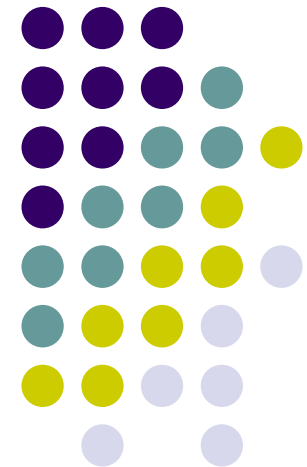


A structural analysis of narratives : William Labov

Lyon, 8 avril 2013

Marie-Agnès Gay, University Lyon 3





Structural invariants, constants
VS.
Surface differences, variables

Vladimir Propp: *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)



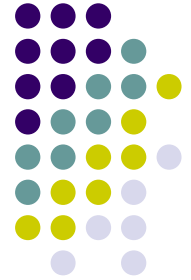
31 “functions”:

1. Absentation
2. Interdiction
3. Violation of interdiction
- ...
30. Punishment (of the villain)
31. Wedding

Simpler pattern:

1. Initial situation
2. Departure
3. Villainy
4. Struggle
5. Villainy nullified
6. Equilibrium

Vladimir Propp: *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)



7 basic character- types

- Villain
- Donor/provider
- Hero
- Dispatcher
- Helper
- Princess (and her father)
- False hero

Julien Greimas: “the actant model” (schéma actantiel)



Sender / Giver → **object** → **receiver/sendee**
(destinateur) (objet) (destinataire)



Helper → **subject** ← **opponent**
(adjuvant) (sujet) (opposant)

William Labov:

- “Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience” (William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, in J. Helms (ed.), *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967)
- “The Transformation of experience in narrative syntax”, in *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.
- Michael Toolan: *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (1988), London and New York: Routledge, 2001.



William Labov:



“A fully-formed oral narrative” follows six stages:

1. **Abstract:** What is the story about?
2. **Orientation:** Who, when where, how?
3. **Complicating action:** Then what happened?
4. **Evaluation:** How or why is this interesting?
5. **Result / Resolution:** What finally happened?
6. **Coda**



“Privacy” < *A Multitude of Sins* (Richard Ford)

- The Decalogue = a filigree to the collection
 - Seventh commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery”
 - Tenth commandment: “Thou shalt not covet your neighbour’s house; Thou shalt not covet your neighbour’s wife...”
 - “Privacy” = inchoate version of the later stories
 - Narrated-I = remains on the brink of adultery
- VS.** narrating-I = full-fledged figure of transgression



1. « Privacy »: in the footsteps of Labov

1. Abstract:

Title = one's right to privacy
marital intimacy
dimension of secrecy

2. Orientation:

- Aspectual modulations
- Habitual modality
- “free clauses“ (VS. “narrative clauses”)

Labov: « free clauses » VS. « narrative clauses »



Narrative clauses

- report an ordered sequence of events
- temporally ordered
- Fixed

John fell in the river, got very cold, and had two large whiskies

John had two large whiskies, fell in the river, and got very cold

VS. Free clauses

- report the context of the events or participants' perspectives
- freely shiftable

[Cf. use of paratactic style in the orientation]



3. Complicating action

- §7
 - singulative discourse
 - cleft structure (salience)

- §9

Multiplication of temporal cohesive markers / connectors

4. Evaluation: §10

5. Resolution: l.125-131

6. Coda

Helmut Bonheim : “In other words, the *and*-sentence is part and parcel of a set of conventions used in story closings.” (*The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story*, Rochester (New York): D.S. Brewer, 1992, p.152)



2. Red-herrings on the way

- **Abstract:**

Breach of Privacy VS. *Privacy*

« Our bed—my wife’s and mine—was in one dark corner where we’d arranged some of the tall, black-canvas scenery drops for our privacy. Though, of course, there was no one for us to need privacy from. » (p.3, l.16-19)

- **Orientation**

→ Deceitful nature of the incipit / rest of orientational information

→ What need for this expositional passage?

- “of course” is repeated twice (§2, l.3 and §.3, l.18)

- “needless to say” (§.5, l.26)



- **Complicating action:**

→ §6

« And so it happened that [...] »

« And so it happened that on many nights that winter [...] I would be awake [...]. And often I would walk [...] »

→ §7

« It was on such a cold night that—through the windows at the back of the flat, windows giving first onto an alley below, then further across a space where a wire factory had been demolished, providing a view of buildings on the street parallel to ours—I saw, inside a long, yellow-lit apartment, the figure of a woman slowly undressing, from all appearances oblivious to the world outside the window glass. »



« It was on such a cold night that — **through** the windows **at** the back of the flat, windows giving first **onto** an alley below, then further **across** a space where a wire factory had been demolished, providing a view of buildings **on** the street parallel to ours — I saw, inside a long, yellow-lit apartment, the figure of a woman slowly undressing, from all appearances oblivious to the world outside the window glass. »



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- **Evaluation (§10)**

« I don't know all that I thought. **Undoubtedly** I was aroused. **Undoubtedly** I was thrilled by the secrecy of watching out of the dark. **Undoubtedly** I loved the very illicitness of it, of my wife sleeping nearby and knowing nothing of what I was doing. It is also possible I even liked the cold as it surrounded me, as complete as the night itself, may even have felt that the sight of the woman—whom I took to be young and lacking caution or discretion—held me somehow, insulated me and made the world stop and be perfectly expressible as two poles connected by my line of vision. **I am sure now** that all of this had to do with my impending failures. »



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- **Resolution**

= Belated complicating action? (top page 7)

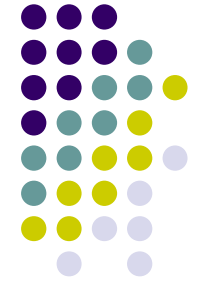
« When I stopped and looked at her she turned and gazed down the steps at me [...] with just the smallest recognition of threat. She was old after all. I might suddenly have felt the urge to harm her, and easily could've. »

« But of course that was not in my thought. »



- **Coda**

“And I walked on then, feeling oddly but in no way surprisingly betrayed, simply passed on down the street toward my room and my own doors, my life entering, as it was at that moment, its first, long cycle of necessity.”



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“And I walked on then, feeling **oddly** but **in no way** **surprisingly betrayed**, **simply** passed on down the street toward my room and my own doors, my life entering, as it was at that moment, its first, long cycle of necessity.”



3. The path of interpretation

Helmut Bonheim: « To grasp the ending of a story as totally open, the reader would have to see it as a blind alley, a useless extension outside the narrative economy [...]. No writer will want to write such an ending, at least, not deliberately [...] The critic who claims to have found a genuinely open ending is in effect confessing his inability to interpret it. » (*The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the short story*, p.157)

3. The path of interpretation



1) An indirect device of characterization

2) Mimetic experience for the reader

3) Self-deception

→ In the diegesis

cf. “the woman—whom I took to be young”

→ In the narrating act itself

Narration as a solipsistic instrument of self-delusion



The self-deceptive narrative process targets 3 levels

1) / marriage

cf. incipit

2) / violence in himself

Cf. Gerald Prince / the “disnarrated”: “terms, phrases and passages that consider what did not or does not take place” (Toolan 2009, 148)

Cf. Nina Nørgaard: “the negatives in fact create what they negate” (Toolan 2009, 148)

3) / sense of overwhelming meaninglessness

Cf. « Abyss » (last short story of the collection)