

Applying Labov's Narrative Structure to "My Mom had only one Eye": Effective Narrative

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Abstract

The use of narrative is very fundamental in sharing the sense of the world. By using Labov's (1972) analysis for narratives of personal experience, this paper will attempt to analyze one of the celebrated narrative on internet named My Mom Had Only One eye, in light of the following structural elements: (1) abstract, (2) orientation, (3) evaluations, (4) narrative clauses, (5) result and (6) coda. This paper will also determine the validity of the narrative selected for analysis on the basis of Labov's model of structural analysis, hence proving the work and effectiveness of the narrative

Keywords: structure of the narrative, Labov, My Mom had only one Eye, effective narrative

Introduction

The use of language is very fundamental means through which we express the sense of this world. Human beings cannot live without communicating with one another. People tell stories to others about who they are? What did they experience? How something should be done? etc. when people are trying to make sense of everyday world they are telling stories and hence using narrative. Thus narratives give coherence to our understanding of life and communicating these understanding to others. Hence we need narrative for life. As linguistics is dealing with language, therefore, it is also necessary to analyze the narratives used by people. Many theories have been suggested in the past decades for this purpose. The structural analysis of narrative is a key which provides a better understanding and insight to the personal narrative. This paper will use Labov's model for the structural analysis of the narrative. Even though his model was presented for oral narrative of personal experiences still many critics have applied his model to the literary works such as by Mary Louise Pratt in *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* applied to first person narrative novel and short stories such as Henry Miler *Plexus*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Herman Melville's *Bertleby the Scrivener*. This paper has picked a very short story named "My Mom Had Only One eye" for the analysis. This narrative was first spotted as a tearjerker in April 2005 on internet through emails. Later in February 2007 the story was viral on internet, social media and through texts. Hype was created by this story. This paper will present how this story presents the six structural analysis structure of narrative presented by Labov. The structural analysis is made up of six parts, which will be analyzed separately in the paper. This analysis will

help us understand why certain points in the narrative are placed in certain position to clarify the meaning of the narrative

1. Literature review:

1.1. Forming the basis

Narratives are very significant means of expressing one's ideas, thought and perception about this world. Narrative has been "one of the major themes in humanistic and social scientific thought since the mid-nineteenth centuries" (Johnstone, 2001). In different fields of human sciences, it has been termed as "narrative turn" (Brockmeier and Harre, 1997). It has been used in many other fields like psychology, psychiatry, language and gender, criminology and technology. The focus towards the analysis of narrative started from Aristotle in his work *Poetics* who outlined the underlying structure of narrative plot (Gimenez, 2010, 199). Many models have been presented for the examination of formal and semantic narrative structure. That includes van Dijk and Kintsch (1978), Hymes (1981), Chafe (1980), Sherzer (1982), Tedlock (1983), and Woodbury (1987), Ochs and Capps (1996) and many more, but the most influential model is presented by Labov.

1.2. Narrative

The word narrative is has many synonyms. According to common use It refers to chronicle, "story, life story, account, discourse, narration and tale with little or no difference in meaning" (Gimenez, 2010, 200). Narrative has been defined by many critics but the most appraised and quoted definition is that of Labov and Waletzky.

This definition rests upon a conception of narrative is one of many ways of reporting past events that have entered into the biography of the narrator. An oral narrative of personal

experience employs temporal junctures in which the surface order of the narrative clauses matches the projected order of the events described (Labov and Waletzky 1967).

(Labov, 2006)

The definition of Labov concentrates on past experiences. It also brings up the concept of narrative clauses and its relation to the events which are described in the narrative. Whereas some critics think that narrative is 'any form of communication' (Barthes, 1966). Some believes that it is the 'main mode of human knowledge' (Bruner, 1986), some has defined it as 'a socially symbolic act . . . takes meaning only in social context . . . plays role in construction of the context as a site of meaning in which social actors are implicated (Mumby, 1993). The definition given by Mumby, Burner and Bathes is analogous to that of Linde who suggests that the story of life is a sort of discourse unit which is linked to the parts in the narrative which is told by people in certain time of their life. (1993:21). All of them have inclination towards the use of narrative in the social aspect. Some critics have explained the function of the narrative as well: In their study of narrative research, Lieblich et al. (1998: 8) define narratives as stories which 'are usually constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these remembered facts' (Gimenez, 2010:201).

This definition explains the function of narrative which helps the people to express the facts of life events and hence provides the freedom of expression by making appropriate

changes to the event while describing it. All the definitions are stating different sort of approach towards the narrative which also shows the gradual change in the approach of linguists. In recent decades, the orientation of the interests of linguists is more towards the sociolinguist aspect of the narrative, evaluating the underlying structures of the narrative. Most of the data in linguistics comes from personal narrative for the analysis. The data is analysed for the lexical, phonetic and morphosyntactic, hence all the internal structure of narrative.

1.3. The framework of narrative analysis:

Labov and Waletzky (1967) have provided a framework on the basis of which we can analyse the narrative. For the identification of basic underlying structure, they have divided the clauses according to their function in the narrative.

- (1) And so we was doing the 50-yard dash
 - (2) There was about eight or ten of us, you know,
 - (3) Going down, coming back
 - (4) And, going down the third time, I caught cramps
 - (5) And I started yelling ‘Help!’
 - (6) But the fellows didn’t believe me, you know,
 - (7) They thought I was just trying to catch up
 - (8) Because I was going on or slowing down
 - (9) So all of them kept going
 - (10) They leave me
 - (11) And so I started going down
 - (12) Scoutmaster was up there
 - (13) He was watching me
 - (14) But he didn’t pay me any attention either
- (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 31)

According to Labov and Waletzky, Free clauses normally give the information for the narrative, including explaining the scene, action, situation, location, time etc. In the above extract, line1-3 is free clauses. Narrative clauses are those clauses with which the significant part of the narrative begins.it sets the basis of the narrative. In the above extract, line 4-5 are narrative clauses. The coordinate clause can have a complex relation to the narrative sequence as in line 6 and 7 in the above extract. The restricted clauses are more fixed to the narrative than the free clauses whereas less fixed than the narrative clauses, as in line 13-14.

By changing the position of these clauses in the narrative, their function also changes. Labov(1972) explained temporal sequence, which is the characteristically order of the clauses in the narrative.

“If narrative clauses are reversed, the inferred temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation is altered *I punched this boy /and he punched me* instead of *this boy punched me/ and I punched him*”. Labov, 1972: 227

In the above example, it is not just the reversal of the order but it is also change in the semantic. The boy has not initiated to punch him whereas in the second the boy has initiated followed by his reaction of punting the boy as an answer. In both the clauses the sequence is changed. In addition to that Labov has also explained temporal Junction. In

the example stated above “*I punched this boy /and he punched me*”, both the clauses are dependent on one another. The removal of one clause will give rise to the change in the narrative. The link of act and effect that lies between two clauses is called *temporal junction*.(1972)

1.4. The overall Lavbovian structure of narrative:

The narrative clauses having temporal junction are sometimes complete narratives. It is because they contain “beginning, middle and end”. There are some elements in the narrative structure which cannot be “fully formed narratives” (Labov, 1972:227), therefore , Labov has presented the model of structure of narrative clauses which is the most appreciated model among all as discussed before. His model consists of six (6) parts.

1. Abstract
2. Orientation
3. Complicating action.
4. Evaluation
5. Result or resolution.
6. Coda

(Labov, 1972:227)

1.4.1. Abstract:

Abstract is the introductory part of the narrative. The function of this part of narrative is to explain the reason of stating the narrative and drawing attention of the listener. Sometimes the abstract is having the whole point of the story whereas in some cases it can be a free clause, which can be placed in any position in the narrative without disturbing the meaning. in the example stated by Labov, as “I talked a man out of _Old Doc Simon I talked him out of pulling the trigger” is encapsulating the main point of the story in the abstract.

1.4.2. Orientation

Orientation provides information about the “time, place, persons, and their activity or situation”. (Albov, 1972:229)

"It was *on a Sunday*, and we didn't have *nothin' to do* after I - *after we* came from church";“had a dog - he was wonderful retriever, but as I say he could do everything but talk."

(Labov,1972: 221-222)

In this example, the italicized words shows the time ,the situation and person involed respectively. Orientation normally starts at the beginning and is characterized by the use of past progressive. (Johnstone, 2001: 638)

1.4.3. Complicating action

“Complicating action clauses are narrative clauses that recapitulate a sequence of events leading up to their climax, the point of maximum suspense. These clauses refer to events in the world of the story and, in the world of the telling, they create tension that keeps auditors listening” (Johnstone, 2001: 638)

Complicating action are the actual events of the story which moves the narrative ahead keeps the listener interested in the narrative, as shown in the following example

And then, suddenly/Out of the blue;Next thing we knew.....;And as if that wasn't enough;Then guess what happened.... ;

1.4.4. The result or resolution

The result or resolution releases the tension and tells what finally happened. Often just before the result or resolution, but also throughout the narrative. It helps identifying how the end worked out. For example,

- a. And I hit the girl: powwww!
- b. And I put something on it.
- c. I win the fight.
- d. That was one of the most important

(Labov, 1972:225)

In the above example, *I win the fight* is the result or resolution.

1.4.5. Evaluation

Evaluation states the reason of the interest of the listener. It states the interested or unusual happenings of the narrative. Its function is to make the point of the story clear. It can be embedded in the free clause as in "And it was the strangest feeling"; "But it was really quite terrific". It can also be "embedded in the narrative, in the form of extra detail about characters ("I was shakin' like a leap), suspension of the action via paraphrase or repetition; "intensifiers" such as gesture or quantifiers ("I hocked him all out in the street")" (Johnstone, 2001: 638)

Evaluation is sometimes present in "the two part structure"(labov,1972: 232) of the narrative. The evaluation cannot be specifically restricted to one or two clauses. In complex and effective narratives it is spread out to all the narrative providing the main idea of the narrative and keeping the listener interested in the narrative. Following Figure 1 illustrates how evaluation can spread to all other parts of the narrative.

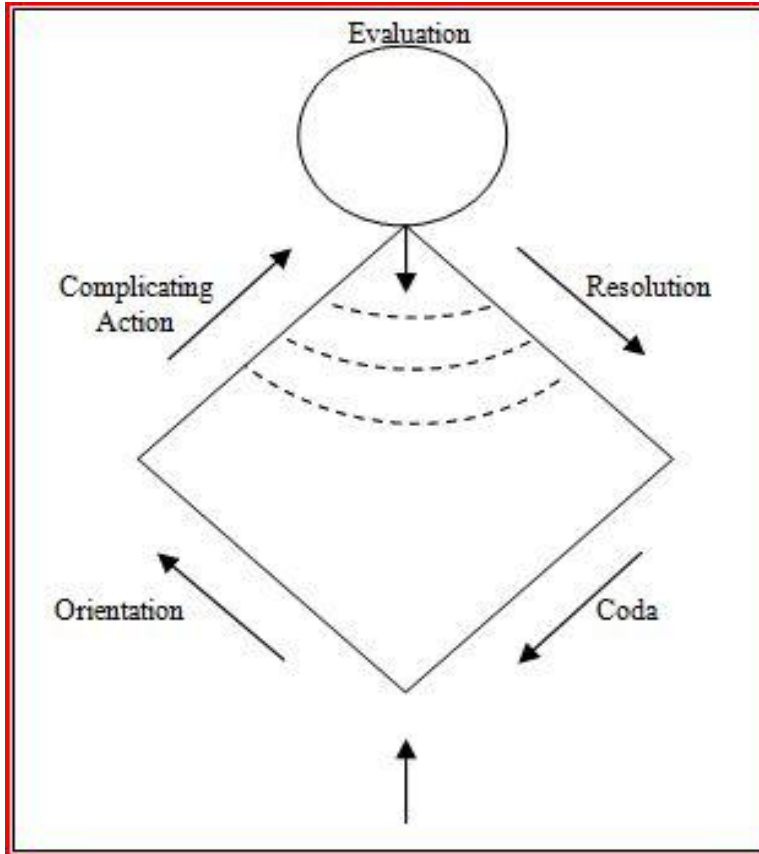


Figure: 1 (Labov, 1972:233)

1.4.6. Coda:

Labov very clearly defines coda as “free clause to be found at the end of the narrative”. For example, d is the coda in the following example. The function of coda is to show that the narrative has ended.

- a. And I hit the girl: powwww!
- b. And I put something on it.
- c. I win the fight.
- d. That was one of the most important

(Labov, 1972:225)

It illustrates that there is no more need of the narrative. Whatever is followed after the coda is unimportant part of the narrative. Sometimes coda relates the narrative to the present, as illustrated in the following example:

- a. And you know that 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.

(Labov, 1972:230)

2. Analysis

2.1. The background and importance of the data:

This paper has picked a very short story named “*My Mom Had Only One eye*” for the analysis. The writer of the narrative is anonymous. For analysis, the narrative was downloaded from a blog named Motivation. The link is <http://academictips.org/blogs/my-mom-only-had-one-eye/>. This story was first spotted on internet in April, 2005. Later in February, 2007, it started circulating in all over the world through email, text messages and other internet and communicative sources. This story has created hype. After the narrative was very famous, many people spread it with their own names as authors but its true writer is unknown. The reason for choosing this narrative was to find out its narrative structure and to examine the reason of this narrative being so eminent. As Labov states “the abstract, the orientation, the resolution and the evaluation answer the questions which relate the function of an effective narrative” Labov, 1972:234)

2.2. Data: narrative

Part 1

- A. My mom only had one eye. I hated her... She was such an embarrassment. She cooked for students and teachers to support the family.
- B. There was this one day during elementary school where my mom came to say hello to me. I was so embarrassed.
- C. How could she do this to me? I ignored her, threw her a hateful look and ran out. The next day at school one of my classmates said, “EEEE, your mom only has one eye!”
- D. I wanted to bury myself. I also wanted my mom to just disappear. I confronted her that day and said, “If you’re only gonna make me a laughing stock, why don’t you just die?”
- E. My mom did not respond... I didn’t even stop to think for a second about what I had said, because I was full of anger. I was oblivious to her feelings.
- F. I wanted out of that house, and have nothing to do with her. So I studied real hard, got a chance to go abroad to study.
- G. Then, I got married. I bought a house of my own. I had kids of my own. I was happy with my life, my kids and the comforts. Then one day, my Mother came to visit me. She hadn’t seen me in years and she didn’t even meet her grandchildren.
- H. When she stood by the door, my children laughed at her, and I yelled at her for coming over uninvited. I screamed at her, “How dare you come to my house and scare my children! GET OUT OF HERE! NOW!!!”
- I. And to this, my mother quietly answered, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I may have gotten the wrong address.” – and she disappeared out of sight.

Part 2

- J. One day, a letter regarding a school reunion came to my house. So I lied to my wife that I was going on a business trip. After the reunion, I went to the old shack just out of curiosity.
- K. My neighbors said that she died. I did not shed a single tear. They handed me a letter that she had wanted me to have.
- L. “My dearest son,
I think of you all the time. I’m sorry that I came to your house and scared your children.

I was so glad when I heard you were coming for the reunion. But I may not be able to even get out of bed to see you. I'm sorry that I was a constant embarrassment to you when you were growing up.

You see.....when you were very little, you got into an accident, and lost your eye. As a mother, I couldn't stand watching you having to grow up with one eye. So I gave you mine.

I was so proud of my son who was seeing a whole new world for me, in my place, with that eye.

With all my love to you,

Your mother.”

2.3. Applying the ‘Labov’s narrative structure:

The narrative is divided into “two parts structure” narrative (Labov, 1972:232) .The first part is forming the ground for the story where he is explaining his difficulties through one part of the narrative and the responses his mother. Whereas, the second part is the actual narrative because of which the first part narrative is being told to us. The first part comprises of A toI whereas the second part contains J to L. Both the narratives are analyzed in this section.

The narrative of part 1 begins with A., which clearly states that it is the abstract of the narrative. A comprises of five Labov’s clauses. It is sparking the event of what is this story about. The clauses in A are depending on one another therefore it is not a free clause. His hatred for his mother is because of her one eye. Hence in the beginning we know the “point of the story” (Labov, 1972, 228) therefore, it is the abstract of the narrative.

B. There was this one day during elementary school where my mom came to say hello to me. I was so embarrassed

Some part of the *orientation* section is present in abstract as “my mom” and “I”, whereas the rest is lying in B. as “one day, during elementary school”.

The complicating action is clearly present in the narrative in F and G. the occurrence which is moving the narrative ahead and is keeping the listener interested. The use of “so” and “then” keeps the 4 clauses binding together. Therefore these are narrative clauses are illustrated below through italicizing and numbering. 1 and 2 are narrative clauses, 2 and 3 are also narrative clauses and hence are in turn giving rise to the clause 4. The complex narrative clauses are depending on one another hence taking the narrative ahead.

F. 1. *I wanted out of that house, and have nothing to do with her.* 2. *So I studied real hard,* 3. *got a chance to go abroad to study.*

G. 4. *Then, I got married...*

The *resolution* is the present in the narrative clause of *F*– and she disappeared out of sight”. Hence it gives the results of the first part of the narrative but there is no coda. It is because the listener may think of what happened after that.

The Part 2 the narrative begins from J and lasts till L. the abstract consists of “clauses at the beginning summarizing the story to come” (Johnstone, 2001: 637) ,therefore, the part 1 is already containing the abstract of the narrative.

The orientation of the narrative lies in J and k like “One day, my house , my wife, old shack, my neighbor”. It sets the time, place and characters for the reader.

The complicating action of the narrative moves on flawlessly. It begins with the first narrative clause i-e J 1 of the extract. The word “so” is building the narrative clause adding another narrative clause, hence constructing the narrative ahead. Similarly, K4 also illustrates that the listeners are kept intact by this narrative clause.

J. One day, a letter regarding a school reunion came to my house.

1. So I lied to my wife
2. that I was going on a business trip.
3. After the reunion, I went to the old shack just out of curiosity.

K. My neighbors said

4. that she died. I did not shed a single tear. They handed me a letter that she had wanted me to have.

The resolution and coda both lies in the letter itself which is L. the resolution lies in L4. Thus it gives the conclusion of the narrative and releases the tension at the end. L is the final statement after which there is no need of asking any question. The result and coda leaves the listeners in a position where he is fully satisfied.

L. 1. “My dearest son,

2. I think of you all the time. I’m sorry that I came to your house and scared your children.

3. I was so glad when I heard you were coming for the reunion. But I may not be able to even get out of bed to see you. I’m sorry that I was a constant embarrassment to you when you were growing up.

4. You see.....when you were very little, you got into an accident, and lost your eye. As a mother, I couldn’t stand watching you having to grow up with one eye. So I gave you mine.

5. I was so proud of my son who was seeing a whole new world for me, in my place, with that eye.

6. With all my love to you,

7. Your mother.”

The evaluation is the most influential portion of the two part structure of narrative. Labov has illustrated the function of evaluation and its identification in the narrative. In this extract the evaluation is spread throughout the narrative. Every line is contributing to the idea of his discomfiture and predicament. The two part structure of the narrative is such designed that the listener has no time to ask the question “so what”. The narrative begins at A keeping the listeners intact but it is suspended till I. the listener is just told about the embarrassment because of his mother and his reaction towards that. In the second half of the narrative everything moves flawless. In J and K, the narrative begins and ends with a single letter. Therefore we cannot limit the evaluation hence it resides overall in the narrative.

3. Conclusion and Discussion :

The analysis section clearly explained all the six narrative structures present in the selected narrative. The extract is divided into two part structure which according to Labov is effective narrative. It comprises of all the six structures i-e abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda. It also incorporates all the clauses which are necessary for any narrative to be an operational and effective narrative. Evaluation is spread over the whole narrative making it more appealing to the listener. It

fulfills all the requirements which are to present in an effective narrative according to Labov's model of structure of narrative. Hence, one of the reason which makes this narrative "My Mom Had Only One eye" so famous is its narrative structure.

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