Action, Action Description, and Narrative*

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I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that a general theory of action may provide partial insight into the structure of narrative discourse. The intuitive idea behind this investigation is that one of the characteristic properties of narrative discourse is that it contains action descriptions. Such action descriptions are also given in current action theories of several disciplines, for example, philosophy, logic, the social sciences, and linguistics (pragmatics). These theories provide a general, systematic, and explicit characterization of the structure of human acts, as distinct from nonacts, events, or states, of act sequences and interaction and of the conditions for successful action. The first part of this paper will briefly and informally summarize conclusions of recent action theories derived from philosophical logic. I shall focus upon the abstract structure and conditions of acts, neglecting specific psychological, social, historical, moral, economical, or other aspects of human action.

* This paper is a shortened version of my paper "Philosophy of Action and Theory of Narrative," mimeograph, 80 pp. (Univ. of Amsterdam), available from the Department of General Literary Studies, 256 Herengracht (remit $2). Esp. section 5 and the further references have been severely cut.

Having considered the structure of action, I shall move in the second section to some features of its description in natural language, and then attempt to define narratives as special kinds of action descriptions following some specific rules and constraints. It should be pointed out from the outset that the terms "narrative discourse" or "narrative" do not exclusively refer to literary kinds of narrative, such as manifested in short stories, novels, or the like, nor to such narratives as myths, folktales, epics, and so on. For several reasons both structural (their complexity) and functional (their pragmatic conditions), such narratives will be called artificial. Insight into artificial narratives must be based on a thorough analysis of natural narratives as they occur in natural, "everyday" conversation. In this respect our inquiry is intended to be interdisciplinary, namely as a contribution to philosophy, linguistics, and poetics.

As a result of the chosen perspective I confine myself to an analysis of the "action structure" of narratives. This action structure is part of the abstract logical structure of narrative discourse and is commonly called the "plot" of the narrative or story. Relations between the "underlying" action structure and the structure of the sentences of the discourse will be ignored here because the relations between logical (meaning) structures and grammatical "surface" structures are still rather obscure in current linguistics. Although it is usual in recent grammatical research to characterize abstract underlying (meaning) structures in terms of formal languages, such as modal predicate calculi, intensional logics, categorial languages, algebras, graph theory, or topology, our approach will remain informal and focus upon the proper analytic construction of the theory and its empirical foundations. This does not mean that at the moment interesting formalizations of parts of narrative theory could not be given, although it must be admitted that the weaknesses of underlying narrative theories often lead to trivial formal results.

Another aspect which will not directly be discussed in this paper is the decision problem: can we determine for any discourse in natural language whether it is narrative or not, that is, do we have effective methods to distinguish the set of narratives from the set of non-narratives?

At the empirical level it may be asked whether native speakers have intuitions about the narrative properties of a discourse and hence are able to distinguish between narratives and nonnarratives. Although this and similar methodological problems are important, we will simply assume here that native speakers have the ability to produce and understand narrative discourses and to distinguish such discourses from other
types of discourse. In this respect, no sharp distinction will be drawn between, for example, an abstract narrative "competence" and factual narrative "performance," because it is not easy to make a clear distinction between abstract rules and cognitive processes (strategies). Finally, it may be the case that a narrative is identified as such not for syntactic or semantic reasons, but on the basis of pragmatic conditions: the same text may function as a narrative in one context and as another discourse type in another context.

Finally, some brief introductory remarks are in order about narrative research in general, both in poetics and in other disciplines. It is well known that a serious re-orientation in this domain has resulted from "structural analysis," especially of primitive narratives such as myths and folktales, initiated nearly fifty years ago by the Russian formalists (Propp) and taken up ten years ago by structuralists in France (Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, Barthes, Bremond, Todorov, etc.), the U.S.A. (Dundes), Canada (Maranda), and other countries. Although this research was limited to the analysis of action sequences of rather simple stories, the methodological and theoretical advantages with respect to classical "theory of the novel" were considerable: it attempted to distinguish and define relevant categories and to provide an elementary syntax of narrative, both of a general if not universal nature. It has tried, in addition, to make the results of this work more explicit in a number of different ways. First of all, under the influence of generative-transformational theory, structural descriptions were made more explicit by the formulation of sets of generative rules and transformations and their specific mathematical properties. Secondly, such generative narrative "grammars" were related to grammars of natural language, especially so called "text grammars" being able to characterize the general structures of discourse. Without such a connection it would be impossible to relate abstract, underlying narrative structures with the sentential structures of the discourse expressing the narrative,

2 This research is well known by now in literary scholarship and need not extensively be referred to here.

a requirement necessary to be able to test hypotheses about natural language narratives.

At the same time interesting studies of narrative have been started in other disciplines, especially sociology and psychology. Labov and Waletzky showed, in their study of oral versions of personal experience,4 that the simple stories of everyday life are based on rather fixed categories and rules. It is interesting to see that the basic macro-categories found in that study are closely related to those found in the structural analysis of myths and folktales. Other work on stories has been going on for some years in so-called “ethnomethodological” sociology, which is interested in our representations of everyday life, the knowledge of rules and conventions and the strategies of conversation and interaction in general.5 Psychologists, often referring to early work by Bartlett on memory for stories,6 start to extend their interest from words/concepts and sentences to paragraphs and texts: how do we read/hear, understand, process, store, retrieve, summarize, paraphrase, remember, reproduce, recognize such complex structures as discourses, and in what respect are these processes and memory structures different from those for sentences? The characteristic results of such experiments with discourse are that individual sentences are not recalled (at least of a longer discourse, and after some delay), but only a “scheme” or “theme + major comments” representing the most important or relevant information of the text.7 In earlier work I have called this global, overall structure of a discourse its “macro-structure.” Another finding is that memory for narrative discourse is better than memory for descriptive discourse, in which temporal and causal relations are less important. The questions arising here are of central importance: how do we perceive and process (transform) sequences of events and actions and how do we relate them with our discourses about them? Such questions have led to studies about the development of our narrative rules and strategies through analysis of

5 See, e.g., work by Sacks and Schegloff in e.g., Ethnomethodology, ed. R. Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) and the experimental work on the structure of psychiatric interviews.
6 F. C. Bartlett, Remembering (Cambridge, 1932).
children's stories at different ages. This experimental work, finally, is paralleled by more theoretical and formal research on discourse and story understanding in artificial intelligence, attempting to simulate such complex interpretative and organizational processes with computers.

My own experience with the construction of discourse grammars and narrative theories from the different points of view sketched here is that in all cases we need a serious theory of action and action discourse, such as is elaborated, for example, in recent philosophy and logic. In this respect, this study is intended to provide some understanding of the foundations of these various approaches to narrative.

II. The Structure of Action

It is clear that in the present section I can merely give a very fragmentary review of some main results of the huge literature on action. The main idea is to give an explicit, systematic account of the properties of human action, that is, of the fact that, intuitively, people in certain circumstances and with certain purposes do “something.” The basic primitive terms in such an account are intention, person, state or possible world, change, bring about or cause, and purpose. The working definition of an act or action is then roughly as follows:

$$\text{ACT}(x) = \text{def} \quad \text{being in a state } i, \text{ } x \text{ intentionally brings about a state } j \text{ under the purpose } k.$$ 

Now, such a provisional definition is clearly incomplete and needs further elaboration and comment.

First of all, the notions of state and state change require some comment. Roughly, a state may simply be viewed as a set of objects characterized by a certain number of properties and relations. In other words, a state is a possible world taken at some time point, where the notion of “possible world” comes from philosophy and modern

semantics of modal logic. The set of sentences or propositions being true in a particular possible world at some time point is usually called a state description. Little more can be said here about the notions of “state” or “possible world”: we take them as primitives. We shall use the term “state” instead of “possible world” in order to stress that we talk about fragments of worlds, not necessarily about whole worlds. Correspondingly, a state description is a partial, incomplete description of a possible world. A (state) change, then, is a binary relation over states. Intuitively, a change takes place or occurs, if one or more objects are added to or removed from the state or if one or more objects acquire or lose certain properties or mutual relations. Thus, moving my arm, the falling of leaves, and a rise in temperature are state changes. State changes will be called events. Events may be complex, that is, may consist of n states and hence n−1 state changes, where the first state is usually called the initial state and the last the final state. Since a state is characterized by a time point, a state change entails a change in time, that is, an event is temporally (hence linearly) ordered.

As we saw, a state change may occur with a human body or part of a body, like moving a hand. Such a bodily event may bring about (cause) other bodily events or events with other objects. The extremely difficult philosophical notion of cause will here be taken as a primitive binary relation over events. Roughly, we may say that an event Ei causes (directly) an event Ej, if—all other things being equal—Ej would not occur without the previous occurrence of Ei. The usual (everyday) notion of cause is “indirect cause,” that is, a cause relation where an initial event in a causal chain causes intermediary events causing the final event. The event brought about by a causing event will be called a consequence, and the final state of a consequence a result. Now, we could say that a bodily event, possibly causing other events, is an action. However, there are some essential components still lacking. Thus, when somebody moves my body (or part of it) while I am asleep or unconscious, we do not call that an action accomplished by me: I do not do something, but somebody else does. In other words, the bodily event must be brought about by myself. This in general requires that I am conscious and aware of the state of my body and its events. Moreover, it seems useful to qualify as

10 The classical Leibnizian term “possible world” has been reintroduced by Kripke and others in the semantics of modal logic. For an introduction into modal logic, see Hughes and Cresswell, Introduction to Modal Logic (London, 1968). See Poetics, 14/15 (vol. IV, 2–3) for some applications in literature, especially metaphor, and for further references.
actions only those bodily events over which we have control in some situation, that is, those events which we can initiate and terminate when we want. Thus, many biological bodily events, like our heart beating, are in normal circumstances beyond our control, and therefore are not actions. Conversely, we may accomplish actions without being explicitly aware of them, but which are nevertheless actions because we can control, that is, could be aware of them. An organism satisfying at least the properties mentioned above (e.g., consciousness, awareness, control) will be called a (normal) person. Hence only persons can accomplish actions. A person accomplishing an action will be called an agent.

The class of events thus characterized is still too large for our purposes. That is, it contains what we may call doings, whereas actions are, or contain (see below), doings which have further properties. Thus, when I play with a pencil without being aware of it, it may be said that I do something, but we will not say that I accomplish an action in the strict sense. Similarly, I may, by accident, drop my glass, without having the intention to do so, as would be the case when I would throw my glass at someone. In most philosophical treatments of action, this notoriously vague but important notion of intention is used to distinguish actions from nonactions, like doings, bodily movements, or other events. Closely related is the moral and legal notion of responsibility. That is, we are only responsible for those doings (and their consequences) which are within our control and which we intended to bring about (directly or indirectly, i.e., as a part of a sequence of doings intended as a whole). Since a doing is a bodily event, and since events are caused by other events, it has been argued that intentions are mental acts causing our doings. However, this leads to difficulties, because mental acts would in turn require intentions as their cause, and so on ad infinitum. Hence, intentions are more safely characterized as mental states or events, which may of course in turn be caused by other mental events like wishes, wants, desires, hopes. Another problem is that, although at ti I may have the intention to do A at ti + k, this intention hardly can be said to "cause" my doing, for example, because I may "change my mind" in the meantime and do something else at ti + k instead (which requires the formation of a different intention at ti + j (j < k) ). Still, let us say that, if "nothing else happens," that is, if no other intentions are formed, an intention will—possibly via a series of mechanical events—result in its corresponding doing or ordered set of doings. Normally, however, the notion of intention is used with a wider scope. If we say that I intend to open the door, we do not normally mean thereby that I (merely)
intend to move my hand in a certain way, but rather that a certain event is caused directly or indirectly by that doing, namely the opening of the door. It is precisely such a complex structure of doings and its caused consequences which is called an action (if intended as a whole): for example, opening a can, a door, a book. Further intricacies will be omitted here.

Another basic feature of rational actions is that of purpose. A purpose is like an intention but places an action within a broader framework of other actions, events, and interactions. I open the door to let somebody in, open a book in order to read, and so on. Thus, a purpose is a mental state (or event/process) exerting functional control over our (intended) actions with respect to their further consequences. We call an action successful if its consequences or results are identical with its intention (weak success) and purpose (strong success). A number of possibilities arise here: although my action may weakly fail (e.g., I do not manage to open the door), it may be strongly successful by chance (e.g., somebody else opens the door at the same time), or conversely: I may be able to accomplish my action, but the “purposed” consequences do not follow.

Although we now have some first features of actions, there are a lot of complications. First of all, we may accomplish an action by not-doing, or rather by the omission of a doing. The intentionality condition also holds here. A further condition is that in most other similar circumstances I would accomplish the omitted action. That is, omitting a doing is an action only if it is somehow normal, expected, or required to do something in such circumstances. Thus, not shooting myself through the head (in normal cases) is not an action by omission, whereas not saving a child from drowning is (under some further conditions: knowledge, abilities, etc.). Further it should be stressed that in both cases of doings and not-doings which are actions the result/consequence need not be an event but also may be a state (in cases of preventions of events or actions), or a nonchange in a series of events or actions (letting something happen), respectively.

In order to preserve the basic "change"—property defining actions, we here might say that we cause a change to take place in a process or series of events which would have taken place (or have continued) if our action had not occurred, or that we cause a change in our usual, normal, or required actions. This account provides a first correction to definition (1), and can be formulated formally in terms of a possible world semantics ("what is true in alternative possible worlds accessible from a particular context of action").

The actions analyzed above have a simple character. Most of the
actions we usually accomplish, however, are compound or complex, that is, should be defined as ordered sequences of actions taking place at the same level (compound) or at different levels (complex), in both cases under the "scope" of a global intention and purpose controlling the local intentions and purposes. Global intentions or macro-intentions will be called plans. Lower level actions are usually auxiliary, that is, their final states are conditions for the successfuless of the higher level actions (e.g., taking my key from my pocket, in order to be able to use it to turn the lock, in order to be able to open the door, in order to be able to enter my apartment, etc.). In similar ways we may characterize interaction and interaction sequences, in which several persons are involved, either as agents (to carry a table together) or as agents and patients (X hits Y). Numerous further conditions have to be satisfied here (mutual knowledge of intentions and purposes) which can not be gone into here.

Agents with different and incompatible or inconsistent purposes are called antagonists, and the agent of auxiliary actions is called a protagonist or helper. We see that the theory provides us with a series of definitions of terms used in the structural analysis of narrative. These definitions are still incomplete and informal but could easily be improved.

Other properties of (inter-)action will not be discussed here, and I now move to action descriptions.

III. Action Descriptions

Whereas "doings" are real, extensional objects, actions are intensional objects, to be identified by our interpretations and descriptions of doings. By moving a pen over a piece of paper, I may accomplish the action of giving my signature, and thereby accomplish the action of signing a contract, thereby buying a house, thereby making my family happy (as a consequence), and so forth. Hence, the same doing may be assigned to different actions in different situations or from different points of view (which makes actions essentially subjective—although there are rules and conventions making them at least inter-subjective in most normal cases).

Since our actions are usually identified by interpretations and descriptions, it is useful to study action languages in which such action descriptions can be given. An action description will be defined as a set of action sentences, and, under further constraints (e.g., of coherence) as an action discourse. An action sentence (or action proposition) is a sentence with at least one action-predicate and one person-argument.
According to the criteria of the previous section, the following sentences are clearly not action sentences:

(2) Roses are red.
(3) Peter is sleeping.

Whereas the following sentences are:

(4) John repaired my watch.
(5) Mary told us to come for dinner.

There are, however, many less clear cases (e.g., "Harry found his briefcase") or cases which, without further context descriptions, are ambiguous ("Peter missed his train"—which he may do on purpose for some specific reason). A simple test to identify action sequences is the impossibility to add the adverb *unintentionally* or the clause "but he/she didn’t want to."

From these few examples, we may conclude that the notion of an "action sentence" is not strictly decidable without the specification of the context or the whole *action discourse*. In action discourses we may be able to interpret or infer that a given action was intentional.

We will assume here that action discourses, first of all, satisfy the general grammatical rules and constraints of texts in general, as specified by the grammar (referential identity, pronouns, etc.). Such a linearly ordered set of sentences is well formed if it has a possible action sequence as its referential value, for example in:

(6) Peter went into the room. He took his raincoat off and threw it onto a chair. He took a book from the table, lighted a cigarette, and sat down to read.

In this example there is a (near) one-one mapping from actions into the discourse. Now, if we take the first sentence and put it at the end, the discourse is ill formed as an action discourse (or in semantic terms: it has no truth value, because there is no possible course of events in which it could be true). The reason of the ill-formedness is that sitting and reading are not actions resulting in consequences or final states which are necessary or sufficient conditions for making entering a room possible. Such constraints can be made explicit in the conditional fragment of an action logic.11

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Discourse (6) is typically a behavior description, that is, it refers only to overt (observable) doings interpreted as actions. Closer to those action descriptions (disregarding style, as in all our examples) which we usually call narratives is the following example:

(7) Peter decided to go into the room. He felt hot and took off his coat. Because he didn’t know where to hang it, he threw it onto a chair. He urged for a cigarette, lit one, and sat down to read, after having dubbed which book to read. The book fascinated him and he felt at ease.

Not only doings, but also intentions and their underlying wants, wishes, and preferences are recorded here. These provide evidence for the reasons why we accomplish certain actions. Since we usually identify a doing as an action only if we know or believe its determining reasons, (7) may be called a full or genuine action discourse. Notice, however, that (7) is not a normal action discourse, because the descriptions of mental events and states are not normally given in third-person descriptions without the deletion of first-person belief sentences (“I thought that . . .”). In literature, as we shall see, such discourses are admissible.

Whereas (6) and (7) are both relatively complete action discourses, the following discourse is action-incomplete:

(8) Peter came in, took a book, and sat down reading without saying a word.

Such a discourse is incomplete because it mentions only part of the actions of the action sequence, in which actions occur which are necessary conditions for the other actions. Still, such action discourses are well formed if the omitted sentences (or propositions) are presupposed or entailed by the other action sentences (reading a book presupposes opening it). Other action sentences may be omitted which refer to actions which are irrelevant for the actions mentioned (e.g., taking off one’s coat). Thus, in natural action discourse there is a rule that we may omit presupposed or irrelevant sentences. A sentence is irrelevant if it refers to a state, event, or action which is neither a cause nor a reason for the other actions of the action sequence. Under that definition the following discourse is a superfluous action description:

(9) It was very hot, although already 6 p.m. As I came into the room with the refreshing air-conditioning, I felt like diving into a swimming pool. I took my sticky shirt off, and lay down onto the bed.

Still, the various mental and feeling descriptions may be interpreted
as indirectly relevant for the interpretation of certain actions (feeling hot, for taking off one's shirt) and may therefore be termed preparatory conditions. In many literary examples, however, there are sentences which are, strictly speaking, action-superfluous (although of course they may have other functions):

(10) "It was a grey, wintry day, with saddened, dark green fields in an atmosphere blackened by the smoke of foundries not far off. She went. . . ."

D. H. Lawrence

In such cases the action description becomes a relatively full world description, providing also a characterization of the setting of the actions involved.

Now, in literary action descriptions, there may be a tendency that both the (mental) preparatory descriptions and the setting descriptions dominate the proper action description. Similarly, we may have action descriptions satisfied only in some alternative possible world (e.g., of our dreams, imagination, wishes): "He would write her a letter, and then. . . ." All such cases may be called seminarratives. Other seminarratives are event descriptions in which human beings are involved (e.g., as patients), such as in most accident descriptions in the newspaper.

We now have several types of action description according to the presence of certain additional categories:

(11) ACTION [INTENTION/PURPOSE] [MENTAL STATE/EMOTION] [CIRCUMSTANCES],

where the bracketed categories are optional.

Further, the description itself may have different modes. Thus it is complete if each action (state, event) of the course of events corresponds to at least one proposition of the discourse, whereas a description is relevant if each proposition refers to an action (event, state) conditional in the course of action. We shall call an action discourse strictly relevant if its sentences refer only to actions which are necessary conditions for other actions. Since normal action sequences are hardly ever strictly effective, most strictly relevant action descriptions are incomplete.

These analytical distinctions may finally be completed by a quantitative characterization, calculating ratios of action-, state-, or event-sentences relative to each other or the total number of sentences. Similarly, we may calculate the density of an action discourse (or part
of it) by providing measures for the distribution of action sentences in the discourse.

IV. The Structure and Function of Natural Narrative

We will assume that every narrative is an action discourse, but not conversely. Hence, we need some further constraints on action discourses in order to account for our usual intuitions about narratives. For several reasons a distinction will be made between two types of narrative: natural narrative and artificial narrative, a distinction which of course recalls the distinction between artificial and natural languages. Natural narratives are those narratives which occur in our normal, everyday conversation, in which we tell each other our personal experiences. Artificial narratives, much like artificial languages, have a "constructed" nature and occur in specific "story-telling" contexts. This distinction is admittedly vague, and more precise pragmatic conditions must therefore be given.

Whether "narration" is a specific speech act is a question which we will not try to answer in this paper (see Searle, in this issue). Its pragmatic conditions, in first analysis, are similar to those of an assertion: a speaker knows that p (where p stands for a proposition or a set of propositions), assumes that the hearer doesn't know that p, wants the hearer to know that p, assumes that the hearer does not want not to know that p, and wants the hearer to know that he (the speaker) knows that p, and so on. Such conditions hold for natural narratives, but not necessarily for artificial narratives. We may add a certain number of conversational principles, borrowed from Grice, in the following form: speaker assumes that p is true, that p (or rather telling p) is relevant with respect to the conversation or the (speech) interaction sequence, that p is complete relative to the hearer's knowledge, and that p is strictly relevant, in the sense defined above. In specific contexts, these principles may be violated (e.g., when the

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12 Some of Searle's arguments are not convincing. Narratives, first of all, may have indicators which may signify a specific speech act ("narrating"), and, secondly, most utterances may function as different speech acts without having specific indicators. Distinctions between speech acts are to be defined in contextual terms only. Finally, even "quasi-speech acts" are speech acts. The differences involved are not pragmatic but semantic in Searle's paper. For some other pragmatic remarks on narrative, see S.-Y. Kuroda, "Reflections on the Foundations of Narrative Theory, from a Linguistic Point of View," mimeograph (Univ. of California, San Diego, 1973).

speaker has particular purposes). The conditions and principles mentioned will not be made explicit here.  

Like any act, the act of telling a story (narrating) has certain conventional purposes. Whereas the immediate purpose is to bring about a change in the knowledge set of the hearer, there may be a number of indirect pragmatic purposes: for example, S (the speaker) assumes that H (the hearer) will do something similar to what S has done on a similar occasion and by telling wants H to know the proper conditions and consequences of such acts (advisory purpose); similarly, S wants to get H to do something similar to what he (S) did before—as expressed in his story (incitative purpose), or S wants H to know that S will act as he did as expressed in his story (announcement or warning purpose), and the like. Since in such cases the narrative functions as a sort of model of experience, based on an analogy principle, it is apparent that natural narratives have a practical function. In addition, a narrative may have what we may call an emotional function if, for example, the speaker expects praise, admiration, or in general positive attention by the fact that either his own actions (as told) were morally positive, or remarkable (see below for this condition), or that the events told are remarkable, or that the story itself is told in a remarkable manner. This last (still vague) condition is very specific for some types of artificial narrative. The further psychological or social consequences or reasons for these purposes (the speaker wants the hearer to like him, his actions, or his story) cannot be gone into here. 

One of the pragmatic conditions of narrative needs some further comment here, namely remarkableness. This notion, which of course is relative (with respect to a given context, i.e., speaker, hearer and their knowledge, beliefs, experiences, etc.) is closely related to the notion of interest. We shall call a narrative remarkable or interesting if the following conditions are satisfied (disjointly):

(i) the actions performed (in the possible world at which the narrative is true—a condition which will be left out below for reasons of simplicity) are difficult;

(ii) the initial situation of an action sequence is a predicament, i.e., the agent has no obvious choice which course of action to take in order to change the state which is inconsistent with his wishes;

(iii) in the course of a normal sequence of events there appear unexpected events, which may cause the agent to change his purposes in order to avoid a predicament;

(iv) one of the states or events (e.g., certain objects or properties) are unusual or strange for the agent.

These, pretty vague, conditions implicitly refer to the set of beliefs of the agent (e.g., the speaker) and of the hearer, and are based on a normality principle. The definition of a "normal course of events" is again framed in terms of a possible world semantics: a course of events is normal if it occurs in most alternative worlds (seen from the given context) compatible with the actual world (defined by a set of laws, conventions, rules, and probabilities). In other terms: a remarkable event is an exception to usual states or events. Since unusual events are relatively unexpected, narratives have high subjective entropy, speaking in information-theoretical terms. Finally, as a last pragmatic condition, it should be remarked that narratives may not be told in any situation or to any hearer. In some contexts their indirect functions (e.g., advisory), as mentioned above, are prohibited and the corresponding direct speech acts are required. Further, it is clear that attention, interest, praise, and so on, may be expected only from those interlocutors which we know relatively well.

In order for the hearer to be able to infer that the communicative act as intended is "narrative," the discourse may have a number of structural properties indicating the specific narrative functions. First of all, such indices are given in introductory or preparatory formulae (well known also in artificial narrative, e.g., epics): Guess what, Now, listen, and so forth. Secondly, the story told must satisfy the pragmatic conditions spelled out above. Thus, coming home and relating the precise usual course of events in the office (known by the hearer) is not a narrative, but perhaps a description for a police report (but then again only if an unusual event happened):

(12) Today the boss came to me in my office and said he liked the weather. My secretary typed my letters, and at eleven I had some coffee from the cafeteria. . . .

Slightly more complex are discourses which, as such, relate a course of events which is "new" (and therefore would be susceptible to appear in the newspaper), but which in similar contexts is not at all unexpected or unusual:

(13) The secretary general today had a conversation with our prime minister, who promised that our government would not neglect her international commitments. . . .
Such discourses, functioning as assertions, do not affect the behavior or evaluations (about the speaker) of the hearer, and therefore do not satisfy the pragmatic conditions of narratives. The same is true for those narratives relating patently impossible events or actions I cannot possibly have accomplished. Similarly, I will rarely tell a story about my actions which are morally very negative. Typically, such stories are not natural in daily conversation but occur in psychiatric interviews.

Although natural narratives in principle must be true, they do not directly connect with the previous discourse in a course of conversation. In this respect narratives are fairly independent of the story-telling context, essentially referring to past states of affairs. Still, there may be an immediate contextual clue leading to the narration, for example, such that a given topic prompts the recall of a specific "narratable" event.

Given the relative semantic independency of narratives with respect to the actual discourse or context, each narrative has to begin with an exposition in which time, place, conditions, previous events, and especially the main agents are introduced, identified, and specified (if the hearer does not know them). Thus we will not normally be able to begin a story as follows:

(14) The man told me he would kill me if I did not give him the money. But then suddenly the girl appeared behind him and slugged him over the head with her bag. . . .

Natural narratives must be relatively complete but also strictly relevant. Thus, telling about a bank robbery to our friends we do not usually give a precise description of the clothes or the car of the robber, information which we would rather give the police if a description is required.

Another structural feature of natural narratives and of "narratives" (news) in the paper, is the occurrence of a short abstract of the main events, functioning as an introductory in order to arouse the interest of the hearer: "Hi John, you know, yesterday our bank was robbed. . . ." Such introductions, however, do not structurally belong to the narrative itself (e.g., to its exposition) but to its pragmatic announcement; these also occur in other speech acts ("I’ll give you a good advice"). Such preparatory abstracts also have an important cognitive function: they facilitate the correct interpretation of the following discourse. The structure of the exposition of the narrative itself may be rather loose, but in general time and place specifications precede the introduction of the agents, which of course in turn must precede
the specification of ongoing events or actions in which the agents are involved.

Following the suggestions made by Labov and Waletsky, the global narrative structure is next characterized by what may be called the *complication*. According to our earlier conditions, a complication must be an event or series of events which are unexpected, dangerous, or in general unusual. This change (in the initial state, as specified by the exposition) may occur in ongoing activities of the agent, the external circumstances (e.g., the weather), followed by a specific change in the emotional or mental states of the agent (e.g., anger, fright). The surface markers of this category are a set of adverbs or adverbial phrases such as: *suddenly, unexpectedly, but then, at a given moment.* The use of such adverbs prohibits the description of those actions which require extensive planning and which therefore can hardly occur suddenly: **“Suddenly, he wrote a book,”** **“Suddenly, Nixon was impeached,”** and so on. Typically, verbs of momentary actions or events, like *falling, exploding, hitting, beginning*, occur after *suddenly*. Other languages, like French and Russian, have specific aspectual forms of the verb to express the sudden breach in a continuous series of events or in a state (*passé défini*), a phenomenon which has had ample attention in the classical literature on narrative. The condition that the action or event told about in the complication has a sudden character may be a necessary condition, but is certainly not sufficient. Thus, the following sentences would not usually qualify as complications of a story:

(15) Suddenly, Peter sat himself into a chair.
(16) But then John lighted his pipe.

In most narratives such events are not *spectacular* enough, like in:

(17) Suddenly, a man with a gun ran towards the president.

Very often, spectacular events have *negative* consequences, that is, consequences which are inconsistent with the purposes of the agent, a group, or a system, or with the preservation of those objects which have positive value for them. Complications with a *positive* character are admitted only after an introduction where circumstances are negative or at most neutral (like telling about poor people winning a lot of money, or about the poor boy marrying the princess in classical folk tales and fairy tales).

“What next?” This sort of question would be uttered were the narrator to stop his story after the complication. Hence, there must
be at least one obligatory category following the complication, even if, at the object level, there are many ways out of the complication. In general, the main agent(s) of the narrative is required to counteract the negative events which had led to the unwanted state of affairs. Such counteraction may simply be a forbearance when the agent knows that the negative situation will change itself or be changed by other means. Normally, however, the agent tries to act such that the unwanted state is changed. If his action is successful, the predicament has been solved. The category in question, then, may be called the resolution of the narrative, even if the agent does not succeed in resolving his predicament, and the unwanted state or events subsist. Again, the actions characterizing this category may not be usual, easy, casual, or the like. They must typically be difficult, careful, brave, and so on. In other terms, the actions reported must have a high probability of failure in normal circumstances. In that case, the resolution arouses the required interest or appraisal. The different types of resolution (failure, success by nonaction, i.e., by chance, and by action) may be observed in the following narratives:

(18) Yesterday morning, during the coffee break at the bank, one of the clients suddenly opened his bag, took a gun from it, and shouted at us to put up our hands. Pointing his gun at me, he ordered me to give him the money on my desk. Terrified by the gun, I knew I couldn’t refuse, and gave him the money, upon which the man quickly disappeared. . . .

(19) (idem) . . . The young guy, however, was so scared himself that we could see that he wouldn’t dare shoot. We didn’t move, and the guy ran away.

(20) (idem) . . . I took the money from my desk, but while he took it, I threw my hot coffee in his face and grabbed his gun. With his hands before his face, he stumbled out of the bank and disappeared.

(21) (idem) . . . As I gave him the money, I stumbled and dropped the cup with hot coffee on his hand, so that he dropped his gun on the counter. I grabbed the gun, and the guy ran away.

The narratives in the given examples seem pretty complete and we may therefore define a narrative at this level of description as an ordered triple of an Exposition, a Complication, and a Resolution. These categories do not have a straightforward linguistic or logical character. Each of them dominates ordered sets of state descriptions and action descriptions. Since the categories do not necessarily determine isolated propositions but sequences of propositions, we call them macrocategories. They describe the macrostructure of the nar-
rative. In other words, the categories are the specific macroconstraints on action discourses defining a narrative.

After the three obligatory macrocategories, many narratives may have one or two optional categories, namely an Evaluation or Moral. The Evaluation covers a set of propositions expressing the mental consequences of the reported events or actions on the agent as narrator, saying that he was frightened, happy, and so forth, namely provides the attitude of the narrator. In the Moral, the narrator relates the story with the actual context, by concluding with respect to future courses of action (not) to take in similar circumstances, for example:

(22) I'll never go to that town anymore!

These terminating categories express the pragmatic point of the story. They are conventional at the end of parables ("Go and do likewise") or fables.

The narrative structure specified above is that of simple narratives. Some of the rules involved, however, are recursive. That is, after an initial resolution, new complications may arise, followed by positive or negative resolutions. Similarly, a second-order story may be embedded in one of the categories, such that, for example, its final result is a necessary condition for a first-order resolution. Such narratives are called complex. Just as for other discourses, we may thus give measures for the structural (macro-) complexity of a narrative.

V. The Structure and Function of Artificial Narrative

A large class of narratives are not usually told in everyday contexts but require specific story-telling situations: myths, folktales, short stories, novels, dramas, and the like. These narratives have been called "artificial" because they have a clearly "constructed" nature, and the narrating act is conventionally valued as an "art."

First of all, artificial narratives need not respect a number of pragmatic conditions. Well known is the fact that such narratives need not be true, although they may be true (or true for the narrator or audience of a given culture), that is, their truth condition is optional by reporting about fictitious agents, events, actions, or circumstances. In this perspective there may be degrees of truth in that the agents may be real persons, but not the actions or events reported (as in historical novels), or conversely. In the latter case, we tell about types of actions (which may be exemplified by real actions in the actual world) with
fictitious particulars. Thus, although artificial narratives may be false in the actual world (history), they may be true in an alternative, but compatible, world. Indeed: they are possible historical fragments of the actual world. In other cases (e.g., in science fiction) we have possible futures as the basis for the semantics of the narrative. In fables, the alternative world is physically/biologically incompatible with ours (animals speak), but the action types—independent of the further qualities of the agents—may be similar to those in the actual world. In all these cases the “narrative worlds” must be similar to a certain degree to our own world, in order for the narrative to have a pragmatic function. Hence a novel may thus, indirectly, influence the future behavior of the reader, by showing actions in some similar world or circumstances as those of the reader. All “didactic” types of narrative (fables, parables) are thus indirectly hortatory. Besides this practical function, artificial narratives may have an epistemic or explanatory function, by providing insight into the structure of the world, society, mental structures, existing conventions, rules and laws (as in myths). Nevertheless, we may say that in general the major pragmatic function of artificial narrative is emotional. That is, the speaker/narrator/author wants the hearer to change his evaluation set with respect to the speaker and his properties (especially his narrating abilities).

Since artificial narratives need not be true and are told in specific conventional contexts, they do not have direct connection with the narrating context. They have a fixed (or relatively fixed) structure and are told in monologue without interference of the hearer/audience. It follows that they must be complete in all possible contexts: the hearer cannot in principle have prior knowledge about fictitious agents or events which are introduced in the narrative for the first time.

Another typical property of artificial narratives of some types is the epistemic accessibility of the narrator (which may be a real or fictitious agent or not) to the mental states of the represented persons or to situations which cannot normally be observed. There are various explanations for this feature: the narrator/author wants the reader/hearer to know the internal structure of the persons in order that he can understand their utterances and actions (by knowing motives and reasons). This specific access is of course possible only in “constructed” narratives which are true in “constructed” possible worlds.

The above are examples of pragmatic and semantic (referential) characteristics of artificial narration and narrative. Syntactic features, that is, those pertaining to the structure of the narrative itself, need not be gone into here, because they are well known from classical and
modern literary scholarship. Instead of a full exposition and many examples, I will give a brief summary of the major aspects.

**Syntactic properties**

**Macrostructure:**

(i) The macro-structure may be transformed, i.e., certain categories may be permuted or deleted; thus a literary narrative may begin “in medias res,” i.e., with the complication or the resolution, followed by the exposition; or the exposition is deleted because it can be inferred from the other categories.

(ii) Macrostructural rules may be recursive: especially complication/resolution may be repeated, very often before a final resolution can be given.

**Microstructure:**

(iii) Description of circumstances, agents, objects, etc., is not always strictly relevant and even sometimes heavily redundant, but indirectly relevant if these properties influence the mental state of the agents.

(iv) The narrative may be third person (or second person) instead of first person—as in natural narrative—but may have the semantic properties of first-person narrative as to self-referential description (access to mental states).

(v) Complications may be described as leading to a predicament by the systematic use of adverbs, verbs, nouns, etc., indicating unexpectedness, fright, anger, or other strong emotions.

(vi) Parts of the complication or resolution may be deleted in order to arouse suspense in the reader, which is based on epistemic ignorance about the consequences of actions or events normally leading to strongly negative results (“risky action”).

These are merely a few examples of structural properties which can be accounted for in terms of the categories and terminology introduced above.

**VI. Final Methodological Remarks (the Moral of this Discourse)**

Much of what has been said in this paper is not new. On the contrary: we know much more about the structure of novels and myths than I have indicated. My aim was to try to provide a systematic, theoretical basis for further definition and explication of traditional as well as more recent terms and categories of narrative theory by applying the results of a more general theory, namely that of action
and action discourse. In this respect the present inquiry is in line with much other recent work in linguistics, poetics, and psychology: we already know much about the facts, the point is to account for them systematically and explicitly in a theory, because only a coherent theory provides serious understanding of very complex phenomena.\(^{15}\)

This brief methodological remark has its implications for the academic study of literature in most language departments. Literature is frequently studied with little reference to other systematic disciplines like philosophy (philosophical logic), linguistics, psychology, and the other social sciences. Most serious advances in literary studies, however, are often elaborated in those other, neighboring disciplines. As long as we keep looking at (masses of) individual “works of art” without any theory, hypothesis, problem or method as a leading principle, we may perhaps give some interesting, though surely ad hoc, interpretative remarks, but we will certainly not provide the more general and systematic understanding of literary phenomena. Moreover, this more general and systematic understanding must satisfy the basic principles and criteria of scholarly investigation (explicitness, definition, coherence, testability, etc.), and can be gained only in close collaboration with research in other disciplines. Example: how can we seriously account for what we call “meaning” of literary discourse without at least some knowledge of the vast literature on semantics in philosophy, logic, linguistics, and psychology?

I am afraid that most of our literature programs (including the “general” or “comparative” ones) have very little to do with the aims of present-day academic scholarship and thus cannot really provide insight into literature and its relations with other phenomena (language, communication, art). Our usual intuitive analyses of literary texts are not the results of the inquiry, but they are themselves data for a serious account of how we read, interpret, and process literary discourse. It may be clear from the previous remarks that “methods,” like “New Criticisms,” “nouvelle critique,” and similar later “critical” fashions are still far off from these aims and criteria. It might, therefore, be fruitful to pay at least as much attention (in our universities, of course) to our texts (descriptions, theories, etc.) about literature as we traditionally pay to the literary texts themselves.

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\(^{15}\) In the notes I have referred exclusively to those studies attempting to satisfy these requirements.