Social characteristics and self-expression in narrative

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The work described in “Narrative Analysis” was part of a project aimed at describing the rich linguistic repertoires of African American and Hispanic children, then thought by educators to be nonverbal. It was also part of Labov’s career-long project of coming to understand the underlying mechanisms of language change. To accomplish these goals, it was necessary for Labov and Waletzky (1967/this issue) to consider how social facts and linguistic facts were related. As they put it: “The ultimate aims of our work will require close correlations of the narrator’s [sic] social characteristics with the structure of their narratives” (p. 5).

In “Narrative Analysis” Labov and Waletzky developed an abstract deep-structure characterization of the structural and functional parts of personal-experience narrative that could be used in studying such correlations.

Sociolinguists have continued to try to link “social characteristics” of narrators with characteristics of their narratives. Undertaken beginning in the 1970s, when it began to be acceptable in linguistics to specialize in discourse, and published mainly in the 1980s, this work expanded in many directions. To list only a fraction: there are studies of personal-experience narrative by Americans and non-Americans (e.g., Chafe, 1980); African Americans (Esher-Lewis, 1993; Heath, 1983) and

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1It is of course dangerous to rely on speculations about authorial intent. People who commit words to paper may not know what they mean, the words may not really be theirs, privileged interpretations of the words may silence other interpretations. On the other hand, though, it is courteous and practical to take seriously what people say as having some bearing on something true, and Labov and Waletzky were as explicit about their intentions as could be.

2Although most subsequent work on personal-experience narrative by sociolinguists has not been explicitly in service of the study of language change, most has, implicitly or explicitly, in part or wholly, had the goal of displaying and describing a kind of verbal skill that is devalued and hence often unheard in the Western educational and high-cultural tradition.
Hispanic Americans (McLeod-Porter, 1991); New Yorkers (Polanyi, 1985), Midwesterners (Johnstone, 1990) and Texans (Bauman, 1986); women (Riessman, 1988) and men; older people (Brewer, 1994) and younger people (Cook-Gumperz & Green, 1984; Shuman, 1996).

None of these studies, and none that I know of since, has ever challenged the existence of personal-experience narrative. This is surprising, and it underscores Labor’s amazing perceptiveness. In an era in which familiar analytical and explanatory concepts are regularly critiqued and regularly found, with justification, to be subtly ethnocentric or oppressive, it has not been suggested, for example, that personal-experience narrative is really just something Western people do, or a way of managing to find some people wanting. In fact, telling about personal experiences seems to be something all humans do, even if not all in the same way—a point made by psychologists like Jerome Bruner (1986) and Roy Schafer (1981), among others.

The idea that speakers have social characteristics has not fared so well, however. After supposing for many years that individuals’ behavior could be explained in terms of facts about them that they brought to interactions, many sociolinguists are now interested in the processes that give rise to categorizations like “male” and “female,” “African American,” and “White” in the first place and in the ways people make strategic use of such categories as they create and express selves and others and relationships among selves and others. This is not the place to review this literature, most of which is not focussed on personal-experience narrative in any case; a very short list, including only people working in the variationist sociolinguistic tradition, would include Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and many of the papers in Hall and Bucholtz (1995) on the creation and expression of gender, Rampton (1995) on the creation and expression of ethnicity, and Johnstone (1996a) and Johnstone and Bean (1997) on the creation and expression of individuality. (Some of this work draws on that of LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) What I do instead is to illustrate with one example what can be gained from thinking about sociolinguistic variation in narrative as a resource for self-expression rather than as the result of preexisting social facts about speakers.

Linda Davis is a White woman in her 20s from a very small town in East Texas. She is a country-western singer and occasional songwriter with an increasingly successful career who now lives in Nashville in between concert tours. She is married to her manager and has a school-age daughter. This transcribed extract comes from an interview with her by my coworker Judith Mattson Bean (see Johnstone and Bean, 1997, for a description of the whole project), during which Bean asked Davis about how her being from Texas had been perceived in Nashville when she first moved there.

Davis: When I first got there, I worked uh at a s- rest- a restaurant at a uh, recording [In] studio. And I was answering [In] the phone and stuff, but also recording [In] so my [may] music is what took me there and I had a reason to go, I felt like [layk]. It was more than just, “Well I think I’ll [al] move to Nashville.” It was it was a little more substance than that; however, those associations have long since passed, but, and new ones have taken their place, but it got me there anyway. But when I [ay] uh, uh … ‘bout, four years into being [In] there, I got a job at the hotel playing [In] piano and singing [In]. And you get so many, oh, all over the country, all over the world, people that come and stay and so, w- we had a lot of Japanese or Oriental people that stayed at our, the hotel, the Sheraton, because there were a lot of companies they owned and they came in, so they were quite [kwayt] interested in my [may], uh you know, the way I talked [towkt] and stuff, and, they’d always want to hear “Tennessee Waltz” and “The Green Green Glass of Home,”

Bean: Yeah.

Davis: They called [kald] it. They even wrote me a note on a napkin wanting to [wowf] hear the “Green Green Glass”—they spelled it “glass”—“of Home.” It was so funny.

Bean: It’s [(laughs)]


The list of demographic facts about her would lead us to expect, among other things, that Davis might sound Southern and rural, and indeed she does. She invariably pronounces the vowel in words like talk or want as a diphthong, [ow]; she answers yes—no questions with “Yes, ma’am” or “No, ma’am”; she greets a stranger more effectively than a New Yorker would greet a long-lost friend; and she talks about the fundamentalist Baptist faith that organizes her life and explains her world. Her speech is also variable in some of the ways one would expect an East Texan’s speech to be: /ay/ before voiceless obstruents is sometimes monophthongized as [a], /ing/ is sometimes pronounced /n/, she is sometimes very folksy-sounding in style.

An account in the traditional sociolinguistic mode of how Davis sounds would leave us at that, or perhaps, following the lead of James and Lesley Milroy (I. Milroy, 1987; L. Milroy, 1992) take the further step of correlating the degree of variability in Davis’s speech with the number and nature of her social ties with people in the community she comes from. In either case, because the goal would be to relate facts about how Davis talks with facts about her that continue to be true throughout her talk (her region, gender, age, income, social network, and so on),

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1The only exception is when the following consonant is /fl/, as in call, because this /fl/ is vocalized, the vowel is not preconsonantal in this environment the way it is in the other words.

2In fact, “discourse-level” features of talk such as greeting behavior, forms of address, and ways of creating coherence are not usually examined in variationist studies, partly because they are very difficult to describe in quantifiable ways.
the ebb and flow of variability in the course of this interaction would not be examined.

If we do focus on the ebb and flow of variability, we can see how Davis uses it as a resource in constructing and expressing her personal identity. In the short excerpt we are examining, Davis begins with scene-setting orientation (“I was answering the phone and stuff,” “I got a job at the hotel,” “We had a lot of Japanese or Oriental people”), then moves into the anecdote about the “Green Green Glass of Home.” As she does this, she displays two aspects of her personality. In the first part of the excerpt Davis uses relatively standard-sounding speech to present herself as a thoughtful person (in implicit contrast to the stereotypical rural naïve hoping to be discovered in Nashville). Her diction is sometimes elevated (“it was a little more substance than that”; “those associations have long since passed, but, and new ones have taken their place”), and she chooses the more standard-sounding phonological variants, [ŋ] for -ing and [ɔɪ] for y/o, at a higher rate. (Her choices for these two variables are 80% standard-sounding and 20% rural-sounding in this part of the extract; see Johnstone [1996b] for an explanation of how I calculated these numbers.) In the second part of the extract (italicized in the transcript), Davis shows that she is also still a country girl. Her speech becomes more rural sounding both in the ways I focused on (for the two phonological variables I looked at, her choices here were the more rural-sounding ones 100% of the time) and in other ways, as she pronounces “wanting to” as /wɑntɪŋ/, “every” as /ˈɛvər/.

There are several reasons for this shift. For one thing, as Labov has pointed out (1972, pp. 92–94), people become less self-conscious and hence more “vernacular” as they narrate more emotional experiences. (This is why eliciting danger-of-death stories is part of the variationist’s interview protocol.) It is thus not surprising that Davis’s speech should become more rural-sounding as she moves from orientation to narration and evaluation (even though this is hardly a danger-of-death story). However, does she become less self-conscious or just conscious of herself in a different way? Like all the other public women we have interviewed, Davis thought of this interview not just as a favor to a couple of professors but as a potential source of publicity, an opportunity to underscore the ways she typifies a successful country-western artist and the things that make her unique. She was being called on to perform, and I don’t think she stopped performing just when the story got interesting. Instead, she used the resources of sociolinguistic variation to show that

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Literary Texts and the Violation of Narrative Norms

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Of increasing interest in text linguistics and discourse analysis is the identification of linguistic properties of narrative texts responsible for their temporal organization. Indeed, many discourse analysts, beginning with Labov and Waletzky (1967/this issue; henceforth L&W), have argued that a defining characteristic of narrative discourse is its temporal organization. For L&W, a narrative is defined as "any sequence of clauses which contains at least one temporal juncture." That is, minimally a narrative must contain one sequence of clauses that refers to events that are temporally ordered with respect to each other, clauses that cannot be interchanged without a "change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation." For example, the sequence of clauses: "I punched this boy/and he punched me" contains temporal juncture because its temporal interpretation will be altered if the order of the clauses is reversed: "This boy punched me/and I punched him." Put another way, then, L&W proposed that a defining characteristic of narrative is the existence of a partial matching between the temporal order of events in the real or a fictional world and their order of presentation in a text.

More recent work in discourse semantics (e.g., Dry, 1983; Dowty, 1986) has attempted to isolate the linguistic properties of clauses that create what L&W have termed temporal juncture. Because temporal juncture depends on the sequential interpretation of clauses (otherwise, a change in the order of clauses will not alter their temporal interpretation), clauses that exhibit temporal juncture will designate events that create the perception of time movement within some narrative world. For Dry (1983), it is predicates that refer to the initial and final endpoints of situations that function to push the reference time of a narrative forward. The effect is illustrated in Example 1:

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