

Where is the action?

SSE/EFI Working Paper Series in Business Administration No 2002:17

October 2002

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Abstract

Taking a set of studies about business action as the empirical starting-point, this paper looks at the various ways in which action is represented. The overall research question can be stated as follows: how is business action reconstructed in our narratives? The texts analysed are collected from research on exchange relationships in the field of marketing. To analyse how these texts depict business action, four narrative constructions are focused: space, time, actors, and plots. The categorisation and analysis are summarised and followed by a set of concluding implications and suggestions for the use of narratives aiming to reconstruct business action in the making.

Key Words

Marketing; narrative; plot; marketing methodology; business action; industrial marketing research

Where is the action?

Introduction

How is action reconstructed in different types of narratives from the business field? The origin of this text was a reflection concerning texts claiming to depict or represent “business action”, i.e. business operations, processes and activities in the making. We were puzzled by the great variation in the extent to which different texts were able to reach out to us as representations of business action. Even more so, as the texts contained few reflections concerning the translation process, i.e. the way in which researchers approach the object in focus, business actions, and ultimately how these field studies in various steps are translated into stories about business action.

Our concern is not with the concept of business action as such. A brief overview of theoretical work on related concepts, e.g., human action, social action and organisational behaviour, indicates that there are several issues that are subject to controversy. For instance, the link between action and intentionality (Schick 1991) and the possibility of collective actors (French 1983; Garret 1988). When it comes to the substantive content of business action, we have found no explicit typologies. It is however possible to impute such typologies for various traditions. For instance, decision making and the execution of decisions seem central to business action as depicted in the behavioural theory of the firm (see e.g. March 1988), while analysis, planning, implementation and control have similar positions in managerial schools, e.g., marketing management (Kotler 1999). As a heuristic suited for our purpose, we will call business action any undertakings that can be seen as serving to generate market exchange (confer Snehota 1990).

Analysis of Narrative Structure

Many studies on business activities in the industrial marketing field are conceptual, using empirical fragments (“illustrations”) as “evidence” in support of their conceptual constructions. When these empirical fragments are turned into longer narrative texts, the “outside, retrospective hindsight” view becomes very common. That is, we are presented narratives of business actions from the researchers’ view from outside, telling their stories retrospectively and chronologically about something that happened during specific, and delimited periods of time, more or less distant from the so called present.

Looking at the way in which these narratives are constructed, a rather limited set of perspectives and devices seems to be favoured. In this section we draw on various texts about narratives in order to reveal some of the factors that simultaneously allow us and constrain us when we write (and read) narrative texts.

Some of the basic building blocks that we will discuss – *action*, *plots* and *actors (characters)* - were presented already by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, when he speaks about the structure of tragedy:

In tragedy it is action that is imitated, and this action is brought about by agents who necessarily display certain distinctive qualities both of character and of thought, according to which we also define the nature of the actions. Thought and character are, then, the two natural causes of actions, and it is on them that all men depend for success or failure. The representation of the action is the plot of the tragedy; for the ordered arrangement of the incidents is what I mean by plot. Character on the other hand, is that which enables us to define the nature of the participants.(Aristotle: *Poetics*, Ch.6)

In 20th century research on narratives also *time* and *space* were added as central factors for analysing narrative structure. In his book about *narratology*, that branch of contemporary narrative theory focusing specifically on the analysis of narrative structure, O'Neill (1994) states in the introduction of one of his texts:

One of the most obvious tasks of narrative discourse is clearly to select and arrange the various events and participants constituting the story it sets out to tell. Initially this might well seem to be a relatively straightforward affair, since stories essentially amount to the doings of particular *actors* involved in various *events* at particular *times* and in particular *places*, and narrative discourse is thus merely a matter of saying who did what, and when, where, and why they did it. Different types of narrative may well privilege one or another of these elements, but most ordinary readers (or listeners or viewers) will feel themselves reasonably entitled to expect all four of them to play an at least implicit role in any narrative. (p.33)

To analyse how business actions actually are depicted in these different types of narratives, we will thus need to focus on a set of generic narrative dimensions: the *events*, *time*, *space/place*, and the *actors*, or as they are described in narrative theory, the *characters*. There is of course also the question of how *the interaction* between these generic dimensions of narratives. From narrative theory we will also need to bring in ideas about the *plots* making up the *stories* and the narrative *discourses*. The narrative discourse is not only that which arranges the events (an inclusive term for both

actions and *happenings*) and the *existents* (an inclusive term for both *characters* and *setting*) into a plot and final story, it also arranges – sometimes more overtly as in fiction and sometimes less so (?) in our non-fictional business literature, the manner in which its reader will react. Or, in the words of Hayden White (1978), is the *mode of emplotment* of our story a case of romance, comedy, tragedy or maybe satire?

Stories and discourses

O'Neill continues by stating that the facts of the matter is that the problem for narrative theory when approaching texts is that in order to discover what ‘really happened’ eg. in an account of a real world event, it will be necessary to sift through the actual *account* of what happened, for the world of the *story* (the narrative contents) - what ‘really happened’ – can be reached only through the *discourse* (the narrative presentation) that presents it. Thus, what he implies is that as the same series of events, real or imagined, can be presented in a multitude of different ways, we can only reach a story through the medium of its discursive presentation. And this, according to O'Neill applies to any kind of narrative text:

...we find much to support the contention that even on its apparently simplest and most uncomplicated level, that of what 'actually happened' in a given story – whether that story is fictional or non-fictional, literary or non-literary – narrative is always and in a very central way precisely a game structure, involving its readers in a hermeneutic contest in which, even in the case of the most ostensibly solid non-fictional accounts, they are essentially and unavoidably off balance from the very start. (p.34)

Sometimes, as stated above with the example of the four modes of emplotment taken from White (1978), *genre* constraints can set up certain expectations on the parts of the readers. For example, in companies' own accounts of certain business events they are involved in, the reader is not likely to be presented a setting – a discourse setting (the textual setting in which the discourse more or less self-referently places itself) – that reminds the reader of a tragedy. Rather, we will expect, more or less overtly, to be drawn into a *romantic* story (“success story”) of the event. Other narrators with other perspectives, we would expect as readers to use other discourses and discourse settings.

Place: space and setting

As for the use of narrative space in fictional literature, O'Neill (1978) states that as compared to the more multifaceted use of time, space is more difficult to actually use and manipulate:

Discursive subversion of story by means of the manipulation of narrative space has fewer possibilities than those afforded by the treatment of time, for narrative space is clearly less amenable to discursive manipulation than is narrative time. (p. 47)

However this does not mean that space is less important or cannot be used as a narrative device:

It none the less offers a number of possibilities, since space can evidently be described in more or less detail, in a more or less orderly fashion, with more or less consistency, and with more or less emphasis on its allegorical or symbolic or ironic possibilities. Most obviously, perhaps, narrative space as setting can be used to establish a particular mood effectively and quickly...(ibid)

While narratives in fiction often use pre-fabricated settings, i.e “typical” settings used in certain types of genres, and effectively use space to put the reader in a specific mood (eg. Kafka’s descriptions of cramped, ill-lit indoor spaces to establish a certain mood of pervasive oppressiveness), non-fictional business narratives seem to make little use of these particular narrative devices for space. In general, narratives in anthropology and ethnomethodology seem to use such devices, including more detail in spatial descriptions and hence coming closer to putting their readers into different moods.

Time

Narratives will always entail elements of time, particular actors will be involved in various events at particular times (ibid):

However hard and fast (or otherwise) the ostensible facts of the world of story may be, they all exist in at least one real-world dimension, namely that of time. Narrative structure is both syntagmic (as regards the linear temporal sequence of the story) and paradigmatic (as regards the shape of the particular discourse chosen to relate the story). Nowhere has the relationship between the two been worked out more systematically than as regards the treatment of time. The distinction between story-time (*erzählte Zeit*), measured in temporal units (days, months, years) and discourse-time (*Erzählzeit*), measured in

spatial units (words, lines, pages) has long been a staple concept of narrative theory. (p.42)

With Ricoer's (1984) words, the emplotment of the story of a narrative is a synthesis in a profound sense, because the final narrative composition will entail a *temporal* totality, synthesising two types of time:

We could say that there are two sorts of time in every story told: on the one hand, a discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, a series of incidents (for we can always pose the question: and then? and then?); on the other hand, the story told presents another temporal aspect characterized by integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration. In this sense, composing a story is, from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession. We can already guess the importance of this manner of characterizing the story from the temporal point of view inasmuch as, for us, time is both what passes and flows away and, on the other hand, what endures and remains.(p.22)

According to Adam (1995), in a final narrative can be collected the various complexities and the multiplicity of social times:

Emphasis on the complexity of social times brings together the personal and the global, the technological and the literary, the bodily and the scientific, totalizing tendencies and local particularities, coevalness and difference. It binds into a unified but conceptually unconventional whole what constitute antinomies, contradictions and incompatible categories in the traditions of Enlightenment thought.(p.150)

Following the reasoning of Ricoeur (1984), in the hands of the reader the final narrative can be a path to increase our self-knowledge and our understanding of humans and their experiences of time:

Do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these "life stories" themselves become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models - plots - borrowed from history or fiction?...It is thus plausible to endorse the following chain of assertions: self-knowledge is an interpretation; self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction, turning the story of a life into a fictional story or a historical fiction...

In his narrative theory, Genette (1980) establishes three basic temporal categories in narratives:

- *order* (When?)
- *duration* (How long?)
- *frequency* (How often?)

The three modes of temporal presentation interact with each other and with the other non-temporal aspects of presentation, eg. the settings and the actors.

As for *order*, this category can be used to contrast the ‘real’ chronological order in which, for example, a set of business actions were taken, with another order by which they are narrated by the particular narrative discourse chosen. While ‘a neutral’ stance often seems to be taken in business narratives (i.e letting the ‘real’ chronological order be mirrored by the discursive order), there are many other options, anachronies, that can be used. Genette (1980) catalogues a number and elaborates on, for example, both backwards looking socalled flashbacks (*analepsis*) and forward looking socalled flashforwards (*prolepsis*) narrative techniques. Pieters and Verplanken (1991) argued the same about eg. the behaviour of economic actors.

People are time travellers; they take different time perspectives to reflect on their past, present and future behaviour. These perspectives are used in planning new behaviours, in anticipating new situations that one may encounter in the future. These reflections are necessary in evaluating past behaviours, and in planning future behaviours on the basis of the evaluations of the past. These reflections are necessary in executing behaviours. Our ideas of what we are doing depend in part on the time perspective taken and on the time horizon. If we travel in the future and retrospect on our present behaviours, we might gain knowledge that is instrumental in determining what we are doing today, and what we did yesterday.(pp.63-67)

Hence, it is not simply an option for the author creating a narrative, but the use of different time perspectives - *vantage points* (from the past, the present or the future) and *viewing directions* (towards the past, present or future) – can also be expected to be something used by the actors themselves, eg. the actors involved in various business actions.

As for the second category – *duration* – O’Neill (1978) describes it in narratives as the amount of ‘real’ time elapsed in the story and the amount of discourse-time (i.e space in the final text) involved in presenting it (p.43). Here, Genette (1980) has presented five major types (of *tempo* or *speed*) that can be found in narratives:

- *ellipsis* (not reporting relevant events at all, ie. maximum discourse speed in that discourse time is zero)
- *summary* ('real' story time is much greater discourse time)
- *scene* (story time largely equals discourse time, eg. like in 'real time' like dialogues)
- *stretch* (slow motion where story-time is less than discourse-time)
- *pause* (minimum discourse speed, eg as in long passages of reflective nature in the middle of a narrative with certain temporal characteristics)

Business narratives more or less deliberately appear to apply most of these five categories of duration time. While perhaps *stretch* (slow motion) is probably the one least frequently used, the remaining four can probably be found.

As for the third and final category – frequency – contrasts the number of times an event 'really' happened in a story and the number of times it occurs in the narrative. Genette (1980) here accounts for four common categories:

- *the singulative*
- *the repetitive*
- *the iterative*
- *the irregular*

The most common type in business narratives is most likely the normal *singulative* type (recounting once what happened once). In contrast, in the *repetitive* narrative, the narrator describes more than once what 'really' happened only once (like in the film 'Jackie Brown'). Some inter-organisational network studies sometimes appear to use this category, when the same business episode is accounted for from two or more interaction companies' perspectives (EX??). This stands in contrast to the *iterative* category, where the narrative only recounts once what really happened more than once.

This is perhaps one of the least used categories in business narratives, although it might be expected that the repetitive nature of certain 'real' business interactions and processes are of significant importance. In other words, can we in narratives account for for example routinized (inter)actions (although each single, repetitive business event might never be completely identical in nature) without killing the reader with boredom? (In addition such routined business actions take place concurrently in very many different places, adding another difficult dimension for the narrator to handle.)

Finally, there is also the *irregular* frequency, i.e what ‘really’ happened several times is also told several times, but a different number of times.

Important to say is that although these categorizations and the division between what we here has called the ‘real’ (story) time and the narrative (discursive) time, there is no such ‘real’ time against which we can check narrative time. As stated by Tambling (1991):

...however you consider real-life time, you must think of it in some represented, narrative form – even a sense of time as linear is a representation of it, just as the word ‘time’ is an attempt to conceptualize something felt about the nature of reality. (p.88)

Later, he ends by relating this fact to ideology:

If this point is accepted, it follows that the text, however mimetic it may seek to be, cannot only deal with real-life problems as these are set up in ideological representations – which also, of course, propose their own range of solutions. However impelling the textual issues may appear to be, they are problems posed in a particular way – though the narrative may actually have the power to question the assumptions in such a setting up. This argument about ideology suggests that what the text does not say is as important as what it does say. (p. 91)

Time and space: chronotope

As stated above, the many dimensions of space and time, together with the actors and their actions are intertwined in narratives. Mikhail Bakhtin even coined a term for it, the *chronotope*:

The process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space. Isolated aspects of time and space, however – those available in a given historical stage of human development – have been assimilated and corresponding generic techniques have been devised for reflecting and artistically processing such appropriated aspects of reality. We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (reprinted in McQuillan 2000, p.53)

Bakhtin argues that in the literary artistic chronotope, the spatial and the temporal indicators in narratives are fused into one carefully, thought-out and concrete whole:

Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.(ibid, pp.53-54)

Hence, in narratives, we can expect a strong connection between time and space, and our next category, the actors or acting subjects. As stated by O'Neill (1980), “times, places and characters interact in a complex fashion in the narrative transaction” (p. 53).

The characters: the actors and the acting subjects

Texts on narratology describe the acting actors in terms of *characters*. A central issue concerns the way in which narratives deal with the process of *characterization*, ie. The way in which the actors/*characters* acquire a *personality*. O'Neill argues that this involves three intersecting processes: a process of construction by the author, a process of reconstruction by the reader, and, pre-shaping both of these a process of pre-construction by contextual constraints and expectations. There are two basic types of textual indicators of the character, the direct definition and the indirect presentation. It is argued that in the former, we are told directly what the actor/character is like, while in the latter we are shown what the actor/character is like (eg. through the actions/events, time and space/setting). The Greek word for character – *ethos* – suggests that is ethical, ie. character can only be revealed in action.

O'Neill (1994) describes the role and situation of the narrative's actors in the following way:

What, finally of the actors who, as creatures of discourse, inhabit this world of story? Whether they realize it or not, they live in a world that is in principle the world of a laboratory rat. Their world is entirely provisional, it is fundamentally unstable, and it is wholly inescapable. The world of story is an experiment, a provisional reality under constant observation ‘from above’ on the part of those by whom it is discoursed. It is the world of a specimen in a display case, a prisoner in a bell jar, the world wished for by all authoritarian systems, a world whose inhabitants have no secrets...(p.41)

The actor in narratives can be made even more complex. Hence apart from the actual *actor/character* of the text, there is also the role of the *narrator*. Greimas (1983) also add the *actant*. O'Neill elaborates on this in the following way:

In any narrative, the most obviously indispensable narrative role is that of the *narrator*, for a story can become a story only by being told. When we talk of the narrator here, however, we might remember that we are really talking about the concretization of a necessary *narrative actant* (which if we wished to coin a term, we might call a narratant, where the pair *narratant/narrator* would correspond to Greimas's *actant/actor*). For in some narratives the narrating voice is external, belonging to a world outside of that occupied by the characters of the narrative text. (p.77)

An actant then would be a vacant conceptual slot in a narrative structure waiting to be filled, an abstract narrative function (similar to subject and object) waiting to be realized by one or more actors. Thus, when we talk about 'actors' in narratives there can be many involved in the production of the text; the author, an implied author, a narrator, a character, a narratee, an implied reader, and a reader. (In the area of sociology of science and technology, an interesting use of some of these dimensions from literary theory can be found in Latour's (1992) *Aramis*.)

The events: the actions and happenings

One important problem and issue in narratives is that not matter how we define an *event*, no matter how big or small, it must always to some extent be quite arbitrary as to the amount of information that we include or exclude in the narrative description. O'Neill (1994) gives an example:

...for all event-labels, from the broadest in scope, such as 'Napoleon marched on Moscow' to the most specific such as 'Jim walked to the door'. The latter, for example, involves all of 'Jim decided to walk to the door', 'Jim shifted his weight to his left foot', 'Jim advanced his right foot', 'Jim planted his right foot on the floor', 'Jim shifted his weight to his right foot' and so on, not to mention an indefinitely large number of even more minutely differentiated activities as well. Each of these, moreover, is itself at least potentially, an entirely full-fledged event that could be absolutely vital given the appropriate narrative context. (p.39)

Thus, as indicated all events can be deconstructed into potentially infinite series of constituent events. However, some should obviously be a more necessary part of the story than other events.

The action, what happens, can be singular, but narratives can also entail multiple actions (eg. entail various sub-plots).

Plot

Aristotle (se quote above) seemed to mean by plot the organized nature of the play or poem. As noted by O'Neill, he also seemed to see action and plot as synonyms since the action was generally seen as a coherent and meaningful *order*, a pattern that arises out of the combination of purposive individual actions. Later, distinctions were made between the story and the plot (or rather, the ‘plot-structure’). The arrangements of events, or ‘what happens’, is what makes an action into a plot. In his discussion on the interpretation of historical narratives, Hayden White (1978) states:

But surely the historian does not bring with him a notion of the ‘story’ that lies embedded within the ‘facts’ given by the record. For in fact there are an infinite number of such stories contained therein, all different in their details, each unlike every other. What the historian must bring to his consideration of the record are general notions of the *kinds of stories* that might be found there, just as he must bring to consideration of the problem of narrative representation some notion of the ‘pre-generic plot-structure’ by which the story *he tells* is endowed with formal coherency. (p.60)

White states that the distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot’ in historical narratives “permits us to specify what is involved in a ‘narrative explanation’ “. By a specific arrangement of the events reported and without offense to the truth value of the facts selected, a given sequence of events can be emplotted in a number of different ways. As stated by Barthes (1966) in his famous essay ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative’ on narratives and narrative theory: ‘The narratives of the world are numberless’ (transl. 1977:79). White concludes his discussion on the many facets of emplotment by linking to *explanation*:

One can argue, in fact, that just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make of it a story of a particular kind.(p.62)

In this case, ‘a story of a particular kind’ can be eg. the epic, the romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire. What one historian/narrator may emplot as a tragedy another may emplot as a romance. (Eg. as in the business press that appear to favour narratives about companies and certain events as either “failures” or as “success stories”.) Hence in the

plot and in the story lies also different modes of explanation, and White also adds a third important aspect, *ideology*:

Thus far I have suggested that historians interpret their materials in two ways: by the choice of a plot structure, which gives to their narratives a recognizable form, and by the choice of a paradigm of explanation, which gives to their arguments a specific shape, thrust, and mode of articulation. It is sometimes suggested that both of these choices are products of a third, more basic interpretative decision: a moral or ideological decision.(p.67)

Next, through a set of examples of business narratives, we will illustrate some aspects of these generic, narrative variables.

The narration of business action

Situating action in space

How are spatial dimensions reconstructed in business action narratives? Are the actions presented as local? If so, is it the actions that determine these localities? How are instances of acting at a distance represented? These were questions raised as we started to think about spatiality and action. It seemed to us that space was a dimension that had been relatively neglected in discussions about business narratives.

Business action as spatially independent

Most narratives we have studied roughly situate the involved *actors* in space, e.g., in terms of their nationality. This mode of presentation provides a spatially static backdrop for *business action*. The actors' existence appears to be tied to a particular spatial location. This image is further underscored by the fact that the specific instances of business action accounted for, often lack explicit location in space. Instead, the accounts make use of a general mode of presentation that renders them an air of spacelessness.

In order to further specify the image transmitter according to the needs of the users, Hasselblad continued to discuss with AFP and other representatives of the global press. ... A "dummy" of the new transmitter was presented to AFP and Hasselblad declared themselves willing to perform the development within a certain time if AFP signed a letter of intent to acquire a specified number of transmitters at a fixed price. AFP agreed and Hasselblad had taken on a new challenge.

(Lundgren 1991, p.161)

Implicitly, by sustaining the action in a peculiar non-space, the account conveys an image of business action as spatially independent. That is, despite whatever spatial distance there is between the actors, their inter-actions flow smoothly.

A problem with these accounts is the difficulty of assessing whether their de-emphasis of spatiality is empirically or theoretically grounded. This seems central to our understanding of business action. If the spatial independence is grounded empirically, these accounts may tell us something very interesting about business action. However, we suspect that in the main, the spatial independence is an effect of the theoretical perspective used, and consequently much less interesting.

Business actions that link localities

The idea that the variation in the importance attributed to spatiality in accounts of business action is a theoretical effect, is supported by the observation that situated accounts of business action are more common in narratives about international business action. In such narratives, the spatial dimension is ascribed theoretical importance through concepts such as physical and psychic distance (Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul 1974).

In 1976, ASG realized that the situation in Belgium had to change. The traffic that AMA and ASG had together could not possibly continue to develop under the conditions that existed. Personnel in AMA engaged in the Swedish traffic contacted the ASG European Representation Office in Brussels and asked for help. ASG tried to find a solution, looking at the different alternatives such as buying a local company, setting up its own office or finding another agent...

In 1977, ASG set up a company of its own and at the same time took over some of the personnel in AMA responsible for the Swedish traffic.

(Hertz 1993, p.115)

While the spatial dimension *is* accounted for in accounts such as this one, it is most prominent in descriptions of the *effects* of business action. More seldom do these narratives specifically *locate* business action in space.

Acting at a distance - intermediaries

The modes of presentation discussed above implicitly assume that actors can act at a distance. Distance is no bar to action. Some narratives, however, try to account for how this is possible by explicating the various intermediaries involved in business action.

It was decided that the vice president of Cantel should visit Ericsson in Sweden, in the spring of 1984. During this visit, he met the president of the Ericsson Group and the president of ERA, and found Ericsson's products and competence very interesting. However, after he had returned to Canada, ERA did not hear from Cantel for two months.

(Blankenburg Holm 1996, p.390)

In this excerpt, the spanning of space becomes important. The inter-action between the two companies depends on an intermediary that links their localities. In this case, we also learn that one of the parties is responsible for this effort. Compared to the account above where the inter-action of the parties was presented as completely unproblematic, we feel that we learn something more about business action. Still, we remain relatively ignorant as to what the intermediary – the vice president of Cantel – transports across space. There is something missing in the account of that which is moving. Perhaps, this something would have shed light on the concluding remark made in the excerpt?

Some accounts suggest that large numbers of intermediaries may be needed to link localities.

It was Atlas Copco's "ambassador", Göran Orwell, who tipped Larsgösta Almgren... The information from Orwell came by telex to Bill Sundberg who gave it to Almgren. Orwell was able to get this initiated information through his personal contact with Odd Hansen who was working for Höyer-Ellefsen on the South-American continent.

(Liljegren 1988, p.206-207. Transl.)

Here, at least four individuals and two telex-machines were involved in spanning the distance between Höyer-Ellefsen in South-America and Atlas Copco in Sweden. By making explicit the number of intermediaries involved, this account provides a flavour of the amount of work that may be necessary to act at a distance. This suggests that if such acting is to be possible on a routine basis, a reliable set of intermediaries must be put into place. This directs attention to the way in which intermediaries affect business action. How is information transformed during transport? Are there ways to increase the fidelity of the intermediaries used?

Ways in which to represent localities

The narratives that do account for the spatial dimension use various devices to represent the localities. The most common way is by reference to geographical space – countries, regions, cities, etc. Some authors also make use of maps to visualise the spatial dimension in their accounts. Others make similar use of blueprints and layouts of factories, stores, warehouses, etc. These efforts seek to transport the reader out of the text and into some other locality. A locality which is considered relevant to the account.

Two questions: What effect does an illusion of “being there” have on the reader? What modes of presentation are capable of creating such an illusion?

As many social observers have argued (e.g Weick, 1979; Giddens 1984) the notion of inter-action is central to action at large. At first, inter-action would seem to imply co-presence in both time and space. But this is not necessarily the case. To understand this, it is necessary to include the various mediators that are used in inter-action. Inter-action is generally supported by a host of intermediaries, e.g., texts, tokens, and technical devices. Such intermediaries seem to allow action at a distance. This links the spatial dimension to the question of acting entities, for how should such intermediaries be conceptualised in our business narratives? Are they simply neutral carriers of the will of man? Although few would subscribe to such a view in principle, many business narratives display strong deterministic streak in their treatment of these intermediaries.

Situating action in time

How is the temporal dimension of business action reconstructed in our narratives? In what ways do we account for the location and unfolding of business actions in time? As we started to look for ways in which time was represented, we found that temporality was nearly always part of the accounts, albeit in very different ways.

Anonymous temporality

A first mode of representation of temporality is that which situates business action in an anonymous temporal dimension. In these accounts, events are unfolding “before”, “during” or “after” other events. Historical influences are inferred through the use of expressions such as “originally” or “from the start”, etc.

[The company] was originally established as a subcontractor for a large local manufacturing company. Nowadays the proportion of annual sales to this customer has decreased significantly from a record 90 per cent to approximately five per cent at the moment. During this long history as a supplier of the large firm, the company has collected experience of inter-firm co-operation...

(Nummela 2000, p.130)

Accounts such as this one create a relative temporal space within them. By doing so, they implicitly ascribe a general importance to temporality. They tell us that it matters that the events occurred in a certain temporal order. However, the accounts do not provide the reader with any tools for evaluating these temporal relations. That is, we cannot assess whether a certain change was quick or slow, or whether it was continuous or discrete. Further, since the events are not related to chronological time, the reader can neither translate them to his or her own temporal perspective, nor relate them to other events outside the account. The reader becomes, so to speak, temporally captive.

Business action and chronological time

The most common way of situating business action in chronological time seems to be by simple reference to a year.

In 1972, knowledge regarding the possibilities and prospects of image processing together with the introduction of mini-computers and microprocessors incited the establishment of several research ventures in Sweden.

(Lundgren 1991, p.122.)

This relatively coarse use of chronological time may endanger the credibility of the account. In the excerpt above, two processes, the formation of knowledge about image processing and the introduction of computers, are said to have caused a third development, the establishment of research ventures. What really happened in 1972? How were the two “causal processes” temporally related?

The chronology provides a more detailed way of situating business action in time. By displaying a series of discrete events along a timescale or in a list, the reader is given an overview of their temporal interrelation (see Figure 1).

These representations may be a way of handling some of the shortcomings of the anonymous temporality discussed above. Implicitly, though, the accounts may promote a form of blind temporal causality. They direct attention only to the chronological sequence in which the actions unfold. Without additional information, then, chronological time becomes the only link between the events. Further, chronologies place a single temporal perspective on events. Thus, any existing differences in how the

involved actors viewed the development are obscured. ‘Was the development rapid or slow? -It took 2 years.’

Year	1970	1980	1990
Events & Activities			
CFC-Ozone Research	-75 article in Nature	-85 Antarctic Survey / ozone hole discovery • standardised surveys and measurements =>	
Regulations	-79 Aerosol Ban in US, Canada & Sweden	-87 The Montreal Protocol -88 Swedish Phaseout plan	
Industry Activities			
•Chemical Industry	Resistance & lobbying	Start-up of some R&D Ending of R&D projects	Resistance & lobbying Restart of R&D projects R&D consortium Plant investments
•Refrigeration Industry & Compressor Industry			Resistance & lobbying Trial with alternatives Co-operation with chemical industry Selection of HCFC/HRC Production start new alternatives
Year	1970	1980	1990

Figure 1. A chronology: Critical Events and Industry activities to replace CFCs in refrigeration. Source: (Sweet 2000), p.139.

Of course, adding information to the chronology can check the risk of only appealing to blind temporal causality:

In May 1987 the Federation of Swedish Industries and the Federation of Swedish Wholesalers submitted a letter to the Governmental Department of Environment and Energy giving a proposal for a phase-out of the CFC use. The industry did not object to the CFC phase-out stipulated by the Montreal protocol, but objected to the proposed plans of an accelerated phase-out in Sweden. Later during the fall...

(Sweet 2000, p.150)

Here, temporality as well as the different perspectives that actors may have on it, emerges as important aspects of business action. The temporal links between individual actions are also represented in a more direct and concrete fashion.

Business action and relative temporal perspectives

The reliance on chronology and sequentiality makes the accounts rather mechanistic in character. It seems that a rich account of business action, besides accounting for the succession of events chronologically, also has to account for the different time perspectives that actors have as they engage in business action: What are the future-oriented perspectives of the actors? How do actors make use of historical developments when engaging in business action? One way in which time can be “folded” within a narrative account is through the use of remnants:

Towards the end of January an information and technical procurement meeting was held at the Atlas Copco Export Centre in Nacka. ... Both the meeting and the project plan were important activities at the prescriptive stage. The discussions concerned different solutions/methods for different stages of the project implementation. ... In the revision there were also suggestions concerning the order in which the access-tunnel should be excavated.

Further we suggest that one starts with the access-tunnel towards the flow-shaft and that one proceeds with part of the access-tunnel from this end while simultaneously working on the path in the flow-shaft. (Also here, the small height and width of the Hägghauler is very advantageous.)

Revised project plan, Atlas Copco MCT, xup28/80.

The project-plan contained a number of revised blueprints for the tunnels that should be excavated and a zero-base specification of the proposed Atlas Copco-equipment.

(Liljegren 1988, p.240-241. Transl.)

Here, the event is not only located in time, but the reader is transported in time through the use of a remnant. The excerpt from the revised project plan discloses a scenario; it offers the reader a temporally situated view of how one actor, Atlas Copco MCT, attempts to direct the unfolding of events in the future.

In other narratives, the past is put forward as important for the on-going events.

This time, the issue was brought up by Harald Mörck in connection to a discussion of "Our economic direction" and in particular the decreased turnover reported for 1949 and the ambition to reach MSEK 175 in turnover during 1950:

The Chairman pointed out that the results for the past year had not been completely favourable. ... Without departing from the principle of "the new deal", which is correct, we must perhaps discuss some telephone-sales of goods that are hard to sell, and which burden our stocks, e.g., rice. Such a sales method should only be used to balance the stocks.

Minutes of the local directors' conference, March 13, 1950, p.1.

Obviously things were not altogether good. This time, the need for sales measures was not due to any provincial circumstance perceived by the local directors. This time, it was in the light of a decreasing turnover for the entire company – something that had not occurred since the 1920s.

(Kjellberg 2001, p.259)

In this excerpt, the chosen quote provides a contemporary account of an event where the actor reaches both forward and backward in time. In his comment, the author also adds historical perspective to the event.

Some concluding remarks about time

It is often taken for granted that humans can assume different temporal *vantage points* (from the past, the present, or the future) and *viewing directions* (towards the past, the present, or the future) to describe, understand and predict their own behaviour. However, this variety seems to become more limited when business actions and behaviours are translated and reconstructed in researchers' narratives (see, e.g.. Pieters et al 1991). We feel that accounts of business action will improve if they convey how actors make use of different temporal perspectives, both oriented towards the past, the present and the future.

Moreover, the temporal vantage points from which certain views on events have been derived are often obscured in the final narratives. That is, the reader remains ignorant as to whether a certain characterisation of an event is a retrospective view or a characterisation made at the time of the event. Needless to say, this drastically reduces the reader's ability to interpret the actions accounted for.

The choice of temporal form for the narrative may also affect our impression of action. By using past tense, the narrative acquires a reminiscent character. The events accounted for are forever gone. We can remember and reflect over them with hindsight. The question is how our perceptions of such past actions can change if the author manages to create an illusion of contemporariness? Will this allow the reader to "take" a more future-oriented perspective on the event?

The acting subject(s)

A third major question concerns the acting entities. At a theoretical level, there is wide agreement that business action is undertaken by actors, and that these actors come in different shapes and in different sizes (see e.g. Håkansson and Johanson, 1992; Lundgren 1991). Still, narratives differ markedly in the extent to which they reconstruct these acting entities. So: Who is actually acting? And: What are the consequences of the narrator's view of who the "actor" is for the study of business action?

As with time and space, accounts of business action are not always explicit concerning who the focal actors are (neither subjects nor objects of business action). In the following we will look at seven modes of presentation, starting with those that pay relatively little attention to the acting subjects and working our way up to those that reconstruct actors as highly problematic entities.

The absent actor

A first group of narratives are those that routinely suppress the acting entities. Not that the acting entities are absent as such; these stories are often full of potential actors. But their characteristic trait is the reluctance to associate specific actions with specific actors. The passive form is their hallmark.

The merger of the international pharmaceutical sales operations is started in June-July 1990. ... Organizational adaptations caused by the merger take place during 1990 and 1991. ... The planning, the actual plans produced, the communication and the fusion process come to be heavily dominated by the striving to take a radical step towards the formation of a new, technologically diversified, Sweden based, global pharmaceutical giant... The practical integration and change process, based on the initial corporate analysis, is started during the second half of 1990 and continues with varying intensity throughout 1991.

(Andersson 1996, p.51-53)

To us, this mode of presentation de-emphasises agency. Things appear to just happen; without effort, without controversy. In this sense, the narratives point in another direction than business action. They point towards forces over which specific actions, and individual actors, have no say, towards structures and macroscopic processes.

So, what is so appealing with this form? One obvious possibility is that the author is interested in constructing an explanation that goes beyond individual actions. If so, de-emphasising agency is a pre-requisite rather than an unfortunate consequence. This would also place the account offside in relation to our present concern. A second possibility is simply lack of information regarding the event. This could be due to the

fact that the author is not really interested in the event, and that he or she consequently chose not to pursue it further. Assuming that the author is interested, it could be due to the event being controversial and that he or she was unable to establish anything more than the fact that something had occurred. It seems to us, that there are a number of alternative ways of accounting for the event that would not impoverish it as does the use of the passive form. One way would be a clear indication of the sources used and the way in which these differ. A third possibility is that the author perceives the passive form to free him or her of the heavy responsibility of distributing responsibility (blame, credit, etc). By omitting the actors, then, the account becomes less contestable.

Clumping

This mode of presentation in a similar fashion dodges the question of responsibility by routinely “clumping” (Woolgar 2002) actors together into functional aggregates such as “the customers” or “the suppliers.” Here, although the form is active, the specific actions and actors remain impossible to identify.

A possible justification for this mode of presentation would be that it is used to reflect a way in which some actor speaks of a particular situation. This would turn the aggregation of actors into an empirical phenomenon with import on our understanding of business action. However, since these narratives often lack explicit justification as to why a certain group or category should be regarded as a single entity, we suspect that this is not the dominant reason for utilising this mode of presentation. A more common justification is that the theory used to interpret the case posits that these aggregates share certain characteristics making them amenable to analysis as a group.

Functional reduction

A related mode of presentation is the anonymous “functional reduction” of actors:

In 1990 there was a specific event which caused the business relationship between the group sales subsidiary and the customer, and also the relationship between the group sales subsidiary and the Swedish supplier, to slacken. At that time the supplier was also selling the same product through another channel in Germany: its own sales subsidiary. The customer made, as it usually does, several inquiries concerning the purchase. One inquiry was made to the group sales subsidiary and another to the supplier's own sales subsidiary in Germany. The Swedish supplier gave the same price to both subsidiaries. The group sales subsidiary then put 10 per cent on that price and made an offer to the customer. The supplier's own sales subsidiary, on the other hand, made an offer to the customer without any margin.

(Havila 1996, p.115)

The advantage of this mode of presentation over “clumping” is its capacity to account for specific actions. By refraining from aggregation, then, business action is given a more prominent position. The relative poverty of these accounts has to do with the perspective from which they are told. The actor is identified in terms of its function vis-à-vis some other actor(s), usually the focal one(s). Without additional information, the actor becomes very circumscribed and stereotypical.

At times, the actors in these accounts are also identified by name.

Gyssens & Co, in the main a small airfreight company, had office space available in the right location.

(Hertz 1993, p.115)

Whether equipped with a name or not, the actors in this mode of presentation are most often restricted to “the company level.” That is, business action is presented as a phenomenon exclusively involving formal organisations. The narrator thus assumes, and/or asks the reader to take for granted the monolithic quality of the acting entities.

Entities capable of cognition

The scope of the above mentioned assumption becomes more clear when cognitive capacities are routinely attributed to these entities.

Scania would like to see the development time of new coolers being reduced, implying less room for trial & error as is custom today. In bringing the development of oil coolers to a higher level, it is not Scania’s intention to decrease its expertise in this field...

(Wynstra 1997, p.96)

Here, the reader is asked to make a similar assumption about the monolithic quality of the acting entity. The difference is that the character of the assumption is made more clear through the explicit attribution of cognitive capacities. Of course, the identification of action with intentional behaviour is an important heritage from western philosophy (Davidson 1980) and is as such not surprising. More so, however, is the self-evidence of the attribution, given the prolonged debates about the extent to which collectivities, such as business firms, can be assumed to possess such capacities (French 1983; Garret 1988; Mahmoodian 1997).

One may of course ask basic questions such as: who did the narrator speak to in order to be able to state that “it is not Scania’s intention to...”? It appears, then, that these modes of presentation also involve a form of “clumping.” At least, they do not provide any reasons for treating this or that company as an acting entity in the specific situation.

Multiple constitutions

The “company level” narratives discussed so far are sometimes developed into a mode of presentation that allow for “multiple constitutions” of actors. This multiplicity is most often made use of when highly specific (and important) events are represented. Further, it almost invariably results in the appearance of human individuals. When the plot thickens, the humans arrive...

In 1982 Hasselblad initiated a development of a digital image transmitter. A former associate of the Picap-group was appointed to lead the new venture. The transmitter was developed in collaboration with Expressen one of the largest newspapers in Sweden and a subsidiary of Expressen adapted the existing system for receiving images to digital technology. Sectra was engaged in the development of the transmission components and Hasselblad was also able to capitalize on their existing supplier structure: Carl Zeiss delivered the objective to the image transmitter.

(Lundgren 1991, p.161)

Compared to the strict “company level” narratives, we find that the introduction of human individuals into the narratives generally promotes the impression of action. It seems that by identifying the (most important) individuals involved, it is possible to create an impression of being “close to” the business actions in focus.

Sometimes, these “actor levels” (individual, company) are mixed (including also collective/individual levels), appearing as counterparts in the focal, business action accounts. From this follows also that there are sometimes collective feelings and thoughts involved in the business interactions:

....Saima's officers were sincerely interested in developing the alliance project. However, they were discouraged from exhibiting more proactive behaviour by the relational problems with Nedlloyd...

...Nedlloyd... impaired the Saima officers' trust in the sincerity of Nedlloyd's intentions ... Nedlloyd managers began to think of themselves as...

(Ludvigsen 2000, pp. 206-208)

Material heterogeneity

Technologies, products and artefacts of different types are in some narratives appearing almost as actors (although passively), separated from humans and companies.

As so many others, those responsible for the tests at Billerud must acknowledge that refining untreated wooden chips leads to "a devastatingly bad result with pulps full of splinters throughout."

The chip-pulp is bad from all points of view. The refinement must be taken to a higher degree of mincing for the pulp to become at all competitive with the ground pulps.

Research report Billerud AB, Göran Annengren, 62.10.16

When the chips are given chemical pre-treatment the result is much more positive. Despite that the capacity of the refiners is not enough to produce a pulp resulting in sheets of paper that are smooth and even enough, there is still a completely new character in the chemically pre-treated chip-pulps. The kinship with mechanical pulp is great, with characteristics such as high yield (approx. 80-85 per cent of the wood input), good light-distribution and opacity.

(Waluszewski 1989, p.77. Transl.)

In other texts, non-humans and humans are more closely connected and appearing as actors on more equal terms in the on-going business actions.

Emergence

Some narratives allow the actors to change during the course of the narrative. Some narratives allow the actor to change configuration, and characteristics. In narrative theory, this is sometimes described in terms of how "the character", i.e the characteristics of the actor, is allowed to emerge via descriptions of eg. its actions, via descriptions of the setting, or via direct descriptions of its characteristics.

What initially is described as an actor in a certain situation, can fall apart and dissolve into a number of actors in the next situation, even during the course of events belonging to the same situation. Alternatively, several actors can converge into one. These variations in the composition of actors is not only part of a process over time - what is an actor vis-à-vis a certain counterpart can be reduced to a part of a collective that is ascribed agency by another counterpart. Thus, agency can be seen as something emerging. If the actor that is ascribed agency does not live up to the counterpart's expectations, the situation will change:

In early June Axel Hultman and Herman Olson were in Antwerp, staying at the Weber Grand Hotel. On 7 June 1913 a telegram was sent to the Administration's general director, Herman Rydin, asking for permission to immediately order the test-exchange. According to the telegram, the manufacturer agreed to have the exchange erected within 9 months, but requested on the other hand a guaranteee that the Administration did not later manufacture switches of that system without the specific agreement of Bell Telephone Manufacturing Co. In a letter to the general director, Axel Hultman the same day reported that they had obtained what seemed to him to be good terms, and that "... Olson had got all his demands on the system fulfilled."

(Helgesson 1999, pp.163-164)

Who attributes agency?

In most of the excerpts above, the narrator has been clearly responsible for attributing agency to the various entities. This attribution, in turn, seems to have been the result of a blending of theoretical and empirical matter. For instance, the rationale for limiting the account to a pre-specified level, e.g., companies, may be theoretical, whereas the identity of the specific actors may be empirically derived, e.g., in a "snowballing" fashion. More seldom, do we see texts where the actors themselves are let to define *who or what* is an actor in the business actions they are involved in.

As with time above, one question is whether accounts of business action would improve – i.e. if they would convey a stronger impression of business processes (in the making) - if actors were allowed to describe and define each other and who or what is actually an active actor in the business process?

It can also be noted that degree to which the author's/researcher's presence is felt also varies between narratives. Some authors' presence can be apparent, while the impression of presence in the actual business action described is low. There are also differences as regards the extent to which the author/researcher lets herself become part of the narrative text, appearing as one of several voices involved.

Finally, linking to ideas of *variable geometries* (Latour 1996), we would raise the question whether in fact important dimensions of - and interesting perspectives of - business actions are lost in many narratives, due to the predetermined, taken-for-granted, categorisations that are made of the actors.

Plotting business action

So far, we have focused on three basic dimensions of business action. In this fourth section, we will take a look at how the various ways of representing these dimensions are combined into full-blown accounts of business action.

The theoretically derived plot

The first type of plot that we have identified, is that which is derived from theory. There are two versions of this: the deduced and the induced plot.

The deduced plot. This plot is derived from existing theory, i.e. the author presents a narrative which follows the chosen theoretical framework. We will use Barbara Henders' (1992) thesis "Positions in Industrial Networks. Marketing Newsprint in the UK" as an example of this type of plot. In the empirical chapter, the theoretical concept of "network position" is used as the *mode of emplotment*. The empirical part starts with the following words:

The intention of the following section is to present an empirical example of positions in a network at a fixed point in time, then to analyze these positions for the opportunities and constraints presented. ...the focus is on individual actors and their positions, and especially how these positions differ from one actor to another in the same network...

(Henders 1992, p.70)

Successively, the text becomes "more empirical" when the UK printing network is described. However, the theoretical concepts are still reflected in the account:

Each actor's position was found to be unique, but inclusive of some features general to a group of actors or the network. For example, two foreign actors representing several suppliers, Lamco and PPL, were very important to the network in terms of volume. However one was tied to its suppliers on an international basis, and one was not. There were three domestic suppliers, Reed, Bridgewater and Shotton, which other than their common characteristics of production assets in the UK differ in most respects. There were three new entities considered, Enso-Gutzeit, Holmen Paper Sales and Parenco. The first recently separated out from Lamco...

(Henders 1992, p.77)

The induced plot. Here, the author's own interpretation of the empirical data is turned into a theory which is used as a plot for the account. One example is Anders Lundgren's thesis "Technological Innovation and Industrial Evolution" (Lundgren 1991).

Lundgren presents a plot consisting of three distinct phases, derived from the study of the emergence of the image-processing network in Sweden. The empirical part is introduced by revealing the guiding plot for the story to come:

The study of the development of digital image processing in Sweden suggests that the emergence of a new industrial network can be described as three distinct phases: genesis, coalescence and dissemination. And even if the underlying processes are omnipresent they tend to dominate in different periods. Genesis represents the creation of variety and the growth of a new pattern of interaction. Coalescence represents the integration of variety into an emerging community of actors. Finally, dissemination represents the adaptation to the pre-existing structures and the dissolving of the industrial network.

(Lundgren 1991, p.100)

Common to these types of plot is the monophonic character of the narrative. The reader is presented a story that severely disadvantages alternative readings through being adapted to the theoretical plot.

The actor-centred plot

The characteristic trait of this type of plot, which can be either deduced or induced, is that it is based on a single actor's perspective. We use Martin Johanson's thesis "Searching the Known, Discovering the Unknown. The Russian Transition from Plan to Market as Network Change Processes" as an example (Johanson 2001).

Johanson's plot departs from one Russian printing house (Typografiya) and centres on how this actor handles relationships with, e.g., authorities during the transition between two phases – Typografiya's Network in the Planned Economy and Typografiya's Network in the Transition Economy.

It also happened that Typografiya ran out of paper and had to make up the deficit on its own. The lack of financial resources made it difficult to do illegal business in the black market. The authorities did not require efficiency from Typografiya, but, on the other hand, due to lack of financial resources Typografiya had limited resources to buy on the black market. Almost all the revenues went directly to Oblispolkom, which then distributed the money back to Typografiya, depending on Typografiya's capability and power. This did not mean that Typografiya did not try to push, charm, convince, or threaten the plan authorities in order to solve some problems where they were dependent on the authorities...

(Johanson 2001, pp.69-70)

The multi-centre plot

Here, the plot is derived by combining several perspectives on a series of events. The resulting narratives vary widely in quality. From the completely incomprehensible to those a little bit like the shopping mall scene in "Jackie Brown."

One of the more prosaic examples is Virpi Havila's thesis "International Business Relationship Triads" (Havila 1996). The basis of a "multi-centred" plot, from a network perspective, is a plot involving a triad. In Havila's case the case is based on such a triad, while the author's own multi-vocal plot (i.e. the analysis) has a different logic:

To sum up, a business relationship case here involves a supplier company, some kind of intermediating actor, and a customer company. Changes are analysed from the perspective of the business relationship as well as of the intermediating actor.

(Havila 1996, p.49)

The main characteristics of the changes in the relationships studied then serve as guideline for describing stories the triads, e.g., The Expanding Business Relationship, The Development-to-Volume Business Relationship, The Shrinking Business Relationship, etc. Each of these stories then basically follows the same structure: I) The Story from year "x" until year "y", II) The Involved Parties over the Years, III) Changes of the Nature of the Business Relationship.

The multi-vocal plot

This type of plot combines a multi-centre plot with other voices, e.g., the author's own, those of other authors who have written on the subject, those of various theoretical scholars, etc. The result is a narrative offering the reader a bewildering cacophony.

Tentative recommendations

With the possibility of actions to span across time and space, with a view of temporality as multidimensional, and of actors as variable, a number of opportunities to tell our stories and write our narratives about business actions are opened up. We suggest that it is possible to achieve an impression of presence in business action...

- by attending to how actors transgress localities through mediation by representatives and representations

- by constructing a succession of events not by simple mechanical analogy or chronology but by looking for credible links between events
- by giving voice to actors' different temporal perspectives (past, present, future), for instance through the use of remnants
- by being clear as to who or what is acting and unto who, or what the action is directed
- by making credible that entities have been / should be awarded actor status in the situations that we recount
- by making the narrative polyphonic, allowing us to integrate concordant and discordant processes and understand the intersection of different plots in one event
- by being aware of the fact that polyphony can involve also various narrative means to handle the 'actors', involving several in the production of the text eg. the author, an implied author, a narrator, a character, a narratee, an implied reader, and a reader
- by experimenting with the use of the three basic temporal categories in narratives: order, duration and frequency
- by being aware of how chronotope in narratives (time-space integration) can be a mean to define and give character to both actors and actions

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