

Narrative

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Why study narrative?

For those who pay attention, narrative is everywhere. From accounts people offer over dinner about their day at work to elaborate explanations about the rise and fall of empires, narratives play an enormous and complex role in our personal and social lives. Philosophers and linguists, communication scholars and anthropologists, psychologists and literary critics, neurologists and folklorists: All have studied narrative as a central sensemaking phenomenon of the human world. As Barbara Johnstone (2001, p. 635) explains: “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.”

Historically, the personal timbre encoded into stories of ordinary people has been one factor explaining the emergence of a research interest in narrative throughout the social sciences. In the 1960s, when academics began challenging positivist thought and modernist master narratives, they took up smaller, local narratives as an alternative vehicle for understanding. In America, the burgeoning popularity of memoirs in literary popular culture, the politics of emancipation and self-expression among disempowered communities, and an increasingly therapeutic culture’s tendency to encourage personal self-exploration, all contributed to the “narrative turn” in the social sciences (Riessman, 2005). As the study of narrative became more central to academic inquiry across disciplines, different claims for narrative arose and became contested among scholars of different allegiances and motivations. A persistent interest of this diverse scholarship has been in the role that narratives play in helping people, families, groups, and societies to organize themselves meaningfully and to make sense of their place in the world around them.

Even so, narratives take many forms, large and small. One challenge for those who study narrative has therefore been to define it in a way that accommodates its inherent slipperiness. In quick accession, those studying narrative face questions about agency, intention, facticity, and representation that can become intertwined with questions about meaning, communication, identity, sociality, and language. The study of narrative is as much about determining which questions to regard as most salient as it is about identifying narratives and subjecting them to an analysis suitable for reaching appropriate answers. Attempts to perform these tasks have taken innumerable forms. Although all such attempts could be contested in one way or another, in many

ways the areas of inquiry known as structural narratology and sociolinguistics have provided the foundation for the study of narrative as a social phenomenon.

Structural narratology and Labov's sociolinguistics

Structural narratologists study how stories hold together internally: with what structure, what patterns, what consistency. They share an interest in narrative texts as isolated artifacts, distinct from authorial intention or the circumstances that lead to a text's production. Such work yields insight into narrative's unique structural characteristics, as well as into the distinctive structural features that differentiate between narratives of varying genres or types. Attempts to understand the structure of narrative first reached the West around the mid-20th century, when Vladimir Propp's important 1928 work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, was finally translated into English (Propp, 1968). For Propp, folktales shared a common "morphology"—a syntagmatic structure in which characters play the same functional roles and perform the same sequence of actions, merely in different iterations from tale to tale. The sequence begins when the character and the situation are introduced; some prohibitive rule then comes to restrict the hero or heroine; eventually the rule gets broken, a villain enters the scene, and a negative consequence results. The pattern recurs. Thus Propp's importance consisted in his showing that this structural pattern is a universal feature of folktales and, by implication, in his suggesting that narratives, *qua* narratives, have a formal syntax: a deep structural pattern that can help both distinguish them from other kinds of talk or writing and distinguish between narratives of different types.

Propp was hardly alone among the influential structural narratologists. American linguist Noam Chomsky's work on transformational grammar helped suggest that language itself, across cultures, is structured by both deep and superficial common grammatical principles. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss also made well-known contributions to conceptualizing the structure of narratives. In particular, Lévi-Strauss considered narrative myths around the world and found that forms of human thought and the stories we tell may vary superficially from culture to culture or region to region, but by and large a finite number of fundamental themes characterize all human thought and narrative. Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye (1957) argued that all plotlines of all stories fall within four categories: comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire. Gérard Genette (1979) isolated structural features of narrative mood, instance, levels, and time in his methodology for interpreting literary narrative. Roland Barthes (1975, p. 237), meanwhile, showed in "An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative" that a deductive approach to narrative structure yields a linguistically valid model of the "countless forms of ... international, transhistorical, transcultural" narrative in the world. These and other contributions to narratology have greatly influenced the literary study of narrative, though the implications of narrative when conceived of as a structured type of spoken or written communication soon spread beyond the interest of literary theorists and critics.

In the social sciences, the work of William Labov signals a landmark shift in how narratives could be understood. Influenced by Propp's morphological or syntagmatic

approach to the elements of a narrative's plot, Labov goes more micro still, to consider individual clauses as part of narrative's intrinsic structure. It is this move, further inside the sentence-level syntax of narrative structure, that makes possible the work of those (communication scholars, for instance) who employ various methodologies to analyze narratives as vital texts in the study of identity and sensemaking. Labov's work forms the basis for many contemporary definitions of narrative as a genre of spoken discourse. Because of Labov, those who accept his program can, with some consistency, identify narratives from their nonnarrative counterparts in speech or text.

Labov's work began with research on how people in New York City and Martha's Vineyard display variation in speech across sociolinguistic demographics. He was especially interested in eliciting unself-conscious speech in order to approximate authentic and indigenous vernacular talk. To do so, he asked people to tell stories about themselves. As guidance, he suggested that they tell tales of their most embarrassing or dangerous experiences, sometimes in face-to-face interviews with an out-group interviewer, other times in conversation with only in-group peers. In "Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience" Labov and Waletzky (1967) formalize their approach to the "personal-experience narratives" (PENs) that their study elicited, using as data 14 of these nearly 600 narratives. They describe their analysis as *functional*, inasmuch as they consider narrative to be one among many verbal techniques for recapitulating experience on the basis of both personal interest and the influence of the social context in which the narrative occurs. Their work then suggests that PENs both communicate personal experience about one's past and offer reasons why that personal experience is important now.

Accordingly, Labov and Waletzky suggest that clauses in such narratives serve either a referential or an evaluative function. Referential clauses concern a narrative's content: what it is *about*, as manifest in its events, characters, settings, and so forth. Evaluative clauses express a story's *point*: why it is being told and why it is worth hearing. This twofold nature of PENs highlights their communicational function, whereby such narratives not only relate some personal experience from the teller's past but do so in a way that creates the relational connection necessary for an audience to understand the narrative thereof and its importance at the time of its telling. The implication of this insight is that PENs have an embedded structure: The first-order narrative consists of referential clauses about a past experience, and the second-order narrative consists of evaluative clauses designed to maintain listeners' interest in the first-order narrative. Such embedment has led Livia Polanyi (1989) to give different names to the two types of "narrative," so as not to confuse them. For Polanyi and those who have taken her lead, "narrative" thus describes the expression of one's personal experience from the past, and "story" means more or less a narrative with a point.

Probably the most influential feature of Labov's work, however, is its contention that the necessary and sufficient condition for labeling a segment of language "narrative" is that it include two temporally ordered clauses. These narrative clauses cannot be rearranged without altering the chronology of a narrative's events and, by extension, that narrative's meaning. For example, "The man bled / and I told him how I felt" is a decidedly different sequence of events, with different implications, from the two clauses reversed: "I told the man how I felt / and he bled." But a personal-experience narrative

with only two temporally ordered narrative clauses makes for a “minimal” narrative at best. A “fully formed” narrative contains more—and more complex—components. These include an abstract, an orientation, a complicating action, an evaluation, a result or resolution, and a coda. Each component plays a specific part in forming the semantic structure of personal-experience narratives in their fullest state.

In Labov’s model, the *abstract* prepares the audience for the narrative ahead by summarizing the story and its overall point. A clause or two suffice for this purpose. The *orientation* situates the audience toward the narrative by introducing the narrative’s characters and settings—both temporal and physical. Labov found that the orientation often occurs at the outset of a narrative; but sometimes it appears or recurs at later points as well. Once the scene has been set, the *complicating action* consists of temporally sequenced clauses that bring a series of events toward a climax, the narrative’s greatest point of suspense. With this accomplished, the *evaluation* comes next, in clauses that explain for the audience why this story is important and what its message is. The *result or resolution* follows when the teller resolves the tension of the climax and tells what happened in the end. Commonly this ending comes with a further *coda*: a few clauses that (1) indicate clearly that the narrative is finished and (2) potentially bridge the temporal gap between the past events that the narrative portrayed and the present moment of their portrayal.

Although Labov’s six components can deepen an understanding of, or at least an orientation toward, what narrative is and how it works, his structural approach does have shortcomings. Sometimes, for instance, his six components blur together, certain clauses doing the double duty of serving both as abstracts and orientations. Arguably, too, language is *always* doing evaluation, which obfuscates the relationship between referential and evaluative clauses in the first place, and then between the narrative and its point. Moreover, although his work specifically concerns personal-experience narratives—which, after all, are only one *type* of narrative—the structural components Labov enumerates are often mistaken for a universal or normative definition of narratives. Some say that treating his structural features accordingly reveals them to form a failed definition, at least by structural standards, because types of narrative exist that do not fulfill his conditions. Others are leaving Labov behind, on the assumption that narrative is co-constructed interactionally. Often called “positioning theory,” such work considers an individual subject’s capacity to position his or her subjectivity within or against the dominant discourses and to master narratives in which his or her personal narrative occurs. Although both the work of structural narratologists and that of Labov remains seminal to the understanding of narrative as a structurally identifiable sociolinguistic category, it should be taken more as a starting point than as the final word.

Analyzing narrative

Given the diversity of approaches to narrative, it stands to reason that ways of analyzing narrative would also differ widely. They do. And each variety of analysis presupposes a particular orientation to what narratives are. One reason for this is a practical

imperative: Scholars who want to analyze an instance of narrative must first be able to identify a stretch of talk or writing accordingly. Without the ability to isolate a narrative as such, the analysis of particular narratives would not be possible. Yet, without an operative sense of what narratives are, the ability to identify specific instances thereof could not manifest itself either. In one register, therefore, narrative analysis depends upon a scholar's ability to locate instances of narrative on the basis of orientations to the concept that also delimit the kinds of analysis they make desirable.

In valuable work that complicates this etic approach to analyzing narratives, Cathy Riessman (2005) has developed, however, a typology of four kinds of narrative analysis. She describes these types as *thematic* (concerned with "what" the narrative is about), *structural* (concerned with "how" a narrative is expressed), *interactional* (concerned with narrative as a dialogical "co-construction"), and *performative* (concerned with how a teller/writer "does" a narrative "for" an audience). This variety of approaches underscores that, even where scholars agree on an operative definition of narrative, there remain multiple ways to subject narrative to analysis. The existence of this multiplicity is itself evidence of a chiasmatic relationship between analysis and narrative: That is, analysis constrains narrative and narrative constrains analysis.

Examples of Riessman's four types (among others) are manifold in the scholarly record. Problematically, though, each type can coexist in analyses whose approaches depend for their focus upon subtle divisions of emphasis. Michael Bamberg (1997) has represented this fundamental divide in a paper titled "Positioning between structure and performance." Again, Labov offers a starting point. Bamberg suggests that Labov and Waletzky's work implies that narratives of personal experience can be understood on either side of the divide. On the structural side, such narratives "are representations of something that once happened and what this past happening meant (or 'now' means) to the narrator" (p. 335). On the performative side, the act of telling or representing "at a particular occasion in the form of a particular story" intervenes "between the actual experience and the story" (p. 335). Bamberg explains: "Whereas the first takes its starting point from what was said (and the way it was said) and works toward why it was said, that is, its meaning, the second focuses more strongly on how it was performed as the main index for what the narrative as an act of instantiation means to the performer" (p. 335). Bamberg and other positioning theorists side more with the latter. Both approaches, however, emphasize that a narrative's meaning is determined by the person expressing it. As the many other varieties of narrative analysis attest, however, how that meaning is determined, and why, remains in dispute.

SEE ALSO: Discourse Analysis; Editor's Introduction; Memory in Narrative; Positioning Theory; Sociocultural Linguistics

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Further reading

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