Things to Do with Words
Narrative Analysis

We owe the distinction between story and plot (*fabula* versus *sjužet*) to Tomashevsky, a Vygotsky's contemporary and member of the school of "Russian formalists". For Tomashevsky,

> A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another. … Motifs which change the situation are dynamic motifs; those which do not are static. … Descriptions of nature, local color, furnishings, the characters, their personalities, and so on-these are typically *static motifs*. The actions and behavior of the main characters are typically *dynamic motifs*. Dynamic motifs are motifs which are central to the story and which keep it moving; in the plot, on the other hand, static motifs may predominate. (Tomashevsky 1965:70, emphasis added)

Propp, another formalist, further argued that in Russian folktales the number of dynamic motifs is limited (31 in total) and their sequence invariant.[i] Half a century later, American socio-linguist Labov would similarly search for invariant macro-level structures of narrative. Such is his classification of parts of narrative in Abstract, Orientation, Complicating action, Evaluation, Result or resolution, Coda (Labov 1972:362-370), where each functional part answers the following set of questions: what was this about? (abstract) who, when, what, where? (orientation), then what happened? (complicating action), so what? (evaluation) what finally happened? (resolution) (Labov 1972:370). Not all narratives contain all these functional parts, and strictly speaking only "the complicating action, is essential if we are to recognize a narrative", (Labov 1972:370), but typically a

> complete narrative begins with an orientation, proceeds to the complicating action, is suspended at the focus of evaluation before the resolution, concludes with the resolution, and returns the listener to the present time with the coda. (Labov 1972:369)

Focusing on micro-level structures, Labov also argued that a narrative clause is based on the simple structure *who-what*, where the *what* is further characterized by time (*when*), location (*where*), mode (*how*) and instrument (a structure that corresponds to the 5 Ws +H of American journalism: who, what, when, where, why and how) (Labov, 1972: 375-376).[ii] Among the French structuralists, Todorov would similarly zoom in on the micro-level structures of narrative, showing that Tomashevsky's dynamic motifs or Labov's orientation are expressed in (narrative) clauses consisting in two basic elements: the *who* and the *what*, the agent and the predicate (Todorov 1969).

It is a structure of this kind, of the 5 Ws + H, a "story grammar", that I started toying with in the early 1980s as a way to study historical processes of conflict and violence, using newspapers as sources of data (e.g., characteristics of strikes in the service, rather than industrial sector, rise of Italian fascism between 1919 and 1922, and, later, lynchings in Georgia between 1875 and 1930) (on newspapers as data sources, see Franzosi 1987). Using rewrite rules I formalized the structure of a story grammar so as to express the relation of every object in the grammar to all other objects. I developed a computer-assisted program that would make the

grammar practically usable in larger-scale historical projects (on these points, see Franzosi 2010, 2014).

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[i] For a lengthier treatment of the characteristics of narrative briefly traced in this paragraph, see Franzosi (2012).
[ii] That structure, in turn, has a very long history rooted in the history of rhetoric and the theory of circumstances, as best expressed in the jingle *quis, quid, cur, quomodo, ubi, quando, quibus auxiliis* (who, what, why, how, where, when, how) (on this point, see Franzosi 2012).