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"Achey-Breaky Heart:" A Labovian Approach To The Structural Analysis Of The Personal Narrative

by Nicole Eagles

The following paper is based upon data derived from tape recordings of past personal heartbreaks experienced by the speaker at one time. Using Labov’s (1972) analysis for narratives of personal experience, I have attempted to analyze my own data in light of the following structural elements: (1) abstract, (2) orientation, (3) evaluations, (4) narrative clauses, (5) result and (6) coda (as cited in Stubbs, 1983). A subsequent aim of this paper is to determine the validity of Labov’s definition of the term ‘minimal narrative’ as reflected in my own data. Finally, an effort will be made to illustrate whether or not the heartbreak narrative follows those syntactic characteristics discussed by Labov in his model for structural analysis of the personal narrative.

Labov’s (1972) definition of a ‘minimal narrative’ is simply, "a sequence of two or more clauses which are temporally ordered: a change in their sequence of narrative events” (Stubbs, 1983: p.31). According to Labov’s proposed structural analysis, the narrative clause is an integral component and is included as one of the six structural elements outlined by Stubbs (1983). The narrative clause is also characterized by (a) simple past tense and (b) unmarked word order, that is, subject-predicate-complement-adjunct (SPCA) (Stubbs, 1983). Through the analysis of the heartbreak narrative specifically, the above characteristics were most evident in all six narratives. For example in Narrative A,

I asked her one day at school (4)
we went to the show together (6)
we had some french fries afterwards (8)
we held hands all the way home (8)

This example clearly illustrates the components of the narrative clause as mentioned above. What distinguishes the narrative clause from most other clauses is that the comprehension of the narrative as a whole is contingent upon the fixed representation of the relative sequence, which the narrative clause is presented (Stubbs, 1983). The following excerpts further exemplify this point and are taken from the Narratives B, C, D, E, and F, respectively,

he was in the army (20)
he got sent to Germany (21)
he was over there for two years (21)
he came home (24)
he didn’t come (70)
he showed up at Mom’s apartment (73)
he had a sunburn (74)
I stayed up all night (93)
he called me right near the end of the summer (94)
we went on a date (94)
he drove out to B.C. (96)
she flirted with me at school (103)
she told me to go public skating (105)
we skated around she had a cigarette (135)
I came to the door (156)
I knocked on the door (158)
I came in (165)
we go out for dinner (167)

As stated in Stubbs (1983:32) the primary function of the narrative clause is to "sustain the narrative action,” which has been shown in the above examples. If the sequence of these clauses were scrambled, the result would be one of an incoherent, nonsensical story. There do exist, however, other clauses which are denoted by other verb tenses and more complex syntactic structures, which serve as the next topic of interest (Stubbs, 1983). Among the remaining five narrative structural elements yet to have been considered are the two elements—orientation and abstract. The orientation identifies the time, place, persons, activities, and situations; and is most commonly recognized in the past
progressive tense (Stubbs, 1983). A summary or encapsulation of the story characterizes the abstract (Stubbs, 1983). Both of these elements most often occur towards the beginning of the narrative. Through my own analysis of the heartbreak narrative, it was clear that each story began invariably with the orientation. The structural element 'abstract', however, seems to take on a consistently non-existent role within all six narratives. This is by no means a deviation from Labov's model since, 'the only obligatory element for narratives of personal experience is at least two narrative clauses,' (Stubbs, 1983, p.33).

Within my own data, the notion of verb tense brings to light some interesting observations. Labov argues that in terms of tense, the orientation typically reflects past progressive. For the most part this statement appears to be true, except when the speaker implicitly or explicitly indicates age, he/she must use the simple past tense of the verb 'to be'. Excluding Narrative C, all other narratives consistently begin with these 'age bound', utterances which describe both the speaker and his/her significant other of which the story revolves. Examples of these are evident in Narratives A, B, D, E and F respectively.

(a) We were in grade eight... (1)
(b) I was fifteen... and he was seventeen... (13)
(c) There was this boy at school... (88)
(d) Melissa Smith was in grade eight I was in grade seven. (101)
(e) I was but a child of nineteen years old. I was in grade thirteen and he was in first year university. (144)

This type of information provided by the speaker appears to be an important component in terms of the narratives' orientation. The verb 'to be' is used as an independent verb (e.g., age bound utterances) and all progressive forms of other verbs are formed by using the verb 'to be' as an auxiliary verb. The latter of the two uses, as defined by Labov (1972), is most typically found in the orientation and displayed as such within the heartbreak narratives (as cited in Stubbs, 1983). Instances of the past progressive tense are scattered throughout the narratives, but are systematically recognized within the orientation.

A. ...she was going with my best friend... my heart was just breaking. (1)
B. ... I started going with this fellow... (13)
C. ... and he was gonna come over. (69)
D. N/A
E. she said we were gonna go and Pete was gonna go with Jennifer. (107)
F. ... and I thought I was being all cool so I didn’t call him for like two weeks... communication was breaking down... (150)

Although the orientation typically occurs at the beginning of a narrative, this norm was at times ignored within the narratives of interest. Depending on the length of a narrative, those that were longer seemed to be segmented into smaller episodes that were usually marked by a change of setting. For example, the speaker of Narrative B provides a detailed account of her heartbreak experience which in turn contain changes of settings. For example, an orientation is represented at the beginning of the narrative, "...when I was fifteen I started going with...", in the middle of the narrative, "...he started coming down... and that was in November of '66", and lastly, "...he was getting out of the army... he was gonna go live with his brother in St. Catherines...". As a result, the orientation may be featured within a new episode where the setting has changed and therefore may not necessarily occur exclusively at the beginning of a narrative.

Another observation worth mentioning is the role of the past progressive tense throughout the body of the narrative. Through my own analysis, there did emerge a definite pattern in terms of verb tense. Action described in the past progressive tense seem to function as providing supplementary information for the maintenance of the narrative action, that is, narrative clauses. Instances such as these were displayed in all six of the heartbreak narratives,

A. ...I had such a crush on her* that every time I was around her my heart was just breaking. (2)
B. "I called a few times* asking for Robin and a course *he wasn't there*... (48)
C. ...*he didn’t come* I was waiting around for him... (70)
E. ...she was huggin' me and we skated* around*... (113)
F. ...*I didn’t call him for like two weeks*... communication was breaking down... (150)

The null role the verb tense past progressive plays in Narrative D, is by no means a deviation from Labov's proposed structural analysis. One reason for this may simply be that it is syntactically less complicated than the other five narratives, and in effect makes use of the basic narrative clause structure-SPCA. Similarly, the null role of the structural element 'abstract', is not a deviation from Labov's model since it is not a compulsory element.

The function of the evaluation is to indicate the point or interest of the story (Stubbs, 1983). The evaluation provides more or less a commentary on
the action and takes on a very descriptive role within the personal narrative. In addition, the evaluation describes the actual opinions and thoughts of the speaker. The following examples exemplify this point,

A. ...it just broke my heart.(10)
B. I just thought he was the end of the world...I figured that we'd get married.(14, 24)
C. ...I was really mad...(76)

Lastly, are the two structural elements- result and coda. The 'result' is represented as a conclusory statement as to what finally happens in the narrative; whereas the 'coda' functions more as a device signaling the end of the narrative. In terms of the result, the closure of the narratives seem to be, on the most part, of this nature. Such instances can be identified in Narrative B, for example, "...I ended up marrying the little darling... we just lived happily ever after." Not only does the result occur near the close of the narrative and reveal what finally happens, but furthermore is evaluative in nature. For example, the end of the narratives are usually characterized by emotionally based evaluations,

A. I'll never forget her.(11)
B. ...lived happily ever after. Twenty-six years.(57)
C. ...I was kinda broken up by that...(85)
E. I hated her ever since.(42)

Given its simple syntactic structure, the only narrative which neglects to display a result, let alone any evaluative characteristics within its closure is Narrative C. The ending of this particular narrative perfectly illustrates the definition of coda, for example," And that was it." Short, simple and to the point.

It is clear that my attempt to analyze the heartbreak narratives in terms of the Labovian model was successful. These particular narratives appear to be extremely appropriate for illustrating the six structural elements: abstract, orientation, evaluation, narrative clause, result and coda. As stated by Labov, the six structural elements with the exception of one, are not obligatory but instead provide a tentative framework for the personal narrative. To recall Labov's definition of the 'minimal narrative', it is that which contains at least two narrative clauses. This feature which defines Labov's minimal narrative, is consistently revealed within my own data. The narrative which scantily displays the conventions of Labov's narrative model is Narrative C. The feature which distinguishes this particular narrative from the rest, are the circumstances upon which it is initiated. It occurred under less formal conditions where interruption by other listeners was not considered rude or inappropriate. A suggestion for future research would be to investigate the effects on listener interruption and the variability of certain structural elements within the personal narrative.

Data Appendix

The following consists of either extracts of or entire narratives. The content of these narratives focuses on a past personal heartbreak that had been experienced by the speaker at one time. The participants vary in gender with 2 males and 4 females and range between the ages 21 and 49. It is the structural analysis of the narratives and not the variability of age and gender that have been chosen as the focus of this paper. The transcription symbols are derived from Ochs' (1979). It should also be noted that all narratives were told in the presence of at least one other individual. Consequently, I have opted to edit out any extraneous discourse that does not directly effect the comprehensiveness of the following narratives.

Narratives

**Narrative A. Male age 49.**

<Uh, we were in grade eight. And uh, she was going with my best friend, and I, had such a crush on her that, every time I was around her my heart was just breaking.> So, *I finally asked her one day, at school*, would she like to go to the show with me on Sunday afternoon. And uh ·she said yes·. ·We went to the show. together, *and then we had sssuh I forget *we stopped some place· little chips *we had some french fries afterwards. * *held hands all the way home ya know? {And uh then on Monday at school it's like it never happened. Like it just broke my heart,] like ya know, it was just that was, Florence Clark was her name. [[I'll never forget her.]]

**Narrative B. Female, age 47.**

B is the narrator and M is her sister. W represents the three other women who are present.

B: <Well see when I was fifteen I started going with this fellow that [ I just thought was the end of the world] and \ \ we went together

M: \ \ [Was he the one with the big ears Beck?]

B: Yeah. [[[LF]]] And he was seventeen at the time I guess. And uhm, *he was in the army* well he- he- he got sent, to Germany* and * he was over there for two years*. And when he came home, well we had
written steadily for two years, sometimes two and three letters a week. and when he came home I figured that we'd get married. And uhmm, but like we both died while he was gone, but [I still really loved him]. So anyway uhmm, he came down, she started coming down on the weekends and that this was in November of '66. And then, I guess it must- I don't know if it was before Christmas or after Christmas, uhmm, he was going to meet me downtown, and so but he left ahead of me and uhmm then when I left I just happened to check- no I left- I went to meet him but he never showed up where we were supposed to meet downtown* and I came home*, and [I didn't know what had happened] and then, when I checked in the mailbox there was a letter from him* that he had left there on his way out. And it was that [I think he said something about the year] but. uhm (it was hard) I remember calling was confused). and he was getting out of the army when I checked in the mailbox* there was a letter from him* that he had left there on his way out. And it was that [I think he said something about the year] but he left ahead of me* and uhm then* when I left· I went to meet him downtown>. and. so November of '66. And then. I guess it must- I don't know if it was before Christmas or after Christmas. And then· I commented on his sunburn· and [I didn't know what had happened] and then, when I called a few times asking for Robin and a course· he wasn't there· and finally· my sister-in-law said to me· that. she just thought ·she flirted with me at school for about two weeks, and [I thought she really liked me. but I guess she didn't]. <So anyway uh. ·she told me to go public skating. and ·I had my skates·. and like I was kinda like gonna go to like meet her there, and do the skating thing?> So. I show up at public skating, and ·I had my skates·. and like I was doing through a tough time right now and that maybe he didn't love me right now the way I loved him. [She tried to, tell me nicely] so that I would leave him alone so he could get his head cleared. [But anyway I ended up marrying the little darling and [we just lived happily ever after]]. [Twenty-six years].

Narrative C. Female, age 40.

M is the narrator and G is M's mother. W represents the three other women who are present.

G: Don't you remember?\ He was a hockey player she] used to carry his hockey stick ya know and she thought she was Mrs. Brett or Brett Hull\ ( )\]

M: \ \I don't remember, what I do re]\n
M: \ \<I do] remember the day that Ian was supposed to come over to our place. And it was a Sunday afternoon, and I had talked to him, and he was gonna come over> and uh *he didn't come he didn't come* I was waiting around for him I got ready again. And about four o'clock in the afternoon *he showed up at Mom's apartment*, and *he had a sunburn*. 

W: \ \[[LF]] \ \]

M: \ \[And I was really mad because he was late. And uhm *I commented on his sunburn* and he had taken another girl to the beach,\]

W: \ \[[LF]]

M: \ \that day], and then came back to get me to do something. [And I thought that was pretty rotten].

G: ( ) No but that wasn't the heartbreak that

M: \ [[Well I was kinda broken up over that]], because I didn't even know he was seeing anyone else.

Narrative D. Female, age 21. Present are four other women.

<There was this boy at school, who uhmm, [everybody was all googoo all- all over], and uhm I thought oh wow [he would never want to talk to me]> And then uhm, I wonder what happened? *He said* oh I'll call ya tomorrow and we'll go out on a date. And *I said* no no no he won't call, so *I stayed up practically all night* [cause I couldn't sleep]. And then uhm, *he called me* and then *we went on a date*. <And this was right near the end of the summer>. And then uhm *he drove out to B.C.* and *he called me a few times*, and uhm [blah blah], and said oh yeah I really miss you and whatever *[he got out to B.C.* and *he never called me again]* [And that was it]].

Narrative E. Male, age 22. Three females are present.

<Melissa Smith was in grade eight. I was in grade seven. She's actually nephew of Martin Short> [so I thought it was kinda cool]. And uh and, anyway *she flirted with me at school for about two weeks, and [I thought she really liked me, but I guess she didn't]. <So anyway uh. *she told me to go public skating, on Friday night*, and uh and *I said okay*, and she said we were gonna go, and- and Pete was gonna go with Jeniffer, this other girl Pete's my friend, and I was kinda like gonna go to like meet her there, and do the skating thing?> So, I show up at public skating, and *I had my skates*, and like I was all dressed up and everything, and [it was cool] like at the beginning of the night she was huggin' me and *we skated around*. [and everything was great, like really, good!] So then, like *we slow skated* kinda once, but she'd always be like, [I would be like trying to be really romantic, and I'd be like trying to look in her eyes] and stuff and [she'd be like foolin' around], and like she'd go up to someone else cause like I was only in grade seven and she'd like pinch them or something and I was like, like [I was like

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gettin' jealous] and stuff like I thought like, I don't know. [it was just weird] like I'm gonna like, you better watch what you do because like we'll break up, and like we weren't even goin' out. So then, [she's just actin' like a real idiot], [like I just wasn't impressed], and at this point the relationship wasn't goin' great but ["I still thought I had a chance"]. So then, [she disappeared totally fucked off, for like forty-five minutes]. And I'm like, she didn't even tell me where she was goin' or anything and it was like forty-five minutes? So I'm like ["I pretended not to notice that she was gone", and then finally "I went out of the arena", I was kinda lookin' for her right? And [she was with all her grade eight friends, and she was with Richie Ochs, this guy, who-who [everyone said she liked, but I didn't think she did]]. And uh, they- she was like ["she had a cigarette in her hand"]. Now I was just like freakin' out, it was ["it was like- like I just found out my mother was like a heroine addict"]. I was like. ["I couldn't believe it eh?"] So I was just like, the minute I saw the smoke in her hand, like I knew she was just like and I knew it was just like ["I was just like a little jerk"]. Then ["I just pretended not to care", but ["I cared", and ["I just hated her ever since"].

Narrative F. Female, age 21.

<Okay I was but a child of nineteen years old. I was in grade thirteen, and he was in first year university. And I fell in love. LOVE>. And I used to always say , c'mon tell me something, c'mon tell me something, he'd never tell me anything about himself, ever, [he was completely and utterly secretive, about everything]. And uhm ["I went away for the summer", and [thought I was being all cool] so ["I didn't call him for like two weeks"]. And uhm, [communication was breaking down] I tell you, even though I bought his parents a bottle of extremely expensive wine, for their 25th anniversary [I mean c'mon PASHA!] So I come home for the weekend right. I like fuckin' thought about what I was going to wear for about two weeks. I's all dressed up, I's at- ["I came to the door", and I'm like ( ). And like I hadn't seen him- no for over two weeks. And ["knocked on the door", I like, the door- the door is always opened right. And I just see his face and his face comes out and he goes oh there's a heart [[[LF]]] there's a surgery, heart surgery on, ah, on television. So ["he didn't even come to the door and open the door", I'm still standing outside the screen door, brushing away the tears that gently caressed my cheek. No I'm just kiddin' I wasn't cryin'. But ["I just pretended not to notice that she was gone", and ["I didn't call me", cause ya know how ya don't call him eh, ya just sit there going ( ) why hasn't he called? So ah, uhm, ["he didn't call me like for about five hours"]. So finally I got up- ["I got up the pride and- and phoned him", and he just like went out. He'd left me, all alone. So ["I was totally sad"] right, cause I thought you know what was going on [I was so confused] ya know I- [you don't understand my-I loved this guy so much never I told him I loved him oh of course, just infatuated]. And uhm, so the next day, ["he didn't call me all day"] like he ju- ["he went to work or whatever"] And then, ["I just never heard from him...[my heart was completely shattered it sounds corny now] but ya don't understand I was in tear- you shoulda seen me when I was bawling that night completely... [And then uh, one thing led to another and I just can't get out of the fuckin' relationship].

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