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Keywords
Labov, narrative, first, second language

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Oral Narrative in a Second Language: Problems with a Labovian Analysis

Kim Ferns

ABSTRACT

In "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax", Labov (1972) details the manner in which oral narratives from English speakers can be analyzed. According to Labov a well-formed narrative will have six essential elements: abstract, orientation, evaluation, complicating (narrative) action, resolution and coda (Labov 1972:363). However, it is not necessary to have all elements in order for a narrative to exist: the minimal requirement is two temporally ordered clauses. But what does one do faced with a narrative that is performed in English by someone whose first language is not English? How would a Labovian analysis deal with a choice of tense that may seem non-standard to English speakers? Does a first language affect the reproduction of experience through narrative syntax in a second language? Another issue to address is the extensive use of direct discourse in this narrative. Labov talks about the use of direct discourse as an evaluative device, however he does not discuss what to do with an extensive stream of it. Does the presence of direct discourse affect the analysis of evaluative, orientation and action elements? These are some of the issues that are addressed in this paper.

CONTEXT

Ilse McKay is the mother of my friend Vicky. Over the years I have come to revere her, and to regard her as a sage. She is someone I can turn to for advice and perspective because to me her wisdom has no limits, and we have as a result developed a mother/daughter relationship. Hers has been a remarkable life. Born in Germany, she lost both parents as a young girl. During World War II, she was interned by Russian soldiers, an experience she does not wish to speak of today. When she returned to Germany after the war she was faced with the horror of what had happened to the Jewish people. She chose to immigrate to Canada, in her words, "because what has happened there, what my people have done and haven't learned anything." Once in Canada she ended up in Vancouver and worked for an accountant.

This particular narrative (see Appendix 2 for transcription) was performed for Vicky and me one morning over coffee at Ilse's dining room table. It is situated third in a series of six narratives about her early experiences as an immigrant in Western Canada which were conveyed over a ninety minute period. Although it is the shortest one, it nicely reflects her story-telling style. It is rich in evaluation: a full thirty-two of forty-nine lines are evaluative. Some of it plays on information that is exophoric to this particular text but included in the previous narratives. For example, in the narrative immediately preceding this one, Ilse mentions how her new friends considered her brave because she had travelled alone and was now living on her own. In this story she is again the brave one, boldly going where no women dare go. In search of wine, no less!

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN"

Valentine (1995) argues that first-person narratives are "highly structured as a result of multiple airings" (168). That this observation applies to this particular narrative is evident if co-text is considered. Earlier in the session Ilse asks Vicky not to let her forget about "Ladies and Gentlemen". That she has a title for her narrative gives evidence of multiple airings.

Discussion of Labovian Categories

Labov's categories can be summarized as follows:

An abstract acts as a brief summary of the narrative, but it doesn't replace it (Labov 1972:363-364). Ilse's abstract, contained in lines 1 and 2, informs us we are going to hear a story about celebrating and wine.

The orientation serves to clarify the who, what, when and where of the story. It is usually found at the beginning of the narrative, but can "strategically appear" anywhere prior to the commencement of complicating action (Labov 1972: 364-365). Orientation clauses are "free" in the sense that they are not bound by temporal ordering (Labov 1972: 361). Using Labov's analysis, the only qualifying bit of orientation information, the "when", appears in the very first line of the abstract. It serves to situate this story in Ilse's life history. Ilse's use of direct discourse to convey other information which could be interpreted as orientation poses a significant problem for a Labovian analysis. This issues is dealt with in the section on direct discourse.

As stated earlier, evaluation is a device that Ilse makes extensive use of in this particular narrative. This is as one would expect given Ilse's age (75) and her storytelling skill. According to Labov, skilled adult speakers are effective users of evaluative techniques (Labov 1972: 394). Evaluation provides information about the point of the story (Labov 1972: 366). So what is the point of a story about the purchase of wine in a
liquor store, something that is commonplace today? Although wine was a standard element of celebrations in Europe and could be purchased at any corner store, in North America a woman entering a liquor store in 1949 was still a unique situation.

The hilarity of the situation is reproduced in the evaluation, which in turn reveals why the narrative is reportable. The evaluative section in lines three through thirty-four serves this function. Ilse makes use of the techniques discussed by Labov: intensifiers, comparators, correlatives and explicatives, but it is her use of embedded evaluation that is the most interesting. Labov writes that middle-class speakers rarely uses embedded evaluations and "often lose the point of their story entirely in an excess of external evaluation and syntactic elaboration" (Labov 1972: 396). This is not a problem in Ilse's narration. While she does use external evaluation, she makes greater use of embedded evaluations: seventeen instances in all.

Embedding an evaluation can happen in three ways: first, when the narrator quotes a thought; second, when the narrator uses direct discourse to address someone else; and third, when the narrator attributes an evaluative thought to a third party (Labov: 372-3). Ilse quotes her own thoughts in the following lines:

5: I said, "Ya what-what on earth could this be?"
27: "Well what on earth, what am I going to get into?"
34: I said "Well anyway I hope I'm coming out of there!"
38: Anyway I said "What am I_would they know what I'm talking about?"
41: I thought, "Gee, this isn't cheap".

It is possible that lines 5 and 34 could be interpreted as discourse directed at someone else rather than herself, however given the surrounding text I have interpreted them as the narrator's thoughts. Ilse uses direct discourse to address someone else in the following nine lines:

12: I said "I-I don't understand this at all."
19: "Where can I... Well, I just want to have a little party...."
20: "Just a little one just celebrating that um I got a job and so on!"
22: I said, "O:h yes you do. It just so happens I want a nice one too".
24: "Go in where?"
30: I said, "Where, where?"
32: I said, "There's nothing there."
43: So I came out, "Got it, got it."
46: "You bet ya next payday."

Finally, Ilse attributes evaluative thoughts to other people in these three lines:

18: "WHAT?"
21: "Ilse you don't need wine to celebrate."
33: "Ya, it's all painted green so you can't see who's in it.

Structurally, complicating action can be identified when a sequence of events that actually occurred are matched to a verbal sequence of clauses (Labov 1972: 359-60). According to Labov, narrative clauses are independent, temporally ordered and follow a basic syntactic pattern (Labov 1972: 361,377). The most striking feature is their "simple auxiliary structure" (Labov 1972: 377). Where would Labov argue the complicating action in this narrative begins? Looking at the third column of the chart in appendix 1, there is no doubt that he would argue that narrative action begins on line 35: I got over and opened the door. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation will be discussed in the section on second language issues.

The resolution signals the end of narrative action (Labov 1972:363). In this story reference to Ilse's party in line 48 ends the complicating action of the narrative.

Structurally, the coda is the place where the narrator informs us that the story is done (Labov 1972: 365). It is also considered an appropriate place for a turn sequence to occur (Labov 1972:366). In conversation analysis terms, the coda can be seen as one part of an adjacency pair. Ilse's coda, "And, um, just one of those things to remember", ties in nicely with the beginning of our taping session where she talks of experiences in life that make your memories either very rich or very resentful. The coda situates this story as one that has made her memory rich.

**Labovian Analysis of Ilse's Narrative**

Using Labov's categories, Ilse's personal narrative can be analyzed as follows:

**I. Abstract**

Want to have a party to celebrate new job (1)
(also Orientation information)
Wine is common at celebrations (2)

**II. Evaluation Section**

Evaluation (3-34)

**III. Complicating (Narrative) Action**

Goes over and opens door (35)
*Evaluation (35-36)
The only woman in the store (37)
*Evaluation (37-38)
Looks down shelves (39)
Finds wine (40)
*Evaluation (40)
Takes out money (41)
*Evaluation (42)
Pays and gets out (43)
*Evaluation (44)
Return to friends (45)
*Evaluation (46-47)
IV. Resolution
- Has party and good time

V. Coda
- Something to remember

(Evaluation throughout narrative indicated by *)

Direct Discourse

Significantly, Ilse did not merely tell this particular narrative, she performed it. Valentine (1995) notes that the "presence of direct discourse is often the best cue that a story is being performed" (1995: 201). A full twenty-four, or half of the forty-eight lines in this narrative, are direct discourse. If the amount of direct discourse in this narrative is compared to other stories that were told during the same session, it stands as distinct. Other evidence that this was a performance was shown by Ilse's use of non-verbal cues to indicate speaker turn. By turning her body and head slightly left or right she would denote who was speaking.

It is the use of direct discourse that makes it hard to analyze what is strictly orientation and what is strictly evaluative in a Labovian sense. If direct discourse is used here to "set up a storyline" and "highlight key sections" (Labov 1972:201), and we interpret this as the giving of orientation information, then it creates the possibility of an alternative interpretation of Ilse's narrative. Section II could be interpreted as:

II. Orientation

- Invites girls to party (the who) (3)
- *Evaluation (3)
- Sees signs (the situation) (4)
- *Evaluation (5-15)
- No money for club (the situation) (16)
- *Evaluation (16)
- Asks where to buy wine (the situation) (17)
- *Evaluation (18)
- Names of the girls (the who) (19-20)
- *Evaluation (21-27)
- Friends take her to corner and point the way (the where) (28-29)
- *Evaluation (30-34)

We see that the interpretation of direct discourse has an effect on how the orientation and evaluation sections are structured.

SECOND LANGUAGE ISSUES

First languages impinge as well on narrative structure, and Labov makes no comment on this. Consider Ilse's choice of verb tense in the following line:

28: So they was staying on the other side,
APPENDIX I
NARRATIVE SYNTACTIC PATTERN

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<td>28</td>
<td>So</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>was</td>
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<td>on the other side</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>And then</td>
<td>they</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>And</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>got over,</td>
<td>the door</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>So</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>(just)</td>
<td>the only woman</td>
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<td>there</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>And</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td>found</td>
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<td>bottle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>And so</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>got</td>
<td>two dollar twenty</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Anyway</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>gave</td>
<td>my two dollar twenty</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>So</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>came</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>And then</td>
<td>they</td>
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APPENDIX 2
TRANSCRIPTION MARKING SYMBOLS AND TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription Conventions

This transcript uses an amended Tedlockian presentation as proposed by Valentine (1995). It was chosen because it is an easily interpreted presentation which best approximates the standard form of a written narrative. Each new sentence is indicated by a numeral, and lines which are indented are part of that sentence. Oral pauses are represented by a break between lines, and the end of grammatical sentences are indicated by a period. Sometimes longer sentences continue on the next line. Items that are not part of the narrative proper (i.e. backchannel cues and responses to laughter) are not numbered. These items can be removed from the transcript and not affect the flow or integrity of it for this analysis. Punctuation is the standard used for English written orthography. Other transcription devices were chosen based on their significance to the analysis. These conventions include:

. = end of grammatical sentence
, = written pause
" " = quotation marks to highlight dialogue
? = question
! = exclamation

Other transcription devices used:

[] = overlapping utterances
() = unclear, muffled utterance
<laughter> = laughter
= = latching
@@ = passage quieter than surrounding talk
*italics* = emphatic stress
**bold** = very emphatic stress
CAPS = louder than surrounding talk
:: = lengthening (one: per beat)
- = stream of talk has stammering quality
- = repair

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN"
FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE, TRANSCRIPTION

ILSE:

1 But anyway,
   um
   ya-ya
   you know,
   I had gotten this job
   now I wanted to celebrate of course.

2 And celebrating in Germany is always
   _is always a bottle of wine.

3 Anyway, I didn't know the girls so much
   _so well yet
   and so I said, "I can't tell you yet_now maybe
   later another month or so I'd have a little more money on the side."

4 Anyway,
   and um,
   in the meantime,
   as you walk up
   _as you walk up the road I see
   every so often a sign over door says "Ladies",
   and then a-a few steps
   farther a sign "Gentlemen".
KIM: [laughter]
VICKY: [laughter]
ILSE: Now listen to this, now listen to this.

5 I said "Ya what-what on earth could this be?"

6 They-they must have all very weak bladders, they [must be]...

KIM: [extreme laughter]
VICKY: [laughter]
ILSE: <laughter> you're laughing!

7 But then you know you'd see these people going up...

8 Of course only later
I had no idea there was anything like a
beer parlour where ladies
there wasn't anything like that in Europe.

9 You didn't
I mean there just isn't anything like it in Europe
no where.

10 You know
if you have to go to the bathroom fine
as you know now it is very much the same

11 But if you want to have a glass of beer you-you can associate with anybody you like,
you know you can even take your dog in.

12 But

um
when they told me
"That's a beer parlour
and you don't go in it",
I said "I-I don't understand this at all."

13 And they said "If you go into a club you have to belong to a club
before you get a drink."

14 I said "WHAT?"

15. <laughter> News, all news.

16 Anyway so I didn't have the money for a club,
I can't go into the Ladies,
I don't like to do that anyway.

17 "Where can I pick up a bottle of wine?"

18 "WHAT?"

19 ["Where can I]...

KIM: [laughter]
VICKY: [laughter]
ILSE: _Well I just want to have a little party,
and I want to have Janet,
and Jean and" ah,
I think um
I've forgotten,
uh Jean's
yea, I think Jean's mother came too.

20 And um
"Just a little one just celebrating that um
I got a job and so on."

21 "Il:se you don't need wine to celebrate."

22 I said, "O::h yes [you do,]="
"Well if you insist, alright then, we-we won't go in with you."

"Go in where?"

"Where you' ah,
I had been looking for wine but I couldn't find anywhere in these uh
grocery stores,
it was just juice juice [juice juice juice.]
[<laughter>] No wine?
[<laughter>] No wine ya.

Anyway so they say "well ah
later on in the lunch break
I go-we go with you to Pender Street,
and then ah,
we-we'll show you where it is."

@Well what on earth
what am I going to get into?@ you know.

So they was staying on the other side
ah- ah- ah
but it was not more than two or three minute walk really from the office,
Hastings,
it was Hastings.

And then they were saying "Ilse
now you have to cross with a light
there
over there."

I said, "Where, where?"

"There where that green thing is."

I said, "There's nothing there."

"Ya, it's all painted green so you can't see who's in it."

I said "Well anyway I hope I'm coming out of there!"

I got over and opened the door,
and of course there are all these strange characters
and the hats and hair in their face, you know
all the winos.

I had no idea there were winos [(around)].

So I was just the only woman in there
and all these men behind the ah counter,
you know, one long counter like this and this, and then all in one k-
in one
_in one ah sort of beige ah...

Anyway, and I said "What am I
_would they know what I'm talking about?"

And I just
_I just-just went down the shelves and then I suddenly didn't have to go any further.

I just found the Italian Chianti bottle which is a famous ah,
um, packaging.

And so I got two dollar twenty,
I've never forgotten that,
two dollar twenty.
42 I thought "Gee, this wine isn't cheap".
43 Anyway I gave my two dollar twenty took my bottle and got out.
44 So I came out, @"I got it, I got it."@ And then they stood over there
45 and then when I got back.
46 "Do you want to go in there again?"
47 "You bet ya next payday!"
48 Anyway, then I had my party
49 and they enjoyed
50 and we had a good time.
51 And
52 um just one of these things to remember.

REFERENCES
