A5

NARRATIVE STYLISTICS

Narrative discourse provides a way of recapitulating felt experience by matching up patterns of language to a connected series of events. In its most minimal form, a narrative comprises two clauses which are temporally ordered, such that a change in their order will result in a change in the way we interpret the assumed chronology of the narrative events. For example, the two narrative clauses in

(1) John dropped the plates and Janet laughed suddenly

suggest a temporal progression between the two actions described. Indeed, not only do we assume that John’s mishap preceded Janet’s response, but also that it was his mishap that brought about her response. However, reversing the clauses to form ‘Janet laughed suddenly and John dropped the plates’ would invite a different interpretation: that is, that Janet’s laughter not only preceded but actually precipitated John’s misfortune.

Of course, most narratives, whether those of canonical prose fiction or of the spontaneous stories of everyday social interaction, have rather more to offer than just two simple temporally arranged clauses. Narrative requires development, elaboration, embellishment; and it requires a sufficient degree of stylistic flourish to give it an imprint of individuality or personality. Stories narrated without that flourish will often feel flat and dull. On this issue, the sociolinguist William Labov has argued that narratives require certain essential elements of structure which, when absent, render the narrative ‘ill-formed’. He cites the following attested story as an illustration:

(2) well this person had a little too much to drink
   and he attacked me
   and the friend came in
   and she stopped it

   (Labov 1972:360)

This story, which is really only a skeleton of a fully formed narrative, was told by an adult informant who had been asked to recollect an experience where they felt they had been in real danger. True, the story does satisfy the minimum criterion for narrative in that it comprises temporally connected clauses, but it also lacks a number of important elements which are important to the delivery of a successful narrative. A listener might legitimately ask, for instance, about exactly where and when this story took place. And who was involved in the story? That is, who was the ‘person’ who had too much to drink and precisely whose friend was ‘the friend’ who stopped the attack? How, for that matter, did the storyteller come to be in the same place as the antagonist? And is the friend’s act of stopping the assault the final action of the story? Clearly, much is missing from this narrative. As well as lacking sufficient contextualisation, it offers little sense of closure or finality. It also lacks any dramatic or rhetorical embellishment, and so risks attracting a rebuke like ‘so what?’ from an interlocutor. Reading between the lines of Labov’s study, the narrator of (2) seems to have felt some discomfort about the episode narrated and was therefore rather reluctantly lured into telling the story. It may have been this factor which constrained the development of a fully articulated narrative.

There is clearly, then, more to a narrative than just a sequence of basic clauses of the sort evidenced in examples (1) and (2). However, the task of providing a full and rigorous model of narrative discourse has proved somewhat of a challenge for stylisticians. There is much disagreement about how to isolate the various units which combine to form, say, a novel or short story, just as there is about how to explain the interconnections between these narrative units. Moreover, in the broad communicative event that is narrative, narrative structure is only one side of a coin of which narrative comprehension is the other (see further thread 10). Allowing then that a fully comprehensive description is not achievable, the remainder of this introductory unit will establish the core tenets only of a suggested model of narrative structure. It will point out which type of individual stylistic framework is best suited to which particular unit in the narrative model and will also signal whereabouts in this book each of the individual units will be explored and illustrated.

It is common for much work in stylistics and narratology to make a primary distinction between two basic components of narrative: narrative plot and narrative discourse. The term plot is generally understood to refer to the abstract storyline of a narrative; that is, to the sequence of elemental, chronologically ordered events which create the ‘inner core’ of a narrative. Narrative discourse, by contrast, encompasses the manner or means by which that plot is narrated. Narrative discourse, for example, is often characterised by the use of stylistic devices such as flashback, prevision and repetition – all of which serve to disrupt the basic chronology of the narrative’s plot. Thus, narrative
Discourse represents the realised text, the palpable piece of language which is produced by a story-teller in a given interactive context.

The next step involves sorting out the various stylistic elements which make up narrative discourse. To help organise narrative analysis into clearly demarcated areas of study, let us adopt the model shown in Figure A5.1.

Beyond the plot–discourse distinction, the categories towards the right of the diagram constitute six basic units of analysis in narrative description. Although there are substantial areas of overlap between these units, they nonetheless offer a useful set of reference points for pinpointing the specific aspects of narrative which can inform a stylistic analysis. Some further explanation of the units themselves is in order.

The first of the six is **textual medium**. This refers simply to the physical channel of communication through which a story is narrated. Two common narrative media are film and the novel, although various other forms are available such as the ballet, the musical or the strip cartoon. The examples cited thus far in this unit represent another common medium for the transmission of narrative experience: spoken verbal interaction. The concept of textual medium, in tandem with the distinction between plot and discourse, is further explored in B5.

**Sociolinguistic code** expresses through language the historical, cultural and linguistic setting which frames a narrative. It locates the narrative in time and place by drawing upon the forms of language which reflect this sociocultural context. Sociolinguistic code encompasses, amongst other things, the varieties of accent and dialect used in a narrative, whether they be ascribed to the narrator or to characters within the narrative, although the concept also extends to the social and institutional registers of discourse deployed in a story. This particular narrative resource is further explored in C2.

The first of the two characterisation elements, **actions and events**, describes how the development of character precipitates and intersects with the actions and events of a story. It accounts for the ways in which the narrative intermeshes with particular kinds of semantic process, notably those of 'doing', 'thinking' and 'saying', and for the ways in which these processes are attributed to characters and narrators. This category, which approaches narrative within the umbrella concept of 'style as choice', is the main focus of attention across the units in strand 6.

The second category of narrative characterisation, **point of view**, explores the relationship between mode of narration and a character’s or narrator’s ‘point of view’. Mode of narration specifies whether the narrative is relayed in the first person, the third person or even the second person, while point of view stipulates whether the events of story are viewed from the perspective of a particular character or from that of an omniscient narrator, or indeed from some mixture of the two. The way speech and thought processes are represented in narrative is also an important index of point of view, although this stylistic technique has a double function because it relates to actions and events also. Point of view in narrative is examined across strand 7, while speech and thought presentation is explored in strand 8.

**Textual structure** accounts for the way individual narrative units are arranged and organised in a story. A stylistic study of textual structure may focus on large-scale elements of plot or, alternatively, on more localised features of story’s organisation; similarly, the particular analytic models used may address broad-based aspects of narrative coherence or they may examine narrower aspects of narrative

![Figure A5.1 A model of narrative structure](image-url)
cohesion in organisation. Textual structure (as it organises narrative) is the centre of interest across the remainder of this strand (B5, C5, D5).

The term *intertextuality*, the sixth narrative component, is reserved for the technique of ‘allusion’. Narrative fiction, like all writing, does not exist in a social and historical vacuum, and it often echoes other texts and images either as ‘implicit’ intertextuality or as ‘manifest’ intertextuality. In a certain respect, the concept of intertextuality overlaps with the notion of sociolinguistic code in its application to narrative, although the former involves the importing of other, external texts while the latter refers more generally to the variety or varieties of language in and through which a narrative is developed. Both of these constituents feature in units C1 and C2.