

# *A Structural Study of Narrative: Two Types of Narrative Transformations*

物語構造の記述：物語変形における二つのタイプ

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文の構造を記述する方法は物語構造の記述にも援用できる。文における主語は物語の登場人物に対応し、文における形容詞は登場人物の属性に対応し、文における動詞は登場人物の行動に対応する。物語は文がいくつかまとまったシーケンスという単位で構成され、均衡状態から不均衡状態またはその逆方向といったシーケンスの変形によって物語は生まれる。

文構造の記述方法を援用した物語構造の記述方法は、昔話や童話といった構造が単純な物語の記述に有用であるだけでなく、20世紀の小説のように複雑なプロットを持つ物語構造の記述にも有用である。

以下の拙論では、物語を構成要素に分解し、シーケンスの二つの変形タイプを中心に、それらの要素が結合されるパターンの記述を試みる。

キーワード

Narrative (物語)    Structure (構造)    Transformation (変形)  
Sequence (シーケンス)    Tzvetan Todorov (ツヴェタン・トドロフ)

## 1

In any academic pursuit, the first step is to identify the object of observation. Here the object of our observation is narrative. We all know what narrative is. But what is it that makes writing a narrative? In other words, how is writing made into a narrative? What are the structures that all narratives and only narratives have in common? Once we know the target of our observation, we have to break down the object of observation into units. In our study of narrative, we have to break narrative down into its basic units. After breaking it down into units, next we must discover the rules and laws by which these units are combined; then we have to be able to describe them.

In this article, I would like to introduce analytical tools for the structural study of narrative

developed by a leading narratologist, Tzvetan Todorov, hoping that the structural study of narrative will give us a clue to the exploration of the grammar of narrative.

## 2

In all narratives there are characters, existents, and events. It is difficult to imagine a story in which nobody or nothing exists and nothing happens. If one can identify a character or an object, animated or inanimate, in a story, this function is called the referential function or denomination.

The two basic functions that language performs are denomination and description. Denomination is used “to identify a spatio-temporal unit, to give it a name” (Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* 110), and description is used “to describe an object, to enumerate its characteristics” (Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* 109). For example, if you name something “pilot,” you have identified something as a “pilot;” that is, X is a pilot. This is denomination. Description is when you describe X as a person whose job is to fly an airplane.

According to the *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*, a proposition is “the basic meaning which a sentence expresses. Propositions consist of (a) something which is named or talked about (known as the argument, or entity) (b) an assertion or predicate which is made about the argument” (297). In other words, a proposition is a verbal unit that consists of a subject and a predicate. In the sentence “He is a pilot,” “He” is a subject, and “is a pilot” is the predicate. Just as a sentence has a subject and a predicate, so does a narrative. Thus, there is a narrative proposition in every story.

## 3

There are two types of propositions. One proposition describes states, that is, X is Y, and the other proposition describes events, that is, X does Y. A narrative proposition has a narrative subject, which is a character, and a narrative predicate, which is a description of a character or an action that a character performs or an event that happens. Quoting Boris Tomashevsky, Todorov makes a distinction between these two types of narrative predicates: “Motifs which change the situation are called dynamic motifs, those which do not change it, static motifs” (*Poetics* 220). The former is a dynamic motif that modifies a situation, describing “a punctual action,” and the latter is a static motif that constitutes the situation, describing “a state which lasts an indefinite time” (*Poetics* 222).

In other words, static motifs supply information about the states of characters or entities in a narrative, and dynamic motifs supply information about their processes.

Following this analogy, we can say that there are narrative “adjectives” and narrative “verbs.” Todorov points out:

...there are two types of episodes in a narrative: those which describe a state (of equilibrium or of disequilibrium) and those which describe the passage from one state to the other. The first type will be relatively static and, one might say, iterative; the same kind of actions can be repeated indefinitely. The second, on the other hand, will be dynamic and in principle occurs only once. (*Poetics* 111)

Narrative adjectives are those predicates “which describe a state (of equilibrium or disequilibrium),” and narrative verbs are “those which describe the passage from one to the other.”

#### 4

Narrative is discourse that consists of narrative units or propositions. For a series of narrative propositions to be a narrative discourse, it must have a superior level, which is a sequence.

A sequence is “a component unit of narrative that is itself capable of functioning as a narrative; a series of situations and events of which the last one in time constitutes a partial repetition or transform of the first one” (Prince 86). A sequence has “different characteristics, according to the type of relation between propositions” (*Poetics* 116). A sequence “provokes an intuitive reaction on the reader’s part, that is, that he is faced with a complete story, an integral anecdote” (*Poetics* 117). For a series of sequences to be a narrative, there must be a passage from one situation to another, a transformation. “For a narrative sequence to be complete, it must contain two distinct propositions in a transformational relation” (Prince 98). What is a transformational relation? According to Todorov, “Two propositions may be said to be in a relation of transformation when one predicate remains identical on both sides” (*Poetics* 224). “A transformation is a relation obtaining between two propositions that have a predicate in common” (Prince 98). Thus, there is a transformation between “He plays the piano” and “He decides to play the piano.” If the two propositions do not have a predicate in common, for example, “He goes to school” and “He plays the piano,” the relation between the two propositions is not a transformation but a succession.

According to Todorov, there are two types of transformation, simple and complex.

Simple transformations “consist in modifying (or adding) a certain operator specifying the predicate. The basic predicates can be considered as being endowed with a zero operator...the case where a verb accompanies the main verb, specifying its sense (‘X begins to work’)” (*Poetics* 225). Todorov enumerates the following six kinds of simple transformations:

1. Transformations of mode. This transformation deals with “the possibility, the impossibility or the necessity of an action by modal verbs such as ought and may, or by one of their substitutes.” An example is “X must commit a crime.”
2. Transformations of intention. This transformation indicates “the intention of the subject of the proposition to perform an action, and not the action itself.” For example, “X plans to commit a crime.”
3. Transformations of result. This transformation “formulates the action as already accomplished.” An example is “X succeeds in committing a crime.”
4. Transformations of manner. This transformation deals with “the manner in which an action occurs.” An example is “X is eager to commit a crime.”
5. Transformations of aspect. This transformation deals with aspects of a verb such as inchoative, progressive, terminative, durative, punctual. For example, “X is beginning to commit a crime.”
6. Transformations of status. This transformation deals with “the replacement of the positive form of a predicate by the negative form or by the contrary form.” For example, “X does not commit a crime.”<sup>1</sup>

## 5

Let us examine these categories identified in the preceding sections by applying them to an actual text, a famous Aesop fable.

A hungry fox tried to reach some clusters of grapes which he saw hanging from a vine trained on a tree, but they were too high. So he went off and comforted himself by saying: “They weren’t ripe anyhow.” (Aesop 5)

In this short story, we can identify four narrative subjects, that is, characters or other entities: a hungry fox, clusters of grapes, a vine, and a tree.

Next we can enumerate narrative predicates as follows (Subjects are in parentheses, and predicates are underlined):

(A hungry fox) tried to reach

(he) saw

(some cluster of grapes) hanging from a vine

(a vine) trained on a tree

(they) were too high

(he) went off

(he) comforted himself

(he) saying

(they) weren't ripe

Among these narrative predicates, we can distinguish between dynamic motifs and static motifs: dynamic motifs include “tried to reach,” “saw,” “went off,” “comforted” and “saying”; “hanging,” “trained,” “were too high” and “weren't ripe” are static motifs.

Before continuing, I would like to introduce one more basic category, plot, by quoting Todorov:

The minimal complete plot consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another. An “ideal” narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical. (*Poetics* 111)

If we use these categories, we can describe this Aesop fable as follows:

There is a fox. He is hungry. This is a static motif and a state of disequilibrium. The hungry fox decides to eat grapes. There is a simple transformation between “The hungry fox eats grapes” and “The hungry fox decides to eat grapes” because these two propositions have the same predicate “eat grapes.” This is a transformation of intention. Thus, this transformation is a sequence because this transformation itself is “a component unit of narrative that is itself capable of functioning as a narrative; a series of situations and events of which the last one in time constitutes a partial repetition or transform of the first one” (Prince 86).

The fox “tried to reach some clusters of grapes.” This is a dynamic motif because the verb describes a punctual action, not an indefinite state. Then the action of a force directed in the opposite direction is exerted to establish an equilibrium. In other words, he tries to resolve the initial disequilibrium by eating the grapes.

But in the end the fox gave up trying to reach the grapes. This is a transformation of status between “The hungry fox eats grapes” and “The hungry fox gave up eating them.” In other

words, he fails to establish equilibrium. Thus, there is a minimal complete plot, which is the passage from one equilibrium to another (in this story, from disequilibrium to another disequilibrium).

If we can break down a story into its various narrative units such as narrative subjects and predicates based on linguistic categories, we will be able to acquire tools through which to explore the universe of narrative.

## 6

In the above sections, we analyzed narrative structures by using linguistic Todorovian categories. In a discussion of the Decameron stories, Todorov makes a further distinction between two types of narrative organizations. Explaining narrative transformations, he summarizes the events in a Decameron story as follows:

A single action is presented three times: first of all, there is Ricciardo's plan for getting Catella into the bath house, then there is Catella's erroneous perception of that scene, when she thinks she is meeting her husband there; finally the true situation is revealed. (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* 31)

In this event there are three narrative propositions. One is "Ricciardo's plan for getting Catella into the bath house"; the second is "Catella's erroneous perception of that scene"; and the third is the revelation of the true situation. Between these narrative propositions, Todorov makes the following distinction:

The relation between the first and third propositions is that of a project to its realization; in the relation between the second and the third, an erroneous perception of an event is opposed to an accurate perception of that same event. (*Genres* 31)

He elaborates on one type of relation:

The first case involved a modification carried out on a basic predicate; the predicate was taken in its positive or negative form, modalized or unmodalized. Here the initial predicate turns out to be accompanied by a secondary predicate, such as "to plan" or "to learn." (*Genres* 31)

Then he defines the two types of narrative organization:

On the one hand we have narratives in which the logic of succession and transformations of the first type are combined; these will be the simpler narratives, as it were, and I should like to use the term *mythological* for this

type of organization. On the other hand, we have the type of narrative in which the logic of succession is supported by the second sort of transformation, narratives in which the event itself is less important than our perception of it, and degree of knowledge we have of it: hence I propose the term *gnoseological* for this second type of narrative organization (it might also be called *epistemical*) (*Genres* 31).

To summarize Todorov's explication, there are two types of narrative. One combines succession and one type of narrative transformation; that is, events happen one after another, and narrative transformations are simple. In other words, events are more important than how they are perceived. In the other type, narrative transformations are complex, and the perception of events is more important than the events themselves. He names the former type mythological and the lattergnoseological or epistemical.

According to Todorov, complex transformations "which produce not a specification of the initial predicate but the adjunction of a derived action upon the first action (*Poetics* 228)." He says:

The second type [transformation] will be that of the complex transformations (or reactions) characterized by the appearance of a second predicate which is grafted on the first and cannot exist independently of it...in the case of complex transformations the presence of two predicates permits the existence of one or two subjects 'X thinks he has killed his mother' is—as is 'Y thinks X has killed his mother'—a complex transformation of the proposition 'X has killed his mother.' (*Poetics* 225)

As with the simple transformations introduced above, Todorov enumerates six complex transformations:

1. Transformations of appearance

"The transformations which I call 'of appearance' indicate The replacement of one predicate by another, this latter being able to pass for the former without actually being it." An example is "X (or Y) pretends that X is committing a crime."

2. Transformations of knowledge

"A type of transformations which in fact describe gaining consciousness of the action denoted by another predicate. Verbs such as observe, learn, guess, know, ignore describe the different phases and modalities of knowledge." An example is "X (or Y) learns that X has committed a crime."

3. Transformations of description

This transformation is “in a complementary relation with the transformations of knowledge; it unites the actions destined to provoke knowledge.” For example, “X (or Y) reports that X has committed a crime.”

4. Transformations of supposition

This transformation deals with prediction. In this transformation “the action designated by the main predicate is located in the future, not in the present or in the past.” An example is “X (or Y) foresees that X will commit a crime.”

5. Transformations of subjectivation

This transformation indicates “the attitude of the subject of the proposition. Transformations of subjectivation refer to actions denoted by such verbs as believe, think, consider. Such a transformation does not really modify the main proposition, but attributes it, as an observation, to some subject.” An example is “X (or Y) thinks that X has committed a crime.”

6. Transformations of attitude

This transformation deals with “descriptions of the state provoked in the subject by the main action in the course of its duration.” For example, “‘X enjoys committing a crime’ or ‘Y is disgusted that X should commit a crime.’”<sup>2</sup>

Such complex narrative transformations are dominant in the second type of narrative. In this type of narrative how the events are perceived is more important than the events themselves. Todorov named this type of narrative “gnoseological or epistemical.”

## 7

Henry James’s story “The Tree of Knowledge” is about a family and their friend, Peter Brench. The family consists of Mr. Mallow, Mrs. Mallow, and their son, Lancelot. Peter is a long-term friend and godfather to their son. Mr. Mallow is a sculptor who believes he has a lot of talent. However, Peter thinks that the pieces Mallow creates are awful and that Mallow is just mediocre, although Peter never makes his opinion explicit.

When Lancelot fails in college, his parents force him to go to Paris to study art. They believe that this is the only career that their son could pursue. Lancelot is determined to learn and is ready for a new experience:

The youth [Lancelot] reasoned that it was a question of time — there was such a mill to go through, such an awful lot to learn. (97)

He says, “‘One has got, to-day,’ he [Lancelot] said, ‘don’t you see? to know’” (97). But Peter does not like the idea. Peter says to Lancelot “Oh, hang it, don’t know!” He insists that “It isn’t knowledge, it’s ignorance that — as we’ve been beautifully told — is bliss” (98). Peter does neither want Lancelot to go to Paris; nor does he want him to acquire knowledge. So Peter offers:

“If you’ll go up again, I’ll pay your way at Cambridge.”

Lance stared, a little rueful in spite of being still more amused. “Oh, Peter! You disapprove so of Paris?”

“Well, I’m afraid of it.” (98)

When Lancelot returns from Paris, he says he understood why Peter was against the idea of his going to Paris. He says “It isn’t so very good to know” (103).

As is often the case with James’s stories, this story develops and unfolds around secrecy. Mallow doesn’t know what Peter knows. Lancelot doesn’t know what Peter knows. Peter doesn’t know what Mrs. Mallow knows, and so on. Todorov says in “The Secret of Narrative”:

Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause  
....The effect of this cause is the narrative....But the cause is absent and must be  
sought:...The quest proceeds; the tale consists of the search for, the pursuit of,  
this initial cause, this primal essence. The narrative stops when it is attained...  
Thus the secret of Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential  
secret, of something not named, of an absent and superpowerful force which sets  
the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion. (*Poetics* 145)

The absolute cause of “The Tree of Knowledge” is that Peter Brench never reveals his secret that he doesn’t think Mallow has any artistic talent. The story develops around this secret, which plays a key role in the story.

Again Todorov comments:

On one hand he deploys all his forces to attain the hidden essence, to reveal the  
secret object; on the other, he constantly postpones, protects the revelation—  
until the story’s end, if not beyond. The absence of the cause or of the truth is  
present in the text—indeed, it is the text’s logical origin and reason for being.  
The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being. The essential is  
absent, the absence is essential. (*Poetics* 145)

Peter Brench opposes Lancelot’s going to Paris because he knows if Lancelot studies art in Paris, he would know that his father has no talent. Peter wants to keep the secret hidden because he is secretly in love with Mrs. Mallow, and he does not want her to know that her

husband is a fake. But Lancelot goes to Paris, studies art, and discovers the nature of Peter's secret. He says:

“Do you [Peter] know your conundrum has been keeping me awake? But in the watches of the night the answer came over me—so that, upon my honour, I quite laughed out. Had you been supposing I had to go to Paris to learn *that?*”...“You won't give a sign till you're sure? Beautiful old Peter!” But Lance at last produced it. “Why, hang it, the truth about the Master.” (104-5)

As usual with James's stories, when the nature of the secret is revealed, the story ends.

The end of “The Tree of Knowledge” reveals that what was considered no one's knowledge was actually everybody's knowledge. Peter realizes that what he has kept secret was never a secret at all.

According to Todorov's distinction, this is a gnoseological or epistemical story; it is a story of knowledge as the title indicates. At the end of the story the hero learns something that he did not know, or a revelation comes to him that what he thinks he knows is not what he thought it was. This is a story of the transformation of knowledge.

## 8

As this exegesis shows, the structural study of narrative can throw light on not only such simple stories as folktales or fairytales but also a sophisticated story written by such a writer as Henry James. I hope that the structural study of narrative will be developed further in the future and give us more clues to explore the universe of narrative.

### Notes

- 1 This is a summary of six simple narrative transformations presented by Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 226-227.
- 2 This is a summary of six complex narrative transformations presented by Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 228-230.

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