

Imperial College London
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MSc Science Communication

The Structure of News Narrative:
Analysis of a News Story
Assignment in Academic Option Module Narrative

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A 'great story' is what many journalists are after. And although the exact definition of what a great story is remains fuzzy, it is my feeling that explicit narrative qualities are an important component. While working in the foreign desk of a daily newspaper I remember well the enjoyment of writing 800-word pieces for the paper's profiles section *Ecce homo*. The results were articles that would readily lend themselves to Proppian narrative analysis. It was a pleasure to discover patterns in a person's life and shape them into the backbone of the article – something I would now call the construction of narrative. I would like to think that they were as much enjoyed by the readers as well.

In this essay I will apply different narrative analysis approaches to an article from the BBC News website that can be labelled as a classic example of 'a great story'. Due to the limits of the essay it is rather theoretical, focusing more on what different structural analysis approaches can tell us about narrative in news than the detailed analysis of agents, space and time etc.

'Dear Blue Peter... I can save lives' by Paula Dear was published on BBC News Magazine website on 27 January. It builds a narrative how Professor Anthony Hollander, a member of the team who recently gave the woman a new windpipe using her own stem cells, sees a correspondence with the BBC children program *Blue Peter* as the defining moment for his career choice (article is attached).

In regard to journalistic genres the piece classifies as a *human interest feature*. This term, connoting the "softness" of the content, has long served as a kind of opposite to "news" or "hard news" (Bird & Dardenne, 1997). Narrative, in the sense of story-telling, is a defining feature of the human interest genre, as is the inverted-pyramid structure for the hard news.

Some authors discussing narrative in news see narrative generally only as story-telling.

„[Narrative] has been out of fashion for journalists ever since the telegraph forced them to turn their stories upside down,“ Fox (2001: 148) writes in his *Writing the News: a Guide for Print Journalists*. “One of the more recent developments in feature writing has been the rediscovery of the narrative as an effective story structure,“ he adds (ibid.). “Strong narratives are built on compelling movement, graphic description, interesting dialogue and the writer’s ability to identify with his or her subject – in short, the tools of the novelist.”

After identifying the article as “story” it is only natural to try to analyze that with the model derived by Vladimir Propp to study the underlying structure of classic fairy tales. His model focuses on characters’ actions, identifying 31 character functions and seven spheres of action.

When applying this scheme to the sequence of events (fabula) described in 'Dear Blue Peter... I can save lives' we can identify a number of character functions:

1. *Abstention*: Anthony is absent from school
3. *Violation*: He and his mother find a fatally injured bird. Death enters
7. *Complicity*: Anthony kills the bird
8. *Lack*: Anthony becomes aware of healing powers of medicine, but he lacks tools
13. *Hero’s reaction*: Anthony writes *Blue Peter*
14. *Receipt of magical agent*: Editor of *Blue Peter* replies, giving confidence

8. *Lack*: Anthony does not get good grades
9. *Mediation*: Anthony cannot study medicine

15. *Guidance*: Anthony studies pharmacology
16. *Struggle*: Anthony does research into helping arthritis sufferers

8. *Villainy*: Tuberculosis (death) threatens a young woman
9. *Mediation*: Anthony is asked to help the woman
16. *Struggle*: Team performs a windpipe transplant
18. *Victory*: Operation helped save the woman

The role of the Hero is activated three times by three different misfortunes (lack of medicine equipment, lack of good grades and death threatening a young woman). The last cycle peaks with victory in the struggle with death and thereby achieving to save a life (gaining Princess). However, many character functions from Propp's list are not explicitly present in our text; from some clues the reader may be able to construct the missing parts (like acknowledgment of the Hero or interpreting stem cells as Donors). The structure remains rather sketchy but still with recognizable key characteristics of a fairy-tale.

Most of Propp's 'spheres of action' (except for False Hero) can be identified in the text:

Hero – Anthony

Villain – Death

Donor – *Blue Peter* (Biddy Baxter)

Helper – Education; science

Princess – Saving lives

Dispatcher – Death of a bird

The plot of the article, however, is not linear as in fairy tales. Rather it begins with the climax (saving a life) and the first elements of the fabula are presented quite near the end.

Anticipation, an important tool in narrative writing according to Fox (2001: 148), is used in the scene of correspondence between young Anthony and *Blue Peter* but not for other scenes.

Propp's model logically peaks when victory is achieved so this could be presumed to be the focus of the narrative. Looking at the story about Professor Hollander, we realize this is not the case here. The Hero is praised and the happy end revealed already in the beginning. This and other aspects indicate that the text is actually centred on the correspondence: this line of action is placed in the beginning of the text and quotes from Prof Hollander identify the action of the Donor as crucial for achieving the final goal. Also, the *Blue Peter* editor Biddy Baxter is the only other active human character in the story, giving leverage to the part of the story with her involvement.

According to Bird and Dardenne (1997: 342) cause-and-effect relationships need to be presented in a logical progression for the "story" to be a narrative. In this article it is done following to the structural conventions of the news genre, not fictional genres. The progression of events (plot), when laid out according to Proppian model might seem to distort logic, effect preceding cause, explanation following the result of the events rather than developing through the story. But with the help of quotes and other journalistic tools, we get a clear idea of the fabula.

Proppian analysis helped us to see that the article indeed has similarities to a fairy tale – an event to set off the quest, overcoming several obstacles and achieving an (almost miraculous) aim. Without doubt this structure is an important component of 'a good story'.

Some additional features to the “storyness” can be revealed with the help of binary oppositions, following the scheme proposed by semiotician Algirdas Greimas. Noting that life and death feature prominently in those oppositions (e.g. professor-saving lives as subject-object, or science-death as helper-opponent), it reveals how the narrative uses fundamental themes that are bound to engage the reader.

The focus on the correspondence part of the fabula is not revealed by Proppian analysis. It requires a different approach, focusing on other structural aspects of the article. For Propp the important thing is what characters do, not what they feel, think they are doing, intend to do, or say they will do (Berger, 1997: 28). Therefore Proppian analysis might help us to explore the structure of an article describing how a scientist became a scientist and made a breakthrough but it will be inadequate in case of an article, say, about discussions how to regulate tissue transplants.

Before we depart from the notion that a news narrative is necessarily story-telling, the use of fiction writing tools and only the matter of human interest stories, we will look at another approach whose underlying assumption is similar.

Bird and Dardenne (1997) attempt to get rid of the hard/soft news distinction, claiming that this has hindered us from seeing news as a unified body that exhibits clear themes and patterns that have little to do with important/interesting splits. But they also suggest ignoring the structural qualities of individual stories, rather considering them “as a body of work that is a continuing story of human activity, and as individual stories that contribute to the continuing one” (Bird & Dardenne, 1997: 335).

They propose to consider news as symbolic system, as myth, through which “members of a culture learn values, definitions of right and wrong” (*ibid.*: 337). By analysing the narrative of news we discover the values and symbols that have meaning in a given culture.

Although proposing to remove the split between hard and soft news, they end up making the same distinction themselves, this time labelling them as “chronicles” and “stories”.

Chronicles, according to them, are pretty much all news of inverted-pyramid structure and their narrative function is to contribute to the overall narrative: be “myth-repairing”. Stories, however, have „narrativity“– they are recognizable as stories. “People respond to and process accurately information presented in story form,” they write (*ibid.*: 343). “The common assumption that readers prefer „human interest“ stories only because the content is more interesting overlooks that these are the same stories that are usually written in traditional story form“ (*ibid.*: 342).

So on the level on an individual news piece they still equate narrative with a story, which some article have and some do not. The Blue Peter article has one, as we have saw. We recognize some established cultural themes (fairy-tales) from the structure; the story conveys underlying messages about power of science and emphasizes the virtue of respect (as shown by Bidy Baxter in response to Anthony’s letter), thereby contributing to the endurance of these cultural myths and norms.

For analysis less focused on the “storyness” and more helpful in establishing the focus of the article, we turn to a narrative analysis approach developed by William Labov and based on analysis of oral narrative (Reah, 1998; Bell, 1991).

He analysed the oral narrative of pre-teenagers, adolescents and adults, identifying patterns that occurred across a range of narratives that his informants used to recount events in their lives. Labov claimed that a fully formed narrative may show the following structure:

1. The Abstract summarizes the central actions and main point of the narrative. A story-teller uses it at the outset to pre-empt the questions, what is this about, why is this story being told?
2. The Orientation sets the scene: the who, when, where, and initial situation or activity of the story.
3. The Complication Action is the central part of the story proper, answering the question, what happened (then)?
4. The Evaluation addresses the question, so what? A directionless sequence of clauses is not a narrative. Narrative has point, and it is narrators' prime intention to justify the value of the story they are telling, to demonstrate why these events are reportable.
5. The Resolution is what finally happened to conclude the sequence of events.
6. Finally, many narratives end with a Coda – 'and that was that.' This wraps up the action, and returns the conversation from the time of the narrative to the present (Bell, 1991: 148).

Of those, only the complicating action and some degree evaluation are obligatory components of the personal narrative. As Bell (1991) shows, the same structure can with some adjustments be applied also to news, only the Coda serves no function in news writing.

Abstract has the same function as the lead; Orientation sums up the basic facts which usually concentrate at the beginning of a story. The function of Evaluation is identical in news and

personal narrative: to establish the significance of what is being told, to focus the events, and to justify claiming the audience's attention;

The lead paragraph is the nucleus of evaluation, because the function of the lead is not merely to summarize the main action. The lead focuses the story in a particular direction. It forms a lens through which the remainder of the story is viewed. This function is even more obvious for the headline, especially when it appears to pick up on a minor point of the story (Bell, 1991: 152). The same section of the news can therefore fulfil several functions at a time (e.g. Abstract includes Orientation and Evaluation).

In contrast to personal narrative, Action in news is seldom told in chronological order.

“Perceived news value overturns temporal sequence and imposes an order completely at odds with the linear narrative point,” Bell writes (*ibid.*: 153). The Resolution in news is often not so clear-cut, when there is one, it is presented in the beginning rather than in the end of the news. But news can also finish in mid-air.

News relate to personal narratives much the same way as fictional texts relate to Propp's fairy-tales: the structure is the same, but one is ordered linearly (chronologically), the structure of the other is more complex.

What oral narrative's structure allows us to see, are the focal points of the narrative. Much the same way as there is nothing accidental in a work of art (Lotman, cited from Berger, 1997: 9), everything in news is also considered to be there for a reason, to be significant information. Yet some information is (for the author) more important than other and the elements of Abstract and Evaluations helps us to see which.

It is this structural analysis that allows us to identify the correspondence as the most important Action and finding of the sick bird as Action with lesser importance. The windpipe transplant that serves in Proppian analysis as climax of the story is here in the function of Evaluation – it is the success of this operation that has given value to the correspondence 35 years prior and that justifies the telling of it.

After the functions have been identified we can proceed with other methods to analyse the key parts of the news story, revealing dominant discourses, narrative techniques, perceived news values etc.

I search of the components of ‘a great story’ different kinds of structural analysis have allowed seeing some of them: “storyness” of the article, an underlying fairy-tale theme, fundamental binary oppositions and the use of a wide-reported event to give value to a piece of narrative.

There is still plenty to analyse in the narrative of the article (i.e. the authorship of the narrative – is it the journalist who wrote the article or Professor Hollander who constructed it) as well as in the structure of the news story but unfortunately I have already overrun my allocated space. I hope to have shown here that while narrative analysis approaches we covered in the lectures can be applied to news stories, the structure of news also calls for another kind of approaches of which the structure proposed by Labov is most fruitful.

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