NARRATION AS ROLE-COMPLEMENTARY INTERACTION: AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LITERARY NARRATIVES

Richard J. Watts

University of Zürich

G. D. Martin (1975) believes that "the past is a huge patchwork of near-certitude, guesswork and doubt". To make sense of that patchwork we must be imaginative. Naturally there are elaborate social checks on the use of our imagination in communicative situations in which the events of the past are meant to be reported "factually". Nevertheless, whether, as reporters or narrators, we want the audience to experience those events as factual or essentially fictional, we must still shape them linguistically and present them in a communicatively effective way.

In our role as reporters or narrators our principal communicative intention is, I believe, to enable the audience to gain access to and re-experience the events of the past, whether true or imagined, so that they may be re-assessed in terms of the present of the narration. This is just as true of oral anecdotes as it is of written reports and chronicles, and just as true of historical texts as it is of purely fictional ones. However, it is not my intention here to discuss differences between various types of narrative text, but rather to evaluate the effectiveness of William Labov's approach to the study of oral narratives (cf. Labov 1972 and Labov and Waletzky 1967) and to suggest how it might be adjusted when applied to written fictional texts.

Labov takes narrating to be a form of socio-communicative verbal interaction. Like other forms of linguistic interaction such as conversing, discussing, debating, lecturing, etc. it is governed by well-defined social constraints concerning, for example, the number and social status of the participants, the nature of the linguistic activity in which the participants are involved, their obligations towards one another, the type and length of the communicative turns granted to them and the ways in which a turn may be acquired, begun, terminated or interrupted by other participants.

In oral narration the narrative text is normally embedded within other forms

of role-complementary verbal interaction, a fact which greatly influenced Labov's data gathering techniques. Interviews with informants were found to restrict their willingness to co-operate, and researchers were trained to involve them in natural conversational interaction. During the course of the conversation the researcher put one of the two following questions at what he deemed to be an appropriate moment:

— Were you ever in a fight with a guy bigger than you?
— Was there ever a time when you narrowly escaped death?

This usually triggered off a personal anecdote of a type which Labov calls a "natural narrative". Its distinguishing feature is that the narrator is also one of the central characters in the narrative.

Labov's data gathering techniques have been adopted and refined by Uta Quasthoff (1980) in Germany, although her research has led her to reject the somewhat standardised "leading questions" used by Labov's team. She quite rightly remarks that his "method structures the interview relatively stringently". In a natural situation anecdotes are not always triggered off by questions and do not always involve what Quasthoff calls "the 'really great' events in a person's life". I shall return to this point later. For the moment, however, I shall consider Labov's analysis of the natural narratives in his corpus.

Labov maintains that a natural narrative can be analysed according to a restricted set of structural categories, some of them obligatory, others optional. The *abstract* is a statement or summary of the theme and/or content of the narrative, and it always precedes the body of the text. The *orientation* section presents the characters of the narrative and its spatio-temporal setting. It may also give any further information which the narrator feels is necessary for an understanding of the text. The *complicating action* is a narrative event or action introducing complexity of some kind into the text. Obviously it is the *raison d'être* of the total narrative, since the text must be geared towards the solution of the problem in what Labov calls the *result* or *resolution*. In most, but not all, of Labov's natural narratives the narrator also added a final commentary, normally of a non-narrative nature, to draw a moral conclusion, bring the audience up to date with the present state of affairs, or invite a commentary on the text by the audience. Labov calls this category the *coda*. The final category, *evaluation*, permeates the whole structure of the narrative. It is essentially the linguistic manipulation of simple narrative structure — narrative and descriptive clauses — to convey the narrator's attitude toward the events and to make the text generally interesting and worthwhile for the audience. He lists eight types of evaluation and describes them in great detail, but I shall forego discussing them in the present paper.

Now, if this is all there is to Labov's theory, it might be asked, why do we need it at all? Is it not really a restatement of the old adage that any text — whether narrative or not — must have a beginning, a middle and an end? And if this is so, surely any good theory of plot, setting and characterization would do just as well? We should note first that Labov did not set up his model of narrative structure as a contribution to literary theory. His primary goal was to assess the linguistic creativity of speakers of the Black English Vernacular in the United States and to provide evidence that dialect speakers in general did not have at their command merely a restricted or impoverished form of standard American English, but a linguistic system which is just as complex and potentially creative as the standard and a valid vehicle for all types of socio-communicative interaction. However, he *does* offer us a rudimentary framework which can be refined, amended and developed in such a way that it offers a linguistic corner-stone to literary theories of plot, setting and characterization. It is precisely in this direction that Uta Quasthoff and Teun van Dijk have been working. In the remainder of this paper I shall present two refinements to Labov's model, which can, I believe, be of use to narratologists.

I shall consider first the fact that oral narrative texts are almost always embedded within conversational interaction. As we saw, Labov's data gathering techniques are based on the assumption that the researcher's question will trigger off the narrative. The question itself is thus outside the scope of the narrative text proper and is not considered further in Labov's model. But, as Quasthoff notes, narratives may be triggered off in many different ways. In a conversational situation in which each participant has an equal right to make a contribution to the interaction — an equal right to take the floor, as it were — and may expect any other participant to claim his right by interrupting, the turns are bound to be relatively short. So, if a participant claims the right to a set of turns constituting a narrative, he is in effect asking the others to give up their right to take a turn for a rather longer period of time. Harvey Sacks (1973) has suggested that there are elaborate floor-seeking techniques available to speakers who wish to take the floor for a set of turns which will constitute a narrative. The potential storyteller has to place them well in the ongoing interaction and time them well, too. What he wants to contribute must be thematically and interactionally relevant, or his floor-seeker will not be successful. In research at the University of Zürich we have also found it necessary to postulate a complementary set of procedures to floor-seeking, which might be called loosely "floor-finding". In other words, if one has been unsuccessful in placing a floor-seeker, one has to "find" another appropriate spot in the ongoing interaction in which to place a further floor-seeker. This may not always be easy, since the original relevance of the story may dissolve rather rapidly. The would-be narrator is thus constantly on the look-out for a new motivation to tell his story. Once he has started, however, he cannot reasonably be stopped until he has reached the resolution or the coda of the narrative.

We might well ask why such elaborate mechanisms exist in role-comple-

mentary interaction simply to enable a participant to tell a story. The answer is to be sought in the nature of role-complementary interaction itself. A narrator's obligation towards the other participants to make his turns interesting is much greater than with a normal converstional turn, and there is a much greater risk of censure if the others feel that his narrative has been deficient. For reasons such as these anybody who wishes to play the role of narrator is conventionally constrained to seek the consent of the other participants to do so. If one of the participants asks a leading question, as in Labov's research, consent is automatically given, since in terms of the theory of turn-taking it is a clear case of "present speaker selects". We will not know how consent is sought and granted if we do not examine that part of the conversational interaction immediately preceding the narrative, which is the main justification for such ethnomethodological research as that carried out by Sacks, Schenkein, Jefferson, etc. and for our own research at the English department of the University of Zürich. We may therefore conclude that "floor-seeking" and "floor-finding" are important structural elements in the whole narrative situation.

How is floor-seeking realized in a written narrative text? In the first instance the mere fact that the text has appeared in print is proof enough that at least the publisher has granted his consent, and that he believes there will be a potential audience. Secondly, any information on the dustcover or flyleaf, any letter from the editor or prefatory note by the author or the implied author etc. fulfills the function of convincing the reader that it will be worth his while to grant the narrative turn. Floor-seeking in this type of communicative situation thus takes on the form of priming the potential audience for the text which is to follow and need not be carried out by the narrator or the implied author.

Consider, for example, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In the 1726 edition (for the purposes of the present paper I shall ignore the complex textual history of the work) the text was preceded by a letter written by a certain Richard Sympson giving details of the alleged author of the *Travels*, Lemuel Gulliver. Sympson vouches for Gulliver's integrity and points out in particular that "there is an air of truth apparent through the whole: and indeed the author was so distinguished for his veracity, that it became a sort of proverb among his neighbours at Redriff, when anyone affirmed a thing, to say, it was as true as if Mr Gulliver had spoke it". The extended title of Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* may also be interpreted as seeking the floor to present a set of narrative turns by assuring the potential reader of the authenticity of the account and making him feel that it will be worth his while to read on:

> *A Journal of the Plague Year*
> being observations or memorials
> of the most remarkable occurrences,
> as well public as private, which happened in

> London during the last great visitation in 1665.
> Written by a Citizen who continued
> all the while in London.
> Never made public before.

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* it is the implied author himself who takes on the task of persuading the reader of the value of the text and also explains what motivated him to write it. Floor-seeking is put into verse form in the "Author's Apology for his Book".

It might be objected that such introductory sections are usually inserted after the completion of the manuscript. This is not all that important for the reading process, however, since, in terms of the overall structure of the text, they occur *before* the narrative. Moreover, as they are an integral part of the total communicative interaction between the implied reader and the implied author (or the narrator) by way of the text, they deserve to play a part in the interpretation of the whole. I am thus suggesting that it is helpful to compare such sections with the communicative function of gaining the floor for a set of narrative turns in oral role-complementary interaction.

Authors are clearly aware of the value of floor-seeking devices in manipulating the reader's reactions to the narrative text. For example, B. S. Johnson's short story "Instructions for the Use of Women, or Here, You've Been Done" openly plays on the floor-seeking mechanism to create a marked beginning to the narrative:

> Let me try to set this down with an exactness you may or may not find curious The only point of precision (as distinct from completeness, to which I feel incapabl of aspiring) on which I am undecided is her name. The indecision is principally occasioned by the existence of libel laws of a surely unnecessarily harsh character: for I am, after all, only telling the truth as I see it now, remembering to the best of those faculties I have what I felt reasonably sure happened at the time. If you are not an acquaintance of mine (which you are almost certainly pleased not to be) her name can mean nothing to you; and those who do know me will already be aware of her name or be easily able, from their special knowledge, to identify her. So how could she be harmed? Why should our lawgivers think she needs protection?
> But in their circumstances I shall call her Winnie, or Rachel, or Stella, or any other name that reasonably preserves her gender, as the mood takes me, or rather as whatever comes to my mind at the time a proper name seems to make the rhythm of the sentence a little less of a failure. And I shall make unthrifting use of the feminine personal pronouns. But, whichever, no burden of universality is to be laid upon the appellative; nor on anything else either.
> I wonder is anyone still reading?

The opening sentence of Johnson's story is a written equivalent of floor-seeking for a narrative in oral interaction. The narrator knows perfectly well that he is under an obligation to make what he says interesting to his audience, and it is clear from his final question that he is quite conscious of having violated the obligation. The unmarked opening of a written narrative text does not

normally consist of an overt request to take the floor. But the very fact that the text has appeared in print is evidence that the author and the publisher are satisfied that the narrative turn will be worth the audience's attention.

My second amendment to Labov's model concerns the categories of orientation, complicating action and result. Most of the natural narratives collected by Labov's team were short anecdotes involving just one complication and a swift movement towards a result. For the purposes that Labov had in mind there was no need to carry out a finer analysis. However, if we want to put the model to use for longer stretches of narrative text, particularly those in the written medium, a number of changes are in order.

Apart from evaluation the narrative structural categories are functional rather than formal and linguistic. Labov does give a surface structure description of what he understands to be the basic narrative clause, but it is inadequate in several respects (cf. Tognola 1983 for a discussion of its inadequacies). In general the categories can be correlated more or less with certain distinctive types of linguistic structure. For example, according to Labov, the complicating action and the result will have to be narrative clauses. Rickenbach (1980) and Tognola (1983) have demonstrated convincingly, however, that complication may be introduced through other forms of linguistic structure. The complication may even be present before the narrative text begins. The orientation is not restricted to one specific clause type, either. In longer narrative texts there may be a number of narrative clauses to which we may wish to attach a label such as "complicating action", whereas other narrative clauses are recognized as leading up to pivotal points in the text. Similarly, in the orientation section we may find sets of narrative clauses without wanting to say that they belong — as a set of narrative sequences — to the narrative proper. Thus, in effect, the categories are really labels to express how the hearer/reader interprets the linguistic structures of the text in accordance with what he has already heard/read and what he/she expects to occur next. The linguist's task is to justify Labov's categorization from the point of view of the language used.

Analysing a sample from a literary text would take us too far here, so I shall confine myself to a short folk-tale to illustrate what I mean. The folk-tale differs from the natural narrative in not involving the narrator as a character in the narrative world of the text, but it is still essentially an oral performance. The tale that I shall present is called "The Solway Worm", and appearing as it does in a published collection of English folk-tales, it has unfortunately suffered a great deal of editing:

The Solway Worm

A great sea-snake or worm used to come up the Solway Firth and eat all the fish and the fishermen and fowlers too, that's what my uncles at Workington used to tell me. So people starved and it would snatch any cattle come down to graze on the sea weed.

Then they made a hundred stakes sharpened at each end and at low tide they went out in their coracles. — Yes, tarred basket boats they said, and they drove one end of every stake in the Solway Firth where the sharp end was just nicely covered when the tide came in. Then they all ran home to be safe and the tide came in and the worm came too and he got stuck with a hundred sharp stakes through him, my uncles said. So they left him there to die for three days. And he bellowed till he died and the gulls and the fishes had a grand feed.

The first clause — "A great sea-snake or worm used to come up the Solway Firth and eat all the fish and the fishermen and fowlers too" — contains the quasi-modal structure *used to* + V, which semantically entails a set of repeated actions in the past which have now been terminated. Two points are significant here: firstly, since the actions were repeated, the clause cannot be classified as a narrative clause, and secondly, the result of the narrative is conventionally implicated, i.e. the point of the story is to get rid of the Solway Worm. In addition, reference is also made to a spatial location and a set of characters — including the sea-snake. Since we know that we are in a set of narrative turns and that the narrative sequences have not yet begun, it is perfectly justified to assume that this is the orientation and the type of structure just discussed is typical of this section of a narrative text.

The second clause — "that's what my uncles at Workington used to tell me" — is interesting. It can be deleted from the text without effecting either the narrative itself or the orientation, and its only interactional function is to justify the telling of the tale by setting it within local and family tradition. In this sense it is an underpinning of the floor-seeking device which we can presume to have preceded the text before it was edited out.

The third clause — "so people starved and it would snatch any cattle come down to graze on the sea weed" — is prevented from being a narrative clause by the logical connective *so* and by the occurrence of the model verb *would* in the second half. *So* introduces the logical consequence of the repeated action governed by *used (to)*, with the result that the verb *starved* is likewise governed by it. The modal verb *would* in the second half of the clause bears the same entailments in this context as *used (to)*. Thus the whole of the third clause can be added to the orientation section of the text. The linguistic signal for the beginning of a narrative sequence is the adverb *then* in clause four. The verb in that clause — *made* — is significantly not governed by either *used (to)* or *would*. Thus it must be interpreted as a unique, non-habitual action and the probable beginning of a sequence of narrative events which will culminate in the slaying of the Solway Worm.

Analysing a text like this is clearly not difficult. My aim has been to show that certain clearly definable linguistic structures can be classified as "typical orientation structure". If we can set up such typical linguistic structures for each of Labov's categories, we shall know what signals to look for in the analy-

sis of longer stretches of narrative text. The type of sociolinguistic and ethno-
methodological approach that I have outlined in this paper can play a sig-
nificant role in the interpretation of literary and non-literary narratives. Nar-
ration is a form of verbal interaction, and, as Uta Quasthoff puts it:

> Verbal communicative behaviour is a structured process, within which available
> linguistic forms are applied, structured towards carrying out functions which can
> only be realized in interaction with a partner.

The formal investigation of the linguistic forms used to carry out the com-
municative function of narration can and should be an integral part of any
theory of narratology.

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