15
Narrative and narrative structure

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15.1 The multiplicity of narratives
Narrative is one of those terms, like ‘creativity’ and ‘text’, which has become unhelpfully promiscuous. Everything’s a narrative, narratives are everywhere, and if you (as an enterprise, a politician, a university department, a public service, a tourist resort – yes, even a restaurant meal) don’t ‘have a narrative’, you are sunk. Some narratives function as a kind of structured mnemonic, encapsulating key information in a memorable format (e.g. in the sciences, in historiography and in legal education). But most centrally narratives have a performative function: what is told and the way that it is told simultaneously reports on the identity and values of the teller, or the subject-matter, or the addressee (or some combination of these). A CV or a Facebook entry usually narrates the subject’s character and values so as to address specific objectives such as employability or social attractiveness. Oral personal narratives are often an accounting – of someone’s experience of a tellable disruption of the habitual, the social order – and are used at every level of seriousness and a multitude of settings. From the rich range of possible example narratives to analyse, in light of space limitations, just one childhood personal reminiscence will be analysed in detail in this chapter, with attention to its numerous indicative formal and functional characteristics.

15.2 Narrative as a genre
Is narrative a genre or a ‘super genre’? Consider Biber et al.’s (1999) influential *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. This selects four registers as important and distinct broad forms of writing (among which grammatical patterns and frequencies may vary revealingly): conversation, fiction writing, news writing and academic prose. In two of these registers, the genre of narrative is arguably prominent (fiction writing and news writing), and it frequently emerges in a third, conversation. On that basis narrative would appear to be a range of textual formats for reporting ‘what happened’ of such generality as to enjoy a significantly different status from a typical genre, loosely on a par with the list, or the syllogism, which equally can be deployed in a range of different genres. Reflecting this, narrative seems only partly to fit the Systemic-Functional Linguistic conception of a genre.
For Systemic linguists, a genre is a ‘staged, goal-oriented social process’. Thus for Systemic-Functional Linguistics it would seem that to form a genre, a set of language-using events would need not only to display recurrent and distinct global linguistic patterns, such as the familiar narrative sequence of stages labelled Orientation, Complication, (Crisis) and Resolution, they would also need to be linked to a patterned and recurrent social goal or activity. This is more apparent in pragmatic activities such as service encounters, which thus can be seen as a genre. By contrast narrative seems to be either a sub-structure (you might use one in the course of advancing through the steps of a service encounter) or a genre-neutral resource (narratives can be used in all sorts of actual genres). Among SFL researchers, Eggins and Slade (1997) have suggested that four distinct genres of story can be identified: Narrative, Recount, Anecdote and Exemplum. Of these, only the first approximates the Labovian structure, the others being regarded as complete and well-formed, but without the evaluative staging, or the complexity of event-sequence, of the Narrative format.

15.3 Fundamental functions of narrative

Narrative or story (I will treat these terms as equivalent and interchangeable) is a ‘core’ structuring form, found in all sorts of language activity (and found in other kinds of human activity which can be entirely non-verbal: in pictures and film, ballet and mime, etc.). We use narratives to represent and to convey at least two connected scenes or situations: (1) a state and (2) a significant change of that state. There are always implicit, in any narrative, at least two connected scenes or situations, even if the earlier scene has to be inferred or reconstructed from the depiction of the later one. The representing and conveying is, crucially, ditransitive: it is not merely the construal of some changed situation that makes a narrative but in addition the implied communicating of this to another party that is definitional of narrative. Usually a narrative is conveyed to an addressee who was not present, as witness, at the occurrence of the situation so reported; but on occasion, often with specific effects, a teller narrates to someone who was a witness and who might be expected to have made sense of the event-sequence for themselves; and again on occasion a teller can tell a story with themselves as sole addressee. Most commonly, however, we tell stories about ourselves and our affines or those whom we value, about experiences we find instructive; and we tell the stories to those whose goodwill or approval we seek.

One brief characterisation of narrative runs as follows (it is from Toolan 2001: 8, rephrased for clarity):

A narrative is a sequence of events that are perceived to be non-randomly connected, typically involving one or more humans or other sentient participants, these being the experiencing individuals at the centre of events; from their experience we human addressees can ‘learn’.

Two aspects of this characterisation may be noted. One is that it does not require a narrative to be a representation of a sequence of events (some analysts put great weight on overtly represented – in the sense of narrated – event sequences, to exclude event sequences where there is direct enactment or performance, as in plays, operas and arguably even films). But the definition above is neutral concerning the reporting versus presenting (or describing versus performing) distinction: it gives priority to the receiver of the narrative. The other notable aspect of the above description is that it does not stipulate a verbal medium for all narratives. Be that as it may, the subjects of the present chapter are indeed verbal narratives,
where a narrator or teller(s) is explicitly or at least implicitly the source of the textual representation of the non-random sequence of events affecting one or more characters and reporting some kind of significant change.

Our personal narratives are not simply vivid ways we tell ourselves ‘what happened’; they also tell us who we now are, or who we have become. This is because the representing of an initial state commonly involves presenting a characterisation or identity for one or more individuals; and then the presentation of the changed state that often entails reporting a change of character or identity. Thus, paradoxically, the very idea of identity – the matrix of behaviour-shaping stable and permanent characteristic(s) of a person, group, or entity – is both put in use and put at risk in narratives. Where our narratives do imply identity-change, a ‘deep shift’, we rehearse through them a more general cultural and even biological phenomenon, namely the situated nature of identity and its potential for change. Our narratives ‘perform’ this making and re-making of identity (and of the terms, conditions and possibilities that we live by).

15.4 The Labovian model

15.4.1 How spoken narratives work

The most natural and commonest narratives that merit first study are those we produce orally or in Sign, a naturally acquired language, without need of any technology, about ourselves and our associates, in the course of everyday conversation. When it comes to describing the structure and function of spoken narratives, it is worth emphasising that a range of related structures (rather than one inflexible template) and a diversity of functions need to be recognised. But in what follows I will present and treat the structure proposed by the sociolinguist William Labov as capturing much that is typical of a ‘fully verbalised’ oral narrative of personal experience, since several of the variant structures can be seen as abridged or compressed alternatives to it. Labov focused on oral narratives of personal experience (henceforth ONPE; as already implied, these can be regarded as the canonical kind of narrative, from which various other forms including written or filmic ones can be seen as derived). Having collected and analysed a number of ONPEs elicited from young African American men when they were prompted by an inquiry as to whether they had ever been in a situation where they feared for their life, Labov proposed an ONPE may have up to six basic elements. These are as follows:

1. **Abstract**: What, in a nutshell, is this story about?
2. **Orientation**: Who was involved, when and where was this, what had happened or was happening (in the way of ongoing background)?
3. **Complicating action**: What new thing happened and then what happened after this (recurring)?
4. **Evaluation**: So what? How or why is this interesting?
5. **Resolution**: So what was the final thing that happened?
6. **Coda**: How does this story ‘connect’ with the speaker, or all of us, here and now?

To clarify how the glossing questions above are intended, consider ‘Evaluation’. For Labov, this denotes all the material in an oral narrative, not primarily reporting orientation or complicating action etc., which can be seen to answer an addressee’s questions about the relevance and significance of the story being told. Other analysts have encapsulated these
questions as concerning the point or tellability of a narrative: an oral telling must justify its own telling by being sufficiently amusing, surprising, alarming, moving or in some other way of value to the addressee (although sometimes an addressee will be placated, where they see no great benefit to themselves in hearing the story, by recognising that the telling is of great importance — perhaps therapeutic — to the teller). Evaluation therefore covers all the linguistic and paralinguistic means by which a stark provision of elements 2 and 3 and 5 (the bare setting and actions) is enriched to make the story more compelling, vivid, memorable and significant.

In the stories Labov analysed, the one obligatory element is the Complicating Action (a report of something having happened). Least required, and frequently absent, are the two (usually smaller) sections that top and tail stories, Abstract (often a preview of what is to come) and the Coda (a conversational ‘bridge’ back to the present conversational situation of the teller and addressee, or a summing-up of the ‘moral’, of what the incident taught the teller). Five of the six elements tend to appear in narratives in the sequence given above. While the sixth, Evaluation, tends to occur at the ‘high point’, before a story reaches its Resolution, it can in fact emerge anywhere in the course of a story, or be spread throughout it. This reflects just how crucial an Evaluation is. Despite the ‘So what? Why is this interesting?’ questions above, there is not one specific question that Evaluation addresses. Instead it is a rich array of turns of phrase, verbal and non verbal elaborations, which can be thought of as added to the barest form of a narrative and is used by the teller to make the story all the more worth telling and hearing. As noted above, evaluative material is often particularly clustered around the ‘hinge’ or climactic point of the action, just before — and in effect delaying — the resolving action or event. Evaluation is also, crucially, all the ways in which the teller’s personal stake in a story is conveyed.

Many conversation-embedded personal narratives will have only some of Labov’s six elements, and in recent years analysts have become more guarded about whether stories with just two or three of the elements should be conceptualised as ‘incomplete’ or ‘lacking’, relative to a full six-parter (perhaps on the analogy of the reduced non-finite clause). It may suffice here to note that presence and prominence of the Labovian elements seems to be culture- and situation-specific, and that in any case no such scheme can fit all stories in all cultural contexts. There is also wide recognition that Abstract and Coda are secondary elements, that Resolution may be preferred but is not structurally essential, and that Orientation may be quite attenuated and almost inextricably embedded within the Complicating Action. What is more generally agreed is that there must be some form of Complicating Action (the ‘referential’ spine of a narrative, according to Labov), which is to say, something must have happened; and that Evaluation, at least implicit indications of the story’s tellability, will feature in some guise.

15.4.2 The story of Mrs Mowdy

The story I have chosen for analysis differs in content and context from Labov’s, but has similarities of structure. What follows is a transcript of an oral narrative that arose in the course of a half-hour conversation between an older woman (denoted in Figure 15.1 by W) from Glasgow, Scotland and a researcher well-known to her (R in Figure 15.1), who was chiefly interested in W’s dialect. R has asked W to share some of her childhood memories. The extract comes about twenty minutes into W’s recollections (Figure 15.1).
But, oh my God, and then the wife in the bottom clo- her husband eh was the the sort of, watchie at this yard.

And they were a weird couple. He had a kind a humphy back, you know, he’d kind of

And stran-, never spoke much to anybody, you know, and his wife was awful funny; she was practically bald.

Her hair was that thin

she really was, she was practically, her hair was that thin all over, she was practically bald. and, anyway, somebody kicked our Sam’s ball and it hit the wood and over into the yard, and he was a crabby old sod, if he got yer ball so-, he would, nine times out of ten, you didnae get it back, and our Sa-, it was a new ball, and I loo- our Sam was nearly greetin, so I ‘I’ll get it’.

So I goes marchin in, chaps the door. Now I was bein very civil //here.//

So the door opens and she, she comes to the door and she says ‘Whi-‘, she says, ‘Well?’ I says, ‘Excuse me Mrs Mowdy, could I have S-, could I please have Samuel’s ball?’ Well my mother nearly died, cause she was doin her brasses on her door up the stairs,

And she, the door got slammed in my face. And my mother came down and she says, ‘What did I hear you sayin there?’ I says, ‘I was only askin Mrs Mowdy for [laugh]

‘For Samuel’s ball.’ ‘Her name isn’t Mowdy’. See the boys used to call him, ‘See him, he’s a, that’s old mowdy, old mouldy’, and oh no, they didnae like him. Old Mou- old Mou-. Well I didnae know her name wasnae Mowdy, so I // went to the door//

And it turned out her name was McFarlane, And eh ‘Please Mrs Mowdy we- could I have Samuel’s ball?’ oh dear God. My mother says, ‘It’s got to the stage where I’m frightened I’m frightened to go doon the stairs.’ [laugh]

oh dear, well I really didnae know. I’d never heard them called anything else, but ‘oh, go, run, here comes the Mowdy’, you know.

[inaudible] the Mowdy, [click]. But the man wi the ca- horse and cart, oh the sweary words that he knew werenae canny, //you know?//
A rough preliminary survey of the story would suggest that turns W1 to W4 are Orientation, W5–W7 are Complicating Action, W8 contains the Resolution, and W9 to W12 are chiefly Evaluative. There is no Abstract, and no real Coda, just a segue to mention of the horse and cart man.

It is in many respects a monologue, and W clearly holds the floor (indeed she has been encouraged to, by R). R’s very brief back-channellings (laughs, or ‘uh-huh’s), are almost like breathing-points in W’s narrative. Once W ‘gets started’ on her story, at W5, R’s supportive and appreciative responses are roughly equidistant from each other; or we can say that W’s ‘phased’ telling is distributed into roughly sentence-long segments. This mutually-managed coordination of telling is a striking feature of conversational storytelling formats which have an element of the ceremonial in their orderliness: there is no evidence of competitive overlapping or interruption of turns in this transcript, nor should we expect much. R clearly defers to W, and it is in R’s interests for W to talk at length (R’s goal is to gather samples of natural dialectal speech). The talk comes to be shaped around the ‘Mrs Mowdy’ story only gradually, preceded by characterisations of both the downstairs neighbours, which can be recategorised as Orientational material preliminary to some Complicating Action, but do not have to be. Thus, in Labovian terms, there is no preliminary Abstract to this story – unlike the one that W has told immediately previously in this interview, a story she prefaces with ‘did I tell you about the time we got the photograph taken?’

W1–W4 are Orientational, describing the two new narrative participants in stative relational clauses or with habitual aspect (husband was a watchie, they were weird, he had a humpback, they never spoke much, she was practically bald, …). But there are elements of Evaluation even in this Orientation – as indeed is quite common in fluent storytelling. To see this a very brief sketch of Labovian Evaluation is needed. Labov postulates two main kinds of Evaluation – external or internal to the story action (a loose analogy might be the contrast between sentential adverbial disjuncts and VP-qualifying adverbial adjuncts). External evaluation stands entirely outside the story proper, and further divides into two types: those where the teller reports on what they now think of what happened (The most amazing thing has happened, you’re going to love this, this one’s hilarious, what do you think of this – I can’t make any sense of it, etc.); and those that describe the teller’s own evaluative reaction to the situation and chain of events, at that past time: I was convulsed with laughter, I was shaking like a leaf, I couldn’t get my words out, everyone seemed to be disgusted by this. Neither type is a disclosure of ‘what happened’ or ‘what finally happened’ but of how you now evaluate what happened, or then evaluated what was happening. A good example of external evaluation in the Mrs Mowdy story comes in W7, where the teller reports not her own evaluative reaction but that of her mother, upon hearing the teller address her neighbour as Mrs Mowdy: Well my mother nearly died. Told at this point, before we learn that Mowdy is not the neighbour’s name but a derogatory nickname misunderstood by the teller, this evaluation’s relevance is quite unclear and the coherence of the story is threatened. It is also threatened since the teller’s mother has not been mentioned as present at all before this point, so the explanation that she is present in that she overhears the request, is timely.

More completely integrated into the telling are the range of types of Internal Evaluation that Labov proposes. Initially these were characterised as linguistic or paralinguistic additions to core action clauses, if the latter are stripped to the grammatical and event-cum-actant essentials. So a simple Complicating Action clause, I hit him, could be evaluatively enriched as I hit him, ‘pow!’ or Ducking and diving to keep out of range, I didn’t hit him I
HITTT him, 'powww!' But it is now widely recognised that internal evaluations are not confined to the two action elements (namely Complicating Action and Resolution); they can be dispersed throughout the telling and are quite common in the Orientation. Labovian internal evaluation is of four subtypes: Intensiﬁers (including repetitions, emphases, paralinguistic accompaniments, intonational exaggerations), Comparators (including modality and negation), Correlatives (including pairings of activities, happening concurrently), and Explicatives (stated reasons and causes). All of these in one way or another add staging, texture, and complexity to the simple ‘then x, and then y, and then z’ of bare-narration Action and Resolution.

Returning to W3–W5, which I have suggested is predominantly Orientation, we can now say more about W’s troubling to mention three times over that the woman neighbour was practically bald. That marked repetition is made evaluative by the repetition. So these phrases realise two functional elements in the narrative (Orientation plus Evaluation). W5 also contains a ﬁrst Complicating Action clause in the story: somebody kicked our Sam’s ball and it hit the wood and over [it went] into the [neighbours’] yard. This does not mean that the Orientation is now complete, however, and that all subsequent clauses will be Action ones. Instead, the next couple of lines of W5 chieﬂy tell us more stative or relational information about the neighbour (crabby, who nine times out of ten did not return balls) and the ball (it was a new one). So here Complicating Action and Orientation are side by side. The ﬁnal two clauses of W5 now resume the narrating of the Action, but in interestingly evaluative ways: we are told Sam was nearly crying ['greetin’], and that the teller undertakes to recover the ball. But he was nearly crying (like I almost fainted and similar constructions) is evaluative by way of negation: strictly speaking, it tells us how Sam did not behave, not how he did; and of course with the switch to direct speech in ‘I’ll get it’, the speaker adopts the more dramatic, performative position of seeming to re-enact the actual dialogue, verbatim, used at the time. This requires some interpretive ﬂexibility on the part of addressees, besides requiring the teller to be convincing now as a performer, and not just a reporter. We do not know yet that the speciﬁc direct speech words used will be crucial to the point of the story; but the teller does and, whether consciously or not, she has switched to the direct speech in good time to ensure a seamless advance to the high point of humour and offence.

That high point comes in W7, and is followed by the Resolution, the door slammed in the teller’s face, in W8. Nothing after this point in the telling constitutes a better or later answer to the question ‘what ﬁnally happened?’, so that slammed door is undoubtedly the Resolution. The action has a powerful symmetry about it, too: superﬁcially the ‘damage to face’ performed by the door-slam is done to the child, but of course this is no more than a different kind of evaluation (of description rather than storytelling) by the neighbour of the child’s term of address, and the implicatures and face-damage that the child’s innocently using that name entails. Not only does Mrs McFarlane understand that the children of the tenement call her Mrs Mowdy, she must realise also that this naming has become so conventionalised that the younger children do not know it as disparaging, but believe it to be simple description, her true name.

Since ‘what ﬁnally happened’ is ﬁrst reported in W8, one of the striking but typical features of this story is that three comparatively lengthy turns follow, providing kinds of evaluative elaboration of how the speaker came to commit the embarrassing but amusing social gaffe. Much of this Evaluation, even if not ‘internal to complicating action clauses’ in the way Labov once stipulated, can still be keyed to the Labovian categories of internal evaluation. Most prominent are the abundant post-resolution repetitions in W8, 9,
10, 11 and 12, of Mowdy; integrated with these are the Comparator negations (didnae... never...) and explications in W9 and W11: Well I didnae know her name wasnae Mowdy... well I really didnae know... I’d never heard them called anything else. Interlaced with these are the teller’s own external evaluations of the whole story situation: oh no (W9), oh dear God (W10), oh dear (W11), and of course her laughter at the close of W8 and W10, which is immediately matched by the recipient’s laughter, interpretable as both appreciative and evaluative.

Another feature that prominently contributes to the effectiveness and tellability of this ONPE are the frequent switches from telling to showing, i.e. from reporting to performing. As noted, at one point in the Complicating Action, the narration runs: ‘our Sam was nearly greetin, so I “I’ll get it”’. Here the speaker reports the first ‘action’ or event (i.e. that Sam was made so upset by loss of the ball that he is nearly crying), but she enacts the second and consequential action in direct speech (compare, in the alternative, a possible continuation of the reporting stance adopted in the first clause: so I said I would go and get it). Similarly, given that the point of the story is the inadvertent insult of calling the neighbour Mrs Mouldy, there is a nice ‘setting up’ of the impoliteness by the speaker telling us beforehand, in W6, Now I was bein very civil. But something else of note happens in the course of a brief advance from ‘I’ll get it’ to Now I was bein very civil: while the telling up to the final words of W5 has been in the past tense, the performing of direct speech seems to license a switch to the more ‘dramatic’ present tense, beyond the direct speech, in the narration at the beginning of W6 (So I goes marchin in, not So I went marchin in). As the complicating action proceeds, the telling remains in present tense, with the exception of the already-noted Now I was bein very civil. There may be more than one explanation for that specific comment switching back to past tense – one being that it is in Labov’s terms a ‘restricted’ and somewhat externally evaluative clause: i.e. a clause that has some freedom of movement to be used at a range of points (from initially in W6 to as late as W11).

While the important steps in the action related in W7 are in the present tense, the evaluative clauses at the close of W7 – again ‘restricted’ in status – shift back to the past tense, although that tense shift is arguably less striking than the format of the Resolution narrative clause at the beginning of W8. Not only is this past tense, it is also – after a seemingly Active voice start, which is abandoned – Passive voice, and a get-passive with agent deletion at that. Why a teller should effect this voice-shift at precisely this high point, and so overtly, is unclear; but one effect is partly to remove any blame or criticism from the reacting neighbour.

Having noted that the teller’s mention of her mother, doin her brasses, is a restricted clause that could conceivably have appeared later, it is worth noting the advantage in skilfully enlarging the frame, the array of dramatis personae in the scene, by mention of the mother at this point and before the neighbour’s outraged reaction is reported. Because the teller’s mother is doin her brasses on the floor above, she has also overheard the incriminating dialogue. To do the brasses was to clean and polish the brass fittings (letter flap, knocker, handle) on the front door, thus the public-facing property, of one’s residence (here, a flat). It is (or was) a quintessentially house-proud and gender-marked activity, typically of working-class housewives – an almost obsessive cleanliness which would be of less account except that it contrasts so sharply with the ‘mouldy-ness’ scandalously or hilariously attributed to the ‘weird’ neighbour couple. It may be noted that the female teller/protagonist has only called the neighbour Mrs Mouldy on the basis of inference, i.e. because the boys were in the habit of calling her husband Mr Mouldy. And while she has undertaken to request return of the ball, she does so on behalf of Sam, who is nearly crying at the loss and knows that Mr
'Mouldy' rarely returns an errant ball. So there are gender politics at work in this narrative along with other forms of dramatic tension.

Accent and dialect vividness can never be wholly discounted, given the work it can do to help make a narrative entertaining, or authentic and credible and particularised. The teller’s and the audience’s assaying of the effect of the dialect is always comparative, made relative to alternative dialects that might have been used but were not; and the assessment is also made relative to the story’s content. Together these considerations mean that a spoken narrative delivered in RP or Standard American English accent and standard vocabulary and grammar, for example, can convey evaluations to listeners if they judge that some different, perhaps markedly non-standard, accent or dialect would in the circumstances have been more ‘natural’ or fitting. In the story under consideration, even reliant here on a transcription (an audio recording of the original can be heard on the website), there is plentiful evidence of enrichment of the Complicating Action and the Evaluation by use of Glaswegian accent and dialect. In W6, for instance, the teller reports she chaps the door, using a Scots dialectal form in place of ‘knocks, raps on’. There are several other dialectal forms that add to the character and specificity of the telling, differing from standard English grammatically or lexically and, we infer, in pronunciation: e.g. the Scots negative contraction used in didnae know, werenae canny; and several items of vocabulary: watchie (for watchman, ‘security guard’), humphy back (humped back), greetin (crying, in W5), doon (down) and canny. This last item has a range of dialectal meanings but is used here in its Scots sense of ‘steady, restrained or temperate’. Also noticeable are the numerous –y/–ie endings, which seem to function here, as more widely in Scots, to convey affinity and informality.

15.5 The small stories of social interaction

Since the landmark contributions of Labov and others, there have been many developments in the sociolinguistically-oriented study of narratives; e.g. Wolfson (1982); Linde (1993); Ochs and Capps (2001); Bamberg et al. (2007); and Bamberg (1998), a special issue of the Journal of Narrative and Life History that reflected on thirty years of narrative analysis post-Labov; and Norrick (2000). De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012) are among the recent sociolinguists who have emphasised the importance of ‘small stories’: they argue that a great many conversational or quasi-conversational floor-holding contributions can be classified as narratives despite having rather briefer extent and comparatively slight structure, by comparison with the ‘classical’ or canonical Labovian six-part model. They have called for a new paradigm of analysis, within which to situate the fragmentary storytelling often found in narrative interview research; in effect they are also questioning the term ‘fragment(ary)’ as a loaded one, implicitly casting such narrative activity as incomplete, reduced, and still to be defined by some ‘classical’ standard. In a world of sound-bites, hourly Facebook updates, 140-character tweets, and text messages, are traditional notions of standard and non-standard, unmarked and marked, still applicable to narrativising activities in social media?

There have even been attempts to interpret such ‘small stories’ as a post-structuralist or late modern superseding of the Labovian modernist/structuralist format, but this narrative itself is perhaps a simplification. Something like the ‘full’ six-part personal narrative format is still deployed on occasion, but shorter and abridged story formats, with ellipsis of various elements, are at least as often encountered. In the past forty years, a host of personal narrative forms which are digital and virtual have been added to the former set of oral and written formats. Today, personal stories are as frequently written digitally, or even multimodally
composed, as orally so. Consider the Facebook entry, or the vlog posted on YouTube, reporting some personal episode with icons and images embedded. And those which are oral may be conveyed by phone or Skype, Viber, MSN or WhatsApp rather than with physical co-presence of teller and audience. But even if certain elements are ellipted in a majority of cases, many analysts see advantages in postulating their underlying potential presence, seeing a loose parallel with principles of complete underlying structure and forms of ellipsis and assimilation found at work in other branches of language analysis such as phonology and syntax. The work of ‘small-story’ analysts is a useful reminder that all of the features of the full or canonical narrative are at the endpoint of clines or degrees of instantiation. The point emerges also from the study by Ochs and Capps (2001), who suggest that tellership, tellability, interactional embeddedness, moral stance and linearity are five key scalar criteria of a speech event’s status as a narrative. But they note that much analysis has favoured texts with features at one end of the continua – e.g. stories with one teller, elaborate tellability and clear linearity – and this may have distorted our conception.

In reality, and outside the elicited research interview, many stories are not very linear, imply a vague or shifting moral stance, may be so interactionally embedded that they are rarely studied, with muted or obscure tellability credentials and a plural or even indefinitely bounded tellership. Likewise, many stories fall somewhere between the personal and the vicarious, being personal supplements or evaluative recontextualisations of public stories (what has just happened in some TV series or in some political development); they may be fashioned around a cluster of loosely-connected episodes rather than one climax-marked outcome; they may be collaboratively and collectively told; and their evaluation and even their main events may alter progressively via negotiation. In short, many actual sequences of interaction, with narrative characteristics, are more embedded, fluid, interactive, bound up with acts of identity and affiliation, than was sometimes fully acknowledged. None of this, however, necessarily overthrows the Labovian tradition as distinct from enlarging and extending it; after all, from the outset the Labovian approach emphasised the importance of evaluation in everyday storytelling, and the shifting disclosure of self and identity that underpins much of this interactional activity.

The ideas of multiplicity, fragmentation and irreducible contingency have now been embraced by sociolinguistics. The small-story tradition, informed by Hymesian sociology of language (Hymes 1996) and Schegloffian conversation analysis, is interested, among other things, in how the specificities of a social setting or ‘site of engagement’ (a particular café, a trailer park, a PTA social event, etc.) may bear on the kind of story that gets told (e.g. many stories are of recent, ‘breaking news’ personal experiences; or they are counterfactual or near- future-oriented, shared imaginings of possible futures) and on the kind of teller and co-tellers, the kind of identity-work, that feature. And, by the same token, such socially-semiotically rich contexts bear also on what does not get told and on who does not tell.

15.6 Other models of narrative

There is space here only briefly to mention one or two of the numerous other interesting modellings of text structure. One such tradition includes the work of Hymes and Gee. Gee, for example, has a richly-developed analytical system that makes an interesting contrast with the Labovian one. Gee finds a ‘stanzaic’ structuring in oral narratives (stanzas themselves are a prominent unit in a hierarchy of units: idea, line, stanza, strophe, and part), but this line-and-stanza structuring is only one of five levels of structure and meaning, each with its own formal marking in the language used, and each level playing a distinct
role in the interpretation. For example, stanza and line, linguistically marked by
patterning, convey ideas and perspectives on characters, events, states, and information
(Gee 2014).

Different again is the influential work of Hoey on the structure of written text with some
implications for written narratives. In Hoey 2001 he develops the dialogical account
introduced in his 1983 book: he treats the phases of a text, the organisational progression, as
the authorial supply of kinds of elaborating answers to the questions which the author has
calculated that their prior text has prompted in the reader. Looking at the situation from the
negative perspective, it is as if the writer embarking on a second sentence is assumed to be
taking care not to write a sentence that will immediately seem unclear, unreliable, irrelevant,
misleading or poorly organised, with too much information or too little. In written narratives,
Hoey argues, readers are guided as to the direction and import of the story by lexical signals,
vocabulary that helps the reader interpret the relationships between sentences or groups of
sentences in a given text.

Stories need not be new and may be aimed at affirming shared values or solidarity rather
than asserting power or authority (see, for example, Norrick 2000; Ochs and Capps 2001).
And any storytelling involves representing matters in one way rather than in any of the
possible other ways, with entities named one way and not another, and with some things
commented on while others are passed over in silence. Thus a narrative can also be viewed
as a complex network of mutually-compatible choices, without which coherence is put at
risk: it is usually problematic to change the time-setting or location of adjacent events, or the
manner of naming a protagonist, without demonstrably good reason. Conversely, multiple
kinds of inconsistency and incoherence may on occasion point to identity trouble, a crisis in
the teller’s life, even psychological impairment.

This is why as overhearers we sense a little ‘trouble’ in the Glasgow story where the
neighbour is variously called Mrs Mouldy and Mrs Mowdy: such instability is at odds with
our expectation of being told ‘exactly what happened’. This transcription variation, we
assume, reflects a pronunciation variation on the part of the teller, which the transcriber has
strived to represent. It would appear to be an instance of the labialisation of a post-vocalic
lateral /l/, common enough in London English where ‘milk’ may be pronounced [mɪʊk] and
transcribed as miuk or miwk. But assuming we are non-Scots-speaking overhearers, we may
not even be sure about this: we may, instead, wonder if mowdy is a sanctioned Scots spelling
of the English word mouldy, reflecting a pronunciation using a labialised allophone of the
post-vocalic /l/. If the latter is not the case, then we are indebted to the transcriber for
rendering the neighbour’s name on at least one occasion by the spelling mouldy; because
without this as clue, we would not have the basis for understanding that mowdy is in the
circumstances insulting (any more than if a child consistently addressed an ill-tempered
neighbour as Mrs Grampy would we be sure of the ‘grumpy’ insinuation). In the above case
it may be pointed out that an audio recording of the storytelling is available to all, on the
SCOTS website; so we can resolve some of these uncertainties. But listeners (trained
phoneticians or not) frequently disagree over what they hear, even on top-quality recordings;
besides, the transcriber has made their decision, and the published written version is as it is.
This small instance is indicative of the nest of complexities that sociolinguistic transcription
entails, raising important questions about ‘fidelity’, representation, the transcriber’s
theoretical assumptions and the evaluative effects subtly carried in a transcription’s
seemingly neutral description. A transcribed oral narrative is in effect a narrative of a
narrative, and adjusting the one in relation to the other is often a matter of striking a balance
among competing considerations.
As intimated earlier, a reliable assessment of the more covert meanings and patterns in an oral narrative, one attuned to the performances of identity and value that a teller’s intended addressees would themselves recognise, often requires insider knowledge. If you are not a member of the particular culture from which a story emerges, you should be careful not to assume you fully grasp a story’s resonances, as Bhaya Nair (2002) reminds us. Besides filling in a story’s verbal gaps (*implicature*), she argues, we also need to know its explanatory cultural background, which she names its *implicature*. Without knowledge of implicature, we may not see the point, get the joke, or recognise the teller’s tone and stance.

### 15.7 Why are narratives important to linguists?

Narratives are one of the best formats within which we can see dialects in action, language performing a range of functions, speakers presenting themselves on their own terms. And all this is especially true of the personal narrative (written or spoken). A sobering thought-experiment is to imagine what it would be like never to tell oral narratives of personal experience. To be in such a condition is almost definitional of being excluded, isolated, devalued, a non-person. Long before the age of majority or of puberty, children are coming into their linguistic enfranchisement by being able to tell their own stories (this would establish an interestingly different ‘critical age’ for linguistic proficiency – at perhaps four or five – than the standard accounts). Narratives are important to linguists because they are important to people, one of the most valued kinds of linguistic performance cherished in every kind of linguistic community, traditional or globalised, oral only or highly literate. Linguists go about studying them only in more systematic ways than ordinary storytellers and storylisteners use them. Ordinary story ‘users’ take care over the design of the text (oral or written) itself, and equally attend to the way in which the telling is performed. They are as aware as the analyst that there is a dual focus wherever narratives are told (an attending to the story, and an attending to the nature of the person telling the story) just as there is a double logic within the act of narration (an implicit sequence of actual or imagined events, and a representing of that sequence in the process of telling).

Since there has been, in recent years, a fairly extensive ‘deconstruction’ of the seemingly robust Labovian categories in their earliest presentation, it is all the harder to see present-day sociolinguistic narrative studies as dividing into two sharply distinct traditions or methodologies – one being Labovian-canonical, the other being social interactional. With sociolinguists shifting towards treating narratives as social practice, embedded in face and identity-maintenance, the methods and descriptive terms of the Labovians and the small-story analysts are recombining. Still, Georgakopoulou is right to warn analysts against the tendency to treat the classic narrative pattern as ‘the endpoint of narrative development and the ideal form in which to cast the richness, depth and profundity of human experience’ (2006: 237). The ‘interactionists’ make a crucial point in arguing that unfinished narratives are by no means inconsequential narratives. One such is the incomplete, ongoing Wikipedia narrative about the trial of Amanda Knox for the murder of student Meredith Kercher (as Page 2014 has argued), a narrative which with twists and turns in the investigation continues to be rewritten and enlarged by contributors from many countries. But also noteworthy are the innumerable stories started in the course of conversations but interrupted and never returned to for completion; or overheard on public transport or similar setting, stories heard only from beginning to middle, or from middle to end, given the timing of the overhearer’s unplanned parting company with the teller. A half-heard narrative is no less important than a half-eaten meal. In Georgakopoulou’s view, the interactionist ‘turn’ has consequences for

247

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how we conceptualise narrative as a genre (it needs to be seen as much more variable and heterogeneous, almost defying of simple genre description); for how we assess narratives as bases for identity-performance (recognising that identities are not static and timeless, but in continual process of discursive emergence, ratification and amendment); and for how we embrace the ‘late modern’ contingent and fragmented in narratives. Some of these questions may arise because small stories emerge from within a different framing activity than that of the controlled social scientific interview. At the same time many social scientists have also found that even within ‘controlled interviews’ a variety of small stories and story fragments can emerge; whether they are properly appreciated as such is another matter. The reality may be that a continuum exists, with degrees of narrative formality and structure discernible. Somewhere near the mid-point is the anecdote, traditionally anathema to the sciences, being ‘the wrong kind of evidence’. But anecdotes are a rich site of contingent and user-defined meaning, as the integrational linguists Pablé and Hutton (2015) have argued.

Further reading

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998); Bamberg (2004); Bauman (1986); Georgakopoulou (2010); Herman (2009); Jefferson (1978); Labov (1972, 2013); Labov and Waletzky (1967); Norrick (1997); Ochs and Capps (1996); Schiffrin (1996); Toolan (forthcoming).

References

Document 351, Conversation 02: Glasgow woman on childhood memories, from The Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (SCOTS). Used with kind permission of Dr Eleanor Lawson, the copyright holder (SCOTS Project, University of Glasgow). www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk.


Narrative and narrative structure


