

Annotating Narrative Levels: Review of Guideline No. 8

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"Let me tell you a story." The proposed guidelines suggest that this phrase serve as the heuristic that readers supply at the beginning of any possible embedded narrative to identify a shift in narrative frames or levels. (The difference between "frame" and "level," although perhaps confusing in the history of narratology, does not seem like an important distinction at this stage of the project.) This simple phrase, the author suggests, can replace a field of narrative theory they feel would "simply confuse my student annotators." However simple the phrase might seem, however, it, in fact, conceals a number of key narratological issues: focalization, temporal indices, diction / register, person, fictional paratexts, duration, and, no doubt, others. The question for the guidelines is whether one can leapfrog the particularity of these issues if students use the above phrase to annotate texts with XML tags and produce operational scripts that identify the nested narratives. As it currently stands, students seem capable of learning the basic idea of nested narratives and tagging changes in narrative frames, but there are no real results to confirm the project's success, as the author reports they are not yet able to confirm any inter-annotation agreement.

How does one "identif[y] moments where one narrative yields to another"? We might have an intuitive sense of this change, or we might see obvious diacritical markers (new sets of quotation marks, for instance), but teaching the machine would seem to require more specific categories. Certain classic narratological keywords ("story" vs "discourse") and debates ("Narrate or Describe?")

might play a part in teaching what is at stake in these narrative shifts, but they do not seem necessary to identify changes in narrative footing. On the other hand, the key categories mentioned in the first paragraph seem useful for writing a program that would include a robust sense of narrative theory. For instance, a reader might notice a change in person (first, second, third, singular or plural), or a character name. Or a reader might realize that while the previous narrative was told in the present tense, the next strip of discourse appears in the imperfect. Additionally, there might not be any change in person or tense, but a new register might take over the text. All of these concepts might fall under the umbrella term of “focalization,” and, if the author of the proposed guidelines does indeed have a sturdy model for sorting moments of free indirect discourse, as they suggest in the proposal, perhaps that script could address these issues. But what if a change in person and / or tense and / or register occurs for only a sentence or two in the course of a dialogue between two characters. Is this a new narrative? Duration, the number of words that pertain to a shift in person and / or tense, seems like a relevant concept to help in classification, as well. Lastly, how would such a classifier independently account for fictional paratexts such as epistolary introductions, fictional prefaces, or other frames that might not differ in person, diction, or tense? Can we limit the search to just one or a few of these key categories and still write a script that successfully identifies the transition from one narrative frame to another?

Operationalizing these issues would seem necessary in order to fulfill the author’s proposal to find a “use beyond the classroom” for these guidelines. On the other hand, the guidelines do seem useful as a pedagogical assignment to draw attention to issues of focalization and other key features of narrative for students confused by the jargon of narrative theory or unconvinced or unexcited by non-operational hand annotation (i.e. circling moments where they’ve identified a change in narrative frame). Moreover, the proposed assignment seems like an excellent introduction to the very idea and process of operationalizing literary concepts.

In a classic of popular narratology, Umberto Eco’s *Six Walks in the Narrative Woods* (delivered as the 1992-1993 Norton Lectures at Harvard), Eco repeatedly turns to the 19th century French writer Gérard de Nerval’s *Sylvie* to explain his theory of nested narratives, the differences between an “author,” “model author” and “narrator,” and the temporal problems that arise alongside or at an intersection with these categories. Citing Bal, Barthes, Booth, Chatman, Cohn, Genette, Greimas, Ricoeur, Todorov, and White, Eco concludes that “a text is a lazy machine that demands the reader do part of its work.” Can the proposed guidelines make a more active and flexible machine? A machine that will easily identify

shifts in narrative levels or frames? And will the results help readers to attend to the meaningfulness of these changes in perspective, acting alongside one machine reading another? The proposal's success will depend on whether it can answer these questions positively.



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