

Narrative Universals

Understanding Narrative Universals

Perhaps surprisingly, the explanation of the Arawak story's difference from the cross-cultural prototype begins to suggest why there is a cross-cultural prototype to begin with. Cross-culturally, there are two common purposes of narrative verbal art – the communication of emotionally satisfying experiences (roughly, a psychological purpose) and the treatment of thematically significant issues, often ethical or political (roughly, a social purpose). The explanation of narrative universals bears importantly on these two elements:

Narratives involve sequences of action engaged in by intentional agents pursuing goals that we share and that engage us emotionally. One thing that cross-cultural patterns suggest is that these narrative goals are much more limited, and much more cross-culturally widespread, than one might have imagined. For example, they include union with a partner in an enduring relationship that is both sexual and founded in attachment – thus, romantic love (on other happiness goals, the related emotions, and the associated narrative structures, see Hogan 2004). The precise development of narratives results in part from the means necessary to intensify emotional experiences – such as creating a relatively sharp change from separation anxiety to reunion, enhancing conflict by involving people who themselves have attachment bonds (e.g., parents and children), and so on.

Again, the development of romantic narratives also crucially includes real social concerns. Most obviously, these involve in-group/out-group divisions and group hierarchies, which presumably result from group dynamics. But group organization does not delimit the entire social world. Individual biological endowments, developmental idiosyncrasies, and experiential accidents in later life guide personal affiliations. There is, in consequence, no way of guaranteeing that personal affiliations will conform to the principles of group hierarchization or in-group/out-group antagonism. Societies are, then, condemned to face conflicts between interpersonal attachments and the segregations imposed by social organization. Romantic plots tell the story of that conflict.

In sum, there seem to be significant narrative universals (many, of course, statistical; others **ABSOLUTE**). These universals arise from a complex interaction of factors, including biological endowment (e.g., in basic emotional responses), patterns in childhood development, and convergent developments arising through group dynamics. In this way, narrative universals are in part derived from biological adaptations. However, they are no less derived from social constructions, which are themselves universal. An understanding of narrative universals is important for at least three reasons: 1) Narratives are a central part of human life everywhere. Understanding narratives is therefore crucial to understanding the human mind and human experience. 2) The precise narrative universals we discover tell us some surprising things about human society. For example, it is striking that most romantic plots develop our sympathy for the lovers, not for the society. This suggests not only that certain sorts of conflict are inevitable in society but also that we share a deep sympathy with individuals or couples working against social hierarchization and group antagonism – a surprising and in many ways hopeful fact. Finally, 3) the complex nature of

narrative universals would seem to have consequences for our understanding of universals elsewhere and for our understanding of the place of both biology and social construction in an account of universals.

– Patrick Colm Hogan

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NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The study of narrative extends over a broad range of human activities: novels, short stories, poetic and prose epic, film, folk-tale, interviews, oral memoirs, chronicles, histories, comic strips, graphic novels, and other visual media. These forms of communication may draw upon the fundamental human capacity to transfer experience from one person to another through oral narratives of personal experience.

A focus on spontaneous recounting of experience was greatly stimulated by the development of sociolinguistic research in the 1960s, designed to capture the closest approximation to the vernacular of unmonitored speech. Narratives of personal experience were found to reduce the effects of observation to a minimum (Labov 2001). Since then it has appeared that such narratives are delivered with a similar organization in a wide variety of societies and cultures as, for example, in the Portuguese of fishermen in northeastern Brazil (Maranhão 1984). The following discussion of oral narratives is based on the initial analysis of William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967), as developed further in the suggested reading.

The discussion first treats the structural organization of narrative (temporal organization, orientation, coda), then turns to the evaluative component and finally to the construction of narrative as a folk theory of causality instrumental to the assignment of praise and blame.

Structural Organization

A narrative is defined here as one way of recounting past events, in which the order of narrative clauses matches the order of events as they occurred. Example (1) is a minimal narrative organized in this way:

Narratives of Personal Experience

- (1) a. Well, this man had a little too much to drink
b. and he attacked me
c. and a friend came in
d. and she stopped it.

The same events could have been reported in the non-narrative order c,d,a,b as in (2), which employs a variety of grammatical devices within a single clause.

- (2) A friend of mine came in just in time to stop this person who had had a little too much to drink from attacking me.

Narrative structure is established by the existence of *temporal juncture* between two independent clauses. Temporal juncture is said to exist between two such clauses when a change in the order of the clauses produces a change in the interpretation of the order of the referenced events in past time. These are *narrative clauses*. Narrative clauses respond to a potential question “what happened then?” and form the *complicating action* of the narrative.

A narrative normally begins with an *orientation*, introducing and identifying the participants in the action: the time, the place, and the initial behavior. The orientation section provides answers to the potential questions “who? when? where? what were they doing?” In the minimal narrative (1), the first clause (a) is the orientation. More information is usually provided:

- (3) a. my son has a—well, it was a fairly new one then.
b. It’s a 60 cc Yamaha.
c. and it could move pretty good.
d. This fella and I were going down the road together

The end of a narrative is frequently signaled by a *coda*, a statement that returns the temporal setting to the present, precluding the question “and what happened then?”

- (4) a. And you know the 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.

Evaluation

Most adult narratives are more than a simple reporting of events. A variety of evaluative devices are used to establish the evaluative *point* of the story (Polanyi 1989) Thus, we find that narratives, which are basically an account of events that happened, frequently contain *irrealis* clauses – negatives, conditionals, futures – which refer to events that did not happen or might have happened or had not yet happened:

- (5) And the doctor just says “Just that much more,” he says, “and you’d a been dead.”
- (6) I’ll tell you if I had ever walloped that dog I’d have felt some bad.
- (7) a. And he didn’t come back.
b. And he didn’t come back.

Irrealis clauses serve to evaluate the events that actually did occur in the narrative by comparing them with an alternate stream of reality: potential events or outcomes that were not in

fact realized. Frequently, such evaluative clauses are concentrated in an *evaluation section*, suspending the action before a critical event and establishing that event as the point of the narrative.

Evaluative clauses vary along a dimension of objectivity. At one extreme, narrators may interrupt the narrative subjectively by describing how they felt at the time:

- (8) a. I couldn’t handle any of it
b. I was hysterical for about an hour and a half

In a more objective direction, narrators may quote themselves (“I said to myself ‘This is it’”), or with more credibility, cite a third party witness, as in (5). At the other extreme, objective events speak for themselves, as in the account of a plane developing motor trouble over Mexico City:

- (9) And you could hear the prayer beads going in the back of the plane.

Evaluation provides justification for the narrative’s claim on a greater portion of conversational time than most turns of talk, requiring an extended return of speakership to the narrator until it is finished (Sacks 1992). Evaluation thus provides a response to the potential question “So what?” (Spanish *Y que?*; French *Et alors?*).

Narratives of personal experience normally show great variation in the length of time covered by the clauses in the orientation, complicating the action and evaluation sections, ranging from decades to minutes to seconds. Sequences of clauses of equal duration may be termed *chronicles*; these are not designed to report and evaluate personal experience.

Reportability and Credibility

A reportable event is one that itself justifies the delivery of the narrative and the claim on social attention needed to deliver it. Some events are more reportable than others. The concept of *reportability* or *tellability* (Norrick 2005) is relative to the situation and the relations of the narrator with the audience. At one end of the scale, death and the danger of death are highly reportable in almost every situation. At the other end, the fact that a person ate a banana for lunch might be reportable only in the most relaxed family setting. Most narratives are focused on a *most reportable event*. Yet reporting this event alone does not make a narrative; it only forms the *abstract* of a narrative.

For a narrative to be successful, it cannot report only the most reportable event. It must also be credible if the narrative is not to be rejected as a whole by the listener. There is an inverse relationship between reportability and credibility: The more reportable, the less credible. Narrators have available many resources to enhance credibility. In general, the more objective the evaluation, the more credible the event.

Narrative Preconstruction

When a narrator has made the decision to tell a narrative, he or she must solve the fundamental and universal problem: “Where should I begin?” The most reportable event, which will be designated henceforth as e_0 , is most salient, but one cannot begin with it. Given the marked reportability of e_0 and the need to establish its credibility, the narrator must answer the question “How

did this (remarkable) event come about?" The answer requires a shift of focus backwards in time to a precursor event e_{-1} , which is linked to e_0 in the causal network in which events are represented in memory (Trabasso and van den Broek 1985). In traversing this network in reverse, the causal links found may be event-to-goal, goal-to-attempt, or attempt-to-outcome. The process will continue recursively to e_{-2} , e_{-3} , and so on, until an ordinary, mundane event e_{-n} is reached, for which the question "Why did you do that?" is absurd, since e_n is exactly what we would expect the person to do in the situation described. The event e_n is, of course, the orientation. Thus, a narrator telling of a time he was on shore leave in Buenos Aires begins,

(10) a. Oh, I was settin' at a table drinkin'.

TRIGGERING EVENTS. Given the mundane and nonreportable character of the orientation, it follows that the first link in the causal chain is a *triggering event*, which drives the narrative along the chain toward the most reportable event. Thus, (10) is followed by (11):

(11) b. an' this Norwegian sailor come over
c. an' kep' givin' me a bunch o' junk about how I was sittin' with his woman.

How ordinary situations like (10) can give rise to the reportable and violent events that followed is a mystery that narrative analysis can only contemplate, since they are part and parcel of the contingent character of history.

The Transformation of Experience

The participants in many narratives include protagonist, antagonist and third party witnesses, of which the first is the most complex. Elaborating on Goffman (1981, 144–5), one can identify many egos present: the self as original *author* of the narrative and its immediate *animator*; the self as *actor*; the self as *generalized other* (normally as "you"); the *anti-self* as seen by others; and the *principal*, the self in whose interest the story is told. That interest is normally advanced through a variety of techniques that do not require any alteration in the truthfulness of the events reported. The re-creation of the causal network involves the assignment of praise and blame for the critical events and their outcomes. Most narratives of conflict involve linguistic devices that contribute to the *polarization* of protagonist and antagonist, though within the family, other linguistic forms lead to the *integration* of participants. The devices used to adjust praise and blame include most prominently the deletion of events, an operation that can often be detected by close reading. Key elements in further manipulation are the grammatical features of voice: active versus passive, but also zero causatives that assign agency ("He *drove* through town with a chauffeur") or verbs that imply the exertion of authority and resistance to it ("My dad *let* me go with him"). Other narrative devices function to increase the impression of agency: pseudoevents that may not correspond to any physical event ("I *turned* to him and," "I *took* this girl and," "I *started to hit* him but").

Narrative analysis can show how the *prima facie* case is built to further the interests of the principal. This involves detecting

insertions of pseudoevents and removing them, detecting deletions and replacing them, and exchanging excuses for the action excused. It is then possible to approximate the original chain of events on which the narrative is based. A useful exercise is to develop a complementary *sub rosa* case in the interests of the antagonist. The comparison of these two constructions deepens our understanding of how narrative skills are enlisted to transform the social meaning of events without violating our commitment to a faithful rendering of the past.

– William Labov

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NARRATOLOGY

The French term *narratologie* (formed in parallel with *biology*, *sociology*, etc. to denote "the study of narrative") was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in his 1969 book *Grammaire du "Décaméron"*. The early narratologists participated in a broader structuralist revolution that sought to use Saussurean linguistics as a "pilot science" for studying diverse forms of cultural expression, which structuralist theorists characterized as rule-governed signifying practices or "languages" in their own right (see STRUCTURALISM; Culler 1975). Likewise, narratologists such as Todorov, Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette, and Algirdas Julien Greimas, adapted Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *la parole* and *la langue* to construe particular stories as individual narrative messages supported by an underlying semiotic code (see SEMIOTICS). And just as Saussurean linguistics privileged code over message, focusing on the structural constituents and combinatory principles of the semiotic system of language,