Focalization and Narration: Theoretical and Terminological Refinements

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Focalization and Narration: Theoretical and Terminological Refinements

Göran Nieragden

Abstract This short article suggests a revision of the hierarchical levels of focalization and narration. It argues that greater precision in distinguishing degrees of both narrators’ and characters’ involvement in these distinct processes will result in a more flexible and more adequate typology. To achieve this purpose, the well-known systems of narrative situations in Bal 1981, 1985 [1977] and of focalization in Genette 1980 [1972] are reconciled with those of homodiegetic narration in Lanser 1981 and Füger 1993. A revised and comprehensive version of possible identity relations among narrators and focalizers is suggested and briefly exemplified through a number of well-known Anglo-American novels.

1. Homodiegetic Narration

Narrative theory has made impressive progress over the last decades. Its theoretical “tool kit” has been constantly refined, adapted to both new developments in fiction writing and new insights into older works. Yet a number of features in the models that are usually brought to the narratological analysis of “storytelling” display terminological and logical inconsistencies. In the main, I will, therefore, be making the point that the traditional dichotomy of “external” versus “internal” focalization does not do...
justice to the wealth of existing possibilities and should be replaced by a new system that distinguishes between “narratorial” and “figural” focalization both in heterodiegetic and in homodiegetic texts.

In the current model of layers within narrative fiction, based on Chatman 1978, the levels of story and discourse are kept apart. According to Gérard Genette’s [1980 [1972], 1988 [1983]] elaborate and widely accepted theory, an authorial narrator, who is not a character at the same time and remains “outside” the story, is called a heterodiegetic narrator, while a narrator who has the status of a character in the story is homodiegetic: “la narration homodiégétique... est le résultat de la délégation de la narration à un personnage, devenu personnage-narrateur” [homodiegetic narration... is the result of delegating the narration to a character who thus becomes a character-narrator] (Cordesse 1988: 487).

Susan Lanser (1981) has suggested a scale to show the various degrees of the homodiegetic narrator’s involvement in the story. Thus, sole protagonists (Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye; Maxine in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior) and co-protagonists (Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby; Jonathan Browne in David Lodge’s Ginger, You’re Barmy) function as autodiegetic narrators, since their own personal experiences and perceptions are at the core of the story. By analogy, for the cases of minor character (Cecilia Brady in Fitzgerald’s The Last Tycoon), witness-participant (Ishmael in Herman Melville’s Moby Dick), and the often nameless uninvolved eyewitness (Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood; Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test), the term of alterodiegetic narrators is here suggested.1 Lanser’s (1981: 160) scale illustrates the gradation of decreasing autodiegeticity, whereby the homodiegetic narrator grows less and less involved in the action that constitutes the story (see Figure 1).

2. Focalization

This system, geared to a homodiegetic narrator’s varying degrees of involvement in the perception of the events related by the narrator, will now be correlated with the existing format of focalization theory.

Gérard Genette’s differentiation of narration and focalization springs

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1. It may well be worth investigating whether this type of homodiegetic narration is a genre-specific feature of the nonfiction or documentary novel, also known as “new journalism.” (See Lodge 1971, Hollowell 1977, and Russell 1990 for an overview.) It cannot be one of its necessary conventions, however, as numerous counterexamples illustrate, e.g., Norman Mailer’s The Armies of the Night (1968), which is narrated by a witness-participant.
2. The opposition of auto- versus alterodiegetic narrators is based on Friedman’s (1955) I-as-protagonist versus I-as-witness but allows more subtle subvariants if combined with Lanser’s scale and Genette’s model of diegeticity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Autodiegetic</th>
<th>Alterodiegetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sole protagonist</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-protagonist</td>
<td>high-medium</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minor character</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>medium-low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>witness-participant</td>
<td>medium-low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uninvolved eyewitness</td>
<td>low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Subtypes of homodiegetic narrators according to their degree of autodiegeticity (adopted from Lanser 1981: 160).
from the evident shortcoming of the older *point of view* terminology. The latter tends to blur the issue in combining questions about the source of narration at the level of discourse with those about the center of perception/orientation that determines the perspective from which the narrated events are presented. Genette (1980: 186) quite rightly criticizes the traditional system for its regrettably confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?*—or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*.

Of course, a character’s perspective is never really autonomous. The “What?” and the “How?” of a character’s perception of the objects (situations, actions, persons) of his or her (fictive) world always form part of the narrative act and, hence, are directly dependent on the narrator’s criteria of inclusion and selection. Yet the choice of center of perception/orientation within any given narrative has great significance for matters such as characterization, completeness, and reliability, regardless of the narrative situation:

The subject of focalization, the *focalizor* (*sic*), is the point from which the elements are viewed. That point can lie with a character (i.e. an element of the fabula [story]), or outside it. If the focalizor coincides with the character, that character will have a technical advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character. (Bal 1985 [1977]: 104)

Bal aptly describes the specific position that the focalizing character occupies within the character constellation of a narrative text. This choice not only bears on the text’s reception; it also is a chief means of characterization: “the way in which a subject is presented gives information about the object itself and about the focalizer” (ibid.: 109). Convincingly arguing that “the narrator speaks the text whose content is the narrative; the focalizer presents the narrative, whose content is the history; the history is acted out by the actors” (ibid.: 45), she conceived of the relationship among narrator (N), focalizer (F), and agent (A) in a by now famous system of equations, which is shown in Figure 2. For the sake of clarity, I have taken the liberty of restating each component’s position in greater detail, but I have left the

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4. The verb *to see* functions only as a paradigmatic example of various perception processes.
logic of the original versions untouched: 5 In post-Genette narratology, cases 2 and 3 are usually taken as examples of external focalization ("narrator-focalizer" in Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 77); the other cases illustrate the types of internal focalization ("character-focalizer" in ibid.). 6 If a given narrative text keeps to either of these focalization types throughout, the result is to be called constant focalization; when changes occur between the types, the outcome will be referred to as variable focalization. 7

In the study of characterization techniques, the relation of subjects (= F) to objects (= A) of focalization ("focalizer" versus "focalized" in Bal 1981: 49), is of special importance where characters, rather than other world elements, function as the latter. In Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady (1881), numerous characters become the objects of Isabel Archer’s focalization; she herself, by contrast, is not focalized by other chief characters (Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood). Here, Bal’s system, as shown in Figure 2, can be rendered more precise by Wilhelm Füger’s (1993) categories of isopercep-

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**Table 1** Identity Relations among Narrator (N), Focalizer (F), and Agent (A) (after Bal 1981: 45).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narr-SUBJ</th>
<th>Foc-SUBJ</th>
<th>Agency-SUBJ</th>
<th>Identity Relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Narr-OBJ)</td>
<td>(Foc-OBJ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. X relates that Y sees that Z does</td>
<td>(N ≠ F; N ≠ A; F ≠ A)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. X relates that X’ sees that Y does</td>
<td>(N = F; F ≠ A)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. X relates that X’ sees that X’ does</td>
<td>(N = F; F = A)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. X relates that Y sees that Y’ does</td>
<td>(N ≠ F; N ≠ A; F = A)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. X relates that Y sees that X’ does</td>
<td>(N ≠ F; N = A; F ≠ A)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5. Special care must be taken not to confuse Bal’s variable A with the one Genette (1990) refers to in his formulas on the distinction between factual (A = N) and fictional (A ≠ N) narratives. There, A is used to describe the author of a work.

6. This article will adopt the usage of most of Genette’s followers in two regards. First, Genette’s concept of “Zero-focalization” is commonly dropped because of the convincing argumentation against the possibility of a nonfocalized text (Bal 1981; Berendsen 1984; Jost 1983; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; O’Neill 1992). Second, the opposition ‘external versus internal focalization’ is reserved for the distinction between focalizing narrators and focalizing characters, respectively. Genette himself (1980 [1972]: 183ff.) originally deployed it to distinguish visible objects of focalization (characters, events, locations) from invisible ones (thoughts, mental states).

7. This terminology diverges from Genette’s (and others’) usage, where the term “variable focalization” serves to describe the phenomenon for which multifocalization is suggested in section 4 of this article. The revised labeling, however, has two major advantages: it allows clearer distinctions of the individual subforms of internal and external focalization, as will emerge later on, and it opens up the changing/changeable relationship of any text’s switch between these as a research topic in its own right.
tive and exoperceptive focalization. Isoperceptive focalization means personal identity of subject and object of focalization and, therefore, corresponds to Bal’s equations 3 and 4; exoperceptive focalization entails their diversity and is the case in equations 1, 2, and 5. The next section will therefore try to establish a new hierarchy model of focalization by narrators and characters.

3. External and Internal Focalization

Despite its undeniable and demonstrated analytical usefulness, Mieke Bal’s concept of focalization displays a number of logico-terminological inconsistencies regarding the identity relations of narrators and focalizers. A (minor) revision, it is hoped, can render the concept as a whole even more useful. It seems that it is, in particular, equations 2 and 3 in Figure 2 that deserve further attention and elaboration and that part of the problem seems to arise from calling the focalization type in equation 3 “external” although the narrator who does the focalizing is also a character, an internal textual element. Equations 2 and 3 postulate identity of narrator and focalizer and are thus typical of heterodiegetic narration but also of homodiegetic subtypes. Bal (1981: 45) herself explains: “An alternation of possibilities 2 and 3 is characteristic of autobiography.” Only a homodiegetic narrator, however, also has an identity on the story level (= the experiencing I), besides the one on the discourse level (= the narrating I), where he or she can function as focalizer: “L’autobiographie est le genre de récit dans lequel le narrateur apparaît comme le principal actant” [Autobiography is that narrative genre in which the narrator appears as principal agent] (Vitoux 1984: 261). Thus it is only in homodiegetic texts that Bal’s variable N describes an entity that also has character status on the story level, and only these texts can display all of the identity relations in Figure 2; in particular, the identity of narrator (N) and agent (A) in equations 3 and 5 can be realized only in them.

If this were also possible in heterodiegetic texts, a rupture in narrative communication would be the consequence, or in Wolf’s (1993: 484) terms, an instance of “hard anti-illusion”: characters, which by definition exist only on the story level, would then localize the actions of the narrator on the discourse level, that is, the act of narrating itself. These characters would thus take “linguistic decisions” and receive “pragmalinguistic competence” (Bronzwaer 1981: 195)—both features that are normally reserved for the

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8. In the original German article, Füger uses “auto- vs. alloperzeptive.” To avoid confusion with the above dichotomy of “auto- vs. alterodiegetic narrators,” the terms have been slightly altered yet keep their evident binary character.
narrator. Theoretically, these characters would then be in a position to perceive the narrator of their own “lives” and to reflect on the act of narrating by which they themselves are “brought into being” in the first place. As a realist text that keeps up the illusion of a narrated “reality” throughout, such a novel would very likely prove unreadable. Though it is very likely true that even character-focalizers often lay claim to “authorial privileges” (Edmiston 1989: 742) and that, just as in heterodiegetic texts, genuine autodiegetic narrators seldom delegate the task of focalization (see Vitoux 1982: 365ff.; Lanser 1999: 174), personal identity of character-focalizer and narrator-focalizer is impossible in the case of a heterodiegetic narrative situation.

Thus, the equations 2 and 3 in Bal’s version have some infelicitous ambiguities, in that they hold true for both internal and external focalization of certain types. This ambiguity can only be resolved by linking the model more closely to the various types of narrative situation and by rearranging the terminology.

External focalization is always heterodiegetic, I would therefore suggest, and hence can only appear in heterodiegetic narrations; the focalizer in this case is solely the narrator, and, accordingly, this variant can be renamed heterodiegetic narratorial focalization. If the focalizer in a heterodiegetic narrative is not the narrator, but a character, this should be called heterodiegetic figural focalization. Internal focalization, by contrast, is possible in both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrations, as was explained above.10 If it is the narrating character who focalizes, the result is homodiegetic narratorial focalization; if focalization is delegated to a character other than the narrator, it is homodiegetic figural focalization.11 This last type is predominantly encountered in alterodiegetic texts, whereas homodiegetic narratorial focalization presupposes personal identity of character and focalizer and is quite typically used in autodiegetic texts, such as autobiography. The options regarding the number and targets of the delegated focalization types, the figural ones, will be specified below.

9. For a detailed scaling of the illusion mechanics of narrative fiction, see the excellent system proposed in Wolf 1993: 474; for a brief discussion of examples from twentieth-century English writing, see Nieragden 1995: 89ff.
10. O’Neill’s remark (1992: 341) that focalization is “evidently a phenomenon of discourse rather than story” thus turns out to be problematic; the narrator (discourse level) can turn various characters (story level) into focalizers, but their focalizations can only concern objects on the same level.
11. For related ideas see Bronzwaer 1981; Edmiston 1989, 1991; and Nelles 1990. This very terminological indeterminacy seems to have elicited the severe criticism of traditional focalization theory in general in Chatman 1986, Kablitz 1988, and Jahn 1996. It is shown here, however, that the problem can be solved by linking the internal hierarchy of focalization typology with the model of narrative situations.
4. Subforms of Figural Focalization

Either form (hetero- or homo-diegetic) of figural focalization can be subdivided further by means of Genette’s (1980 [1972]) categories of frequency. **Monofocalization** (“fixed focalization” in Genette 1980 [1972]: 189) sticks to one character as focalizer, whose perceptions determine the highly individualized orientation of the complete story. Miriam Henderson in Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1915–1938) and Maisie Farange in Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew* (1897) are often-quoted examples of this variant. **Multifocalization** (“variable focalization” in Genette 1980 [1972]: 189), on the other hand, offers an alternation between several focalizers. This type displays a number of realizations.

In the category of **singulative multifocalization**, each focalizer perceives different objects. Virginia Woolf’s novels often illustrate this technique. Clarissa Dalloway focalizes other aspects of London than do Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925); and Charles, James, and Cam Ramsay focalize distinct features of nature in the third part of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). **Repetitive multifocalization** (“multiple focalization” in Genette 1980 [1972]: 189), finally, appears when identical objects are focalized by different focalizers. Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868), Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747–1748), and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) are prominent instances of this variant. The two latter works feature interesting examples of establishing the internal power relationship among characters through this subtype of focalization: protagonist (Clarissa Harlowe) plus “accessory” (Anna Howe) versus antagonist (Lovelace) plus “accessory” (John Belford) in *Clarissa*; three male (Bernard, Louis, Neville) versus three female (Jinny, Rhoda, Susan) focalizers with extremely divergent focalizations of one object, in particular, Percival.

The last type, repetitive multifocalization, can in turn be split up into **autotelic versus alterotelic focalization**, again drawing on Füger 1993. When different focalizers represent identical objects, they can concentrate on the same (autotelic) aspects/features of it or on different ones (alterotelic). It is especially this distinction that helps to establish the degree of a text’s

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12. Genette (1980 [1972]: 190) correctly cites the epistolary novel in general as a subgenre that makes frequent use of this subform of focalization (cf. also the detailed work on Richardson’s *Pamela* in Vitoux 1984). Epistolary novels that feature only one correspondent (homo-diegetic narrator), however, tend toward monofocalization. A recent example is Sarah Worth in John Updike’s novel *S.* (1988).

13. In this context, Banfield’s (1982) problematic category of “collective focalization” can be neglected since it is more adequately covered by the suggested new system of internal focalization. For a detailed criticism of Banfield’s concept, see Fludernik 1996 (chap. 6.1.1).

14. He uses the German terms “iso- vs. autotelisch.” Cf. note 8 above.
Figure 3 Subforms of figural subjects and objects of focalization.

Perspectival consistency/integrity (what Ansgar Nünning [1989: 81] calls “Integrativität aller Einzelperspektiven”). The Waves, for example, demonstrates how discrepancies and contrastive accents among characters’ perceptions of seemingly identical objects (i.e., alterotelic focalizations) help individualize both the characters and the objects in question.

Figure 3 lists the possible forms of internal focalization; the model is enlarged by the variable O (= focalized object). Superscript letters and numbers concern either different focalizers (F₁⁻ⁿ), different objects of focalization (O₁⁻ⁿ), or different aspects/features of one object of focalization (O¹⁻ⁿ⁻¹).₁⁵

5. Conclusion

To sum up, a character can become the subject of figural focalization in both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic texts. Only in the latter case, however, can the narrator become the object of focalization, since only then is he or she a character, a “focalizable” phenomenon of the (fictive) world.₁⁶ At least in the standard dependency model of narrative layers, a heterodiegetic

15. It should be evident that no single literary text displays all of the theoretically established possibilities of focalization. The present attempt at restructuring the model should be taken as a contribution to cross-textual typology, which can then be applied to individual texts. For similar “pro-theory” arguments see Prince 1995.

16. A remarkable case arises in chapter 3 of David Lodge’s novel Changing Places (1975), which is made up of letters by the four protagonists. These four are internal figural focalizers in the other chapters, but the epistolary episode temporarily turns them into internal homodiegetic ones. For the time being, the logic of direct dependency on the heterodiegetic narrator that is inherent to internal figural focalization is abandoned, giving rise to the illusion of characters
narrator who, by definition, is located solely on the discourse level cannot appear as an acting and, hence, focalizable character on the story level: “the agent that sees must be given a status other than that of the agent that narrates” (Bal 1985 [1977]: 101; see also Bal 1993). Where identity of narrator and object of focalization obtains, the former must be of a homodiegetic nature.

By analogy to Lanser’s (1981) model of gradable (auto)diegeticity (cf. Figure 1), two theses can now be put forward. First, an increase in narratorial autodiegeticity correlates with a decrease in figural focalization. Thus in *The Catcher in the Rye, The Woman Warrior, The Great Gatsby*, and *Ginger, You’re Barmy*, the sole or co-protagonists focalize, if not exclusively, then more often, longer, and more intensely than do the other characters. The inverse conclusion that a decrease in autodiegeticity will invariably lead to an increase in figural focalization, however, does not seem justified, since it is very often *uninvolved eyewitnesses* or *witness-participants* who must rely on their own (i.e., narratorial) focalization in order to perform their roles as alterodiegetic narrators.

The second thesis is that isoperceptive focalization strongly corresponds to the degree of autodiegeticity. Alterodiegetic narrators function only very rarely as agents in the story and, hence, rarely focalize themselves to become the objects of isoperceptive focalizations.

By introducing a third parameter, focalization types can be established unambiguously. Instead of the somewhat misleading dichotomy “external versus internal,” there is now the possibility of distinguishing between (a) heterodiegetic and (b) homodiegetic focalization, either of which can be of narratorial or figural type. Regarding the relationship of subject to object of focalization, this can be one of personal identity (isoperceptive) or of diversity (exoperceptive), with the exception of heterodiegetic narratorial focalization, which cannot be of isoperceptive nature, as the narrator is outside the story and hence cannot focalize himself or herself.

A new version of the relationships involved, which for the sake of clarity is enlarged by the variable of Character (C), is given in Figure 4. I have included Bal’s terminology of X/Y/Z to establish the correspondence of my own version to her original system of equations.¹⁷

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¹⁷. These equations correspond to the following in Bal’s version in Figure 2: 1 = 2; 2 = 1; 3 = 4; 4 = 3; 5 = 2; 6a = 1; 6b = 5; 7 = 4.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narr-SUBJ</th>
<th>Foc-SUBJ</th>
<th>Agency-SUBJ</th>
<th>Identity Relations</th>
<th>Autodiegesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Narr-OBJ)</td>
<td>(Foc-OBJ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. heterodiegetic narratorial exoperceptive</td>
<td>((\text{X relates that } Y \text{ does}))</td>
<td>((\text{C}\neq\text{N};\text{N}\neq\text{F};\text{N}\neq\text{A}))</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. heterodiegetic figural exoperceptive</td>
<td>((\text{X sees that } Y \text{ does}))</td>
<td>((\text{C}\neq\text{N};\text{N}\neq\text{F};\text{N}\neq\text{A}))</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. heterodiegetic figural isoperceptive</td>
<td>((\text{X sees that } Y' \text{ does}))</td>
<td>((\text{C}\neq\text{N};\text{N}\neq\text{F};\text{F}\neq\text{A}))</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. homodiegetic narratorial isoperceptive</td>
<td>((\text{X relates that } X'' \text{ does}))</td>
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<tr>
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<td>((\text{X relates that } Y \text{ does}))</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>6b. homodiegetic figural exoperceptive</td>
<td>((\text{X relates that } X' \text{ does}))</td>
<td>((\text{C}\neq\text{N};\text{N}\neq\text{F};\text{N}\neq\text{A}))</td>
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<td>7. homodiegetic figural isoperceptive</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4** Rearranged Identity Relations among Character (C), Narrator (N), Focalizer (F), and Agent (A).
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