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978-1-107-03334-4 - The Language of Life and Death: The Transformation of
Experience in Oral Narrative

William Labov

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The Language of Life and Death

The Transformation of Experience in Oral Narrative

We share the experience of others through the stories they tell of the crucial events in their lives. This book provides a rich range of narratives that grip the reader's attention together with an analysis of how it is done. While remaining true to the facts, narrators use linguistic devices to present themselves in the best possible light and change the listener's perception of who is to blame for what has occurred.

William Labov extends his widely used framework for narrative analysis to matters of greatest human concern: accounts of the danger of death, the escalation of violence, premonitions, and large-scale community conflicts. The book also examines traditional epic and historical texts, from Herodotus and the Old Testament to Macaulay, showing how these literary genres draw upon the skills and techniques of personal narratives. Not only relevant to students of narratology, discourse and sociolinguistics, this book will be rewarding reading for anyone interested in the human condition.

WILLIAM LABOV is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania.

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It could be argued that the narrative art itself arose from the need to tell an
adventure; that man risking his life in perilous circumstances constitutes the
original definition of what is worth talking about.

Paul Zweig: *The Adventurer*

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Preface

As a sophomore at Harvard in 1945, I took a beginning class on Homeric Greek with Eric Havelock, the scholar who later became a dominant figure in classics studies through his *Preface to Plato* and other work. We had been reading of the unquenchable laughter that arose among the gods when the affairs of Hephaestus, Ares and Aphrodite were exposed. Havelock turned to us and asked, “Why are the gods such comic characters?” There was a pause; no one spoke. He continued, “Because if you’re not going to die, nothing important can happen to you.”

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In putting this book together, I have received help from several sources that do not all appear in the references. Gerald Prince has introduced me to the many domains of narratology that have been developed since my first efforts in 1967. Robin Séguy read the manuscript with meticulous care and used his deep knowledge of narrative to restore a sense of order to the complex web of citations. My daughter Alice Goffman read a near-final version and contributed much to my effort to say what this book adds up to. Henry Glassie gave me needed orientation to the interpretation of the traditional tale “In vain I tried to tell you.” My wife and colleague Gillian Sankoff has been a continuing source of insight into the cultural and emotional issues involved and helped reduce the many errors to a reasonable number. My indebtedness to the narrators who provide the substance of this book is so obvious that I shall not mention it here: but see the last sentence of the book on this point.