

Narratives in conversation

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Narratives in Conversation By Agatha Xaris Villa INTRODUCTION This essay focuses on the study of the narrative most prevalent in everyday conversations – the conversational narrative. First, it discusses a definition of the narrative from a structural level based on the structure of conversational narrative presented by William Labov (1972). Next, it enumerates some of the important functions which the narrative is able to achieve both on a personal level and also on the interpersonal. Lastly, it ventures to explore the notion of the narrative based on its context – language and society, culture.

NARRATIVES: A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE In the 1960s and 1970s, William Labov developed what is now commonly believed to be the general structure of a narrative. His research involved ‘ a focus on spontaneous recounting of experience’ and the capturing of vernacular, unmonitored speech. He interviewed African American youths in South Harlem and asked them whether they had ever encountered a life-endangering experience. He found that the stories which ensued from these interviews ‘ reduced the effects of observation to a minimum’ (Labov, 2001) and referred to them as oral narratives of personal experience.

Through his study, Labov noted some very important structural characteristics of oral narratives. First, he observed that the events featured in narratives often appeared in the order in which they actually happened. According to his definition, the narrative was a way of retelling (i. e. narrating) the action sequence of an event that had already happened. Therefore, parts of conversation considered to be ‘ narrative’ was limited to the discursive data contributing to the recounting of the turn of events.

All other parts which were not directly related to the story served the purpose of backing up the story. He claimed that these oral narratives usually had a basic structure composed of any of the following six basic parts: (1) Abstract, (2) Orientation, (3) Complicating action, (4) Evaluation, (5) Resolution and (6) Coda. Using a transcript of 'Sample Stories – Stories about mothers' (CD-ROM 1, Band 6)(Appendix 1. 1), we may illustrate these elements as they occur in actual oral narratives. The data presented has two speakers: a female interviewer (A) and a male interviewee (B).

The transcript also features two accounts: the first is with regards to (B)'s early memories of his mother who was training as an educational psychologist and the second of which occurred sometime during his adolescence. By definition, an abstract is a synopsis of what the story is about. Looking at the transcript of 'Stories about mothers', it is useful to note that the first story offered by (B) seems to lack an abstract. This, however, is understandable as his story was elicited by (A)'s question regarding childhood memories of his mother. Therefore, the interviewer provided the abstract prior to the beginning of the narrative.

In the second story, the abstract is located in line 21-22 wherein (B) cites when his mother was 'most sympathetic' to him – during his 'adolescent rebellion stage'. Typically, the orientation appears first in the narration and begins by citing the basic details of the story: that is, the 'who', the 'what', 'where' and 'what were they doing' of the narrative. In our transcript we can detect the beginning of an orientation in lines 5-10 in which (B) recounts when his mother had begun studying educational psychology and some of the tests she carried out on him and his brother.

The complicating action effectively answers the question – ‘ then, what happened? ’ An example may be found in line 11 where (B) said recalls his mother’s reaction to a ‘ slightly alarming’ result of an inkblot test. The complicating action is the only element which Labov believed to be a pre-requisite to a narrative. On the other hand, evaluation is the only element which does not necessarily happen in sequential order in a story. It may occur in any part of the story, most noticeably at the story’s climax and answers the question – ‘ so what? ’.

It may come in the form of ‘ external evaluation’ (narrator steps in to give an evaluation)(e. g. line 10: referring to the intelligence tests as ‘ actually fine’) or ‘ internal evaluation’ such as intensifiers (which emphasize on aspects of a story)(e. g. ‘...she took it very, very seriously’.), paralinguistic features (e. g. the use of sound effects, facial expressions and gestures) and the taking on of other people’s voices (Bakhtin, 1981). Evaluation is important to the narrative as it is a way for narrators to emphasize important parts of the story by drawing the attention of his listeners by adding more information.

An obvious paralinguistic feature which we can deduce from the transcript was (B)’s use of tone and pause. At about line 11, he starts using a rather loud and fast-paced voice but the dynamic changes in line 13 before (B) voices out his mother saying ‘ Oh I see...’ followed by a pregnant pause for ‘ dramatic effect’. It may be argued that tone and the pauses were used evaluatively and therefore is a very good example of how people are able to use language creatively even in everyday conversation. In a narrative, the resolution is what we refer to as the concluding action – what finally happened.

For example, in conclusion to the memory of the slight scare regarding the inkblot test, we are told that (B)'s mother reassures him that he needn't worry because she was 'just learning' (line 15-16). The final element, the Coda, tells us how the story is relevant to the storyteller or his audience in the present time. A potential coda may be found in line 18 where (B) jokes that he now thinks that the results of his mother's tests were 'right'. The Labovian categories regarding the narrative structure has been criticized for 'constricting' what can be considered a story but continues to have significant impact on narrative study even today.

It persists to be a useful procedure in narrative analysis by providing a succinct set of categories for defining 'stories'. Furthermore, while it emphasizes on the 'flow' relationship between 'experience, cognition and representation' - it spends a fair amount of time taking the language into consideration before attempting to make sense of it (Squire, 2008).

NARRATIVES: A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE Rather than identifying narratives according to their structural characteristics, we may also define narratives according to the function they accomplish in relation to the storyteller and his or her audience.

In the process of storytelling, the narrator is not only able to recount the happenings of past events but in addition, the resultant narrative is imbued with select aspects of the teller's identity. Through the narrative, the storyteller tells his audience the 'kind of person' he sees himself as. (Toolan, 2006, p. 63). Narrative identity may be projected in the narrator's use of evaluative language. Sometimes during the course of an oral narrative, the speaker might use different styles (style-shifting) or language varieties (i. .

codeswitching) in order to ‘ create voices’ for their characters and may serve to help in the transmission of identity and allegiance (Maybin, 1996). In ‘ Stories about Mothers’, (B) portrayed himself as an active participant in his mother’s tests. In retrospect, he seems to be telling us that at present, he is rather fond of his childhood memories of his mother (perhaps alluding that he has a good relationship with his mother now) and that he has since grown out of his rebellious teenage stage (he’s ‘ mature’ now).

Narratives not only serve a personal function but may also serve an important interpersonal purpose. According to the work of Norrick on nuclear families (1997), participation in co-narration (which is common practice in families and others in close relationships) is a way for family members to demonstrate and therefore solidify their position within the family. He believes that family membership may be measured by the contribution that a member is able to provide to the act of shared narration. Through the shared narration of past or recurring events, individuals exhibit shared group identity and allegiance. Norrick also points out that shared narration may also function as a way to demonstrate shared values within families. While an outsider may not have the advantage of having shared experiences with other family members and so be unable to participate in the co-telling of past events, he or she may use his or her own experiences which are similar to those of the family in order, thereby adopting values inherent with the family.

In this way, outsiders may gain acceptance as ‘ insiders’ of the family. All this is in agreement with Bruner’s suggestion that ‘ our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our own sense of self and our

sense of others in the social world around us' (1986). NARRATIVES: A CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE In order to gain a full understanding of the narrative, one must take context into serious consideration because stories are constantly under the influence of the narrator's representation of experience as well as of language, society and culture.

While it is a narrator's prerogative to portray the characters and events of his story in a manner of his choice, the details of the story and the way that it is told is largely influenced by the storyteller's personal notions of himself, those around him and events. Stories, whether they are in written or oral form are all representations of the narrator's experience (Toolan, 2006, p. 68). External and internal evaluations are important tools used by the narrator to be able to represent their experience of people and events through the narrative.

In addition, evaluation may also be 'embedded' into narratives when narrators directly quote a character (Toolan, 2006, p. 68). In 'Stories about mothers', [B] repeatedly gives voice to his mother by quoting some of the things she used to say (e. g. You'll be fine!). How experiences are represented all depends on the narrator's personal constructs. Personal constructs are inner worlds and perceptions that determine the way that we 'see' people and events and are largely determined and affected by language, culture and society.

The importance of taking the socio-cultural context of a narrative is important especially when we move to decoding the 'meaning' behind narratives. In 1975, Grice explained that everyday conversations were being guided by four maxims: the maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation and <https://assignbuster.com/narratives-in-conversation/>

Manner (Toolan, 2006, 72). These maxims (inferential norms or so called conversation implicatures) explain how individuals are able to ‘logically’ comprehend meaning in conversation but may be insufficient when trying to explain how stories or jokes are understood.

Nair (2002) proposed that in the process of narrative inferencing (i. e. , the way that we figure out what a story means), cultural cooperation between the narrator and the audience is of utmost importance. The implications regarding the importance of implicature in narrative inferencing is that we are reminded that (1) there are aspects of narratives which are culturally situated and must be interpreted in the context of the same culture and (2) therefore, only individuals who share the same cultural identity may fully interpret cultural narratives.

The relationship between the narrative and culture is further demonstrated by the fact that stories of folklore and native traditions have been passed on from generation to generation in the form of the narrative. In this way, narratives contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural identity and belonging. CONCLUSION Stories are commonplace in everyday life. In fact, it has been said that conversational English is largely in the form of the narrative (Maybin, 1996) – in laidback conversations with friends and relatives to our more professional interactions with colleagues in the workplace.

They can be identified through their structural characteristics, the personal and interpersonal functions they serve in everyday social life and are both the result and inferred from the socio-cultural context and yet, the oral narrative remains a natural part of human life from the cradle to the grave -

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from the silly bed time stories we are told in childhood, to the epitaphs told in ‘our memory’ at our lives end.

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