

to appear in  
Georgetown University Round Table 2001  
(Georgetown: Georgetown University Press)

## **Uncovering the event structure of narrative**

William Labov, University of Pennsylvania

Oral narratives of personal experience have provided one of the most fruitful areas for the study of discourse because the structure of these speech events is unusually clear and well defined.<sup>1</sup> 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). If the order of the clauses is reversed, the inferred order of the reported events changes.

The narratives that use this principle of temporal organization are characterized by a well articulated structure that follows, as I hope to show, from certain structural principles necessarily involved in narrative construction. This report will attempt to use that structure to make inferences about the relation of a narrative as it is told to the underlying events as the speaker experienced them. The first part of the paper will use a narrative told by an older resident of a small town in Michigan, reporting a terrifying experience of his boyhood, to develop the tools for locating the underlying structure of events. The second part will apply these tools to the analysis of testimony before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which one of the perpetrators of the crimes involved deals with the responsibility for a series of murders.

In the great majority of cases, the only information available on the nature of the reported events is in the narrative itself: there is no independent

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first delivered at a meeting of the advanced discourse seminar taught by Professor Heidi Hamilton at Georgetown University in February 2001. I am grateful to members of the seminar for the fruitful discussion which contributed to the form of the paper given at GURT in March and the present version: Anne Berry, Sylvia Chou, Elisa Everts, Philip LeVine, Heidi Hamilton, Karen Murph., Aida Premilovac, Anne Schmidt, Nicole Watanabe, Alla Yeliseyeva and Najma Al Zidjaly.

evidence on what actually happened.<sup>2</sup> At first glance it might seem that the original events cannot be recovered, and that the narrative has to be considered as an entity in itself, disjoined from the real world. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why the effort should be made to reconstruct the original events from the narrative evidence. Inferences about the original events will lead us to greater insights on how the narrator transforms reality in reporting it to others. Re-tracing these transformations tells us more about the character of the narrators, the norms that govern the assignment of praise or blame, and in more serious cases, the narrator's complicity in the events themselves.

This report rests upon a set of findings about speakers' behavior that are the result of examining large numbers of narratives of personal experience. The first finding is that it is useful to begin with the premise that the narrators do not lie. This is obviously incorrect premise because speakers often do lie, and in ways that we cannot detect. Nevertheless, we can make considerable progress by beginning with this premise because of three properties that tend to minimize the occurrence of lies: they are (1) dangerous, since they are frequently exposed by events outside of the control of the narrator; (2) inconvenient, since they require much more effort than reporting the events themselves, and (3) unnecessary, since there are more efficient means of transforming reality in the interests of the narrator. The second finding is that the transformation of events is often incomplete. The linguistic devices that narrators use to affect the listener's view of motivation, praise, blame and culpability will often change the semantic interpretation of the original events, but in so doing leave traces that allow the analyst to reconstruct an underlying, untransformed series. This is particularly true of the simplest and most common transformation: the deletion of one or more events in the series. Just as phonemes are coarticulated with their neighboring phonemes, the clauses used to report events are interconnected with the clauses used to report neighboring events, in ways that prohibit the total elimination of information on the deleted event.

The overall framework for the study of narrative that I will use is given in (1). The underlined elements are familiar (Labov and Waletzky

---

<sup>2</sup> In rare cases, several of those present provide narratives of the same events (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968). Longitudinal studies of the same speaker focus upon re-tellings of the same narrative. These limited data sets provide a different approach to the problem of this report, which focuses on the normal case where no independent information can be found.

1967, Labov 1972). I will be dealing here with aspects that are not so familiar, shown in bold type.

- (1) The insertion of the narrative into the framework of conversational turn-taking by an *abstract*.
  - The orientation of the listener to the time, place, actors and activity of the narrative.
  - The temporal organization of the *complicating action* through the use of temporal juncture.
  - The differential evaluation of actions by a juxtaposition of real and potential events through the use of irrealis predicates.
  - The validation of the most reportable event by enhancing credibility through the use of objective witnesses.
  - The assignment of praise or blame for the reportable events by the **integration** or **polarization** of participants.
  - The **explanation** of the narrative through a chain of causal relations from the most reportable event to the orientation.
  - The **transformation** of the narrative in the interests of the narrator through deletion of objective events and the insertion of subjective events,
  - The **termination**: of the narrative by returning the time frame to the present through the use of a *coda*.

### **The event structure of a small town narrative**

Let us consider first a narrative told by a 73 year old man from South Lyons, Michigan, recorded quite a while ago by Claire Galed at the 1973 Linguistic Institute. On the slides, the evaluative predicates are indicated in red.

- (2) **The first man killed by a car in this town**  
 Interviewer: Claire Galed  
 Speaker: "Ross Hawkins", 73, South Lyons, MI.

#### **Abstract**

Shall I tell you about the first man got kilt–killed by a car here. . .  
 Well, I can tell you that.

**Orientation**

- a He–eh–'fore-'fore they really had cars in town
- b I think it was a judge–Sawyer–it was a judge in–uh–
- c I understand he was a judge in Ann Arbor
- d and he had a son that was a lawyer.

**Complicating action**

- e And this son–I guess he must've got drunk  
because he drove through town with a chauffeur  
with one of those old touring cars without, you know–  
open tops and everything, *big* cars, first ones–
- f and they–they come thr-through town in a–late in the night.
- g And they went pretty fast, I guess,
- h and they come out here to the end of a–  
where–uh–Pontiac Trail turns right or left in the road
- i and they couldn't make the turn
- j and they turned left
- k and they tipped over in the ditch,
- l steerin' wheel hit this fellow in the heart, this chauffeur,
- m killed him.

**Evaluation**

- n And–uh–the other fellow just broke his thumb–  
the lawyer who [hh] was drunk.
- o They–they say a drunk man [laughs] never gets it [laugh].
- p Maybe I shouldn't say that,
- q I might get in trouble.

We have no difficulty in understanding this narrative in terms of its main point, established in the evaluation section n-q. Big city lawyers are the problem, and the blame is clearly assigned to the drunken lawyer, who escaped with minor injuries. The narrator makes a little joke about the fact that he, a small town person, might get into trouble by criticizing these city folks with their chauffeurs and big, modern, fancy touring cars. It is the most familiar theme of American culture: the simplicity, honesty and competence of small town people against the sophistication, corruption and incompetence of big city people.

The construction of this narrative can be examined more closely by looking at the causal sequence of events narrated. The analysis begins with

*reportability* and *the most reportable event* (Labov 1997). The notion of reportability is well known to be relative to the immediate social situation, age and other cultural parameters. A *reportable event* is defined here not in absolute terms, but in relation to the narrative situation. Given the fact that the unmarked turn in a conversation is a single completed sentence, a narrative is marked by the fact that it is normally much longer than this. The narrative speaker therefore holds the floor, and occupies social space for a longer time than a conversational participant who is not telling a narrative. As Sacks points out (1992: II, 3-5), other participants may take turns during the narrative, but the performance of the narrative is effectively a claim to return the assignment of speakership to the narrator until the narrative is completed.

(3) Definition: A *reportable event* is one that justifies the automatic re-assignment of speaker role to the narrator.

Implication: To be an acceptable social act, a narrative of personal experience must contain at least one reportable event.

Among these reportable events, one can usually identify a *most reportable event*, which we will identify as  $e_0$  as the event that is least expected and has the greatest effect upon the needs and desires of the participants in the narrative. It is the least compatible with a potential intervention, “So what?”

The most reportable event is usually the one that the story is about. It is a non-trivial fact that the speaker rarely constructs the narrative with the most reportable event as the first of the complicating actions.<sup>3</sup> Where then is the narrator to begin? Every event is preceded by an unlimited number of prior events. The question of where to begin must be posed and answered by every narrator, and it is not infrequently made explicit.

The answer to the question of where to begin is related to a second basic concept that governs narrative: credibility. The overall credibility of the narrative rests upon listeners’ belief that the most reportable event did in fact take place in real time. The less credible the event, the less likely is it to be awarded automatic speaker reassignment.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Though the most reportable event is often mentioned in the abstract, if there is one.

<sup>4</sup> We are dealing here with serious accounts of every-day life told by ordinary people with the purpose of conveying information about real events. The success or failure of such narratives, and the status of the narrator, is intimately involved with their credibility. These considerations do not extend to the special genre of “tall tales,” told by skilled

A fundamental paradox of narrative rests on the inverse relations of credibility and reportability. To the extent that the most reportable event is uncommon and unexpected, it is less credible than more common and expected events. There is therefore a strong motivation to precede the  $e_0$  with another that explains it: that is, which is related to it as cause to effect. Credibility is thus enhanced by introducing events that answer the question, “How did this (perhaps incredible) event come about?” Having done so, the narrator is then faced with the question as to whether this preceding event needs explaining. This is a recursive process, in which the narrator must (consciously or unconsciously) follow the chain of events from the most reportable backwards in time.

Where does the process stop? The narrator stops when he reconstructs an event for which the question, “How did this event happen?” is inappropriate. This is in fact the *orientation*.

#### (4) Narrative construction

- (a) The narrator first selects a most reportable event,  $e_0$ , which the narrative is going to be about.
- (b) The narrator then selects a prior event,  $e_{-1}$ , that is the efficient cause of  $e_0$ , which answers the question about  $e_0$ , “How did that happen?”
- (c) The narrator continues the process of Step 2, recursively, until an event  $e_{-n}$  is reached for which the question of Step 2 is not appropriate.
- (d) The narrator then provides information on  $e_{-n}$ : the time and place, the identity of the actors and their behavior as the orientation to the narrative.

A narrative is therefore created as the narrator’s theory of causality. In the narrative of Ross Hawkins, the most reportable event is (m) the death of the chauffeur. In following the causal chain backwards, we find that he was killed because (l) the steering wheel hit him in the heart, because (k) the car tipped over in the ditch, because (i-j) they turned left but couldn’t make the turn because (g) they were going pretty fast because (e) the judge’s son got drunk.<sup>5</sup> Why did he get drunk? No further explanation is needed, because it

---

narrators for the purpose of entertainment, with no investment in the truth-conditional status of the events (Bauman 19??).

<sup>5</sup> Not every clause preceding (m) is locked into the causal chain. Clauses (i) and (f) are locate the path of the actions without being themselves causes of what follows or precedes.

is assumed that's the kind of thing that big city lawyers do. Clause (e) is headed by a statement that would ordinarily be a part of the orientation (*he must've got drunk*) and subordinates to it the first complicating action (*he drove through town with a chauffeur*). It is not simply this first action that is subordinated to *because* but the whole succeeding narrative (e-m). It is this whole series of events that leads the narrator make this inference.

The net effect of this causal sequence is to assign responsibility for the death of the chauffeur to the (drunken) lawyer. Let us examine this question more closely by listing the activities of each actor, clause by clause, in the participant analysis table (5).

(5) Participant analysis table for part 1 of *The first man killed by a car in this town*.

	e		f	g	h	j	k	l	m
	gets drunk	drove through	came through	went fast	came out	turned left	tipped over	hit him	killed him
Judge									
Judge's son	(y)	x	x	x	x				
Chauffeur		y	y	y	y	y		z	z
Car		z	x	x	x	x	y		
Steering wheel								y	y

The actors named in the narrative are the judge (who plays no further role) his son, the chauffeur, the car, and the car's steering wheel. The causal relations are assigned here not by the theory inherent in the narrative, but by our understanding of causal relationships in the real world. Active causal agents are entered as *y*, and patients directly affected as *z*; other participants are *x*. The first action is in parentheses, since the narrator qualifies it with *I guess he must've*. Here the active agent is the judge's son. But he is not the active agent for the five following clauses. It is clear that the chauffeur was driving the car because in (l) the steering wheel hit him in the heart and (m) killed him. Yet the general understanding of most listeners and my own when I first heard the narrative is that the (drunken) lawyer was responsible. Otherwise, the assumption that he must have been drunk, first stated in (e) and elaborated in the evaluation section (n-q), is completely unmotivated.

How does the narrative transfer the responsibility implied in (e) to the succeeding actions and the events as a whole? It took several years of study of this narrative before I realized how this was achieved. This re-assignment of responsibility is the work of the zero causative verb, *drove*. The semantic composition of this complex item is indicated in (6). Both *push* and *drive*

indicate transverse<sup>6</sup> motion, but *drive* indicates that an agent causes an entity which has its own source of power to move transversely. This entity may be a self-powered machine (boat, train, car) or be powered by coupling with other animate agents (wagon, coach).

(6) The semantics of *drive*

push	'cause something to move [transversely]
drive <sub>1</sub>	'cause a machine to move [transversely, under its own power]'
drive <sub>2</sub>	'cause person to drive' = 'cause a person to cause machine to move [transversely, under its own power]

This is *drive*<sub>1</sub>. But there is a *drive*<sub>2</sub>, which involves a second participant. English *drive*<sub>2</sub> is used with subjects who have ordered, directed or otherwise motivated other agents to *drive*<sub>1</sub> a machine. *Drive*<sub>2</sub> is the linguistic device that creates the causal link for the listener. The further course of the narrative shows that the narrator had no knowledge of the actual situation of the judge's son and the chauffeur as they drove through the town in the middle of the night. Nonetheless, the zero causative effectively evokes the image that the (drunken) son was responsible, most likely ordering the chauffeur, against his will, to drive faster and faster. But it is also consistent with the possibility that he was asleep in the back of the car. As we follow the participant diagram, step by step, it is clear that in fact the chauffeur is the active agent, in driving through the town, in going fast, in turning left, in not making the turn, until the car itself becomes the active agent, and the steering wheel kills the driver. Yet *drive*<sub>2</sub> is appropriate because whether or not the judge's son had given a direct order, the action was taken in his behalf.<sup>7</sup>

The narrator then achieves this re-assignment of responsibility by two features of the narrative. The first narrative action is subordinated to the supposition *he must have got drunk*. The unstated but implied logic of *must* is that no other explanation would account for the series of events that followed. The homonymy of *drive*<sub>1</sub> and *drive*<sub>2</sub>, combined with this unstated inference, allows the listener to sustain the implication that the judge's son was the active agent. The narrator's interpretation is sustained by an ambiguity is a specific feature of English. In *He drove through town with a*

---

<sup>6</sup> One does not drive an airplane or a balloon, which move vertically as well as horizontally.

<sup>7</sup> Thus a child who was driven to school by her mother may answer the question, "How did you get here?" by "I drove with my mom."

*chauffeur, drive* is a “zero causative” in that the additional causal relationship has no overt marker, as it would in a French translation (*Il s’est fait conduire à travers la ville par un chauffeur.*)

The overt subject of the narrative is the chauffeur, the first person killed by a car in South Lyons. Normally the principal characters of a narrative is introduced as a major part of speech in a narrative clause: subject, direct object, predicative noun. The choice of the zero causative verb, reduces the chauffeur to the object of a prepositional phrase—*he drove through town with a chauffeur*—and assigns agency to the lawyer. Furthermore, this entire construction is placed in a subordinate causal clause. As the story progresses, it turns out that the chauffeur is even a less active agent. Mr. Hawkins continues with a further extension of the opposition of big city to small town morality. Mr. Hawkins’ father was the local magistrate responsible for cleaning up the situation created by these big city people.

---

(7) Part II of *The first man got killed by a car in this town*

**Complicating action 2**

r But–uh–anyway, they called up my dad.

**Orientation 2**

s And I lived across from the City Hall there.

t And he was justice for most of his life, and–uh–justice of the peace, you know.

**Complicating action 2**

u And they says, “Mr. Hawkins, ya–we want you to get t-livery barn,  
get Mr. Drury to get you a liv–a buckboard and a livery st–  
and have you drive it out there  
and get that man  
'n' bring him t'town to–eh–you know,  
f'r whatever they had to do,” funeral home or what.

---

**Complicating action 2**

v So my dad said it–let me go with him.

**Orientation 2**

w Of course I was over twelve.

x I don't know how–probably fifteen maybe.

**Complicating action 2**

y And so we went out there,

z and we picked up that man in a buckboard.

**Evaluation**

aa Well, there was two men on the front seat,  
so I had to lay back there with that man,

bb and his feet was floppin' over the edge [laughs]  
where the gate goes down if there was any gate [laughter]  
and the-flop [laughs]

cc And he turned black 'cause it-stopped his circulation, you know,

dd And I thought it was a Negro man,

ee and boy, that was an *eery* night for me  
comin' home [laughs] in the dark with that . . . *man*

In part 2, the narrative of Ross Hawkins turns out to be quite different from the story projected at the outset. The morality play of big city vs. small town values continues, but shifts from the death of a stranger to the frightening experience of a 15 year old boy, which he still remembers at the age of 73. The assignment of praise or blame now shifts from the responsibility for the death of a stranger to the responsibility for an experience that may still return as a current nightmare.

The most reportable event  $e_0$  is encapsulated in the final evaluative sentence (ee) *that was an eery night for me comin' home [laughs] in the dark with that . . . man*. How did this come about? Following the narrative theory backward, it appears that  $e_0$  happened because  $e_{-1}$  Ross had to lay in the back of the buckboard when they picked up the boldy because  $e_{-2}$  there were two men in the front and Ross was with them because  $e_{-3}$  his father let him go with them. However, there is nothing in the preceding material that accounts for this.

The actors in this second half are *They* (the people who called up), Mr. Hawkins Sr., Mr. Drury, Ross, and the chauffeur.

(8) Participant analysis table for part 2 of *The first man killed by a car in this town*.

	<i>r</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>v</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>aa</i>	<i>aa</i>	<i>bb</i>	<i>cc</i>	<i>dd</i>
	called	told	let	went	picked	sat	lay	feet	turned	thought
		him	me	out	up	front	back	flopped	black	Negro
They		y	y							

Mr. Hawkins	z	z	y	x	y	x			
Mr. Drury				x	y	x			
Ross Hawkins			z	x			x		x
Chauffeur					z		x	x	x

The responsibility for the actions rests with the active agents entered as *y* in the participant table (8): first with the people who placed the phone call, then with Mr. Hawkins, who permitted Ross to come. Ross himself participates actively only in his final perception of the corpse as a Negro man. The question remains, why would a justice of the peace bring his 15-year-old son on such a grim expedition?

This inexplicable situation can be resolved by a close examination of the text. Ross reports that his father received a phone call and tells us the whole contents of the message. Since there were no speaker phones in those days, we must conclude that Ross learned about the message from his father by asking him,

(8) I said, “What did they say, Dad?”

From (u) we know that Ross knew what had been said to his father, and so (9) follows:

(9) They said, (u) “Mr. Hawkins, we want you to get t’ the livery barn, get Mr. Drury to get you a buckboard and a livery st—and have you drive it out there and get that man 'n' bring him t'town

A third deleted event follows necessarily from the main verb of *v*, *He let me come with him*. The expression *X let Y do Z* presupposes a number of conditions. One is that *X* was aware that *Y* wanted to do *Z*. One does not *let* someone do something unless there is evidence that they want to do it. Secondly, some persons (possibly including *X*) would have not wanted *Y* to do *Z* or prohibited him from doing it. Given these two conditions, the verb *let* asserts that *X* removed any such obstacle to *Y* performing the action *Z*. The most likely way in which Mr. Hawkins could have become aware of Ross’s desire to go with him was a third utterance in the deleted series,

(10) I said, “Can I go with you?”

It is possible that Mr. Hawkins simply said “Yes,” in spite of the presupposed prohibition introduced by *let*. But what follows in (w-x) strongly indicates that Mr. Hawkins first response was negative. In fact, given (w), we can plausibly reconstruct (11):

(11) My dad said, “No, that’s no job for a twelve-year old boy.”

Furthermore, the most likely response of the son is prefigured by (x):

(12) I said, “I’m more than twelve—I’m almost 15!”

At this point, the original form of (v) follows logically:

v’ So my dad said it was all right for me to go with him.

The speech events (8-12) do not replace any of the narrative clauses in the original, but must be inserted after (u) and before (v), as shown in the amplified participant analysis table in (14).

(14) Amplified Participant analysis table for part 2 of *The first man killed by a car in this town*.

	<i>r</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>u1</i>	<i>u2</i>	<i>u3</i>	<i>u4</i>	<i>u5</i>	<i>v</i>
	called	told him	asked (8)	told me (9)	asked (10)	answered (11)	answered (12)	let me
They	y	y						
Mr. Hawkins	z	z	z	y	z	y	z	y
Mr. Drury								
Ross Hawkins			y	z	y	z	y	z
Chauffeur								

The deletion of these events from Ross Hawkins’ narrative is not unexpected. Like most family narratives, this is an integrative and not a polarizing transformation. Ross deletes the events that would assign blame to his father, and also those that would assign blame to him. But such deletions frequently leave their traces behind, in the particular form of the lexical choices that had been made in the original. Thus Ross could have transformed v to “So I went out there with them,” but he did not, leaving the *let* that allows us to reconstruct the absent events, and in his quotations from the argument that followed, even the most probable shape of the linguistic forms.

The two key elements in the analysis of this narrative both involve the linguistic signaling of voice, the linguistic category that relates the participants to the action. The zero causative *drove*, which assigned blame to the passenger, and the permissive *let*, which would have assigned blame to Ross' father if its implied constituents had been realized.

### **Testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings**

On a recent visit to South Africa, I became acquainted with the work of Bock, McCormick and Raffray (2001), who applied the narrative analysis of Labov and Waletzky 1967 to the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC].<sup>8</sup> The TRC implements the unique program of the South African government for avoiding a new cycle of retribution on the part of newly liberated South Africans against their former oppressors. The objectives of the TRC are “to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past” (TRC Report 1998 Vol 1:55). Under the TRC, the Human Rights Violation Committee held hearings from 1995 to 1999, reviewing the conflicts and divisions that dominated the country in the period of *apartheid* from 1960 to 1994. The reports of the TRC are available on the web site: <<http://www.truth.org.za>>.

The goals and achievements of the TRC have been widely reviewed, defended and criticized. The concept of *truth* has been examined and discussed from many points of view. As summarized by Bock, McCormick and Raffray, the Commission addresses the factual questions “What happened? to whom? by whose agency?” Since most of the testimony is in the form of narrative as here defined, these goals of the TRC coincide with the undertaking of this paper, to locate the underlying event structure of narrative.<sup>9</sup> The TRC did not minimize the difficulties involved. It endorsed the position of Ignatieff that “All that a truth commission can achieve is to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse” (Ignatieff 1991:113, cited in TRC 1998 Vol. 1:111). The first section of this paper put forward the idea that much of the narrative work

---

<sup>8</sup> The discussion of the history and aims of the TRC below is based directly upon Bock, McCormick and Rafferty 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The present analysis does not deal with the deeper questions of reconciliation faced by the TRC, “How could such things have happened? What were the effects of what happened? What kind of resolution can be achieved?”

can be illuminated by starting with the assumption that speakers transform reality by techniques more subtle and effective than lying. It is my hope that the techniques of narrative analysis developed here can be used to promote the aims of the TRC in achieving a better understanding of the testimony it has accumulated.

The Human Rights Violations hearings include much testimony from the perpetrators of heinous acts as well as their victims. Bock, McCormick and Raffray apply the analytical concepts of Labov and Waletzky 1967 to the testimony of victims. This analysis will be dealing with the testimony of one of the perpetrators, applying the further steps of narrative analysis of Labov 1997 as developed in the first part of this paper. The testimony to be examined was Case 1050/96, given before the TRC by Cornelius Johannes Van Wyk, an Afrikaner member of a racist group with a genocidal program. The narratives of interest are to be found on the TRC web site at <http://www.truth.org.za/amntrans/pta1/vanwyk.htm>.

My purpose in examining these narratives is to see if the same techniques used in section 1 of this paper can be useful in revealing the relationship between what is said in the narrative, and what is likely to have been done: that is, to locate the underlying structure of events. In Van Wyk's own account, he has been charged with three charges of murder; robbery; attempted robbery with aggravating circumstances; housebreaking with intent to steal and illegal possession of firearms and explosives. He is now in prison, serving sentences following conviction of such charges. We will see that his testimony shows many indications of efforts to mitigate responsibility for these crimes, and it must be assumed that he believes that his testimony might be relevant to a possible amnesty or reduction of his sentences.

We will examine some of Van Wyk's testimony to see what linguistic devices are used to transform the events in his narrative in a way that minimizes his participation in a series of killings. In the first section, I cited the value of beginning with the assumption that the narrators do not lie. In this case, the assumption has more support than usual, since his testimony can presumably be compared with court records available to members of the commission.

Van Wyk's actions were motivated by a deep-seated ideology which includes a hatred of blacks, Jews and other minorities. In (15), the attorney Gimsbeek interrogates Van Wyk to reveal his early prejudices:

(15) MR GIMSBECK: Mr van Wyk ... start right at the beginning and tell us a little about your childhood and your personal background and the

various influences which led you to commit these offences. ..

MR VAN WYK: Yes. I think it will be suitable if I start during my puberty. I was about 12, 13 years old and at that stage - well I grew up in a very strict, conservative and rightwing home. . .

Perhaps I should refer to the most important chapter in the tenets of the White Men's Bible. It's an organisation which was found in America, I think in the early 1900's. To refer to the White Man's Bible this is the basis of the tenets of this particular group. . .and in the document they relate how the Jewish slave traders rule the entire world as a result of their financial muscle and that they use people as political puppets, and this also means that they want to use the White man as a slave by plunging him into debt.

The particular killings involved here took place when Van Wyk and his associate White broke into a house belonging to two black people, Mr. and Mrs. Dubane, to steal guns. I have lettered the independent clauses and indented subordinated clauses, following the technique used to analyze oral narratives of personal experience.

(16)

- a Later at about seven o'clock we then proceeded to the house.
- b There was a bushy area in front of the house
- c and we took up our position there.
- d Mrs Dubane, at that stage was outside busy sweeping the stoep,
- e and we waited for her to leave the premises  
so that we could enter the house.
- f At some point she came to the front of the house
- g and she was standing right in front of us
- h and virtually looking straight into White's face without actually  
noticing him  
because we were camouflaged,
- i but I think she became suspicious at some point
- j and that's when White told her in her own language
- k he greeted her,
- l he said hello,
- m and she turned around
- n and he then shot her from behind.
- o He then proceeded to cut her throat.

Up to this point, Van Wyk's narrative shows him only as a spectator and

White is the sole agent of the actions. Van Wyk waited while White greeted Mrs. Dubane, shot her from behind, and cut her throat.

(17)

- p At that stage I thought we should withdraw  
 because the operation was not going according to plan  
 and it was planned that  
 we would withdraw under those circumstances.
- q But at that stage Mr Dubane came around the corner,  
 r saw Mrs Dubane lying on the ground  
 s and fled down the path.  
 t White shot at him,  
 u he missed at him  
 v and told me to shoot.  
 w I then followed Mr Dubane down the road  
 x and fired a shot at him.  
 y White came around  
 z and passed me.
- aa At that stage Mr Dubane was lying on the ground,  
 bb he then slit Mr Dubane's throat.

The calm and seemingly objective character of this grim story is typical of the TRC hearings of this class. Clause (p0 is an overt evaluation section that exhibits no emotion, but rather practical reasoning. Van Wyk portrays himself as a moderate person who wanted to abstain from further killing, and laying the chief responsibility upon White. This is however easily recognized as special pleading of self-interest, since it is a subjective statement of the speaker's thoughts without any possibility of corroboration.

A closer look at the event structure of the narrative shows objective adjustments that operate to minimize the guilt of the speaker. The most reportable events are clearly (o) in (16) and (bb) in (17), the two criminal acts of White that effectively ended the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Dubane. A participant analysis table of (17) is given as (18) below, showing the causal sequence leading up to (bb). The active agent who initiates events (t), (v) and (bb), entered as *y*, is White. White shot at Mr. Dubane, then told Van Wyk to shoot. The only action taken by Van Wyk in the narrative is (x), to *fire at* Mr. DuBane. Following this, White is again the active agent who slit Mr. Dubane's throat.

## (18) Participant analysis table for Van Wyk's testimony (17)

	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w
	thinks to withdraw	came around	saw Mrs. D.	fled	shot at him	missed	told me	followed Mr. D.
White		x			y	x	y	
Van Wyk	x						z	x
Mr. Dubane			x	x	z			x
Mrs. Dubane			x					
		x			y	z	aa	bb
		fired at him			came around	passed me	lying on ground	slit his throat
White					x	x		y
Van Wyk		y						
Mr. Dubane		z					x	z
Mrs. Dubane								

The question that this part of the testimony has to deal with is “Who killed Mr. Dubane?” Was it Van Wyk or White? The expression *fire at* presupposes, on Gricean principles, that the Van Wyk missed the target. If one asked the question, “Did you shoot him?” an answer might be, “I fired at him but missed.” One would not expect “I fired at him and hit him”, since *firing at* someone is a necessary and expected prerequisite to shooting someone. The use of *fire at* in (x) then would lead the listener to believe that White is completely responsible for the death of Mr. Dubane. Nevertheless, we find that incomplete deletion, as in the second half of the South Lyons account. In clause (aa) Dubane is lying on the ground. He may have tripped and fallen on his own momentum, but given the fact that White fired at him, the most likely explanation is that Van Wyk's bullet did hit him. Van Wyk's bullet may well have been the main cause of his death before White slit his throat.

The amended participant analysis table (18') restores two events deleted from the causal sequence where Van Wyk was the active agent. *I hit him* and *he fell*. But left behind are two traces that would undoubtedly be picked up by attorneys if this testimony were introduced into a court of law. To delete the two events effectively, Van Wyk would have had to either delete the *at* of *fired at* or add the lie, *but I missed*. He would also have to add the lie that White shot DuBane before he slit his throat. It seems likely that this would conflict with testimony already given by White. The simple deletion of the two events is simpler than deliberate fabrication, even though it may not be completely effective on detailed examination.

(18') Amended participant analysis table (18) (additions in italics).

	x			y	z	aa	bb
	fired	<i>hit</i>	<i>fell</i>	came	passed	lying on	slit his
	at him	<i>him</i>		around	me	ground	throat
White				x	x		y
Van Wyk	y	y					
Mr. Dubane	z	z	x	x	z		

The narrative continues to deal with the murder of a white, Afrikaner woman.

(19)

- cc At that stage once again I thought we would withdraw  
because we were heading in the direction of  
where our clothes and equipment had been left.
- dd But White said no, we should continue with the operation.
- ee We then entered the house,
- ff I can't remember  
which door we used to enter the premises
- gg but we did enter the premises.
- hh We proceeded down the passage  
where we expected to find the particular arms  
we were looking for.
- ii White said we should search the cupboards
- jj and we didn't immediately find the guns.
- kk There was a separate change room to one side
- ll and it contained a lot of built-in cupboards.

The special pleading of (cc) and the effort to blame White overtly is again a transparent device that needs little comment. Here we will focus on the objective statements depicting the activities of the two men. The view presented here in (ii) to (kk) is that the two men are searching cupboards in different parts of the room, probably back to back.

(20)

- mm I then started searching through these cupboards
- nn and he did likewise.
- oo At some point I heard him slamming a cupboard door
- pp and he then fired a shot into one of the doors

qq and I did exactly the same purely on instinct  
 rr and it was only later  
     that I realised  
         that Mrs Roux had been inside the cupboard.  
 ss I didn't know that beforehand.  
 MR GIMSBEEK: But you did suspect that there was somebody inside  
     the cupboard?  
 MR VAN WYK: Yes, but I didn't know it.  
 tt White then opened the cupboard,  
 uu slit Mrs Roux's throat.

After (ss), the attorney points to a weakness in Van Wyk's self-serving testimony, and his response is the unconvincing excuse that he was not sure that Mrs. Roux was in the cupboard. Van Wyk goes on to express his regrets in two forms. The first is a plainly racist statement

### (21) Evaluation

vv At that stage that action had a great impact on me.  
 uu You know we espoused the cause of the Afrikaner people  
 vv and now we had killed one of our own people.  
 ww At that stage it wasn't a great sadness for me to see two Black  
     people dying,  
 xx but to see Mrs Roux dying was a terrible thing for me to have to  
     witness

The second apology is a statement that—if it were taken at its face value--would imply that Van Wyk is a profoundly changed person.

(22) I think without detracting from what I said the way I feel now, the experience I have now gained I would like to say to Mr and Mrs Dubane's family and all their friends, I would like to say to them I am really sorry for what happened. And I would like to say to Mrs Roux's family and friends I am truly sorry for the error which we committed there. I am really, really sorry. I have no words to express how I feel and nothing can undo, no words can undo what we actually did, but I am very sorry.

The only appropriate response to these ritual apologies is made by the TRC chair—he adjourned the meeting. The apologies are all the more suspect

since they show Van Wyk's continued efforts to transform the events in a way that assigns guilt to White and excuses himself. In (22) Van Wyk says, *we had killed one of our own people, not I had killed*. In (21) he portrays himself as a witness of Mrs. Roux's death, not the agent, and avoids the direct expression *It was a terrible thing for me to have killed Mrs. Roux*. Returning to the narrative proper, one finds other evidence of an underlying structure of events in which Van Wyk has the main responsibility for the killings.

In (qq) we can recognize another special pleading. Van Wyk's argus that he did not intentionally fire into the cabinet, but merely duplicated White's action *purely by instinct*. This is a subjective claim that has no probative value in testimony, and can easily be set aside. The factual question that remains is "Who killed Mrs. Roux, White or Van Wyk? One possibility is that Van Wyk fired into the same cabinet that White fired into, and that his second shot was not necessarily the cause of death. The other is that Van Wyk fired into a different cabinet, that White did not fire into, and that he was necessarily the agent of Mrs. Roux's death. These two readings of the narrative are possible, depend upon the interpretation of the an ambiguous construction much discussed by linguists: *exactly the same*.

If I say, "John scratched his nose and I did exactly the same", the expression 'same action' is not usually understood to mean that I scratched John's nose, but rather that I scratched my own. Yet both are possible interpretations. In this case, one can interpret the expression *did exactly the same* in (qq) to mean that White opened the cabinet door, saw Mrs. Roux in the cabinet, deliberately fired into the cabinet to kill her, and Van Wyk, standing alongside him, fired by instinct into the same cabinet and perhaps did not actually hit her. On the other hand, if we are dealing with two different cabinets, then the question remains, in which cabinet was Mrs. Roux and who killed her?

The use of the definite article *the* in (rr), coupled with the *the* in (tt), shows that Mrs. Roux was in the cabinet that Van Wyk fired into. The open question is whether White had fired into a different cabinet, the one designated originally with the indefinite article *a* in clause (oo). Thus we have two different causal sequences

In (23a), both men fire into the same cabinet, first White and then Van Wyk. White then reopens the door of the cabinet and slits Mrs. Roux's throat. In this scenario, White is the effective executioner of Mrs. Roux with gun and knife. In (23b), there are two cupboards. White fires into the empty one and then Van Wyk fires into the second, which contains Mrs. Roux.

White then opens the door of the second cabinet and slits Mrs. Roux's throat who is very likely already dead from the bullet fired by Van Wyk.

(23a) Participant analysis table of (20)

	mm	nn	oo	pp	qq	tt	uu
	started	started	heard	fired	fired	opened	slit her
	searching	searching	slam	shot	shot	cupboard	throat
White	y		x	y		y	y
Van Wyk		y	x		y		
Mrs. Roux				z	z		z
cupboard			x	z	z	z	

(23b) Alternate participant analysis table of (20)

	mm	nn	oo	pp	qq	tt	uu
	started	started	heard	fired	fired	opened	slit her
	searching	searching	slam	shot	shot	cupboard	throat
White	y		x	y		y	y
Van Wyk		y	x		y		
Mrs. Roux					z		z
cupboard <sub>1</sub>			x	z		z	
cupboard	z						

Which is correct, (23a) or (23b)? Van Wyk has created this ambiguity by the use of the ambiguous expression, *did exactly the same*. However, he has left behind evidence that it is the second scenario that is correct, in which he is the sole person who has shot Mrs. Roux. This depends upon the Gricean implicature of the verb *heard*.

If Van Wyk had said in (oo), "I saw him slam the door" that would be consistent with the two men standing side by side firing into the same cabinet. But *heard* is not consistent with this interpretation. *I saw him slam the door* has the conversational implicature *I heard him slasm the door* (unless it is specified that the shooter is far away, or the speaker is deaf). On the other hand, *I heard him slam the door* has the conversational implicature *I didn't see it*.

The conclusion must be that White was standing in such a situation that Van Wyk could not see what he was firing at, and that White's shot was into a different, empty cupboard. If Van Wyk's had altered the verb of (oo) from *heard* to *saw* the result would have been consistent with the ambiguity introduced by the expression *exactly the same*, but since the verb is left as

*heard*, there is no ambiguity.<sup>10</sup> The interpretation of (23b) is selected as most likely.

It is my hope that this study of the Van Wyk testimony helps to accomplish the initial goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: to discover what was done, and who was responsible. The analysis of underlying event structure shows that Van Wyk has consistently transformed his account of events to minimize his own assignment of guilt for the actions involved. The transformation is accomplished by the same two basic techniques that we observed in the narrative of the first man killed by a car in South Lyons.

(i) The deletion of events

(ii) The exploitation of ambiguous constructions

We have found that neither of these techniques produces a clean result. The interlocking and overlapping of linguistic structures across sentence boundaries leaves traces that point to the nature of the deleted material. With some care, we are able to use these traces to reconstruct the underlying events on which the narrative was formed.

There is no reason to see the speakers' operations upon the original event sequences as Machiavellian manipulations of the truth. From the observations of a wide range of narrators, I believe that such transformations are automatic features of the organization of narrative. The narrator is unconsciously directed by a normative ideology that assigns praise and blame for the actions involved in ways that are sensitive to the social relations of the narrator, his immediate addressees and the wider potential audience. It is also clear that listeners do not normally engage in the analytic processes that we have conducted here. They show no evidence of being aware of the gaps and minor inconsistencies in the narrator's construction, but rather on the basis of their overall impressions, accept or reject the narrative as true or false as a whole.

The procedures of this paper are therefore not a reconstruction of the listener's understanding. They represent an attempt to stand behind the narrators, from the moment of their first motivation to project a story that has entered into their biography, and follow the logic of narrative construction. I have tried to reconstruct what is involved in putting together

---

<sup>10</sup> It is of course possible that Van Wyk heard the shot fired and moved to where White was firing before he fired, but this is not entirely consistent with firing "purely by instinct," which is a more immediate reaction.

a linear sequence of narrative clauses that correspond more or less to what happened and to what the narrators would like to have understood about what happened.

Clearly these reconstructions are far from certain. We have no measures of the degree of confidence in the correctness of the result. Nevertheless, the undertaking promises to illuminate the process by which narratives are created, transmitted and understood.

## References

- Bock, Mary, Kay McCormick and Claudine Raffray. 2001. Fractured truths: discourse in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Hearings. Ms.
- Labov, William 1972. The transformation of reality in narrative syntax. In W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: U. of Pa. Press. Pp. 354-396.
- Labov, William 1997. Some further steps in narrative analysis. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7:395-415.
- Labov, William and Joshua Waletzky 1967. Narrative analysis. In J. Helm (ed.), *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*. Seattle: U. of Washington Press. Pp. 12-44. Reprinted in the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7:3-38.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1992. *Lectures on Conversation*. Volume I and II. Edited by Gail Jefferson. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2001. *Truth: the Road to Reconciliation*. <http://www.truth.org.za/>