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NARRATIVE ANALYSIS—OR WHY (AND HOW) SOCIOLOGISTS SHOULD BE INTERESTED IN NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the questions of why and how sociologists should be interested in narrative. The answer to the first question is straightforward: Narrative texts are packed with sociological information, and a great deal of our empirical evidence is in narrative form. In an attempt to answer the second question, I look at definitions of narrative, distinguishing narrative from non-narrative texts. I highlight the linguistic properties of narrative and illustrate modes of analysis, paying close attention to both the structural properties of the text and its subtle linguistic nuances. I guide the reader through a detailed analysis of a short narrative text. I show how linguistics and sociology interplay at the level of a text.

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversations. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives. . . . narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: It is simply there, like life itself. . .

Barthes 1977:79

NARRATIVE: WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?

Given a set of numbers—236, 435, 218, 767, 456, 367—most sociologists certainly would recognize the numbers as data. Most would also know what to do with them. They could plot those data, tabulate them, estimate statistical models. Some would easily deal with the problems of first-order correlation of the residuals that those data and those models may produce; they would try to overcome problems of heteroschedasticity, non-normality, influence, and all the other little and big problems that plague our statistical work. But take the following text.

As soon as the water went down, I began to work digging the bodies out of the debris. I worked for eight days after the flood looking for bodies, and I recovered twenty-two of them. The last one I found was a little five-year-old boy. It reminded me so much of my own little boy that I could not take any more. That is when I went to pieces... (Erikson 1976:165)

As sociologists, what should we get out of this passage? Does the passage contain data (data?) of any interest to us? What are we to make of it? How are we to analyze it, to test hypotheses, to draw inferences? Paradoxically, we are more at ease in the artificial and (wo)man-made world of statistics than in the more natural world of language and words. After all, a course in statistics is part and parcel of any sociology graduate training. A course in the analysis of text certainly is not, and even courses in qualitative research methods pay little attention to texts and narratives as such. And, perhaps, before we even ask questions of method and analysis, there is a more fundamental question that begs an answer: Why should sociologists be interested in narrative?

In this article, I take up these questions. Do not expect a comprehensive or summary review of the literature on narrative—of necessity, I will be rather selective.¹ My goal is to introduce sociologists to the basic concepts, particularly as elaborated by linguists, and to show how linguistics and sociology interplay at the level of a text. I provide definitions of narrative, distinguishing narrative from non-narrative texts. I highlight the linguistic properties of narrative and illustrate modes of analysis. As a way to review the issues involved I guide the reader through a detailed analysis of a short narrative text. In this analysis, I pay close attention to both the structural properties of the text and its subtle lin-

¹I found Chatman (1978), Genette (1980), Rimmon-Kenan (1983), Cohan & Shires (1988), and Toolan (1988) to be the best introductions to the issues. Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988) three-volume work on time and narrative is not for the faint of heart. It provides a comprehensive review of the views on time and narrative of linguists, philosophers, historians, and sociologists. It may be hard for the novice to follow the intricacy of Ricoeur's account of the various authors' positions, despite Ricoeur's lucid and clear language. I would recommend reading it last.

guistic nuances.² After all, as Chatman (1978:94) writes, “For many narratives what is crucial is the tenuous complexity of actual analysis rather than the powerful simplicity of reduction.”

The narrative analysis of the text helps to bring out not only the properly linguistic characteristics of the story—a task perhaps better left in the hands of those who know how to do this best: linguists—but also a great deal of sociology hidden behind a handful of lines. It is precisely because (a) narrative texts are packed with sociological information and (b) much of our empirical evidence is in narrative form that sociologists should be concerned with narrative. [Just think: Even the quantitative sociological method par excellence, the sample survey, often hides powerful narratives behind its numbers (Mishler 1986:72).]

NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Labov defined narrative as “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” [Labov (1972:359–60); see also Labov & Waletzky (1967:20)]. That definition has survived, more or less intact, through the years and through a number of hands that have pulled and pushed it from different angles. We find it in Rimmon-Kenan: “... narrative fiction ... [is] a succession of events” [Rimmon-Kenan (1983:2–3)]; in Cohan & Shires: “The distinguishing feature of narrative is its linear organization of events” [Cohan & Shires (1988:52–53)]; and in Toolan: “A minimalist definition of narrative might be: ‘a perceived sequence of nonrandomly connected events’” [Toolan (1988:7)].

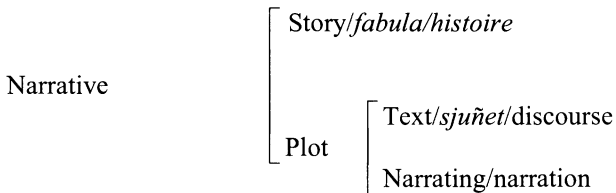
It is not surprising that all these definitions are in basic agreement. After all, they have common roots in the work of the Russian formalists of the beginning of the twentieth century, Propp (1968) and Tomashevski (1965) in particular. It is the Russian formalists who introduced the distinction between story vs plot in narrative (*fabula* vs *sjužet*). Building upon Aristotle’s idea of plot-structure or *mythos*—in the master’s own words, “By this term ‘plot-structure’ I mean the organisation of the events” (Halliwell 1987:Ch. 6, p. 37)—Tomashevski (1965:67) wrote, “Plot is distinct from story. Both include the same events, but in the plot the events *are arranged* and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work.” He continues in a note, “In brief, the story is ‘the action itself, ... [the plot is] how the reader learns of the action.’” Basically, a *story* refers to a skeletal description of the fundamental events in their natural logical and chronological order (perhaps

²The latter type of analysis has fallen under the domain of discourse analysis [e.g. the four volumes edited by van Dijk (van Dijk 1985) or the easier treatment by Fairclough (Fairclough 1995)].

with an equally skeletal listing of the roles of the characters in the story) (Bal 1977:4; Toolan 1988:9).

The French structuralists adopted the basic distinction *fabula* vs *sjuñet*, coined their own terms for the dichotomy *histoire* vs *discours* [see Benveniste (1971:206–8); Barthes (1977); Chatman (1978:19); Toolan (1988:11–12)], story vs discourse, and further subdivided the plot/discourse level into text (or, more generally, discourse) and narrating or narration, i.e. “the act of narrating taken in itself” (see Genette 1980:27, Toolan 1988:10–11).

Bal also speaks of a “three-level hierarchy, *histoire, récit, narration*” (Bal 1977:5–6) and of the “three aspects of narrative,” story, text, and narration (Genette 1980:25–26; see also Rimmon-Kenan 1983:3–4, Cohan & Shires 1988:53). As usual, the trouble is that subtle differences exist among authors not only in the narrative levels and labels, but also in their definitions that make ploughing through the literature an unnecessarily difficult task [see Toolan (1988:9–11) on this point]. Nonetheless, we could summarize the distinctions that linguists have introduced in the study of narrative in the following way:



It is the story—the chrono-logical succession of events—that provides the basic building blocks of narrative. Without story there is no narrative. “The presence or absence of a story is what distinguishes narrative from non-narrative texts” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:15). “A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another,” wrote Tomashevski (Tomashevski 1965:70). A story, in other words, implies a change in situations as expressed by the unfolding of a specific sequence of events. The chronological sequence is a crucial ingredient of any definition of story. Tomashevski, Labov, Prince, Bal, Todorov, Rimmon-Kenan, and Cohan & Shires all drum away at that same point [Tomashevski (1965:70); Labov (1972); Prince (1973:23); Bal (1977:7); Todorov (1977:111); Rimmon-Kenan (1983:19); Cohan & Shires (1988:53–54)].

Not every sequence of any two temporally ordered events can constitute a story (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:19). Two sentences such as “Joan took her plane at 5 pm” and “Peter drove to the airport at 8 pm” would constitute a story only if later sentences established a logical connection between those two sentences, such as “They had both been looking forward to spending the weekend together.” The temporal ordering of events in a story is a necessary but not suf-

ficient condition for the emergence of a story. The events in the sequence must be bound together by some principles of logical coherence.³ At the level of plot the events of a story can form complex sequences by combining events in a variety of ways through enchainment, embedding, and joining [Bremond (1966); Todorov (1981:52–53); Rimmon-Kenan (1983:23)]. Finally, the events in the story must disrupt an initial state of equilibrium that sets in motion an inversion of situation, a change of fortunes—from good to bad, from bad to good, or no such reversal of polarity, just an ‘after’ different from the ‘before,’ but neither necessarily better nor worse.

“The inversion of an event is one of the essential features of a story,” sums up Prince (1973:28)—the other essential feature being the temporal ordering of events in a story.⁴ In classical Aristotelian poetics, the turn of fortunes—a *reversal*—is the key characteristic of comedy and tragedy. “Reversal,” wrote Aristotle, “is a complete swing in the direction of the action” (Halliwell 1987:Ch. 11, p. 42). While comedy marks an improvement of a situation, tragedy marks a worsening, the “transformation to prosperity or affliction” [Halliwell (1987:Ch. 18, p. 51); on Aristotelian reversals, see Chatman (1978:85) and Ricoeur (1984:43–44)]. Reversals can occur repeatedly in a story along the sequence: initial state → disruption → new state → disruption → new state → ... → final state (equilibrium). Each new state is both a point of arrival and a point of departure, sort of a temporary equilibrium between the “before and after,” the past and the future. In Todorov’s words, “The elements [of a story] are related [not] only by *succession*; ... they are also related by *transformation*. Here finally we have the two principles of narratives” [Todorov (1990:30)].

In a sequence, not all events are equally consequential for change of a situation. For Tomashevski, “Motifs [basically, actions and events] which change the situation are dynamic motifs; those which do not are static” (Tomashevski 1965:70). This distinction—between those actions and events that fundamentally alter a narrative situation and the ones that do not—recurs often in the field. Barthes, for instance, distinguishes between cardinal functions (or nuclei) and catalyzers (Barthes 1977:93–94). Catalyzers “merely fill in the narrative space,” while cardinal functions alter current states of affairs, either by bringing them to a new equilibrium or by disrupting an existing equilibrium. “Catalyzers are only consecutive [i.e. chronologically ordered] units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential” (Barthes 1977:94). Chat-

³However, as Chatman argues, readers will typically even attempt to make a story out of temporally sequenced but logically unrelated clauses by implicitly supplying logical connectives [Chatman (1978:47, 49)].

⁴See also Prince (1973:23). On the reversal of situation, see Tomashevski (1925:70–71); Todorov (1977:111–12, 1981:51); see also Aristotle, who first introduced the concept of reversal in his *Poetics* (Halliwell 1987:Ch. 11, p. 42). Bremond (1966) also believed that all sequences are either sequences of improvement or deterioration (see the discussion by Rimmon-Kenan 1983:27).

man (1978:32, 53–56) adopted Barthes' basic distinction with different labels: kernel and satellite events (labels also adopted by Rimmon-Kenan 1983:16). Again, although intuitively and in principle the separation of the clauses of a text into different functions should be straightforward, in practice, in the analysis of any specific text, what is kernel to one author may be satellite to another, and vice versa. Deletion of kernels would fundamentally destroy the narrative logic (Chatman 1978:53). Kernels open up narrative choices.

Dynamic motifs, cardinal functions, or kernel events have corresponding linguistic markers. For Labov (1972:360–61) “a minimal narrative ... [is] a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered. ... The skeleton of a narrative ... consists of a series of temporally ordered clauses” (called narrative clauses). And yet, while there may be no narrative without narrative clauses, not all clauses found in narrative are narrative clauses. [Danto (1985:143–81) similarly talks about “narrative sentences.”]

Consider Labov's example:

- (a) I know a boy named Harry.
- (b) Another boy threw a bottle at him right in the head
- (c) and he got seven stitches.

In this narrative passage, only clauses *b* and *c* are narrative clauses. Clause *a* is not. It is a “free clause,” in Labov's terminology; a clause that, having no temporal component, can be moved freely up and down in the text without altering its meaning. Not so with narrative clauses.⁵ A rearrangement of narrative clauses typically results in a change in meaning (“I punched this boy/and he punched me” vs “This boy punched me/and I punched him”) (Labov 1972:360).

Labov not only draws a distinction between narrative and non-narrative clauses, he also posits the presence of six distinct functional parts in a fully formed narrative: (*a*) abstract; (*b*) orientation; (*c*) complicating action; (*d*) evaluation; (*e*) result or resolution; (*f*) coda. Of these six functional parts, “only ... the complicating action is essential if we are to recognize a narrative” (Labov 1972:370).⁶ The complicating action constitutes “the main body of narra-

⁵In 1925, Tomashevski had already introduced the distinction between bound motifs and free motifs, where a motif is basically a unit of narrative. Free motifs are those that may be safely omitted from a story “without destroying the coherence of the narrative”; bound motifs are those whose deletion would disturb “the whole causal-chronological course of events” (Tomashevski 1965:68). As Todorov notes, “optional ('free') propositions ... are such only from the point of view of sequential construction; they are often what is most necessary in the text as a whole” (Todorov 1981:52–53). Indeed, it is likely that it is at the level of free motifs that the telling of the story (the plot) would differ (Tomashevski 1965:68). See also Barthes' distinction between cardinal functions (or nuclei) and catalyzers (Barthes 1977:93–94).

⁶Labov did not test his structural model of narrative. Peterson & McCabe (1983), however, did analyze a set of children's narratives using Labov's scheme. van Dijk also adopted a Labovian scheme in his analysis of narratives of ethnic prejudice (van Dijk 1984). For a more complete list, see Toolan 1988:176.

tive clauses,” and that body of clauses “usually comprises a series of events” (Labov & Waletzky 1967:32). Implicitly,

Labov works on the broad assumption that what is said ... will not be the core of a story; that, rather, what is done ... will be. The “what is done” then becomes (or may become) the core narrative text of clauses—actions—while the “what is said” becomes evaluative commentary on those actions... (Toolan 1988:157)

But the “doing vs saying” distinction implicitly or explicitly is at the core of linguistic theories of narrative structures. In Ricoeur’s words, “there is no structural analysis of narrative that does not borrow from an explicit or implicit phenomenology of ‘doing something’”(Ricoeur 1984:56). Bal similarly points out that “in general, narrative theorists rather tend to analyse the course of action to which they limit their story” (Bal 1977:89). Genette (1980:164, 169) distinguishes between narrative of events and narrative of words.

It is this emphasis on action (on “doing something”) that has led to the privileged position of actions/events over actors in poetics. We first find this subordination of character to action in Aristotle, who wrote in his *Poetics*: “Tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of action and of life, and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action. ... and while men do have certain qualities by virtue of their character, it is in their actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness. ... without action you would not have a tragedy, but one without character would be feasible” [Halliwell (1987:Ch. 11, pp. 37–38); see also Ricoeur (1984:37); Barthes (1977:104); Rimmon-Kenan (1983:34)].

We find it also in Propp, the Russian formalist of the beginning of this century who left a seminal work on the structural analysis of narrative. In his study of Russian folk tales, Propp identified 31 basic functions (namely, spheres of action) that are invariant across different tales (Propp 1968). After spending the better part of a book discussing these functions and their roles in narrative sequences, Propp dedicated only a handful of pages to a quick discussion of characters (1968:79–91). All story characters can be reduced to a simple typology of seven “character roles” based on the unity of actions assigned to them by the narrative: the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, the false hero.

We still find this emphasis in Greimas, who proposed to describe and classify narrative characters according to what they do (hence the name actants)—once more reproducing the subordination of character to action despite Greimas’ focus on actants (Greimas 1966). According to Greimas, six basic actants can be found in all narratives, working in sets of three interrelated pairs (Greimas 1966: 172–91), sender/receiver, helper/opponent, subject/object, typically represented in the following way:

Sender → object → receiver

Helper → subject → opponent

In Greimas' model, (a) the sender initiates or enables the event; (b) the receiver benefits or registers the effects of the event; (c) the opponent retards or impedes the event by opposing the subject or by competing with the subject for the object; (d) the helper advances the event by supporting or assisting the subject [see also Toolan (1988:93); Barthes (1977:106–7); Rimmon-Kenan (1983:34–35)].

In general, a narrative text will comprise a mixture of both narrative and non-narrative clauses. In particular, descriptive and expository propositions typically enter into a minimal narrative (Tomashevski 1965:66; Bal 1977:13; Rimmon-Kenan 1983:14–15). "Description alone is not enough to constitute a narrative; narrative for its part does not exclude description" (Todorov 1990: 28). Narrative texts are those where the distinctive characteristics of the narrative genre are prevalent (Bal 1977:13).

Bal correctly points out that a theory of narrative presupposes a theory of text genres; she proposes three types of texts, lyrical, dramatic, and narrative (Bal 1977:12–13). The narrative text basically tells a story (just like drama, but unlike lyrical texts) in a complex way (contrary to the other two types of texts) wherein the ratio of narrator's discourse to actor's discourse is maximized (contrary to both lyrical and dramatic texts). "In modern theories of literature," states Bal, "description occupies a marginal role. The structural analysis of narrative relegates it to a secondary function: It is subordinate to the narration of action. It can occupy the catalyser function, but never that of nucleus" (Bal 1977:89). Description is a luxury, a narrative ornament (Bal 1977:89–90).

FURTHER FORAYS INTO A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE

"A narrative ... shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis, no matter how much patience its formulation requires" [Barthes 1977:80 (1966)]. We have seen the results of that collective exercise in patience in search of "the invariant structural units which are represented by a variety of superficial forms" (Labov & Waletzky 1967:12); of the recurrent characteristics and the "distinguishable regularities" behind narrative (Greimas 1971:794); behind the "millions of narratives" [Barthes 1977:81 (1966)] to be more precise.

Propp took the first bold step toward a structural analysis of narrative when he identified an invariant pattern of 31 functions behind the large variety of Russian folktales. Regardless of the particular content of a folktale, regardless of how the story is told, all Russian folktales, according to Propp, will exhibit (at least some of) those 31 basic functions. Furthermore, the sequence in which

those functions appear is fixed.⁷ Greimas further aggregated Propp's 31 functions into a basic set of six functions (Greimas 1966). Labov found a six-part macrostructure in vernacular narratives of New York Harlem African-Americans: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda (Labov 1972:362–70; see also Labov & Waletzky 1967).⁸ More generally, van Dijk has argued that all texts are characterized by macrostructures (“schemata”) that provide the “global schematic form” of a discourse—different discourse genres being characterized by different schemata (van Dijk 1983:24). Thus, the schema of a newspaper article comprises both a summary and a story; the story further comprises a situation and comments; the situation comprises episode and background; the episode includes main events and consequences; while background includes context (circumstances and previous events) and history (van Dijk 1988:51–59).

Of particular interest is the relationship between these deep, macrolevel structures and surface, microlevel structures. For Labov (1972:375), narrative, macrolevel structures can be mapped into surface structures through adverbial elements (for time and space), a subject-noun phrase, and a verb phrase. Other linguists, as well, have argued that narrative stories are characterized by a simple surface representation patterned after the canonical form of the language (subject/action/object) with some modifiers (Todorov 1969:27–41; 1977: 218–33; 1981:48–51; Halliday 1970; Chatman 1978:91; Prince 1973:32). Cognitive psychologists and computer scientists involved in artificial intelligence projects of computer understanding of natural languages have similarly represented stories in terms of a “story grammar” (e.g. Rumelhart 1975; Mandler 1978).

Over the last decade, sociologists have proposed various methods of analysis of narrative texts that are fundamentally based on these and other structural linguistic characteristics of narrative. Abell (1987), for instance, has proposed a methodology that he terms “comparative narratives” based on a formal representation of narrative structures in terms of actors and actions. In my own work, I have developed a story grammar (or semantic grammar) to structure the narrative information provided by newspaper articles on protest events (Franzosi 1989). A semantic grammar offers several advantages over more traditional content analysis schemes for the collection of text data (Franzosi 1989; 1990a,b). In particular, the re-expression of the grammar in set theoretical terms allows researchers to go “from words to numbers,” i.e. to analyze

⁷For a critique of this aspect of Propp's morphology of stories, see Bremond (1964). Bremond argues that stories are not all characterized by a single, invariant macrostructural sequence. Rather, invariant sequences are characteristic of microstructures (i.e. parts of stories) and those sequentially invariant microstructures combine in a multiplicity of forever varying ways to form complex narrative macrostructures.

⁸For a comparison of Greimas' and Labov & Waletzky's schema, see van Dijk (1972:293).

narrative information statistically (Franzosi 1994). Furthermore, within a set theoretical notation, the basic structure of a semantic grammar translates easily into the mathematical structure underlying network models (Franzosi 1998). Intuitively, a semantic grammar structures narrative information within the basic template SAO, or subject, action, object, where both subjects and objects are typically social actors (e.g. “police charge demonstrators”). In other words, the basic structure of a semantic grammar links social actors around specific spheres of action. Network models can be used to analyze text data organized not only in SAO structures, but also in sets of relational concepts. Concepts, rather than social actors, represent the nodes of these networks (for this approach, see Carley 1993).

Other approaches proposed by sociologists similarly take off in fundamental ways from structural characteristics of narrative. Abbott (1995), for instance, investigates the sequential organization of narrative structures in search of patterns of recurrent sequences. “The sequence of events has its own laws,” wrote Propp long ago. “Theft cannot take place before the door is forced. Insofar as the tale is concerned it has its own entirely particular and specific laws. The sequence of elements ... is strictly *uniform* [emphasis in original]. Freedom within this sequence is restricted by very narrow limits which can be exactly formulated” (Propp 1968:22). Abbott & Hrycak’s method of analysis allows investigators to bring out those uniform sequences (and not just in narrative) (Abbott & Hrycak 1990).

Even more closely related to the structural characteristics of narrative is a method of analysis of text data proposed by Heise (Heise 1989; Corsaro & Heise 1990). Following the long philosophical and linguistic tradition of the difference in meaning between “things [that] happen because of one another, or only after one another,” of dynamic and static motifs, of cardinal functions (or nuclei) and catalyzers, of kernel and satellite events, Heise developed a computer program, ETHNO, that forces investigators to make explicit the implicit assumptions built into causal arguments, as these arguments are reflected into the chronological sequence of skeleton narrative sentences. Griffin’s analysis of the narrative of a lynching event that took place in Mississippi in 1930 (Griffin 1993) shows that Heise’s approach does help to tease out the implicit and explicit causal patterns of a narrative. Furthermore, the approach helps to bring out research questions and broad patterns of social relations by focusing on a single narrative.

What is characteristic about these new techniques is that their real contribution does not seem to lie so much in the methodological but in the epistemological realm. As Abbott argues with reference to sequence analysis, sequence analysis is not just “a particular technique [of data analysis, but] ... rather a body of questions about social processes” (Abbott 1995:93). No doubt, a view of social reality fundamentally based on narrative data shifts sociologists’ con-

cerns away from variables to actors, away from regression-based statistical models to networks, and away from a variable-based conception of causality to narrative sequences. That view promises to bring sociology closer to history and to sociology's own original concerns with issues of human agency. It also blurs the line between quality and quantity, transcending the terms of a debate that has uselessly involved social scientists over the last 50 years (see Abell 1987:3–12). But whether a technique is worth its salt (particularly when it claims to rise above the methodological realm and into the epistemological one) fundamentally depends upon the substantive products it delivers. And as of yet, the researchers involved in peddling these wares have delivered substantive products of limited import (for some examples, see Abbott & Barman 1997; Franzosi 1997a,b; Griffin 1993). More to the point, these researchers have been less than forthcoming in spelling out the methodological and epistemological limitations of their techniques (see Franzosi 1999). Semantic grammars, they tend to mix syntactical and semantic categories (e.g. subject and object are syntactical categories—actor would be a better semantic alternative—but action is a semantic category; verb would be the syntactical equivalent). Furthermore, the processes that actors perform are broader than those implied by the term action. The high costs involved in the collection of event data may lead researchers to focus on particularly transformative events (e.g. “the red years” and “black years” of 1919–1922 of my work, or Tarrow's focus on the cycle of protest around the Italian “hot autumn” of 1969; see Franzosi 1997b, Tarrow 1989). The event is back, from the ashes of Braudel's attack and that of his colleagues in the *Annales* school. Finally, the very richness of the event data that computerized semantic grammars deliver may lead researchers to adopt descriptive modes of explanation, the narrative of the evidence imposing its form on the mode of explanation. In going “from words to numbers” we may have inadvertently gone from “thin explanations” (based on variables and regression models) to “thick descriptions.” The application of network models to narrative data may not necessarily improve things on this score. Laumann wrote that “the hallmark of network analysis ... is to explain, at least in part, the behavior of network elements (i.e. the nodes) and of the system as a whole by appeal to specific features of the interconnections among the elements” (Laumann 1979:394). Such emphasis on explanation (rather than description) is certainly part and parcel of our disciplinary mottos and of the legacy bequeathed to us by our “founding fathers.” But a focus on the system of interconnections alone is unlikely to lead us beyond the descriptive.

With respect to Heise and Griffin's approach, their method leaves unresolved the issue of how investigators reach fundamental decisions about what is sequential and what is consequential. For all the logical questions that ETHNO asks, for all its probing, the decision-making process itself remains a “black box” hidden in the recesses of the human psyche. That being the case,

and given that ETHNO has been applied to understand short narrative passages, why would a good linguist or a good historian not reach those same conclusions without ETHNO? (For a critique of one of Abbott & Bauman's contributions, see Franzosi 1997c.)

AN EXAMPLE

Consider the following text.

Neville: After my wife kicked me out I spent several weeks living in my car. Being homeless she wouldn't let me see my son ... I really missed Ricky. A friend suggested I go to see Shelter. I was a little apprehensive ... frightened to go in, but they were brilliant. It's a bit like a hotel, it's very clean and the staff are great. Best of all my wife came round to check the place out and now lets my son visit me, it's let me rebuild me family life... (*Oxford Independent*, 1997)

It is not hard to recognize this text as narrative. The text deals with "the temporal character of human experience" (Ricoeur 1984:52), with a change in situation from bad (homelessness and breakdown of family life) to good (a place to live and the rebuilding of family life), and contains both narrative and non-narrative (mostly descriptive) clauses arranged in chronological order (see Table 1).

Many temporal references in Neville's story highlight the role of narrative as "recapitulation of past experience" (Labov 1972:359). But time in narrative has a dual function: It "is constitutive both of the means of representation (language) and of the object represented (the incidents of the story). Time in narrative fiction can be defined as the relations of chronology between story and text" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:44). In Neville's story, the sequence of clauses coincides with the sequence of the narrated events (the sequences of both clauses and events are the same; see columns 1 and 2 in Table 1). Story and plot coincide, with minimum plot development. That is rather typical of simple stories. The plot is the realm where the narrative abilities of different authors can make something out of the basic raw material of a story (a sequence of events). Narrative theorists have highlighted three different aspects of narrative time—order, duration, and frequency—each dealing with three different sets of questions: When? For how long? And how often?⁹

Neville's story does not provide enough clues for a clear answer to the first question: When? Although extranarrative information tells us that the story

⁹The most comprehensive account of narrative time is Genette's treatment (Genette 1980). Ricoeur's three-volume treatment is more ambitious (Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988), but not as crisp as Genette's. Ricoeur's book deals with linguists', philosophers', and historians' views of time. It provides a comprehensive review of each author's position in lucid, clear language. For brief introductions to the issues, see Rimmon-Kenan (1983:43–58), Cohan & Shires (1988:84–89); Toolan (1988:48–61).

Table 1 Narrative and non-narrative clauses in Neville's story*

| Clause sequence | Event sequence | Narrative clauses | Descriptive clauses |
|-----------------|----------------|--|--------------------------------|
| (01) | T ₁ | After my wife kicked me out | |
| (02) | T ₂ | I spent several weeks living in my car | |
| (03) | | | Being homeless |
| (04) | | she wouldn't let me see my son | |
| (05) | | I really missed Ricky | |
| (06) | T ₃ | A friend suggested | |
| (07) | T ₄ | I go to see Shelter | |
| (08) | | | I was a little apprehensive... |
| (09) | | | frightened to go in |
| (10) | | | but they were brilliant |
| (11) | | | It's a bit like a hotel |
| (12) | | | it's very clean |
| (13) | | | and the staff are great |
| (14) | T ⁵ | Best of all my wife came round | |
| (15) | | to check the place out | |
| (16) | T ₆ | and now lets my son visit me | |
| (17) | | it's let me rebuild me family life | |

*The distinction between “narrative” and “descriptive” units in Table 1 is based on the linguistic properties of the verb. Typically, the narrative characteristics of a story are linguistically marked by the use of (a) finite (rather than non-finite) verbs (e.g. walks or walked, rather than to walk) and (b) dynamic verbs that depict events and active processes, rather than stative verbs that describe states of affairs or descriptions (Prince 1973:29, Chatman 1978:31–2, Toolan 1988:34–5, 266). “Process statements are in the mode of DO or HAPPEN.... Stasis statements are in the mode of IS” (Chatman 1978:32). Yet, some static verbs in the mode IS hide process statements in the mode of DO. A good example is clause 10, “they were brilliant,” which implies that the Shelter staff DID something to make Neville feel welcome, or comfortable and at home.

Also, strictly speaking, the numbered text units are not clauses (e.g. clause 4), although most of them are. The discourse analysts’ terminology of “discourse units” may be more appropriate. I have kept the term “clause” to emphasize Labov’s separation of narrative and descriptive, or “free,” clauses (Labov 1973).

was published in January 1997, it does not tell us when exactly the narrated events took place. The deictic element “now” temporally anchors the story to the moment of narration—rather than to a moment prior to that of narration—but that narration could have occurred at any time in the past prior to publication. The temporal shift from the past tense of most clauses in the story (“kicked out,” “spent,” “missed,” “suggested”) to the present tense of clauses 11–13 is in line with the descriptive character of those clauses and with the

static nature of those verbs. As for duration, we know that Neville spent several weeks living in his car, but we do not know how long he has been living in Shelter or how long his son's visits are. Finally, we do not know, for instance, how often Ricky visits his father Neville at Shelter. In clause 4, the aspect of the verb "wouldn't let me" indicates a repetition of the action (habitual action), a denial protracted in time.

The narrativists' duration and frequency do not just refer to the duration and frequency of the narrated (real-life) events. More generally, duration and frequency refer to the relationship between narrative clauses and narrated events. [On these points, see Genette (1983:33–160); Rimmon-Kenan (1983:43–58); Cohan & Shires (1988:84–89); Toolan (1988:48–62).] A narrator can sum up in one sentence events that took place over a long period ("After the fall of the Roman empire..."), or dwell for many pages on fleeting events lasting a few minutes [Geertz's thick description (1973:3–30)]. Neville dedicates the same textual duration (one clause) to events of unequal temporal duration ("I spent several weeks living in my car" and "my wife came round"). Similarly, a narrator can recount the same event several times (frequency). In the film *Groundhog Day* the events occurring in one day in the life of a TV news reporter are told several times as that day is relived over and over by the protagonist.

The narrative "game with time" (Genette 1980:155) is by no means confined to purely fictional narrative. Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued that chronology is the distinctive characteristic of history: Without chronology ("dates"), there is no history [Lévi-Strauss (1972:258–60); see also Barthes (1970); White (1987:1–25)]. But different periods of history are characterized by different densities of dates. There are "hot" chronologies such as World War II, where the historian closely follows the events day by day, hour by hour, and chronologies where the historian quickly jumps over long spans of thousands of years. This selection of dates and events (the "facts" of the historian), these narrative strategies are not "innocent." They reflect the (conscious and unconscious) intentions of the historian; they serve a fundamental ideological function (Barthes 1970; White 1987:35). That is true for even the simplest of historical work—the chronicle. Medieval chroniclers listed events sequentially, year after year, one event per year, one year per line, a blank entry for many years. Furthermore, events varied in duration from "Pippin, mayor of the palace, died" (714 AD) to "Theudo drove the Saracens out of Aquitaine" (721 AD) (White 1987:6–9). Yet, even this seemingly random and bizarre selection of facts—"712 flood everywhere; ... 722 Great crops; ... 725 Saracens came for the first time" (White 1987:7)—makes sense in light of the authors' fundamentally religious *weltanschauung* where only the "other world" counts and God's intentions for this world are inscrutable.

The choice of "facts" in Neville's narrative and the lack of correspondence between narrative duration and the duration of narrated events perhaps points

to an ideological bias in Neville's narrative. Take Neville's dramatic entry into his story in the first clause: "After my wife kicked me out...." The clause does not have independent status. It is "backgrounded" with respect to the "foregrounded" main clause of the sentence, "I spent several weeks living in my car." (See Hopper 1979 on backgrounding and foregrounding.) As such, it downplays the event of being kicked out of the house, and up-plays the state of homelessness. Yet the clause is highly marked. It is the very first clause of the story. Neither in the first sentence nor in subsequent sentences does Neville tell the reader why his wife kicked him out. His narrative does not focus on the reason and causes of an action that has tragic consequences for his life. Rather, it focuses on those tragic consequences. Through careful backgrounding and foregrounding, through silence on causes and emphasis on consequences, Neville draws the reader's attention to Neville's point of view, rather than the wife's (indeed, we read "me," "me," "me," "my," "my," "my" throughout the story). It provides a male's, rather than a female's reading of the events.

The second sentence in the text is similarly introduced by a clause with no independent status: "being homeless." The participial form syntactically introduces a causal argument, without, however, explicitly stating causation ("because I was homeless"). As a result, subsequent actions are less clearly consequential. The aspect ("wouldn't") of the verb "let" indicates not only a habitual response (i.e. throughout this period of Neville living in his car), but also a volitional response (she did not want Neville to see his son—his son!). Backgrounding and foregrounding of clauses in the second sentence make the actions of Neville's wife appear unmotivated and mean-spirited.

Using similar rhetorical devices of silence and emphasis, of backgrounding and foregrounding, the media provide ideologically biased readings of social relations (Eco 1971). In one of the few systematic analyses involving English mainstream and radical papers, Hartmann (1975/1976) shows that the *Morning Star*, the daily newspaper of the British Communist Party, pays much more attention to the causes of industrial action than its consequences on the economy or on the public. According to Downing, the "refusal to explain the roots of any strike, ... [and the focus] on its disruptive effects, ... [makes] the strikers' decision all the more inexplicable and unforgivable" (Downing 1980:47).

The research of the Glasgow University Media Group on British television coverage of strikes highlighted similar patterns. The TV news reporting of the 1975 Glasgow garbage collectors' strike focused on the health hazard posed by the strike (the "effect" of the strike) with minimal attention paid to the reasons for the strike (Glasgow University Media Group 1976:244, 249, 253). Murdock's analysis of media coverage of radical groups shows that those same mechanisms of systematic bias operate in the media against other groups (Murdock 1973). Murdock writes, "Attention is (then) directed away from the underlying issues and the definitions of the situation proposed by radical

groups, and fixes instead on the forms which this action takes. The 'issue' therefore becomes one of the forms rather than causes" (Murdock 1973:157). His case study of a mass demonstration against the Vietnam War held in London on 27 October 1968 shows how media emphasize form over content, how "the underlying causes of why there was a march to begin with" are neglected (Murdock 1973:160). Van Dijk's work on the role of the Dutch media in the reproduction of racism basically tells the same story with regard to ethnic minorities (van Dijk 1987:210, 218). "Topics are dealt with in terms of 'problems' and from the point of view of the authorities" (van Dijk 1987:210). "The causes or context of such problems are seldom analyzed in the press, and hardly ever explained in terms of White racism" (van Dijk 1987:218).

Careful backgrounding and foregrounding of information can certainly go a long way in ideologically coloring a text. But that ideological color can also be made quite explicit. According to Labov, the sequence of purely narrative clauses performs the referential function of narrative. Basically, that function deals with the question: What is the story? But narratives are also characterized by a second function—the evaluative function—which deals with the question: Why is the story told? (What is the story's point? See e.g. Toolan 1988:147.) A typical story will contain explicit evaluative statements that reveal the teller's attitudes to the events recounted. Many of the narratives collected by Erikson, after the Buffalo Creek flood that wiped out an entire mining community, express sentiments of anger towards the Pittston Mining Company:

- "We have bitterness toward the coal company."
 - "They washed us out, killed all those people."
 - "I don't think they thought of us as human beings."
 - "All I can call the disaster is murder."
 - "The coal company knew the dam was bad, but they did not tell the people."
 - "All they wanted was to make money."
 - "They did not care about the good people that lived up Buffalo Creek..."
- (Erikson 1976:183)

Indeed, the sense of moral outrage toward corporations and the profit motive may well be the point of the stories of at least some of the survivors. But stories do not necessarily have only one point. The Buffalo Creek survivors, while blaming the company for such devastating tragedy, may also want to convey to city people who have flocked to Buffalo Creek after the disaster what it means to have lost not just someone close to kin, but a community:

- "If you had problems, you wouldn't even have to mention it."
- "People would just know what to do. They'd just pitch in and help."
- "Everyone was concerned about everyone else."
- "Well, I have lost all my friends. The people I was raised up and lived with, they're scattered. I don't know where they are at. I've got to make new friends, and that's a hard thing to do..." (Erikson 1976:190–91)

The more complex the story, the more likely that it will explicitly satisfy the evaluative function with one or multiple story points. Children's ability to tell stories increases with age—simple chronological stories being characteristic of children less than four years of age. [For a brief review of children's narrative development, see Toolan (1988:193–202).] Between the ages of four and nine, children steadily improve their narrative competence: (a) The weight of the evaluative function increases at the expense of the purely narrative function—that function being marked by specific evaluative clauses; (b) stories become longer and plots more elaborate (older children present the events in the plot in a different sequential order than in the story); (c) direct speech or free indirect speech, completely absent in younger children, becomes more common with age; (d) main characters become “rounder,” to use Greimas' expression; (e) stories become more coherent and causal arguments more explicit.

Neville's story presents none of the characteristics associated with high narrative competence. His story does not contain explicit evaluative clauses. That does not mean, of course, that there is no evaluation in Neville's account of a particular moment of his life. As Skinner has argued, the process of production of text is always inextricably linked to the production of ideology.¹⁰ Even the referential function of narrative—the chronological sequence of narrative clauses—is not devoid of evaluation. Purely narrative sequences are never innocent. Narrative sequences imply causal sequences. As Aristotle wrote in the *Poetics*, “It makes a great difference whether things happen because of one another, or only *after* one another” (emphasis in the original) (Halliwell 1987:42). Todorov made that point explicit: “Most works of fiction of the past are organized according to an order that we may qualify as both temporal and logical; let us add at once that the logical relation we habitually think of is implication, or as we ordinarily say, causality” (Todorov (1981:41)).¹¹ Certainly, Neville's story suggests (or is at least compatible with) the following causal proposition: Because a wife kicks out a husband, the husband ends up homeless. There is some truth to that. In a survey of three different populations of single homeless people conducted in England in 1991, the breakdown of a relationship is the main reason for homeless persons leaving their last home (Anderson et al 1993:70–73).¹² But that, of course, is dodging the question: Why did Neville's wife kick him out in the first place? After all, the in-depth study of 30 newly separated mothers in the Nottingham and Derby

¹⁰See the essays collected in Tully (1988).

¹¹On the relationship between causality as chronologically ordered sets of propositions, see also Rimmon-Kenan (1983:17–19); Cohan & Shires (1988:17, 58).

¹²This does not in itself explain why people who have left their homes become homeless. In Britain this is primarily due to a shortage of affordable housing, so that people in low-paid jobs, the unemployed, and those with mental health, alcohol or drug abuse problems are at risk of homelessness if they lose their accommodation following the breakdown of a relationship.

areas shows that the most frequently reported reason for the breakdown of a relationship is the man's violence and adultery (Leeming et al 1994:19). Again, silence on causes and emphasis on consequences shifts the blame away from Neville and towards his wife.¹³

The implicit causal reading of Neville's narrative does give us some clues on how to interpret his story and his intentions—the story point. Perhaps Neville is suggesting that women are to be blamed for men's misfortune. The text, then, is a political manifesto against women. Both the causal arguments implicitly built in Neville's narrative and the subtle backgrounding and foregrounding of information point to that reading of the story point. Further evidence for that interpretation of the text comes from character traiting—the positive or negative portrayal of actors—and the attribution of actions to actors. There is minimum characterization of *dramatis personae* in Neville's story.¹⁴ With the exception of Shelter, all actors—Neville himself, the wife, his son Ricky (indeed, always referred to as “my” son), the friend, Shelter staff—are human. Interestingly enough, and perhaps no differently from fairytales where the giver/sender in Greimas' model is often nonhuman and endowed with magical powers, the giver/sender is not a human being but an organization (Shelter). It is adjectives that provide basic information on character traiting (Todorov 1969:31).

For Chatman, “A trait may be said to be a narrative adjective ... labeling a personal quality of a character” (Chatman 1978:125). In qualifying the word “adjective” with the word “narrative,” Chatman is stressing the fact that character traiting (or the adjectival function of narrative) does not necessarily fall on adjectives exclusively. Again, there is minimum use of adjectives in Neville's narrative for the purpose of character traiting. Of the five adjectives found in the text (apprehensive, frightened, brilliant, clean, great), however, two (apprehensive and frightened) are used by Neville to portray himself and the other three (brilliant, clean, and great) are lavished upon Shelter. While the first two adjectives describe negative psychological and emotional states, the other three are either hyperbolic (brilliant, great) or, when they are simply positive (clean), they are strengthened by a quantifier (very). Again, Shelter emerges as the real *deus ex machina* in Neville's narrative. In fact, setting him-

¹³The issue of narrative truth is not a linguistic problem. It becomes a problem when narrative is used to index social reality. It is a problem for historians. For Ranke, one of the “founding fathers” of the historical profession, history must relate things the way they actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)—the historians' “noble dream” of objectivity (Novick 1988). It is a problem for ethnographers who draw broader inferences from informants' narratives—narratives always subject to selection, distortion, interpretation, evaluation (for a brief introduction to the issue of narrative truth, see Kohler Riessman 1993:21–23).

¹⁴We owe to Greimas the distinction between flat and round characters, characters with minimum characterization and characters presented with a relative degree of complexity and depth (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:40; Bal 1977:31).

self up as a “little guy” (frightened and apprehensive) helps Neville build up Shelter, by contrast.

In the absence of explicit character traiting, we can also infer character from action (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:60–61; Toolan 1988:102). Thus, the dramatic opening of Neville’s story “After my wife kicked me out” implicitly points an accusatory finger towards the wife. After all, as far as we know, Neville did nothing to deserve this. In his narrative, Neville does not volunteer any information on the reasons why he was kicked out of the house. We are left to imagine: Because he abused his wife, because he refused to carry any responsibility around the house, because he had affairs, because he was a drunk or a drug addict.... In fact, the violence perpetrated against Neville in the opening clause—violence all the more senseless and gratuitous because it has no (narrative) explanation—helps to bring Neville into focus as a victim rather than a villain. We feel sorry and we sympathize for victims, while we are repulsed by villains. Further clues help to conjure up positive images about the moral fiber of Neville—after all, a man who (“really”) misses his son, who has strong aspirations to family life, who appreciates cleanness, and who has friends.¹⁵ Rather than a brazen and insolent villain, this narrative presents before us a man deserving of our pity—homeless, harmless, and deeply hurt in his paternal feelings (if not in his masculinity altogether). And so it is. We do extend him our pity. At which point, with the reader on his side, Neville, in the closing lines of his narrative, can even afford a more sympathetic portrayal of his wife. Again, characterization is not direct; we have to infer character from action. But the actions of Neville’s wife in the last clause point to a caring mother, who, having the well-being of her son at heart, comes around to check Shelter, and then lets Ricky visit his father.

Whatever Neville’s intentions, no doubt, the wife’s actions associate her to a strong character: She kicks out, she would not let (combining volition and permission), she comes around, she checks, she lets. Indeed, these are actions of authority and power. By contrast, both directly and indirectly, Neville comes across as a weak character. Directly, Neville describes himself as apprehensive and frightened. Indirectly, we can infer who Neville is not only from what he did, but from what he could have done and did not do. Neville appears to passively accept his wife’s authority and power. His story offers no signs of protest on his part to his wife’s most damaging decisions: of kicking him out of the house and of not allowing him to see his son. He could have kicked the wife out. He could have argued and screamed, perhaps even resorted to physical violence. He could have run away with his son. He could have engaged a legal battle with his wife.

¹⁵Rossi’s data on Chicago homeless show that homelessness does not necessarily imply complete loss of friendship (or family) ties (Rossi 1989:173–7).

He could have, but he did not. Why not? “The human capacity to withstand suffering and abuse is impressive,” writes Barrington Moore (1978:13) in his *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*. It certainly helps if the sufferers believe in the fundamental justice of their suffering. [See Barrington Moore’s discussion on responses of moral outrage or moral submission to injustice (Moore 1978:49–80).] Does Neville believe that he deserves having been kicked out of the house? And does he hold that belief because his wife’s action was prompted by something he did and that he himself perceives as morally wrong—a breach of the social contract—or because he “take[s] pride and pleasure in ... [his] pain” (Moore 1978:50) and suffering, like religious ascetics or Indian Untouchables?

We do not know the answer to those questions. But the text does present an interesting reversal of stereotypical gender roles of male aggressiveness and female passivity. That is particularly true if we make the reasonable assumption that Neville is a member of the lower classes. As Bourdieu shows, a conception of masculinity in terms of toughness, virility, physical strength (with “enormous, imperative, brutal needs”) is much more likely among working-class men (Bourdieu 1984:192; also 190, 382). There is nothing in Neville’s traiting of his wife’s decisiveness. Being apprehensive, frightened, and generally hesitant (as underscored by the choppy character of the narrative at this point—see the dots which imply a temporal pause in Neville’s talk in clause 8) is not a traditional masculine trait. When considering that in Neville’s story the wife is the prime mover, the initiator of a temporal sequence of clauses that, in the end, sees Neville in a homeless state, perhaps Neville is telling his fellow readers that his wife has emasculated him, broken him down as a man. That is something, of course, that no patriarchal society can accept. Peasant communities across Europe for centuries collectively “took care” of offenders of traditional community norms through public rituals known as “rough music” or *charivari* (Thompson 1993:467–538). Women who broke patriarchal values—the scold, the husband-beater, the shrew—were a prominent target in these rituals (Thompson 1993:476, 493). In an 1838 description:

When any woman, a wife more particularly, has been scolding, beating or otherwise abusing the other sex, and is publicly known, she is made to ride stang. A crowd of people assemble towards evening after work hours, with an old, shabby, broken down horse. They hunt out the delinquent ... and mount her on their Rozinante ... astride with her face to the tail. So they parade her through the nearest village or town; drowning her scolding and clamour with the noise of frying pans &c.... (Thompson 1993:499)

Whether Neville believes his wife’s actions to be just or unjust, the lack of resources would certainly put a limit to the available courses of action. If Neville were poor he could hardly engage his wife in a protracted legal battle over

their son. Gamson et al (1982:60–64) argue that the range of possible responses to unjust authority vary from compliance to evasion, rim talk, resistance, direct action, and preparation for future action. But whether social actors chose one form of reaction or another in their encounters with unjust authority ultimately depends upon the availability of resources. Scott's (1985) study of Malaysian peasants makes that point quite clear: The relative lack of resources does not allow the peasants to take overt reactions. "Most forms of this struggle stop well short of outright collective defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on" (Scott 1985:xvi). Newby, in his study of East Anglian peasants, similarly noted: "The agricultural worker has acknowledged his powerlessness and decided to make the best of his inferior situation, contriving to take it somewhat for granted while not necessarily endorsing it in terms of social justice" (Newby 1979:414).

We do not know Neville's thoughts on the justice/injustice of his wife's actions. But we can at least ask the question: What resources does Neville command? More generally, what do we know about Neville? Who is Neville? In one of Grimm's classical fairy tales, "Roland and Maybird," the parents of the two children abandon them in the thick of the woods. Cleverly, Roland leaves behind a trail of white pebbles that will help him find the way out. Neville has also left behind a trail of clues that help us understand who he is. We know that Neville is likely to be a young man. After all, Ricky, his son, is still a little boy in need of his mother's permission to see his father. Perhaps, he is also white. The majority of homeless people surveyed by Anderson et al in England were white, male and in the age group 25–44 (Anderson et al 1993:7–9).

We also know that Neville is likely to be poor. If he were not, he could have moved into a hotel or into a place of his own after being "kicked out." There is no mention of any financial transactions between Neville and his wife. Is Neville contributing child support? Unlikely, in his current situation; in fact, unlikely in any situation from what we know of divorced men's contributions to child support. Most ex-partners provide no child support to newly separated mothers (Leeming et al 1994:55).

We do not know whether Neville is also unemployed, although he is quite likely to be. In the 1991 English survey of homeless by Anderson et al, fewer than 10% of the homeless people surveyed were employed (Anderson et al 1993:15–16; see Rossi 1989:135 for similar data on Chicago homeless). But if he is gainfully employed it is likely to be in a low-pay, low-status occupation. How could he hold onto a more demanding job while living for weeks in a car? Rossi's data on Chicago homeless make it clear how difficult it must be to keep up appearances while living in the streets: Only 27.5% of the respondents

living in the streets appear “neat and clean” to the interviewer vs 70.5% of those living in shelters (Rossi 1989:93). In England, according to the survey conducted by Drake et al, 65% of the currently unemployed homeless were semiskilled or unskilled in their last job (Drake et al 1982:26, 29). As for their current job, when the homeless do work, they do so prevalently in low-pay, low-status, casual jobs (Anderson et al 1993:15–16).¹⁶

Not only the facts of Neville’s story tell us something about his social background. Purely linguistic markers also help to identify Neville as a member of speech communities more typically found among the lower ranks of British society. There is some evidence of a “women’s language” (Lakoff 1975) or, more generally, a “powerless language” (O’Barr & Atkins 1980). [However, see the strong critique by Coates (1993:132–35).] That language is characterized by: (a) hypercorrect grammar; (b) higher frequency of accompanying gestures, hedges (“well,” “I guess”), and intensifiers (e.g. “so,” “very”); (c) “empty” adjectives (“divine,” “cute,” “charming,” “ghastly”); (d) polite forms (“would you please ...?”); (e) rising (question-type) intonation in declarative sentences; (f) greater pitch range and more rapid pitch changes; (g) tag questions (“isn’t it?”) (Lakoff 1975:53–57; O’Barr & Atkins 1980; Toolan 1988:250; Coates 1993:132–33). Linguistic research on courtroom transcripts has shown that defendants and witnesses with professional qualifications or positions of authority tend to use a language of power (see Toolan 1988:249–55 for a review). Furthermore, those defendants and witnesses who use a language of power tend to be perceived by judges, juries, and lawyers as more knowledgeable, more credible, and more trustworthy than those who use a powerless language.

In Neville’s language we find many of these markers of powerless language. We find hedges (the dots in clause 8 are a marker of hesitation and uncertainty, further underscored by the adjectives “apprehensive,” “frightened”), empty adjectives (“brilliant,” “great”), and intensifiers (“really missed Ricky” in clause 5; “very clean” in clause 12). What Neville finds attractive about Shelter (“clean” and “like a hotel”) is also more typical of working-class individuals. In his study of taste, Bourdieu provides quantitative evidence on the relationship between socioeconomic background and images of an “ideal home” (Bourdieu 1984:247–48). “The proportion of choices emphasizing overtly aesthetic properties (studied, imaginative, harmonious) grows as one moves up the social hierarchy, whereas the proportion of ‘functionalist’ choices (clean, practical, easy to maintain) declines” (Bourdieu 1984:247).

The text does not provide any information on posture, gestures, gaze, or voice pitch. That is unfortunate, because conversation analysts and ethnometh-

¹⁶The most common form of income for homeless people was Income Support or other state benefits with an average total income of £38 per week (Anderson et al 1993:15–16). On the income of homeless people in the US, see also Rossi’s data on the Chicago homeless (1989:136).

odologists have shown how telling those extralinguistic characteristics can be (Maynard 1992; see also Coates 1993:188, 197–98; Kohler Riessman 1993:40).¹⁷ Silences may speak even louder than words, as shown by the work by West & Zimmerman (West & Zimmerman 1980, 1983; see also Coates 1993:107–14) on gender differences in patterns of silences and interruptions in everyday conversations. In a careful analysis of interactions between doctors, patients, and family in the delivery of bad news, Maynard writes: “We must pay attention to the full sociolinguistic environment surrounding the bearing of bad news” (Maynard 1992:118). The evidence from Neville’s text on hypercorrect grammar is mixed. If anything, the text contains several vernacular forms. “Me family life” in clause 17 should be “my family life.” In “Being homeless, she wouldn’t let me” (clauses 3 and 4), the semantically implied subject of the first clause is “I” but syntactically it is “she.” Coates argues that hypercorrect language is more characteristic of women than men (Coates 1993:66–86); if anything, working-class men have a linguistic preference for nonstandard, vernacular language. That being the case, Neville’s use of vernacular language is quite characteristic of both his gender and class. Not so characteristic, however, is Neville’s use of formal adjectives (e.g. apprehensive) and of complex syntactical constructs (e.g. clauses 1 and 3 and the adverbial clause 14). Neville’s text seems to contain a peculiar mix of lowbrow and highbrow linguistic codes.

Notwithstanding some contradictions in Neville’s language, facts and language by and large go hand-in-hand in Neville’s story, to project an image of Neville as a powerless character. Interestingly enough, for all the strength of Neville’s wife as a character, for all the power she wields (by contrast), ultimately it is not up to her to reverse Neville’s fortune. It is Shelter! Although Neville’s wife is the grammatical subject (and the agent) in clauses 14, 15, and 16, the subject of the very last clause in that sentence (clause 17) is “it” (presumably Shelter, the only “it,” i.e. the only non-human and inanimate character in the story with agentive characteristics). It is it—Shelter—that “lets” Neville rebuild his family life. In fact, in the very last clause of Neville’s narrative, Shelter has replaced the wife as the agent we had come to expect as being associated with the verb “let.”

It is that sudden and awkward transition in grammatical subjects in the conjoined clauses of the last clause that may leave the reader wondering whether, when Neville says “it’s let me rebuild me family life,” he does not mean, in fact, that he has moved back into the house. Neville does not tell us that. But

¹⁷Written text, of course, does not provide any information on accent and pronunciation. Sociolinguists have shown that, perhaps even more than any other linguistic markers, pronunciation can offer invaluable clues about the social background of individuals (Coates 1993:61–86; Romaine 1994:69–75).

neither did he tell us that he went to see Shelter. All he told us in clauses 6 and 7 was “A friend suggested I go to see Shelter.” From there, Neville jumped directly to Shelter. There is a “gap” in the text that the reader fills (“I went to see Shelter”).¹⁸ Is Neville introducing another similar gap at the very end of his narrative? Only the deictic element “now” in clause 16 excludes the possibility that Neville has moved back with his wife. “Now” anchors the text to a concrete spatial and temporal situation (now = Neville at Shelter = rebuilding family life inside Shelter), which may shed some new light on the story point. Could Neville’s narrative be just an advertisement for Shelter? The adjectival traiking of Shelter, the role of Shelter as *deus ex machina* of the narrative, and the ambiguity of the last clause certainly point in that direction. In that sense, a more explicit reference to Neville’s return home in the last clause would have taken the referential focus away from Shelter, something no advertisement can afford.

To bring Neville’s story into sharper focus as, perhaps, an advertising text, consider the following narrative: “You were leading a miserable life, without any friends and anyone to go out with, all because you had dandruff. But now, thanks to Best Shampoo, dandruff is gone and you have plenty of friends and dates.” Best Shampoo (or Shelter) offers the magical solution to one’s problems. When viewed that way, Neville’s reversal of fortunes from bad to good brought about by the intervention of Shelter conforms quite closely to Greimas’ basic narrative model: A subject (typically the hero) strives to win over an object (a beautiful princess) against the opposition of a villain but with the help of a friend or relative (helper) and the magic intervention of a sender [a sort of superhelper in Toolan’s words (Toolan 1988:93)]. In Neville’s story, Neville is acting as the subject missing his son Ricky (object) whom he cannot see because of his wife’s interdiction (villain); with the help of a friend (helper) Neville gets in touch with Shelter (sender), which will allow Neville to attain his goal. Vestergaard & Schroder (1985:27–32, 94) showed that such a model is indeed one of the typical models of advertising narratives, where the advertised products take on Greimas’ actant role of giver/superhelper. “Advertising ... does not try to tell us that we need its products as such, but rather that the products can help us obtain something else which we do feel that we need”—health, success, friends, and the like (Vestergaard & Schroder 1985:29).

In many advertisements, the power of the magic superhelper to bring about change in one’s life is dramatized via the use of colors: The before is typically in black and white, the after in color—the temporal framework of the technical

¹⁸Gaps can be introduced to speed up the reading process—as in this case—or to arouse the reader’s curiosity. On the linguistic concept of “gap” see Rimmon-Kenan (1983:127–29) and Perry (1979).

development of photography providing the simple temporal reading of the advertising narrative. Thus, in the advertisements for Virginia Slims cigarettes, the picture typically contrasts a black-and-white, small frame of a woman's life in the old days—a life of drudgery and hard work, particularly when compared to a man's life—to a larger and colorful frame of a woman's life now, a life of success and independence, as underscored by the fact that she can freely smoke (!).

There are no explicit references to colors in Neville's narrative. Yet, consider the role of the adjective "brilliant" in clause 10. Coming after the images of gloom and doom conjured up in the reader's mind by Neville's description of his homelessness, the adjective "brilliant," although used in reference to Shelter staff, floods the narrative space with bright light, ultimately opening a glimmer of new hope in Neville's life. The before (gloom and doom) and after ("brilliant") are starkly separated by the use of that adjective of light. The before and after are further underscored by the sudden shift in the use of verb tenses from the past tense to the present tense of clauses 11 through 13 (it's ... a hotel; it's ... clean; ... are great).

If Neville's story is nothing but an advertisement for Shelter, then perhaps Neville is a fictional character. He is not the author of his story. There is a real author behind the story. Chatman introduced different levels of narrators and narratees [Chatman (1978:151); see also Rimmon-Kenan (1983:86–89); Cohan & Shires (1988:89–94); Toolan (1988:76–80)]:

real author → implied author → (narrator) → (narratee) → implied reader →
real reader

But that real author has hidden behind Neville, leaving no explicit markers of his/her role—after all, what Shelter can do for the homeless is all the more credible if it comes from a real character. (On verisimilitude, see Chatman 1978:48–53.)

And that quest for realism leads to a muffled authorial voice. A muffled authorial voice is a purely rhetorical device. It is the same device that authors normally use in scientific writing. To achieve objectivity, authors silence their authorial voice. Objectivity is "absence of clues to the narrator ... [a] referential illusion" (Barthes 1970:149) achieved by suppressing the emotive and conative functions of language and emphasizing the referential function (Jakobson 1960:357). In scientific writing, the authors' direct intervention is minimal if not nonexistent. Historians have worked hard at denying themselves a voice. Their narrative mode of writing puts them dangerously close to narrative fictional writers—dangerously close, that is, for anyone expected to tell a real rather than fictional story and, thus, to be more than a mere storyteller. "A narrator is no longer present [in historical writing]. ... The events appear to narrate themselves" (Benveniste 1971:206–8; see also Cohan & Shires 1988:93). His-

torical discourse is “a discourse without ‘Thou’.... In historical discourse destination-signs are normally absent” (Barthes 1970:148).

Yet, the author of Neville’s text has only partially succeeded in this. Just like Neville himself, the “real” author has left behind clues of his/her presence. The many gaps in the narrative suggest that, perhaps, the author was trying to compress the text, to summarize it. The beginning of Neville’s story is strongly marked (i.e. unusual). We do not typically start a narrative in the form: “After my wife kicked me out.” Rather, we might say: “This and that happened, then my wife kicked me out.” “A friend suggested I go to see Shelter” would be followed by “so I went.” Truly direct speech (by Neville) would also contain many utterances of the type “ehm,” “well,” “you know,” “so ... then” commonly found in colloquial discourse.¹⁹

The real author has also introduced linguistic expressions that are atypical of colloquial direct speech, particularly for low-status individuals. The complex, syntactically subordinate clauses 1 and 3 and the adverbial clause 14 seem out of character. The adjective “scared” would have sounded more realistic in Neville’s mouth than the formal synonym “apprehensive.” “I lived in my car for several weeks” would have been more likely than “I spent several weeks living in my car.” “Because I was homeless,” or “I did not have a home ... so ... my wife wouldn’t let me see my son” would have replaced the hypotactic “Being homeless.” Perhaps Neville’s text is the result of an educated writer trying hard to be Neville-like, to imitate the speech of a homeless person by putting words into the mouth of an imaginary Neville, or the result of that same type of writer tampering with the narrative (e.g. an interview) of a real Neville. The apparent contradictions noted above in Neville’s mixture of both powerful and powerless language find a plausible explanation when we take into consideration issues of authorship.

Both a structural analysis of Neville’s story and one that pays close attention to the linguistic nuances of the text have helped us shed light on the story point. The story may simply be an advertisement for Shelter rather than a male manifesto against women (or both). Indeed, the double reversal of a situation in Neville’s narrative seems to support both story points. Neville’s being kicked out of the house by his wife marks the first reversal, the first disruption of an equilibrium, the worsening of a situation characterized by homelessness and loss of family life, in a word, the beginning of tragedy. Neville’s moving into Shelter marks the second reversal, the improvement of the situation that ultimately leaves the reader on a happy-ending note. Neville’s wife plays a crucial role in this first reversal of fortunes, good→bad, which may lead to a

¹⁹That could be the result of poor transcribing, however, wherein an inexperienced interviewer has cut out many of the speaker’s colloquial utterances; for a basic introduction to the problems of transcribing ethnographic text, see Kohler Riessman (1993:56–60).

reading of the story as a male manifesto. Shelter, the organization for the homeless, plays a pivotal role in the second reversal, bad→good, which may lead to a reading of the story as an advertising text. But in this double reversal, the first reversal is backgrounded and the second foregrounded. By parallelism, Neville's story foregrounds its advertising role and backgrounds its role as a male manifesto.

Perhaps if we had more information on the context of Neville's narrative we might be able to draw firmer inferences on the story point. Under what conditions was the text produced? All we know, besides Neville's story itself, is that the story comes from *The Oxford Independent*. That information excludes a range of options as a source of the excerpt. For sure, the narrative does not come from a social science investigation of the type that Elliott Liebow (*Tell Them Who I Am*) (Liebow 1993) and Peter Rossi (*Down and Out in America*) (Rossi 1989) have masterfully put together on the subject of homelessness. Particularly in Liebow we find many excerpts of Neville's kind: "One day I was a productive and respected citizen, the next day I was dirt," says Shirley to Liebow (Liebow 1993:217). Too close for comfort? Sandford, the author of *Down and Out in Britain*, put it pungently:

I descended into the bilges of society. Wearing boots that gaped at the seams and an ancient great-coat, I allowed my beard to grow and my hair to become matted with dirt. I wanted to meet and talk with down and outs.... And I sensed a feeling of deep insecurity, the deep fear that I too might all too soon end up, derelict, on Britain's skid-row.... (Sandford 1971:9)

Not surprisingly, sociologists (and social scientists in general) have tried hard to put some distance between themselves and the people they study, both in their methods (e.g. surveys on the basis of questionnaires not directly administered by the "scientist") and in their language (e.g. talking about respondents as the "object" of study). (For a feminist critique of this last point, see Graham 1984.) What is of interest here is how science underscores objectivity at the level of language through the systematic elimination of any signs (*a*) of the subjectivity of authorship and of a direct relationship between author and reader (Barthes & Jakobson's "referential illusion"), and (*b*) of any relationship between the real authors (the "scientists") and their subjects (turned into objects) of inquiry (the double illusion of science). The development of a specialized jargon to express common concepts is another effective distance device (Lakoff 1975:53–57).

The name *The Oxford Independent* seems to suggest that the source of the excerpt is a newspaper. After all, *The Independent* is one of England's quality papers. *The Oxford Independent* could just be a local paper based in Oxford. If so, what kind of newspaper is *The Oxford Independent*? A daily, weekly, monthly? The fact that the issue is numbered (Number 12) and the fact that reference is made to a month (January), rather than a specific day (e.g. 1/3/1996)

seems to point to a monthly publication. Perhaps even more telling is the year of publication of the article (1997). Together with the place of publication (Oxford, England), this information helps to contextualize Neville's misfortune. As it turns out, Neville was far from being alone in his homeless status in those years. Although it is no simple matter to get reliable estimates of the number of homeless people, it is widely acknowledged that (a) the number increased significantly throughout the 1980s and early 1990s in England, and that (b) homelessness became more visible, with makeshift beds in subways, shop doorways, and parks.²⁰

Between 1975 and 1985, and then again in the early 1990s, the rate of unemployment soared despite changes in definitions (Gallie & Marsh 1994:3). On that score, England followed a path similar to that of other industrialized nations. What was more peculiar to England was that the policies of the Thatcher governments were systematically dismantling the welfare state, with devastating consequences for those living on the edge of poverty. As the poor were getting poorer, the richer were getting richer. Income inequality sharply rose in the United Kingdom from the late 1970s onward, reaching levels second only to those of the United States in the industrialized world (Johnson & Webb 1993; Atkinson 1997).

Why was *The Oxford Independent* running Neville's story? Could the excerpt be part of a larger reportage on homelessness? After all, one of the most compelling accounts of homelessness came from the English journalist and writer Jeremy Sandford in his book *Down and Out in Britain*, which inspired Rossi's own title. Alternatively, was the story part of a single article on homelessness? Since human-side stories are typically run around Christmas time, the date of the story (January) seems to confirm that assumption.

THE ROLE OF THE READER

On that scene of last-minute Christian pity, let us take leave from Neville and his world—the microcosm of his personal life and the macrocosm of British society at the turn of the second millennium. I could have said more, no doubt,

²⁰It is difficult to quantify precisely the extent of or increase in homelessness. The 1991 Census provided the first official record with 2,827 homeless people and 19,417 hostel dwellers (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1993). Occasional surveys suggest higher figures of 5,000–6,000 homeless (Shelter 1991) and 50,000 hostel dwellers (Connelly & Crown 1994:15). Other official statistics exclude "single" homeless people, because single homeless do not qualify for housing under the terms of the 1977 Housing and Homeless Persons Act, the 1985 Housing Act Part III, and the 1996 Housing Act. Indirect measures also provide an indicator of the increase in homelessness. For instance, between 1971 and 1986 there was a seven-fold increase in housing applications from homeless people according to official statistics (Shanks & Smith 1992:35). The number of households statutorily accepted as homeless has also increased, from 63,013 (1978) to 111,757 (1985) to 169,966 (1992).

but my page limit is up. But within those limits, I hope to have given the reader enough token evidence on why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative. The analysis of Neville's story has brought out a wealth of both linguistic and sociological information.

"The analysis of Neville's story," but, really, come now! The analysis has brought out nothing; Roberto Franzosi has, in reading Neville's narrative—one time, two times, many times, "with steadily greater selectivity and attention ... [and forming] tentative hypotheses about the nature and intention of whatever was noted" (De Beaugrande 1985:55). I have brought out that wealth of both linguistic and sociological information.²¹ And you—the reader—will have surely done the same, refracting Neville's story onto my story and ultimately building your own story.

Whatever else the analysis of Neville's story may have shown, one thing it has clearly shown: Our ability to understand and fully grasp the meaning of even such simple text as Neville's story is inextricably linked to a wealth of background knowledge that readers consciously or unconsciously bring to the text in the construction of meaning. "No knowledge without foreknowledge," the hermeneutics scholars maintain (Diesing 1991:108). Our ability to read Neville's story as an advertising text fundamentally depends upon our "foreknowledge" of advertising codes.²² Our ability to pick up the deeply ingrained male viewpoint in Neville's story depends upon our linguistic competence in teasing out meaning embedded in language nuances. Finally, our ability to go beyond Neville's microcosm depends upon our knowledge of the social relations of his macrocosm (the interplay between text and *context*).

Perhaps, when reading Neville's story, the average reader will not think of Culler, Liebow, Rossi—the linguistic and sociological paraphernalia of my own text. Eco distinguishes on this point between a "naive" and a "critical" reading of a text, "the latter being the interpretation of the former" (Eco 1979:205). There is never a single message uniquely encoded in a text; there are several messages ("a network of different messages") as decoded by different readers endowed with different "intertextual frames" and "intertextual encyclopedias," and different reading codes (Eco 1979:5).

²¹Indeed, according to hermeneutics scholars, text comprehension is an iterative process (the "hermeneutic circle"): A reader will (a) approach a text with some hypotheses in mind about the text; (b) search for evidence on those hypotheses in a reading of the text; (c) set up new hypotheses about meaning; (d) restart the reading process (Diesing 1991:109, 121). On the text and its reading, see also Rimmon-Kenan 1983:117–29, in particular 119–22, and Cohan & Shires 1988:114–33; on the dynamic of text reading as a system of hypotheses, see Perry 1979:43 and Culler 1975.

²²"Code" is the concept used by Barthes in his *S/Z* (Barthes 1990). Eco talks about "intertextual frames" and Perry of "frames" (Eco 1979; Perry 1979:36). This process of assimilating the meaning of a text through the familiar is called "naturalization" by Culler (1975:138).

The role of the reader is far from passive. Narrators and authors, of course, may try to build a “preferred” reading of their texts. Neville’s story is undoubtedly told from his point of view. For one thing, Neville is the narrator of the story. More to the point, Neville tells the story from his perspective. We know how Neville feels and what he has had to go through. But we do not know how his wife feels, the difficulties she had to face as a single parent. Had the wife told the story, she probably would not have chosen to begin it the same way as Neville, leaving out the reason for kicking him out. Perhaps the story is told from the point of view of a homeless organization in search of publicity.

Whatever the author’s “preferred” reading, readers bring in their own preferences, their own points of view. Texts are hardly ever so “closed” as to allow only one type of reading to the exclusion of all others. (On the concept of “open” and “closed” texts, see Eco 1979:8–11.) Even when they try to be, the outcome of their reading by a different “model reader” is unpredictable. “Nobody can say what happens when the actual reader is different from the ‘average’ one” (Eco 1979:8). Contrary to the structuralist view of a text as a process closed by the author in production, Culler, Eco, and others see the text as something actually produced in the reading process. “The reader as an active principle of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text” (Eco 1979:4).²³

To Neville’s text we bring our attitudes toward homelessness and gender. According to Millar (1982), in the 1970s the English public perceived homeless people as drunks, but by the 1980s they viewed them as “wandering mad people” and they blamed their presence on the streets on the closure of mental hospitals and the failure of community care. The result of an unplanned experiment has similarly revealed the role of our gender attitudes on the interpretation of texts. In discussing Neville’s text in a graduate class, the women in the class were much less likely than the men to automatically grant Neville their pity, to unconditionally take his side regardless of what he had done to deserve his present condition. They were much more likely to view the woman in the story not as a ruthless wife but as a responsible mother. Neville must have done something heinous to drive such a woman to kick him out—a wimpy character who, while looking for our sympathy, does not even have the courage to tell us what he did. It is clear from the unfolding of the story that the wife’s actions are motivated not by anger or revenge toward her husband, but only by her son’s well-being. She is certainly not using Ricky as a weapon against Neville. No, Neville’s story is just another story told by a man, in men’s image, and for men’s consumption.

²³Significantly, the first section of the “Introduction” to Eco’s collection of essays in *The Role of the Reader* bears the title “How to produce texts by reading them” (Eco 1979:3).

The point is: Understanding of even the simplest text requires a great deal of background knowledge, an “intertextual encyclopedia” in Eco’s words (Eco 1979:7, 208). In fact, some would argue that our very ability to understand, to *really* understand Neville’s story depends upon an empathetic understanding of the “other,” upon having shared the same experiences as the “other”—a distinct kind of knowledge sociologists and philosophers of knowledge have referred to as *verstehen*.

CONCLUSIONS

Historian Carlo Ginzburg closes with the following lines from a wonderful little book on the trial by the Inquisition of a poor sixteenth-century miller called Menocchio: “About Menocchio we know many things. About this Marcato, or Marco—and so many others like him who lived and died without leaving a trace—we know nothing” (Ginzburg 1982: 128). Perhaps I can close similarly: About Neville we know very little. All we know is what he has left behind in a short narrative of a moment of his life. In fact, we cannot even be sure that Neville is a real or fictitious character. We do not know what the purpose of the story is.

Yet, the linguistic analysis of Neville’s narrative has allowed us to shed light on many real lives like his. Narrative analysis has not only revealed the close relationship between the words in a text and between a text and other texts (e.g. stories and advertisements). Narrative analysis has brought out relationships between people—texts do not just index a relation between words and between texts, but between text and social reality. Sociology has crept in behind linguistics. Neville’s simple (and perhaps, fictitious) narrative has sparked our sociological imagination; it has allowed us to get a glimpse of the broad social relations (especially of gender and class) of British society at the turn of the second millennium.

That, of course, may be too brazen a claim in the eyes of the sociological “scientist.” Ginzburg and his fellow historians may deal with the life of Menocchio. Linguists may spend pages and whole tomes arguing over the structure and meaning of a four-line text. Other members of the academic community may make their living on the basis of a single story. But sociology is about discovering general laws. Sociology is a science. It is not interested in the particular; its objective is the universal.²⁴ We can hardly find any interest in this man’s life, a man we do not even know is real. Much of the sociological debate between qualitative and quantitative approaches has centered on the issue of

²⁴On these issues, see Windelband’s 1894 inaugural lecture (Windelband 1980) and Rickert—Windelband’s teacher (Rickert 1962:55–56).

sample size, of the small “N” of ethnographic approaches. The analysis of Neville’s story may just be an extreme example of the study of the particular.²⁵

That view of the sociological enterprise has led sociologists to their own way of approaching narrative texts: content analysis (for all, see Kúppendorf 1980). Notwithstanding the ethnomethodological approach to text, sociologists have typically not been interested in (nor do they have the theoretical and methodological tools for) analyzing the linguistic nuances of a text—what can one text tell them about broader social relations anyway? Nor have they been interested in the invariant, structural patterns of narrative—yes, it is patterns that sociologists are after, but not patterns of texts (that’s linguists’ business), rather patterns of social relations. (On this point, see also Todorov 1981:5–6). And in their search for patterns of social relations, they tease out of a text the common threads (“themes”)—common to the texts, but as they apply to real human beings—and then they count and tabulate those themes (how many of these, how many of those). Alternatively, they provide snippets of those common themes (think, indeed, of such beautiful accounts as Erikson’s and Liebow’s). In analyzing “respondents’ stories,” sociologists cut up individual stories and recompose the pieces into new stories, with the coherence and context of each original narrative lost and forgotten. Upon the new stories, sociologists then impose the coherence of the “scientific” ethnographic text in the context of sociological “literature.”²⁶

Yet, “precisely because they are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents’ ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished” (Kohler Riessman 1993:4). That, of course, is easier said than done. Such close analysis of a handful of short texts is possible. But where does that leave researchers confronted with large bodies of narrative data (e.g. ethnographic material or unstructured interviews)? At the current state of linguistic formalization and computer-software development, there may be no escape from one form or another of the kind of thematic analysis proposed by content analysis [even when these themes or “concepts” are represented in terms of network relations (see Carley 1993)].

Ultimately, each technique has its advantages and limitations. Researchers should be aware of what is gained and lost with the use of each technique. To the extent possible, researchers approaching the study of textual material (in

²⁵I should point out, however, that linguists have been no less interested than sociologists in building general theories and that they have been very successful in building such theories on the basis of case studies. The real issue, in fact, is not the number of cases scientists take into account in building their models, but, whether individual cases fit into a general model.

²⁶For a brief sociological introduction to narrative, see Kohler Riessman (1993) and the literature cited there; for a more ethnographic view, see Van Maanen (1988); for an epistemological feminist manifesto on narratives, see Graham (1984).

fact, not just those) should use a variety of methods. Even simple frequency-counts of words have their value when properly used and backed up by other forms of evidence and analysis. As usual, what really counts is not the methods used but the questions asked.

Given the enormous difficulties and ambiguities that we have encountered in understanding and extracting meaning from even such a simple text as Neville's story, some of the key words that appear in most definitions of content analysis—"objective," "systematic," "scientific," "quantitative," "replicable and valid inference," "explicitly formulated rules"—will strike any reasonable reader as overly optimistic if not altogether misguided (see Shapiro & Markoff 1997 for a quick summary of definitions). In light of Eco's "network of different messages," "intertextual frames," and "intertextual encyclopedias" that go into the reading process (Eco 1979:5), how could we ever hope to squeeze it all in a handbook of coding rules that did not itself look like an encyclopedia? The emphasis on "objective," "systematic," or "scientific" in the process of going from text to coding may succeed in drawing attention away from the murky waters of text understanding, but ... it does not get us any closer to finding real solutions to the problem. The scientific claims of content analysis must not refer to this central aspect of the technique but, perhaps, to other, more peripheral aspects. That is indeed the case. Lasswell, one of the "founding fathers" of content analysis, concentrated his "scientific" efforts on such issues as statistical sampling of texts, design of coding categories, validity and reliability, unit of analysis, and methods of data analysis, but did not tackle the fundamental issue of meaning [see the many chapters in *Language of Politics* dedicated to methodological issues (Lasswell et al 1968)]. Taking the part for the whole—a rhetorical device or "figure of speech" technically known as *synecdoche*, one of the four "master tropes" with metaphor, metonymy, and irony—scientists effectively generalize their scientific claims.

The debate on the sex of the angels occupied some of the most brilliant minds of the Middle Ages. Within the Christian culture of medieval European societies, that issue addressed central concerns of dominant cultural frameworks. Has the current culture of scientific or pseudoscientific discourse blinded us to the point that we actually believe some of things we are writing? (As an exercise in the rhetoric of science, count the number of times such key words as "rigor," "power," "precision," and the like appear in my published work on semantic grammars). Perhaps, in light of the themes discussed in this chapter, what we need is more "open texts," scientific texts that are open to the conditions of their own production. Hopefully, in this process of self-reflectivity, we will not have fallen prey to postmodernist gibberish, nor will we have given up an honest search for rigor in the social sciences.

The narrative analysis of Neville's story also points to a different way of looking at the relationship between the micro and the macro, the particular and

the universal. The process of contextualizing a text for narrative understanding—the foreknowledge of knowledge—quickly leads us away from Neville’s microcosm to the macrocosm of British society. That same process quickly leads us away from narrow linguistic concerns. I have provided a handful of examples on how to link a linguistic analysis to a sociological analysis, how to go from text to context, from Neville’s particular to the universal.

For sure I have picked and chosen here and there to shed light on context, selectively drawing from the “intertextual encyclopedia” of knowledge. The linkages I have explored between text and context, micro and macro, are more tentative and informative than definitive. Readers who approach narrative texts with more strongly substantive-driven problems will no doubt pursue those linkages more systematically. My goal was modest: Show the reader how to raise sociologically informed research questions and how to pursue them, rather than answer them, starting from a narrative text. Following that goal, I hope to have also shown that narrative analysis (broadly conceived here as the analysis of both linguistic and extralinguistic characteristics of speech acts) yields an understanding of social relations as embedded in linguistic practices. Many of the studies reviewed here have shed light on how specific linguistic mechanisms underline social relations of gender or class. Unlocking those mechanisms in one particular social setting may ultimately provide greater knowledge than that based on tenuous statistical relations between poorly measured and even more poorly understood concepts in the context of poorly estimated models, even if the rules on how to go from the particular to the universal are scientifically embedded in the procedures we use. (Think, for instance, of sampling statistics.) In that sense, narrative analysis may have also shown how social scientific practices involve specific language games in relation to the people we draw information from (our subjects/objects of study) and pass information to (our readers).

To the novice, all of this will surely sound like a daunting task (perhaps it is easier to let the computer run regressions). The understanding of the text has required us to zoom down on linguistic problems. The understanding of the context has required us to open up to neighboring and distant disciplines, to harness knowledge that comes from far afield. Don’t despair! The good news is that literary competence is not intuitive but learned (Culler 1975:113–30; Toolan 1988:29; Cohan & Shires 1988:22; see also Bourdieu 1984:399). And so is the “competence” of linking a narrative analysis to a sociological analysis. Just start from Statistics 101 ... sorry ... *Narrative* 101.

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