

Mapping Time in Narratives

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Although many researchers argue that time is a fundamental structure of narrative few have developed the means to model its use in the context of a story. The following figure depicts a model of the temporal structure (Bruner, 1994) of a single life-story (McAdams, 1988). This model may be used to represent and examine similarities and differences in the temporal structuring of many complex forms of narrative.

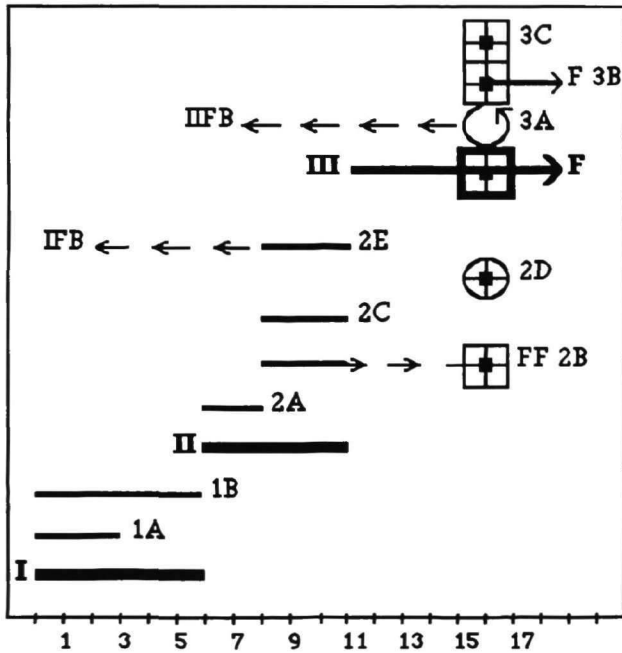


Figure 1. Prototypical Time Map of a Life-Story

The horizontal axis of the time map represents the total number of years covered by the episodes in the story (in this case a life-story), from birth (i.e., year 0) to the present (i.e., the moment of narration). Some events project into the future, represented by an arrow pointing to a capital letter F at the far right margin. The progression of time on this dimension is thus from the left to the right. The vertical axis represents the number of episodes (major parts of the story) and events (divisions within episodes) in the story (i.e., from one to the total number in story). The progression of events on this dimension is from the bottom to the top of the graph. Thus, time maps are read from bottom to top and from left to right. Note that time maps capture the time that episodes in a narrative cover (i.e., in terms of years or months covered), not the pace of the story (i.e., lines of protocol devoted to each event).

The dark horizontal lines labeled with Roman numerals show the time period covered by each major episode in this life-story (i.e., from I to II, etc.). The lighter-colored lines and the Arabic numerals with capital letters to their right

(i.e., 1A to 1B, etc.) depict the ordinal position (bottom to top) and elapsed time (left to right) of events within the episode. Thus, the example story begins at episode I (denoted by the dark line at the bottom of the map with the Roman numeral I to its left), which lasts from birth to age six. The event structure of this episode is depicted by the finer line immediately above the episode line. The symbol 1A to the right of this line indicates that this is the first event of the first episode in the life-story.

The square symbol appearing in episode two indicates that the episode concerns the present moment (i.e., the time at which the narrator is telling his life-story). The circles that appears in this episode represents the narrators use of the "eternal present," signified by terms like "always" or "never". The counterclockwise arrow in Episode III represents the recapitulation of events in the story. Thus, in event 3A the narrator briefly reviewed events from episode II.

The time map also displays more complex deviations from temporal linearity such as flashbacks and flash forwards. To be considered a flash back or a flash forward an event had to jump outside the temporal boundaries of the episode that contained it and shift the narrative to a time period bounded by a different episode in the story. Event 2B is an example of a flash forward. In addition to the arrows pointing to the right, event 2B is denoted by the capital letters FF (i.e., a flash forward) to the right of the arrows and to the left of the event number. Event 2E is an example of a flashback. This is denoted by the arrowline that points to the left of the event line and the symbol FB, which stands for flashback. The Roman numeral I to the left of the letters FB indicates that this event is a flashback to the time period covered by episode I.

Although this tool for mapping temporal structure was developed in the context of a life-story research project, it can be used to study the uses of time in a variety of forms of discourse.

References

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