

The Importance of Comparison And Contrast in Narrative Organization

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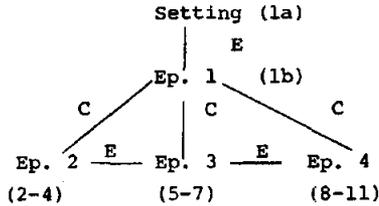
Visitors to our household in the past couple of years have run the risk of being regaled with corny comic stories told with great gusto by my two children. Two of these stories, transcribed from recent tellings, follow. Although the conditions of recording (by note pad) produced slower, more cautious, tellings than would have occurred in a spontaneous setting, the stories do not seem to me substantially altered from earlier versions, partly because the children are much practised in their telling. The only important change, suggested by me, was the loss in each story of the national identity of the characters; this was to avoid perpetuating a subtle form of prejudice, which associates one nationality with stupid or unsociable behavior. Needless to say, though my children were the narrators, they were not the originators of the stories.

The first was told by my daughter, Alice, aged 10, the other by my son, Richard, aged 12; for convenience of reference, I have inserted sentence numbering wherever the transcription naturally permits it:

1. (1) There was once three men, Fred, Bill and Joe, who entered a competition who could stay in a pigsty with lots of pigs for the longest amount of time. (2) First of all went in Fred, and he stayed in for ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour. (3) "Pooh stinky, fresh air!" (4) He came out. (5) Then went in Bill, and he stayed in for ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour, forty minutes, fifty minutes, one hour. (6) "Pooh stinky, fresh air!" (7) He came out. (8) Then went Joe, and he was like a tramp and was rather smelly. (9) He stayed in for ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, forty minutes, fifty minutes, sixty minutes, one hour ten minutes, one hour twenty minutes, one hour thirty minutes, one hour forty minutes, one hour fifty minutes, two hours. (10) The pigs come out. (11) "Pooh stinky, fresh air!"
2. (1) There were three men who were called Fred, Bill and Joe, and they were caught by a firing squad and they were all going to be shot. (2) So Fred was brought out and all the firing squad lined up ready to shoot him. (3) As they were about to press

their triggers, he cried "Tornado!" (4) And the firing-squad all ran off thinking there was a tornado and he escaped. (5) Then Bill was brought out. (6) As the firing squad lined up he shouted "Hurricane". (7) And the firing squad all ran off thinking there was a hurricane, and he escaped. (8) Last of all Joe was brought on. (9) As the firing squad lined up he shouted "Fire!" (10) And they shot him.

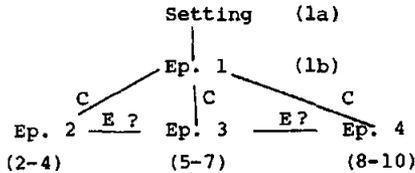
Work on narrative has tended to concentrate on its most salient feature: the sequencing of event-statements in episodes. Darnton (this volume) cites a representative selection of writers who have studied narrative from this perspective and makes her own contribution to such studies. It is quite possible to analyse both the comic tales quoted on the lines suggested by Darnton. The first might look as follows:



Diag. 1 - Pig competition: causal chain.

This analysis treats the second part of sentence as initiating the narrative and therefore separate from the setting. It also assumes that the leaving of the pig-sty by one man enables, but does not directly cause, the entering of the pig-sty by the next.

The second story can be similarly represented:



Diag. 2 - Firing Squad

Indeed the representation is not just similar; it is virtually identical. Again, it assumes that the vacating of the place of execution by one would-be victim enables the next to be brought out. But the connection is not strong and a convincing case might equally be made for there being no connection (in Darnton's terms, an F relation) or a strong causal connection (a C relation). The latter would require one to see the second and third plans as prompted by the success of the previous one(s); Richard has on occasion told the story in such a way as to make this explicit. The former case would point to the possibility that what we have are three independent stories which could have been told in any sequence, the place of execution being of no significance.

This uncertainty aside, though, the analysis in terms of Darnton's adaptation of Trabasso et al (1984)'s system is revealing in a number of respects. It shows how the stories are built on the same pattern of threes and suggests a recurrent pattern for comic stories. But it is not, and cannot be, complete.

Darnton is aware of this. She notes that causal connections are insufficient to account for the complexity of all narratives and cites *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle as an example of a story whose interest-value for children derives not primarily from the sequencing of the episodes, which is as simple as a young child's (as she demonstrates), but from the complexity of the matching relationships that hold between these episodes. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the nature of these relationships and offer an approach to the analysis of narratives that will complement that of Darnton's.

First, some definitions. Winter divides the relations that semantically organise text into two broad classes: (logical) sequence and matching relations (Winter 1974, in particular; Hoey, 1983). Sequence relations include time sequence, cause-consequence, and instrument-achievement and are central to the description of narrative. They are characterised by the fact that the reader or hearer needs to interpret one part (or member) of the relation as logically or temporally prior to the other.

In matching relations, on the other hand, neither part is prior to the other in time or logic. Instead the reader has to interpret each part of the relation as clarifying how the other part is to be understood. Examples of matching relations include contrast, comparison, exemplification, and, at their most simple, topic maintenance.

Since it is hypothesised by Winter and others that sequence and matching relations together organise all text, it is in itself neither surprising nor particularly interesting that matching relations can be shown to be present in narratives. What is perhaps of interest is that two of these relations, contrast and compatibility, can be shown to be central to our sense of what makes a narrative acceptable.

Contrast and compatibility relations can be identified in a number of ways. In the first place, they frequently manifest parallelism of structure and systematic repetition. Take for example the following pair of sentences, from a scientific paper:

3. When the normal stress component is directed outward from the surface (tensile stress), it is defined as positive. Directed inward from the surface (compressive stress) it is defined as negative.

(from Cochrane, T. et al, 1981)

We can represent these diagrammatically in such a way as to spell out the hidden generalisation or constant that underlies both:

	When the normal stress component is directed	outward	from the surface	(tensile stress)	it is defined as	positive
	Directed	inward	from the surface	(compressive stress)	it is defined as	negative
Constant	When the normal stress component is directed	in a direction	from the surface	(type of stress)	it is defined as	positive or not
Variable	-	in/out	-	which type	-	yes/no

The parallelism is sometimes less obvious than this. Consider the following extract from Ernest Hemingway's *A Day's Wait*.

4. That's a different thermometer. On that thermometer 37 is normal. On this kind it's 98.

Here we have to modify the wording slightly to demonstrate the contrast relation. In the diagram that follows, square brackets indicate ignored wording, and italics indicate inserted wording:

	On that kind of thermometer	37	is normal
	On this kind of thermometer	[it's] 98	[that] is normal
Constant	On each kind of thermometer	a temperature	is normal
Variable	which kind	which temperature	-

The Hemingway example also illustrates the second way in which contrast and compatibility relations may be recognised - by a class of signals that specify the relation in advance, in retrospect, or in the midst of it (Winter, 1977). In this case, it is the item **different** which anticipates the contrast that immediately follows. Other items that serve the same function are **alike, compare, compatible, contrary, contrast, dissimilar, opposite, same, similar, and unlike** (from which the reader will be able to infer that this sentence is in a compatibility relation with the previous sentence.) This list is however only suggestive and in no way comprehensive.

Related items are the subordinators and conjuncts. Signals of contrast and compatibility of this kind include **although, whereas, and while**, as examples of subordinators and **again, also, here again,**

however, in comparison, likewise, on the contrary, on the other hand, similarly, and yet. Again, the list is only suggestive; it should also be noted that these items have rather different functions and are not to be taken as synonymous. Nevertheless they all serve the function of signalling contrast and compatibility in texts.

The third way these relations can be recognised is to see what questions are being answered by the sentences under consideration. Thus we can project example 3 into dialogue as follows:

5. D(iscourse): When the normal stress component is directed outward from the surface (tensile stress), it is defined as positive.
Q(uestion): How does this compare with when it is directed inward?
or (more simply)

How about when it is directed inward?

D: Directed inward from the surface, (compressive stress), it is defined as negative.

Similarly example 4 can be projected into dialogue as follows:

6. D: On that thermometer 37 is normal.
Q: How about this thermometer?
D: On this kind it's 98.

Another way of using questions is to compare the question that elicits one piece of text with the question that elicits another. If they match in detail, then so must the pieces of text. Thus

On that thermometer 37 is normal

and

On this kind it's 98

are both elicited by the question

What's normal for this/that thermometer?

Since the question varies only in the determiner used, the sentences elicited must match. This way of using questions is particularly useful for establishing connections between non-adjacent bits of text; neither this nor the previous use of questions should however be confused with the questions a real reader might ask of a text in

real time.

Armed with these analytical tools, we can return to our two comic narratives. The first of these shows close parallelism between sentences 2, 5 and 8a and 9:

	First of all	went in	Fred,	and he stayed in for	... half and hour
	Then	went in	Bill,	and he stayed in for	... one hour
	Then	went	Joe...	He stayed in for	... two hours
Constant	At some point	went in	one of the men	He stayed in for	a certain time
Variable	when	-	which	-	how long

There is a similar parallelism marking compatibility between sentences 4 and 7, and marking contrast between these and sentence 10:

	He	came	out
	He	came	out
	The pigs	came	out
Constant:	Someone	came	out
Variable:	who	-	-

and of course there is total identity of sentences 3, 6 and 11, with an inferred change of speaker(s) on each occasion.

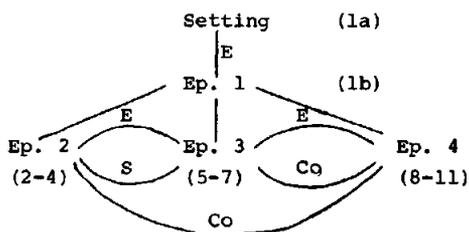
This matching of detail creates a matching of episodes that can be represented in a matrix form (for further discussion of this means of representing episodes, see Coulthard & Hoey, forthcoming):

	Fred	Bill	Joe
Who went in?	(2a)	(5a)	(8)
How long did they stay in?	(2b)	(5b)	(9)
Who came out?	(4)	(7)	(10)
What did they say?	(3)	(6)	(11)

The matrix shows, amongst other things, that the final episode contrasts not only in detail as already shown in diagrams 1 and 2, but also in manner of telling. Whereas, for Fred and Bill, the answers to the first two questions are conjoined by **and**, for Joe the two answers are not structurally connected and have accordingly been given separate sentence status in the transcription. Furthermore sentence 8 contains secondary setting information concerning the appearance and personal hygiene of Joe, information that is not paralleled in the earlier episodes.

Finally, in the Joe episode, the answers to the third and fourth question are reversed, the order here in fact being the more normal. These changes can be related to the fact that the peak of a narrative is frequently linguistically marked as such (Longacre, 1983), though changes of this kind are not included as markers of peak in the checklist that Longacre provides.

In the light of such an analysis, diagram 1 can now be modified to take account of the matching relations that also exist between the episodes. (We shall use S to mark similarity/compatibility relations and Co to mark contrast relations):



Diag. 3

Before considering the implications of this diagram, it may be helpful to look at the organisation of our other story, about the firing squad. In this story, the repetition is slightly more complex but still establishes a matching pattern between the episodes. First, we have a matching of similarity between sentences 2b, 6a, and 9a:

..	all the firing squad	lined up	ready to shoot him
	the firing squad	lined up	∅
	the firing squad	lined up	∅

Here it is the first episode that is differently told in that the lining up of the firing squad is given independent clause status on only its first occurrence and the squad's readiness to shoot is left to be inferred in subsequent episodes. The reasons for this seem to relate to the novelty of the information on the first occasion and its expectedness on each subsequent occasion. As a consequence of this difference of telling, the first episode also differs somewhat in the way it reports the next event:

	As they were about to press their triggers	he cried	"Tornado"
	As the firing squad lined up	he shouted	"Hurricane"
	As the firing squad lined up	he shouted	"Fire"
Constant:	As the firing squad prepared itself for the execution	he shouted (cried is synonyms in this context)	"Violent natural phenomenon"
Variable	What stage of preparation	-	which

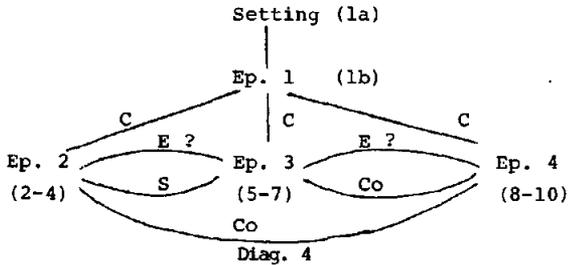
But the differences are trivial compared with the strength of similarity, which shows the sentences to be strongly matched. This strong matching is strongly maintained between sentences 2a, 5, and 8, and between sentences 4 and 7. Overall, then, the episodes can be shown to be matched as in the following matrix:

	Fred	Bill	Joe
What happened to the man	2a	5	8
What did the firing squad do?	2b, 3a	6a	9a
How did the victim-to-be attempt to solve his problem?	3b	6b	9b
What was the effect on the firing squad?	4a	7a	10
Was the ruse successful?	4b	7b	10

It will be seen that the third episode differs in that it

answers both the fourth and fifth questions in a single sentence. In this, and in the sentence's terseness, there would appear to be some marking of peak; change in sentence length is in fact one of the markers of peak listed by Longacre (ibid.).

If we represent this story in diagrammatic fashion, we arrive at a virtually identical diagram to that found for the pigsty story:



It will be noticed that the doubt we felt about the nature of the causal connections between the three episodes disappears entirely when we consider the matching relations. The reality is that for both these stories the causal connections between episodes are secondary to the relations of similarity and contrast. (Of course the causal connections within episodes remain as crucial as ever.) Thus an augmented descriptive system for narrative will need to incorporate the fact that matching relations are often central to our understanding of what makes narratives tick.

But not all are matching relations. It is not the similarity relations but the contrast relations that are crucial here.

Although the similarity relation between episodes 2 and 3 of each story is important in establishing the pattern that is to be broken by the final episode, in both cases the joke could be told, albeit much less effectively, without the 'Bill' episodes. Without the 'Joe' episodes, on the other hand, there would not only be no joke but little in the way of a 'tellable' story.

The two jokes we have analysed exemplify the way contrast makes stories tellable, but of course they do not reflect the range of ways in which contrast may function in narrative. Contrasts need

not feature different characters nor are they exclusively associated with jokes. Consider for example the following extract from **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** by Eric Carle (analysed in terms of its causal chain by Darnton in this volume).

- (1) On Monday he ate through one apple.
- (2) But he was still hungry.
- (3) On Tuesday he ate through two pears, but he was still hungry.
- (4) On Wednesday he ate through three plums, but he was still hungry.
- (5) On Thursday he ate through four strawberries, but he was still hungry.
- (6) On Friday he ate through five oranges, but he was still hungry.
- (7) On Saturday he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon.
- (8) That night he had a stomachache.

Three sentences later we are told 'now he wasn't hungry any more...'

It should be apparent without the need for detailed demonstration that the **Saturday** sentence contrasts in a number of respects with the sentences in the series previously established. What is eaten is not fruit and is heterogeneous; further, the series would have predicted six items of food, but we are told of ten. Here is also an implied contrast between the repeated **But he was still hungry** in sentences 1-6 and the absence of such a statement in sentences 7 and 8. This contrast is made explicit finally in **Now he wasn't hungry any more**.

This kind of contrast, marking a reversal of some kind over time, is perhaps one of the most common kinds in narrative and would repay further study. In the story **Alfie Gets in First**, analysed by Darnton in this issue, we find, for example, an extension to the description so far given.

Early in the story we are told:

Alfie didn't know how to open the door from the inside.
The catch was too high up (p.13).

At the end, we have:

The front door suddenly opened and there was Alfie! He had managed to reach the catch and turn it - like that - after all (p.27).

Although there is substantial lexis in common between the two passages, it is not possible to represent the contrasts in terms of diagrams such as were used for the two jokes and as could have been used in the analysis of **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**. Thus we have to extend our analysis of contrast between sentence and inference.

The contrast in this case relies on necessary inferences. Thus **Alfie didn't know how to open the door** necessarily gives rise to the inference 'The door didn't/wouldn't open'. It is this inference that

The front door suddenly opened
contrasts with.

Likewise

The catch was too high up
requires the inference that

'Alfie could not reach the catch' and, again, this inference is what the clause

He had managed to reach the catch contrasts with.

In adult fiction, the contrasts may be harder to isolate. Perhaps some development of the matrix system described earlier in this paper will prove an appropriate way of isolating and representing contrasts of reversal. But whatever method of representation and analysis is used, their presence in much fiction - and importantly their centrality - is difficult to deny.

What I hope has been demonstrated in this short paper is that we need to consider not only the sequence of episodes in a narrative and their causal connections but also their similarity and contrast relations, if we are to account for what makes at least some stories 'tellable'.

Texts quoted:

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