

William Labov

THE TRANSFORMATION OF EXPERIENCE IN NARRATIVE

[. . .]

In a previous study we have presented a general framework for the analysis of narrative which shows how verbal skills are used to evaluate experience (Labov and Waletzky 1967). In this chapter we examine the narratives we obtained in our study of south-central Harlem from preadolescents (9 to 13 years old), adolescents (14 to 19), and adults to see what linguistic techniques are used to evaluate experience within the black English [BE] vernacular culture [. . .]

It will be helpful for the reader to be acquainted with the general character and impact of narratives in black vernacular style. We will cite here in full three fight narratives from leaders of vernacular peer groups in south-central Harlem who are widely recognized for their verbal skills and refer to these throughout the discussion to illustrate the structural feature of narrative. The first is by Boot.¹

Extract 1

(Something Calvin did that was really wild?)

Yeah.

a It was on a Sunday

b and we didn't have nothin' to do after I – after we
came from church.

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- c Then we ain't had nothin' to do.
 d So I say, "Calvin, let's go get our – out our dirty clothes
 on
 and play in the dirt."
 e And so Calvin say, "Let's have a rock – a rock war."
 f And I say, "All right."
 g So Calvin had a rock.
 h And we as – you know, here go a wall
 i and a far away here go a wall.
 j Calvin th'ew a rock.
 k I was lookin' and – uh –
 l And Calvin th'ew a rock.
 m It oh – it almost hit me
 n And so I looked down to get another rock;
 o Say "Ssh!"
 p An' it pass me.
 q I say, "Calvin, I'm bust your head for that!"
 r Calvin stuck his head out.
 s I th'ew the rock
 t An' the rock went up,
 u I mean – went up –
 v came down
 w an' say [slap!]
 x an' smacked him in the head
 y an' his head busted.

The second narrative is by Larry H., a core member of the Jets gang. This is one of three fight stories told by Larry which match in verbal skill his outstanding performance in argument, ritual insults, and other speech events of the black vernacular culture.

Extract 2

- a An' then, three weeks ago I had a fight with this
 other dude outside
 b He got mad
 'cause I wouldn't give him a cigarette.
 c Ain't that a bitch?
 (Oh yeah?)
 d Yeah, you know, I was sittin' on the corner an' shit,
 smokin' my cigarette, you know
 e I was high, an' shit.

- f He walked over to me,
g "Can I have a cigarette?"
h He was a little taller than me,
but not that much.
i I said, "I ain't got no more, man,"
j 'cause, you know, all I had was one left.
k An' I ain't gon' give up my last cigarette unless I got some
more.
l So I said, "I don't have no more, man."
m So he, you know, dug on the pack,
'cause the pack was in my pocket.
n So he said, "Eh man, I can't get a cigarette, man?"
o I mean - I mean we supposed to be brothers, an' shit,"
p So I say, "Yeah, well, you know, man, all I got is one, you
dig it?"
q An' I won't give up my las' one to nobody.
r So you know, the dude, he looks at me,
s An' he - I 'on' know -
he jus' thought he gon' rough that
motherfucker up.
t He said, "I can't get a cigarette."
u I said, "Tha's what I said, my man".
v You know, so he said, "What you supposed to be *bad*, an'
shit?
w What, you think you *bad* an' shit?"
x So I said, "Look here, my man,
y I don't think I'm bad, you understand?
z But I mean, you know, if I had it,
you could git it
aa I like to see you with it, you dig it?
bb But the sad part about it,
cc You got to do without it.
dd That's all, my man."
ee So the dude, he 'on' to pushin' me, man.
(Oh he pushed you?)
ff An' why he do that?
gg *Everytime somebody fuck with me,*
why they do it?
hh I put that cigarette down,
ii An' boy, let me tell you,
I beat the shit outa that motherfucker.

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it,

- jj I tried to *kill* 'im – over one cigarette”
 kk I tried to *kill* 'im. Square business!
 ll After I got through stompin' him in the face, man,
 mm You know, all of a sudden I went crazy!
 nn I jus' went crazy.
 oo An' I jus' wouldn't stop hittin the motherfucker.
 pp Dig it, I couldn't stop hittin' 'im, man,
 till the teacher pulled me off o' him.
 qq An' guess what? After all that I gave the dude the cigarette,
 after all that.
 rr Ain't that a bitch?
 (How come you gave 'im a cigarette?)
 ss I 'on' know.
 tt I jus' gave it to him.
 uu An' he smoked it, too!

Among the young adults we interviewed in our preliminary exploration of south-central Harlem, John L. struck us immediately as a gifted story teller; the following is one of many narratives that have been highly regarded by many listeners.

Extract 3

(What was the most important fight that you remember, one that sticks in your mind . . .)

- a Well, one (I think) was with a girl.
 b Like I was a kid, you know,
 c And she was the baddest girl, *the baddest girl in the neighborhood.*
 d If you didn't bring her candy to school,
 she would punch you in the mouth;
 e And you had to kiss her
 when she'd tell you.
 f This girl was only about 12 years old, man,
 g but she was a killer.
 h She didn't take no junk;
 i She whapped all her brothers.
 j And I came to school one day
 k and I didn't have no money.
 l My ma wouldn't give me no money.
 m And I played hookies one day,
 n (She) put something on me.²

- o I played hookies, man,
 p so I said, you know, I'm not gonna play hookies no
 more
 'cause I don't wanna get a whupping
 q So I go to school
 r and this girl says, "Where's the candy?"
 s I said, "I don't have it."
 t She says, powww!
 u So I says to myself, "There's gonna be times
 my mother won't give me money
 because (we're) a poor family
 v And I can't take this all, you know, every time she
 don't give me any money."
 w So I say, "Well, I just gotta fight this girl.
 x She gonna hafta whup me.
 y I hope she don't whup me."
 z And I hit the girl: powwww!
 aa and I put something on it.
 bb I win the fight.
 cc That was one of the most important.

This discussion will first review briefly the general definition of narrative and its overall structure. [. . .] The main body of narratives cited are from our work in south-central Harlem, but references will be made to materials drawn from other urban and rural areas, from both white and black subjects.

Definition of narrative

We define narrative as one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred. For example, a pre-adolescent narrative:

Extract 4

- a This boy punched me
 b and I punched him
 c and the teacher came in
 d and stopped the fight.

An adult narrative:

cigarette,

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 ed story teller;
 ly regarded by

one that

Extract 5

- a Well this person had a little too much to drink
- b and he attacked me
- c and the friend came in
- d and she stopped it.

In each case we have four independent clauses which match the order of the inferred events. It is important to note that other means of recapitulating these experiences are available which do not follow the same sequence; syntactic embedding can be used:

Extract 6

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

Or else the past perfect can be used to reverse the order:

Extract 7

- a The teacher stopped the fight.
- b She had just come in.
- c I had punched this boy.
- d He had punched me.

Narrative, then, is only one way of recapitulating this past experience: the clauses are characteristically ordered in temporal sequence; if narrative clauses are reversed, the inferred temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation is altered: *I punched this boy/ and he punched me* instead of *This boy punched me/and I punched him*.

With this conception of narrative, we can define a *minimal narrative* as a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation. In alternative terminology, there is temporal juncture between the two clauses, and a minimal narrative is defined as one containing a single temporal juncture.

The skeleton of a narrative then consists of a series of temporally ordered clauses which we may call *narrative clauses*. A narrative such as 4 or 5 consists entirely of narrative clauses. Here is a minimal narrative which contains only two:

Extract 8

- a I know a boy named Harry.
- b Another boy threw a bottle at him right in the head
- c and he had to get seven stitches.

This narrative contains three clauses, but only two are narrative clauses. The first has no temporal juncture, and might be placed after *b* or after *c* without disturbing temporal order. It is equally true at the end and at the beginning that the narrator knows a boy named Harry. Clause *a* may be called a *free clause* since it is not confined by any temporal juncture. [. . .]

It is only independent clauses which can function as narrative clauses – and as we will see below, only particular kinds of independent clauses. In the representation of narratives in this section, we will list each clause on a separate line, but letter only the independent clauses. [. . .]

The overall structure of narrative

Some narratives, like 4, contain only narrative clauses; they are complete in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there are other elements of narrative structure found in more fully developed types. Briefly, a fully-formed narrative may show the following:

Extract 9

- 1 Abstract.
- 2 Orientation.
- 3 Complicating action.
- 4 Evaluation.
- 5 Result or resolution.
- 6 Coda.

Of course there are complex chainings and embeddings of these elements, but here we are dealing with the simpler forms. Complicating action has been characterized above, and the result may be regarded for the moment as the termination of that series of events. We will consider briefly the nature and function of the abstract, orientation, coda, and evaluation.

The abstract

It is not uncommon for narrators to begin with one or two clauses summarizing the whole story.

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Extract 10

(Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of being killed?)

I talked a man out of – Old Doc Simon I talked him out of pulling the trigger.

When this story is heard, it can be seen that the abstract does encapsulate the point of the story. In 11 there is a sequence of two such abstracts.

Extract 11

(Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?)

a My brother put a knife in my head.

(How'd that happen?)

b Like kids, you get into a fight

c and I twisted his arm up behind him.

d This was just a few days after my father died . . .

Here the speaker gives one abstract and follows it with another after the interviewer's question. Then without further prompting, he begins the narrative proper. The narrative might just as well have begun with the free clause *d*; *b* and *c* in this sense are not absolutely required, since they cover the same ground as the narrative as a whole. Larry's narrative (see Extract 2) is the third of a series of three, and there is no question just before the narrative itself, but there is a well-formed abstract:

a An' then, three weeks ago I had a fight with this other dude outside.

b He got mad

'cause I wouldn't give him a cigarette.

c Ain't that a bitch?

Larry does not give the abstract in *place* of the story; he has no intention of stopping there, but goes on to give the full account.

What then is the function of the abstract? It is not an advertisement or a warning: the narrator does not wait for the listener to say, "I've heard about that," or "Don't tell me that now." If the abstract covers the same ground as the story, what does it add? We will consider this problem further in discussing the evaluation section below.

Orientation

At the outset, it is necessary to identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or the situation. This can be done in the course of the first several narrative clauses, but more commonly there is an orientation section composed of free clauses. In Boot's narrative (Extract 1), clause *a* sets the time (*Sunday*); clause *b* the persons (*we*), the situation (*nothin' to do*) and further specification of the time (*after we come from church*); the first narrative clause follows. In Larry's narrative (Extract 2), some information is already available in the abstract (the time – *three weeks ago*; the place – *outside of school*); and the persons – *this other dude and Larry*). The orientation section then begins with a detailed picture of the situation – *Larry sittin' on the corner, high*.

Many of John L.'s narratives begin with an elaborate portrait of the main character – in this case, clauses *a-i* are all devoted to *the baddest girl in the neighborhood*, and the first narrative clause brings John L. and the girl face to face in the schoolyard.

The orientation section has some interesting syntactic properties; it is quite common to find a great many past progressive clauses in the orientation section – sketching the kind of thing that was going on before the first event of the narrative occurred or during the entire episode. But the most interesting thing about orientation is its *placement*. It is theoretically possible for all free orientation clauses to be placed at the beginning of the narrative, but in practice, we find much of this material is placed at strategic points later on, for reasons to be examined below.

The Coda

There are also free clauses to be found at the ends of narratives; for example, John L.'s narrative ends:

cc. That was one of the most important

This clause forms the *coda*. It is one of the many options open to the narrator for signalling that the narrative is finished. We find many similar forms.

Extract 12

And that was that.

Extract 13

And that – that was it, you know.

Codas may also contain general observations or show the effects of the events of the narrator. At the end of one fight narrative, we have

Extract 14

I was given the rest of the day off.
 And ever since then I haven't seen the guy
 'cause I quit.
 I quit, you know.
 No more problems.

Some codas which strike us as particularly skillful are strangely disconnected from the main narrative. One New Jersey woman told a story about how, as a little girl, she thought she was drowning, until a man came along and stood her on her feet – the water was only four-feet deep.

Extract 15

And you know that man who picked me out of the water?
 He's a detective in Union City
 And I see him every now and again.

These codas (14, 15) have the property of bridging the gap between the moment of time at the end of the narrative proper and the present. They bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative. There are many ways of doing this: in 15, the other main actor is brought up to the present: in 14, the narrator. But there is a more general function of codas which subsumes both the examples of 14, 15 and the simpler forms of 12, 13. Codas close off the sequence of complicating actions and indicate that none of the events that followed were important to the narrative. A chain of actions may be thought of as successive answers to the question "Then what happened?"; "And then what happened?" After a coda such as *That was that*, the question "Then what happened?" is properly answered, "Nothing; I just told you what happened." It is even more obvious after the more complex codas of 14 and 15; the time reference of the discourse has been reshifted to the present, so that "what happened then?" can only be interpreted as a question about the present; the answer is "Nothing; here I am." Thus the "Disjunctive" codas of 14 and 15 forestall further questions about the narrative itself: the narrative events are pushed away and sealed off.³

Evaluation

Beginnings, middles, and ends of narratives have been analyzed in many accounts of folklore or narrative. But there is one important aspect of narrative which has not been discussed – perhaps the most important element in addition

to the basic narrative clause. That is what we term the *evaluation* of the narrative: the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at. There are many ways to tell the same story, to make very different points, or to make no point at all. Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, "So what?" Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over, it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, "So what?" Instead, the appropriate remark would be, "He did?" or similar means of registering the reportable character of the events of the narrative.

The difference between evaluated and unevaluated narrative appears most clearly when we examine narrative of vicarious experience. In our first series of interviews with preadolescents in south-central Harlem, we asked for accounts of favorite television programs; the most popular at the time was "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."

Extract 16

- a This kid – Napoleon got shot
- b and he had to go on a mission,
- c And so this kid, he went with Solo.
- d So they went
- e And this guy – they went through the window,
- f and they caught him.
- g And then he beat up them other people.
- h And they went
- i and then he said
that this old lady was his mother
- j and then he – and at the end he say
that he was the guy's friend.

This is typical of many such narratives of vicarious experience that we collected. We begin in the middle of things without any orientation section; pronominal reference in many ways ambiguous and obscure throughout. But the meaningless and disorientated effect of 16 has deeper roots. None of the remarkable events that occur *is evaluated*. We may compare 16 with a narrative of personal experience told by Norris W., eleven years old:

Extract 17

- a When I was in fourth grade –
no, it was in third grade –
- b This boy he stole my glove.
- c He took my glove

- d and said that his father found it downtown on the
ground
(And you fight him?)
e I told him that it was impossible for him to find
downtown
'cause all those people were walking by
and just the father was the only one
that found it?
f So he got all (mad).
g Then I fought him.
h I knocked him all out in the street.
i So he say he give.
j and I kept on hitting him.
k Then he started crying
l and ran home to his father.
m And the father told him
n that he ain't find no glove.

This narrative is diametrically opposed to 16 in its degree of evaluation. Every line and almost every element of the syntax contributes to the point, and that point is self-aggrandizement. Each element of the narrative is designed to make Norris look good and "this boy" look bad. Norris knew that this boy stole his glove – had the nerve to just walk off with it and then make up a big story to claim that it was his. Norris didn't lose his cool and started swinging; first he destroyed this boy's fabrication by logic, so that everyone could see how phony the kid was. Then this boy lost his head and got mad and started fighting. Norris beat him up, and was so outraged at the phony way he had acted that he didn't stop when the kid surrendered – he "went crazy" and kept on hitting him. Then this punk started crying, and ran home to his father like a baby. Then his father – his *very own father* told him that his story wasn't true.

Norris's story follows the characteristic two-part structure of fight narratives in the BE vernacular; each part shows a different side of his ideal character. In the account of the verbal exchange that led up to the fight, Norris is cool, logical, good with his mouth, and strong in insisting on his own right. In the second part, dealing with the action, he appears as the most dangerous kind of fighter, who "just goes crazy" and "doesn't know what he did." On the other hand, his opponent is shown as dishonest, clumsy in argument, unable to control his temper, a punk, a lame, and a coward. Though Norris does not display the same degree of verbal skill that Larry shows in 2, there is an exact point-by-point match in the structure and

evaluative features of the two narratives. No one listening to Norris's story within the framework of the vernacular value system will say "So what?" The narrative makes its point and effectively bars this question.

If we were to look for an evaluation section in 17 concentrating upon clause ordering as in Labov and Waletzky (1967), we would have to point to *d-e*, in which the action is suspended while elaborate arguments are developed. This is indeed the major point of the argument, as shown again in the dramatic coda *m-n*. But it would be a mistake to limit the evaluation of 17 to *d-e*,

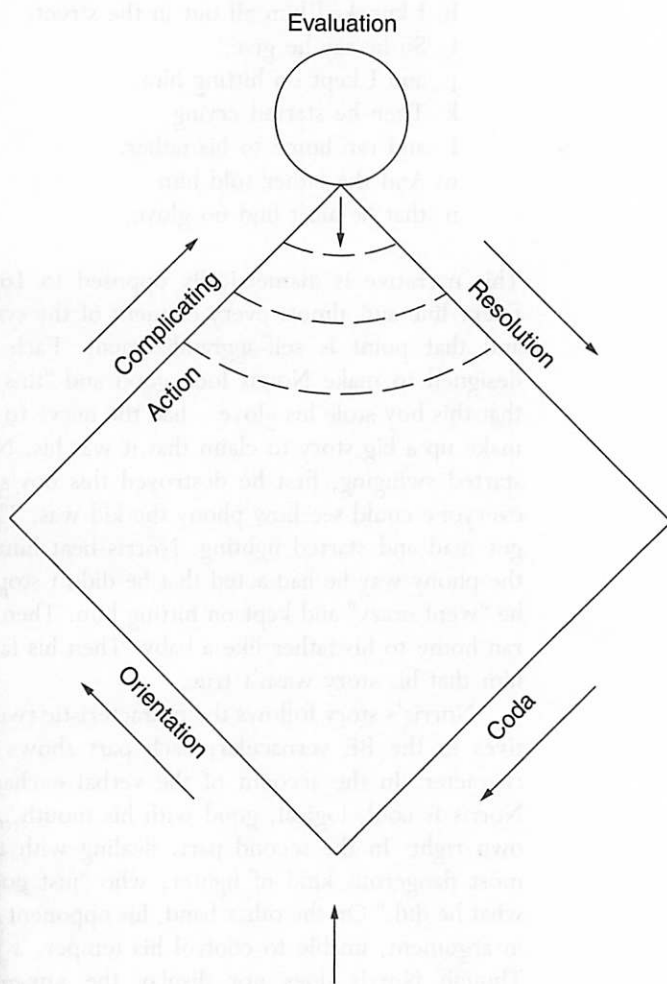


Figure 12.1 Narrative structure

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since evaluative devices are distributed throughout the narrative. We must therefore modify the scheme of Labov and Waletzky (1967) by indicating E as the focus of waves of evaluation that penetrate the narrative as in Figure 12.1.

A complete narrative begins with an orientation, proceeds to the complicating action, is suspended at the focus of evaluation before the resolution, concludes with the resolution, and returns the listener to the present time with the coda. The evaluation of the narrative forms a secondary structure which is concentrated in the evaluation section but may be found in various forms throughout the narrative. [. . .]

We can also look at narrative as a series of answers to underlying questions:

- a Abstract: what was this about?
- b Orientation: who, when, what, where?
- c Complicating action: then what happened?
- d Evaluation: so what?
- e Result: what finally happened?

Only *c*, the complicating action, is essential if we are to recognize a narrative, as pointed out above. The abstract, the orientation, the resolution, and the evaluation answer questions which relate to the function of effective narrative: the first three to clarify referential functions, the last to answer the functional question *d* – why the story was told in the first place. But the reference of the abstract is broader than the orientation and complicating action: it includes these and the evaluation so that the abstract not only states what the narrative is about, but why it was told. The coda is not given in answer to any of these five questions, and it is accordingly found less frequently than any other element of the narrative. The coda *puts off* a question – it signals that questions *c* and *d* are no longer relevant.

[. . .]

Notes

- 1 Remarks in parentheses are by the interviewer. The initial questions asked by the interviewer are also given to help clarify the evaluative focus of the narrative.
- 2 To *put something on someone* means to 'hit him hard'. See also aa, *I put something on it* 'I hit hard'.
- 3 The coda can thus be seen as one means of solving the problem of indicating the end of a "turn" at speaking. As Harvey Sacks has pointed out,

a sentence is an optimal unit for the utterance, in that the listener's syntactic competence is employed in a double sense – to let him know when the sentence is complete and also when it is his turn to talk. Narratives require other means for the narrator to signal the fact that he is beginning a long series of sentences which will form one "turn" and to mark the end of that sequence. Many of the devices we have been discussing here are best understood in terms of how the speaker and the listener let each other know whose turn it is to talk. Traditional folk tales and fairy tales have fixed formulas which do this at the beginning and the end, but these are not available for personal narratives. It can also be said that a good coda provides more than a mechanical solution for the sequencing problem: it leaves the listener with a feeling of satisfaction and completeness that matters have been rounded off and accounted for.

Reference

- Labov, W. and Waletzky, J. (1967) 'Narrative analysis' in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, Helm, J. (ed.), Seattle: University of Washington Press, 12–44.