Proppian Functions & Moves

What are Functions?

Proppian Functions & Moves is a classification scheme for abstract pieces of plot that are repeated across multiple folktales. It was created by Vladimir Propp in the early 20th-centery and described in his seminal monograph, *The Morphology of the Folktale*. You should read Propp's monograph to understand Propp's system for analyzing folktales. Page numbers or section numbers mentioned here in Propp's book refer to the Second Edition of the English translation, published by University of Texas Press (Austin, TX), in 1968.

The purpose of this annotation scheme is to mark the location of both Propp's functions and moves in texts.

What to Annotate

There are two annotation schemes associated with this guide: functions and moves.

To annotate a function, you annotate some set of the following things: (1) the function **symbol** and **modifiers**, (2) the **function type**, (3) whether or not the function is **inverted**, and (4) some number of function *instances*. A function requires at least one instance. For a function instance, you annotate (1) the **instance type**, (2) the **signal**, (3) the **inversion signal**, and (4) the **extent**.

The texts you analyze may or may not already have a list of functions and moves associated with them. If they do have a list of functions, your job is to identify where those functions occur in the text. If you don't have a list of functions, your job is to determine not only which functions occur, but where. If you have a partial list of functions, say, only non-preparatory functions, your job is to identify where the listed functions occur in the text, and also to identify which preparatory functions occur, and where.

To annotate a move, you annotate two things: (1) the move **number**; and (2) the **functions involved** in the move.

In the examples in this guide, the extent of a function will be surrounded by [square brackets], while a signal will be underlined. Inversion signals will be marked with double underline.

Function Symbol and Modifiers (Subtype)

Function symbols and modifiers are listed in Propp's monograph. Symbols are the main identifier for a function. Remember that case matters for function symbols: "A" is different from "a". Special symbols, such as Greek letters and arrows, should be written out if they do not have a corresponding key on the keyboard (e.g., alpha, beta, up, down, etc.). Modifiers in Propp's monograph are shown in subscript or superscript, either before or after the main symbol. Place the modifiers in the appropriate place, either the pre-superscript, post-superscript, or post-subscript position.

Function Type

There are three different types of functions: Normal, Preparatory, and Initial Situation. Normal functions are functions that, in Propp's monograph, are listed with roman letters; the Initial Situation is indicated by the Greek letter α; and Preparatory functions are listed with other Greek letters.

A text may only have a single Initial Situation function. The Initial Situation function must: not be inverted; have only one instance; have no signal; and have no inversion signal.

Function Inversion

Functions may be marked as "inverted", meaning the function is fulfilled by something semantically opposite of its usual filler. An inverted function is shown with an underscore ("_") after the function symbol but before the subtype. So for a function "A1", its inverted form is "A_1"

Note that inversion is not the same as negation:

(1) [She ate the pudding.] (E: no inversion)
(2) [She did not eat the pudding.] (E_: inversion indicated by negation)
(3) [Nikita would not accept a reward.] (W_: inversion indicated by negation)
(4) [Nikita refused a reward.] (W_: inversion indicated by semantics)
(5) [Baba Yaga did not catch them.] (Rs: no inversion, but negation present)

Inversion is indicated by the semantics of the fulfilling event, not negation.

Function Instances

Function instances represent an individual occurrence of a function in the text. Instances have three properties: (1) the signal; (2) the extent; (3) the inversion signal; and (4) the type. Functions may have multiple instances if they are, for example, trebled. Keep in mind that multiple instances for a single function are different from multiple occurrences of the same function across different moves.

Instance Signal

The signal is a single word or phrase that most strongly indicates the presence of the function. Usually it is a verb, but might not always be. In the next example, we pick "beg" for the function signal

(6) [The tsar] went in person [to beg Nikita the Tanner to free his land from the wicked dragon and rescue the princess.] (B^4)

If the verb you pick occurs elsewhere in the extent with the same sense, referring to the same action or type of action fulfilling the function, mark those words as well, as in (7). If you pick a verb, do not include verbal modifiers (such as modals) or helping verbs in the signal (but do include them in the extent). If there are two verbs which express different aspects of the function, and are both critical to the enactment of the function, include them both, as in (8).

(7) [The dragon] went out [to fight in the open field. Nikita fought him for a long time or a short time]; in any event, the dragon was defeated. (H^1)
(8) [The dragon seized the princess and dragged her to his lair.] (A^1)

If the instance is implicit (see Instance Type, below), you should still mark the signal. In this case, the signal corresponds the head word of the event.

Note that multiple signals of a single instance is different than multiple instances of the same function (i.e., what Propp refers to as *trebling*). If trebling is marked, you should instantiate it with multiple instances.

Instance Extent

All instances have an extent, which is the portion of the text covered by the instance. You should mark the smallest set of the text where the instance is found, but including core verbal arguments and elaborations. The extent of a function must, at the very least, contain all the signal words and the inversion signal, but it may contain other relevant text as well. Choose the smallest region that covers the function, as in example (8).

Do your best to include the function signal's verbal arguments in the extent, even if this causes the extent to be discontinuous, as in the next example.

(9) [Nikita], having done his heroic deed, would not accept any reward, but [returned to currying hides]. ($\downarrow$)

Note how the extent in this example makes for a complete sentence in and of itself: "Nikita … returned to currying hides." This will sometimes be the case, but not always, and is not critical. For example, in instances like (7), with infinities, the extent will not make a grammatically correct sentence. If a verb is marked as a signal, you should include core arguments to that verb (such as the subject, object, instrument, and so forth) in the extent.

Excluding non-core arguments result in excluding the word "immediately" in (10). This also results in us excluding markers such as "So", "Thus, "But", or "And", unless they connect two statements that themselves are inside of an extent. So, in (10), the "And" at the beginning of the second sentence is not included in the extent.

(10) "Don't worry about it," said Shabarsha. And immediately [Shabarsha set off for the millpond]. ($\uparrow$)

Only include sentence-ending punctuation (such as a period, question mark, or exclamation point) when (a) the extent includes the whole sentence, or (b) the extent covers the words on either side of the sentence boundary, as in (7). This rule results in the period in (10) being excluded from the extent.

Inversion Signal

If the function is inverted, the inversion may be signaled explicitly using a word like "n't", "not", "neither", or "nor." In these cases, mark the inversion signal separately, and do not include it in the function signal. Two parallel examples are as follows:

(11) [Nikita], having done his heroic deed, [refused a reward], and returned to currying hides. (W*, implied inversion, but no inversion signal)

(12) [Nikita], having done his heroic deed, [would not accept any reward], and returned to currying hides. (W*, explicit inversion signal "not")

Instance Type

Most function instances are explicit, meaning there are words in the text that describe the execution of that function. Sometimes, however, a function is *implicit* in the text, meaning it obviously happens, but there are no words that directly express it having happened. In this case you mark the closest event (in the timeline) that appears in the text of the story as the extent of the instance, and then mark the instance as either an *Antecedent* or *Subsequent*. If the event you have marked happens directly before the function instance, this is *Antecedent*. Otherwise it is *Subsequent.* You should always choose the event that is closest in story time to the function; however, if there are two events, one before and one after, that are equidistant on the timeline from the function, you should pick *Antecedent*.

Move Number

Moves are number sequentially in the order they are encountered. You may be provided with a list of moves; if so, follow the provided numbering scheme.

Move Functions

Moves involve multiple functions, and moves may be found sequentially, nested, or overlapping in more complicated ways. For each move, identify which functions participate in that move. A function may participate in more than one move: this happens in case, for example, where the same function concludes two or more moves, or the same function kicks off two or more moves.

The order of functions in the move is important. The function order should be in the order they are encountered in the discourse of the story.

Difficult Cases

Provided Function Symbol or Subtype Doesn't Match Text

Use provided function, but add a detailed note.

Multiple Interpretations

Given a list of functions, there may be multiple interpretations: one interpretation where the function identies match well, but marking the functions in that manner results in an out-of-order marking; or an in-order marking that results is less-well-matched function markings. Because it known that many of Propp's functions do actually occur out of order (these are even sometimes marked in the table), you should prefer better matching function identities over preserving function order.

Speech Acts versus Speech Act Content

Sometimes a function is fulfilled by a speech act, i.e., someone saying something. The content of the saying is not specified by the function definition, only that something is said. In these cases, you should mark the speech act, or verb of communication, as the signal of the function. In the next example, the events "be", "watch" and "do not leave" are not the signals of the interdiction; rather "said" is the interdiction and the actual instantiation of the function

    (13) [The mother <u>said</u> "Be careful, watch over your little brother, do not leave the house."]
        (γ: Interdiction)

Extent of the Initial Situation: Narrator Comments

Events that happen before the first function of the story are usually included in the initial situation. However, not all text should be included: in particular, narrator comments that are not a part of the story timeline should not be included in the initial situation function. Example (14) shows a normal initial situation; example (15) shows an example of initial narrator comments that should be excluded from the initial situation.

(14) α:[A dragon appeared near Kiev; he took heavy tribute from the people - a lovely maiden from every house, whom he then devoured. Finally, it was the fate of the tsar's daughter to go to the dragon.] A:[He seized her and dragged her back to his lair.]

(15) Shall I amuse you with a little tale? It's a wonderful tale. There are marvelous marvels, wondrous wonders, and the laborer Shabarsha, Shabarsha who is a rogue among rogues: oh, well, in for a penny, in for a pound! α:[So Shabarsha set off to work as a laborer, and times were bad. …]

Glossary

(Headwords for entries are in *italics*. A term in a gloss that also appears as a headword in this glossary is underlined.)

instance – An individual occurrence of a function in a text.

function – An abstract piece of plot that can be found across multiple stories.

move – A series of functions that constitute a complete narrative arc within the story.

symbol – The main identifier for a function.

subtype – The specific form a function takes within the text.

inversion – A condition in which a function is fulfilled by an agent or action semantically opposite to the agent or action that normally fulfills the function.

number – An annotation showing the sequential order in which each move appears in the text.