

Narrative: Sociolinguistic Research

J Smith, University of York, York, UK

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Labov and Waletzky, 1967

In the sociolinguistic quest to 'tap the vernacular', one of the richest sources of data comes from narratives of personal experience (Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). As the narrator becomes immersed in the details of the narrative itself, he is "no longer free to monitor his own speech as he normally does in face to face interviews" (Labov, 1972: 355), hence mitigating the 'Observer's Paradox' (Labov, 1970: 32). Thus, this type of data provides a wealth of largely unmonitored speech amenable to analysis of variable lexical, phonetic, and morphosyntactic forms. However, these narratives of 'ordinary people' (Labov, 1997: 397) which are commonplace in sociolinguistic data, have a more intrinsic interest: the internal structure of the narrative itself. These funny, tragic, trivial tales may appear to be idiosyncratic to the individual narrator, but despite their disparity vis-à-vis content and style, similarities in linguistic structure and function abound.

In an attempt to uncover the underlying mechanisms at work in the course of telling and retelling narratives of personal experience, Labov and Waletzky (1967: 12) propose an analytical framework which isolates "the invariant structural units which are represented by a variety of superficial forms." In other words, the deep level structures which map onto surface-level variations. Although this framework is nearly 40 years old, it "continues to dominate the field," (Macaulay, 2002: 289) alongside more wide-ranging treatments of narrative (e.g., Prince, 1983; Linde, 1993). It has thus remained the bedrock for sociolinguistic narrative analysis over the last few decades.

Fundamental to this framework is (1) the clause as a grammatical unit, and (2) the semantic functions

of these clauses. The individual clauses are grouped into sections which have different functions within the story. Labov (1972: 359–360) defines narrative as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which ... actually occurred" (see also Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 201). A minimal narrative contains "a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered" (Labov, 1972: 360–361), as in (1) and (2):

- (1) and I took his nappy off
and as I took it off literally he pooped all over the cubicle!
- (2) and then his mum and dad woke up
and Mel punched his dad

(All examples come from a large number of narratives collected at the University of York (Smith *et al.*, 2002–2004) by students enrolled in the course Variationist Narrative Analysis).

These chronologically ordered clauses, or **complicating actions** (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 32) provide the **referential** function of the narrative, reporting 'a next event' in response to the potential question 'What happened [then]?' (Labov, 1997: 402). They provide the backbone of the story and are the 'most reportable event' (Labov, 1997: 404): without these, there is no narrative. (The complicating action is often terminated by a result or resolution, "the set of complicating actions that follow the most reportable event" (Labov, 1967: 414).

However, most narratives are not this minimal, and, significantly, one "which serves this [referential] function alone is abnormal: it may be considered an empty or pointless narrative" (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 13). In addition to the question 'What happened next?', we also want to know 'What's the point?'. Labov refers to this as the **evaluative** function of the narrative.

Evaluation clauses in a narrative contain statements or words that tell the reader what to think

about a person, place, thing, event, or entire experience. They are "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at" (Labov, 1972: 366). They give the story reportability and make it worth telling. These clauses can be highly embedded within the narrative itself and can include evaluation of a third person as in (3).

- (3) And so he said in future years he'd only shag actresses.

On the other hand, it can be a much more direct statement about the narrator's feelings, as in (4):

- (4) They've just got absolutely no scruples about owt.

The circumscription of evaluation, both structurally and semantically, has proved to be the most problematic. Its defining qualities underwent substantial revision in Labov (1972) and Labov (1997).

Added to the referential and evaluative function of narrative are orientation, abstract, and coda.

The **orientation** section of a narrative contains statements that provide the setting or context of a narrative which "serve to orient the listener in respect to person, place, time, and behavioral situation" (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 32), as in (5):

- (5) and he used to drink Lowenbrau
and he used to like ten pints every night
and at the weekends he'd get so drunk he couldn't stand up.

The **abstract** "is an initial clause that reports the entire sequence of events of the narrative" (Labov, 1997: 402) in summary form, as in (6):

- (6) Last time I got pulled it were for drink driving.

In other cases, they are requests for an extended turn at talk, as in (7):

- (7) So did you hear about the gas leak?

These often act as some type of advertisement in order to 'get the floor', as in (8):

- (8) Right, I can tell you a birthday story and a half!

The **coda** is "a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment" (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 39). These clauses often employ deixis, as in (9), or make the effects of the narrative applicable to the here and now, as in (10):

- (9) Erm, and that was it. That was me getting arrested for fraud.
(10) So we live and learn and I shall never ever move a static caravan again.

These five major sections most often follow a linear structure: the story opens with the abstract, followed by some orientation clauses and then the complicating action, while the coda signals closure. Evaluation clauses are interspersed throughout this bounded unit.

In discourse level phenomena, "narrative is the prototype, perhaps the only example of a well-formed speech event with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Labov, 1997: 396). Moreover, they have "a fairly regular structure that is largely independent of how they are embedded in surrounding talk" (Schiffren, 1994: 284). Although there are differences, both structurally and functionally, in how a narrative is realized, the study of a large body of narratives have demonstrated that this structure is fundamental to the majority of narratives of personal experience, it is the 'normal form' (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 40).

Sociolinguistic Correlates

Although Labov and Waletzky's prime motivation in the 1967 paper was the narrative itself, one of the 'ultimate aims' was to "require close correlations of the narrator's social characteristics with the structure of their narratives" (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 13). Since that time, a number of classic sociolinguistic categories have been examined against the backdrop of narrative: in particular class, gender, geography, age, and ethnicity.

Class

Labov (1997: 412) observes class differences in narrative: upper middle class speakers report on emotions, while lower class speakers "are sparing in their reporting of subjective feelings." Horvath (1987: 219) also finds differences in content: the majority of working class speakers' stories concern themselves and other family members; in middle class speakers' narratives, protagonists not personally known to them predominate.

Class differences may also exist not only in content, but in quantity, too. Macaulay's (1991: 139) study of Ayr in South West Scotland shows that working class speakers have on average a greater number of narratives both in number terms and as a proportion of the overall sociolinguistic interview than their middle class counterparts. This finding was replicated in his study of Glasgow speech (Macaulay, 2002: 298).

Gender

Labov and Waletzky make no explicit reference to gender differences in narrative, but it, too, may have an impact on content. Findings from Johnstone's

(1990: 66) study of middle class whites in Fort Wayne, Indiana, suggests that men's narratives focus on their personal exploits and successes, whereas women underplay the 'protagonists' personal roles.' Holmes' (1997: 286) results from the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English are similar: "the women focus on relationships and people, affirm the importance of their family roles, family connections, and friendships. The men focus on work and sport, events, activities, and things, and affirm the importance of being in control, even when they don't achieve it."

Cheshire's (2000) research into the narratives of teenage friendship groups in Reading also finds gender stratification in how stories are co-narrated: in a nutshell, "for the boys, the telling was the more salient aspect of a narrative, whereas for the girls it was the tale" (Cheshire, 2000: 200).

Age

Labov (1972: 393–396) finds that the ability to narrate evolves with age. This is supported in subsequent research (e.g., Peterson and McCabe, 1983; Bamberg, 1997; Toolan, 1988). 'Leap frog' narratives are the most common among four year olds where the child jumps from event to event unsystematically. By six years old, the classic pattern established by Labov is more in evidence: temporal relationships have developed, but the referential function predominates, with little evaluative function evident (e.g., Peterson and McCabe, 1983), and a paucity of orientation clauses (e.g., Snow and Imbens-Bailey, 1997). In later years, there is a focus away from factual information to getting the point across, with an increasingly sophisticated use of evaluative devices with increasing age (e.g., Romaine, 1985; Kernan, 1977: 101).

Syntactic complexity increases with age from pre-adolescent to adult (Labov, 1972: 393), and remains stable in later years (Labov and Auger, 1993).

Ethnicity

Labov and Waletzky (1967: 38) state that their proposed framework "will achieve greater significance when materials from radically different cultures are studied in the same way." Indeed, whether their framework is culture specific or universal has been the subject of scrutiny (e.g., Tannen, 1981, 1982, 1984; Blum-Kulka, 1993; Tsitipis, 1988). Divergences from the 'expected' model appear from the very earliest years. Michaels (1981, 1984, 1985) shows that "children from different backgrounds come to school with different narrative strategies" (Michaels, 1981: 423). White children have as a framework 'topic-centered' narratives which have minimal assumption

of shared background, full description of objects, explicit spatiotemporal grounding; black childrens' narratives are 'topic associating,' where the narrator presents "a series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes" (Michaels, 1981: 429). Ethnic differences are not restricted to children: Holmes (1997) finds in her New Zealand corpus that Maori speakers, in comparison to their Pakeha counterparts, leave parts of the narrative relatively inexplicit, including the evaluation section.

Geography

Johnstone (1990) suggests that there are regional differences in discourse style explicable in terms of different cultural contexts. In her analysis of Indiana narratives, she finds that the narrators use highly specific details, or 'extrathematic orientation' (Johnstone, 1990: 201) in orientation sections of narratives. She interprets this within the context in which the narratives take place: they must be culturally embedded, or 'anchored in the real, local world' (Johnstone, 1990: 210) in order for the narratives and narrators themselves to sustain, in Labov's (1997: 407) terms, credibility.

Linguistic Internal

The syntactic correlates of narrative structure are discussed in Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972). Hopper (1979) and Hopper and Thompson (1980) also find that certain linguistic forms predominate in particular parts of the narrative: complicating action verbs are most usually punctual rather than iterative or durative and are usually perfective; stative predicates predominate in orientation; evaluation clauses are often irrealis, with use of modals, subjunctives, and negatives (see also Silva-Corvalán, 1983). These "predictable grammatical correlates not only for narrative type but also within narratives" (Fleishman, 1985: 852) are realized formally in some languages: for example, in Swahili, foregrounded clauses or complicating actions are marked with the prefix *ka-*, background with *ki-* (Hopper, 1979: 213). In other languages such as English, they derive from the discourse structure itself (Hopper, 1979) and are used as devices to signal levels of 'information relevance' (Fleishman, 1985: 852).

Variable morphosyntactic forms that cannot be explained at clause level may find interpretation within the broader discourse unit of the narrative. Schiffren (1981) finds hardly any use of the historic present in abstracts, codas, and evaluative clauses, and a minimal number in orientation. In contrast, almost one-third of complicating action clauses are in the historic present. The interpretation of these

quantitative results relies on Labov and Waletzky's model: as verbs in complicating action clauses are temporally ordered, they are free from providing a reference time, thus marking for tense is redundant (see also Johnstone, 1987; Wolfson, 1979; Silva-Corvalan, 1983).

Despite some findings on differential behavior across a range of sociolinguistic and linguistic internal categories, the foundations of Labov and Waletzky's framework remain largely unchallenged. In the field of sociolinguistics, they continue to provide a solid foundation for research into narratives of personal experience.

See also: Aging and Language; Conversation Analysis; Corpora in Studies of Variation; Cultural and Social Dimension of Spoken Discourse; Discourse Markers; Discourse, Narrative and Pragmatic Development; Elicitation Techniques for Spoken Discourse; Ethnicity; Evaluation in Text; Foregrounding; Gender, Grammatical; Identity and Language; Labov, William (b. 1927); Narrative: Cognitive Approaches; Narrative: Linguistic and Structural Theories; Narrativity and Voice; Narratology, Feminist; Oral Traditions and Spoken Discourse; Particles in Spoken Discourse; Social Class and Status; Sociolect/Social Class; Speech Community; Teenagers, Variation, and Young People's Culture; Variation and Language: Overview; Variation in Child Language; Vernacular.

Bibliography

- Bamberg M (1987). *The acquisition of narratives: learning to use language*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Blum-Kulka S (1993). "You gotta know how to tell a story": telling, tales, and tellers in American and Israeli narrative events at dinner.' *Language in Society* 22(3), 361-402.
- Cheshire J (2000). 'The telling or the tale? Narratives and gender in adolescent friendship networks.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4(2), 234-262.
- Fleischman S (1985). 'Discourse functions of tense-aspect oppositions in narrative: toward a theory of grounding.' *Linguistics* 23(6), 851-882.
- Holmes J (1997). *Narrative structure: some contrasts between Maori and Pakeha story-telling*. Multilingua.
- Hopper P (1979). 'Aspect and foregrounding in discourse.' In Tedeschi P & Zaenen A (eds.) *Syntax and semantics: discourse and syntax*. New York: Academic Press. 213-241.
- Horvath B (1987). 'Text on conversation: variability in storytelling texts.' In Denning K, Inkelas S, McNair-Knox F & Rickford J (eds.) *Variation in language: NWAV-XV at Stanford*. Stanford: Department of Linguistics. 212-223.
- Johnstone B (1987). "'He says ... so I said": verb tense alternation and narrative depictions of authority in American English.' *Linguistics* 25, 33-52.
- Johnstone B (1990). 'Variation in discourse: Midwestern narrative style.' *American Speech* 65(3), 195-214.
- Kernan K (1977). 'Semantic and expressive elaboration in children's narratives.' In Ervin Tripp S & Mitchell-Kernan C (eds.) *Child discourse*. New York: Academic Press. 91-102.
- Labov W (1970). 'The study of language in its social context.' *Studium Generale* 23, 30-87.
- Labov W (1997). 'Some further steps in narrative analysis.' *The Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7, 395-415.
- Labov W & Auger J (1993). 'The effect of normal aging on discourse: a sociolinguistic approach.' In Brownell H & Joannette J (eds.) *Narrative discourse in neurologically impaired and normally aging adults*. San Diego: Singular Publishing Group. 115-133.
- Labov W & Waletzky J (1967). 'Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience.' In Helm J (ed.) *Essays on the verbal and visual arts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 12-44. Reprinted in the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7, 3-38.
- Linde C (1993). *Life stories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Macaulay R (2002). 'Discourse Variation.' In Chambers J K, Trudgill P & Schilling-Estes N (eds.) *Handbook of language variation and change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Peterson C & McCabe A (1983). *Developmental psycholinguistics: three ways of looking at a child's narrative*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Prince G (1982). *Narratology: the form and functioning of narrative*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.
- Romaine S (1985). 'Grammar and style in children's narratives.' *Linguistics* 23(1), 83-104.
- Schiffrin D (1981). 'Tense variation in narrative.' *Language* 57(1), 45-62.
- Silva-Corvalán C (1983). 'Tense and aspect in oral Spanish narrative: context and meaning.' *Language* 59(4), 761-780.
- Tannen D (1981). 'New York Jewish conversational style.' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30, 133-139.
- Tannen D (1982). 'Oral and literate strategies in spoken and written narrative.' *Language* 58(1), 1-21.
- Tannen D (1984). 'Spoken and written narrative in English and Greek.' In Tannen D (ed.) *Coherence in spoken and written discourse*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex. 21-41.
- Toolan M J (1988). *Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Tsitsipis L D (1988). 'Language shift and narrative performance: on the structure and function of Arvanitika narratives.' *Language in Society* 17(1), 61-86.
- Wolfson N (1979). 'The conversational historical present alternation.' *Language* 55(1), 168-182.