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INTERFACE
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Preface

Narratives are everywhere, performing countless different functions in human interaction; therefore the area of inquiry of this book must be delimited rather strictly. As the subtitle indicates, it is intended as a critical introduction, and I hope to be genuinely critical and genuinely introductory. More narrowly still, this critical introduction is specifically concerned with language-oriented or linguistically-minded perspectives on narrative: ways of looking at narrative that attend systematically to the language of stories, and models of narrative-analysis that focus on the linguistic form of narratives or their linguistically-describable structure. The basic rationale for such an emphasis is the conviction that systematic analytical attention to the logic and dynamics of language behaviour can shed light on any sub-domain or mode of language behaviour. The mode spotlighted here is narrative.

What is it about narrative that makes it such a pervasive and fascinating phenomenon? And how can one begin to answer such a question without entering into a narrative of one's own? The fact is, as my opening sentence announces, narratives are everywhere. Or are potentially so. Everything we do, from making the bed to making breakfast to taking a shower (and notice how these combined – in any order – make a multi-episode narrative), can be seen, cast, and recounted as a narrative – a narrative with a middle and end, characters, setting, drama (difficulties resolved), suspense, enigma, 'human interest', and a moral. (The moral of the story of my making breakfast this morning could be stated as 'Don't try to clean the toaster while cooking porridge'.) From such narratives, major and minor, we learn more about ourselves and the world around us. Making, apprehending, and then not forgetting a narrative is making-sense of things which may also help make sense of other things.

Just how pervasive and important oral and written narratives are to our lives becomes startlingly clear if we stop to think of the forms of narrative we depend on as props and inspirations: biographies and autobiographies; historical texts; news stories and news features in many media; personal letters and diaries; novels, thrillers and romances; medical case histories; school records; curricula vitae; police reports of 'incidents'; annual performance reviews; and, often most crucially, the stories we tell about ourselves and others – stories of triumphs and disasters, pleasure and pain – in

the course of our everyday lives. These are only some of the materials shaping our lives that are palpably narrative in form and function.

But we might also consider many other preoccupations which, as a means of assisting comprehension, we 'narrativize'. Law students struggling to grasp and retain the ramifications of the law concerning theft may well, as a sense-making procedure, cast the law(s) as a developing story shaped by attendances to and departures from precedent, and by statutory revisions. And the criminal law in its entirety can be seen as a revisable story: the story is about socially impermissible conduct and the means of redress available when such conduct is exposed. This all-embracing 'story of the law' subsumes an infinite number of more specific episodes (actual and hypothetical), with probable but contestable outcomes: if you do this, in those circumstances, then you may be liable to such and such penalties.

Science, too, may at first glance look very different from narrative. We often think of it as an expanding storehouse of incontestable facts, the hallowed repository of objective knowledge of how things in the world work: a rich but static description, quite remote from 'storytelling'. But that turns out to be mistaken in both theory and practice. In theory, the emphasis on scientific enquiry as an ongoing revisable narrative (with revisions made on the rational grounds that the revised account brings enhanced descriptive or explanatory power, and greater generalizability) is now commonplace. And in practice, too, one has only to think of how science is taught in schools to see the centrality of narrative to understanding.

For instance, the concepts of fuel, energy and work might be taught in the primary school by telling stories about eating breakfast before running around, and putting fuel in the car before going on a long trip. If the child doesn't get the point of these stories, and see the logical connections between the stages within each story as well as the analogical parallels across the stories, they won't begin to understand the concepts involved. At secondary school the presentation may be less informal and more theorized, but narrative methods persist. Any laboratory exercise in physics, chemistry or biology, for example, is a planned and guided story in which the child is an essential participant. Testing for the hydrogen that is released when copper filings are added to sulphuric acid is, for teacher and lab assistant, an old, old story (ah, they don't make them like that any more!). But it's a new story, a narrative of enforced personal experience if you like, for the child, the moral of which is to be learned. And afterwards, in the passive voice style that tries to keep human interest out of the picture, they must 'write up' the experiment.

If the above is a reminder that narrative is a mode that, directly or more indirectly, may inform almost every aspect of human activity, I must now stress that the following chapters are concerned almost entirely with narratives in a narrower sense: literary narratives, folktales, stories by and for children, conversationally-embedded spoken narratives, and news stories in the media. There are linguistic similarities between these types of

stories which I hope, rather than leading to a boring sameness, will be thought-provoking, and linguistic differences, too, which are yet not so great as to make for unmanageable heterogeneity.

For this second edition, I have made many minor revisions and rephrasings, some cuts and several additions or expansions. The expansions have been kept in check by the need to keep the book to a manageable length, and the requirement that something linguistic and introductory could be relevantly said about each topic. The substantially new sections include ones on narrativity (1.3), modes of narration (3.8), surprise and suspense (4.7), film narration (4.8), Labov applied to literature (6.11), systemic story genres (7.6), the structure and analysis of hard news stories in print and online (8.2–8.4, 8.6), and gender (8.7). All the Further Reading and Notes and Exercises sections, at the end of each chapter, have been radically revised and brought up to date.

On the other hand, I have sometimes retained from the first edition particular demonstration analyses even where these use approaches that may have developed further in very recent years. The more recent work often builds on the earlier work, so that the latter remains both important and truly introductory.

In the following chapters, particularly the earlier and more literary-minded ones, presentation and discussion of models and theories often involves detailed reference to one or more of a few celebrated literary texts which I have taken as exemplary. So the best way to read these chapters is with those narratives both firmly in memory and close to hand for direct consultation. This special collection comprises the following stories: James Joyce's 'Eveline' and 'The Dead', from *Dubliners*; William Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun' and 'Barn Burning'; Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'; and Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Pnin*. Many other narratives, short and long, oral and written, literary and non-literary, will be discussed in the course of the book. But those six are especially relevant to the first five chapters.

A linguistic introduction can hardly avoid the occasional use of more technical terms that may at first seem off-putting to those who have taken no linguistics courses. I have tried to keep specialist jargon to a minimum, explaining terms as the discussion proceeds.

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Nearly all the work on the first edition of this book was done while I was a member of the Department of English Language and Literature of the National University of Singapore, while any better thoughts that have emerged in the second edition arose at my next academic home, the English department of the University of Washington, Seattle, or my present one, the Department of English of the University of Birmingham. Much of the material presented here has been used on courses in Stylistics or Narrative at all three institutions, and all kinds of small debts are owed to students on those courses. I still owe thanks to all those listed in the first edition, friends, colleagues and students, together with a goodly number of scholars who have one way or another influenced or unwittingly contributed to the second edition: Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, Betty Samraj, Brian Ridge, Carmen-Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, Carol Marley, Charles Owen, Chris Heffer, David Birch, David Butt, Gail Stygall, George Dillon, George Wolf, Hayley Davis, Heidi Riggenbach, Jim Martin, K. P. Mohanan, Malcolm Coulthard, Michael Halliday, Michael Hoey, Monika Fludernik, Nigel Love, Norman Macleod, Paul Hopper, Paul Simpson, Peter Verdonk, Peter White, Phil Gaines, Roy Harris, Ruth Page, Sandy Silberstein, Talbot Taylor, Thara Mohanan, Thiru Kandiah, Tony Hung, and Victor Li. Thanks also to Ms Gouri Uppal for permitting me to reproduce conversational data from her National University of Singapore MA thesis (1984).

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