ROLE OF THE NARRATOR IN AN ADVENTURE COMIC BOOK

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1. TWIXT SPEECH AND WRITING

Comic books provide an interesting, yet largely untapped set of texts. The verbal material in an adventure comic book is sufficient to be meaningfully analyzed, yet small enough to be handled thoroughly. Comic books bridge the chasm that separates speech and writing.

On the speech side of the bridge is the visual material within each panel. Indeed, the absence of an immediate contextual envelop is a primary factor distinguishing writing from speech. In comic books, however, each illustration supplies a visual context through which the reader easily enters the instantial world. She/He sees characters operating within their world, characters who in turn see and react with other characters.

The speech balloons stand midway on the bridge, simulating actual speech. Writing's nearest analogue is material within quotation marks. Yet, the verbal material within the balloons exhibits few actual speech characteristics that discourse analysts observe, characteristics such as fillers, restarts, shifts, post-completions, recurrences, reusages, and the like (Beaugrande, 1982: 240-253).

The narrator blocks rest on the writing side of the bridge. They have no analogue in speech, but they do supply textual cohesion and provide underpinning for the reader's perception of discoursal coherence.

All comic books possess visuals; otherwise, they...

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1I wish to thank Ms. Debi Reiter, a graduate student in English at Drake University, for introducing me to the world of comic books as potential texts for linguistic analysis.
would not be comic books. Almost all comics have speech balloons. (Ferd’nand, however, has only visuals.) But not all comic books have narrator blocks. For instance, Dennis, the Menace (Vol. 1, No. 11, September 1982) needs no amplification of events or situations, beyond that provided by the visuals and the balloons. Adventure heroes, on the other hand, carry out their missions in strange worlds. Their real-world readers often need insights and commentary to understand the reasons for the characters' actions, and to perceive the import of unusual situations and events. Conan, the Barbarian, No. 135, June 1982, "The Forest of the Night," (henceforth, simply Conan, the Barbarian) is a representative adventure comic book.

2. SURVEY OF THE TEXT

Conan, the Barbarian, is an ongoing adventure story. Each issue presents the hero with a problem that he must overcome and solve. (Occasionally, as with the November and December 1982 issues, a single adventure spans two issues.) The plot outline is given in Figure 1 (next page). There are seven major divisions or episodes; these are indicated by roman numerals. Each episode contains one or more scenes, shown by capital letters.

The introductory episode plugs into the previous issue, and situates Conan in a foreboding forest. In episode two, Conan meets Merya, the mysterious woman in the plot. He is immediately seduced by her. Allusions are made to the god of darkness, Arawn, who is Merya's lord, and whom Conan must overpower later in the adventure.

Episodes three, four, and five constitute the body of the adventure, containing by far the largest portion of visual and verbal material. A wild nightmare dominates episode three. As a result, Conan realizes he is cursed, and must purge himself of the spell. In episode four, he seeks out and finds Merya. In a flashback, she tells her tale of woe, and enlists Conan as her salvation from Arawn. Arawn, the god of darkness/hell/death, seizes Merya in episode five. Conan gives chase, and vanquishes the god in the climactic battle scene, scene F.

Merya is saved from Arawn's clutches, but she must die in episode six. (After all, were Conan to marry and settle down, the series would pretty well terminate.) In episode seven, the conclusion, Conan safely returns to the garrison and dines with his friend, Cleon.
I. INTRODUCTION
   A. Setting; transition from previous adventure
   B. Initial premonitions; stag kill for meal

II. CONAN - MERYA INITIAL MEETING EPISODE
   A. Seduction scene
   B. Bewitched forest disappears

III. NIGHTMARE EPISODE
   A. Conan's return to the garrison; Cleon's wagering
   B. Barkeep's warning
   C. Dream fight: owl and stag
   D. Deer head omen
   E. Conan's leaving the garrison; Cleon's wagering

IV. CONAN - MERYA SECOND MEETING EPISODE
   A. Conan finds Merya; Merya's explanation
   B. Flashback: Merya's story
   C. Merya's revelation; Conan as her savior
   D. Stag attacks Conan; steed bears Merya away

V. CONAN VS. ARAWN EPISODE
   A. Conan tracks Merya
   B. Arawn's altar draws Merya
   C. Conan battles Arawn's beasts
   D. Conan's initial attack on Arawn
   E. Conan battles illusory serpent
   F. Conan's climactic battle against Arawn

VI. MERYA'S DEATH EPISODE
   A. Merya's death and burial

VII. CONCLUSION
   A. Conan's return to the garrison; meal from Cleon's wagering

Figure 1
The narrative structure presented in Figure 1 forms the basis for the first column of Table 1 (on the following page).

The 135 picture panels present the visual orientation for Conan, the Barbarian. Table 1, column 2, shows the number of panels for each episode and scene. For example, episode I contains six panels; the first scene, A, has only a single panel, while the second scene, B, has five panels. The third column of Table 1 indicates the percentage of the entire adventure that each episode occupies. The six panels of episode I constitute 4% of the visual text. Note that the three central episodes -- III, IV, and V -- contain 109 of the 135 panels, or 80% of the entire comic book.

The speech balloons and the narrator blocks carry the text's verbal material. There are a total of 263 utterances or verbal chunks, roughly a ratio of two utterances for each panel. For the purposes of this analysis, I define an utterance as follows:

A balloon or block of linguistic text within a single panel, visually or graphically separated from other balloons or blocks within the same panel.

Thus, when Merya says,

"Conan! For every step you take ---" V D 19 (4) - U2
followed in the succeeding panel by,

" -- you move farther away!" V D 19 (5) - U1

I count two utterances, even though the two chunks com-

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2Utterances are identified as follows (using the present utterance as an example):
V ..... episode V
D ..... scene D
19 ..... 19th page of the original comic book text
(4) ..... fourth panel on that page
U2 ..... second utterance within that panel
### Role of the Narrator

<table>
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<th>NARRATIVE STRUCTURE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF PANELS (EPISODES AND SCENES)</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF PANELS TO ENTIRE NARRATIVE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF UTTERANCES (EPISODES AND SCENES)</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF EPISODE UTTERANCES TO ENTIRE NARRATIVE</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF NARRATOR BLOCK UTTERANCES (EPISODES AND SCENES)</th>
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<td>263</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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</table>

**TABLE 1**

Note: Percentages rounded off to nearest whole number; totals may not be 100%.
prise a single complex surface sentence. And when Conan earlier says,

"With these trees gone, I see I've veered north, into the foothills. The garrison's not a day's walk away!"

I count a single utterance, though it obviously contains two complete surface sentences.

Table 1, column 4, indicates the number of utterances for each episode and scene. Table 1, column 5, shows the percentage of the entire verbal text of 263 utterances that each episode contains. Notice the general congruence of percentage figures in columns 3 and 5.

This paper focuses upon the functional role of the narrator blocks. Table 1, column 6, shows the percentage of narrator block utterances to all utterances in each episode and scene. For example, 25% of the utterances in episode III are narrator block utterances, ranging from a low of 6% in scenes A and E (each with one of 17 utterances) to a high of 50% in scene C (11 of 22 utterances). There are eight scenes where nearly half (40% or more) of the verbal text is carried by narrator blocks.

The narrator's 76 utterances (29% of the total utterances) is surpassed only by the 86 utterances of Conan, the hero (33% of the total utterances). My conjecture was that the narrator blocks are quite crucial for comprehending Conan, the Barbarian, as text and discourse.

3. ROLE OF THE NARRATOR

Figure 2 classifies the functional roles of the narrator blocks. All but three of the narrator block utterances are intra-narrative. Let us briefly consider, then, contextual and extra-narrative functions.

The contextual function serves a preparatory purpose. It establishes for the reader the instantial world in which the narrative unfolds, tying it in with the previous issue's story. Consider the initial utterance of the narrator in this issue:

"After his recent return to his Cimmerian homeland, Conan has drifted west into the area known as the border kingdom. There, at least
for a little while, he plans to act as a scout along the frontier."

The extra-narrative role permits the narrator to inform the reader about some real world situation. In the final utterance of the text, the reader's interest is whetted with news of the July issue:

"Next issue: Bruce Jones and John Buccema team up to bring you -- "River of Death"

The narrator may further supply the reader with footnotes. The present issue contains no examples, but in Conan, the Barbarian, No. 138, September 1982, "Isle of the Dead," page 3, panel 3, utterance 3, we find:

"*See issue #134, "A Hitch in Time" -- Louise"
The vast number of narrator block utterances serve an intra-narrative function. The structural function presents the narrator as story-weaver. The narrator either provides new settings, participants, or topics in the structural development of the story, or provides cohesive connections between segments (episodes, scenes, panels) signaling structural relationships. For instance, after Conan's seduction by Merya in II A, scene B of the same episode begins,

"-- But when he awakens ..." II B 4 (3) - U1

And, in III E, where Conan requests a leave of absence to purge himself of the curse, we find,

"Minutes later, at the stables ..." III E 11 (6) - U1

The commentary function presents the narrator as commentator. The narrator offers explanatory comments which help the reader understand the 'why' and the 'how' of the characters' actions or of the events in the adventure.

In the psychological role, the omniscient narrator comments upon or peers into the minds of the characters. He supplies us with insights into the inner feelings and workings of the characters' minds, sharing with us a character's private thoughts. In IV D, Conan has been knocked unconscious by one of Arawn's stags, and Merya is forced to mount the steed sent by the dark god. Consider this sequence of three utterances:

"If only her champion ..." IV D 16 (5) - U2

"No. He, too, is still, her vain hopes crushed with him."

"She knows she has no choice." IV D 16 (6) - U2

In the situational role, the narrator offers comments about a character, a situation, an action, an event. Where the psychological function probes or comments upon X's thoughts, the situational function tells us about X. In IV D, the same episode and scene as in the above example, Conan faces the charging stag, but this time, as contrasted with the nightmare scuffle in III C, we are told that he is better prepared:

"Yet, this time, Conan wields bow and arrow, not
Role of the Narrator

sword."

An obvious problem with defining the term utterance as I have done is that not all narrator block utterances fall neatly into only one of the terminal boxes in Figure 2. Several narrator block utterances spill into two functional roles. For example, when Conan heads for his bunk at the end of III B, the narrator tells us,

"Cleon's words fall on deaf ears [situational function -- comment on the action], for Conan can only hear the cries of a stag that screamed like a man [psychological function -- what's going on in Conan's mind]." III B 7 (1) - U1

And later, in III D, when his companions realize that a curse has fallen upon Conan, the narrator says,

"Silently, they return to their beds [structural function -- the story-weaver] as if Conan were no longer among them [situational function -- the commentator]." III D 10 (5) - U2

In sum, of the 76 narrator block utterances (out of a total of 263 utterances), 13 are multi-functional.

4. A READING - FREE RECALL EXERCISE

I then wanted to discover how comprehension would suffer if the three variables -- visual material, speech balloons, and narrator blocks -- were manipulated. I set up five realistic texts:

[+ visuals, + balloons, + blocks] -- the original, unadulterated comic book;
[- visuals, + balloons, + blocks] -- verbal text; Figure 3 presents the script of the five panels of page 7 of the comic book: narrator blocks are presented in capital letters, non-linguistic utterances in capital letters with jagged underlining, and speech balloons in normal letters following the character speaking. (Figures 3-6, on the following pages, are all identical story material from episode III, the nightmare episode.);
[+ visuals, - balloons, + blocks] -- speech balloons removed, Figure 4;
[+ visuals, + balloons, - blocks] -- narrator blocks removed, Figure 5;
[+ visuals, - balloons, - blocks] -- both speech bal-
Page 7, panel 1:
Conan: I fear ... he speaks the truth.
Conan: Conam! Wait!
CLEON'S WORDS FALL ON DEAF EARS, FOR CONAN CAN ONLY
HEAR THE CRIES OF A STAG THAT SCREAMED LIKE A MAN.
Page 7, panel 2:
HIS THOUGHTS KEEP HIM AWAKE INTO THE NIGHT.
SLOWLY, HE TOO, DRIPLS TO SLEEP --
Page 7, panel 3:
-- A SLEEP ABRUPTLY SHATTERED!
Owl: SKRAH!
Conan: Crom! An owl -- smashing shutters built to
withstand half a legion!
Page 7, panel 4:
Conan: The others still sleep as if bewitched!
Owl: SKREEE!
Conan: This is sorcery!
Page 7, panel 5:
Conan: I've fought sorcerous creatures before ... and
I've learned one lesson well --
loons and narrator blocks removed, Figure 6.

I purchased several complete copies of Conan, the Barbarian, No. 135. I typed out the complete verbal text or script (as in Figure 3). The Drake University Educational Media Services made me three complete texts in the manner of Figures 4-6.

I then enlisted 20 subjects, all Drake University students. (Actually there were 23 subjects; I needed some insurance, knowing that some students would sign up as subjects only to forget about the appointment.) I had, therefore, at least four subjects for each set of texts. Each subject read one of the versions. When she/he had finished and indicated that she/he understood as well as possible, I asked the subject to recall the story on tape -- as fully and as accurately as possible. I encouraged subjects to make oral footnotes if they remembered some detail out of its order. I then left the room so each subject would feel as much at ease as possible.

This was an exercise, not an experiment. An experiment implies stringent controls and a resultant body of quantitatively analyzable data. I, however, wanted to obtain subjects' free recall protocols, much as Janet Emig's (1971) protocols. Using Figure 1 as a model or template of the narrative structure of the text, I then listened several times to each free recall, noting down the sequential structuring and the degree of detail. Naturally (and unfortunately), individual style of recall is a variable that I could not control. Some free recalls were more detailed and more elegant than others. Two of them were relatively useless.

For ease of reference, subjects and texts are noted as follows:
0-subjects .... the original, unadulaterated text;
V-subjects .... text with visual material removed (Figure 3);
B-subjects .... text with speech balloons removed (Figure 4);
N-subjects .... text with narrator blocks removed (Figure 5);
BN-subjects .... text with both speech balloons and narrator blocks removed (Figure 6).

Names. As noted previously, the four principal characters are Conan, the hero; Merya, the woman; Arawn, the god of darkness; and Cleon, Conan's friend. B- and
BN-subjects used only Conan's name, referring to the other characters as 'the beautiful lady,' 'some kind of evil guy,' 'big mean Viking guy.' On the other hand, V- and N-subjects employed names, although not always correctly: 'Creon,' 'Myra,' 'Arnus.' Inexplicably, O-subjects, like B- and BN-subjects, generally omitted characters' names. They also seemed to prefer to use referring phrases, such as 'this one witch,' 'the king of death.'

**Detail.** As could be surmised, detail was most seriously lacking with B- and BN-subjects. Detail was fullest with O- and N-subjects. Certain episodes, such as III, the nightmare episode, elicited detailed recall especially from O- and N-subjects. The Conan vs. Arawn episode, V, on the other hand, seemed to thwart detailed recall. Only N-subjects used any detail here. Perhaps the many, rapidly unfolding scenes of this episode bombarded the reader with too much ongoing action. Scenes A through E were either omitted, or conflated and skimmed over. Only scene F, the actual climactic battle (18 panels) received any significant detail.

**Inferences.** B- and BN-subjects often conjectured about events and actions. Lacking speech balloons, these guesses were often faulty. For example, one subject stated, 'the girl steals the horse Conan had and leads all the animals away (IV D). Actually, Merya is compelled to mount the steed which Arawn had sent; Arawn's animals of the forest accompany her.

**Uncorrected ordering problems, and back-tracking.** V-, N-, and BN-subjects experienced some difficulty in recalling events in their correct sequence. For example, two V-subjects mis-ordered the first three scenes in episode IV as A, C, and then B. One BN-subject mis-ordered scene C of episode V between scenes E and F. Perhaps narrator blocks do aid in keeping the story sequentially on track. Back-tracking occurs when a subject recognizes an ordering problem and seeks to correct it. Most back-tracking occurred with N-subjects, although there was a moderate amount with O- and BN-subjects. One N-subject, completing the recall of episode III, suddenly remembered details of scenes A and D of that episode. Another N-subject, while recalling V C, remembered that an owl had tried to kill Conan in his nightmare in III C. Some BN-subjects felt compelled to provide rather lengthy commentaries, as addenda, after finishing the narrative recall. They apparently were trying to work out to their own satis-
faction the many loose ends that resulted from being deprived of all verbal material.

Omissions. All subjects, except BN-subjects, omitted many scenes of episode V. This is a visually action packed episode. Possibly, these BN-subjects, deprived of all verbal material, were applying extra effort to the visuals in an attempt to understand the story. V-subjects omitted the most of episode V. As could be guessed, N- and BN-subjects floundered in recalling episode I, the initial episode; here narrator blocks make up 100% of the verbal material. B- and BN-subjects generally omitted IV C; over 90% of the verbal material in this scene is carried in speech balloons, and there is very little visual activity. IV B, the only scene in the entire narrative which has no narrator blocks, was omitted by only two B-subjects. Almost all subjects recognized that Merya was relating something of her past history.

In sum, the ability of subjects to recall the story line of the narrative is not especially threatened by being deprived of the narrator blocks. My original hunch -- that the narrator blocks are crucial for comprehension -- seems incorrect. In hindsight, this should not have been surprising. Youngsters are attracted to comic books. These young readers get the gist of the adventure; they can tell the good guys from the bad guys. They rely primarily on the visual material. What the narrator blocks apparently do, then, is to smooth the transition from one segment of the narrative to another, and to furnish the reader with insights -- psychological and situational commentary -- into the why and the how of the story's actions and events.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Figures 4-6 are reproduced courtesy of Conan Properties, Inc., New York, New York.

REFERENCES


Emig, Janet. 1971. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. NCTE.