

Narrative pre-construction

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Abstract: Before a narrative can be constructed, it must be pre-constructed by a cognitive process that begins with a decision that a given event is reportable. Pre-construction begins with this most reportable event and proceeds backwards in time to locate events that are linked causally each to the following one, a recursive process that ends with the location of the unreportable event--one that is not reportable in itself and needs no explanation. Comparison of such event chains with the sequence of narrative clauses actually produced will help to understand how the narrator re-organizes and transforms the events of real time in the finished narrative.

Over the past four decades, the study of narrative has expanded to raise a host of interesting questions in a broad variety of fields. The framework developed in Labov & Waletzky 1967 [henceforth L&W] has proved useful for many students of narrative in following the path of narrative construction. L&W define narrative as a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to. They then describe the full elaboration of adult narratives of personal experience, beginning with an abstract, orientation, an evaluation section embedded in the complicating action, a resolution and a coda. In both fundamental concept and in this elaboration, narrative construction follows the order of events in time. The following discussion projects a set of cognitive operations that operate in the reverse order, the narrative *pre-construction* that every narrator must accomplish before beginning the narrative itself.

The discussion to follow is based on studies of oral narratives of personal experience, which are fundamental to the human faculty for story-telling, but applies more generally to other narrative genres. The framework, already outlined in *Some further steps in narrative analysis* (Labov 1997), is used here to generate and motivate the earlier L&W narrative framework, and then projected as a platform for new directions of narrative research.

For L&W, the fundamental concept that distinguishes narrative from other ways of reporting the past is *temporal juncture*: a relation of before-and-after that holds between two independent clauses, and matches the order of events in time. Such sequences of ordered clauses form the complicating action that is the skeletal structure of narrative. Here we may begin with a more basic consideration from which that definition can be derived: we begin with the understanding that a narrative is *about something*.

A narrative is initiated when a person is impelled to tell others about something, sometimes by an external stimulus ("What happened?"), sometimes by an internal one ("I've got to tell you what happened."). It is only when that something is an event--

something that happened—that the speaker will signal to listeners that a narrative is to be initiated. If the something is a state of being (“I’m tired”) or the location of an entity (“Dad is home”) what has been told is a simple report that does not require a further turn of talk.

It is well understood that the initiation of a narrative requires conversational work: the listeners must be alerted to anticipate an extended turn of talk on the part of the narrator, and/or the automatic return of speakership after next turns until the narrative is ended (Sacks 1992, Labov 1997). Whatever steps that narrators take to accomplish this also signal that they have decided that the event is *reportable* (or *tellable*, which I take to be equivalent). There is a great deal to be said about the concept of reportability for any given event, and its relativity to age and social context (Fludernik 1996, Norrick 2005), but the very concept of narrative demands that we recognize as an essential first step the decision to report an event, and the entailment that it is judged to be reportable.

It is also evident that a narrative is more than a statement about a reportable event. “I broke my leg” is not a narrative, but an abstract of one. If the event is reportable, it does not happen every day, as a product of every-day activities. (“I got up this morning.”). And if the reportable event is not an expected, every-day occurrence, it calls for an accounting. The speaker who has made the decision to report it is normally under a requirement to supply some information on how it came about. The narrator’s attention is then directed backward in time, from the reportable event to a preceding one, driven by the need to answer the question “How did that happen?” It follows that a second step necessary to the construction of a narrative is for the narrator to locate an event that was prior in time to the reportable event and stands in a causal relation to it (“I fell and I broke my leg”).

This is a recursive process, since the preceding event may also be reportable and require an explanation (“Why did you fall?”) We can then distinguish the initial event about which the narrative is told, as *the most reportable event*. That is the normal situation, though it is not uncommon for one of the preceding series of events to emerge as more reportable than the one that was first selected as what the narrative was to be about. This is an important issue in narrative analysis, but it is a product of complex interactions in the social environment, and for the moment I will continue to refer to the event of narrative initiation as the most reportable event. It will be symbolized as e_0 , and the events preceding in this recursive process as e_{-1} , e_{-2} . . .

The second step in narrative construction is then to construct a recursive series of events preceding the most reportable event, each linked causally to the one that follows. From this consideration we can derive the central characterization of narrative in L&W as a series of clauses that contain at least one temporal juncture. Thus “I fell and I broke my leg.” contains one temporal juncture and qualifies as a narrative. When temporal relations are signaled by subordinating conjunctions, the same events can be told in any order without constructing a narrative (“When I fell, I broke my leg.” or “I broke my leg when I fell.”)

This recursive chain of events will generate the *complicating action* in the L&W framework. But in order to begin the narrative and locate the beginning of the complicating action, it is necessary to terminate the chain. This is done by locating some event that is not in itself reportable and does not require an explanation. This will be called in short the unreportable event. It will be symbolized as e_{-n} , where n is the number

of causally linked events in the narrative chain. The third step in narrative construction is therefore to locate an event for which the question “Why did that happen?” is inappropriate, since it is an every-day activity that is not reportable in itself. (“I was coming home. I tripped on the curb, and I fell and broke my leg.”). In narrative construction, this event e_n is normally embedded in the *orientation* of the L&W framework. This is the section that informs the listener about the time, place, participants and behavioral setting at the beginning of the narrative.

Normally we think of the narrative as it is told, beginning with the orientation and proceeding *forward* through the complicating action to the most reportable event, the resolution and the coda. The narrative pre-construction described here operates in the opposite direction, proceeding *backward* from the most reportable event e_0 and ending with the unexplained event e_n . This is not far from asserting that in narrative, time is reversible (see Bres 1991). This is a strong claim, but the evidence for it is also strong. It is not uncommon for narrators to hesitate before they begin a narrative by saying “Let me see. Where should I begin?” Introspection, as well as the logic of narrative construction, will indicate that no narrative can be told before pre-construction answers this question.

The outline of narrative pre-construction put forward here assumes that the narrator has free access to a store of event representations in his or her biographical memory, and that these representations have a veridical relation to what actually happened in past real time (for a contrary view, see Hopper 1997). It remains to be seen how much agreement can be obtained in the reconstruction of event chains (Labov 2001, 2004). To the extent that memory deteriorates, events are forgotten or transformed in memory, the narrator is no longer in control of narrative construction, and the final narrative version may be the product of such unconscious transformations. The concept of narrative pre-construction lays the foundation for further inquiry into how narrative events are stored in memory and accessed by the narrator, how the narrator makes selection from that storage, and how that selection is rearranged to transform the normative significance and evaluation of the events in the interests of the narrator.

From pre-construction to orientation

Once the pre-construction is complete, the narrator begins to generate the narrative by formulating the orientation section, in which the unreportable event e_n is embedded along with information on the time, the place, and the participants in the action. The next step, launching the complicating action, shows that the view of narrative pre-construction just presented is defective in one respect. The unreportable terminating event of pre-construction e_n can not have a regular causal relation to the event that follows. Otherwise this every-day activity would continually trigger reportable events, and it is common knowledge that it does not. The first event that follows the orientation is normally unpredictable to some degree. An examination of a particular narrative shows the importance of this unpredictability.

Narrative (1) is Harold Shambaugh’s account of the Norwegian Sailor, analyzed in greater detail in Labov 1997.

(1)

(What happened in South America?)

- a Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin'
 b And--this Norwegian sailor come over
 c an' kep' givin' me a bunch o'junk about I was sittin' with his woman.
 d An' everybody sittin' at the table with me were my shipmates.
 e So I jus' turn aroun'
 f an' shoved 'im,
 g an' told 'im,
 h I said, "Go away,
 i I don't even wanna fool with ya."
 j An' nex' thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me,
 k An' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head.
 l Your throat's cut."

Given the evidence of the narrative as Shambaugh produced it, the chain of events that he would have had to remember would appear as (2). The verb *kept* in the construction *kept giving* entails that at least two complaints and two refusals were made. To capture the sense of working backward in time, the past perfect is useful.

(2)

- e₀ This Norwegian sailor cut my throat.
 e₋₁ I had refused to listen to him twice.
 e₋₂ He had repeated a complaint that I was sitting with his woman.
 e₋₃ I had refused to listen to him the first time.
 e₋₄ He had complained that I was sitting with his woman.
 e₋₅ He had come over to where I was.
 e₋₆ I had been sitting with my shipmates drinking.

Here narrative clause **a** forms the orientation, corresponding to event e_{-n} where n = 6. For a sailor in a port, sitting at a table drinking does not require any further explanation. We can note that the non-reportable event is typically formulated with the progressive aspect, as in clause **a**. The progressive focuses upon the action itself, and not its beginning or end points in time, so that it is not separated by a temporal juncture from the following event e₋₅, the approach of the Norwegian sailor. This first following action is presented as an inexplicable and unmotivated event. This is normal: event e_{-n+1} is the *initiating event* of the narrative. Its initiating character is connected with the fact that the orientation e_{-n} has no structural consequences for action.

The selection of the endpoint of pre-construction is a critical step in the organization of the narrative and the presentation of the narrator's point of view. The sequence (2) may have been all that Shambaugh remembered. But the analysis of Labov 1997 pointed out that if the narrative chain had been extended further back in time, we might well have seen that the Norwegian sailor had arrived with a woman who was sitting at Shambaugh's table so that e₋₅ was not as unpredictable as presented in the finished narrative (1).

The narrative work done in generating the orientation is illuminated in another short narrative, *The falling out*, told to me this year by a young woman, Melinda D. The narrative has to do with events surrounding the sudden death of her father Tom D. Here the events inferred for pre-construction are indicated in a separate column to the left.

(3)

The falling out

event clause

- a Well, I'm gonna give you a small history.
- b My father's best friend, he—when we were young
- c His name was Ray,
- e₄ d and uh they had a falling out, the parents,
because their dog bit my sister
- e and they didn't talk after that incident.
- e₃ f So, you know, my father died unexpectedly
- e₂ g and Ray was in surgery on his knee in the hospital the same day
my father died
- e₁ h When he woke up from his surgery
he said to his wife Linda
who was also my mother's best friend
he said, "Lin, I had a dream,
that Tom came to me,
and said, "Let bygones be bygones.
Like--forget it.
It's over."
- e₀ i And then she said to him, "Ray, Tom died today."
- j The man was like a ghost.
- e₁ k He came to the hospital--I mean to the funeral, on crutches
because he was so freaked out by it
- m He was really quite hysterical.

The narrative is one of many that deal with communication from the dead to the living, a member of the subset in which this communication takes place in a dream. As such, it has high reportability, and is critically involved in the inverse relationship between reportability and credibility (Labov 1997). The credibility of such a narrative depends on the fact that it was not a response to information received prior to the dream. In hearing this narrative, the listener does not know until clause **i** that Ray did not know that his friend Tom had died until after he awoke and reported the dream. Clause **i** therefore strikes listeners as the most reportable event, e₀. The dream itself, e₁, is not as remarkable in itself since it would be expected that Ray would dream about his friend after hearing of his death. Only when the listener realizes that Ray had no knowledge of Tom's death is the case made effectively for communication from the dead.

If Ray had simply dreamed about his friend Tom at the time of his death, that would have been a remarkable coincidence. The case for communication from the dead is strongly reinforced by what Tom said in the dream, since it is understood that

reconciliation is a characteristic move of someone who is at the point of death (or beyond it).

The causal chain identified by Melinda in pre-construction moves backward in time from the report of Tom's death e_0 to the dream $e_{.1}$ which makes the report relevant, to the surgery and anesthesia $e_{.2}$ which led to the dream. The preceding event $e_{.3}$, her father's unexpected death, can be seen as a second cause of the dream. Thus two unexpected events—Tom's death and Ray's surgery—coincide to initiate the chain that leads to the most reportable event.

The orientation to *The Falling Out* is the absence of communication between the two friends (and their wives). It is a counter-example to the proposition that orientations are based on every-day behavior that needs no explanation. This every-day behavior—no communication between best friends for many years—requires an explanation, which is encapsulated in the subordinate clause, "because their dog bit my sister." Melinda opts to begin the narrative with a static situation without pursuing the events further back in time. When I asked her afterwards what caused the disagreement, she explained that the dog had bitten her twin sister Mariana in the face. Her father became angry with his friend because after the incident, Ray never inquired after Mariana or came to see how Mariana was. Plainly the dispute went even further backward in time, since this is truly inexplicable behavior for the neighborhood in which they lived. These events must also have been part of Melinda's stored memories. In fact, her sister Mariana who was present showed me the faint scar still left from the wound. But the narrative construction created by Melinda ignores these earlier events. Her selection of orientation is consistent with the fact that the assignment of praise or blame in the dispute between Ray and her father is irrelevant to what her narrative is about.

Construction and pre-construction

The sequence of complicating actions is generated on the basis of the chain of events identified in pre-construction. Yet it is rare for these two sequences to show a one-to-one relation. We can gain an understanding of how narratives organize and transform events in the interests of the narrator by examining this relationship. The mismatch of events and narrative clauses for the Shambaugh narrative (1) is shown in (4).

- (4)
 (What happened in South America?)
 event clause
- | | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| e-6 | a | Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin' |
| e-5 | b | And--this Norwegian sailor come over |
| e-4 | c | an' kep' givin' me a bunch o'junk about I was sittin' with his woman. |
| e-3 | | [Shambaugh's first refusal] |
| | d | An' everybody sittin' at the table with me were my shipmates. |
| e-2 | | [Sailor's repetition of the complaint] |
| e-1 | e | So I jus' turn aroun' |
| | f | an' shoved 'im, |
| | g | an' told 'im, |
| | h | I said, "Go away, |
| | i | I don't even wanna fool with ya." |
| e ₀ | j | An' nex' thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me, |
| | k | An' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head. |
| | l | Your throat's cut." |

We note that events e₂ and e₃ have no representation in the spoken narrative, since they are collapsed into e₄ by the construction *kept + Verb + ing*. On the other hand, the second refusal e₁ is elaborated into five narrative clauses. The organization of this narrative is designed to reinforce Shambaugh's point of view that the Norwegian sailor's complaint was unpredictable and inexplicable, and not worthy of attention in any way. The sudden and unmotivated character of the attack is reinforced further by the elaboration of e₀ into three narrative clauses, showing that Shambaugh did not realize that his throat was cut until someone told him. This is a necessary transformation of the events, since in all narratives of personal experience, the listener learns of the event in the same way that the narrator did.

In the discussion of the orientation section of *The Falling Out* in (3), it appeared that a preceding chain of events was encapsulated in the subordinate clause *because their dog bit my sister*. This raises the question of the role of complex syntax in narrative construction. relations of underlying events and narrative clauses. The characteristic narrative clause has a simple subject (usually pronominal), preterit verb and complement, and elaboration beyond this point is usually confined to the embedding of direct speech as the complement of verbs of quotation.

The Norwegian Sailor displays this simple syntax for all narrative clauses but **j**. On the other hand, *The Falling Out* shows a remarkable efflorescence of syntactic complexity, particularly for event e₁, Ray's account of his dream. Here the main verb *said* has a subordinate clause as a temporal complement (*when he woke up. . .*), a non-restrictive relative clause subordinated to its indirect object (*who was also. . .*), and in the direct quotation that is its complement, the object *dream* has embedded two complements (*Tom came. . . and said*), the second of which in turn has three complements (*Let bygones be bygones, forget it, it's over*). This exploitation of complex syntax is a common characteristic of narratives that deal with premonitions and communication with the dead. It is not clear how and why narrators are led in this direction. No current aspect of

linguistic theory can account for it, but the study of narrative may lead to a deeper understanding of the function of syntactic complexity in discourse.

Extending the argument to other forms of narrative

Granted the role of pre-construction in oral narratives of personal experience, to what extent can this argument be applied to other forms of narrative: epic, fiction and film? The film *Casablanca* raises a typical challenge. It is well known that the script was written from day to day as the filming progressed and no one knew how the film would end (review of Tim Dirks, <http://www.filmsite.org/casa.html>). How then could it be pre-constructed to end at an ending that did not exist?

It is not likely that the process of story telling on film can escape the imperatives that control story telling in every-day life. At some point before the film was finished, an ending was selected: that Ilsa would take the plane with Victor Laszlo and leave Rick behind. At that point, the process of pre-construction would have to begin. Given this final event, what brought it about? And what preceding events would take us back to the situation that prevailed at the beginning of the final scene? The dialog as it was finally written included the lines

Inside of us, we both know you belong with Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going.

It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.

These could only be written once the ending was selected. More generally, all narrative forms will be ruled by the inverse relations of reportability and credibility, which force the tellers to follow chains of causality until they reach the unreportable base from which all narrative begins. The great creators of fiction are well aware of this. In his discussion of chivalric novels, Cervantes said (and I am indebted to Richard Harvey for directing my attention to this quote):

" ... if you reply that the men who compose such books write them as fiction, and so are not obliged to look into fine points or truths, I should reply the more it resembles the truth, the better the lie, and yet at the same time the more provocatively doubtful or barely possible it is, the better it pleases."
-- Don Quixote, 1605.

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