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Greimas's structural approach to the analysis of self-narratives

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This paper introduces a formal procedure for analyzing narratives that was developed by the French/Lithuanian structuralist, A. J. Greimas. The focus is on demonstrating the utility of Greimas's ideas for analyzing one aspect of personal narratives: identity-construction. Reconstructing the basic actantial structure from self-narratives is shown to provide cues to power differentials among actants as perceived by the narrator. Distinguishing narrated events along conflict versus communication axes helps the analyst determine whether an experiential or a discursive domain is of primacy for the narrator. Moreover, investigation of communicative outcomes can be used to validate (or invalidate) findings on power relations. Analyses of narrative plots may afford insights into how people engage objects with cultural valuations within the various social contexts recounted in narrative data. Finally, Greimas's theory of modalities can be used to differentiate among these plots within narrative trajectories. This approach to narrative analysis differs from more traditional "denarrativization" and "renarrativization" approaches in that it affords the researcher a language (or discursive structure) according to which the narrator's, not the analyst's, understandings of character relations and reality conditions become the subject matter of one's research.

Keywords: Narrative, Actantial Model, Self, Identity, Modality

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In analyzing narrative data, the grounded theory approach has traditionally been sociologists' method of choice. This approach characteristically entails what Somers (1994) calls a *denarrativization* of narrated experiences – a process of extracting from narrative data a set of atemporal sociological categories that are then portrayed as reflecting the texts' discursive structure. Analysts of this style usually resort to sociological or psychological categories external to the analyzed texts for a final causal explanation. For example, such tendencies can be found in Cooper's (2000) research into the structuring power of gender and labor institutions, and May's (2000) and Gimlin's (2000) evidence for the need to sustain a positive self-identity. In a similar vein, social constructionist analysts emphasize the importance of institutional settings, such as a judicial court or a workplace, and the tension between the structuring force of the situation and the contingent repertoires of the speaking subject (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Harré & Gillet, 1994; Hermans & Kempen. 1993; Edwards, 1997). In all of these cases the integrity of texts is rendered servile to a sociological or psychological meta-discourse. Differently put, denarrativizations involve "making sense" of texts by interpreting them in accordance with a privileged meta-discourse. As a consequence, denarrativizations have as typical disadvantages that their results are neither generalizeable across texts nor free of researchers' theoretical convictions. Although the predominant approach in sociology for analyzing self-narratives, denarrativizations are inevitably *ad hoc* or *post hoc*, yielding as many interpretations of a text as the number of distinct meta-discourses applied to it.

A second style of analysis, *renarrativization*, involves situating narratives within a historical context. Instead of "making sense" of narratives within a meta-discourse, sociologists who adopt this style (e.g., Griffin, 1993; Heise, 1989; Franzosi, 1994, 1998; Jacobs, 1996) apply operational procedures for "revealing facts" presumed to be embedded within the texts. For instance, consider Griffin's (1993) analysis of texts describing a Mississippi lynching that occurred in 1930 – an analysis in accordance with Heise's (1989) event structure analysis procedure. The research goal in this study was to reconstruct from fragmentary historical documents a chain of events that is sociologically plausible (i.e., that is believable, despite the potentially distorting perspectives of those who authored the documents) by using techniques such as counterfactual questioning. Also of the renarrativization style, Franzosi's (1994) approach to narrative analysis uses a semantic grammar that contains a single narrative template: Subject – Action – Object. The primary objective of this approach is to reveal hidden aspects of an external reality (namely, "who did what to whom [or

what]") that are not immediately evident in the narrative texts but that can be gleaned via quantitative aggregation of information across narratives. In both Griffin and Heise's and Franzosi's narrative analyses, an assumed reality (what happened) is granted a privileged status relative to the texts not unlike the status of a meta-discourse in denarrativization approaches. However, in renarrativization it is causal-(socio)logical consistency that enables the researcher to distinguish valid parts of the texts from parts likely to be in error. In other words, the researcher's texts only become valid after being reintegrated (or renarrativized) into a social-historical metanarrative, the believability of which is the researcher's role to certify.[1]

This paper introduces a formal narrative analysis procedure developed by the French/Lithuanian structuralist, A. J. Greimas. What distinguishes Greimas's approach from denarrativization and renarrativization is its grounding in a structural framework that is sufficiently generic to allow each narrative to "drive" not only the relations among actants within it but also the actantial positions that its characters may take from one moment to the next.[2] Our purpose is not to offer any sweeping generalization about the "true structure" of narratives, but to introduce a third method of narrative analysis to supplement the more commonly used denarrativization and renarrativization approaches just described. As will be shown, Greimas's method has great potential for depicting characters' narrative *positions*, *links* among these positions, and the *trajectories* of narratives' utterance-sequences. In this paper we make these points

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1.   In renarrativizations social actors are typically interpreted in accordance with stable social categories, and are "allowed" only actions that are believable from members of groups associated with these categories. Since identity construction is likely to involve shifts among social categories, renarrativizations are unlikely to be appropriate for analyzing narratives like the one analyzed in this paper – a narrative in which the author describes the process of her own identity construction.

2.   Greimas is not the only person to apply a structural approach in analyzing narratives. For example, Jacobs's (1996) analysis of "narratives of civil crisis" in the case of the Rodney King beating is guided by a pre-established narrative scheme derived from the four literary genres proposed by Frye (1954). By allowing the narratives to drive his findings, Jacobs shows differences and similarities in mainstream versus African American newspapers' portrayal of both the event and the ways that subsequent events were rendered meaningful. In particular, he provides evidence that events' (esp. tragic versus romantic) literary genre is associated with their inclusion in or exclusion from reports appearing in each type of newspaper. Rather than working with categories broad enough to span entire literary genres, Greimas used a much more fine-grained approach.

while demonstrating the utility of Greimas's ideas for analyzing one aspect of personal narratives: identity-construction. The demonstration is made in the process of analyzing a single personal narrative that appeared in 1974 in the *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party in China). This narrative was chosen as typical of a popular genre in the mid-1970s' Chinese mass media – a genre that had become well-established by the time of its publication, namely eight years into the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Actantial models and actantial analysis

Linguists have developed two types of models for analyzing narrative data: the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. Syntagmatic models are sequential in nature. For example, in his classic analysis of Russian folktales, Propp (1968 [1928]) proposed a narrative grammar composed of thirty-one narrative functions that are performed by persons in seven roles. His story grammar indicates how these functions may be juxtaposed sequentially in a folktale. Each narrative can thus be reconstructed in a way analogous to a sentence with the story grammar's functions as its syntactic components. Applications of such models commonly afford conclusions regarding the sequence of semantic elements that define the forms of narratives under study (e.g., the Russian folktale). Yet it is precisely this "essentialist nature" that makes these models of limited sociological value, given that sociologists are generally less interested in learning what the essential sequence of a particular genre is, than in explaining why sequences may differ within and among genres.[3]

Paradigmatic models use a contextual approach in which sequences of events are presumed to reflect a stable underlying structure. Structuralists like Levi-Strauss (1984 [1963]) and Greimas (1966 [1983]) argue that syntagmatic, surface structures are generated from paradigmatic "deep structures."

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3.   Seeing his approach as a distinct alternative to methods in which narratives are classified according to broad text genres, Greimas stated, for example, that a genre theory "has nothing in common with the typology of discourse the establishment of which is being attempted" in his work. Moreover, he continued with Courtés (1982, p. 135) that classical genre theory, which establishes a typology that includes literary genres such as tragedy and comedy, "is based on a non-scientific definition of the 'form' and 'content' of certain classes of literary discourse." In the same source, Greimas also declined any affinity between his work and that of post-classical genre theory, with its genres of the fantastic, the realist, and the surrealist.
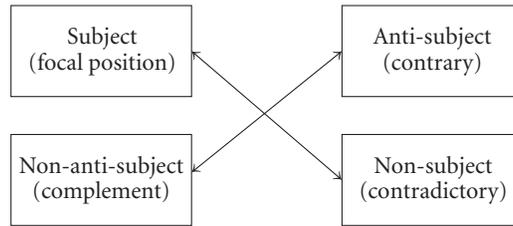
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┌─────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────┐
│     Subject     │         │   Anti-subject  │
│ (focal position)│ ╲     ╱ │    (contrary)   │
└─────────────────┘  ╲   ╱  └─────────────────┘
                      ╲ ╱
                      ╱ ╲
┌─────────────────┐  ╱   ╲  ┌─────────────────┐
│ Non-anti-subject│ ╱     ╲ │   Non-subject   │
│  (complement)   │         │ (contradictory) │
└─────────────────┘         └─────────────────┘
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Figure 1. Greimas's elementary structure of signification

Although acknowledging value in the work of formalists like Propp, they argue that it is naïve and subjectivistic to presume that surface syntactic forms produce meaning. Instead, narrative analysis should start at the semantic level – the level at which a single semiotic unit achieves its meaning. Moreover (and this is where Greimas departed from Levi-Strauss), building a paradigmatic model can serve as a basis for analysis rather than as its objective. Greimas developed his paradigmatic model as a template with the potential for generating and mapping a wide variety of syntactic manifestations.

Greimas referred to his analytic approach as "actantial analysis." At the heart of his actantial model of narratives is what he called "the elementary structure of signification," also known as the semiotic square. As depicted in Figure 1, every semiotic unit acquires meaning within this elementary structure in relation to its opposites. More concretely, a sign is meaningful only in relation to its contradiction, contrariety, and complement.[4]

Referring to Figure 1, if the upper-left cell in the figure corresponds to a "subject" within a narrative, then three logically possible relations generate three alternative concepts that are meaningful: the anti-subject, the non-subject, and the non-anti-subject, which refer respectively to the subject's contrary, contradictory, and complementary positions.[5] This semiotic structure establishes a set of abstract relations for analyzing narrative structure. Note that

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4. Although his approach to meaning creation was neither new nor unique to him, it was Greimas who revived this "medieval 'semiotic square'" (White, 1987, p. 158), and who used it as a fundamental meaning-generating machine. Its profound influence can be found in works by Hayden White (1987), Frederic Jameson (1988), and Richard Harvey Brown (1985).

5. Note that the Greimasian actantial subject is one within a deep narrative structure independent of the narrator's motives. This is clearly distinct from the pragmatic orientation of

it is through attributing a semantic unit to one of the cells that the other three cells obtain meaning. For instance, if the focal position is taken by a "hero," then according to Greimas the contrary position suggests an "opponent," the contradictory position a "value-object," and the complementary position a "helper."

Each position thus represents an actant (or actantial role), and the set of relations in the semiotic square provides a means for depicting narratives' characters within an organized unit (Greimas, 1987, pp. 109–10). Actants and characters need not have one-to-one relations. Within a narrative more than one character can realize a single actant, and one character can take more than one actantial position. For instance, at the discursive level a hero may have multiple opponents such as a villain and unfavorable natural elements – both of which take the contrary position, representing a single actant (namely, the opponent).

Greimas supplemented the structure in Figure 1 with two more actants, sender and receiver, to complete the three axes of his actantial model (as shown in Figure 2).[6] The quest axis (i.e., the vertical axis from subject to object) corresponds to narrative events related to the status of the link (or junction) between subject and value-object. The upper half of Figure 2 depicts the communication axis. Events related to the sender's and the receiver's transference-relations to the value-object occur along this axis.[7] The lower half of the figure depicts

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the narrator that social constructionists like Edwards, Potter, and Wetherell refer to as "the subject position."

6. Greimas refers to the three axes in at least two ways: their semantic investment and their narrative functions. For instance, Greimas named the subject/object axis "desire" in term of its semantic investment but "quest" in term of its narrative function. We have applied to the three axes names that correspond to their narrative functions. Since Greimas did not explicitly name the axis of helper/subject/opponent, the name of "conflict" was adopted from Petitot (1985 [2004]). Schleifer's introduction to Greimas (1966 [1983]) and Culler (1975) offer alternative naming schemes.

7. Translators usually render *objet-valeur* as "object of value" when translating Greimas. This wording has the unfortunate connotation of something having positive but not negative value. We use "value-object" to convey the more neutral meaning he intended. Also, Greimas's translators use the expected translation of the French word, *transformation*, as "transformation." However, Greimas used *transformation* in various ways in his writings. The Greimassian usage referred to in this paper is exclusively one of a function that alters the junction of an object with one or more actants. Recognizing this (and at the risk of adding an unwanted realist connotation to his term), we shall instead use the term, "transference," in the pages that follow.
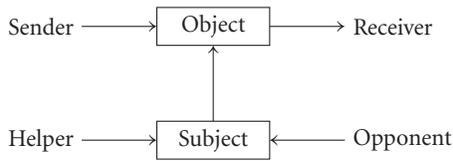
Figure 2. Greimas's actantial model (Greimas, 1966 [1983], p. 207)

the conflict axis, along which the helper's, subject's, and opponent's activities give rise to events that may facilitate or impede communication or quest.

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 363) the elementary narrative unit, or narrative utterance, is one of two types: an utterance of *being* (a state) or an utterance of *doing* (an action). An utterance of *being* depicts either a conjunction or a disjunction between a subject and a value-object; an utterance of *doing* depicts actions that affect the junction (either a conjunction or a disjunction) between subject and object. For example, if an utterance's subject possesses a value-object, this would comprise a conjunction between subject and object; if the subject had lost the object, there would instead be a subject-object disjunction. Greimas represented such utterances using the logical operators $\cap$ for conjunction and $\cup$ for disjunction.

Utterance of *being* (Junction):

$S \cap O$ or $S \cup O$, where S is the subject and O is the value-object.

Utterance of *doing* (Transference):

$S \rightarrow O \rightarrow R$, where S is the sender and R is the receiver.

It should be noted that for Greimas the quest axis corresponds to utterances of state whereas the communication and conflict axes correspond to utterances of doing. In other words, these three axes in the actantial model correspond to three syntactic patterns. Moreover, the being and doing forms of utterance are sufficiently inclusive to allow for a wide variety of narrative trajectories among numerous "narrative programs (or plots)" (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 207).

As Schleifer and Velie (1987) have noted, Greimas's re-analysis of Propp's Russian folktales illustrates the importance of a method with sufficient flexibility to consider two actants as being manifested in one actor. When sufficiently commonplace, such fusions are likely to reflect narrative patterns that are typical of a particular genre or culture. For instance, the frequent syncretization of hero and receiver may convey the message that heroes should be rewarded,

whereas the repeated fusion of helper and receiver oftentimes tells the tragic narrative of a hero who dies, leaving the helper to communicate to the reader or audience a meaning for the hero's death (Schleifer et al., 1992).

Note also that the actantial model is a template of power/authority relations. Although the power differential between subject and opponent typically determines the ending of a narrative, the helper and the sender are each depicted as having a powerful quality distinctive to its position. Whereas the helper affords power along the conflict axis, the sender has authority (i.e., unassailable credibility) that it expends along the communication axis. For instance, if a narrative's focus is on the opponent, we normally see a hero who is nearly as powerful as her enemy, as is often the case in tragedies. If the helper/sender is the focus (and thereby, usually relatively powerful), the narrative is commonly about a flawed hero whose accomplishment along the quest axis relies heavily on the helper's assistance (Schleifer & Velie, 1987, p. 1141). Thus in constructing a specific actantial model for a narrative, one identifies actants' social relations as perceived by the narrator, and the focal actant for insights into the distribution of power among all actants.

This paper illustrates how the actantial model depicted in Figure 2 can be used to classify narratives' syntagmatic structures through what Greimas (1966 [1983]) referred to as "anthropomorphizing" (i.e., the projection of human or human-like figures into actantial positions). Greimas's actantial model not only provides a scheme for constructing power relations among actants but also offers tools for the study of types of actions and events and their sequential orders in narratives.[8] In this respect, Greimas suggests (1966 [1983], pp. 202–6) that a narrative tension is created with the initial desire (or wanting) of the subject for the object and with the opponent's attempt at impeding the subject's "quest" for the object. This first step in Greimas's method is demonstrated in the following section as the narrative to be analyzed is introduced.

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8.   Linguistic analytical approaches of narratives such as those established by Labov (1972, 1997) and Bal (1985) are grounded in a presumed temporality that is stable, continuous, and that can be organized variably in narratives. Greimas's actantial approach deals differently with temporality. He argued that "temporalization" is one of three discursive strategies (the other two being actorialization and spatialization) in which time itself is a "figure" with an actantial position. For instance, time may be helper ("time" leads one to certain realization) or opponent (bad "timing"). But "time" per se does not figure into the actantial model and the (topo)logical derivations of the actantial model such as syntagms. Of course, Greimas did refer to narratives' trajectories. Yet these trajectories were mere surface-aspects as distinct from the deeper structures of his actantial model.

In the section thereafter it is shown that once a narrative's actantial positions have been identified during this first step, a narrative's plot can be characterized in terms of how transferences of the value-object are sequentially structured. We next demonstrate that these narrative programs often involve some actants' modalizations of others' performances or competences. In a final analytic section, events along the communication axis are shown to be especially important in self-narratives within which the narrator-subject's performance and competence are modalized through communicative events.

Actantial positions within a Chinese narrative written during the Cultural Revolution

This section illustrates a narrative analysis based on the actantial models just discussed. The emphasis is on self-identity formation in accordance with the discursive structure established by the official ideology within China during the 1970s. For the purpose of illustration, only a single narrative need be analyzed. This narrative was published on July 17, 1974, in the *People's Daily* (the Chinese Communist Party official newspaper directly controlled by the Ministry of Propaganda and the central government). The narrative is an account of a rural elementary school teacher's process of losing and regaining her valued identity – a type of narrative commonly found in the *People's Daily* during this era (Wang, 2003).

When the narrative was written, the Cultural Revolution had entered its eighth year. At this time the official ideological system clearly divided all social identities into two disjoint sets: in-group identities (or friends) such as poor peasant, worker, soldier, and red guard, and out-group identities (or enemies) such as capitalist-liner and bourgeois intellectual. As Bauman (1991) argues, modern totalitarian societies such as Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union were intolerant of ambiguous social categories. Typical of such societies, China in the 1970s did not have "space" for identities of a third type.

The narrative recounts the narrator's experiences of becoming a teacher and striving at being a "good teacher." Typical of such narratives, the narrator occupies the position of "subject." That is to say, this is a narrative told by an "I" about this particular "I." Hence the narrator is more than a mere witness of the narrated sequence of events. She is of central importance to the unfolding of the narrative.

Event 1: The narrative's first event occurs along the communication axis. A representative of poor peasants to the administration of the school takes the position of sender who gives the narrator a mission by assigning her to a teaching position at the elementary school in her village. The narrator willingly accepts the mission believing that she would be a "good teacher" because she comes from a poor peasant family (or, in her terms, "having a straight root and growing into red seedling"). The subject's belief reflects a mode of causality in her narrated world: a causal link between peasant and teacher identities. The function of this event is two-fold. First, it establishes a contract between the narrator and her community represented by the peasant representative. Second, this first linking between the subject and the value-object – in the identity of "good teacher" – also establishes a "wanting" or desire in the subject to sustain such linking.

Event 2: The next event occurs along the conflict and communication axes. The narrator is accused by one of her students' parents of bullying their child by scolding the "naughty student" in front of his whole class. Here the accusers are nameless, yet their identities are made clear in the narrative as peasants and thus as persons of the in-group type. The narrator's action along the conflict axis (i.e., her scolding a naughty pupil) is minimized, and is presented merely as the occasion for the sender-parents' communication to the narrator-receiver of a problem (a potential disjunction) regarding the "good teacher" identity that she wants. The conflict consists in the contrariety between the subject's desire to be a good teacher and her performance, namely scolding the student. At this point in the narrative, the opponent remains unexposed.

Event 3: The third event also occurs along the communication axis. Since a complaint had been voiced to the school administration, a peasant representative was required to "talk" with the narrator. During this talk, the peasant representative indicates that "good intentions" are not sufficient for being a good teacher and that her problem is not one of ability but one of "line." The use of "line" here is a reference to the policies advocated by the central government. (Within this narrative genre, alignment with the "revolutionary line" is the ultimate criterion for judging one's identity.) The peasant representative further points out that the narrator was educated in the pre-cultural-revolution (1949–1966) revisionist educational system, and the way she treats her students is not different from the way she was treated under the old system. At this point the identity of the narrator is problematized by the peasant representative's suggestion that her in-group identity was tainted under the influence of the revisionist

educational system. In so doing, the representative also induces in the narrator a revision in how she understands her "quest" of being a good teacher. This is a turning point where the subject's quest is revised as being toward realignment with her in-group identity. It is also the point when her opponent is revealed to be her "revisionist educational influences."

Events 4 & 5: The fourth and fifth events in the narrative are analogous to the second and the third. In the fourth event, the narrator makes a similar mistake by disciplining another pupil in class. The fifth event is another conversation between the peasant representative and the narrator. Different from the first instance, this time the narrator knows that it is her fault. However, she now exculpates herself by attributing her "mistake" to her quick-temper. The peasant representative rejects this excuse, pointing out that the real problem is her estrangement from the poor peasants. He issues an ultimatum that she needs to decide whether or not she wants to serve the poor peasants.

Events 6: The sixth event is also along the communication axis. In it the narrator has a conversation with the mother of the second student she disciplined. The student's mother recalls the suffering her family had to endure in the "old society" (before 1949), especially the lack of opportunity for education. This interaction ends with the mother entrusting her child to the narrator, a ritual that renews the mission the teacher/narrator received in the beginning.

Events 7 & 8: In event 7, the narrator reveals her shame at realizing that she had not always followed the "revolutionary line," and that she had let the poor peasants down. Such self-reflection can be viewed as an event occurring along the communication axis in which the sender and receiver are fused in the teacher/narrator. The split of one character into two actantial roles is unsettling if the message concerns the flaw of the narrator syncretized as both sender and receiver. In event 8, which occurs along the conflict axis, the narrator studies Chairman Mao's teachings, and learns that the influence of the old system would not disappear automatically. One must fight it, sometimes painstakingly. The narrative ends here with her heightened awareness of and alertness to the evil influence of the revisionist system. Therefore, the last two events can be seen as following a narrative sequence of self-reflection and inner struggle, which respectively have narrative functions analogous to religious experiences of repentance and purification.

This reconstruction is based on the actantial model shown below in Figure 3. Notice that the subject in this structure is "flawed." This flaw becomes manifest in interactions between her and the students, their parents, and the
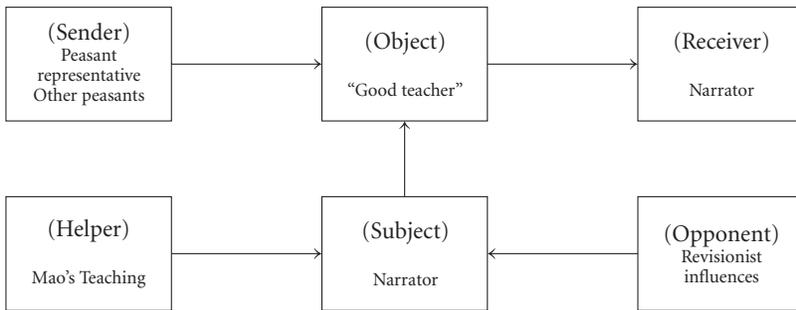
Figure 3. The Chinese narrative's actantial structure

peasant representative, all of whom help her fend off the revisionist influences that (as her opponent) constitute her flaw. This flaw thus involves the fusion of two actantial positions: the subject and the opponent. The ensuing conflict occurs between the subject and herself at a figurative (or subjective) level with all other characters syncretized as the helper/sender. Such stories of "inner struggles" comprise a genre of narratives that is likely to include stories about religious experiences in which the subject occurs as both body (desires) and soul (moral standard). The coincidence of subject and opponent in a single character is one of the distinctive features of this genre of self-narratives. Thus the function of the helper/sender is not only to supplement the power of a weak subject, but also (as sender) to expose and define the subject's flaw. Note also that this flaw is relationally defined as the subject's distance from the people she serves. The flaw is thus in her "being," not in her "doing." This static nature is evidenced by the peasant representative's insistence that the problem is not one of method, but one of closeness to the poor peasants.

This analysis reveals the actantial structure of social relations within which the subject of the narrative positions herself. The poor peasants, with unambiguous in-group identities, appear as both helper and sender. As core members of the in-group, they not only know better, but also (as more thoroughly discussed in the next section) can never be wrong. Accordingly, our narrator never judges whether or not the accusation from the first student's parents is valid or not. Instead, the problem is always identified as residing in the subject (thus the syncretization of subject and opponent), who is alienated from the in-group by influences from her past. The interactions between the subject and the peasant representative take the form of communication initiated by the syncretized sender/helper. The resolution of the conflict between the

subject and her opponent depends on the subject's awareness of her flaw. It is only through her recognition of the flaw and the consciousness-raising experience recounted as the last event that her quest of becoming a "good teacher" is accomplished.

Narrative plots and transference of the object

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 245), a narrative program "is an elementary syntagm of the surface narrative syntax, composed of an utterance of doing governing an utterance of state." Such a narrative program consists of two components: a link between the subject and a value-object, and a transference of the value-object between two actants. In the actantial model the subject's and the object's values become actualized by the subject's desire established in some initial events and may change from virtual to realized through a final type of junction between the two. Furthermore, a subject's realized relation to an object can become virtualized through a disjunction, as might happen when an initially valued object (like Steinbeck's pearl) is discarded once its demonic character is revealed. Thus Greimas proposes two simple narrative programs along the communication axis: realization and virtualization.

Table 1 shows the four ways in which Greimas and Courtés (1982, pp. 96–8) argue that transference can occur. As shown in the table, a conjunction between a value-object and the subject who initially possesses it can be virtualized in two ways: the subject gives the object away (renunciation) or the object is taken away (dispossession), both realized in narrative utterances of disjunction. Two similar patterns exist in the realization of an initially virtual subject-object link: the subject obtains the object (appropriation) or the subject is given the object (attribution), both realized in narrative utterances of conjunction.

Table 1. Four modes in which value-objects are transferred

		Virtualization (Subject initially possesses the object)	Realization (Subject initially does not possess the object)
Object is transferred to or from the subject …	voluntarily	Renunciation	Appropriation
	forcibly	Dispossession	Attribution

It should be stressed here that these elementary narrative units are used in structuring narratives at the discursive level. That is, narratives are produced through the narrator's selection of specific narrative units and her inscription of cultural values and meanings into these structural components. The actual production of narrative discourse adds complexity through concatenation of these units and through selections from among a wide number of value-objects (e.g., tangible ones such as wealth or bride, and intangible ones such as identity).

In analyzing the teacher's narrative, we only have need for the simple concatenation of two of Greimas's elementary narrative programs and for one type of value-object, namely social identity – a culturally valued or unvalued sign that can be linked to a subject. To further simplify the analysis, we focus on only one social identity involved in the narrative, and that identity's *virtualization* followed by its *realization*, leaving the narrative to conclude with the narrator/subject embracing a valued identity.

In her narrative the teacher/narrator serves as an interface that makes possible an interpenetration between the narrator's world and that of the reader. This interpenetration is enabled through the commonly recognized value status of the social identity, as during the narrative the narrator invokes shared cultural norms that render the value status of the social identity recognizable to the reader. In this case, the narrative involves two types of identity-related changes, namely in the value status of the social identity and in the ways the identity is later realized. Therefore, the transference within the first narrative unit in the concatenated pair can only be one of identity *renunciation* if the narrated subject initially mistakes her identity as non-valued (irrelevant) or unvalued (negatively valued). Subsequent realization of the subject-identity link could occur either through the subject's *appropriation* or a sender's *attribution*.

If it were not until the closing moments of a narrative that the narrator were to perceive a change in the status of a valued identity, then the first narrative unit in a concatenated pair would necessarily be *dispossession*, since the subject would not willingly relinquish an identity that it values. The narrative's focus would then be on regaining the identity, which could occur either through the subject's appropriation or an attribution from the sender/helper. Accordingly, if one generalizes from such concatenated pairs of elementary narrative programs to entire narratives, the four modes of transference can be generalized to the four narrative plots listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Four narrative plots that begin with an identity's virtualization and end with its realization

Initial Virtualization	Subsequent Realization	Plot
Renunciation	Appropriation	Conversion: subject recognizes the value of an initially denied identity
	Attribution	Compliance: subject accepts the value of an initially denied identity
Dispossession	Appropriation	Transformation: subject gains or regains a valued identity
	Attribution	Rehabilitation: subject is bestowed a deserved identity

What is pivotal in these plots is the narrator's perception of her world. In *renunciation-appropriation/attribution* narratives, the narrator recounts a world whose value changes. (Note that the value of the narrated world is formally signified by only one "object" – the social identity.) For instance, a *renunciation-appropriation* plot may very likely be manifest in narratives of minority group members' reclaiming their ethnic identity, the value of which the subjects mistakenly do not recognize initially. In a sense, the value of the narrated world changes and the narrator attributes her conversion to an alternative discourse. In contrast, when a narrative involves a case of *dispossession* followed by *appropriation/attribution*, the value of the narrated world does not change and thus an external social discourse is held constant. What changes is the link between the subject and the object. For example, a popular narrative form in China after Mao's death (1976) followed the rehabilitation plot, which typically told stories about "intellectuals" who suffered during the Culture Revolution but who afterwards were granted valued identities such as party membership and honorary titles.

Our illustrative narrative is clearly of this second type. In the narrative's first event, the subject is linked to the identity of "good teacher" (i.e., one who whole-heartedly serves the poor peasants). Throughout the narrative the value of this identity remains unchanged. What changes is the relation between the subject and the valued identity. In the second and fourth events this link is put to test and questioned. In the third and fifth events the link is problematized by the peasant representative, thus virtualizing the subject in relation to the valued identity. During the crucial fifth event, the peasant representative unambiguously offers the subject a "choice," asking her to "make up her mind" whether or not she wants to serve the poor peasants. By suggesting that the subject re-

link with her valued identity of "good teacher," the helper/sender implies that the two are severed. At this point in the narrative, virtualization is complete and the tempo of the narrative accelerates.[9]

Events 6 and 7 in the narrative involve the regaining of the valued identity. Event 6 renews the contract between the subject and her community, but leaves the link between the subject and the valued identity severed. Event 7 is especially important. The emotional display of shame is analogous to "repentance" in religious narratives, and the subsequent acknowledgment of the (evil) influence of the revisionist education system serves as a confession. However, repentance and confession are insufficient to absolve the subject from her "sin." A purification ritual (event 8) is needed, which in the narrative is recounted as studying Mao's teachings – the highest authority for absolution. Such narrative plots have a structure identical to that of religious conversion stories. In both religious conversion stories and party narratives a narrative trajectory of repentance (recognizing one's own flaw) is followed by purification. However, as a hypothesis, one might speculate that in religious conversion stories, events along the conflict and communication axes will be more likely to affirm the conjunction of the subject and the valued religious identity. In our story, events along both the conflict and communication axes negate such a conjunction. As is discussed in the following section, this distinction most likely results from the two genres' different depictions of the subject's pragmatic and cognitive competence.

Modalization and key elements of a syntagmatic grammar

In the previous section we characterize self-narratives as sequences of simple narrative programs involving virtualization and realization of subject and object. In this section we discuss the functions of narrative syntagms that involve other actantial roles such as the sender/receiver and the helper/opponent. In a sense, the narrative syntagms discussed in this section can be subsumed under higher-level ones such as virtualization and realization. In other words, if these two higher-level narrative programs regulate the contour of self-narratives, the

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9.   In a society where ambiguous identities are not tolerated but are immediately associated with one of two disjoint sets (valued comrades and loathed enemies), severance from a valued identity is "uncomfortable." This discomfort is the likely motivation behind this accelerated tempo of events.

syntagms discussed in this section give structure to events conveyed during the narrative, and thereby illustrate how Greimas subsumed syntagmatic narrative models under his paradigmatic model. Greimas's strategy for providing this actantial structure hinges on his theory of modality and modalization. Defining the operation of modalization as "the modification of a predicate by a subject" (Greimas, 1987, p. 121), Greimas begins by arguing that two types of utterances, *doing* and *being*, modify each other. Performance (*doing* modalizing *being*) and competence (*being* modalizing *doing*) are two such schemata of modalization.[10]

In these schemata Greimas distinguishes between the modalizing subject (S_M) and a subject whose performance or competence is modalized (S). Modalization of S's performance or competence presupposes S_M's cognitive performance and competence. Greimas termed modalization of a subject's performance, *recognition* – an important narrative component in that it enacts the next link in the narrative chain, namely that of sanction.

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 267), *sanction* is actualized explicitly or implicitly through the initial contractual encounter between sender and subject/receiver. It is thus a generation from the actantial structure along the communication axis. Sanctions are of two types: *pragmatic* (recompense and punishment) and *cognitive* (recognition of the hero and foiling of the villain).

Both cognitive and pragmatic sanctions are used in the teacher's story. In the initial encounter between the author and the poor peasants' representative, a "contract" is established that obligates the author to be a "good teacher." This contract also establishes a "wanting" (i.e., the author's positive cognitive sanctioning of herself) – an actualizing of the link between the subject and the valued identity, which may become realized through the subject's performance. However, accompanying this "wanting" is her "false belief" (or *mis-recognition*[11]) that she is automatically already a good teacher because of her poor peasant origin. The author's recognition of this mis-recognition is real-

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10.   Greimas (1987, pp. 123–4) also mentions two other modal schemata (namely, *being* modalizing *being* and *doing* modalizing *doing*), both of which are of marginal importance for this analysis.

11.   Mis-recognition is another modalization of the subject developed by Greimas (1987, p. 125–6). Here the three categories of not-being, seeming, and not-seeming are developed by placing the predicate, *being*, within the semiotic square. A modal utterance in which *not-being* is modalized as *being* implies an incompetent subject who mis-recognizes.

ized through subjective communication (i.e., through a syncretism of sender and receiver within the narrator herself) that comprises for her a self-inflicted, punitive sanction.

As narrated through each of events 2 and 4, the author's performance is modalized (evaluated or judged) through events 3 and 5 respectively. In both of the latter events, the modalizing subject is the poor peasants' representative – a sender who is actorialized as a nameless figure throughout the story. The only sign implying its unquestionable cognitive competence in recognizing the narrator's incompetent performance is its in-group identity of poor peasant.[12] A punitive sanction occurs in event 5 when the representative issued a threatening ultimatum that the narrator may be removed from her position. Not only does this pragmatic sanction reflect the categorical in-group and out-group character of social identities in the narrator's world, it also reveals how the severance (or virtualization) of the subject from the valued identity amounts to stigmatization, a form of Greimassian *punishment* leading ultimately to the self-inflicted punishment referred to previously.

Figure 4 depicts the narrative trajectory of the teacher's story. Dotted arrows in the figure trace the sequence of events; solid arrows show directions of communications (from sender to receiver) and of conflict (from higher to lower actantial power or authority). The narrative begins with the onset of the narrator's desire to be a good teacher. Then follow two conflict-punishment sequences (in brackets) that result in a narrative disequilibrium whereby the subject is unlinked from the value-object, and the subject's understanding of the latter is revised. After a parent's recognition helps renew the narrator's desire, the narrator's punishment no longer originates with others but with herself. This internal strife is finally overcome in an act of purification during the last event when the narrator studies Mao's teaching. Distinct from that of the peasant representative and the student's mother, Mao's function is not cognitive performance (i.e., not recognition). As the ultimate sender, Mao "sends" his own teachings as the teacher's helper. Like "the force" in *Star Wars*, Mao is "the force" in our story. Like "the force," his message takes the position of "helper" along the conflict axis in the actantial structure. The function of the helper in the analyzed story is one of "purification" – a virtualization of a subject's relation to an object of negative value. This virtualization simultaneously

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12.   "In as much as sanction is exercised by the final sender, sanction presupposes that this sender has an absolute competence" (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 267).
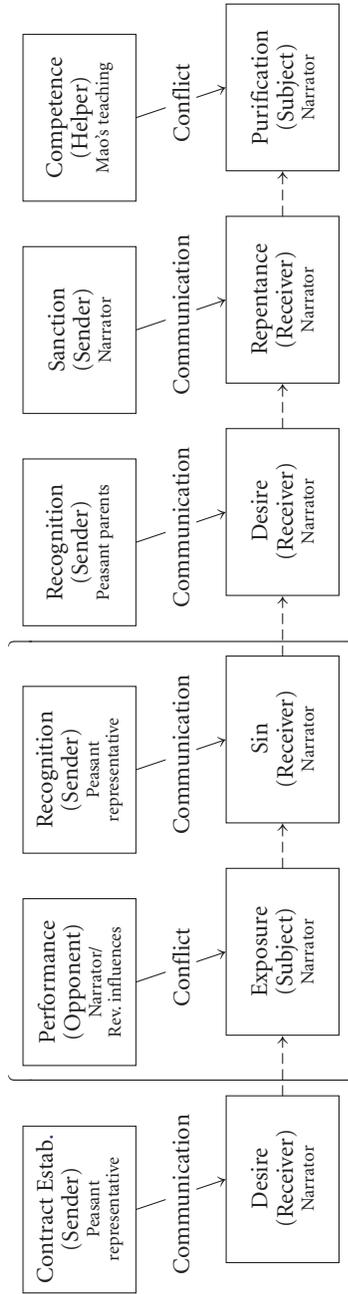
Figure 4. Narrative trajectory of the teacher's story: A transformation beginning with dispossession (in brackets) and ending with appropriation

entails the realization of the subject's conjunction with a positively valued object, and thus a modalization of the narrator's competence as a teacher. It is perhaps not coincidental that the mutual exclusive and exhaustive character of this narrative's positive versus negative value-objects (namely, "good teacher" versus "revisionist tendencies") corresponds closely with that of the comrade versus enemy distinction so central to the Chinese Communist Party rhetoric of the times.

The above narrative reconstruction shows that although narratives can unfold along all three axes, some axes (e.g., the quest axis in this narrative) may be enacted less than others. Moreover, only a single axis may predominate. For example, in the teacher's story the communication axis gets most use, leaving the conflict axis of central importance only in the last event. Prior actions along the conflict axis are minor ones, restricted in events 2 and 4 to the narrator's scoldings of her students – mindless victimizations resulting from her mis-recognition of herself as a good teacher. As shown in this section, such failed performances led to the sender's *recognition* of the subject's incompetence, and eventually to sanction. This is a fundamentally different syntagmatic scheme from that of the folktales analyzed by Propp (and Greimas), in which *struggle* (performance) is followed by *success* and *recognition*. The two conflict-resolving events (3 and 5) both occur along the communication axis, suggesting the importance of discourse in this narrative. The conflict axis, along which the subject's performances occur, functions to create occasions for communication, making it secondary to the communication axis. The fact that the last event occurs not only along the conflict axis but also in the absence of further communication or conflict, further distinguishes this narrative from Propp's folktales. In its final event it is the superior status of Mao's teaching relative to either the peasant representative's or the peasant parents' cognitive competence that renders further recognition superfluous.

The importance of communication: Outcomes of marking

Greimas (1966 [1983], p 231) argues that communication may take the form of marking (or indicating), with recognition as its objective. Generated through the sender-receiver opposition, in this communicative form it is the sender who
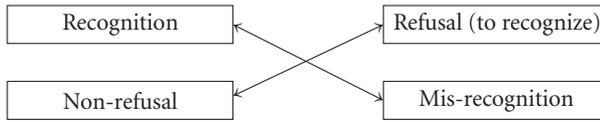
Figure 5. Possible outcomes of communication initiated by marking

marks and the receiver who recognizes.[13] Yet after initiation, communication need not always yield recognition. One may refuse to engage in a communication. Furthermore, communication may appear to have occurred but result in misunderstanding.

Generated using Greimas' elementary structure of signification, Figure 5 depicts the four possible outcomes of communication initiated by marking. After marking, recognition completes the communicative act, whereas refusal ends it. Mis-recognition entails misunderstanding, whereas non-refusal leaves communication an open possibility.

The narrative at hand includes five events along the communication axis, all of which have the narrator as receiver and are articulated in the form of "marking-recognition." In four of these five the sender is a peasant, indicating not only the sender/peasant's relatively powerful position, but also the subject's inability to independently recognize her flaw. In so doing, the form allows for a type of subjectivity that "wills" (*wanting* established through the initial contract) but "does not know" (*incompetence* recognized by the sender). Restoration of knowing entails realignment with an in-group identity having an authority more compelling than that of any individual. To know this identity is to be in accordance with it. Therefore it is not the subject who knows but an all-knowing system to which one acquiesces. Furthermore, since mis-recognition, refusal to recognize, and further inquiry (non-refusal) would further problematize the subject's identity, recognition is the only viable avenue for concluding these sender-initiated communications.

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13.   Greimas also provides an inquiry-answer form of communication in which the one who answers is the sender and the one who inquires is the receiver, giving a form for communications initiated in the converse direction (i.e., toward, instead of away from, the initiator).

Conclusion

Narratives are occasions for analysis. If one's analytic strategy is one of denarrativization, they are occasions for applying a particular meta-discourse. If one's approach is one of renarrativization, they are occasions for distinguishing the factual from the false. Greimas understood narratives neither in accordance with a particular theoretical or ideological perspective (or meta-discourse), nor as a reflection of reality. Narratives are merely sequences of utterances that depict relations among actantial positions – positions that characters may take simultaneously or en masse. By mapping how narrators inscribe characters into these positions, the analyst can glean information on both the meta-discourse and the reality (or facts) that characterize the narrator's (not the analyst's) world. Insofar as these are one's research objectives, one will find value in Greimas's actantial approach to narrative analysis. Moreover, by freeing the researcher from results that vary according to analysts' choice of meta-discourse and according to their capacity for discerning truth, actantial analyses are relatively likely to produce results that are replicable and that can be compared across text genres (e.g., between confessions published in Chinese communist newspapers and ones whispered in the confessional).

In this paper we have illustrated the utility of actantial models in analyzing narratives on identity formation. Reconstructing the basic actantial structure from self-narratives has been shown to provide cues to power differentials among actants as perceived by the narrator. Distinguishing narrated events along conflict versus communication axes helps the analyst determine whether the narrator's primary domain is experiential or discursive. Analyses of narrative plots can afford insights into how people engage objects with cultural valuations within the various social contexts recounted in narrative data. Finally, we have shown how Greimas's theory of modalities can be used to differentiate among these plots within broader narrative trajectories. Insofar as applications of these actantial tools yield consistent inter-narrative results, these results are likely to be generalizeable to the genre of narratives under analysis.

Of course, Greimas's ideas have much broader potential for narrative analysis than we have been able to illustrate here. For example, if one is working with narratives in which a realized identity is unvalued, the four corresponding sequential structures might be applied in analyzing self-narratives authored by people who struggle with social stigma, for instance, certain physical features and disabilities. Another example might be the revelation of a previously suppressed neurosis or phobia that one then seeks to overcome (i.e., a case of

realization followed by virtualization). In such cases, narratives could be analyzed as instances of disidentification, in which valued identities are lost or unvalued identities are successfully shed.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that actantial models are abstract narrative structures at a "semio-narrative" level. As such, they allow both the relations among characters and the unfolding of events to be distinguished in accordance with a neutral actantial structure, rather than in accordance with character relations or reality conditions assumed by the analyst. As a result, actantial models provide a language for "talking about" cultural and historical variations in how narrators construct these relations and conditions. The aim in applying such models is thus not the analyst's construction of "reality" but an understanding of how realities are constructed by others.

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