

Schiffrin,  
Tannen &  
Hamilton

The Handbook of  
Discourse Analysis

*The Handbook of*  
**Discourse  
Analysis**



*Edited by*  
**Deborah Schiffrin,  
Deborah Tannen & Heidi E. Hamilton**



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# 32 Discourse Analysis and Narrative

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BARBARA JOHNSTONE

## 0 Introduction

Narrative has been one of the major themes in humanistic and social scientific thought since the mid-twentieth century. The essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative. In linguistics, narrative was one of the first discourse genres to be analyzed, and it has continued to be among the most intensively studied of the things people do with talk.

I begin with a brief description of structuralist narratology, the most immediate context for discourse analysts' work on narrative. I then turn to some of the earliest and most influential American work on narrative in linguistics, that of Labov and Waletzky (1967; Labov 1972: 354-96). Subsequent sections cover other important work on the linguistic structure of narrative and on its cognitive, cultural, social, and psychological functions, on the development of narrative skills and styles in children, and on variation in narrative. I then touch on some work on narrative in other disciplines which bears on and often draws on linguistic discourse analysts' work: work on "narrative knowing" and narrative rhetoric, on history as story, on the "narrative study of lives" as a research method in education, psychology, and sociology, and on poststructuralist literary narratology. The final section discusses the current state of narrative study in discourse analysis and sketches some directions in which new work is going.

## 1 Structuralist Narratology

Two related but somewhat different approaches to the structure of narrative became known in the West beginning in the mid-1950s. One was that of the Russian Vladimir Propp, whose *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) was published in Russian in 1928 but first translated into English in 1958. Although Propp borrowed the term "morphology"

from biology rather than linguistics, his technique for showing what all folktales have in common and how they can differ is essentially that of linguistic analysis. Propp's work might more accurately be called the *syntax* of the folktale, since its fundamental claim is that all folktales have the same syntagmatic deep structure, the same sequence of "functions" or meaningful actions by characters. Once characters and their initial situation are introduced ("A little girl and her little brother lived with their elderly parents"), an interdiction is addressed to the hero or heroine and some family member leaves home ("One day the parents said to the girl, 'We are going into town. Take care of your brother and don't go out of the yard.' Then they left"). Next the interdiction is violated (the little girl leaves the yard) and a villain appears on the scene (geese swoop down and snatch the little brother). And the tale continues, one more or less predictable function after another.

While Propp's approach to characterizing the universal features of folklore is like that of formal syntax, Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1955, 1964, 1966) is more similar to formal semantics. Lévi-Strauss's interest was in describing the abstract elements of meaning that are expressed in myth, semantic contrasts such as male/female and raw/cooked. His claim is that traditional narrative around the world, though superficially varied, all deals with a limited number of basic themes. A number of French philosophers and literary theorists, writing in the late 1960s, adapted Propp's and Lévi-Strauss's ideas or similar ones to the analysis of literary narrative. The best known of these is probably Roland Barthes, whose "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" was published (in French) in 1966. Others are A. J. Greimas (1966), Tzvetan Todorov (1967), and Gérard Genette (1966). (See Culler 1975: ch. 9 for an overview of structuralist theory about literary narrative.)

These structuralist approaches to myth and literature were not all the same, but they all shared two assumptions. One was that there are abstract levels on which structures and meanings that seem different superficially are really the same. The other was that narrative can be separated from the events it is about. This assumption is discussed most explicitly in the work of French linguist Émile Benveniste (1966), who distinguished between *histoire* and *discours*, or "story" – the events – and "discourse" – the presentation of the events in a narrative. Both these ideas were current in the American linguistics and literary theory of the 1960s (the former most obviously in Transformational/Generative Grammar), and, as Hopper (1997) points out, both were taken into the first American work on narrative discourse.

## 2 "Oral Versions of Personal Experience": Labov and Waletzky

William Labov's influential work on personal experience narrative (PEN) began in the context of his research about the social correlates of linguistic variation on Martha's Vineyard, in New York City, and elsewhere. In order to elicit unselfconscious, "vernacular" speech, Labov had people tell stories about themselves, often (though not always) stories about dangerous or embarrassing experiences. Fourteen of these stories formed the basis for "Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience" (Labov and Waletzky 1967), published in the proceedings volume of the 1966 meeting

of the American Ethnology and Waletzky 1997.) In the context of PEN. The goal was to draw an eye to correlating surface structure with Labov's project was simplifying syntagmatic structure. The focus was on the functions of i

According to Labov and Waletzky, referential or evaluative clauses (events, characters, setting, clauses) have to do with the story. They should listen to it: evaluation and Waletzky (1967) consider these events. A later, more easily accessible members from Harlem (1972) summarize both versions to show they have been most influential.

Any narrative, by definition, is one that cannot be taken to have occurred in a different chronology: "I remember a sequence of events than 'narrative' is not any talk in which a sequence of events (inferred) actually occurred."

Although "minimal narrative" consists of just two or three narrative clauses, the "developed" narrative mentions, often roughly in the

- 1 abstract
- 2 orientation
- 3 complicating action
- 4 evaluation
- 5 result or resolution
- 6 coda.

Each of these elements (characters, feelings, and setting) is on the side of the ongoing in which the story is being related events and incidents.

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of the American Ethnological Society. (The paper has since been reprinted as Labov and Waletzky 1997.) In this paper, Labov and Waletzky propose a "formal" approach to PEN. The goal was to describe the invariable semantic deep structure of PEN, with an eye to correlating surface differences with the "social characteristics" of narrators. Labov's project was similar to Vladimir Propp's in its attempt to lay out the underlying syntagmatic structure of plot elements in narrative, except that Labov's focus was on the functions of individual clauses rather than larger chunks.

According to Labov and Waletzky, a clause in PEN can serve one of two functions, referential or evaluative. Referential clauses have to do with what the story is about: events, characters, setting. Evaluative clauses (and evaluative aspects of referential clauses) have to do with why the narrator is telling the story and why the audience should listen to it: evaluative material states or highlights the point of the story. Labov and Waletzky (1967) concentrates on reference in narrative, especially reference to events. A later, more easily accessible book chapter about narratives by young gang members from Harlem (Labov 1972: 354–96) concentrates on evaluation. I will summarize both versions together here, focusing mainly on the parts of each that have been most influential.

Any narrative, by definition, includes at least two "narrative clauses." A narrative clause is one that cannot be moved without changing the order in which events must be taken to have occurred. If two narrative clauses are reversed, they represent a different chronology: "I punched this boy / and he punched me" implies a different sequence of events than "This boy punched me / and I punched him." For Labov, "narrative" is not any talk about the past, or any talk about events; it is specifically talk in which a sequence of clauses is matched to a sequence of "events which (it is inferred) actually occurred" (Labov 1972: 360).

Although "minimal narratives" like the two about punching in the previous paragraph consist of just two narrative clauses, most PEN is more complex, including more narrative clauses as well as "free" clauses that serve other functions. A "fully developed" narrative may include clauses or sets of clauses with the following functions, often roughly in this order:

- 1 abstract
- 2 orientation
- 3 complicating action
- 4 evaluation
- 5 result or resolution
- 6 coda.

Each of these elements of PEN serves a double purpose, making reference to events, characters, feelings, and so on that are understood to have happened or existed outside of the ongoing interaction, and at the same time structuring the interaction in which the story is being told by guiding the teller and the audience through the related events and insuring that they are comprehensible and worth recounting.

The abstract consists of a clause or two at the beginning of a narrative summarizing the story to come. In response to Labov's "danger of death" question, for example, a person might begin, "I talked a man out of – Old Doc Simon I talked him out of pulling the trigger," then going on to elaborate with a narrative. (Examples are

Labov's.) The abstract announces that the narrator has a story to tell and makes a claim to the right to tell it, a claim supported by the suggestion that it will be a good story, worth the audience's time and the speaking rights the audience will temporarily relinquish.

**Orientation** in a narrative introduces characters, temporal and physical setting, and situation: "It was on a Sunday, and we didn't have nothin' to do after I - after we came from church"; "I had a dog - he was a wonderful retriever, but as I say he could do everything but talk." Orientation often occurs near the beginning, but may be interjected at other points, when needed. The characteristic orientation tense in English is the past progressive: "I was sittin' on the corner an' shit, smokin' my cigarette, you know;" "We was doing the 50-yard dash."

**Complicating action** clauses are narrative clauses that recapitulate a sequence of events leading up to their climax, the point of maximum suspense. These clauses refer to events in the world of the story and, in the world of the telling, they create tension that keeps auditors listening. The **result or resolution** releases the tension and tells what finally happened. Often just before the result or resolution, but also throughout the narrative, are elements that serve as **evaluation**, stating or underscoring what is interesting or unusual about the story, why the audience should keep listening and allow the teller to keep talking. Evaluation may occur in free clauses that comment on the story from outside: "And it was the strangest feeling"; "But it was really quite terrific"; or in clauses that attribute evaluative commentary to characters in the story: "I just closed my eyes / I said, 'O my God, here it is!'" Or evaluation can be embedded in the narrative, in the form of extra detail about characters ("I was shakin' like a leaf"), suspension of the action via paraphrase or repetition; "intensifiers" such as gesture or quantifiers ("I knocked him *all* out in the street"); elements that compare what did happen with what did not or could have happened or might happen; "correlatives" that tell what was occurring simultaneously; and "explicatives" that are appended to narrative or evaluative clauses. (Strategies for evaluation are treated in detail in Labov 1972: 354-96.)

At the end of the story, the teller may announce via a **coda** that the story is over ("And that was that"), sometimes providing a short summary of it or connecting the world of the story with the present ("That was one of the most important;" "He's a detective in Union City / And I see him every now and again").

Labov's characterization of narrative reflected contemporary concerns and anticipated and influenced later work in discourse analysis in several ways. Labov was one of a number of linguists who, beginning in the 1960s, started to show that connected talk is orderly and describable in terms of its structure and function. This observation makes linguistic discourse analysis possible. Labov's work with Americans' narratives, along with work by Grimes (1975), Longacre (1976, 1983), and others comparing discourse syntax and semantics across languages, began to illustrate the functional reasons for grammatical choices, anticipating subsequent work in functional grammar and grammaticalization (see the chapters in part I of this volume). The suggestion that discourse, like syntax, can be modeled in terms of variable surface structure and invariable deep structure has been taken up by scholars interested in formal models of discourse (see Polanyi, this volume). Labov's illustration that reference is not the only function of talk, that a great deal of what speakers and audiences do serves to create rapport and show how their talk is to be understood, was part of the move during the

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Two aspects of Labov of these has to do with was a sequence of clau "fully formed" narrativ "Personal experience na Many subsequent resea for any talk representin get and keep someone resulted in confusion b since the two uses of ' first sense being a nece have accordingly foun the second sense. Follo using "narrative" to me roughly what it does in

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### 3 Other Work

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