

## Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art Analysis of Natural Narrative

Labov & Waletzky propose a method of narrative analysis which focuses on how the narrator orders the expression of events relative to the times when the events are true in the world depicted.

The fundamental unit of analysis in this system is the **narrative unit = independent clause**:

**Narrative Units:** The units of narrative are independent clauses, i.e. clauses which by being ordered in a certain way produce a temporal ordering in the semantic (meaning) interpretation of the narrative.

They draw a distinction between **dependent** and **independent clauses**. Each **independent** clause has a certain **temporal anchor**, that is, a 'now' time with respect to which its truth-value is interpreted.

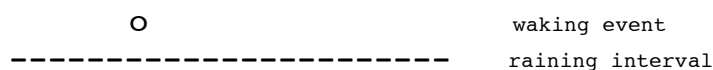
**Dependent** clauses have no such independent temporal anchor, but rather *depend* on another clause, which supplies to them a temporal anchor.

When I woke up, it was raining.

Here *I woke up* is temporally dependent on *it was raining*.

The sentence asserts that there was an interval of time such that some point of that interval was before the utterance time, i.e. was in the past.

*When I woke up* is interpreted as occurring at a point within the interval denoted by *it was raining*:



**Temporal juncture:** A temporal juncture is a relation between two independent clauses in which reversal of the given order produces a change in the semantic interpretation of the order of the events referred to.

Temporal junctures can be explicitly asserted with words such as *so, then, later, afterwards*, and so forth; but most of the time a temporal juncture can be inferred only by the ordering of two independent clauses. In such cases the juncture is covert.

**Determining whether a clause is independent or dependent.**

All independent clauses must contain a **finite verb**, since these are the grammatical units which express tense, and thus provide a temporal anchor.

**Finite vs. non-finite verbs**

**finite verb:** a verb carrying tense information.

- a. A phrase containing a finite verb has a corresponding question form in which the verb or *do* appears at the beginning:

My mother <i>will</i> tell him	::	<i>Will</i> my mother tell him?
I <i>have</i> to go	::	<i>Do</i> I have to go?
He <i>said</i> , 'Stop that!'	::	<i>Did</i> he say, 'Stop that!'
Lucy <i>shoved</i> Phil	::	<i>Did</i> Lucy shove Phil?

- b. A phrase containing a finite verb (if not negated already) can be negated with *-n't* attached to either the finite verb or to *do*.

My mother <i>won't</i> tell him	Lucy <i>didn't</i> shove Phil.
I <i>don't</i> have to go	He <i>didn't</i> say, 'Stop that!'

**non-finite verbs:**

infinitive (*to Verb*)  
 gerund (**Verb-ing**)  
 participle (**Verb-ing, Verb-ed, Verb-en**)

My mother will tell him [*to leave* the room.]  
 [*Getting* drunk] wasn't such a good idea at that point.  
 [*Having eaten* all the ice cream], my little brother threw up.

An **independent clause** must meet all the following conditions.

- (a) must be a phrase containing a finite verb
- (b) **not** follow a subordinating conjunction such as:  
*while, when, after, before, because, since, though, about, that, which, who, as*  
 However, an independent clause can be introduced by other (non-subordinating) conjunctions such as:  
*and, or, but, so, then, for*
- (c) **not** be introduced by a verb of quotation, such as  
*said, goes, yelled, is like, cried, etc.*

A **dependent clause** is any other phrase containing a finite verb.

**Test for determining if a clause is independent or dependent:**

A dependent clause can be shifted to the right or left of an adjacent independent clause without changing the meaning:

Edgar thumped Ricky after Ricky thumped Milo. =  
 After Ricky thumped Milo, Edgar thumped Ricky.

Donna said, 'Get out of my life, creep!' =  
 Get out of my life, creep!' Donna said.

Reordering two independent clauses either produces an ungrammatical sentence or can change the meaning (by altering the temporal ordering of the events described):

Edgar thumped Ricky and Ricky knocked Edgar to the ground.  
 \* And Ricky knocked Edgar to the ground, Edgar thumped Ricky.

Edgar thumped Ricky. Ricky knocked Edgar to the ground ≠  
 Ricky knocked Edgar to the ground. Edgar thumped Ricky.

Alice called Edgar a Nazi, then he called her a Republican.  
 \*Then Edgar called Alice a Republican, she called him a Nazi.

A simple measure of the syntactic complexity of an independent clause is to count the number of dependent and non-finite clauses it contains.

0 Edgar thumped Ricky

1 Donna said, 'Get out of my life, creep!'

1 *After* Ricky thumped Milo, Edgar thumped Ricky

2 And *when* he came out, I beat him, *until* I got tired

1 I was getting scared  
as either side of us were trees off of the road

3 and I couldn't remember anything at that point  
what with the thought of my immanent death at the  
hands of my crazy friend  
who was driving like a loon  
because of my lapse in listening ability  
during this journey!

When transcribing narratives using the Labov & Waletzky technique it is conventional to indent each dependent finite clause or non-finite clause after the independent clause.

## Procedure for narrative analysis

**Step 1:** Transcribe narrative

**Step 2:** For each clause *which has an independent temporal anchor* assign a unique index (letter) in order.

My dad jumped out the car (a).

My mom was screaming (b).

Here a, b are not anchored to each other.

When my dad jumped out the car (a), my mom was screaming (b).

Here a is temporally anchored to b because time at which 'my dad jumped out of the car' occurred is dependent on when 'my mom was screaming': they must be simultaneous.

Essentially, an index is assigned to each temporal anchor, and the material that goes with each anchor is called a (temporally independent) *clause*.

**Step 3.** For each clause *a*, test to see how far back or far forward it could be placed in the narrative without changing the order of the events described. This range of clauses is called the *displacement class* of *a*.

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a I was unconscious in the back seat.	a					
				o		
b When I woke up, I opened my eyes	b		o			
c and then I saw there was blood everywhere.	cde			o		
d My dad had tied a makeshift bandage around my head.	b-f					
e I must have been in shock.	a-f					
f I closed my eyes again.	def					o

*a* describes a state which is true prior to *b*, but ceases to be true at *b*.

*b*, *c*, *d* all occur in that order, hence: {*a*} > {*b*} > {*c*} > {*f*}

*d*, *e* (both 'perfect tense' clauses) refer to events (or states beginning) in the past that still hold true of that moment in the narrative. Since presumably the narrator was unconscious both before and after his father tied the bandage around his head, then *b* must follow *a* but could occur as late as after *f*.

Note that the *perfect* tenses ('has Xed' or 'had Xed') refer to the *results* of events. For this reason, they are temporally *stative* and refer to an interval of time which begins at the event mentioned and is still true at the time of the temporal anchor.

a	-----o	unconscious
b	o	eye-opening
c	o	blood-seeing
d	o-----	bandage-tying
e	-----	shock state
f	o	eye-closing

## Temporal ordering

If, for two clauses *a* and *b* with displacement classes  $D(a)$  and  $D(b)$ , neither  $D(a) \subseteq D(b)$  nor  $D(b) \subseteq D(a)$ , then *a* and *b* are *temporally ordered*.

In other words, two clauses are temporally ordered if neither one's displacement class contained in the other's.

a	I was unconscious in the back seat.	a
b	When I woke up, I opened my eyes	b
c	and then I saw there was blood everywhere.	cde
d	My dad had tied a makeshift bandage around my head.	bcdef
e	I must have been in shock.	abcdef
f	I closed my eyes again.	def

pairs of clauses which are temporally ordered

$a > b$

$b > c$

$a > d$

$c > f$

plus, by transitivity:

$a > c$

$a > f$

$b > f$

## Classification of clauses by temporal function

**free clause:** could go anywhere in the narrative, not temporally restricted; has every clause in the narrative as its displacement class.

Example: clause *e* 'I must have been in shock'

displacement class = abcdef (all the clauses)

**narrative clause:** the set of narrative clauses are all clauses which are strictly ordered.

A clause is *narrative* (strictly ordered) if

- (a) its displacement class only itself (it is 'locked in place')
- (b) its displacement class contains only clauses which have no temporal ordering among themselves.

Example (a) : clauses *a*, *b* are 'locked in place'

'I was unconscious in the back seat.'

'When I woke up, I opened my eyes.'

Example (b) : clause *c*, because, although it could move past clauses *d* and *e*, *d* and *e* are not temporally ordered.

'and then I saw that there was blood everywhere}'

**restricted clauses:** clauses which are temporally ordered, but not strictly.

Example: clause *d*, because it is not free (its displacement class {*b*,*c*,*d*,*e*,*f*} excludes clause *a*), but it is not narrative, because there is some temporal ordering within the clauses in its displacement class, e.g.  $b > c$ ,  $b > f$ .

'My dad had tied a makeshift bandage around my head.'

In addition, two clauses can be called coordinate if they have the same displacement class. By definition all free clauses are coordinate, since a free clause has every clause in the narrative in its displacement class.

**Step 4:** Divide the clauses into free, narrative, coordinate and restricted clauses. (The finite verbs which introduce temporal anchors are shown in blue)

- a They **loaded** me into the ambulance.
- b Then we **went** to the hospital.
- c I **asked** the guys if I was going to be OK.
- d They **said** not to worry,
- e but by that time my stomach **hurt** like hell.
- f But I **thought** that as long as I was going to the hospital  
everything was gonna be all right.
- g When we got to the hospital there **were**, like, 2 doctors and  
five nurses all around me.
- h I **was shivering** out of control
- i They **put** all these blankets on me
- j but everytime they moved a blanket I **would shake** violently
- k I think I **started** to moan really loudly.
- l They **couldn't figure out** what was wrong with me.
- m This **was** back before there was MRI.
- n All they **had** was x-rays.
- o I remember hearing a nurse **say**, "Radiology is gone for the  
night"
- p and it **seemed** like it took forever for them to do the x-rays
- q I **kept asking** the nurse, "Are you gonna put me to sleep"
- r Because I was in so much pain, all I **wanted** was to be out of  
pain
- s She **said**, "We want you to go to sleep naturally"
- t I **should have said**, "Yeah, like die?"

*Primary sequence.* This is the 'basic' or least complicated ordering of the independent clauses which preserves the temporal ordering of the events of the narrative.

- (1) all the narrative clauses are listed in order
- (2) all the free clauses are moved to the beginning of the narrative and listed in the order in which they occur in the original
- (3) each restricted clause is moved to the earliest point in the narrative as possible
- (4) coordinate clauses are fused into single clauses

Now we can ask the question: how has the narrator *reordered* the clauses from this primary sequence, and why??

**Step 5:** Determine the primary sequence and note how the narrative departs from the primary sequence.

**Step 6:** Discuss the large constituents of the narrative, and the function of the order of the clauses (insofar as it departs from the primary sequence), as well as the role of the evaluation clauses in qualifying the narrative.

[http://www.ink19.com/issues\\_F/97\\_12/ink\\_spots/ric\\_ocasek\\_nf.html](http://www.ink19.com/issues_F/97_12/ink_spots/ric_ocasek_nf.html)

Car Trouble: An interview with Ric Ocasek  
by Gail Worley

(Can you tell me a story about a time when you met one of your rock heroes?)

a Well, first, I can tell you that I **never had** an idol nor a hero.  
b I just never **felt** that way.  
c But I **can tell** you about the time I met Dylan.  
d That **was** five years ago.  
e I **was supposed** to write songs with him,  
f so I **went** up to his house [in L.A.]  
g and we **sat** in the kitchen.  
h First, I **got** his studio going  
 'cause he didn't know quite how to do it.  
i Somebody **had built** a studio  
 when he was away  
j and when he came back he **didn't know** how to turn it on.  
k So I **crawled** under the board  
l and I think I just **plugged** it in,  
m and he **thought** I was amazing.  
n We **were trying** to write one song  
o and he **was saying**, "Come on man, give me some lyrics to  
 go with this,"  
p and I **was** like "Bob, you do the lyrics." [Laughs].  
q So, ultimately he **was adding** some of his catch phrases to a  
 particular song, like "By which you would" -- all those kind  
 of funny things.  
r So we **sat around** for a day  
s and **did** that.  
t It **was** fun meeting Bob.

a-b evaluation: free clauses, could go at the end

c-e orientation: "that" as deictic element

f-s complication (resolution?)

t coda: "it" as deictic element

Primary sequence:

a Well, first, I can tell you that I never had an idol nor a hero.  
b I just never felt that way.  
c But I can tell you about the time I met Dylan.  
d That was five years ago.  
e I was supposed to write songs with him,  
i Somebody had built a studio  
when he was away  
j and when he came back he didn't know how to turn it on.  
t It was fun meeting Bob.

f so I went up to his house [in L.A.]

k So I crawled under the board  
l and I think I just plugged it in,  
h First, I got his studio going  
'cause he didn't know quite how to do it.

m and he thought I was amazing.

g and we sat in the kitchen.  
n We were trying to write one song  
o and he was saying, "Come on man, give me some lyrics to  
go with this,"  
p and I was like "Bob, you do the lyrics." [Laughs].  
q So, ultimately he was adding some of his catch phrases to a  
particular song, like "By which you would" -- all those kind  
of funny things.

r So we sat around for a day  
s and did that.

## Classification of clauses

Clauses are classified according to both *temporal* and *functional* criteria.

The classification according to temporal criteria divides clauses into:

*free, narrative* and *restrictive*

(clauses can also be called *coordinate* if they have exactly the same temporal distribution. So there can be *coordinate* clauses that are *free, narrative* and *restrictive*).

The classification according to functional criteria divides clauses into:

*orientation, complication, resolution* and *coda*.

Depending on what it contains, a clause may also be *evaluative* while still belonging to one of the functional classes above. Some evaluation clauses are 'pure' evaluation:

This is the part that is really scary.

Other clauses are *both evaluative and narrative*. Such a clause will contain a temporally ordered event, but the narrator may introduce evaluative properties such as lexical intensification:

And then the car just fuckin' went out of control!

Or, suspension of action may be created by increasing the sentence complexity or introducing a group of coordinate clauses. Some or these clauses might be narrative, but the whole group has an evaluative role.

Even orientation clauses can be evaluative:

This happened long, long ago when your grandfather was still a child ...

Of course, coda clauses also can be evaluative:

Now isn't that a strange story?