

Gerald Prince

## Towards a Humorish Dictionary of Narratology

There have been many versions of narratology – feminist, cognitivist, rhetorical, sociological, historical, geographical, postcolonial, and more – but no elaboration of a humorish one. Below is a partial list of useful narratological notions, categories, and features which I hope will encourage such an elaboration. Each item is accompanied by one or more jokes that concretize or shed light on it rather than simply being “about” it, mentioning it, referring to it, or exploiting it.

### *Characterization/Charactonym*

A guy goes to the state court and has his name officially changed from Malibekatuvtson to Smith. A week later he goes back to the court and wants to change his name to Jones. The judge says: “Weren’t you here last week? Didn’t you change your name from Malibekatuvtson to Smith? What’s going on?” “Oh! It’s very simple, your Honor. Now, should one ask me ‘But what was your name before it was Jones, I’ll say Smith.’”

### *Denarration*

(1) John, a chronic complainer, sneezed once and started to whine “I have a cold! I have a cold!” His friend told him: “You don’t have a cold! You just sneezed because you were plucking your eyebrows.” John continued to whine: “Ah, poor me, I don’t have a cold! I don’t have a cold!”

(2) Schrödinger’s cat walked into a bar and it didn’t.

### *Disnarrated*

(1) Harry tells Larry that he has pneumonia and Larry says: “Could have been worse.” A week later, Harry tells Larry that he lost his job and Larry says: “Could have been worse.” A few more days go by and Harry tells Larry that his house burned down, that he’s broke, he’s dying, he has nowhere to stay, and Larry says: “Could have been worse.” This time Harry snaps: “Wait a minute! Every time I tell you my problems, all you say is ‘Could have been worse.’ How in God’s name could it have been worse?” “Well, could have been me.”

(2) Larry drops in for lunch unannounced and Harry fixes him a good sandwich, makes him a nice salad, and brings him a big chocolate chip cookie. Larry

thanks him effusively and says: “I can just imagine the kind of lunch I would have had if you knew I’d come by!” “If I knew you’d come by, I would have gone out.”

*Distancing narrator*

Why did the narrator cross the road? To be farther away from the narratee.

*Ellipsis*

(1) Mary is looking intently at a white canvas hanging on the museum wall. Her friend asks: “What’s so great about that canvas?” “The story!” “What story? What is it about?” “It’s about a cow who was in a meadow. It ate all the grass and then it left.”

(2) Larry wants to let his brother know that their father just died and decides to send him a telegram: “Dear Harry, Father died. Your brother, Larry.” But, surely, Harry knows his brother’s name and who would send him a telegram if not his brother and why would his brother send him a telegram if not because their father died and doesn’t Harry know that he’s dear to Larry and, besides, who else could the message be for? Larry decides not to send a telegram.

(3) A fish dealer puts out a sign that says “Fresh Fish Sold Here.” A customer tells him: “What’s the word ‘Fresh’ doing in your sign? Shouldn’t it be clear that your fish are fresh?” The dealer paints out the superfluous term. Another customer comes in and says: “What’s the word ‘Here’ doing in your sign? Where else would you be selling fish?” The dealer erases the term. A few minutes later, still another customer asks: “‘Sold?’ What else? Do you give your fish away?” The dealer paints out “Sold.” Then a fourth customer sees the sign and says: “‘Fish?’ Believe me, you don’t have to say ‘Fish.’ You can smell them a mile away.” The dealer removes the sign.

*Engaging narrator*

Why did the narrator cross the road? To be nearer the narratee.

*Metanarrative*

(1) A pastor, a priest, a rabbi, and a narrator walked into a bar. The narrator looked around and said: “I must be in the wrong narrative.”

(2) A narrator, a narratee, and a character walked into a bar. The barman took one look at them and said: “Is this some kind of narrative?”

*Narrative empathy*

John and Mary were at the movies watching a melodrama full of unrequited loves and bitter tragedies. Everyone in the theater was crying except for Mary. At one point, as John tried to repress a sob, she even laughed aloud. John turned to her and said: “Look, if you don’t like the movie, why don’t you just leave and at least let me enjoy myself.”

*Narrative power*

Knock, knock.  
Who’s there?  
Narrator.  
Narrator who?  
Narrate or die!

*Narrative versions*

(1) Harry and Larry, who know the same stories and have used them for years, decide to give each story a number in order to save time when discussing them. One day, Harry asks Larry to tell him a story he thinks is particularly good. Larry says: “3681.” Harry doesn’t react. Larry says: “Don’t you think it’s a great story?” “Sure! But not the way you told it.”

(2) A member of the Chamber got so mad at his colleagues one day that he shouted: “Half of the people in this hallowed hall are fools!” This was greeted with angry cries and demands for an apology. “All right, he said, I take it back. Half of the people in this hallowed hall are not fools!”

*Narrativity / Narrativeness*

Mary is perusing the phone book. Her friend asks her: “What are you doing?” Mary says: “I’m reading a novel.” “Any good?” “Nah! Too many characters and too little action!”

*Natural and unnatural narratology*

How many natural narratologists does it take to screw in a light bulb? One. How many unnatural narratologists does it take to screw in a light bulb? A fly.

*Perspective and point of view*

(1) “How’s your daughter doing? I hear she got married?” “She’s doing great, thanks. She married an angel. He brings her breakfast in bed. She spends her day reading and writing and playing tennis. And in the evening, he always takes her out to some fancy restaurant.” “That’s wonderful! And how’s your son? I

hear he too got married?” “Ah! Don’t ask! He married a witch. She insists on getting breakfast in bed. She spends her day reading and writing and playing tennis. And in the evening, she drags him to a lousy meal in some fancy restaurant.”

(2) A psychoanalyst shows a patient an inkblot and asks him what he sees. The patient says: “A man and a woman making love.” She shows another inkblot and he says: “That’s also a man and a woman making love.” She shows him a third inkblot and he says: “That’s another couple making love.” She says: “You’re obsessed with sex.” He retorts: “I’m obsessed? You’re the one with all the dirty pictures!”

*Post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy*

In order to prove one of his theories to his students, an entomologist trains a flea to jump on demand, puts it on his desk and cries “Jump!” The flea jumps. He cries “Jump!” again and the flea jumps. “Jump!” It jumps. The entomologist then cuts off the legs of the flea and cries “Jump!” The flea doesn’t move. “Jump!” It doesn’t move. “Jump!” It still doesn’t move. The professor then says: “You see, if you cut off a flea’s legs, it cannot hear.”

*Predictive narrative*

The doctor told his patient: “Don’t worry! You’ll live to a hundred and one.” “But I am a hundred and one!” “Well?!”

*Scene*

Joe is asked by the cops to tell them exactly why he didn’t show up when he had to. Joe says: “After washing up and getting dressed, I went out, got in my car, put the key into the ignition and rotated it. Nothing! I rotated it once more. Nothing! I tried again. Nothing! And again. Nothing! And again. N ...” One of the cops interrupts him: “What’s going on? What’s with you?” “Nothing,” says Joe, “but the car wouldn’t start.”

*Space and place*

Three refugees were stopped at the border. “Where were you going?” asked the judge. “My goal was the United States,” said the first. “I was trying to get to Canada,” said the second. “I planned to get to Australia,” said the third. “Australia?” said the judge. “Why so far?” “Far? Far from what?”

*Speed*

Harry and Larry met on the avenue. “Good morning!” said Harry. “Go to hell!” said Larry. “What’s wrong with you? I say ‘Good morning!’ and you tell

me to go to hell? Are you nuts?” “I’ll tell you. If I answered pleasantly, you’d ask where I was going and I would tell you I’m going to have a cup of coffee at Freddy’s Diner and you would say you’d never patronize that filthy dump and call me all sorts of names and I’d tell you to go to hell. This way, it’s much faster: you say ‘Good morning!’ and I say ‘Go to hell!’ and it’s over.”

### *Suspense*

How do you keep an audience in suspense? I’ll tell you later.

### *Time*

(1) “What time is it?” “Four o’clock.” “Oh, no! Not again!” “What’s the matter? What did I say?” “I’ve been asking that question all day and everyone gives me a different answer!”

(2) Before hiring Peter, Mary calls his former employer as a precautionary measure and asks: “How long did he work for you?” “Oh! A week or two.” “What? He says on his application that he was with you for three years!” “Yes, unfortunately, that’s true.”

### *Unreliable focalization*

Knock, knock.  
Who’s there?  
Focalize.  
Focalize who?  
Foca lies a lot.

### *Unreliable narrator*

I’ll tell you exactly what happened. You know I never make a mistake.

### *Untrustworthy narrator*

What’s the difference between an untrustworthy narrator and a flying jerk? The letter f.

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