ORAL NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Willliam Labov

The study of narrative extends over a broad range of human activities: novels, short stories, poetic and prose epic, film, folk tale, interviews, oral memoirs, chronicles, histories, comic strips, graphic novels and other visual media. These forms of communication may draw upon the fundamental human capacity to transfer experience from one person to another through oral narratives of personal experience.

A focus on spontaneous recounting of experience was greatly stimulated by the development of sociolinguistic research in the 1960s, designed to capture the closest approximation to the vernacular of unmonitored speech. Narratives of personal experience were found to reduce the effects of observation to a minimum (Labov 2001). Since then it has appeared that such narratives are delivered with a similar organization in a wide variety of societies and cultures as for example, in the Portuguese of fishermen in northeastern Brazil (Maranhão 1984). The discussion of oral narratives to follow is based on the initial analysis of Labov and Waletzky 1967, as developed further in the suggested reading.

 The discussion to follow will first treat the structural organization of narrative (temporal organization, orientation, coda), then turn to the evaluative component, and finally to the construction of narrative as a folk theory of causality instrumental to the assignment of praise and blame.

Structural organization

A narrative is defined here as one way of recounting past events, in which the order of narrative clauses matches the order of events as they occurred. (1) is a minimal narrative organized in this way.

(1) a Well, this man had a little too much to drink

b and he attacked me

c and a friend came in

d and she stopped it.

The same events could have been reported in the non-narrative order c,d,a,b, as in (2), which employs a variety of grammatical devices within a single clause.

(2) A friend of mine came in just in time to stop this person who had had a little too much to drink from attacking me.

Narrative structure is established by the existence of *temporal juncture* between two independent clauses. Temporal juncture is said to exist between two such clauses when a change in the order of the clauses produces a change in the interpretation of the order of the referenced events in past time. These are *narrative clauses.* Narrative clauses respond to a potential question, "what happened then?" and form the *complicating action* of the narrative.

A narrative normally begins with an *Orientation*, introducing and identifying the participants in the action: the time, the place, and the initial behavior. The orientation

section provides answers to the potential questions, "who? when? where? what were they doing?" In the minimal narrative (1), the first clause (a) is the orientation. More information is usually provided.

(3)   a   my son has a--well, it was a fairly new one then.

      b   It's a 60 cc Yamaha.

      c   and it could move pretty good.

      d   This fella and I were going down the road together

The end of a narrative is frequently signaled by a *Coda*, a statement that returns the temporal setting to the present, precluding the question, "and what happened then?".

(4)   a   And you know the man who picked me out of the water?

      b   He's a detective in Union City,

      c   and I see him every now and again.

Evaluation.

Most adult narratives are more than a simple reporting of events. A variety of evaluative devices are used to establish the evaluative *point* of the story (Polanyi 1989), Thus we find that narratives, which are basically an account of events that happened, frequently contain *irrealis* clauses—negatives, conditionals, futures,—which refer to events that did not happen or might have happened or had not yet happened.

(5)   And the doctor just says, "Just that much more," he says, "and you'd a been dead."

(6)   I'll tell you if I had ever walloped that dog I'd have felt some bad.

(7) a   And he didn't come back.

    b   And he didn't come back.

Irrealis clauses serve to evaluate the events that actually did occur in the narrative by comparing them with an alternate stream of reality: potential events or outcomes that were not in fact realized. Frequently such evaluative clauses are concentrated in an *evaluation section,* suspending the action before a critical event, and establishing that event as the point of the narrative.

Evaluative clauses vary along a dimension of objectivity. At one extreme, narrators may interrupt the narrative subjectively by describing how they felt at the time.

(8) a   I couldn't handle any of it

    b   I was hysterical for about an hour and a half

In a more objective direction, narrators may quote themselves ("I said to myself, 'This is it'"), or with more credibility, cite a third party witness, as in (5). At the other extreme, objective events speak for themselves, as in the account of a plane developing motor trouble over Mexico City.

(9)   And you could hear the prayer beads going in the back of the plane.

Evaluation provides justification for the narrative's claim on a greater portion of conversational time than most turns of talk, requiring an extended return of speakership to the narrator until it is finished (Sacks 1989). Evaluation thus provides a response to the potential question, "So what?" (Spanish "Y que?", French "Et alors?").

Narratives of personal experience normally show great variation in the length of time covered by the clauses in orientation, complicating action and evaluation sections, ranging from decades to minutes to seconds. Sequences of clauses of equal duration may be termed *chronicles*; these are not designed to report and evaluate personal experience.

Reportability and credibility.

A reportable event is one that itself justifies the delivery of the narrative and the claim on social attention needed to deliver it. Some events are more reportable than others. The concept of *reportability* or *tellability* (Norrick 2005) is relative to the situation and the relations of the narrator with the audience. At one end of the scale, death and the danger of death are highly reportable in almost every situation. At the other end, the fact that a person ate a banana for lunch might be reportable only in the most relaxed family setting. Most narratives are focused on a *most reportable event*. Yet reporting this event alone does not make a narrative: it only forms the *abstract* of a narrative.

For a narrative to be successful, it cannot report only the most reportable event. It must also be credible if the narrative is not to be rejected as a whole by the listener. There is an inverse relationship between reportability and credibility: the more reportable, the less credible. Narrators have available many resources to enhance credibility. In general, the more objective the evaluation, the more credible the event.

Narrative preconstruction.

When a narrator has made the decision to tell a narrative, he or she must solve the fundamental and universal problem: "Where should I begin?" The most reportable event, which will be designated henceforth as e_0, is most salient, but one cannot begin with it. Given the marked reportability of e_0 and the need to establish its credibility, the narrator must answer the question, "How did this (remarkable) event come about?" The answer requires a shift of focus backwards in time to a precursor event e_{-1}, which is linked to e_0 in the causal network in which events are represented in memory (Trabasso and van den Broek 1985). In traversing this network in reverse, the causal links found may be event-to-goal, goal-to-attempt, or attempt-to-outcome. The process will continue recursively to e_{-2}, e_{-3}, etc. until an ordinary, mundane event e_{-n} is reached, for which the question "why did you do that?" is absurd, since e_n is exactly what we would expect the person to do in the situation described. The event e_n is of course the Orientation. Thus a narrator telling of a time he was on shore leave in Buenos Aires begins,

(10)   a   Oh, I was settin' at a table drinkin'.

Triggering events. Given the mundane and non-reportable character of the orientation, it follows that the first link in the causal chain is a *triggering event*, which drives the narrative along the chain towards the most reportable event. Thus (10) is followed by (11).

(11)   b   an' this Norwegian sailor come over

          c   an' kep' givin' me a bunch o' junk about how I was sittin' with his

                woman.

How ordinary situations like (10) can give rise to the reportable and violent events that followed is a mystery that narrative analysis can only contemplate, since they are part and parcel of the contingent character of history.

The transformation of experience.

The participants in many narratives include protagonist, antagonist and third party witnesses, of which the first is the most complex. Elaborating on Goffman (1981:144-5), one can identify many egos present: the self as original *author* of the narrative and its immediate *animator*; the self as *actor*; the self as *generalized other* (normally as "you"); the *anti-self* as seen by others; and the *principal*, the self in whose interest the story is told. That interest is normally advanced through a variety of techniques which do not require any alteration in the truthfulness of the events reported. The re-creation of the causal network involves the assignment of praise and blame for the critical events and their outcomes. Most narratives of conflict involve linguistic devices that contribute to the *polarization* of protagonist and antagonist, although within the family, other linguistic forms lead to the *integration* of participants. The devices used to adjust praise and blame include most prominently the deletion of events, an operation which can often be detected by close reading. Key elements in further manipulation are the grammatical features of voice: active vs. passive, but also zero causatives which assign agency ("He *drove* through town with a chauffeur") or verbs which imply the exertion of authority and resistance to it ("My dad *let* me go with him"). Other narrative devices function to increase the impression of agency: pseudo-events that may not correspond to any physical event ("I *turned* to him and", "I *took* this girl and", "I *started to hit* him but").

Narrative analysis can show how the PRIMA FACIE case is built to further the interests of the principal. This involves detecting insertions of pseudo-events and removing them; detecting deletions and replacing them; and exchanging excuses for the action excused. It is then possible to approximate the original chain of events on which the narrative is based. A useful exercise is to develop a complementary SUB-ROSA case in the interests of the antagonist. The comparison of these two constructions deepens our understanding of how narrative skills are enlisted to transform the social meaning of events without violating our commitment to a faithful rendering of the past.

Works Cited and Suggestions for Further Reading

Goffman, Erving. 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Labov, William. 2001. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Labov, William and Joshua Waletzky. 1967. "Narrative analysis". *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, ed. J. Helm, 12-44. Seattle: U. of Washington Press.. Reprinted in *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7:3-38, 1997.

Maranhão, Tulio. 1984. "The force of reportive narratives." *Papers in Linguistics* 17(3): 235-265. *International Journal of Human Communication*. Canada: Linguistic Research, Inc.

Norrick, Neal R. 2005. "The dark side of tellability." *Narrative Inquiry* 15:323:344.

Polanyi, Livia. 1989. *Telling the American Story*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Sacks, Harvey. 1992. *Lectures on Conversation*. Vol. I and Vol. II. Edited by Gail Jefferson. Oxford: Blackwell.

Trabasso, T., and P. van den Broek. 1995. "Causal thinking and the representation of narrative events." *Journal of Memory and Language* 27:1-22.

Suggestions for further reading

Labov, William. 2001. "Uncovering the event structure of narrative." *Georgetown University Round Table* 2001.

This article develops the search for the events underlying the narrative.

Labov, William. 2004. "Ordinary Events." In *Sociolinguistic Variation: Critical Reflections*. ed. C. Fought, 31-43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An exploration of the evaluative effect of inserting ordinary events into narrative.

Labov, William. 2006. "Narrative preconstruction." *Narrative Inquiry* 16:37-45.

A fuller development of this topic.