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William Labov
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1 Introduction to the language of life and death

In the late afternoon of July 29, 1963, I was talking to a retired Jewish postman named Jacob Schissel, in his brownstone house on New York City's Lower East Side. I had reached the point in the interview that dealt with serious matters, and I asked, "Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of being killed? Did that ever happen to you?" Schissel answered "Eh no, at no time" but then added, "Wait a second, let me contradict myself. Yes, once." I said, "What happened?" and Schissel said, "My brother put a knife in my head." I said, "How'd that happen?" and Schissel then told me the story.

> This was just a few days after my father had died
> and we were sitting shiva.
> And the reason the fight started,
> he saw a rat out in the yard
> – this was out in Coney Island –
> and he started talk about it.
> And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee
> and I told him to cut it out.
> 'Course kids, y'know, he don't hafta listen to me.
> So that's when I grabbed his arm
> and twisted it up behind him.
> When I let go his arm,
> there was a knife on the table,
> he just picked it up
> and he let me have it.
> And … I started bleeding – like a pig.
> And naturally first thing to do, run to the doctor,
> and the doctor just says, "Just about this much more,"
> he says, "and you'd a been dead."

As I was leaving, going down the stairs, I heard Mrs. Schissel say, "That's a clever young man." I remember being puzzled. I didn't do anything clever, I thought to myself. But something important must have happened on that Monday afternoon.

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As a setting for this inquiry into the language of life and death, it may be helpful to ask how I came to ask Schissel that question. It was a logical outcome of my own personal history and the route I followed in entering the field of linguistics. I had spent eleven years as an industrial chemist, formulating printing inks, and, though I was good at it (inks I formulated are still selling well), I wanted to work in a field where you could publish your good ideas when they worked, instead of burying them with other proprietary information. My earlier efforts at writing drew my attention to language, and linguistics attracted me as a field for people who really wanted to know how language worked.

At that time, most of the data for this field came from introspection: a linguist would put the question (most likely, to himself) "Can you say this?" or "Can you say that?" I thought that the field might be put on a more solid footing if it were based on what people actually said in everyday life. A wonderful instrument, the tape recorder, had recently been made available (from German patents obtained at the end of World War II), but linguists weren't using it. I bought one (a Uher, then a Nagra) and set out to record a random sample of New Yorkers across all social classes.

The kind of language I hoped to record was something like the language I had been used to hearing from the men in the printing ink factory at lunch time: free flowing, joking, loud, argumentative, full of stories and friendly insults. But I found that when the speaker was face-to-face with a microphone, the speech that emerged was more compressed, more guarded and less interesting. People said what they thought you wanted to hear, and said it in a way that they thought you wanted it to be said. This was a particular problem in New York City, where the local dialect was highly stigmatized, and the shift away from it to a more formal style produced strange and irregular efforts at the correction of sounds, grammar and vocabulary.

Over the next few years I developed a variety of techniques to reduce this level of formality – getting people to argue with each other, talk about the games they played as kids – but the most effective way was to elicit personal narrative. I noticed that the level of formality was distinctly reduced when people were talking about their personal experience – events that had actually happened – rather than their general opinions. When the narrative centered on really important experience, the level of formality dropped even further.

The question on the danger of death that I asked Schissel was particularly effective. This was clear in another interview on the Lower East Side with a 16-year-old Irish-Italian boy named Eddie Delaney, from a lower-working-class family. He was a very careful and guarded speaker. After his brothers had talked about their experience, I asked him "What happened to you?" He answered:

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The school I go to is Food and Maritime – that's maritime training
and I was up in the masthead,
and the wind started blowing.
I had a rope secured around me to keep me from falling–
but the rope parted,
and I was just hanging there by my fingernails.

At this point, Eddie's breathing became very heavy and irregular; his voice began to shake, and drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. Small traces of nervous laughter appeared in his speech. (My interventions are in parentheses).

I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in my life …
(What happened?)
Well, I came out all right …
well, the guys came up
and they got me.
(How long were you up there?)
About ten minutes.
(I can see you're still sweating, thinking about it.)
Yeh, I came down,
I couldn't hold a pencil in my hand.
I couldn't touch nuttin'.
I was shakin' like a leaf.
Sometimes I get scared thinkin' about it …
but … uh … well, it's training.

At the point where I first observed the sweat standing out on Eddie's forehead, there was a dramatic change in the linguistic variables that register style. His use of the variable (ING) switched from the standard *-ing* to colloquial *-in'* (*nuttin'*, *shakin'*, *thinkin'*); he used double negative (*I couldn't touch nuttin'*), and he dropped the technical and formal vocabulary that he started with (*secured, parted*). Only at the very end did he pull himself together and return to the formal style that he felt was appropriate for an interview.

One might ask, why is one style better than another? Why the effort to record the least formal style? My answer is that there is one style of speech that is superior to all others – from the linguistic point of view – which we call the *vernacular*. It is the form of language first learned, most perfectly acquired, which we use automatically and unthinkingly in conversation with family and intimate friends. It is the most systematic and rule-governed: the formal language we acquire later in life never shows the same intricate regularities, and we often find ourselves embarrassed to discover that for many years we have been mispronouncing a word that was only learned in reading. Most importantly, the vernacular is the basis for historical continuity and regular linguistic change: it is the form of language that is inherited from parent to child over generations. The history of a language is the history of its vernacular.

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One might also ask why interview at all? Why not just record the stream of speech at the dinner table, on the street, at the post office, in a barber shop, at the laundromat, over card games? Indeed some very important work has been done this way.[1] But the individual sociolinguistic interview is an indispensable tool for many reasons. It obtains the best sound quality, needed for the study of phonetic variation; it obtains the large volume of speech needed for quantitative studies of grammatical variation, and allows us to gather the demographic information needed for socioeconomic studies. Most importantly, these interviews are the necessary basis for a representative study of large speech communities, that allows us to track social stratification and the age differentials that are our most useful indicators of linguistic change.

Principles of interest

The interviews generated in sociolinguistic studies are designed, then, to simulate spontaneous conversation, but not the desultory conversation that prevails when there is nothing interesting on the table. We give considerable attention to what makes speech flow at a high level of intensity in everyday life, in pursuit of the general question "Why does anyone say anything?"

There are of course endless sources of local interest that people like to talk about, in sports, politics, food, music and fashion. But themes that are most useful in a general program for priming the flow of speech involve three universal centers of interest: death, sex and moral indignation. These three drive the flow of speech in every language and every culture, but surface in a wide variety of forms, depending on what is appropriate in local social norms. Thus we can expand these concepts into a range of possible topics around which the currents of speech may flow:

- Death and the danger of death: violence, fighting, sickness, fear, dreams, premonitions and communication with the dead.
- Sex and relations between the sexes: dating, courtship, proposals, marriage, breaking off relationships, affairs, intermarriage.
- Moral indignation: assignment and rejection of blame, unfairness, injustice, gossip, violations of social norms.

As we will see, many narratives combine two or even three of these themes. The confluence of interest will flow strongly into the concept of *reportability*, which is an essential element of the study of narrative. At this point it may be asked, do we need a theory or proof of a theory to support what has just been

[1] See the long-term studies of "Springville," Texas, by Cukor-Avila and Bailey (1995); and the recording by Arvilla Payne of the speech of Carol Meyers over the course of an entire day, analyzed in Hindle (1980).

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said about principles of interest? The narratives that will be put forward in the chapters to follow will be the argument, and if they should fail the test of interest for any given reader, they and this book as a whole may be rejected out of hand.

The study of narrative

As the field of sociolinguistic inquiry developed, narratives of personal experience became more and more important. The narrative itself became a focus of linguistic interest. And as the range of linguistic inquiry gradually broadened, the analysis of discourse became a prominent part of the field, although it never developed the precision and complexity of the central areas of grammar and phonology. Various types of speech events were studied – sermons, lectures, arguments – but of these the narrative turned out to have the most clearly defined properties, with a beginning, a middle, an end and an internal structure that can be described with precision.

In 1967, I published a paper on "Narrative analysis" with Joshua Waletzky (henceforward, L&W)[2] that has been widely used as a basis for further studies of the narrative genre. In 1997, a special four-part issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (now *Narrative Inquiry*) reproduced this paper along with thirty-eight others commenting on or related to it. I've published a dozen other papers on narrative since then, with results, techniques and analyses that will be integrated into the text of this volume.

Narrative studies and narratology have grown enormously in the past half century[3] and taken different forms in different fields: not only in the literary domain, but in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and folklore.[4] A good proportion of this work makes reference to the L&W paper. Two basic themes from that original paper are most often referred to:

- A fully developed narrative begins with an abstract, an orientation with information on persons, places, times and behavior involved; the complicating action; an evaluation section, which identifies the point of the narrative; the resolution; and a coda, which returns the listener to the present time.
- The importance of evaluation in adult narrative, which compares the events that actually happened with those that might have but did not happen.

[2] Labov and Waletzky (1967).
[3] E.g. Genette (1972), Chatman (1976), Greimas (1977), Prince (1982, 1994), Fludernik (1996), Pratt (1997), *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1991–1997, *Narrative Inquiry*, 2000–2012.
[4] A selection of works from the various disciplines includes: in philosophy Ricoeur (1984), in psychology Goldman et al. (1999), in anthropology Ochs and Capps (2001), and in folklore Dundes (1984).

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On the other hand, there are other aspects of the L&W approach to narrative that are echoed less frequently in the literature:

- A definition of narrative as a particular way of recounting past events, by matching the order of narrative clauses with the original order in which those events occurred. Thus narrative, as defined by "temporal juncture," is only one of many ways of dealing with the past. Much of the literature deals with material that L&W would not consider narratives in this sense.
- A focus on the capacity of narrative to transmit to listeners the emotional impact of the central events of the narrator's experience – the matters of life and death that are the focus of this book. In everyday life, people often recount fragments of the day's events to their familiars in unremarkable and ordinary conversational exchanges, and much of the literature deals with such events – quite properly for a discipline that would grasp narrative skills in the most general sense. But certain aspects of narrative construction are brought to the fore by accounts that engage the central matters of life and death, and for the reasons outlined above, these were the primary materials on which the L&W analysis was based. And these are the topics of this book.

This volume continues the tradition of the early L&W approach to narrative in an effort to understand the profound interest generated in listeners by certain narratives, elicited in the course of sociolinguistic interviews, from ordinary people who are not known as gifted storytellers. These are not polished productions that have been many times rehearsed. There is often evidence (as in the case of Jacob Schissel) that they have not been told before.

The primary data on which this book is based are not the narratives themselves, but their effect on listeners when they are retold. Archetypical is the story that Schissel told me in 1961. Since then, I have retold the story to many audiences, small and large, as Jacob Schissel told it to me. I sometimes introduce it in this way: "I'm about to tell you a story. As I begin, this room will become completely silent. The usual little noises that people make, shifting in their chair, turning pages, coughing, whispering, will stop. And that silence will continue for some time after I'm finished. Now you might think to yourself, 'Well, I'll just drop my book on the floor, right in the middle of the story.' But you won't."

Many retellings have proved me right on this, with audiences as large as several thousand, or as small as two. At one such event, a burst of noise was heard in the middle of the story. It was from a playing field outside the auditorium, which had become so silent that noise from outside was suddenly audible.

Retelling stories in public is an odd experience, perhaps no different from that which actors experience in delivering their lines to an audience. Over the

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years I have tried hard to understand the effect that Schissel's story has on the audience, speaking through me. I am writing this book because I think I have some part of the answer.

I am at a disadvantage in this printed format. Some part of Jacob Schissel's personal style that comes through in oral retelling will be lost. You yourself will have to judge whether I am right in saying that this narrative – the substance of the matter and the way it is told – is inherently interesting. If you agree, we can proceed to the next question: why does Jacob Schissel's story have such a profound effect upon us?

Narrative dimensions

Ochs and Capps begin their study of conversational narrative[5] by establishing five dimensions along which narratives can be placed: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity and moral stance. They characterize the default narrative as one that occupies an extreme position on these five dimensions:

1. Tellership: one active teller;
2. Tellability: highly tellable account;
3. Embeddedness: relatively detached from surrounding talk and activity;
4. Linearity: temporal and causal organization;
5. Moral stance: certain, constant moral stance.

This is a good description of the subject matter of this book. With few exceptions, the narratives will be told by a single teller, without strenuous competition from the floor. The contents are all matters of life and death, which are identified with a high degree of reportability. There is some back channel activity, but the connection with the surrounding conversation springs from a question asked by the interviewer. Most importantly, the narratives in Chapters 3–11 all follow the definition of *narrative* put forward in Chapter 2, which involves an organization of discourse that matches the linear order of events in real time. Finally, these events are presented in a manner that maximizes a given moral position of the narrator, sometimes polarizing or sometimes minimizing the conflicts among the characters.

There is no doubt that much is to be learned by studying more fragmentary narratives in which tellership is divided, reportability is minimal, the stream of speech is much divided, and no clear point of view emerges. In most conversations, people refer to past events in one form or another, in ways that are not far from the basic narrative organization that is described here.[6]

[5] Ochs and Capps (2001: 20). [6] Ochs and Capps (2001), Riessman (2002).

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The sociolinguistic interview is an ideal context to elicit the archetypical narrative.[7] This volume will focus upon ten narratives recorded in my own interviews. An equal number are drawn from sociolinguistic interviews conducted by students in courses on "The Study of the Speech Community" and particularly LING560 at the University of Pennsylvania from 1972 to the present. The sociolinguists aim for a conversational style, initiated by an exchange of small talk that carries the setting as far as possible from the formal questionnaires that are used in survey research. Yet this is not a typical conversation that might show an even balance of speakership among the participants. A sociolinguistic interview is considered successful if, in nine out of ten jumps to some point in time, the subject is heard and not the interviewer. One way of achieving this result is for interviewers to let the subject know as quickly as possible that they are interested in whatever he or she has to say. Throughout the interview, they follow the Principle of Tangential Shifting, based on Ruth's statement to Naomi: "Whither thou goest, I go."[8] To guide and stimulate this conversation they traverse a network of conversational modules which contain questions of the following sort:[9]

- "Were you ever in a situation where you thought to yourself that you might not make it, where you said to yourself, 'This is it'?"
- "Was there someone in your family who used to have the feeling that something was going to happen, and it did happen?"
- "Did you ever get blamed for something you didn't do?"
- "Did you ever get into a fight with a guy bigger than you?"
- "Did you ever have a dream that really scared you?"

Such yes/no questions do not in themselves evoke a flow of speech; the answer that follows is usually a simple "yes" or "no." But given a positive response, interviewers then have available one of the most powerful tools in their armory: the question "What happened?" If the speaker has already committed to the existence of such an event, he or she is more likely to launch into the narrative than if the interviewer had said, "Would you please now tell me about one of the most important experiences in your life?"

The interview situation, then, provides an ideal setting for the elicitation of narrative under the full control of the narrator. The interviewer is attentive, interested and has conveyed the idea that he or she has no other goal in life more pressing than to listen to what the speaker has to say, no matter how long it takes. We know of course that the narratives will show

[7] Labov (1984). [8] Old Testament book of Ruth, 1:16.
[9] Experienced interviewers often stimulate response and enhance the conversational nature of the exchange by volunteering a (short) experience of their own.

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"audience design"[10]: to some extent, the speaker shapes the form and content of the narrative according to what the listener is expected to know. But given this favorable setting, many speakers will produce a more expanded account of the events than if they had to compete for the floor in a general conversation.

The question has been raised as to how often such full-formed narratives (the "default" narrative of Ochs and Capps) are to be found in everyday life.[11] At this writing, I have just come from a Christmas party at the home of family friends where "The falling out" (see Chapter 5) was recorded three years ago. Six people were gathered in the small kitchen. For a good quarter of an hour, the floor was held by a 40-year-old man who told with great gusto a series of stories about his sexual adventures with his wife before they were married, and their encounters with his wife's father who at one point returned unexpectedly to the house. The three narratives were reportable in the highest degree, though they would not be tellable[12] in some other gatherings. There was much laughter from the group, four of whom had heard the stories before,[13] but there was no competition for the floor, only encouragement to continue. This is one of countless such occasions where I have observed the unrecorded flow of full-formed archetypical narratives in everyday life. For our present purposes, recording is essential, since we are concerned with the details of the linguistic construction that transform experience in the interests of the teller.

A great deal is to be learned about narratives from observing how they are inserted into such a competitive situation, and the field of narrative studies has recently developed a strong interest in "small stories" which are located some distance from the Ochs and Capps default narrative. As Bamberg and Georgakapoulou describe them, such small stories may be brief efforts at telling that are seen as part of the speaker's efforts to establish a given identity, "fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world." They may be "very recent or still unfolding events … immediately reworking slices of experience." The events involved are not necessarily interesting in themselves.[14]

Recent work on narrative makes reference to "a debate between proponents of big story research and supporters of small story research."[15] This can be fruitful, in pointing to the limitations of each. In big stories, the effects of audience design are not so obvious and may be missed. Small stories are often compressed under competition for the floor, and the full development of the moral position of the narrator may be obscured. Both types of narrative have

[10] See Bell (1984). [11] See Schegloff (1997). [12] See Norrick (2005).
[13] His wife was standing beside him throughout.
[14] Bamberg and Georgakapoulou (2004). See also Bamberg (2006), Georgakapoulu (2008).
[15] Helsig (2010: 274), Freeman (2006).

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much to tell us about human experience. As Freeman points out, they tell about different regions of experience: one that involves the quotidian work-aday world of incidents and exchanges, of routine talk about this or that, and another that involves a kind of holiday, in which one takes the time to consider what it is that's been going on.[16]

In both types of narrative, one can observe the narrator's efforts to transform experience in the interest of the teller. This volume will focus on the linguistic implementation of those efforts. At the same time, the relation of our stories to the real world of the past will be defended, beginning with the working principle that narrators do not lie, given the rich store of devices for transforming reality without lying.

From the study of big stories, we will learn much about the underlying forms of narrative construction and the shape of fully developed narratives. In the forest, trees are crowded together, pressing against each other in ways that limit their horizontal spread. In an open field, we often see a great oak, maple or chestnut at its fullest development, its limbs reaching out under a gigantic symmetrical dome. The narratives of this volume are more like the trees in an open field than those of the forest. There is nothing unnatural about their development; big stories are not the creation of the interview format. We find many such full-fledged extended narratives in recorded conversations, where a single speaker holds the floor for an extended period until the story comes to its natural end.[17] One big story, "The falling out" (Chapter 5), is jointly told by a pair of sisters, with competition for the floor that gradually shifts as the experience of one becomes dominant over the other.

Many of our big stories are quite brief, sometimes as short as eleven clauses. They deal with a single situation in a single setting, and when they come to an end there is no doubt that the story is over.[18] We will also encounter much longer narratives that continue over a series of times and places before the fundamental problem is resolved. These will be presented as "epic narratives," the focus of Chapters 6–9. The scope will be extended further in the following chapters, which consider sagas and true epics. Finally, we will consider the narrative style of certain well-known historians, who have complete control over how much and how many facts will be presented, yet are conscious of the scrutiny of future generations, who may or may not accept their selection.

[16] Freeman (2006: 137).

[17] This does not mean that no one else speaks. As Sacks (1992) points out, back-channel responses do not claim the floor, and the performance of the narrative is effectively a claim to return the assignment of speakership to the narrator until the narrative is completed.

[18] As we will see in the treatment of temporal organization (Chapter 2), narratives often are concluded with a coda, which returns the time of reference to the present time of the conversation, obviating any further implementation of "What happened?"

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