Role-Theoretic Frameworks for Narrative Analysis

David Herman
Ohio State University
Department of English, 164 W. 17th Avenue
Columbus, OH 43210-1370
herman.145@osu.edu

Abstract
In early narratological research, roles were construed as invariant semantic functions fulfilled by characters with variable surface features (e.g., both Claudius in Hamlet and Lex Luther in Superman instantiate the role of “villain”). Subsequent story analysts have drawn on a range of explanatory paradigms—including models of discourse processing, semantic and functionalist frameworks, and (socio)pragmatic theories—to develop richer accounts of roles and their bearing on narrative understanding. The present paper provides an overview of this research, arguing for the advantages of an integrative approach in which roles assume the profile of complex, multidimensional inferential constructs. From this perspective, roles in narrative are constellations of structural, semantic, and other factors any subset of which may be more or less salient, depending on the nature and distribution of the discourse cues used to trigger role-based inferences in narrative contexts. The multifacetedness of roles in stories, and the resulting need to combine multiple role-theoretic perspectives, are pertinent for emergent research initiatives concerned with “narrative intelligence” (Davis 2005; Mateas and Senger 2003).

The Roles of “Role” in Narrative Inquiry
Analysts of stories have long been concerned with the concept of “role.” Aristotle (1971) made roles parasitic on plot (muthos), arguing that characters’ qualities and functions derive from the unfolding structure of action in which they participate. Some 2,500 years later, the novelist Henry James sketched a more complicated model, suggesting a tight reciprocity between roles and plots. As James famously put it, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (Miller 1971: 37). The pendulum shifted back toward Aristotle’s position with the advent of structuralist narratology, a theory of narrative developed by theorists such as Roland Barthes (1977), A. J. Greimas (1983), and Tzvetan Todorov (1966, 1969) in the 1960s and early 1970s. Influenced in part by the Russian Formalists’ work on narrative technique (Propp 1968; Shklovskii 1990; Todorov 1965) and by Saussure’s structuralist linguistics, these early narratologists posited a distinction between narrative langue (or the system in terms of which individual stories are understood as stories) and narrative parole (or the individual narrative “messages” made possible and intelligible by that system). Specific characters are constituents of narrative parole; but roles, defined as invariant semantic functions instantiated by any number of particularized individuals, are constituents of narrative langue. Hence Barthes (1977) followed Aristotle in subordinating character to plot; uncoupled from psychological essences, roles entail modes of “doing” rather than “being.” Greimas, as discussed below, adopted the same approach in distinguishing between deep-structural roles or “actants” and the more or less well-defined characters (acteurs) fulfilling those roles. Narrative processing, from this structuralist perspective, depends on reducing or normalizing the heterogeneity of specific actors by matching each such character with a limited repertoire of basic and general roles.

In the years since the heyday of structuralism, narratology has ramified into narratologies (Herman 1999), with story analysts incorporating explanatory frameworks that either post-dated structuralist research or fell outside its original purview. In particular, students of narrative have drawn on post-Saussurean developments in language theory—including possible-worlds semantics (Margolin 1987, 1990; Ryan 1991), functional grammar (Herman 2002; Toolan 2001), and discourse analysis (Emmott 1997; Herman 2000)—in an effort to achieve greater modelling adequacy in their role-theoretic frameworks. After reviewing the structuralists’ foundational work in somewhat more detail, the remainder of this paper provides a synopsis of more recent attempts to explore structural, semantic, and other dimensions of roles in narrative. The multifacetedness of roles in stories, and the resulting need to combine multiple role-theoretic perspectives, are pertinent for emergent research initiatives concerned with “narrative intelligence” (Davis 2005; Mateas and Senger 2003). These initiatives, which seek to develop systems that emulate humans’ ability to use and understand stories, harmonize with a larger body of research in which narrative figures as a fundamental resource for structuring and comprehending human experience (Bruner 1991).

Structuralist Foundations
Roles as Actants. One of the first projects of structuralist narratology was the attempt to create a systematic framework for describing how characters participate in the
narrated action. Propp (1968) provided the basis for structuralist accounts of actants, which found their fullest expression in the work of Greimas (1983, 1987). Conceived as “fundamental role[s] at the level of narrative deep structure” (Prince 1987: 1), “actants are general categories [of behavior or doing] underlyng all narratives (and not only narratives) while [actors] are invested with specific qualities in different narratives” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 34).

Propp’s groundbreaking analysis of the “functions” performed by characters in Russian folktales furnished a precedent for this structuralist conception of actants. Defining the function as “an act of character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (1968: 21), Propp argued that many seemingly diverse functions join together to create a few, typifiable “spheres of action.” He developed a typology of seven general roles (the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero) that correspond to the ways in which characters can participate in the plot structures found in the genre of the folktale (Propp 1968: 79-80).

Greimas drew on the syntactic theories of Lucien Tesnière (1976) to recharacterize Propp’s “spheres of action” as actants. Associating actants with “narrative syntax” (Greimas 1987: 106), Greimas further argued that whereas “an articulation of actors constitutes a particular tale; a structure of actants constitutes a genre” (1983: 200). In refining Propp’s typology of general roles, Greimas initially identified a total of six actants to which he thought all particularized narrative actors could be reduced: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent (see Figure 1).

\[
\text{Sender} \rightarrow \text{Object} \rightarrow \text{Receiver} \\
\uparrow \\
\text{Helper} \rightarrow \text{Subject} \leftarrow \text{Opponent}
\]

Figure 1. Greimas’s (1983) Actantial Model

He explicated this scheme as follows: “[i]ts simplicity lies in the fact that it is entirely centred on the object of desire aimed at by the subject and situated, as object of communication, between the sender and the receiver—the desire of the subject being, in its part, modulated in projections from the helper and opponent” (1983: 207).

**Limitations of Actantial Models.** In later work, however, Greimas demoted Helpers and Opponents to positive and negative “auxiliants,” thereby raising questions about the internal coherence and modelling adequacy of the actantial framework (Herman 2002: 128-33). At issue is the appropriate number and kinds of actants for all narrative genres and subgenres, as well as the procedure for matching general actantial roles with particularized actors. The link between actors and actants, after all, is both one-many and many-one: a given character may embody more than one actantial role (in *The Incredible Hulk* comics, the Hulk is at once Subject, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent, depending on the circumstances), and a given actantial role may be realized by more than one character in a narrative (multiple characters function as Opponents vis-à-vis the Hulk).

Indeed, around the same time Greimas proposed his actantial model, William O. Hendricks (1967) revealed problems with the conceptual underpinnings of the Proppian tradition from which the model derived. An early contribution to the then-nascent field of discourse analysis, Hendricks’s study sought to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate extensions of linguistic paradigms “beyond the sentence.” For Hendricks, Propp’s function analysis constitutes an illegitimate extension because functions (e.g., “act of villainy”), like the spheres of action that informed Greimas’s actantial typology, are byproducts of a prior unstated gloss of the story being analyzed, rather than constituents of narrative discourse in the way that morphemes are constituents of words and phrases are constituents of clauses and sentences. What the structuralists left unspecified, in other words, is the procedure by which the analyst builds an initial global interpretation of the narrative being analyzed. Actantial roles, supposedly encoded in a story’s structure, are in actual fact the product of an implicit theory of what the story is about.

A paradox, related to the classic bootstrapping problem, emerges: a processor cannot assign a role to a character without already having knowledge of the overarching plot-structure of which the character is an element. Roles are needed to build up an understanding of this larger configuration, i.e., the plot; yet roles can be matched with participants only after the fact, on the basis of a fully developed plot-model that allows roles to be (retrospectively) attributed to characters in a given time-slice of the unfolding storyworld.

**From Actants to Heuristics.** For Bruner (1991), this version of the bootstrapping problem is endemic to narrative understanding: a basic feature of stories, according to Bruner, is their “hermeneutic composability,” such that comprehension of the part is contingent on an understanding of the whole and vice versa. Arguably, however, the paradox at issue is an artifact of the particular class of linguistic models on which the structuralists drew. As a rule, first-wave narratologists did not question the scalability of the linguistic paradigms that they used; they worked in a bottom-up fashion, attempting to map sentence-level units and structures to units and structures at the level of narrative discourse, begging the question about part-whole relationships between character roles and larger textual segments. Thus Greimas (1983) tried to move directly from Tesnière’s syntactic theory to a theory of discourse. Likewise, Todorov (1969) sought to correlate nouns, verbs, and predicates with characters, their actions, and their attributes.

By contrast, although he too made a structuralist category-mistake when he argued that that a narrative is
merely a long sentence (Barthes 1977: 83), Barthes (1971, 1977) also presciently suggested that roles are inferential constructs that derive from an interplay of top-down and bottom-up processing strategies. For Barthes, people’s stereotypical knowledge about the world allows them to chunk narrative discourse into action-sequences; these sequences are elements of a broader experiential repertoire based on recurrent patterns of behavior (quest, betrayal, revenge, etc.). Hence action-sequences afford heuristics for assigning roles to characters whose doings trigger the inference that the characters are engaged in some culturally salient behavioral pattern or another. When the Incredible Hulk’s behavior starts to assume the form a struggle with a villainous opponent, the classification of the unfolding events as part of a violent struggle in turn generates mapping principles by which participants in the narrated action can be slotted into a configuration of roles. If what initially seemed to be a struggle instead proves to be a playful contest, then different mapping principles will be generated by the heuristics of this alternative sequence-type. The point is that, in the post-actantial model at least hinted at by Barthes, character-to-role mappings are dynamically enabled by ongoing, moment-by-moment inferences about action-sequences, rather than deriving from unstated glosses of whole texts—i.e., from necessarily ex post facto assessments of how a particular character’s action relates to the plot as a whole. Localized roles and larger plot-configurations are thus reciprocally, rather than circularly, related to one another.

Beyond Structuralism: Perspectives from Discourse Analysis, Possible-Worlds Semantics, and Functional Grammar

In moving beyond the actantial models of the structuralists, later story analysts have built on Barthes’s suggestion that roles are the output of heuristics brought to bear on the processing of narrative texts. But these theorists have drawn on a number of analytic paradigms that were not available to Barthes himself. The present section focuses on three such explanatory paradigms: the contextual frame theory proposed by Catherine Emmott (1997), possible-worlds semantics, and functional grammar. The next section then briefly discusses a different kind of role-theoretic framework—namely, the “positioning theory” (Harré and van Langenhove 1999) developed in social psychology. According to this theory, roles, recast as positions within interactionally constructed “storylines,” arise from and make possible the situated production of discourse.

The Referential Basis of Roles: Pronouns, Participants, and Contextual Frames. Building on models of discourse processing (cf. Webber 1979; Garnham and Oakhill 1996), Emmott (1997) has developed a participant-oriented theory of narrative comprehension. The framework was designed to account for how pronominal references can be disambiguated across more or less extended stretches of narrative discourse. At issue is how even the most skeletal textual cues (he, she, it) allow specific participants to be selected from among a pool of candidate referents.

For Emmott, “contexts,” or spatiotemporal nodes inhabited by configurations of participants, constrain pronoun interpretation. Actions and events are necessarily indexed to a particular context and must be viewed within that context, even if the context is never fully reactivated (after its initial mention) linguistically. Shifts in context—e.g., shifts from a flashback to the main narrative—alter the pool of potential referents for a pronoun and may enable a pronoun to be interpreted without an antecedent. Further, information about contexts attaches itself to mental representations that Emmott terms contextual frames. A participant is said to be bound to a contextual frame, and when one particular contextual frame becomes the main focus of attention for the reader, it is said to be primed. In the case of frame modification, the same contextual frame remains primed but the frame has to be altered to reflect a change in the participant group. In frame switch, one contextual frame replaces another, while in frame recall a previously primed frame is reinstated. Emmott uses the term enactors to name the different versions of participants encountered in narrative flashbacks. Contextual monitoring is necessary to keep track of the current enactor because flashback time is not always signalled by verb aspect, for example. Indeed, there can be frame participant ambiguity (i.e., uncertainty about who is present in a context); another challenge is the monitoring of covert participants in the action (i.e., participants whose presence can be inferred but is not explicitly marked by textual cues).

In effect, Emmott’s approach focuses on the referential basis for drawing inferences about participants’ roles. Before a role can be mapped onto a particular participant, the identity of the participant needs to be established within the flow of discourse. At the same time, Emmott’s model allows for the possibility that in some instances roles may serve as a criterion for participant identity, as when a character’s behavior suggests that a given textual segment concerns enactor as rather than enactor. For example, the role being instantiated by Bruce Banner at a given point in a Hulk comic can serve to identify whether the narrative is flashing back to an earlier, pre-mutated version of Banner or whether the Banner being referred to is the one who has already been exposed to Gamma Rays.

The following two subsections shift the emphasis from the referential underpinnings of roles and role-relationships to the mapping principles by which particular roles can be assigned to particular participants, once they have been picked out referentialy.

Roles in Possible Worlds. Narrative scholars such as Dolezel (1998), Margolin (1987, 1990), and Ryan (1991) have drawn on ideas from possible-worlds semantics to develop productive role-theoretic models. For Margolin (1987), for example, a literary character can be modelled...
as a nonactual individual, or individual existing in some hypothetical, nonactual world—fictional worlds being a subclass of possible worlds. A fictional character is thus “a stipulated individual, an artificial construct, called into existence, introduced and sustained exclusively by means of a set of semiotic procedures/operations” (108). On the basis of those semiotic cues, the character can be conceptualized as a property-bearing and role-performing being located in a particular fictional world.

On the one hand, fictional characters’ property structure is only partially determined (Margolin 1990: 461); as radically incomplete beings, fictional characters like the Incredible Hulk have properties that remain indeterminate or undecided (e.g., what is the Hulk’s average resting heart-rate, or the exact circumference his left quadricep muscle?). On the other hand, the role structure underlying a set of fictional individuals is determine; or rather, the role structure will be indeterminate only to the extent that the processor of the story fails to grasp the plot of the narrative in its totality. Understanding the plot of a narrative—grasping the interrelations among characters in the world a narrative represents, and thus the very nature of that world—is tantamount to being able to fit each participant in a determinate structure of roles.

Ryan’s (1991) account of the modal structure of narrative universes throws additional light on this link between inferences about roles and narrative understanding. For Ryan, “Narrativity resides in a text’s ability to bring a world to life, to populate it with individuals through singular existential statements, to place this world in history through statements of events affecting its members, and to convey the feeling of its actuality, thus opposing it implicitly or explicitly to a set of merely possible worlds” (112). The possible worlds that orbit around the “text actual world” (= TAW), or world assumed as actual within the narrative, include a range of subworlds inhabited or at least imagined by participants, such as knowledge-worlds, obligation-worlds, wish-worlds, pretend worlds, and so on. Further, the relations among the worlds of the narrative system are not static, but change from state to state. The plot is the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe. [For] participants, the goal of the narrative game...is to make TAW coincide with as many as possible of their [subworlds]...The moves of the game are the actions through which characters attempt to alter relations between worlds. (Ryan 1991: 119-20)

Hence participant roles—and the conflicts between roles that constitute the “engine” of narrative—derive from the relations among characters’ subworlds and TAW, which of course includes other characters with their own subworlds. A villain is a participant whose attempt to bring TAW into conformity with his or her subworlds militates against the protagonist’s competing attempt to do precisely the same thing. An ally is a participant whose efforts to reconcile his or her subworlds with TAW complements the protagonist’s. Meanwhile a protagonist or villain may experience internal conflict, in effect getting caught between incompatible role possibilities, when he or she entertains competing strategies for aligning TAW with one or more subworlds. Yet even in this case the underlying role structure remains determinate; the character’s internal conflict can be discerned only within a known constellation of possible role-choices.

**Toward a Functionalist Account of Roles.** Ideas from functional grammar suggest a different heuristic basis for matching textual cues with inferences about roles. In a functionalist approach to participant roles in narrative, the key idea is the concept of the “process type.” For Halliday (1994), process types encoded in language specify preferences for assigning roles to participants involved in those processes. Functionalist accounts of how textual cues express participant roles and relations are thus grounded in two assumptions: first, that the language system enables people to construct mental models of reality as made up of processes of various types; and second, that each such process type specifies a preferred participant structure as well as a preferred set of cues for expressing it.

Table 1 presents a simplified version of Halliday’s account of process types and participant roles; Table 2 provides examples at the level of the clause. Note that whereas structuralist narratologists assumed a simple homology between clause- or sentence-level structures and features of narrative discourse, the functionalist approach assumes that process types and participant roles are scalable up to the discourse level, and furthermore that narrative genres or text-types form a crucial mediating link between sentence-by-sentence processing of narrative discourse and inferences about roles across larger textual segments (Herman 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Types</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Actor, *Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>*Senser, *Phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Carrier, Attribute, Identified, Identifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Behaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Sayer, Receiver, *Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
<td>Existent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes participants optionally involved in a process type

**Table 1. A Simplified Model of Process Types and Participant Roles (Adapted from Halliday 1994)**

Material process

*She* [Actor] *put the book* [Goal] *on the table*

Mental processes

*I* [Senser] *saw the tree* [Phenomenon];

*The tree* [Phenomenon] *pleased me* [Senser]

Relational processes
The cat [Carrier] is finicky [Attribute]; Oglethorpe [Identified] is the villain [Identifier]

Behavioral process

Oglethorpe [Behaver] grumbled

Verbal process

I [Sayer] tried to tell everyone [Target] but only Oglethorpe [Receiver] heard me

Existential process

There is a cat [Exist] by the window

Table 2. Outline of Halliday’s (1994) Process Types

Herman (2002: 136-48) uses the functionalist model to redescribe narrative genres as preference-rule systems. In each genre (epic, allegory, psychological novel, etc.), types of process and associated participant structures can be assigned preference rankings that contrast more or less markedly with the rankings that define other genres. In other words, understanding the roles of participants in a story requires situating the narrative within a larger system of narrative kinds. How a given story fits into this larger system entails stronger or weaker preference rankings for role assignments vis-à-vis participants.

Though it is highly schematic and ignores potential shifts in preference rankings over the course of a narrative, Table 3 represents interconnections among narrative genres, process types, and inferences about participant roles. For example, whereas epics preferentially code participants in terms of Actor-Goal relations (Odysseus battles the suitors for control over his home on Ithaka), allegories by contrast show a preference for relational types of process. In allegories participants are coded mainly as beings that function as exemplars of abstract qualities or traits.

Table 3. Preference Rankings for Process Types in Some Representative Narrative Genres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Genre</th>
<th>Preference Rankings for Process Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epic</td>
<td>Material &gt; Behavioral &gt; Verbal &gt; Mental &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegory</td>
<td>Relational &gt; Material &gt; Verbal &gt; Mental &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic Novel</td>
<td>Material &gt; Relational &gt; Verbal &gt; Behavioral &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Novel</td>
<td>Mental &gt; Behavioral &gt; Relational &gt; Verbal &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective Novel</td>
<td>Mental &gt; Material &gt; Relational &gt; Behavioral &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost Story</td>
<td>Mental &gt; Existential &gt; Relational &gt; Behavioral &gt; . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Preferred Role Assignments for Protagonists (by Genre)

In sum, from a functionalist perspective, the way a story relates to existing genres explains its preference for particular sorts of processes and the number and kinds of participants that they specify. Reciprocally, observing which process types predominate in a narrative triggers inferences about its generic affiliation and guides subsequent efforts to match participants with roles.

A (Socio)pragmatic Perspective: Roles as Positions

Another role-theoretic framework relevant for narrative analysis is that which has grown up around the idea of “positioning,” a concept which originated in the subfield of social psychology known as discursive psychology. Workers in this field hold that people acquire the status of psychological beings just by participating in discourse, in normatively accountable ways (Harré and Gillett 1994: 18-36).

In Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999: 1-31) account, one can position oneself or be positioned in discourse as powerful or powerless, admirable or blameworthy, etc. In turn, a position can be specified by characterizing how a speaker’s contributions are taken as bearing on these and other “polarties of character” in the context of an overarching storyline—a narrative of self and other(s) being jointly elaborated (or disputed) by participants, via self-positioning and other-positioning speech acts. For example, in a recent television interview the comedian Jon Stewart other-positioned U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney by comparing him with the Incredible Hulk. Stewart situated Cheney in a storyline that suggested inner tendencies toward aggression and rage on Cheney’s part—tendencies that might “break out” uncontrollably at a moment’s notice. Inversely, the Hulk storyline afforded a
context in which Stewart, his interviewer, and the wider television audience could match a particular kind of illocutionary force—namely, a position-assigning force—with Stewart’s speech acts. Further, the storyline in which Stewart’s joke positioned Cheney recast the broader American political scene in comic-book terms, ironically embedding the storyline of recent U.S. politics within the storyline of uncontrollable “acting-out” used to position the Hulk himself. Given the chance, Cheney would no doubt dispute Stewart’s other-positioning strategy and mode of storyline construction; a Stewart-Cheney debate would result not just in a battle of positions, but also in a war over what constitutes a legitimate way of constructing storylines and assigning positions in this context.

Redescribed as a position, then, a role is an interactional achievement grounded in the production and interpretation of discourse. The role-concept becomes Janus-faced. On the one hand, positions derive from inferences about what sort of storyline is being constructed by way of illocutionary acts; a given storyline entails specific positions. On the other hand, by monitoring an unfolding discourse for position-assigning speech acts, participants can infer what sort of storyline is being constructed, on a moment-by-moment, turn-by-turn basis.

The Need for Integration and Synthesis

In this short discussion I have reviewed only a selection of the role-theoretic frameworks developed by analysts of narrative over the past several decades. Other accounts, deriving for example from rhetorical, action-oriented, and cognitive-psychological accounts of characters in narrative, would need to be included in a fuller survey of the field. Nonetheless this sketch points up the advantages of an integrative approach in which roles assume the profile of complex, multidimensional inferential constructs. From this perspective, roles in narrative are constellations of structural, semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic factors any subset of which may be more or less salient, depending on the nature and distribution of the discourse cues used to trigger role-based inferences in narrative contexts. The processing of participant roles in complex written narratives (novels, for example) is likely to foreground structural and referential factors of the sort addressed in Emmott’s contextual frame theory and in functionalist models of roles. Such factors are likely to be less salient, however, in narratives told in contexts of face-to-face interaction. In such contexts, the exigencies of online production and comprehension create an overall bias against extended turns at talk, obviating some of the more complex referential tasks necessitated by print narratives (Herman 2004)—e.g., anaphora stretching across pages and pages of text. Indeed, in everyday storytelling a more dominant concern is apt to be how self- and other-positioning speech acts serve to build (or contest) storylines in which interlocutors assign, accede to, or dispute specific kinds of linkages between participants and roles.

In any case, as researchers continue to explore (and design systems that emulate) modes of intelligent activity—including those bound up with the production and processing of stories—they would do well to consider role-theoretic accounts of narrative. Conversely, greater familiarity with the computational modelling of roles can only benefit story analysts concerned with role-related structures and heuristics.

References


