

Annotation Guideline No. 5: Annotation Guidelines for Narrative Levels and Narrative Acts

Florian Barth

10.03.19

Article DOI: 10.22148/16.056

Journal ISSN: 2371-4549

Cite: Florian Barth, "Annotation Guideline No. 5: Annotation Guidelines for Narrative Levels and Narrative Acts," Journal of Cultural Analytics. December 3, 2019. doi: 10.22148/16.056

0 Rationale

The annotation guidelines for narrative levels and narrative acts have been developed in conjunction with my master thesis, the goal of which is to distinguish plot relevant settings from rather mentioned spaces in literary texts. For this, the determination of narrative levels is a requirement to precisely classify settings. Nevertheless, the guidelines itself were developed independently from the spatial classification task.

Since the notion of narrative levels encompasses both, level and narrative, the guidelines aim at a clear separation of these concepts. Therefore, they are designated as *narrative level* and *narrative act*, and both terms also serve as annotation tags. The narrative level gives the vertical dimension of the tagset and can hold a limitless amount of narrative acts on a horizontal axis, even on the first level. While narratological theory of levels broadly reflects on framing or embedding techniques and their specific function, these guidelines only focus on the determination of the vertical level structure of narrative acts or their horizontal succession. For this, the guidelines reflect on 1) nested narrators, as described by Genette, 2) possible types of level borders including Ryan's cross-classification of

illocutionary and ontological boundaries, or 3) techniques that cause a change of a narrative act without level switch, as Peer and Coste describe it for digression.

To specify textual characteristics in conjunction with the latter, each tag can be appended with property values that address, for example, the identity of the narrator, its presence in the diegesis or the relation and boundary to the upper level. Furthermore, the properties capture specific textual surfaces like letters or quotations of other literary works as well as metanarration and metafiction, which all indicate insertions of separate narrative acts on the same or a subordinate level. At last, properties give the annotator an opportunity to highlight metalepsis if there is a transgression between two or more narrative levels.

Overall, the guidelines are an attempt to deliver a simplistic and an easy to use set of tags with a clear hierarchical structure based on the distinction of narrative levels and narrative acts. In addition, property values include a more comprehensive perspective on the narratological background and also force the annotator to reflect on his annotation decision.

1. Tagset Conception

Narrative levels, as proposed by Genette, aim to describe the relations between an embedded narrative and the diegesis,¹ and indicate a clear hierarchical structure between these diegetic levels. Genette explicitly states his intention to systemize the existing notion of *embeddings*, which, according to him, lacks “the threshold between one diegesis and another” as well as the possibility to hierarchical structure a “second diegesis [...] within the first diegesis”².

In these guidelines, the often co-occurring notion of embeddings and *framed narratives* is grouped under the term *narrative act*.³ Since narrative acts can not always be considered in conjunction with vertical levels (e.g. William Nelles points out the possibility of horizontal embeddings),⁴ we clearly separate narrative levels and narrative acts.

¹Gérard Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (Cornell University Press, 1983), 227-231; John Pier and Didier Coste, “Narrative Levels (revised version),” *The living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. 2014.

²Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, 1988, 84.

³Conjunctions and delimitations between embeddings and frames are addressed in section 1.2.

⁴William Nelles, *Frameworks: Narrative levels and embedded narrative*, vol. 33 (Peter Lang Publishing Incorporated, 1997), 132.

1.1 Tag: Narrative Levels

Typically, narrative levels arise “when a character in a story begins to tell a story of his or her own”, which creates a narrative act within a narrative act.⁵ The change of a speaker is the most basic characteristic of levels and obligatory in Genette’s terminology, where for each narrative act on a certain level a different speaker occurs (figure 1).⁶

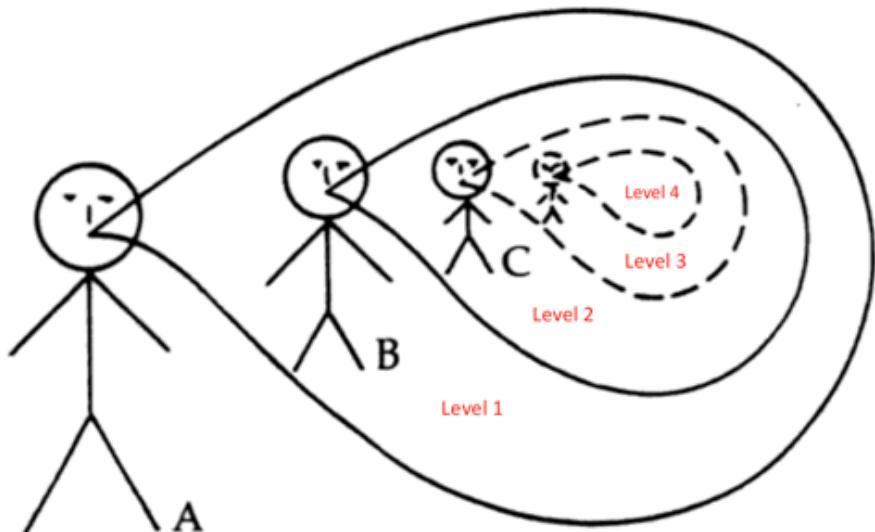


Figure 1. Narrative levels in conjunction with speech acts as proposed by Genette
 Marie-Laure Ryan describes the switch of speakers as an *illocutionary boundary*, which can be *crossed actually*, when a new voice like a character reports a story on the second level within a direct speech act.⁷ Additionally, utterances of characters presented by the narrator as in indirect discourse (indirect speech, character

⁵ Manfred Jahn, “Narratology: A guide to the theory of narrative,” *English Department, University of Cologne* 28 (2005).

⁶ Jahn, “Narratology: A guide to the theory of narrative”; Silke Lahn and Jan Christoph Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextranalyse* (Stuttgart und Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 83; In Genette’s terminology, the narrating instance of a first level (speaker A in figure 1) is “extradiegetic by definition” (Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, 229), therefore his story on level 1 is intradiegetic. An intradiegetic speaker (B) then tells a metadiegetic story (level 2), a metadiegetic speaker (C) a metatradiegetic narration (level 3) and so forth. Within the annotation, we only assign the level by a number, and for the speaker, we set a unique ID (cf. section 2.2 “Speaker: Identity”).

⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 176.

thoughts) are considered as a *virtually crossed* illocutionary boundary.⁸ Furthermore, Ryan highlights that levels not only arise through the switch of speakers but also if a “new system of reality is introduced” like in *Alice in Wonderland*, where “the primary reality of an everyday world” switches to “the dream world of Wonderland [...] in a continuous speech act.”⁹ This is defined as the crossing of an *ontological boundary*. While *Alice in Wonderland* marks an actually crossed ontological boundary (the fictional characters indeed enter another form of reality), virtual crossing occurs in this case when the second reality “is anchored” in the primary one, e.g. if the plot of a movie is described from the perspective of the primary reality.¹⁰ An ontological border is also crossed virtually, when the first level narrator cites an existing fictional narrative, like the quote of *Rip van Winkle* in Max Frisch’s *Stiller*. Both, illocutionary and ontological boundaries, can occur combined,¹¹ which leads to six possible boundaries (cf. figure 2) that are considered as a requirement for a new narrative level in these guidelines.

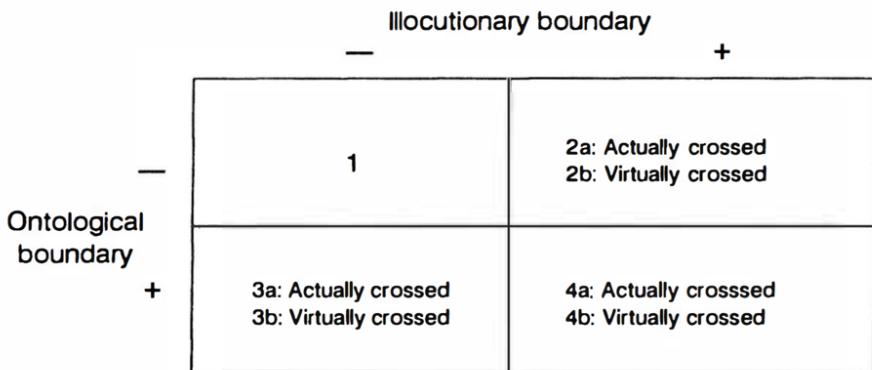


Figure 2. Boundaries between narrative levels following Ryan

Ryan also indicates that each utterance of a new voice may create “its own seman-

⁸Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*, 176.

⁹Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*, 177.

¹⁰Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*, 177.

¹¹Ryan determines an actual crossed illocutionary and ontological boundary (4a in figure 2) as “a fiction within a fiction” told by different speakers, e.g. the stories of the intradiegetic narrator Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights* (ibid.). Instead, virtual crossing for both boundaries (4b) would refer to a description of a metafictional story from the perspective of the first level speaker but including the mention of a second level speaker (Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*, 177.). This rare constellation occurs in *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero* by Jorge Luis Borges, where the primary narrator tells his plan to write a story, whose narrator will be “Ryan”, but the first level narrator “never speaks as Ryan himself” (ibid.).

tic universe”, which potentially deviates from the primary reality of the narrative and therefore may establish a new narrative level.¹² Even though the theoretical assumption of a level switch through each crossing of an illocutionary boundary seems considerable, these guidelines only focus on levels, in which indeed a new narrative act is realized.¹³

1.2 Tag: Narrative Acts

As proposed above, narrative acts cover both, embedded and framed narratives. Framing is more a “presentational technique”, where the rather short frame narration encloses a more ample inner tale like a painting.¹⁴ An example is Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, in which an extradiegetic narrator only introduces the character of Marlow that tells the story of his voyage up the Congo River on a second level (figure 3). In contrast, embeddings can be thought of as smaller insertings “within a larger unit,”¹⁵ e.g. in Kleist’s short story *Improbable Veracities* an officer tells three stories that appear as independent narrative acts on the second level (figure 4). Practically, the border between the dominance of an inner tale and a frame narrative is fluent, and these guidelines do not aim to identify framing or embedding techniques, their specific function,¹⁶ or a certain “main narrative” within several stacked narrative acts.¹⁷



Figure 3. Framing in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

¹² Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*, 175-176.

¹³ If only the boundaries for potential narrative levels are of interest, this may lead to tasks like the detection of direct and indirect speech acts that has been done separately, cf. Annelen Brunner, “Automatic recognition of speech, thought, and writing representation in German narrative texts,” *Literary and linguistic computing* 28, no. 4 (2013): 563-575.

¹⁴ Inner tale refers to the term *Binnenerzählung* in German literary discourse (Lahn and Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse*, 79); Pier and Coste, “Narrative Levels (revised version)”.

¹⁵ Lahn and Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse*, 79.

¹⁶ Cf. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 95; Lahn and Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse*, 87-90.

¹⁷ Evelyn Gius, *Erzählen über Konflikte: Ein Beitrag zur digitalen Narratologie*, vol. 46 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2015), 164.



Figure 4. Multiple embeddings of independent narrative acts in Kleist's *Improbable Veracities*¹⁸

As opposed to the “vertical” arrangement of narrative acts within levels, Nelles describes “horizontal” embedded narrative acts, which appear at the same level.¹⁹ This happens, when texts by different narrators are presented next to each other without an upper frame narrator. For example, in J. M. R. Lenz epistolary novel *Der Waldbruder* several letters by alternating characters are presented on the same diegetic level (figure 5).

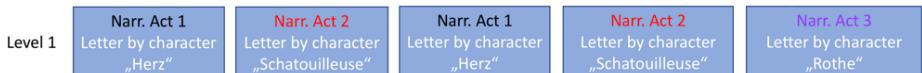


Figure 5. First five letters of the epistolary novel *Der Waldbruder*

Moreover, Pier and Coste describe *digression* as a form of embedding without the switch of levels.²⁰ This includes excursus, e.g. if the narrator directly addresses the reader,²¹ which occurs, for example, in Houellebecq's novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, where the narrator states:

1. The pages that follow constitute a novel; I mean, a succession of anecdotes in which I am the hero. [...] There are some authors who employ their talent in the delicate description of varying states of soul, character traits, etc. I shall not be counted among these.

Additionally, Bernard Duyhuizen describes intercalation as a form of digres-

¹⁸In our terminology, we count narrative acts separately on each level. Narrative act 1 to 3 on the second level represent the embedded stories, while narrative act 1 on the first level marks the gathering, in which the officer tells these stories.

¹⁹Nelles, *Frameworks: Narrative levels and embedded narrative*, 132; Nelles also defines the term *modal embedding* for dream worlds (William Nelles, “Embedding,” Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, 2010). In contrast to Ryan, he doesn't see a level switch here, even though he states a shift in the ‘reality’ of the fictional world. Still, for our guidelines the assumption of a subordinate level for crossing ontological boundaries seems more accurate (cf. Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*).

²⁰Pier and Coste, “Narrative Levels (revised version).”

²¹Excursus also corresponds with metanarration, which is captured as property in caption 2.2.

sion.²² This includes intercalated apologetics like in Aesop's fable *The Wolf and the Lamb* that closes with a moral statement:

2. The tyrant can always find an excuse for his tyranny. The unjust will not listen to the reasoning of the innocent.

In summary, a new narrative act is indicated by a level switch (illocutionary or ontological boundary) or by horizontal insertions (letters without framing instance; apologetics). Besides such formal criteria for narrative acts, Eberhard Lämmert indicates that a new narrative act at least diverges in time, setting or the corresponding characters from the previous one.²³

2. Annotation Scheme

2.1 Inclusion and Stacking of Narrative Acts

The main focus of the annotation is to determine the relationship between vertical stacked or horizontal structured narrative acts, which happens by associating the narrative level. Therefore, no limits of inclusion exist, narrative acts can have multiple embeddings and on each level several independent narrative acts can occur. Therefore, embedded narrative acts can frame stories and vice versa. Ryan illustrates this by means of *The Arabian Nights*, where the framing narrative act of Scheherazade and the Sultan directly includes the stories of *Ali Baba and The Three Ladies of Baghdad* told by Scheherazade on level 2.²⁴ Moreover, the latter story includes several independent narrative acts on level 3 like *Amina's tale* (stories 4, 5, 7, 8 in figure 7), which also contains *The young Man's Tale* on level 4 (figure 8).

To represent the vertical structure of narrative levels, each of which can include a limitless amount of narrative acts, we use the following nested structure of tags:

- Level 1
 - Narrative act 1
 - Narrative act 2
 - ...
 - Narrative act n
- Level 2
 - Narrative act 1

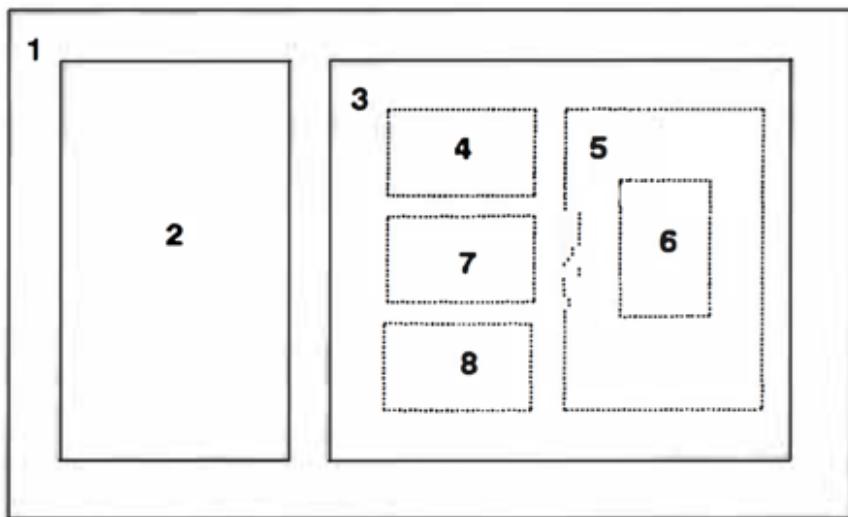
²²Bernard Duyhuizen, "Framed narrative," *Routledge encyclopedia of narrative theory*, 2005, 187.

²³Eberhard Lämmert, *Bauformen des Erzählers* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1955).

²⁴Ryan, *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Stacks, Frames, and Boundaries," in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Ohio State University Press, 2002), 366.

- Narrative act 2
- ...
- Narrative act n
- ...
- Level n

The span of the annotation can cover whole chapters but also single paragraphs, complete sentences or clauses.



- 1: *The Arabian Nights*
2: "Ali Baba"
3: "The Three Ladies of Baghdad"
4: The Porter's tale

- 5: Amina's tale
6: The Young Man's tale
7: Safia's tale
8: Zubaida's tale

Figure 6. Inclusion scheme for the *Arabian Nights* by Ryan

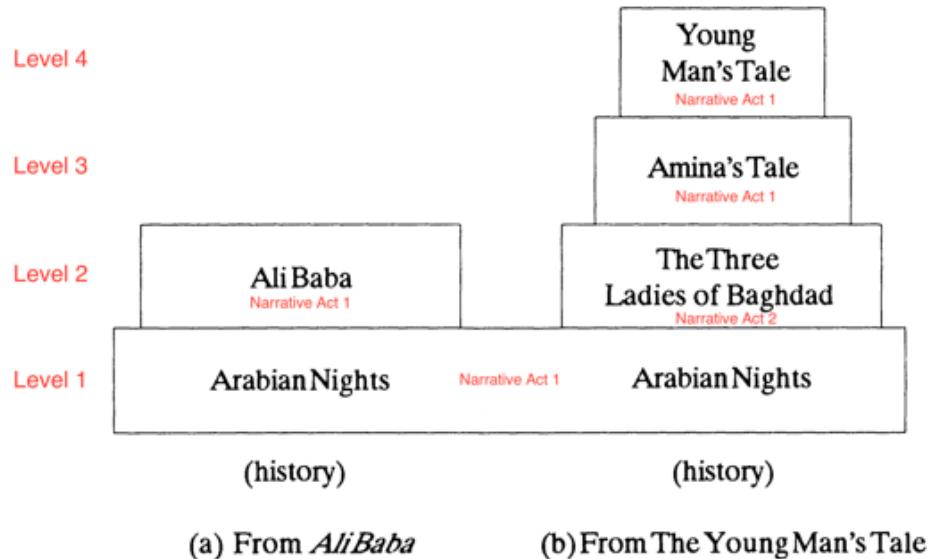


Figure 7. Stacking of narrative levels in the *Arabian Nights* (adapted from Ryan)

2.2 Properties

Properties aim to reflect on the annotation decision and give further information about the relation of narrative acts and levels.

Upper Level: Boundary

This property indicates the boundary between narrative levels following Ryan (cf. figure 2). As mentioned above, illocutionary and ontological boundaries can be combined.

- Illocutionary boundary (actual)
- Illocutionary boundary (virtual)
- Ontological (actual crossed)
- Ontological (virtual crossed)

Upper Level: Head of former level

The annotator should indicate the narrative act of the former level, in which the current narrative act is embedded. For example, the head of *Amina's Tale* is *The Three Ladies of Baghdad*, which is narrative act 2 on level 2 (cf. figure 8).

Speaker: Identity

Since stacked narrative levels can have multiple narrators, we capture the identity of each speaker. This is done by alphabetic ID's for each speaker identity.²⁵

- speaker entity a
- speaker entity b
- ...
- speaker entity n

For example, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* a different narrator occurs on each level: Robert Walton recounts in his journal the meeting with Victor Frankenstein and quotes the oral narration of Frankenstein, who cites the metadiegetic narration of his creature.²⁶

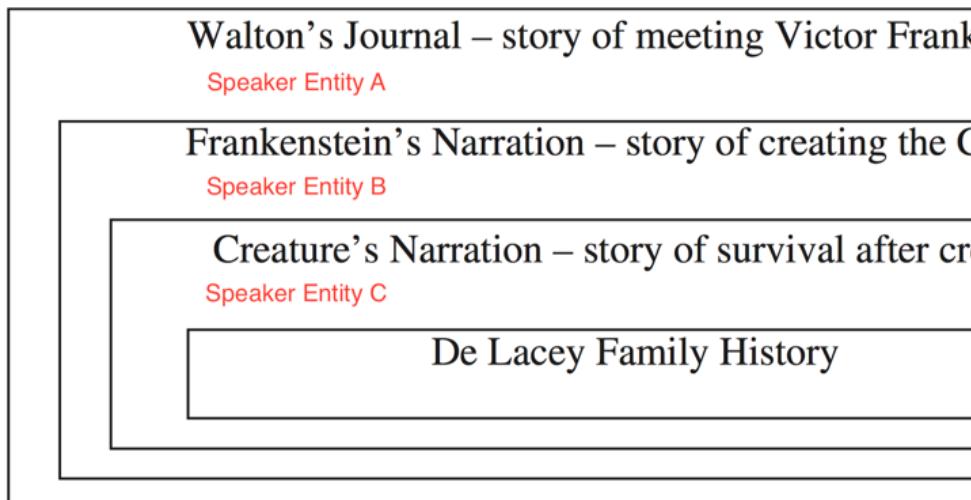


Figure 8. Different narrators for each level in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

In contrast, when the reporting voice remains constant between level 1 and 2 (e.g. if the same narrator reports a dream, which corresponds with the crossing of an ontological border), it should be annotated as the same speaker entity.

²⁵We do not use Genette's terminology for speakers (extradiegetic, intradiegetic, metadiegetic) since they only capture the level of a speaker, not his identity.

²⁶Cf. Duyfhuizen, "Framed narrative," 187; Another example would be Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*, cf. Lahn and Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse*, 85-87.

Speaker: Story Presence

This property captures if a speaker is present in the story or not. We use the terms defined by Genette:

- homodiegetic (speaker is part of the diegesis)
- heterodiegetic (speaker isn't part of the diegesis)

Narrative: Type

To record the type of narrative or speech act of an intradiegetic character, we annotate the textual type of a narrative act. Predefined are:

- undefined (This applies to the most extradiegetic narrators on level 1.)
- direct speech act (cf. *Heart of Darkness* in figure 3)
- indirect speech act (cf. the example of Chekhov's *An Avenger* below)
- quotation of a literary work (e.g. the quote of *Rip van Winkle* in Max Frisch's *Stiller*)
- letter (for example, the letters in *Waldbreuder* [figure 5] or *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* [figure 9].)
- transcribed speech (This also occurs in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, since Walton transcribes Frankenstein's narration in his letters.)

Example: Speaker switch within one narrative act in Chekhov's *An Avenger*

Following Ryan, we consider indirect utterances or thoughts of characters presented by the narrator as an implication for a switch of levels (cf. above: virtually crossed illocutionary boundary in section 1.2). Therefore, it happens that two speakers occur within a single narrative act like in *An Avenger*. First, the thoughts of Fyodor Fyodorovich Sigaev are uttered within direct speech and secondly expressed by the frame narrator:

3. [“Shouldn't I challenge him to a duel?”]₁ [flashed through Sigaev's mind.]₂ [“It's doing him too much honour, though. . . . Beasts like that are killed like dogs. . . .”]₁

[His imagination pictured how he would blow out their brains, how blood would flow in streams over the rug and the parquet, how the traitress's legs would twitch in her last agony. . . . But that was not enough for his indignant soul. The picture of blood, wailing, and horror did not satisfy him. He must think of something more terrible.]₂

1: level 2; narrative act 1; speaker entity 2

2: level 2; narrative act 1; speaker entity 1

This passage is embedded within the narration of the extradiegetic narrator of level 1. Therefore, the direct speech is assigned the property “speaker entity 2”, while “speaker entity 1” in the second paragraph refers back to the narrator of the first level.

Metanarration & Metafiction

Both, metanarration and metafiction, address self-reflexive utterances. While metanarration covers “the narrator’s reflections on the act or process of narration” (like in the example of Houellebecq’s novel in section 1.2), metafiction rather concerns “comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative.”²⁷ Metafiction occurs in Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, where narrator describes the reading process in second person. Each chapter contains another version of how the novel could be written (each is a separate narrative act), but none of these stories gets finished.

As mentioned in section 1.2, metanarration and metafiction are supposed to be annotated on the same level, in which they occur, but they create a new narrative act. These narrative acts can be marked by the property values “metanarration” or “metafiction”.

Metalepsis

We capture metaleptic intrusions of the upper or the lower level.²⁸ For example, if a metafictional character from level 2 appears in a narrative act on level 1 (by violating ontological boundaries), we add the property value “intrusion by level 2” to the annotation of the narrative act on level 1.²⁹



Unless otherwise specified, all work in this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

²⁷ Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, “Metanarration and metafiction”, *Handbook of Narratology*, 2015, 204-211.

²⁸ Cf. Lahn and Meister, *Einführung in die Erzähltextanalyse*, 90.

²⁹ Originally, Genette’s concept of metalepsis includes “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator into the diegetic world” (Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, 234-235). For example, if two intradiegetic characters on level 1 speak about the narrator, who writes the story (like in Flann O’Briens *At Swim-Two-Birds*), this refers to the extradiegetic point of view of the narrator and is captured within our guidelines by setting the property value “metanarration” (see above).