# NARRATIVE SEMANTICS AND MOTIF THEORY

Lubomír Doležel,
University of Toronto, Canada

From the Russian poetics of the 1920's, we have inherited two different approaches to the study of narrative semantics:

a/ the Tomashevski approach /Tomashevski 1928/ which is the first version of a theory of the minimal semantic units of narrative, called motifs;

b/ Propp's approach /Propp 1928/ which is an attempt to formulate macrostructural interpretations of stories in terms of functions. In the Russian poetics, the relationship between the two approaches was never spelled out. After the war, the development of the two approaches was rather lopsided: Proppian semantics became very popular /esp. during the 1960's/ in the form of a generalized Propp model, of Lévi-Strauss's mythological model and of various psychoanalytic models; in contrast, Tomashevski's contribution to narrative semantics has not been widely recognized, although some of the important contributions of the French Structuralists are to be properly placed within the framework of Tomashevski's approach /see esp. Barthes 1966, Bremond 1966, Todorov 1969/.

The reason for the independent development of the two forms of narrative semantics lies obviously in the fact that the relationship between Tomashevski's motif and Propp's function is rather difficult to describe explicitly. It is clear that in order to arrive from the motif level to the function level, some kind of interpretive transformations are necessary; however, the exact form of these transformations is unclear. Already Propp pointed out that the interpretative transformations are context-dependent, i. e. a motif /or a motif sequence/ is interpreted as a certain function according to its role in the overall story structure; thus, for example in Propp's model of the Russian fairy-tale, the motif of "abduction" is interpreted as the function of "Villainy", or, in other words, it appears as one of the manifestations of "Villainy". However, not every "abduction" is "Villainy";

if, for example, the hero abducts his beloved from
inimical parents, no "Villainy" in Propp's sense is committed.

This example shows that the relationship between motifs
and functions cannot be described by simple generalizations.
Propp's function is not a class of semantically homogeneous
motifs; rather, semantically non-homogeneous motifs can become
manifestations of one and the same function. This situation
has led some representatives of Proppian semantics to deny
any regular and systemic relationship between the "surface"
meaning of a narrative text /expressed in motifs/ and its
"deep" macrostructural interpretation /expressed in functions
or similar concepts/; macrostructural meaning cannot be
derived /by some systematic procedures/ from the "surface"
meaning. [1] Under this assumption, Proppian semantics becomes
a subjective, purely intuitive guessing game.

Challenging this assumption does not mean eliminating
the possibility of assigning various macrostructures to
one and the same narrative text. Clearly, macrostructural
interpretations are to a high degree dependent on cultural
ideological, historical and even psychological factors. In
narrative theory, however, we have to postulate the necessity
of formulating - in each case - the interpretive trans-
formations as explicitly and systematically as possible.
Only if this postulate is satisfied, macrostructural
interpretations are defensible /can be falsified/ and a
distinction between interpretations and misinterpretations
can be made.

This paper will not be devoted to the problem of interpretive
transformations; [2] rather, I would like to bring out the point
that the application of interpretive transformations is
impossible if the "surface" meaning of narrative texts has
not been analyzed. In other words, a theory of the "surface"
meaning is a necessary precondition for macrostructural
interpretations. This assumption leads us back to Tomashevski's
programme and, in fact, justifies the integration of this

programme into narrative semantics. Tomashevski's semantics and Propp's semantics appear as complementary parts of an integrated semantic theory of narrative texts.

Tomashevski's semantics - i. e. theory of narrative motifs - will answer certain questions which are of fundamental importance, in particular: a/ What is the set of possible states and events that enter into the formation of stories? b/ What is the set of narrative individuals and in what kind of "roles" they participate in the narrated states and events? Obviously, such "classical" categories of narrative as "description", "narration", "character" etc. should be explained in the framework of the motif theory. By specifying the necessary elementary categories of stories, motif theory will not only pave the way for the macrostructural interpretations, but also offer its own interesting insights into story structuring.

In accordance with Tomashevski's concept, motif can be defined as semantic representation of the "nucleus" of narrative sentence. Each simple and complete narrative sentence manifests a motif. [3] Assuming that the semantic representation of a sentence nucleus is to be based on its logical form /Harman 1972:25/, we shall represent motif as a predicate accompanied by one or more arguments: Pred. $/Arg._1,...Arg._n/$. Semantic interpretations of this logical form will yield a system of motifs which should correspond to our pre-theoretical categories /"descriptive motifs", "action motifs", etc./.

One way of interpreting semantically the logical form of sentences was offered by the linguistic theory of "case grammar". [4] In its original form /Tesnière 1959, Fillmore 1966/, "case grammar" specified the arguments of the logical form in terms of a universal class of "deep cases" /Agentive, Instrumental, Dativ, etc./, while the Pred. expression remained uninterpreted. In subsequent developments /see, esp. Chafe 1970, Halliday 1970/, the Pred. expression was interpreted and different "case frames" were assigned to different semantic

categories of the predicate. Thus Chafe distinguished /as
his basic categories/ predicates of state, process and
action, while Halliday those of action, mental process
and relation.

While offering a set of interesting semantic categories,
"case grammar" is, in principle, unsatisfactory as a basis
of motif theory /cf, van Dijk 1973:164f./. "Case grammar"
has been a semantics of isolated sentences, while motif
theory is to be a text-type semantics. This postulate
becomes obvious, if we consider some simple examples. In
isolation, a sentence like John died is ambiguous, since
it can describe a set of fundamentally different events:
"John died of natural causes", "John died in an accident",
"John was killed by somebody", "John committed suicide".
Since it is precisely the specific character of John's
death which is of narrative significance [5] a motif theory
must be capable of distinguishing the various events which
are described by the ambiguous sentence. A similar example
has been already discussed by Davidson /see Davidson 1971:6/.
The sentence John spilled the tea can be interpreted in
three ways: as an intentional action of John, as an unintended
accident and as a consequence of somebody else's action. No
semantics of isolated sentences can disambiguate these and
similar event descriptions and assign different semantic
representations to the different possible "readings".

And the other hand, such problems have been extensively
discussed in contemporary theory /logic, philosophy/ of action.
Consequently, it has been claimed /van Dijk 1974/75, Doležel
1976/, theory of action is of major significance for narrative
semantics. Narrative semantics cannot make a substantial
progress, unless the problems and the results of the theory
of action are fully absorbed. On the other hand, we can
expect that a developed semantics of narrative motifs will
throw some light on the complicated problems of the general
theory of action.

In the classical form - which, in my opinion, still
retains its essential validity - theory of action was
formulated by Georg H. von Wright /see esp. von Wright
1963, 1968/. The essence of von Wright's approach consists
in his logical analysis of the concept of event. Event is
defined as change of an initial state into an end-state.
Action is then a specific category of event.

Thus, in von Wright's theory, the concepts of state, event
and action represent the fundamental categories; our claim
is that these are also the fundamental categories of motif
theory. The categories can be introduced in the following
way:

1. Let us consider world $U_1$ whose individuals - called
Objects - have no ability to change and no ability to bring
about change. In this world, the Pred. expression of the
motif structure will be interpreted as State. Motifs of
the form State $/Arg._1, \dots Arg._n/$ [6] shall be called descriptive
motifs.

2. Let us expand world $U_1$ into world $U_2$ by introducing
an individual - called Natural Force /NF/ - that has the
ability of bringing about changes in Objects, but itself
cannot be affected by any change. A change brought about by
NF shall be called Natural Event /N-Event/. When interpreting
the Pred. expression as N-Event, we obtain a new form of
motifs: N-Event $/Arg._1, \dots Arg._n/$. Motifs of this form are
N-event motifs.

3. World $U_2$ is expanded into world $U_3$ by the addition of
an individual called Agent. Agent is such an individual that
can bring about intentional changes in Objects and also in
himself. Speaking about intentional changes means that we
relate somehow the bringing about of the change /the event/
to a mental state /or event/ called intention; and this, in
turn, means that Agent is an individual that can be assigned
mental properties. As a result, world $U_3$ permits two new
semantic interpretations of the Pred. expression: Action

/bringing about a change of state intentionally/ and Mental
State / Event. Motifs with the former predicate are called
action motifs, those with the latter one - Ment-state or
Ment-event motifs.

4. World $U_4$ is a world where more than one individual
of the type Agent is present. For theoretical purposes, we
can use two-agent world as representative of $U_4$. In $U_4$, a
new semantic interpretation of the term Pred. is possible,
namely Interaction. Motifs with this predicate shall be
called interactional motifs.

Descriptive, N-event, action, interactional and mental
motifs are the basic classes of elementary semantic units
of narrative. A detailed investigation is needed in order
to justify and develop this motif system. Here, I can do
no more than to point to some crucial problems which require
further study:

1. N-event motifs. N-event motifs are descriptions of
changes which are brought about by an inanimate Natural
Force which can be, in principle, identified with the laws
of nature. These events can affect both Objects /in world
$U_2$/ and Agents /in world $U_3$ and $U_4$/. The difficulty with
the concept of Natural Force [7] lies in the fact that rarely
or, perhaps, never an expression corresponding to this
argument appears in the surface structure of sentences;
rather, we find there nominal phrases with natural
phenomena lexemes, such as wind, storm, sea, etc. In a
typical case, these lexemes are to be semantically interpreted
as natural instruments, while the underlying Natural Force is
treated as the prime "Causer": John was killed by lightning
/lightning is the instrument of NF/. A strong evidence for
this analysis is offered by Russian sentences of the type:
Ivana ubilo molnijej where the surface cases reflect most
directly the underlying argument structure and the impersonal
form of the verb is the result of a special transformation

triggered by the argument NP. /It is impossible to say:
*Ivana ubilo avtomobilem, since avtomobil' cannot be
interpreted as natural instrument./

2. Action motifs. Intentionality is crucial for the
concept of action /cf. Meiland 1970, 38-43/, but a purely
linguistic analysis of action sentences has difficulties in
expressing it in its system of "deep cases". For action
theory - and motif theory as well - the main question is:
when can we say that an Agent acted intentionally and when
is such a description inappropriate? I would like to argue
/in contrast, for example, to Brennenstuhl 1975: 183-185/
that the Agent is "responsible" /in the widest sense for
both his successful and unsuccessful actions. A successful
action is such an action where the Agent achieved the intended
end-state. If the intended end-state is not achieved, but
instead another end-state is achieved, the action is un-
successful. We say that an accident happened. [8] There is
a variety of accidents /not necessarily harmful to the Agent/,
but all of them are to be considered "by-products" of
intentional acting. It has no sense, in my opinion, to call
accidents "non-actions" /Brennenstuhl, op. cit./, or to
treat the Agent as "Force" in the semantic representation of
accidents /Huddleston 1970: 505/. Since accidents very often
play a crucial role in the structuring of stories, the study
of motifs of narrative accidents is of major significance for
narrative semantics.

3. Interactional motifs. Interaction is a symmetrical
exchange of acts where two /at least two/ individuals
alternate in the roles of Agent and Patient: John hit Paul.
- Paul hit John. [9] Agent is the individual whose Action
brings about the change of state; Patient is the individual
whose state is changed by the Action. Thus, in Interaction,
the change of state brought about by the Agent is identical
with the effect produced in the Patient. Since both Agent
and Patient are necessary arguments of Interaction, the only

way for an individual to escape the role of Patient is to
abandon the interactional exchange.

Interaction is the most complex category of events and -
because of its complexity - it assumes a central role in
stories. It cannot be explained by the models of acting
which are valid in the one-agent world /world $U_3$/; rather,
a special theory of narrative Interaction is to be developed.
This theory has to take account of the fact that Interaction
each individual pursues its own intentions. Various modes
of Interaction - ranging from cooperation to conflict -
can be defined on the basis of the relationships between
the intentions of the participating individuals /see
Doležel, forthcoming/.

4. Mental motifs. Mental states and events of acting
characters have been always of great interest for narrative
theory, being usually treated under the label of "psychology".
We have to emphasize, however, that in stories mental motifs
have no autonomous character, but are always related to actions
and interactions. [10] The category of mental events presents a
special difficulty for semantic analysis, because of the un-
certainty about their intentionality. Whereas some mental events
such as computation or argumentation, are clearly controlled by
intention, other Ment-events seem to happen spontaneously, not
unlike Natural events. In a language like Russian, it is
possible to distinguish between ja choču and mne chočetsja, the
first phrase being close to an action description, the second
one to an N-event description. Narratives have widely utilized
these alternative modes of description, presenting the
mental life as either controlled by the acting character's
intentions, or as a spontaneous "stream-of-consciousness",
thus, in fact, exposing different "philosophies of mind".

I have emphasized that the problems of a systematic motif
theory are too complex to be given a satisfactory treatment
in a brief paper. What seems clear, however, is the fact
motif theory can contribute substantially to our understanding

of the structures and meanings of stories. The "surface"
meaning of stories is much richer than Proppian semantics has
been ready to acknowledge. It is likely that when this
richness has been fully explored, the models of Proppian
interpretations will have to become much richer themselves.


Footnotes:

[1] This assumption was explicitly formulated by A. Dundes
/see Dundes 1975/.

[2] In Dolezel /1976/ narrative modalities have been proposed
as the theoretical basis of these transformations.

[3] Tomashevski's concept of motif is essentially different
from the well-known usage of the term in folkloristic
and comparative studies; there, motif is "the smallest
element of narrative which has the power to be preserved
in the tradition" /"das kleinste Element einer Erzählung,
das die Kraft hat, sich in der Überlieferung zu erhalten"
Lüthi 1962/. This concept of motif is necessarily historical.

[4] The link between the logical form of sentences and the
"case grammar" is quite obvious in light of Fillmore's
statement: "The propositional core of a simple sentence
consists of a 'predicator' ... in construction with one
or more entities, each of these related to the predicator
in one of the semantic functions known as /deep structure/
'cases'" /Fillmore; 1971:37/.

[5] Thus, for example, natural death or suicide is a common
ending of stories, whereas violent death is usually just
the beginning of a story.

[6] To simplify our exposition, we leave the argument
expressions uninterpreted; obviously, they should be
interpreted - in a proper way - in terms of individuals
of the corresponding worlds.

[7] The concept of Natural Force has been accepted into some

system of "case grammar" /Huddleston 1970, Nilsen 1973/;
however, a negative assessment was given by Fillmore
/Fillmore 1971:44/.

[8] If an Agent drives his car to his office and reaches this
office /the intended end-state/, his action is successful;
is on his way he hits a pole and winds up in a hospital
/unintended end-state/, an accident happened.

[9] The symmetry is a fundamental property of interacting
simpliciter. If some restrictions /for example, power
restrictions/ are imposed in world $U_4$, an individual
can be prevented from responding in accordance with this
symmetry. Such ans similar restrictions, however, are
not inherent in Interaction and have to be explained in
other /for example, deontic/ terms.

[10] The relationship between mental motifs and action or
interaction motifs can be studied on the model of
practical reasoning /see, for example, Apostel 1976/.

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