Theme and Generic Structure Potential:
Setting a criterion for the characterization of school narratives

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1. Introduction

Any regular literate person in facing a written or spoken text of narrative mode is capable of recognize it as a narrative one, whatever if it is a large complex novel or a brief simple anecdote. This is easily defensible if we consider that narrative text is the first textual structure that children acquire, being the most usual, and sometimes privileged, type of text produced in school, spreading throughout all the years of schooling.

Widely, narrative mode means a family of text genres, each having different communicative purposes, thus different generic structures to meet those goals. Quickly we could identify a variety of narrative mode genres: personal letters, shorts stories, fables, testimonials, and so on. But relating specifically to Brazilian regular classroom environment, there is the narrative genre itself\(^1\), a text which function and structure have overlapping bounds with functions and structures of many others genres of the same family. In simple words, school narrative genre can resemble a recount or a personal letter, but still having its existence apart of the others. For a language teacher, who must to assess this kind of text, establishing scores and marks to student’s compositions – a demanding of many Western educational systems –, it seems that the issue is a puzzle.

Christie & Derewianka (2008: 58), with respect to writing of stories, concludes that there are schematic structures of recounts and narratives, in Australian classroom, that remain reasonably constant from childhood to adolescence. Carrying these conclusions over to the

\(^1\) In many Brazilian classroom, until 80’s, the term “narrativa”, sometimes interchangeable with “narração”, referred to all kind of text produced on basis of narrative mode, whether a short story or a testimonial. Since 90’s, the genre-based writing approaches have come to change this reality. But even today it is completely possible to find these terms used in the former meaning.
reality of the Brazilian classroom, bearing in mind certain contextual differences, one question may serve as our starting point:

what are the elements of generic structure that can be found in school narratives?

To do so, the framework used here comes from systemic functional linguistics, particularly as it concerns with Generic Structure Potential (Hasan 1996; Halliday & Hasan 1985). Generic Structure Potential seems to be a very suitable framework, since it is an analytical tool that allows one to describe the possibilities of instantiation of any genre.

As suggested by Hasan (1996: 56), a semantic-based identification of attributes of structural units of any text type, to be successful, has to be stated in lexicogrammatical basis. In virtue of this, I choose to use some remarks on Theme structure (Halliday; Fries 1999; Gouveia & Bárbara 2004; Gouveia 2006), given that Theme is a textual device facilitating the reader/listener’s recognition of the writer/speaker’s communicative purposes. So, an additional question comes to bear on this study:

how can thematic structures be regarded as defining features of generic elements?

Based on a corpus of 40 texts produced by Brazilian students in their last year of secondary school (year 12), as part of their ordinary classroom activity, I intend to convey more systematized and reproducible methods for assessing the generic structure of school narratives.

2. Generic Structure Potential

Generic Structure Potential, to be short after here GSP, represents all textual elements available for the development of a genre. For each genre, there is a potential of elements, or stages. Thus, a specific set of these elements, when grouped in a certain order and constitution, determined by semantic categories, allows us to recognise, and even to reproduce, texts belonging to same genre. In simple words, the Generic Structure Potential, for its descriptive stamp, represents the full potential of occurrences of elements for a particular text.

The functionality of this theoretical construct enables one to detect, within the limits of genre, what are their variable and invariable properties. To do this, we must identify, in the organization of the text:
i) all those elements of structure whose presence is obligatory, if the text is to be regarded as a complete instance of a given genre by the members of some community;

ii) all those elements whose presence is optional, so the fact of their presence or absence, while affecting the actual shape of a particular text, doesn’t affect its generic status;

iii) the obligatory and optional ordering of the elements vis-à-vis each other, including the possibility of iteration. For illustrative purposes, it follows the GSP of the nursery tale (Hasan 1996: 54):

\[
[(<\text{Placement}>^) \text{Initiating Event}^] \text{Sequent Event}^\text{Final Event}[^{(\text{Finale})^\text{Moral}}]
\]

The elements surrounded by round brackets are optional, that is to say, Placement, Finale and Moral, and if not surrounded by round brackets the elements are obligatory, this includes Initiating Event, Sequent Event and Final Event.

The square brackets indicate the limits of mobility. One case of limitation of mobility is among Finale and Moral. Meanwhile here is more clear the relationship of mobility because there is a dot, which means free reversibility between two elements, the limits of mobility between Placement and Initiating Event are tighter. When Placement occurs, it could occur in only two ways: either preceding the Initiating Event, or included in it. This last possibility, that of lexicogrammar included in other element, is indicated by angled brackets. The circumflex carat indicates relative fixity on the order of elements: the element to the right of circumflex may not precede the element of the left. Finally, the arrow curve implies the possibility of iteration of element.

In others words, this genre typically begins with a stage oriented to the characters and circumstances of habitude wherein they are (i.e., Placement), which will be amended by the entry of a strange event to that habitude (i.e., Initiating Event), followed by the happening of other subordinated events (i.e., Sequent Event), which are repeated until an event put an end to the cycle of events (i.e., Final Event) and which may be followed by the description of a return to a normal state of affairs (i.e., Finale) and/or comments about the lessons learned after the occurrence of the facts (Moral). The group of events elements, Gouveia (2006: 5) refers to as Logical Sequencing of Events. This arrangement is sometimes adopted in this study because it summarizes coherently the core of a narrative of events.
3. Theme structures

For Halliday (2004: 65), Theme serves as the element in initial position which adjusts the clause in a specific context, pointing out to the development of the clause. Fries (1999: 318) goes further assuming that Theme serves to conduct the reader/listener on the message that is to be heard, making a framework available for the interpretation of that message. Theme is, thus, the element that is a sign of the context in which the message is developed. This development is the Rheme, the entire remain on the right side of the Theme.

One of its basic characteristics concerns with the location of the Theme according to clause mood choices, whether closer to the standard usage – the unmarked choice – whether away from it – the marked choice, the most unusual. In Portuguese, traditionally recognized as a SVO language (Subject + Verb + Object) (Cunha 2002), the declarative clauses, for instance, are expected to have the Subject in thematic position, which includes the elliptical Subject (Gouveia & Barbara, 2004: 60). These choices are non-marked. Contrasting to this, if an Object, for instance, is posed in initial position in a declarative clause, one can affirm that this choice is highly marked.

Beyond this criterion, it is also possible classify Theme according the constituents that it represents. The constituents of the structure of Transitive (participants, processes or circumstances) that function in thematic position are called topical Themes. It is essential to emphasize that each clause presents only a single Theme. So, this classificatory distinction is only necessary to distinguish experiential Theme structure from other types of possible Theme, namely the interpersonal Theme, related to the structure of Mode, and textual Theme, related to the structure of Cohesion.

Broadly, as interpersonal Theme, Modal Adjuncts can function. The textual components which can be posed in thematic position can be continuative Adjuncts and conjunctions. The textual Theme does not express neither ideational nor interpersonal meanings (Eggins 1994: 277). His role is purely cohesive. The thematic unity in which one Theme and another, interpersonal and/or textual, coexist is called multiple Theme (Halliday 2004: 81).

Other considerations about the Theme are related to what Halliday (idem:69) names as thematic resources, the means by which the writer manipulates the structure of the message to
emphasize specific types of framing. So, when a writer uses a thematic equative, he does it in order to give the clause a remark of exclusivity. This structure corresponds to a game of balance, where Theme and Rheme are equivalent and can even be exchanged without having to change the meanings. The predicated Theme is another resource and allows the writer to relocate the new information, which is usually rhematic, in thematic position (Thompson 1996:128).

4. Methods of analysis
4.1. Generic structure

Taking into account that generic elements are construed in messages, which are the smallest unit capable of performing a semantic stage of the structure of a text on the hierarchy of units to the semantic level, according to the proposition of Hasan (1996b: 117), the first step was to split each text in clauses. It’s important to notice that a message is realized lexicogrammatically by non-embedded clauses. The embedded clause is the clause that is part of a nominal group, not being in relation to parataxis or hipotaxe with other non-embedded clauses and maintaining a relationship with them indirectly (Halliday 2004: 426).

As a continuing point for the identification of elements of the structure of the narrative genre, labels were used. Thus, as reference, the Hasan’s labels to GSP of nursery tales were applied, if they match, to every element founded in narrative genre. This choice relies on the universality of these names, since they can be applied to many different narrative texts, and on its mnemonic and self-explanatory qualities. The fact that the genre described by Hasan not depend crucially on pragmatic environments to exist as a speech event, being the language of the nursery tale constitutive by itself of the speech event, is also considered as a justification, for the reason that, although a text is never been suspended in vacuum, being always susceptible to the interferences of context of production, many school compositions are strongly characterized as purely linguistic tasks, thus existing in and through language. This makes clear that both nursery tale and school narrative under analysis here have language as the primary source to define them as genre.

4.2. Theme

All the Themes have been uncovered by its primary meaning, whether topical, interpersonal or textual from each non-embedded clause of the corpus. Despite Theme may exist at several ranks (Fries 1999: 318), because of limited space, only the clause rank is
under analysis, standing aside the group rank. With reference to topical Themes, the experiential constituent which fulfills this thematic slot was revealed: Participant, Process or Circumstance. Furthermore, the grammatical features that realize these constituents were also put on view. Given those initial categories, it makes possible to present some outcomes on the nature of markedness of Theme structure in Portuguese language.

5. Some lexicogrammatical realization of generic structure

For a satisfactory understanding of major findings, it is useful to see before the motivating task, which provides a set of information to define the more immediate context of these school textual productions:

Imagine que você esteja amando alguém e tenha decidido se casar. NARRE como você conheceu essa pessoa. É imprescindível que você também a DESCREVA física e psicologicamente.

“Imagine that you love someone and have decided to get married with him/her. NARRATE how you met that person. It is essential that you also DESCRIBE him/her physically and psychologically.”

This task required imaginative skills from student to put himself in a specific situation, which is a loving relationship with projection of marriage. The story should extend to the past, when the narrator, in first person, has met his lover. After here this character will be referred as secondary.

According to the task, it would be two the obligatory accomplishment that should appear in instantiated texts: to meet a person and to describe him or her. Therefore it was expected representation of events, spatially and temporally correlated, and the characterization of physical and psychological secondary character. From the analysis of texts, it was found that all students had accomplished those two obligatory accomplishments. It follows a sample, with the obligatory and optional elements highlighted:

Initiating Event

Quando eu entrei na faculdade, fiz muitas amizades novas, dentre elas, com uma tive menos contato inicial, porém mais atenção essa pessoa me chamou.
Esse garoto, tão misterioso e calado, despertou-me a curiosidade em conhecê-lo melhor, mas, tímida, [eu] não conseguia me aproximar. Ele também não, achava até que ele nem tinha isso em mente.

Sua beleza era incontestável; [ele] tinha olhos castanho-escuro, alta estatura e porte atlético. A pele era morena-clara e suas feições tinham um quê de descendência oriental. De fato, acabei descobrindo que seu pai era brasileiro e sua mãe, árabe.

Ele tinha a personalidade muito forte, sua opinião era quase sempre imutável. Nada que significasse prepotência ou ignorância, pelo contrário, ele sempre ouvia o que os outros tinham a dizer. E respeitava. A questão é que ele pensava muito antes de chegar a uma conclusão e era pouco influenciável. Sua aparente timidez disfarçava a autoconfiança e a simpatia que me fizeram surpreender.

Demorou um pouco para que ficássemos amigos próximos e, quando isso aconteceu já tinha-me apegado a ele de tal maneira que [eu] fiquei confusa em relação aos meus sentimentos. Não tardou para que realmente assumíssemos estar apaixonados um pelo outro.

Namoramos cinco anos e [nós] estamos de casamento marcado.

[Eu] Penso que, às vezes, os fatos acontecem sem percebermos. Um garoto tão diferente e singular que conheci na faculdade hoje é meu noivo, e sempre gostamos de recordar aqueles tempos.

The first obligatory accomplishment covers Hasan’s event elements: Initiating, Sequent and Final Event. Functionally, the Initiating Event should represent the moment when the narrator stands aware of the existence of the secondary character, what changes his/her very own existence. Sequent Event is the stage where the love relationship between narrator and secondary character evolves, making it the backdrop to the closing of the narrative, Final Event, the last obligatory event element, which represents the closing of the previous movements – the marriage, for example.

The main semantic property of the Initiating Event is the punctiliar aspect or, according to Hasan (1996a: 69), one-time-ness. This property refers to the duration of an action: the smaller is the space of time between the beginning and end, more ad hoc it is. In other words, the main process of the Initiating Event represents an occurrence of unique temporal aspect, finished, whose lexicogrammatical characterization should be essentially realized by perfective verbal forms. It may contain temporal adjuncts contributing to the
semantic characterization. The ancillary nature of these adjuncts is explained on the fact that a verb in a perfective form is plenty to encode punctiliar nature.

Let me justify it based on some lexicogrammatical features. It was noticed that 45% of texts recover the lexical word to meet, which appears in the trunk of the task. This seems to be a strong evidence for a strategy of anchoring his/her text in the motivating task. A look up the examples:

Numa festa de formatura, eu conheci uma garota chamada Sara.
“At a graduation party, I met a girl named Sara.”
Numa das muitas viagens que fiz durante a faculdade, eu conheci Maurício, um jovem estudante de jornalismo que vivia em Belo Horizonte.
“In one of the several trips I made during college, I met Maurício, a young journalism student who lived in Belo Horizonte.”

Other 20% chose to use different processes of meanings, but keeping the agency in charge of the narrator and relating strictly to the idea of meeting:

Ele cursava a sétima série, quando eu vi pela primeira vez o Samuel.
“He was attending the seventh grade, when I first looked at Samuel.”
Então, fui andar um pouco pela festa e, logo após, vi uma menina linda e meiga.
Then, I hung around the party and, soon after, I saw a sweet and beautiful girl.”

In other 35%, the secondary character simply enters in scene, what can be justified through material processes whose actions are controlled by this character. Look the examples:

Fui a uma aula de biologia rotineira.
“I went to a usual biology class. The teacher hadn’t appeared. Then a substitute came in the classroom.”
Apareceram quatro irmãos para disputar uma partida comigo e com meus amigos.
“Four brothers appeared to play a match with me and my friends.”

The second obligatory accomplishment emerges as a new element, autonomous, requiring in its own right a specific label, named here as Character Description. All writers also accomplish this element. Look at some examples of realization:

Ele é moreno claro, magrinho, de estatura mediana, tem os cabelos lisos e escuros, tem um sorriso lindo e um olhar meigo.
“He is brunette, thin, median height, has soft and dark hair, has a beautiful smile and looks sweet.”

Quexada, 18 anos, magro, olhos castanho escuro, corpo malhado, cabelo castanho, liso, alto, simpático, de olhar marcante, fez, primeiramente, massagem na minha perna e me trouxe um copo com água.

“Quexada, 18 years old, thin, dark brown eyes, well built, straight brown hair, tall, friendly, impressive gaze, he firstly did some massage in my leg.”

O jeito dele carinhoso e intelectual me deixava maravilhada.

“His loving and intellectual way left me enchanted.”

The main semantic categorization identified in this element was the attribution, which is coded by nominal groups, or in non-defining clause form, or in participant form, accompanied by a material process.

For limitation of space, it will be explained only one case of optional element. That will be Placement. This element provides initial information about characters, like usual state of existence, particularization, attributions and circumstances of time and place. However, all kinds of information about the secondary character are not considered as semantic categories of Placement. The Placement, therefore, relates only to the narrator in this case. For better understanding of that element in the narratives school, look up this fragment, representative of the first paragraph of a text:

Em um acampamento da Igreja Batista Manancial, da qual sou membro, juntamente com a Congregação Batista Tessalônica (atualmente, Igreja Batista Vida Nova), conheci um menino da Tessalônica, o Wesley. Na época, eu era criança; estava perto de completar onze anos. Ele tinha quinze. Não nos falamos muito nessa época, mas foi aí que nos conhecemos.

“In a Baptist Church camping, of which I am a member, together with the Thessalonica Baptist congregation (now New Life Baptist Church), I met a boy of Thessalonica, Wesley. At that time, I was a child, I was close to turn eleven. We did not talk much at the time, but it was there we met.”

In this case, the Placement has been held detailed and explicit; it is detailed because it takes place in autonomous clause and it is explicit, because its achievement can be justified fully on the basis of grammatical structures. The choice of Placement is supported in exactly three messages: of which I am a member, / At the time, I was a child, / I was close to turn eleven. And these three clauses concern to the narrator. The messages can illustrate one semantic category recognized in Placement: attributions of character, in this case, the narrator.
The first message, of which I am a member, refers to a permanent quality, at least within the narrated events, which is held by the choice of the verbal group with relational meaning in present tense, although the composition task required from students a series of events that have occurred in the past.

So this shape reinforces the allocation of an invariable attribution. It is important to notice that to be a member of the church is one influencing factor to the continuation of events and to the welfare of the characters.

See one sequential event element of the same text, where the membership of Wesley is one important factor that allows a happy end:

Depois desse retiro, ele [Wesley] se tornou membro da minha igreja. Sendo agora da mesma igreja, passamos a nos conhecer mais ainda.

“After this camping, he [Wesley] became a member of my church. As now he is from the same church as me, we got to know each other better.”

The other two messages at that placement: at the time, I was a child / I was close to turn eleven also contribute to describe the narrator, but now pointing to ephemeral characterization. The age - initially indicated by the relational was - the attribute child, reinforced by specifically circumstantial was, plus the attribute I was close to turn eleven allow us to understand an initiating state in which the narrator is forbidden to any loving relationship, exactly what is requested by the task.

At the same time, it seems to be one feature that allows the development of events, what can be found typically in narratives with conflicts: an obstacle to overcome, which is justified even by repeated updates time, for example: Six years later/ Now / After several years.

The time setting is another semantic category identified in Placement, though that category has a very special achievement. From the same example, we can state a co-occurring events phenomenon: at the same time the adverbs support the Initiating Event (met a boy of Thessalonica), also they support the identification of the narrator. This proves also by the repetition of the adverbial group At the time, which orbits around the two qualifications already revealed.

In none of the texts examined, it may be noticed the occurrence of time-space circumstances exclusively to Placement. All occurrences are referring to both: the Placement and the Initiating Event. Another occurrence can be exemplified in this initial paragraph:
Eram umas quatro da tarde, [eu] estava meio triste e [eu] resolvi ir à praia, caminhar, esairecer, ver gente diferente.

“It was about four in the afternoon, I was kind of sad and decided to go to the beach, go for a walk, cool down, and see different people.”

In this case, the location takes shape in two sentences related through parataxis, working as circumstancing the first time the state where the narrator is.

6. The Theme cooperating to the elements of GSP

Given the elements identified in the school texts under analysis, the sequent step is to highlight the occurrences of thematic structure in each element. The outcomes of this step can provide an idea of how the writer indicates to the reader paths to follow in order to construct meaning.

In Placement above, there is one time adverbial phrase in topical Theme - On a beautiful Sunday - reinforced by locative circumstantial phrase - on the beach - but in rhematic position. This kind of chose points out to a non-dated form of defining time, stating the fictional aspect of text. Still about Placement, the writer chooses to fill the Placement with three thematic pronouns in relation to both: the narrator and secondary character. This strategy satisfies another semantic category of that element, orienting to the characters.

Em um belo domingo, [eu] estava caminhando na praia e [eu] vi que algumas pessoas estavam jogando bola perto de uma barraca. Uma garota que andava em minha direção não percebeu que seria atingida por uma bola. [Eu] Corri até onde ela estava e [eu] consegui evitar que ela fosse atingida.

No momento [eu] achei aquilo tudo normal (…)

“On a beautiful Sunday, I was walking on the beach and I saw some people playing soccer near a restaurant. A girl who walked towards me didn’t realize that she would be hit by the ball. I ran until the place she was and I got to avoid that she would be hit.

In that moment, I thought everything normal (…)”

It was noticed that to orient to narrator, all occurrences are ellipsed. In Portuguese language, the elliptical subject is unmarked. But when the writer orients to the secondary
character, the subject is not anymore elliptical. The writer uses a nominal group, accompanied by a ranked clause to functioning as defining - A girl who walked towards me.

There is ellipsis of the pronoun referred to secondary character only when new element emerges: the Description of Character.

Era branca, olhos verdes e olhos castanhos.

“[She] was a white girl, green eyes and brown hair”

The rhematic adjective group - Normal - strengthens the whole aspect of inertial state of affairs that can be presented in Placement, already pointing to the semantics category of habitude, which, however, will be amended by the Initiating Event.

As expected, to start the Initiating Event, the narrator arises himself in thematic position. This choice seems to ensure the agency of actions by the narrator, and seems also ensure the "agency" of feelings. That is so very reasonable, justifying the secondary character role, the existence of the secondary character is enough by itself, being not necessary that he/she involves more effectively.

To contribute further to that subordination, it is possible to see that, when placed in thematic position, the secondary character is participating of relational processes and the relative (que) works as a substitute for captivating gaze and smile, that it is nothing more than a meronymy, which attributes agency to the body gestures of the girl, not to the girl.

Ela possuía um olhar e um sorriso contagiante, que despertou em mim uma grande admiração por ela.

“She had a captivating gaze and smile, that made me feel great admiration for her.”

Final remarks

First, I noticed that many non-dated forms in Placement: they defining the time of reported events, but without set time markings - which continue the line established by the Theme that begins the text. Furthermore, it was noticed that these circumstantial adjuncts of time and the presence of paratactic connector suggest that the discourse organization of events is consistent with its order of occurrence.

In experiential Themes of the text prevails, however, another type of topical element: the terms are predominant marks that designate participants in the described state of affairs.
Indeed, in this text, there are twenty themes. Of these twenty themes, seventeen in the participant is represented anthropomorphically.

Also deserved my attention the fact that the subject is often done by an empty lexical category, nine of seventeen themes are participating in these cases. The presence of co-reference chains shows the permanence of related entities concerned as participants in the various described actions.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the thematic elements act as first instructions for activating a series of interpretative procedures. These initial instructions help the reader to predict the direction of sequences that start, creating expectations for the actions.

It is clear that, to the interpretation of these elements as evidence of the textual organization, it is necessary the competence of listener / reader: the knowledge that the speaker has about the prototype of narrative text - and, in particular, the narrative school - guides the interpretation and organization of generic structure of the text.

I hope that this thematic analysis has the merit of contributing to rigorous linguistic grounds of differences not only between the elements of a genre, but between different genres. The thematic elements, by the meaning that they realize, could be potential indicators of generic elements of a text.

References

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