


### Narrative: Linguistic and Structural Theories

**M Toolan**, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

The production, reception, and use of narratives is one of the hallmarks of human life. Indeed narrative has been called a metacode and a human universal, with story-making now as widely bruitied as metaphor as a basic mode of humanistic sense-making. As representations of events removed from the immediate here-and-now, narratives are a vital human resource in making sense of the world – and even in the making (construal) of that world itself. Indeed, some now suggest that it is the narrativizing faculty (with its other-orientedness or intersubjectivity and attention to goals and intentions), rather than simply a language faculty, that most sharply differentiates humans from other animals. Narratives reflect one of the key design features of the language faculty – displacement – although narrative is itself a faculty that can be realized in other media than the verbal. Narratives are also astonishingly various and heterogeneous in forms and functions, with rich possibilities for embedding of stories within stories.

In this article the focus is on contributions to the understanding of core elements of narrative that have come from narratologists and narrative poeticians, who chiefly consider fiction and film narratives; other analyses and models of narrative – e.g., those rooted in sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, ethnomethodology, and elsewhere – are addressed in a range of separate entries. One important development not addressed here because it is treated fully in a
separate article concerns the putative genderedness of narratives, narrative production, and reading (see Narratology, Feminist).

**Core Elements: Story and Discourse**

It may not be possible to offer here a wholly satisfactory definition of narrative, because the theories to be discussed have in fact objects of enquiry that differ from each other in significant respects. Nevertheless a minimal characterization may be proposed:

a perceived sequence of nonrandomly connected events, i.e., of described states or conditions which undergo change (into some different states or conditions).

By ‘nonrandom connection’ is meant some connectedness that is taken to be motivated and significant. This principle is formulated in terms of “transformation” by the structuralist Todorov (1977: 233):

The simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have elements in common. But if all the elements are in common, there is no longer a narrative, for there is no longer anything to recount. Now, transformation represents precisely a synthesis of differences and resemblance; it links two facts without their being able to be identified.

But perceiving nonrandom connectedness in a sequence of events is the prerogative of the addressee: the ultimate authority for ratifying a text as a narrative rests not with the teller but with the perceive/ addressee. Before structuralists and literary theorists and sociolinguists turned to narrative, however, it had been examined with considerable analytical sophistication by folklorists and anthropologists, tending to identify as narratives those stories where an initial state of equilibrium is disturbed by various forces of turbulence, before some sort of action (perhaps a magical intervention) leads to the restoration of a modified version of the original equilibrium.

Recent studies in narrative poetics have tended to divide the subject of study into two main domains or levels of inquiry. Thus, the early 20th-century Russian Formalists (Propp, Tomashevsky, etc.) distinguished *fabula* from *sjuzhet*, roughly equivalent to the more recent French (see Benveniste, Emile (1902–1976); Barthes, Roland (1915–1980)) terms *histoire* and *discours*. These are equivalent in turn to the widely adopted English labels (as in Chatman, 1978) of story and discourse. By the first term of each of these pairs is meant a basic description of the fundamental events of a story, in their natural chronological order, with an accompanying and equally skeletal inventory of the roles of the characters in the story:

A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors (Bal, 1985: 5).

This is the level at which we may expect the possibility (and impression) of ‘total transfer’ from one medium to another: everything at the level of story in, e.g., Dickens’s *Great Expectations* can and perhaps should appear as easily in a film or cartoon version, or a ballet, as in the original written version. In a story outline all the events and characters are presented synoptically, with the minimum attention to, for example, complexities of sequence – it as if the paradigmatic raw materials of the narrative are displayed. The syntagmatic dimension, the linear distribution of event-and-character presentation, disclosure, elaboration, and so on, is severely attenuated.

Relatedly, the *sjuzhet* or *discours* of a narrative is the version of the core story that is realized in an actual cinematic or dance or literary creation. In fact both the process and the product – the realizing and the realized end product – are referred to by these terms. For *sjuzhet* and *discours* also denote all the techniques that authors bring to bear in their varying manners of presentation of the basic story.

In literary studies, discourse has been viewed as the more interesting area of narrative poetics, whereas story has been treated as a focusing on the preartistic, genre- and convention-bound basic event-and-character patterns of narrative, with scarcely any room for evaluative contrasts or discriminations, a level at which authorship seems an irrelevant concern. It is worth stressing that such a marginalizing of story is controversial in some quarters, where attention has been directed to the cultural and ideological ‘work’ done by certain kinds of recurrent story elements, character-types, generic plots, and so on. Despite such revaluations, this pair of terms remains current, with discourse understood as the artistic and individualized working with and around the genres, the conventions, the basic story patterns, in the distinctive styles, voices, or manners of different authors.

**Events and Event-Structure**

**Propp’s Morphology**

The starting-point of Propp’s famous study (Propp, 1968, originally published in Russian in 1928; see Propp, Vladimir Jakovlevich (1895–1970)) seems to have been something like the minimalist definition of narrative introduced earlier – a text in which there is recounted a change from one state to a modified state, i.e., an event. In his proposed ‘morphology’ of the Russian fairy tale, Propp offered an inventory of all
and only the fundamental events (called ‘functions’) in his chosen corpus of 115 Russian fairy tales. Looking particularly for recurring elements or features (constants) and random or unpredictable ones (variables), Propp concluded that although the characters or personages of the tales might superficially be quite variable, yet their functions in the tales, viewed in terms of the story’s development, were relatively constant and predictable. Both the number (31 in all) and the sequencing of the functions is asserted to be fixed. Examples from the set of 31 functions include

1. One of the members of a family absents himself from home. (An extreme exponent of this function is the death of one of the parents.)
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
3. The interdiction is violated.
16. The hero and villain join in direct combat.
31. The hero is married and ascends the throne.

Propp noted some internal patterning within the 31-function sequence. Certain functions clearly go together as pairs, such as prohibition and violation (2 and 3), struggle and victory (16 and 18), and pursuit and deliverance (21 and 22). Clusters of functions are also grouped under general headings. Thus, functions 1–7 are potential realizations of the ‘preparation,’ 8–10 are the ‘complication,’ and later general groupings include ‘transference,’ ‘struggle,’ ‘return,’ and ‘recognition.’ In addition to the 31 functions Propp identified 7 basic character types or roles:

- villain; donor/provider; helper; princess (+ father); dispatcher; hero (seeker or victim); and false hero.

An actual character may fill more than one character-role (e.g., some individual in the tale may be both villain and false hero) and of course one role might be filled by several individuals (there might be several people jointly functioning as helper or villain).

Propp’s methods have been used extensively, particularly in anthropological studies, and it is certainly striking that fictions rather remote from the Russian fairy tale (children’s stories, TV crime series, etc.) do seem to lend themselves to Proppian analysis. But at the same time the question of reductivism has persistently undercuts regard for Propp’s work – particularly when attempts are made to apply it beyond the fairy tale. It is argued that the morphology is a model that severely distorts, because it sets on one side the important and necessary cultural context in which these tales occur and ignores also the varying details of stories. The counterargument is that a structuralist–morphological approach must necessarily ‘reduce,’ and explicitly sets out to shear off the nonessential from the essential, appealing to intuition. Truly uncovering intuitive judgments (rather than learned and conditioned ways of talking publicly about plots and plot structures) will always present difficulties. But the substantial degree of agreement that similarly acculturated groups of readers reveal, concerning what they regard as essential or not in plot and character and in other respects, suggests that some common sense of structure exists. Like all other kinds of common sense, this is undoubtedly relative to sociocultural determinants and ideologically motivated in subtle ways. But this generality of agreement and commonality of sense are the essential justification for the inductive speculations of Propp, Barthes, Todorov, and others (see also Barthes, Roland (1915–1980); Structure and Structuralism: Semiotic Approaches).

**Barthes’s ‘Functions’**

Barthes (1977 [1966]) proposed three major levels of narrative structure:

a. functions (as in Propp and Bremond);

b. actions (roughly, characters – cf. Greimas’s *actants*, discussed later),

c. narration (equivalent to the *discours* or discourse described in the first section).

In fact Barthes focused almost entirely on the level of functions or narrative events, the level at which narrative is ‘driven.’ Every function has the effect of starting or developing a story line that will have consequences at a later point in the narrative; thus function is teleological. It is the means of achieving the overarching coherence of a narrative, rather than any merely local or proximate cause-and-effect logic. There are for Barthes two types of functions: functions proper (similar to Propp’s) and indices. The latter include pointers to characters’ psychological states, notations of atmosphere, and so on. Whereas functions proper are distributional, sequential, ‘completed’ further on in the story, and so have a kind of syntagmatic rationale and ratification, indices are said to be integrational, hierarchically oriented, empowered by the reader’s relating of them to some higher, integrated level, a paradigmatic ratification. On a broad continuum, Barthes suggests, there are heavily functional narratives such as folktales, in contrast with heavily indexical ones such as psychological novels.

Barthes subcategorized both functions and indices. Thus, the former are of two types, nuclei (cardinal functions) and catalysts. Nuclei are moments of risk, hinge-points or branches in story development, where events could proceed in two radically different directions; they are consecutive and consequential. Catalysts ‘fill in’ between nuclei and are parasitic on
them; they are the prevarications and other accompanying actions that may flank a genuinely nuclear function. Indices can also be ranked for salience, with indices proper, charged with implicit relevance in, e.g., character portrayal, contrasted with informants, which are relatively insignificant and depthless identifiers. Furthermore, a unit can be a member of more than one class at time: it could be both a catalyzer and an index, for example. But nuclei (also termed kernels) remain the core items providing the necessary framework, the other three types being enhancements of these.

Even the smallest of these segments may combine into coherent sequences (in a way reminiscent of Propp’s notion of clustering, and of phrasal syntax generally):

A sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity: the sequence opens when one of its terms has no solitary antecedent and closes when another of its terms has no consequent (Propp, 1968: 10).

For example, ‘having a drink’ is suggested as a closed sequence with the following nuclei: order a drink, obtain it, drink it, pay for it. Seeing a sequence in such a string of reported events, and labeling it as ‘having a drink’ is for Barthes the kind of projective interpretive activity readers are always performing in their narrative processing (this is later subsumed under the proaeretic code: see Barthes, 1970). Naming is the key act of mental processing, under the assumption that the reader is selective in attention in the course of reading or hearing a narrative and instead registers, and may even verbalize, the main threads of the narrative. The reader enacts an incremental and revisable précis making.

Despite the attractions of Barthes’s basic four-way categorization of narrative material, problems immediately arose and persist concerning reliability of identification of nuclei, informants, and so on – i.e., concerning diversity of interpretation. It may be concluded that kernels and catalyzers are less textual given than analytical constructions, and that, in true Saussurean structuralist terms, they are essentially relational units:

What is a kernel in one plot or at one level of description will be a satellite [catalyzer] at another. For the hero to lie in wait for the villain is, at one level, a kernel, since it logically requires a temporal consequence: the villain arrives and is shot down. But at another level these functions are satellites which expand the kernel ‘revenge,’ the consequence of an initial kernel such as ‘suffering harm’ (Culler, 1975: 13).

In readers’ retrospective processes of sense-making and plot-determination, Barthes’s notion of sequence-identification, or something similar, must be crucially involved. But much of this model-building is guided by our cultural background and our assumptions about ‘normal’ behavior. It is because there is always this context of cultural significances and saliences ‘around’ all our involvements with narratives that Barthes says we have ‘a language of plot’ within us even before we approach any particular story (see also Barthes, Roland (1915–1980)).

In the last dozen years or so, many narratologists and discourse linguists have revisited such fundamental notions as event and ‘eventhood,’ the episode, narrativity, and the bases on which a causal and not merely sequential relation is inferred between events. In a plot-based approach to narrative those are clearly the fundamental building blocks of production and comprehension, but their linguistic shape and grammaticization (e.g., via contextually contrastive use of tense, aspect) or reflection in particular lexical choices, defy easy formulation.

**Plot-intuitions and Summaries, and Grammaticization**

In addition and perhaps in contrast with the assumption that his morphology uncovers the essential structure of a corpus of stories, Propp’s work may be seen as an exploitation or display of (Russian fairy tale) readers’ narrative competence, i.e., of the kinds of structuring and progression that story-recipients apparently expect and require in particular kinds of tales. This reader-oriented emphasis is the basis for research on sharedness of plot-identification and evaluation, ability to summarize plots and agreement on what constitutes a good summary, and agreement in recognition of the transformational relatedness of plots. Culler (1975) argued that evaluation of models of plot analysis must be in terms of the adequacy as models of aspects of readers’ ‘literary competence’ (here, intuitive knowledge of plot essentials, plot similarities, etc.). But literary competence significantly contrasts with what is claimed of ‘linguistic competence’ in generativist theory, because the former is learned and markedly culture specific.

Relatedly, calling these culture-specific abilities ‘intuitive knowledge’ remains a matter of debate (significantly, in areas such as discourse analysis, in recent years, the emphasis on intuition has been displaced to some degree by one on shared knowledge, or common background). People can be better or worse at plot summarizing and can improve at
it. In Western societies, constructing and communicating plot summaries is a valued skill; it might not be so in a settled oral community, where a set time and social space was reserved for storytelling. There, to précis a plot might be either incomprehensible or taken as indicative of poor storytelling skills. In addition, literary texts are arguably a problematic testing ground for general principles of summarizing, such narratives being too category-marginal, too deautomatizing of plot logic, to be suitable exemplification of our standard ability to summarize. The case of literary fiction is perhaps particularly expressive of Henry James’s famous rhetorical questions and their challenge to the structuralist assumption of the separability of event, character, and setting:

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?

At a more narrowly grammatical level, interest continues in the possibilities of specifying the typical grammatical features of, for example, fully narrative or functional clauses (and, by contrast, of nonnarrative clauses of description, evaluation, and background). Various functionalist-oriented linguists support the postulation of a set of lexicogrammatical features that may be most expected and salient in narrative clauses. Additionally, there may be a need to rank, from most expected or appropriate to least so, the range of options that are possible candidates at particular points in text structure. Thus, past tense transitive clauses of action, physical or mental, may be one kind of most expected clause in narratives (cf. the narrative clause Goldilocks ate up all the porridge with the more descriptive clause Goldilocks was hungry). Similarly there seem to be narrative–clause preferences for nonprogressive aspect (ate not was eating); realis rather than irrealis mode and positive polarity rather than negative (thus not would (not) have eaten); and a clearly individualized participant as subject and actor (not the porridge had been eaten). Some such set of preferred options in the grammar of narrative clauses may in turn guide a reader’s real-time processing of text in the search for plot, constituting links between grammar and plot structure. But such lexicogrammatical tendencies are preferences or expectations, not stipulations hence are provisional and liable to be overridden in particular narrative situations. They and the provisional plot assessments they give rise to may need radical recasting as the reading process is enacted and completed.

**Temporal Order, Duration, and Frequency**

This section concerns the temporal aspects of the transformation and elaboration of a story as a discourse (as those terms were characterized earlier). A starting point must be acknowledgment of the heavily convention-laden nature of so-called story time and text time: in both cases a verbal representation of temporality, rather than actual temporal progression, is the focus of study. And the processes of time representation are made more richly complex by the fact that the performance of narrative reception—listening to an oral story, or reading a written one—itself involves some passage of time. Artifice and aesthetic issues are therefore involved here, where the reader/analyst may be postulating or assuming some kind of match between real-world temporality as this is implied in the story and our sense of time passing during the experience of processing the narrative discourse. Another kind of disruption of a steady linearity of the temporal dimension of narrative is entailed whenever a narrative involves more than one story line, i.e., more than one set of developing circumstances affecting at least partially distinct sets of characters. But even where the correlation between real-world time and text-world time seems least noticeable or manipulated as in pure direct speech storytelling (monologue or dialogue), it is probable that the actual extent of the reading time considerably exceeds that which would be spent in an actual enactment.

The most influential recent theorist of text time has been Gérard Genette (1980, 1988), who specified three chief dimensions of temporal articulation of story in discourse—order, frequency and duration—addressed in the following:

a. Order: the relations between the assumed sequence of events in the story and their actual order of presentation in the narrative. Any storytelling departure from the natural or logical order of events is an anachrony, these being achronological movements either back in time (a delayed disclosure of an earlier-occurring event, or flashback) or forward in time (a premature disclosure of a later-occurring event, or flashforward). Genette’s terms for these anachronies are analepsis and prolepsis, respectively. An analepsis, further, may take the reader back to a time earlier than that which has previously been established as the starting point of the story, in which case the analepsis is termed ‘external’; or the shift may be to an earlier time within the established frame: an ‘internal’
analepsis. Both kinds of temporal jump may be either ‘homodiegetic’ or ‘heterodiegetic,’ i.e., relating events involving the same character or story line as was the focus of attention immediately before the textual shift (homodiegesis) or relating events involving some other character or story line than the one previously focused on (heterodiegesis). And more complex narratives, such as Genette’s chosen study, Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, show that there are ample opportunities for analepsis within analepsis, heterodiegesis within homodiegesis, and so on, and the functions of such anachronies are equally numerous. A caveat worth recording immediately concerns the need to distinguish fleeting anachronistic allusions to temporally distant events (e.g., in the course of character portrayal), from substantial shifts of temporal grounding, anachronies proper. The former may be better thought of as analeptic or proleptic traces, contributions to a rich narrative texture (in Barthes’s terms, indices or informants rather than functions).

b. Frequency: the congruence, and means of divergence, between frequency of some event happening in the story, and frequency of its narration in the text. Modernist novels, such as Faulkner’s, often reveal interesting manipulations of frequency, away from the singulative norm (telling once what happened once). Thus, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on the murder of Charles Bon, told 39 times in all, by various tellers; whereas *The Sound and the Fury* involves multiple tellings of the death and burial of Addie Bundren, and *The Sound and the Fury* includes versions of particular events (from Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and a more detached narrator) from significantly contrastive perspectives.

c. Duration: for Genette, this covers the relations between putative temporal extent of events in the imagined world of the story, and the textual extent of treatment in the narrative: duration is both the most problematic and the most creative of dimensions of temporal formulation. Genette’s interest is in narrative pacing as a text–internal strategy, rather than in relating it to external factors such as duration of reading time. Thus, textual pace at any point in a narrative is to be assessed relative to pace (protractedness or brevity of event narration) elsewhere in the same narrative. Thus, for every narrative, norm of pace can be derived, against which notional departures can be charted. Constancy of pace would emerge if the ratio between story duration and extent of textual presentation were invariant – e.g., a chapter for every year of a character’s life, with a page for every month of each year. The weaknesses in this approach lies in its mechanical and simplistic treatment of what is rarely so simple a textual phenomenon – notations of time elapsed, in a story, may be scarce and ambiguous – and its failure to concentrate specifically on the sense of rapidity of disclosure that readers report experiencing in their reading of particular delimited scenes. The latter phenomenon, perceptions of local accelerated telling, may again be related to lexicogrammatical features, such as use of transitive clauses, many different clause themes and affected participants, and nonfinite progressive clauses.

It seems possible and reasonable to distinguish duration from narrative selectivity and discontinuity. The latter concern the various blocks of time that a reader infers must have elapsed between narrated events and ordinarily will have no special interest: e.g., where a character retires to sleep at the end of one chapter and is depicted taking breakfast the next morning at the opening of the following chapter. Duration and variations of duration are not concerned with narrative gaps of this order, but rather with variations of extent in telling, from the evidently protracted to the evidently neglected or suppressed, of those things that are indeed told.

The extremes of textual duration are ellipsis (no textual treatment of some temporal segment of the story) and descriptive pause (textual presentation of that which involves no passage of time in the story). But more widespread are relative accelerations and decelerations, commonly labeled ‘summary’ and ‘scene.’ Shift of duration from the summary to the scenic is typically taken as a narratorial indication of the importance of the events and conversations so presented, whereas a shift from the scenic to the summary will often be taken to signify that the reported events are of secondary or backgrounded importance. Consequently, shock and ironic effects can be achieved by textual inversion of such norms – fleeting depiction of some cataclysmic event, framed by lengthily described routine matters. A complication common in modern novels is the attribution of choices in textual duration to a character within the narrative, whose thoughts are being represented, rather than to an external narrator. Thus, within the single scene of Peter Walsh’s morning visit to Clarissa Dalloway (in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*) there are both scenic and summarized mental recollections, by Clarissa, of their encounters in the past. And this recollected material is part of a story of far greater time span (Clarissa’s life) embedded within one of relative brevity (Clarissa’s day). As a unit within the framing narrative the reminiscence maintains normal
order, apparently text-normal duration, and singulative frequency. But as a separate narrative embedded within the framing narrative, it is marked by various anachronies, with variations of duration (some recollected events are highly summarized) and some repetitive frequencies. Useful as such applications of Genettian order and duration may be, they seem not to address directly the reader’s experience of the text, which is primarily linear, whatever the narratorial practices of temporal reordering and embedding. In complex ways that may resist analytical unraveling, readers may—arguably have to—synthesize the story of things happening with that of happenings remembered. In such a holistic reading, Mrs. Dalloway’s reminiscences may paradoxically be both timely as well as anachronistic, past in actuality, present in consciousness.

Character

Until recently, there was noticeable neglect of character by narratologists (but important recent contributions include books by Phelan, Culpeper, and M. Smith). Some of this neglect reflected ambivalence about the ontological status of characters or individuals in fictional narratives, itself a reaction to lay and literary critical tendencies to talk and write about character by narratologists (but important recent con-...
limited success by a friend or relative (helper), but their combined efforts count for little, in the struggle against some opponent (a wicked uncle of the princess, some other eligible but ignoble suitor), until a sender (better, a superhelper) such as the king, or God, or some individual with magical powers for good, intervenes.

Despite the model’s simplicity, and despite the need to annotate it variously so as to fit different genres better, the scheme is worth applying to a range of texts, from religious stories to Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*. One thing to note is that two of the ‘roles,’ Sender and Object, are not typically strictly characters at all in most modern stories: modern literary narratives are likely to have quality of life, liberty or liberation, the pursuit of happiness, or greater self-knowledge, or mental peace, as their object. Nevertheless there remain plenty of spy stories, westerns, romances, and detective stories, however, where a particular concrete object is clearly the target. The role of higher help is interestingly problematic: in a secular and rationalist society, there is evidently some resistance to adult narratives that invoke such a role.

Greimas’s six-role schema seems particularly applicable to advertisements, where the targeted consumer is understood to be both subject and receiver, the object is something contributory to a new or improved lifestyle, while the marketed product often functions as superhelper. In a range of product-oriented advertisements there is a narrative-style emphasis on change of state, and the product providing some important assistance in that transformation. However, this narrative format tends to fall away in the promotion of truly luxury items, such as perfumes, fur coats, very expensive cars, and so on. In these, a more synecdochic relation seems to obtain, where the product is presented as intrinsic part (however small) of the chic and elegant lifestyle that the advert typically portrays. The product is part of the object, rather than representing the sender.

**Character Traits and Distinctive Feature Analysis**

In many modern narratives of the more complex kind, details of characterization – the kind of material that Barthes labels as indices or (mere) informants, often irrelevant to story – are just what the reader finds most engaging. In evaluating such material, readers are inevitably guided by real-world background knowledge, the mental scripts and schema that we bring to our reading of any narrative, derived from our previous experiences of individuals, events, and situations. Such knowledge has been characterized as an interwoven complex of facts and ideology. Some of this knowledge is perhaps particularly important, as it can underpin a kind of feature analysis of the characters.

A semantic feature analysis (loosely analogous to distinctive feature phonology) of the characters of a tale involves specifying a limited list of what the analyst takes to be the crucial and contrasting attributes that distinguish particular characters. From this viewpoint, extensive description of character is secondary and even undesirable (just as, in the similar phonological analysis, the minimum set of contrasts needed is the preferred set). Although comparison and contrast of characters in terms of attributes is basic, a refinement of the method involves assessing variations in degree (how weakly or strongly?) and modality (how probably or usually?) of an attribute. And in light of the importance of change to narrative, a further enrichment is where a character’s shift in ‘trait realization,’ e.g., from being proud and presumptuous to being chastened and grateful, can be recorded. Given the nature of narratives and their reception, the method does not assume the same level of agreement in analysis, powers of prediction, and replication, as are claimed for distinctive feature analyses in phonology or semantics. Rarely will reader analysts agree over the precise set of features appropriately present or absent in a text’s characters. Such variant emphases, in analyses, are in themselves and in their reflection of analysts’ assumptions an indication of ideological and interpretive diversity. The feature matrices that this method nurtures are often held in low esteem today, yet a great many critical commentaries on literary narratives draw, in their discussion of character motivation and appropriateness of plot development, on informal accounts of characters’ crucial traits. A more difficult charge to refute is that the model takes reductive structuralism to an extreme, so that the given texture of characters, their syntagmatic extension through a long narrative, is largely neglected.

**Names and Faces**

Names and faces are so typically attributes of individuals that are immediately in the public domain, and so often regarded as unique and indicative, that they are a staple resource for characterization. In matters of naming, textual designation of a character by way of proper name, or definite descriptions, or pronominal, is a basic choice that often reflects narratorial point of view. The effects of irony or sympathy, approval or distaste achieved by particular naming strategies can be quite complex, given that there is usually an ongoing designating of several characters, in any stretch of text, by these varied means.

Another heavily exploited means of characterization, often with the assumption that outer surfaces
reflect inner essence, is description of characters’ outward appearance – especially clothes and facial features. Given the rarity of surgical adjustments of the latter, one commonsense rational assumption is that looks, build, and physical qualities of an individual (and so, a character) are both given and arbitrary, certainly rejecting any claimed causal link between appearance and personality (such theories of physiognomy and phrenology, popular in the 19th century, influenced writers such as Balzac and Dickens). On the other hand, common sense also recognizes the multiple consequences, in life, that particular physical attributes can assist or impede. Physical attributes are in this sense facts in the world, constraining and defining individuals in very real ways (sex, skin color, and physical handicap being three of the most socially defining). Cyrano’s protruding nose, Falstaff’s vast belly, Esther Summerson’s disfigurement by smallpox, and Othello’s blackness are just a few instances where body, life, and narrative fate seem to interact. Then again, some features of physical appearance such as body shape, hairstyle, facial expression (propensity to frown, with head lowered, versus a smiling disposition with an ‘enquiring’ tilt of the head) are judged to be partly under a character’s control, something for which they can be held accountable.

The source of character apperception that is perhaps most complex to chart – using structuralist or any other methods – is the process of implicit characterization based on how a character acts and reacts. Twentieth-century fiction has tended to opt for the indirectness of presentation, a ‘showing’ of character that respects the ability of the reader to infer, evaluate, and draw conclusions on the basis of presented behavior, rather than direct (and directive) presentation, an authoritative one, of how a character is. But the multiplicity of types and formal exponents of what Barthes first called indices and informants and later (in S/Z) assimilated to five overarching interpretive codes, seem triumphant resistant to grammatical modeling.

**Characterization through Dialogue**

One of the most striking things that characters do in literary narratives is speak and think, and the nature and structure of characters’ reported discourse is treated in several independent entries (see, e.g., Dialect Representations in Texts; Speech and Thought: Representation of). But some evidence is also derived from how characters in narratives participate in conversation: how cooperatively, aggressively, sensitively, and so on, they interact. Models that have been widely applied in such analyses of fictional dialogue include the ethnomethodologically oriented tradition of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, etc.), the discourse analytical system associated with linguists at Birmingham University (exemplified by Burton, 1980), and more pragmatic and social psychological approaches that focus on how individuals’ conversational contributions are shaped by concern to maintain an appropriate image of self and other, so that ‘face,’ ‘politeness,’ and other pragmatic principles are greatly affecting just how turns of talk are formulated (see especially Goffman 1981; Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987). But probably the greatest influence has been wielded by Grice’s seminal paper of 1975, in which his Cooperative Principle and its four subsidiary maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relation are outlined, together with his account of how addressees (including here, readers) derive implicatures concerning the speaker’s covert or indirect meaning, where there seems to be a calculated departure from simple maxim observance.

**Setting**

Though less essential to a narrative than event and character, the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong psychological preference in most readers. We like and expect clear spatiotemporal indications of just where and when a thing happened. However, this specificity requirement seems relative to genre and story type: some fables and folktales do not need elaborate details of setting, nor do certain speculative or psychological stories, whereas Kafkaesque or Beckettian stories may appear deliberately to withhold setting.

In the novel, settings (especially but not exclusively residential ones) are often depicted at length and come to seem inseparable from character and motivation: they may function like a character (at least a Forsterian flat one), and be the cause of various events. In novels by Fielding and Austen, particular houses, country estates, inns, parsonages, and cottages are instrumental in this way, as may be the contrast between a drawing room and an open-air encounter. In analyzing fiction from the late 19th century onward, critics have come to attend to questions of public and private space and gender, and changes in these, especially where implicit norms in these matters have functioned to confine women to their ‘proper place.’

Although it is customary to talk of the relations between setting on the one hand and character and events on the other as either causal or analogical, often texts are indeterminate between these two types of relation. Hardy’s characterizations of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, for example, are so distinctive and compelling partly because we sense...
Narrators and Narration

Just how many optional or obligatory roles are involved the process of narration remains richly controversial. Many narratologists (e.g., Chatman, 1978: 151) identify as many as six major participants (Figure 2).

In Chatman’s discussion, the real author and reader are left out of discussion, on the grounds that their ‘implied’ counterparts are their functioning substitutes in the business of narrative transmission, and the further claim is made that the narrator–narratee pair are optional positions. Others, perhaps chiefly concerned that study of literary narratives should not appear recognizably different from more comprehensive study of narratives in society, have argued for just three essential roles in narrative transmission, and an optional fourth (e.g., Toolan, 2001) (Figure 3).

It is no accident that of the six roles usually discussed in narratological studies, these three are the ones that are robustly present on the surface of narrative texts and the most deeply recalled when we ordinarily think about narratives. By contrast, the implied author, the narratee, and the implied reader are rather more notional: potentially analytically important, but in more oblique ways.

The implied author is the mental picture of the author that a reader constructs on the basis of the text in its entirety. That such an imagining of the author can and often is undertaken is easiest to see where we read an unattributed text. More important than the general characteristics a reader might impute to the implied author are the values – the ideology – that, rightly or wrongly, the reader imputes to him or her. The reader reasons that in having constructed the kind of narrator to be found in the narrative and in having written about the kinds of things here written about, and written about in just the way found here, the implied author must tacitly subscribe to these particular values rather than others.

The notion of the ‘implied author’ was first proposed by Wayne Booth (1961), who suggested that each of an author’s novels projects a different ‘official version’ of that author and his or her values. But such versions can be separated from the actuality of authorial narrative production: they may be important in narrative reception and critical theory, but are arguably irrelevant to narrative production. In this view, the ‘implied author’ is a real position in narrative processing, a receptor’s construct; but it is not a real role in narrative transmission. It is a projection back from the decoding side, not a real projecting stage on the encoding side. That is to say, it is extremely doubtful whether writers do set out to create an implied or refracted version of themselves, perceptible by the reader, over and above (and logically prior to) the creation of a narratorial persona, in each of the fictions they embark upon. It is harder for most readers than Booth assumes, to keep in mind and separate an ‘official scribe’ and an ‘official narrator.’

Although sociolinguistically oriented narratologists argue for a reduction of the production side of narrative transmission from three participants to two, they tend to simplify the reception side even further: they disregard two of the participant roles assumed in much narrative poetics (narratee and implied reader) and treat only the real socially situated reader as central. Again, this reduction involves no denial that narratee and implied reader are important strategic positions in the processes of narration and narrative reception (for vigorous defense of poeticians’ enlarged view of the narratee, see especially Prince, 1983). The narratee is an individual, whether involved in or detached from the events of the story, who is directly addressed and to some degree characterized by the narrator (the process of characterizing an addressee is important: on this criterion, many first-person narratives of _prima facie_ ‘direct address’ do not have an addressee: _Tom Jones_ has such a narratee, _Great Expectations_ does not). Very occasionally narrators address their discourse to themselves, but much more typically the addressee is a character–receiver within the story, even if one seemingly marginal to the action. Sometimes, as in Sterne’s _Tristram Shandy_, a narratee...
is playfully conjured up and, for instance, castigated for inattentiveness. But in all such cases, with their overt and displayed addressee-constructions, the narratee position is less than a proper part of the framework of the telling and is rather an integral device in narrational strategy. Almost invariably, the narratee is addressed by an intradiegetic narrator, i.e., not the narrator of the narrative in our foundational sense (the source or agent for everything that gets told) or, in Bal’s words (1985: 120): “that agent which utters the linguistic signs that constitute the text.”

The ‘implied reader’ is another reader-based construct, like the implied author: it is a picture, based on the text in its totality, of the kind of reader or archetypal reader that real readers assume that the text has or had in mind as its audience. Inferencing and stereotyping is involved in positing any text’s implied reader. It usually seems easier to sketch the implied reader for narratives that are themselves rather generic and formulaic; it is harder to say who is, or is not, the implied reader of any particular literary masterpieces.

The notion of the implied reader, and its implication that certain readers are directly addressed or interpellated whereas others are not, is always likely to provoke contention and controversy. But the ascription of a particular kind of implied reader to particular kinds of texts certainly happens, and to that extent this secondary role or notion is valuable. Rightly or wrongly, in the face of a certain kind of writing (which appears to treat one gender or ethnic group or nationality or class or professional or technical group, etc., as insiders) we assume that the author had a particular kind of reader in mind. Nevertheless, actual readers and audiences can assimilate stories in quite unpredicted ways, seeing a different point to them and picturing quite dissimilar authors of them.

Relations between Story and Narration

Among the more significant of these is the time relation between postulated events and their narration. The commonsense norm for written narratives, perhaps reflected in the use of past tense, is for events to precede their narration: by anything from just a few minutes to many years. But we can also get ‘anterior narration,’ a telling of what, it is asserted, will happen. A third type of narration, simultaneous with the action, reports events as if they were currently taking place (in the present tense). Of course, the simultaneity is notional rather than real, creating the effect of minimal story-to-narration distance: such narration is akin to news film, in which we see things as if they were just happening, even if the film is broadcast many hours after the incidents have taken place. Intriguing subsidiary effects also seem to derive from use of simple present tense in literary narration, reflective of that tense’s commonest uses: particularly, a sense of habituality and even of the quasigeneric in some of the events and states reported. Simultaneous present-tense narration is popular with many contemporary novelists (Updike, Bradbury, Coetzee, Gordimer, and many more).

Framing or embedding relations are also important – for example, the coordinate chaining of several stories within a single text or the embedding of one story (told by a character, for example) within another (about that character). In Genette’s terms, the latter case is one of a main story (the diegetic level) narrated by an extradiegetic narrator and an embedded story (the hypodiegetic level) with an intradiegetic narrator. Hypodiegetic narratives commonly serve to advance the action of the first narrative, to explain the background of the first narrative (analepsis is often involved here), or, through similarity of theme with that of the first narrative, to enhance that theme by implicit comparison.

A Typology of Narrators

Literary criticism uses a number of well-established terms for distinguishing kinds of narrator and, by extension, kinds of narration, and many of them continue to be used by linguists. The terms often appear to constitute binary alternatives: third-person vs. first-person narration; within third-person narration, omniscient vs. limited narration; and, within omniscient narration, intrusive vs. impersonal narration. Although invaluable, these terms are far from uncontroversial, and they also direct attention to the narrator, whereas the schemes to be introduced next focus more directly on the narration (and derive tentative characterizations of narrators therefrom). These latter schemes are thus more text linguistic and less psychological in orientation, and thus more suited to a linguistic study of narrative.

Following Genette, first distinctions are made between narratives where the narrator figures within the world of the story they tell (intradiegetic), or is outside it (extradiegetic); and where she or he is an involved story participant (homodiegetic) or a peripheral reporter (heterodiegetic). More linguistically complex are gradations in the narrator’s prominence within the telling. The kinds of textual material listed following are indicative – in order of increasing intrusiveness – of narratorial presence and of claims of increasingly full knowledge and understanding of whatever story is articulated:

a. Descriptions of settings
b. Identification of characters
c. Temporal summaries
d. Definition of characters
e. Reports of what characters did not think or say
f. Commentary: interpretation, judgment, and generalization

There are also degrees of intrusion and understanding within any of these stages; for example, descriptions of the same setting may range from the vague and superficial to the precise and detailed. Such a scheme is one way of attempting to measure narratorial control or power or more precisely the effects and illusion of control (or ‘mastery’ and management) that a particular style of narration conveys to the reader. But it is not just a matter of control – as in a sense the reader knows that the author controls everything anyway. It is perhaps more the effect of the narrator displaying their foreknowledge of what they know will transpire, the final nature of the characters, etc.; some narratives do not advertise or display their possession of this foreknowledge.

An alternative and equally effective typology of narrators is of the kind suggested by Uspensky (1973), whose approach is congruent in many respects with the early 20th-century Jamesian poetics of Lubbock. Fowler (1986) is a convenient exposition of this typology, in which there are just four basic types of narration, grouped into pairs on the basis of whether the narration is internal and intrusive or rather external and limited.

Internal narration is, then, narration from a point of view within a character’s consciousness, manifesting his or her feelings about and evaluation of the events and characters of the story (which I shall call type A); or from the point of view of someone who is not a participating character but who has knowledge of the feelings of the characters – the called ‘omniscient’ author (type B). ‘External’ point of view relates the events, and describes the characters, from a position outside of any of the protagonists’ consciousnesses, with no privileged access to their private feelings and opinions (type C), and in some cases actually stressing the limitations of authorial knowledge, the inaccessibility of the characters’ ideologies (type D) (Fowler, 1986: 135).

In recent years, as an interesting revision of the Fowler/Uspensky scheme, which yields nine distinct narrative modes, Simpson (1993) has proposed a typology that merges two three-way distinctions. The first of these is between first-person, third-person narratorial and third-person reflector (or ‘limited’ to one character, as in Jamesian novels) types of narration; as these are familiar distinctions no more need be said about them here. The second three-way distinction is between narration that is positive and ‘engaged’ in modality (especially that expressing wishes, desires, and obligations) and in evaluation (including epithets and generic sentences); narration that is negative and ‘dissociated’ in modality (especially that expressing epistemic uncertainty, and assertions qualified by perceptual language: what seemed, appeared to be the case, etc.) and in evaluation; and narration, which is neither of these, but neutral, ‘objective,’ largely confined to the observable facts. This last, neutral mode is suited to physical description rather than psychological development (as in Camus and Hemingway). Each of the voices (first-person, third-person narratorial, etc.) can adopt any of the three stances (positive, negative, neutral), giving rise to nine notional distinct modes of narration. In practice, actual narratives can modulate frequently and subtly between these modes, especially among the three posited stances (and of course the more numerous the postulated types, the more noticeable such modulation becomes).

In Simpson’s scheme as in Fowler’s, a major emphasis is on identifying the linguistic markers of these distinct narratorial stances toward the material that is being reported. But in both these schemes it could also be suggested that so much bearing on ‘point of view’ is addressed that the phenomenon known as focalization, to be described in the following section, really has no scope for fully independent existence.

**Focalization**

In the process of telling a narrative, and the concomitant specifications of time and place, some perspective or other is always implied as the vantage point from which spatiotemporally determinate events are related. This inescapable adoption of a (limited) perspective in narrative, a viewpoint from which things are seen, felt, understood, and assessed is now (following Genette, and Bal) widely referred to as ‘focalization.’ Focalization is least problematically a matter of visual perception (cf. the Anglo-American counterpart critical term: point of view). But in a more liberal interpretation it concerns all aspects of narrative orientation, including the cognitive, emotive, and ideological.

Unlike the older notion of point of view, the term focalization may help to keep analytically distinct two major aspects of narrative practice:

a. The orientation from which what gets told is told
b. The individual who seems to be the source for whatever words are used in the telling

These two aspects may be summarized in the question, ‘From whose perspective do we “perceive”?’ and ‘Whose words do we “hear”?’ In many narratives, perspective and speaking are sourced in a single individual. But speaking/thinking and seeing need not come from the same agent. There are numerous
cases where a narrator ‘undertake[s] to tell what another person sees or has seen’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 72). In the early chapters of Great Expectations, for example, the narrator is Pip the adult, with an adult’s extended vocabulary, whereas the focalizer is Pip the child. A corollary of the notion of focalizer or agent-of-the-focalization is that there must also be someone or something that is the object of the process: this entity is termed the ‘focalized.’

Focalization may be external or internal. External focalization occurs where the focalization is from an orientation outside the story and is not associatable with that of any character within the text: in such cases the narrator/focalizer distinction tends to collapse. Internal focalization usually takes place inside the setting of the events and almost always involves a character–focalizer, though some unpersonified stance could be adopted. In Faulkner’s ‘Barn Burning,’ the boy Sartoris is often the focalizer, because the story is told largely from his orientation, though he is not directly responsible for the words used, as this extract from the opening indicates:

The Store in which the Justice of the Peace’s Court was sitting smelled of cheese (1). The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish . . . (2). He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father’s enemy stood, but he could hear them (3).

Here, sentence (2) expresses exclusively the boy’s orientation, whereas (1) is less specific, what anyone inside the store would perceive; and (3) mixes the boy’s focalization (‘he could hear’) with information about the relative positions of the Justice and his father and the table, which we are explicitly told the boy could not see.

Like the two types of focalizers, there are also two types of focalized, where the distinction is between viewing from outside or from within.

The great interest in focalization lies in its function of revealing both the focalized and the focalizer. Here, too, one can distinguish between focalized that readers accept exist in the world of the narrative and those taken to be dreams, fantasies, or other figments of the character–focalizer’s imagination. Some narratives productively exploit the reader’s uncertainty as to whether what is focalized is actual – and potentially public experience – or imagined and hence an index of psychosis (a celebrated example is James’s The Turn of the Screw).

A final facet of focalization–variation is the ideological. It could be said that all text containing either explicit or implicit evaluation of the major categories or classifications that inform our daily lives and/or evaluation of known individuals or groups or positions that are regarded as ideological is disclosing significant ideological orientations or focalizations. Often, it seems, one ideology or worldview, of an external narrator–focalizer, is the dominating norm, and any characters’ ideologies that deviate from this standard are at least implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) censored. On the other hand, there may be a juxtaposition of different ideological orientations without any overt adjudication between them, so that the reader is torn between different views of certain events in particular and (by extension) the world in general (on this rich topic, see Bakhtin, 1981; see also Dialogism, Bakhtinian).

Unreliable Narration

A narrator may willfully or unwittingly distort, mislead, or suppress important information. The interest is primarily in the reliability or otherwise of intradiegetic narrators, i.e., narrators visible – if only by way of the first-person pronoun – within the narrative. Unreliability constitutes another text-processing burden for the reader; and the linguistic interest is in specifying the chief text–linguistic patterns or indices of unreliability and of levels of unreliability. But it remains true that narratorial unreliability is not always traceable to textual cues – particularly where the unreliability is in essence a simple silence or secrecy on certain issues.

Unreliability takes many forms, though the general principle is that unreliability is attributable to any narrator the veracity of whose account the reader comes to suspect. Some narrators are liars or consciously flatter themselves and are clearly intended to be seen as attempting to deceive. Other narrators mislead for less culpable reasons: e.g., the limited knowledge of a young narrator, or one with limited mental capacity like Benjy in The Sound and the Fury. Personal involvement with events – especially when the narrator is a direct or indirect victim of those events – may often give rise to narratorial suppression, distortion, prevarication, and so on (as one example, consider Rosa’s account of events in Absalom! Absalom!). Abnormal values may give rise to a type of unreliability that makes it difficult to decide whether we have a normal narrator telling terrible things with much covert irony, or simply an awful narrator. The great attraction and danger of unreliable narration is, as Booth (1961) rather regrets, that no clear moral or ideological stance is spelt out and held
to, and we as readers are not told what to think. But a fully articulated theory of what unreliability consists in, and of the grounds for attributing it to one narrator but not another, remains elusive and contentious. For important recent discussions of the topic, which also usefully challenge us to rethink what we mean by reliable narration, see Yacobi (1981), Wall (1994), Nünning (1999), and Fludernik (1999).

**Psycholinguistic and Cognitive Studies of Narrative**

Much psycholinguistic research has been undertaken into the question of whether humans develop mental frameworks specifying the standardly accepted linear and hierarchical structuring of stories, which frameworks they can then use as an aid in the comprehension, storage, and recall of actual stories (see especially Mandler, 1984). These mental frameworks are termed story schemata, and their probable configuration can be represented on the page as a grammar. Hence researchers in this area are often described as story grammarians.

New applications of story grammar theory continue to be proposed. The primary foci of attention remain story recall and comprehension in normal and cognitively impaired adults and children—for example, presenting one group of readers with a story that is slightly scrambled story-grammatically, and noting the effect on readers’ rate and extent of recall when compared with a control group’s performance with an unscrambled (‘grammatical’) version of the story. But besides studies of recall and comprehension, the theory has also been interestingly invoked in identifications of and predictions about defective (‘ungrammatical’) stories.

In recent years, many branches of literary linguistics have taken a ‘cognitive’ turn, including narrative, so that this new approach merits an article of its own (see **Narrative: Cognitive Approaches**). Distinct from the latter are those studies rooted in linguistic pragmatics and philosophy, which attempt to specify the basic types of logical, informational, and evaluative inferences that story processors must use in comprehension. The study of inference making and inference triggering seems likely to grow in importance, not least because it broaches the daunting but essential task of modeling aspects of the interaction between situated discourse and what is sometimes called ‘background knowledge’ but has recently been dubbed ‘implicature’ (Bhaya Nair, 2003).

**See also:** Barthes, Roland (1915–1980); Benveniste, Emile (1902–1976); Dialect Representations in Texts; Dialogism, Bakhtinian; Narrative: Cognitive Approaches; Narratology, Feminist; Propp, Vladimir Iakovlevich (1895–1970); Speech and Thought: Representation of; Structure and Structuralism: Semiotic Approaches; Structure and Structuralism: Semiotic Approaches.

**Bibliography**


Narrative: Sociolinguistic Research

J Smith, University of York, York, UK
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Labov and Waletzky, 1967

In the sociolinguistic quest to ‘tap the vernacular’, one of the richest sources of data comes from narratives of personal experience (Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). As the narrator becomes immersed in the details of the narrative itself, he is “no longer free to monitor his own speech as he normally does in face to face interviews” (Labov, 1972: 355), hence mitigating the ‘Observer’s Paradox’ (Labov, 1970: 32). Thus, this type of data provides a wealth of largely unmonitored speech amenable to analysis of variable lexical, phonetic, and morphosyntactic forms. However, these narratives of ‘ordinary people’ (Labov, 1997: 397) which are commonplace in sociolinguistic data, have a more intrinsic interest: the internal structure of the narrative itself. These funny, tragic, trivial tales may appear to be idiosyncratic to the individual narrator, but despite their disparity vis-à-vis content and style, similarities in linguistic structure and function abound.

In an attempt to uncover the underlying mechanisms at work in the course of telling and retelling narratives of personal experience, Labov and Waletzky (1967: 12) propose an analytical framework which isolates “the invariant structural units which are represented by a variety of superficial forms.” In other words, the deep level structures which map onto surface-level variations. Although this framework is nearly 40 years old, it “continues to dominate the field,” (Macaulay, 2002: 289) alongside more wide-ranging treatments of narrative (e.g., Prince, 1983; Linde, 1993). It has thus remained the bedrock for sociolinguistic narrative analysis over the last few decades.

Fundamental to this framework is (1) the clause as a grammatical unit, and (2) the semantic functions of these clauses. The individual clauses are grouped into sections which have different functions within the story. Labov (1972: 359–360) defines narrative as “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which . . . actually occurred” (see also Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 201). A minimal narrative contains “a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered” (Labov, 1972: 360–361), as in (1) and (2):

1. and I took his nappy off and as I took it off literally he pooped all over the cubicle!
2. and then his mum and dad woke up and Mel punched his dad

(All examples come from a large number of narratives collected at the University of York (Smith et al., 2002–2004) by students enrolled in the course Variationist Narrative Analysis).

These chronologically ordered clauses, or complicating actions (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 32) provide the referential function of the narrative, reporting ‘a next event’ in response to the potential question ‘What happened [then]?’ (Labov, 1997: 402). They provide the backbone of the story and are the ‘most reportable event’ (Labov, 1997: 404): without these, there is no narrative. (The complicating action is often terminated by a result or resolution, “the set of complicating actions that follow the most reportable event” (Labov, 1967: 414).

However, most narratives are not this minimal, and, significantly, one “which serves this [referential] function alone is abnormal: it may be considered an empty or pointless narrative” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 13). In addition to the question ‘What happened next?’, we also want to know ‘What’s the point?’. Labov refers to this as the evaluative function of the narrative.

Evaluation clauses in a narrative contain statements or words that tell the reader what to think