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# Grand Principles of Narratology

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**Abstract:** Through an analysis of a number of narratologies three Grand Principles are rendered as the epitome of much effort in narratology. The Principles are: Succession, Transformation and Mediation. The Grand Principles of Narratology correspond to three textual levels with their own characteristics in relation to different narrative concerns. Succession corresponds to a Narrative Syntax, addressing narrative coherence. Transformation corresponds to a level of Narrative Semantics, addressing the significance of correlating properties of textual elements, distributed throughout the narrative. Finally, Mediation corresponds to a level of Narrative Pragmatics, addressing questions of intentionality and relevance. These observations are collected in the 'Narrative Matrix', a model that may function as a guideline for narrative analysis, and as a means to discuss the expressive power of different narratologies. The description is subject to ontological considerations.

**Keywords:** narrative theory, succession, transformation, mediation, semiotics, syntactics, semantics, pragmatics.

## 1. Introduction

One of the long-term goals of narratology is to account for the mechanisms of *all narratives* and *only of narratives*. In this paper, I suggest a framework for narratologies based on a combination of three fundamental principles and three semiotic dimensions. The three fundamental principles of narrative and of narratology are considered as the elementary forces of narrative discourse, of storytelling, of story logic, and of story comprehension. The essential methodological move

in this paper is not only to identify these three constitutive elements, but in addition to apply them to the description of narrativity itself.

## 2. Defining Narrativity

I submit that narrativity can be defined as what takes place in texts where a complex relation consisting of three parts governs the relation between the text and that for which the text stands, between expression and content; and I submit that this insight is the epitome of much effort in narratology.

Firstly, in narration, incidents and objects are not simply stated (that would amount to nothing more than description) they are arranged in sequences. This is the *principle of succession*, which is rooted in our experience of time and change.

Secondly, in narration, sequences are more than episodal accounts (that again would amount to nothing more than description). Sequences are arranged in patterns signifying that some state of mind or some state of affairs undergoes some sort of change. This is the *principle of transformation*, and it is rooted in our perception of unities. Comprehension of unities enables us – among other things – to define beginnings and endings. The notions of time and succession in themselves do not.

Thirdly, narration conveys something other than the content to which the expressions refer. This is the *principle of mediation*, rooted in our desire and ability to communicate about more than our immediate surroundings. Mediation differs from the description of unity and time in that this principle allows us to let the configuration of the unity refer to something outside the world of the text. Words like ‘premise’ and ‘rationale’ points to this principle.

None of the three principles can stand alone as valid explanations for the extremely complicated mechanisms of narrative communication, and none of them can be omitted. Taken together, however, they explain how we utilize narratives to isolate, designate, and mediate. That is: they account for the essential parts of how we make sense of the world through narratives. Seen as a whole, the principles of *succession*, *transformation* and *mediation* allows us describe all and only narratives, and it provides a backbone for describing and evaluating narratologies. By removing any of these, the

construction falls apart, and we are left with something other than a narrative.

### **On Succession**

According to Kant, all things are in time, and in the substratum of time only coexistence or succession can occur (Kant 1934: 212). Coexistence (conjunction) does not constitute a narrative since nothing happens. In coexistence, things simply are, and there is no temporal order. For the sake of the argument, imagine two propositions:

- A) Peter fired his gun.
- B) Paul dropped dead to the floor.

In coexistence 'A and B' equals 'B and A'. That is to say that the interpretation of A has no bearings on the interpretation of B and vice versa. For all we know, the two incidents could occur at different continents (in a Californian sunset and in a Scandinavian daybreak). All we can say is that two things happen at the same time. But if the incidents are placed successively, we get:

- C) Peter fired his gun and Paul dropped dead to the floor, *or*
- D) Paul dropped dead to the floor and Peter fired his gun.

It is possible to maintain that the two incidents in C) as well as in D) are separate occurrences, but it is much more difficult, especially in C). Given a frame containing the propositions that someone fires a gun and that someone dies, we are likely to infer that the first person shot the second. The reason is that we apply inferences with respect to temporality and causality to the text. In the words of Tomashevsky: "We must emphasize that a story requires not only indications of time, but also indication of cause." (Tomashevsky 1965: 66)

We are beings of time, and we are aware of it. This was evident to Kant, and to many others before him, including Leibniz who argued that our reasoning is based on two principles: that of *contradiction* and that of *sufficient reason* (Leibniz 1999: §31-32). Both of these are based on temporality and causality.

To illustrate this and the following principles, please consider this well-known fable by Aesop:

### The Hare and the Tortoise

A HARE one day ridiculed the short feet and slow pace of the Tortoise, who replied, laughing: "Though you be swift as the wind, I will beat you in a race." The Hare, believing her assertion to be simply impossible, assented to the proposal; and they agreed that the Fox should choose the course and fix the goal. On the day appointed for the race the two started together. The Tortoise never for a moment stopped, but went on with a slow but steady pace straight to the end of the course. The Hare, lying down by the wayside, fell fast asleep. At last waking up, and moving as fast as he could, he saw the Tortoise had reached the goal, and was comfortably dozing after her fatigue.

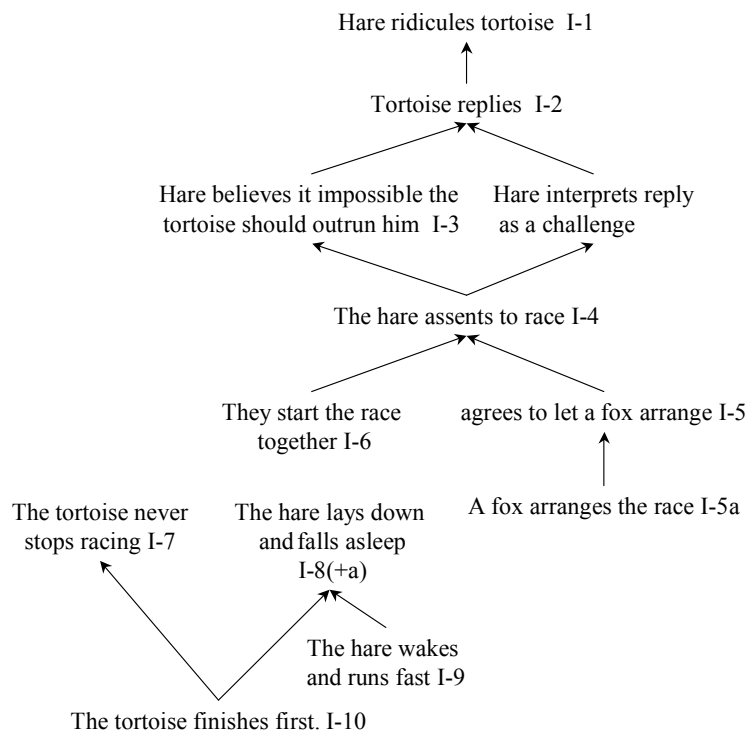
Slow but steady wins the race. (Aesop)

We recognize the principle of succession by which the incidents are arranged. The sequence of the events is fairly clear, and can be rendered as follows:

- I-1. A hare ridicules a tortoise
- I-2. The tortoise replies laughing that she will beat the hare in a race
- I-3. The hare believes that the assertion of the tortoise is impossible
- I-4. The hare assents to the proposal of a race
- I-5. The hare and the tortoise agrees to let a fox arrange the race
  - a. A fox arranges the race
- I-6. They start the race together
- I-7. The tortoise never stops racing
- I-8. The hare lays down at the roadside and
  - a. falls asleep
- I-9. The hare wakes up and
  - a. runs as fast as possible and
  - b. sees that
- I-10. The tortoise has finished the race and is resting.

Here, the incidents are presented in canonical (Ohtsuka and Brewer 1992) or unequivocal order (Herman 2002: 213), meaning that for any two incidents it is possible to ascertain an exact temporal relation. It should be mentioned, however, that the partial order is much more common than the unequivocal order. This is especially true if we consider time as durations rather than as instances. In theories of time and temporal logic the question of time as instants versus time as durations has been a great concern. Under this perspective, it is somewhat surprising that this matter by and large is left uncommented

by narratologists. In fact, Todorov, a firm believer in the principle of succession seems to exclude duration from the constitutive elements of narration (See the quotation in section 3). In the tradition following Genette, (Genette 1980) the term *duration* simply denotes a relation between discourse time and story time. In the present analysis, we shall simply say that events are related by temporality and causality. A graphic representation of the causal relations in the fable may look like this:



**Fig 1** Causal dependencies

Without a doubt, the first grand principle in narratology is that of succession. I am not aware of any narratology that questions this. But true as this may be, the principle of succession *in itself* has some severe limitations. For instance: what exactly do we mean when we infer a causal relation? Certainly, it cannot mean anything like Mill's 'invariable sequence' according to which A is immediately followed

by B and anything similar to A is always immediately followed by something similar to B. This would entail that whenever (this) hare agrees to race a tortoise he will go to sleep during the race. And 'cause' cannot be explained by counterfactual implication, which is to say that if A had not happened, B would not have happened; since this would entail that if the hare had not begun the race, he would not have fallen asleep.

Please note in fig.1 that the chain of dependencies simply breaks once the race begins. The incidents 7-10 are not in any logical sense dependent on elements stated in incidents 1-6. Not even the portrayal of the hare as arrogant (in I-1) is enough to anticipate the strange case of a track-runner that goes to sleep in the middle of a race. Even for small and dense narratives like this, the notion of an unbroken chain of causes and effects does not hold because it does not take into account the phenomenon of *peripeteia*. Moreover, it is important to note that the dependencies are traceable only backwards. A forward counterpart is simply not feasible. On the contrary: from (almost?) any point in the narrative it is possible to envision alternative courses of action, and hence different conclusions. Sometimes, this is exactly the point. See for instance Manfred Jahn's work on 'garden-path narratives' (Jahn 1999).

The principle of succession, granted a primary status, lends itself to another principle of massive importance. This principle is that of transformation, and the reason for the intricate relationship between the two principles resides in the fact that succession is a prerequisite for describing change, and without change there can be no narration.

## **On Transformation**

Aristotle's notions of beginning, middle, and end illustrate this principle and its consequences vividly. In (Aristotle: book 7), Aristotle defines a beginning as:

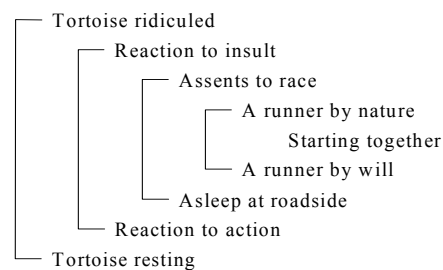
... that which does not itself follow something by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be.

Both parts of this definition points to a temporal order. But the notions of 'beginning' and 'ending' have wider bearings than just that of temporality. Prominent scholars such as Ricoeur and Bruner have enriched our understanding of this matter. Ricoeur, on his part investigated in great detail the relation between time and narrative,

rooting his thinking in the works of Aristotle, Augustine and Heidegger (Ricoeur 1984). In Ricoeur's thinking the matter of time plays an important role not only because sequentiality is a prime factor in constructing narratives, but equally important, because our understanding of narratives is grounded in temporal experience, at the level of reading and at the level of existing. Bruner, on his part, also points to the principle of succession as the first property of narrative. And like Ricoeur, he underlines that sequentiality is established by means of a higher principle. On the nature of narrative, Bruner argues:

“Perhaps its principal property is its inherent sequentiality: a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not, as it were, have a life of their own. Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole – its plot or fabula.” (Bruner 1990: 43)

In the fable, the principle of transformation is recognized by the overall configuration of elements. In the text we find *actions* (characterized by verbs), *situational dependencies* (e.g. that the race is arranged by a notorious runner – a fox), and the *patterns of reaction* (e.g. insult – response). And the elements are tightly connected into a unity, here underlined by the rhetorical trope of a chiasm. The event structure can then be displayed as follows:



**Figur 2** Chiasmic display of events

Even in a narrative as simple as this, we see how the principle of succession generates a coherent structure in which the elements are held together because one situation is transformed into another. Narratologies such as those of (Propp 1968), (Lévi-Strauss 1963), (Greimas 1966) and (Campbell 1993) comes to mind. Later, Todorov made his now famous claim that:



Thus it is incorrect to maintain that the elements are related only by succession; we can say that they are also related by transformation. Here finally, we have the two principles of narrative.

(Todorov 1971)

## On Mediation

But there is more. If we are to account for all and only narratives, these two principles are insufficient. Succession and transformation are essential components of narratives. But they are also fundamental principles of many other texts, including cooking recipes, travel plans, many scientific papers, and user manuals.

In the definition of narrative, I state a third principle: that of mediation. Words like relevance, intention, rationale, and verisimilitude comes to mind here. In the context of narrative communication, none of these can be accounted for by the principles of succession and transformation. If we look at the text itself, and the inner workings of contingencies relating textual elements, the highest level we can rise to is the phenomenon of *reportability* as proposed by Labov (Labov 1972), which means that some incident is of such qualities that it is worth reporting. The first two principles cannot account for the communicative power of narratives, and neither can the third principle be understood independently.

The principle of mediation means that the text refers to something other than the content of the text itself. This principle is frequently hinted at in the narratological literature as a principle in its own rights (McQuillan 2000: xi), as the epistemological condition under which narrative structures are employed (Greimas 1966), or as a pragmatic condition intrinsic to storytelling: “To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances.” (Bruner 1990: 51)

If we think of two texts, say the hare – tortoise fable and a recipe for apple-pie, and than ask a number of questions, the difference between the text types will be clear.

Consider questions such as: 1) What is the text about? 2) What does it tell us? 3) What do we learn from the text? For the apple-pie recipe, the answers to all of those questions are exactly the same: how to make apple-pie. But for the fable, the answers differ greatly. Suppose a group of listeners heard this fable for the first time, and we

than asked them questions 2) and 3); if their answers were simply accounts of the incidents, I would conclude that they had not understood the story at all. That is to say, that the *point* of the story had gone unnoticed. Moreover, I would not be surprised at all if the obtained answers were very much alike; typically something about good qualities in men, good conduct of live etc. But how is that? What is it that makes us ‘tolerate’ speaking animals, and in terms infer that the outcome of their doings has some bearing on our lives? The answer resides in the power of narrative mediation.

The fable can give rise to another perspective on mediation. The fable is quite well known, and can be identified as type 275A in the Stith Thompson catalogue (Thompson 1973). And the central idea (motif) can be found in many variations in different cultures. The Stith Thompson catalogue reports versions from Latvia (275B), Spain (275C), Japan, India, West Africa, and different places in North America as well as from Europe. I would like to draw attention to a version from the Nez Perce tribe of northwestern America, called ‘Turtle Races with Bull’ (Hines 1999: 171). In this variation, which is not included in the Stith Thompson catalogue, the winner gets as his price the right to eat the loser. The stakes are higher, but the two stories are quite similar. The conclusions, however, differ substantially. In the Nez Perce version, the turtles defeat the bull and than devour it, after which the author concludes that: ‘Thus it came to be said that turtle meat is very, very good for eating; it is really Bull’s meat’ (Hines 1999: 173).

The question that now arises is this: How can it be that the same narrative structure can be used to promote a cosmogonic premise – as in the case of the Nez Perce story and an anthropological premise – as in the case of the fable by Aesop? In the words of Ricoeur:

... a narrative conclusion can be neither deduced nor predicted. There is no story unless our attention is held in suspense by a thousand contingencies. Hence we must follow the story to conclusion. So rather than being *predictable*, a conclusion must be *acceptable*

(Ricoeur 1981: 277)

Thus, narrativity is regarded a characteristic of texts that incorporate all three principles as fundamentals. In the following I shall consider how these principles can be integrated in a framework that allows analysis of narrative communication. The means to do that is to consider the American tradition of semiotics as a second constitutive element of the model proposed in section 4.

### 3. Semiotics

If we think of the minimal unit of narrative as a *sign* in the semiotic sense, it becomes possible to consider the aspect of *succession*, *transformation*, and *mediation* from a different perspective. In the tradition of American semiotics, after C.S. Peirce, the notion of a sign is defined as: "... something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." (Peirce 1992: 2.228).

Following this definition, it becomes obvious that the level of analysis is not determined in advance, and that a theory of signs can be a suitable framework for different kinds of analysis. C.W. Morris defined three dimensions of semiotics that have earned him a reputation as one of the founders of semiotics (Nöth 1995: 49). Just like Peirce, Morris believed that semiosis consists of three parts: The relation between signs, the relation between sign and that for which the sign stands, and the relation between the sign and the interpreter. He named these areas: *syntactics*, *semantics*, and *pragmatics*, respectively (Morris 1938: 6-7). The terminology suggested by Morris has prevailed to the present day, except – of course – that his successors readily renamed syntactics as syntax.

The tripartition into syntax, semantics, and pragmatics has been of great influence, especially in the area of linguistics, but in Morris' theory – as in that of Peirce – the notion of a sign is not restricted to the linguistic sign. Thus, by following this tradition, the framework that emerges embraces the transposability of narratives from one media to another.

### 4. The Narrative Matrix

In narrative semiotics the quality of the individual sign depends on the scope and purpose of analysis. That is to say that anything we can justifiably describe as a minimal unit may be considered as a sign that can be studied under the perspectives of *syntactics*, *semantics*, and *pragmatics*. Thus, by *narrative syntax* I denote the study how minimal units of narrative can be combined into meaningful sequences. This area is intrinsically related to the principle of succession. By *narrative semantics* I denote the study of the significance that minimal units obtain from the things that they

(individually or collectively) represent. This area is intrinsically related to the principle of transformation. And by *narrative pragmatics* I denote the study of how collections of minimal units become the bearer of information distinct from the objects that the signs represent. This area is intrinsically related to the principle of mediation. But rather than simply restating the three grand principles of narrative into levels, or dimensions, I shall suggest that these two ways of describing narrativity complement each other. In other words: each principle and each dimension can be seen as having three aspects, defined by each other. This double tripartition can generate a narrative matrix that takes as in-put any minimal unit that we desire to investigate.

	<i>Succession</i>	<i>Transformation</i>	<i>Mediation</i>
<i>Syntactics</i>	X		
<i>Semantics</i>		X	
<i>Pragmatics</i>			X

The narrative Matrix

In the following, we shall consider the two most prominent classes of minimal units: incidents and descriptive elements.

### Incidents

<b>INCIDENT</b>	<i>Succession</i>	<i>Transformation</i>	<i>Mediation</i>
<i>Syntactics</i>	Order	Progression	Relevance
<i>Semantics</i>	Performance	Outcome	Role
<i>Pragmatics</i>	Motivation	Trait	Reason

At the syntactical level we consider the relation between one incident and another incident. It is well described in the literature that incidents are organized by means of *temporality* and *causality* to establish a certain *order* among them. The incidents may be reported in a number of different ways (see below), but nonetheless, the reader of the narrative must be able to place the events relative to each other. This is the principle of *succession* at work. But equally important, the

syntactic level is also what constitutes our sense of *progression* between states of affairs. That is to say that the ordering allows us to talk about one situation in which something is true, as before or after another situation in which something else is true. The reader must also be able to conclude that one situation has been transformed into another situation, and that the characters and other elements of the narrative maintain their identity throughout this transformation. Finally, the syntactic level can be used to fashion an anachrony between story and discourse by not reporting the incidents chronologically but in an alternative order, by means of analepsis, prolepsis, or starting in media res. This is often done to create tension or to enhance attention in the narrative, in which case it is a matter of succession. But it can also be used to demonstrate that, say, a character gradually learns some truth about something, in which case it is a matter of *mediation*, because the ordering pertains to something else than simply the chronology of the related incidents. In this way, the syntactical level has the capacity to mediate matters of *relevance* regarding the order of progression.

At the semantic level, we may benefit from Chatman's distinction between actions and happenings (Chatman 1980). When actions or happenings are linked together in sequences we may identify patterns or action schemata, which allows us to further describe dependencies between actions, and label some of them as 'response', 'reaction', 'answer'; and some of the happenings as 'result', 'consequence', etc. Under one heading we may talk about the *performance* of the characters. When such a sequence is viewed as a transformational scheme, it becomes possible to describe the semantics of the *outcome* of a sequence as, say, a success or a failure. Finally, the semantics of incidents can be used to mediate something that is not actually intrinsic to the incidents themselves or to their outcome, namely to present certain actions as e.g. heroic or pathetic, trustworthy or treacherous, and certain patients of happenings as victims or as fortunate ones. In this way, the semantics extends to the characters *role* in the overall narrative in the capacity of relating the performance to the outcome. The notion of an 'actant' comes to mind here.

The pragmatic level takes us 'behind the scene', and allows us to describe successive events in terms of *motivations* for this or that action. E.g., where a sequence of actions may be semantically summarized as a 'flirt' or as a 'deception', a pragmatic summary may render this as 'desire'. Similarly, a transformational sequence may

render the outcome (from the semantic level) in pragmatic terms as a *trait* of a character, that the semantics of the incident in itself could not vouch for. The pragmatic level also holds the capacity to mediate the premise of the narration or the *reason* for this particular narrative to take place.

### Descriptive elements

Even narratologies that depend strictly on temporal relations between certain actions (such as (Propp 1968), (Dorfman 1969), and (Campbell 1993)) rely heavily on description as well as action. In fact, the notion of an initial state – as well as of other states – compels us to consider description as an intrinsic part of narrative, however briefly it may be presented in the actual discourse. That is to say that not only *actions* (incidents) are subject of temporality, but also *conditions* characterized by the absence of action (pertinent to the overall chain of events) are subject to temporality.

Both of them receive their significance from their place in successively ordered chains of incidents, and both rely on temporality. A state of equilibrium means one thing at the beginning of a tale, but something quite differently at the middle of a story. Todorov remarks:

Description and narrative both presuppose temporality, but the temporality differs in kind. The initial description was situated in time, to be sure, but in an ongoing, continuous time frame, whereas the changes that characterize narrative slice time up into discontinuous units: duration-time as opposed to event-time. Description alone is not enough to constitute a narrative; narrative for its part does not exclude description, however.

(Todorov 1990: 28)

Descriptive elements are identifiable as occupying the semantic relations of manner, characteristic, and attribute.

<b>DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENT</b>	<i>Succession</i>	<i>Transformation</i>	<i>Mediation</i>
<i>Syntactics</i>	Order	Progression	Relevance
<i>Semantics</i>	Description	Change	Role
<i>Pragmatics</i>	Motivation	Trait	Reason

If we take as our minimal unit the notion of *descriptive elements*, it is fairly obvious that the three levels for the most parts can be described in the same terms as in the case of the incidents. This is not surprising, considering that descriptive elements alone cannot constitute narration, but that they add to the narrative. Thus, the syntactic and the pragmatic level remains essentially the same, but the construal of the semantic components must obviously be altered since *performance* and *outcome* are unsuitable to account for adjectives and similar constructions. These two aspects I shall name *description* and *change*, respectively.

## 5. Conclusion

By stating three fundamental principles of narratology, and by combining them with three semiotic dimensions, a model – the narrative matrix is generated. The names of the slots in the matrix may be subject of discussion, and depending on the scope and purpose of analysis, different terms may be applied. Nonetheless, many kinds of narrative analysis will employ terms that are subsumed by the categories *event* and *descriptive element*, in which case the suggested names of the slots will still make sense. In fact, the narrative matrix embraces a great number of minimal units, atomic as well as compound. Examples include: themes, events, emotional displays, diegetic shifts, shift in deixis, etc.

Moreover, the model sustained by this double tripartition can be used to evaluate and compare different narratologies, since a given theoretical observation rarely (if at all) makes use of all nine slots in the narrative matrix.

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