below, researchers' interest in narratives in literary translation studies has maintained a stable position through the years, higher than the other two types, and highly specific texts are drawing more and more attention, with a year-on-year increase in number.

There are some studies of hybrid texts every year, but they are not numerous. Researchers do not choose the subjects of their studies according to the translatability of the texts. They favour neither the most difficult ones to translate nor the least difficult ones. It is clear, however, that small attempts are being made to explore new types of texts to study.

The next aspect to be examined is the distribution of research objectives over the five years. As mentioned before, narrative analysis is the intersection of two basic objectives research on narrative in which narrative itself is the object of the study, and research with narrative in which narrative is used as a tool (Bamberg & Cooper, 2012). In short, one concerns the features of narratives and the other concerns the strategies of narratives.

In Figure 4, the research objectives of these samples are listed in columns. Most studies within the last five years focus on narrative strategies, and few are taking the epistemological approach to explore what narrative is. However, some efforts are being

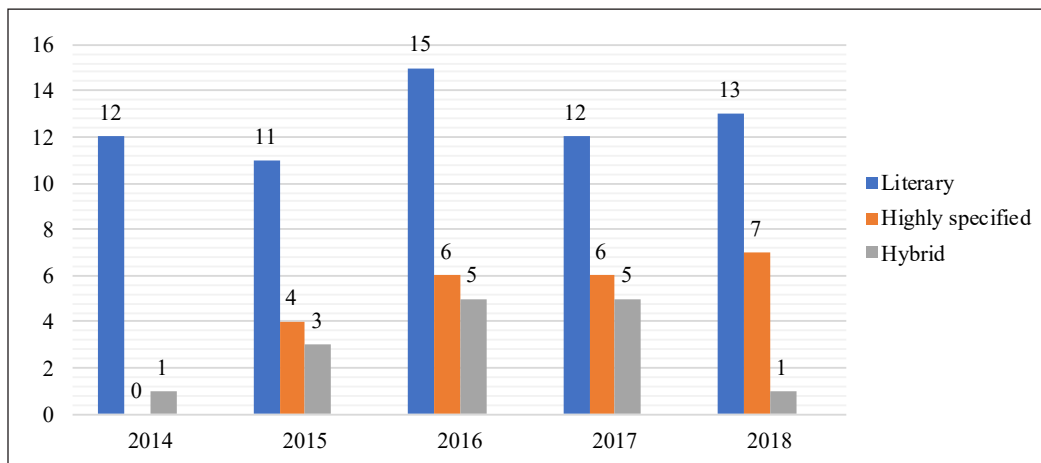


Figure 3. Distribution of research subjects yearly (2014-2018)

made to explore new perspectives such as studies of translation reception (Scaff, 2014) and quality assessment (Hassan, 2015).

Narrative analysis is an interdisciplinary field with no unified methods. It borrows tools from other sources. In these samples, diverse research methods are employed, as is shown in Figure 5, setting examples for other researchers to plan future studies by importing tools from fields such as

computer science, linguistics, or rhetoric. Besides textual analysis, the methods found in the articles over the last five years include discourse analysis (Schuster, 2014), critical discourse analysis (Constantinou, 2017), comparative approach (Wilkinson, 2015), computer-generated language analysis (Prud'Hommeaux & Roark, 2015), fieldwork and rhetorical analysis (Dodge & Keränen, 2018), interview analysis

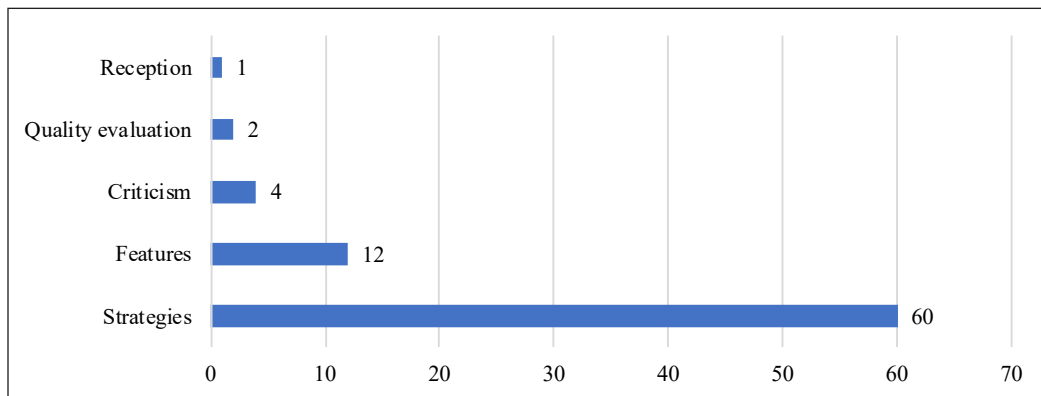


Figure 4. Distribution of research objectives within five years (2014-2018)

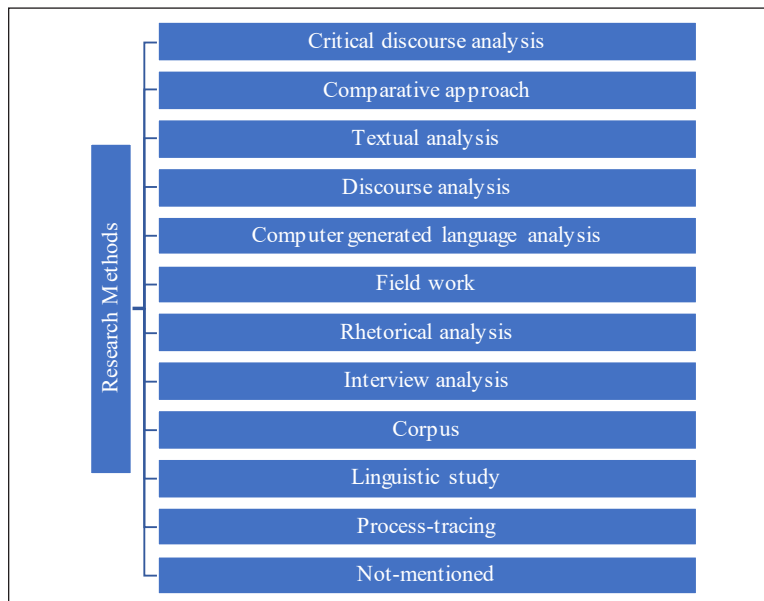


Figure 5. Categories of research methods in narrative analysis in translation studies (2014-2018)

(Johnson, 2016), corpus (Rizzo, 2018), linguistic study (Gunderson, 2016), and process-tracing (Bolton & Minor, 2016).

However, in 30 out of the 92 samples, the researchers do not mention the method through which they conduct narrative analysis. Fuzzy words such as ‘explore’, ‘analyse’, ‘examine’, and ‘inquire’ are found, instead of practical research methods.

## DISCUSSIONS

### Trends of Narrative Analysis in Translation Studies

Although narrative theoretically exists everywhere and narrative analysis is applicable to many different kinds of texts, written or unwritten, this systematic literature review indicates that compared with large numbers of academic articles including journal papers, conference papers, and proceedings on other approaches in translation studies within the last five years, narrative analysis has not become the mainstream approach in translation studies. Narrative analysis has even suffered setbacks in its progress in quantity. Another problem revealed in this systematic literature review is that as the years pass, there is no trend showing that researchers could reflect and reconsider the fundamental rules in narrative because the number of empirical studies always far surpasses that of theoretical studies.

In spite of that, the quality of narrative analysis has improved. Researchers do not limit their scope within literary translation; they are turning their attention towards

more diversified areas, making tentative attempts to combine narrative analysis with practice in translation, which has enriched this approach.

### The Status Quo of Narrative Analysis in Translation Studies

The systematic literature review identified two general characteristics of current implementations of narrative analysis in translation studies. First, because of different understandings of narrative and the diverse frameworks of narrative analysis, researchers attach more importance to research with narrative analysis as a tool without solving the epistemological problem of the term ‘narrative’. In particular, the studies examining the ‘what’ in narratives have lagged far behind those concerning the ‘how’.

Second, as a positive result of the additional attention given to empirical studies and analysing strategies in narratives, some researchers borrow tools from other approaches or subjects and create more diversified research methods. In addition, research subjects are moving from a single modality to multimodality.

### Gaps in Recent Research and Research Implications

In the following section, gaps in recent research of narrative analysis in translation studies are elaborated and solutions for such gaps based upon narrative theory are proposed. Specifically, the gaps between theory and practice and the gaps in research methods and subjects are illustrated.

**Gaps between ‘What’ and ‘How’.** As is mentioned earlier, narrative analysis is placed at the intersection of both researches on narratives and research with narratives. The results of this systematic literature review show that more attention has been drawn towards narrative analysis used as a tool instead of reflecting upon what narratives really are. If researchers are carrying out studies on narrative analysis in translation without fully understanding the epistemology of the term ‘narrative’, their empirical studies may risk losing their cornerstone.

**Proposition:** The gap between what narratives are and how to carry out narrative analysis is not new. The ever-changing definitions of narratives provided by different scholars in fields like communication, literature, and sociology have confused researchers when they attempt to find related literature to support their research on narratives in different fields. It is recommended that researchers understand the features of their research samples before jumping into discussing the strategies that these samples employ. For example, the definition of narrative in the literature presented by scholars like Wayne C. Booth emphasising the rhetorical features of narrative can be used effectively (Booth, 2010) to examine narrative in literary translation from the perspective of rhetoric.

**Gaps in Research Methods.** Researchers’ gaps in their understanding and application of research methods in the narrative analysis are shown in the literature review. Some

researchers engaged in highly academic attempts by combining narrative analysis with tools from other fields, or by exploring new methods, while others stated unclear methods in their research.

**Proposition:** Narrative analysis is an umbrella term, and translation study is an interdisciplinary subject. This combination engenders diversities as well as challenges. Besides textual analysis, there are more possibilities for researchers to explore in methodology such as fieldwork, discourse analysis and so on. To this end, a collection of research methods have been organised in Table 1 with the aim of offering assistance to researchers looking for appropriate methods in this field.

**Gaps in Research Subjects.** Another noticeable gap lies in the uneven distribution of the subjects of these studies. Even though narratives are recognised as existing everywhere around us, current research primarily concerns narratives in translations of literary texts. Studies on the translation of highly specific texts or hybrid texts in more diversified forms through narrative analysis are less. No matter what the reason is, translation studies with narrative analysis could hardly meet the demands of translation markets.

**Proposition:** The development in translation practices requires researchers to leave the ivory tower and enlarge their scope, as translation is a huge industry. For example, translation in corporate communication has long been ignored, yet it is in huge demand for high-quality services under the guidance

of a mature theoretical translation system. While studies on translations of corporate communications from narrative approach may sound novel, nowadays, texts in the translation of corporate communications are in variable forms, highly specific or hybrid, with important information to convey, which renders good samples for study. Based on the findings in this review of previous studies on narrative analysis of translation in fields other than literature such as public services (McBeth & Lybecker, 2018), popular culture (Zur, 2018), and children's spoken language (Prud'Hommeaux & Roark, 2015), exploring new fields in translation studies does not involve starting from scratch.

## CONCLUSION

This paper launched a systematic literature review of current research in narrative analysis in translation studies in the last five years (from 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2018). While previous systematic literature reviews have mostly been carried out in the healthcare field with quantitative synthesis, considering the peculiarity of translation studies, a descriptive qualitative synthesis has been provided without a meta-analysis. The aim of this study is to provide a holistic systematic review over the last five years of all the related research on narrative analysis in translation studies with minimal bias, including the trends, status quo, and gaps. This study also contributes to the present application of systematic literature reviews by offering a case in translation studies.

The findings of the review indicate that narrative analysis in translation studies is far from being a mature and mainstream approach. The focus should be shifted from studies of how narrative analysis is used as a tool towards the reflection upon what narratives are, and new fields still await examination.

However, since a systematic literature review can only maintain minimal bias, this research is of no exception. It has some limitations. First, the study detected setbacks in the quantities of narrative analysis in translation studies through a statistical analysis but failed to explain why, because individual systematic literature reviews are more suited to discovering problems than finding ways to solve them. Second, a review of papers published within the last five years is not sufficient for identifying the evolution of narrative analysis in translation studies because the term 'narrative' has been used over a much longer period of time. To gain a full view of the development of the term, reviews should employ a wider time range. The third limitation lies in that due to 'the strong English-language overrepresentation' of the databases (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016), a rigorous and comprehensive review of papers published in English has been conducted whereas papers published in other languages are not included. For example, this review did not include papers written in Chinese from the most popular database in China named CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), which is 'the most comprehensive gateway of knowledge of China' ('Introduction', n.d.) because

more than 600 papers were identified after a preliminary search had been launched. It is certain that if CNKI is included as an additional supplementary database, the results will be richer, yet the review will be too broad for one journal paper. In this case, further researches could be conducted about differences in the narrative approach of translation studies between China and other countries.

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