

## Chapter 2

### Introduction

The framework of personal experience stories in natural conversations is not always clearly recognizable. Some stories are explicitly introduced into the ongoing conversation while some stories cannot be distinguished from the preceding talk in the narrative segment. This chapter discusses some basic terms and methods used for describing the internal structure and pattern of oral narrative. In narrative studies importance is given to conversational storytelling and in the study of conversation in storytelling contributes to both narrative research and conversation analysis.

### Narrative Structure

A narrative is a sequence of events. Toolan posits three defining features of narratives. Narratives consist of sequenced and interrelated events which are logically and chronologically related, feature fore-grounded individuals and has crisis or uncertainty that precedes resolution. Sociolinguistic studies on naturally-occurring narrative, particularly narratives of ordinary people in their everyday lives were pioneered by the American sociolinguist William Labov.

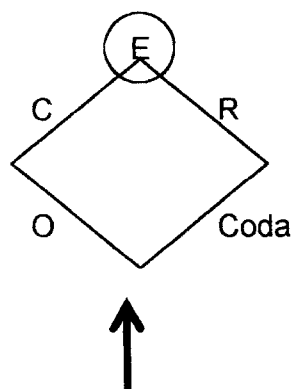
#### *Labovian Model*

The standard characterization of personal narratives in social science research was pioneered by Labov and Waletzky (1967). Labov and Waletzky hypothesized that fundamental narrative structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experience in

narratives of ordinary people. Labov elicited stories of near-death experiences from a large number of “unsophisticated speakers” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). By looking at many narratives, these researchers hoped to identify and relate formal linguistic properties of narrative to their functions. Even though the research was said to be based on only spontaneous accounts of past personal experiences, the stories elicited could have been the product of many retellings. Thus the narratives could have been retold throughout particular time to gain attention and entertain the listeners. Nevertheless the internal features that Labov and Waletzky (1967) found have been taken as fundamental in most narrative research.

Labov and Waletzky, based on the basic techniques of linguistic analysis, “isolated the invariant structural units which are presented by a variety of superficial forms” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). They identified two linguistic-structural properties to functions. The first is the referential function: narrative’s functioning as a means of recapitulating experience in an ordered set of clauses that matches the temporal sequence of the original experience. The second function, which Labov and Waletzky termed as “evaluation” attends to the use of narratives that narratives should have a point, and they are worth telling to the listeners. The normal form of narrative structure proposed by Labov and Waletzky is represented by the following diagram:

**Figure 1: Normal form of narrative by Labov (1967, Page 41),**



The originating function of narrative begins at the base of the diamond. The story begins with an abstract which would answer the question – what is this story about. Next is, orientation (‘O’) which would provide answers as to who, when and where the story took place, and then the story would move up the apex to the complication (‘C’) which would answer questions as to what happened. After the complication the narrative or the action is usually suspended at the evaluation (‘E’), this would answer the question “So what?” – How/why the story is interesting. Next comes resolution (‘R’) which would answer what finally happened, and the story would proceed downwards to the right to Coda which would bring the narration back to the present situation. This is represented by the line which returns to the situation (point of time) at which the narrative was first elicited.

This standard form pioneered by Labov does not always appear in narratives. At times the story could end at the complication, without a clear resolution (“He hit me hard and I hit him back” Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Jokes, ghost stories and surprise endings usually end at the resolution since such stories might have been reshaped by many retellings. Everyone cannot be good storytellers. A good story could only be told by a good storyteller who has “greater over-all verbal ability” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967).

### ***Modified Version of Labov’s narrative structure***

Findings from Eggins and Slade’s research (cited by Jones, 2001) have resulted in the modified version of Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) oral narrative framework. One of the most frequently occurring storytelling genres in casual conversation involves anecdotes in which small crisis or misfortune results in embarrassment, humiliation or frustration for the protagonist. Thus, tellers narrate such incidents in order to elicit some sort of reaction from the listeners (Jones, 2001).

The generic structure of this type of crisis anecdotes is: Abstract, Orientation, Remarkable Event, Reaction and Coda. In this structure, the abstract is rarely more than one sentence long. It has a summarizing function, to give listeners an indication of the type of story they are about to hear. This feature though often found at the beginning of the anecdote, is optional. Orientation also occurs near the beginning of the story and it serves to “orient the listener in respect to time place and behavioral situation” (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Remarkable events consist of “temporally ordered actions, outlining a remarkable event, which the narrator wants to share his or her reaction to” (cited by Jones, 2001). The next part of the generic structure is reaction. Reaction refers to how the characters in the story world or the listeners react. Typical reactions may include expressions of anger, fear and amusement. The final feature is coda. Coda like the abstract is an optional feature. Its function is to round off the story by building a “bridge between the story world and the moment of telling” (McCarthy, cited by Jones, 2001).

These five elements according to Eggins and Slade give structure to the story. Another element that can occur throughout the story based on Jones’ study (2001) and which coincides with Labov’s findings (1967) is: evaluation. This feature if used effectively will project “interest and tellability” (Jones, 2001) and answer the “So what?” question from the listener. Thus, evaluative devices whether external or internal will help the audience appreciate that something was funny, frightening or unusual.

***Polanyi’s “Main time line” or key story events***

Polanyi too based her findings on William Labov and Joshua Waletzky’s “Narrative Analysis” (1967) and Labov’s book “Language in the Inner City” (1972) (Polanyi, 1989). Polanyi analysed stories as narratives in which the teller describes events which took

place in one specific past time world in order to make some sort of point about the world which the teller and the listener share. Narratives consist of *main time line* which is actually some events which lead to the point of the storytelling. These events which are syntactically encoded in main clauses form the main time line. These events or key events will bring about changes in the story world and they are relevant to the point which is being made. Thus the story teller's task is to give enough details using various key events to enable the listener to infer the point of the story.

Evaluative devices encoded in clauses also make up the linguistic structure of conversational storytelling. Thus in her study, Polanyi reduced conversational narratives into 'adequate paraphrase' using the most heavily evaluated propositions in the main story line. Polanyi formulates her adequate paraphrase to summarize the narrative and to serve as a tool for comparing narrative performances. Polanyi integrates the teller's and the listener's contributions to a narrative to come together to make a coherent narrative structure from a polyphonic conversational performance.

### ***Story Grammar***

Stories have been used to study the cognitive processes involved in comprehension and the factors that influenced those processes. Based on some initial research, researchers have developed a systematic way to analyse narratives. An internal structure for simple stories, referred to as story grammar was identified (cited by Olson and Gee, 1988). Story grammar has been used by researchers to provide a way to analyse stories and "is categorized by a hierarchical network of categories and the logical relations that exist between these categorizes" (cited by Olson and Gee, 1988). Traditional grammar

describes our knowledge of language structures while story grammar delineates what we know about story structures.

Children would have heard many stories in their first language. Consequently, they would have internalized the structures of stories. These structures will provide mental scaffolding or story schema around which they will organize and understand the content of stories (Olson and Gee, 1988). Thus children expect story from categories to be filled by storytellers to form a coherent story. The categories of story grammar are: Setting and Episode (Initiating event, Internal response, Attempt, Consequences and Reaction) (Olson and Gee, 1988). Story grammar offers a model to develop instructional strategies that may help children especially poor readers better comprehend stories. Thus teaching story structure explicitly to children will help them to comprehend stories as well as write better-formed stories. In conclusion, studies on the use of story grammar categories have shown that readers/listeners recall best simple stories that tend to conform to story grammar categories.

### **Narrative Patterns**

Applebee posits two processes – centering and chaining – as the basic narrative structures of children’s stories. Based on his studies Applebee came up with six basic types of narrative structures (1978). There are: Heaps Sequences, Primitive Narrative, Unfocused Chain, Focused Chain and Narratives. Narratives were classified based on these narrative structures but if the stories do not fit neatly into one or another of the six categories, judgments were made globally, on the basis of the predominant mode of organization.

Peterson and McCabe (1983) studying the structure of narratives produced by children, found several patterns of organization. One pattern is similar to the prototypical form of

adult narratives found by Labov, which is referred to as the classic narrative pattern. The other patterns were developed by Peterson and McCabe. They are: Ending-at-the-high-point pattern, Leap-frogging pattern, Chronological pattern, Impoverished pattern, Disoriented pattern and miscellaneous pattern. The narrative patterns were based on high point analysis.

### **Conversational Storytelling**

Conversational stories are sequenced objects articulated in a particular context in which they are told (Sacks, cited by Jefferson, 1978). A storyteller can project a forthcoming story with a preface. The listeners then will align himself as a story recipient. Next the teller will produce the story. This will be followed by talk by the listener by referring to the same story. The story preface can have consequences for the story's reception, and so a rather extended series of turns at talk can be seen as a coherent conversational unit. In conversational storytelling, Sack posits equal responsibility for who talks when on both the speaker and the listeners (Wiemann, 1978). Jefferson's study (Sequential Aspects of Storytelling, 1978) was based on Sacks' model of turn-taking in conversational storytelling. Jefferson investigated the story's beginning and ending, sketching out two features via which a story can be seen to articulate with turn-in-turn talk. In other words stories emerge from turn-by-turn talks which are locally occasioned, which upon their completion appears to be sequentially implicated.

Techniques are involved in producing a story via a prior talk so as to account for and propose the appropriateness of, the story's telling. The local occasioning of a story by ongoing turn-by-turn talk can have two discrete aspects. A story is "triggered" in the course of turn-by-turn talk (something said at a particular moment in conversation can remind a participant (speaker or hearer) of a particular story, which may or may not be

topically relevant with the talk in progress and a story could be methodically introduced into turn-by-turn talk (Jefferson, 1978).

In "A Simplest Systematic for the Organization of Turn Taking for Conversation", Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) studied sequentially on the assumption that conversationalists know just when someone is to talk. As long as each turn has recognizable sentence structure and makes a single proposition or consists of a simple back-channel like "m-hm" or "wow", interlocutors have plenty of cues to determine where each successive one will end, but if turns can encompass any number of sentence-like units, as in most stories then would-be tellers must provide special cues when they wish to take a longer turn, and listeners must key their behaviour to them. Then, just as single-sentence turns like questions herald particular responses like answers, so too; certain sorts of stories expect particular hearer responses. And tellers must signal these features of their stories as well (Norrick, 2001).

Wong posits that oral practices of everyday life may take the form of: "first saying + insertion + second saying" (Wong, 2000). This storytelling technique is an effortless task for a native speaker. According to researchers (cited by Wong, 2000), back-channel cues like "uh huh" are among the last conversational features acquired by child first language learners because children need to achieve a certain level of automaticity in message comprehension to enable them to free their attention resources to reflect on their own comprehension state. However, much of the literature on back-channelling has been unable to provide precise and replicable tools for listeners' contributions (McCarthy, 2003). Thus it is difficult to assess whether back-channel responses as signalling no desire to assume the role of speaker or whether such contributions should be classified as turns that change the identity of "current speaker".



Just as back-channel cues in child first language learners, first and second saying are possibly a later acquired feature of conversation for second language learners. Thus a second language learner, in order to produce “first saying + insertion + second saying” will need a high degree of cognitive complexity embedded in simple oral practices, since the ability to think ahead and monitor one’s own speech in the course of its production against an internal criterion of information needed by the recipient, is necessary (Wong, 2000).

### **Story recipients’ response**

According to Toolan (1988) recipients play an important role in conversational storytelling. If a recipient accepts a text as a “narration” he or she will react to the narration by aligning himself as story recipient and invite the storyteller to go on and tell the story. By requesting to hear the story the recipient situates himself or herself as a suitably awed recipient. The listener shows his active listening by constantly reacting. Thus the recipient is constrained to make comments, backchannel noises, ask questions and when the story is over, engage in some talk about the story after it is completed. By doing so, the listener helps the storyteller to connect the story world to the conversation (Polanyi, 1985). Polanyi (1985) posits that the constraints on the recipient of a conversational storytelling are: agree to hear the story, refrain from taking a turn and at the end of the telling, demonstrate that the point of the story has been understood (possibly demonstrating that understanding by undertaking to tell a story).

Since stories are complex utterances, a complex of responses may be appropriate. In interactively constructed discourse, such as conversational storytelling “meaning” is not an absolute characteristic of texts. In the course of an interaction, proposals for what is going on in the telling may be brought forward by the teller through internal evaluation

and explicit commentary and may offer their own interpretations of what the telling should be taken to be about (Polanyi, 1989).

Conversational storytelling concentrates on the interactional achievements of a story between teller(s) and listener(s). Listeners convey their understanding of a storytelling through the immediate input they convey in a telling. The immediate input or the affective reactions (based on this study) were: back-channel noises, requests and response stories. Response stories generally accomplish more than simply demonstrate an understanding of the foregoing story. They lay claim to parallel experiences, and often to shared values and feelings as well. A typical response story depicts the new teller in similar circumstances, demonstrating similar behaviours, and arriving at similar conclusions. Such response stories can be painstakingly fitted to the foregoing story because response stories demonstrate a particular understanding of their predecessors, they determine what these predecessors are taken to mean.

In conversational storytelling, narrators must navigate around listeners' questions and comments, gauging the interests, attitudes and background knowledge of their audience. During storytelling when narrators provide for example an abstract of their story in the form of a synopsis alongside an evaluative comment, the abstract would allow potential listeners to identify the story, while the evaluative comment would signal the teller's attitude toward the events depicted. In a conversational storytelling listeners and tellers operate as equals. This equality is put into operation by the participants turn taking. Questions can be used by storytellers to check the listeners understanding, that the listeners are listening attentively to the teller's narrative but in this study the only time the storyteller question the listeners is at the beginning of the storytelling –to ask “permission” to tell the story.

Opportunities should be offered to listeners to ask questions by the storyteller. When significant questions are asked, the storyteller can better shape the story as he /she conveys specific details connected to it. Besides making the story more evocative, questions might lead a teller into further inspecting his/her memory and uncovering its significance (Booth and Barton, 2000). Moreover, by requesting information or by questioning the tellers, the listeners could evoke memory or details that the teller has forgotten because while telling a story in conversation the teller would be paying more attention to the present telling. Thus by eliciting information the listeners are actually helping the storytellers in structuring the narrative. According to Chafe (cited by Bernado, 1980), when a person is narrating a past experience, he/she is aware of both the larger chunk (the memory of the whole experience), and he/she would minichunk the experience that he/she is focussing on at the moment. The former seems to be in the back of his/her consciousness; the latter is in the focus of his/her conscious. Thus, according to Bernado the minichunk would be more highly activated than the larger chunk (Bernado, 1980).

At the end of the story, it is incumbent on the story recipients to demonstrate understanding. After the story proper there is conventionally exit talk of a couple of turns at least, which revolves around the story. At this time the story recipients usually show whether the point of the story was taken to be comic or sad about one event or another or one circumstance or another. Often a recipient will ask a question about some key aspect of the story or people may laugh and repeat a phrase or two from a humorous story. The teller may also ask the recipients explicitly for a response or even elicit a story on a similar theme from them.

By doing this, the teller simultaneously gives an interpretation of his own story and formally turns the floor over to the recipients. Since an absence of exit talk is itself a socially salient response indicating embarrassment, confusion, annoyance, lack of understanding, or low esteem for the teller, the teller who initiates the integration of the story into the conversation eliminates the possibility that the story will be followed by noticeable silence. Failing to understand an appropriate, well structured story is a mark of conversational ineptitude on the part of the story recipients who can be reasonably expected to make obvious inferences and connections.

In response stories, more than one story is told and the stories told are embedded within others. There would be a primary storyteller and a secondary storyteller who is also involved in the circumstances being discussed and knew enough to have told the similar story, act more or less as story recipients while the story is being told. Response stories thus are a group of stories interacting either as a simple chain of one story after another or as a very large story, hierarchically embedding several major stories which appear independent as they are being told but which link up into one grand unit at the end of the sequence (Bernardo, 1980).

In everyday conversation, stories and narrative-like structures bubble-up and recede into turn-by-turn talk. Participants as listeners can distill a coherent story from a discourse which enables them to respond appropriately, sometimes with parallel stories of their own. Listeners are also capable of recognizing incompleteness and incoherence in narratives and formulating appropriate questions to fill in the missing information.

Susan Engel (cited by Booth and Barton, 2000) suggests listeners can help in shaping a story by listening attentively, respond substantively as a true listener, rather than a critic and collaborate by asking questions that help shape and direct the teller's story.

When one tells a story, others are likely to follow. Any joke can follow a joke, but successive stories are topically related and highly pre-specified. Thus if the first speaker talks about his holidays, the second is also expected to tell a first person story about his holidays. A story which does not have this degree of parallelism is less appropriate. If across a range of topics one participant shows himself unable to produce appropriate stories he also shows himself to not be a member of the group with which he is conversing (Coulthard, 1977).

### **Teaching conversational storytelling skills**

Jones (2001) advocates a consciousness-raising (C-R) approach to the teaching of conversational storytelling skills. In a consciousness-raising approach, a learner will acquire a structure when he or she is ready for it, by a process that could well involve steps backwards as well as forwards – by generalising the rules. C-R process follows the pattern of noticing a feature, formulating and applying a rule, experimenting, re-noticing and re-structuring as the pattern. Batstone (cited by Smith, cited from the internet) posits that the cycle of noticing, structuring, re-noticing and again experimenting would not be successful if the learners do not practice in order to be able to use the language they have been (re)noticing and (re)structuring.

To encourage the process of (re)noticing and (re)structuring, the language needs to be made available, a lot of input must be provided and awareness raised to linguistic features to turn in into intake, following the principle that once something has been noticed, it is likely to be noticed again and repeated noticing leads to acquisition. Among the characteristics of consciousness-raising are: the attempt to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention, the provision of data which illustrates the target feature, as

far as possible from texts which have already been processed for meaning and the requirement that learners utilise intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature.

Hegglin-Besmer (cited from the internet) posits C-R activities as a key to bridging the gap of communicative language teaching. According to Hegglin-Besmer, the C-R approach should expand existing methods rather than replace them, thus making use of the students' experiences of pre-established learning habits and rituals already present in the classroom thereby providing security for the students so that there is room to take risks. The students too should be responsible for their learning as it is a crucial factor which could not be compensated for by the change of teaching methods.

McCarthy (cited from the internet) posits the use of genre theory to enable language teachers to model genres which specify the precise linguistic characteristics of particular genres. By using computers and working on the CANCODE corpus (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English), certain forms of "language-in-action" genres which characterise particular contexts and genres could be used to specify more closely the lexical and grammatical features that regularly characterise different genres. Thus imitate students can produce the target language. According to McCarthy (1998, from the internet), one of the most useful elements in the syllabus should be "enjoyment of language learning", for the rewards of pleasurable listening and observation may only be visible in the long term, which may prove to be surprising rich.

### **Summary**

In conversational storytelling the structural description of the narrative structures would reveal teller strategies and the immediate reactions of listeners to narratives would give

direct access to the storytelling process and the perceptions of narrators by auditors. Conversational competence is thought of as an elaborate social contract, which requires cooperative social interaction- linguistic skill, and the ability to use information about discourse, context, listener, situation, turn taking, repair and so on. These aspects of language must be reckoned by a second language user in order to pave an interlanguage road that, would eventually lead towards the acquisition of: “syntax-for-conversation”. Narratives have interactional functions and the study of narratives should examine how narratives define not only the narrator but the relationship between the narrator and the audience.