

# **‘Oral versions of personal experience’: Labovian narrative analysis and its uptake<sup>1</sup>**

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William Labov is known across the human and social sciences for his work on oral narratives about personal experience. This article provides an overview of that research and discusses its uptake and influence in linguistics and in other fields. Subsequent scholarship on narrative has critiqued Labov’s model on the grounds that it privileges a certain genre of personal-experience narrative and underplays the role of interlocutors and other contextual features in shaping oral narratives, but such scholarship inevitably borrows Labov’s insight that the form of narrative is linked to its interactional functions. Narrative research in psychology and other fields often cites Labov without actually making much use of Labov’s model, but Labovian narrative analysis has nonetheless had an enormous influence in making possible and legitimizing the study of everyday, vernacular narration.

Für seine Arbeit zu mündlichen Erzählungen über persönliche Erfahrungen ist William Labov in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften bekannt. Der vorliegende Aufsatz bietet einen Überblick über diese Forschung; es wird erörtert, wie diese Forschung aufgenommen wurde und wie sie die Sprachwissenschaft und andere Fächer beeinflusst hat. Wissenschaftler kritisierten in der Folge Labovs Erzählmodell mit der Begründung, dass dieses ein gewisses Genre von Erzählungen über persönliche Erfahrungen bevorzugt und die Rolle der Gesprächspartner sowie weiterer kontextueller Merkmale, die mündliche Erzählungen prägen, herunterspielt. Diese Forschung entlehnt jedoch unvermeidbar Labovs Erkenntnis, dass die Form der Erzählung mit ihren interaktionalen Funktionen verbunden ist. Die Erzählforschung in Psychologie und anderen Fächern zitiert Labov häufig, jedoch ohne besonders viel Gebrauch von seinem Modell zu machen. Trotzdem hatte die Labov’sche Erzählanalyse einen enormen Einfluss, indem sie die Untersuchung von alltäglicher, umgangssprachlicher Erzählung ermöglicht und legitimiert hat. [German]

**KEYWORDS:** William Labov, narrative, discourse analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Many scholars across the social and human sciences know William Labov (henceforth L) primarily because of his work on the structure of narrative. Coinciding with other early scholarship in linguistics on the structure of discourse and the connection between linguistic form and communicative function, Labovian narrative analysis quickly became a canonical part of the foundational literature of linguistic discourse analysis. In other fields, Labov's work on narrative offered legitimacy and methodological rigor to scholars interested in the qualitative analysis of human identities and experiences. This paper provides an overview of Labov's work on narrative and its uptake. While relatively few of the scholars who cite, draw from, or critique this body of work share its author's goals as a linguist, Labovian narrative analysis has helped legitimize close attention to language for other reasons, in a number of other lines of inquiry.

### 'ORAL VERSIONS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE'

In 'Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience,' Labov and Waletzky (henceforth L&W; 1997[1967]) proposed an approach to personal experience narrative that would be both 'formal,' in that it would employ clause-by-clause linguistic analysis in order to describe the 'invariant structural units' of personal experience narrative, and 'functional,' in that these structural units would be described with reference to what personal experience narratives must accomplish if they are to seem 'normal' (1997 [1967]: 4). L&W's ultimate goal was to correlate surface differences among ways of telling the same underlying narrative with 'social characteristics' of narrators and to provide a systematic method for gauging the 'relative effectiveness and completeness' of personal experience narratives (1997 [1967]: 38). The method proposed in L&W was subsequently used to compare narrative styles across social groups (see below) and to measure children's development of narrative skill (McCabe and Peterson 1991), but it was not widely taken up as a formal method for gauging the complexity or quality of adults' narratives.

According to L&W, a clause in a personal experience narrative can serve one of two functions: referential or evaluative. Referential clauses have to do with what the story is about – events, characters, setting. Evaluative clauses (and evaluative aspects of referential clauses) have to do with why the narrator is telling the story and why the audience should listen to it. In other words, evaluative material states or highlights the point of the story. Any narrative, by definition, includes at least two 'narrative clauses.' A narrative clause is a clause that cannot be moved with respect to any other narrative clause without changing the order in which the represented events must be taken to have occurred. If two narrative clauses are reversed, for example, they

represent a different chronology: 'I punched this boy/ and he punched me' implies a different sequence of events than 'This boy punched me/ and I punched him.' L&W describe a formal procedure, based on the relative movability of each clause in a narrative, for determining the narrative's 'primary sequence,' or underlying structure (1997[1967]: 24). This procedure was never taken up again in L's subsequent work on narrative, and I will not discuss it any further here.

L&W note that 'in most [personal experience] narratives, the linear ordering of clauses departs significantly from the order of the primary sequence' (1997 [1967]: 26), and the rest of the article provides a functional account of the reasons for this. A 'fully developed' narrative may include clauses or sets of clauses with a number of functions. Each functional element serves a dual purpose, making reference to events, characters, feelings, and so on that are understood to have happened or existed outside of the ongoing interaction, and at the same time structuring the interaction in which the story is being told by guiding the teller and the audience through the events and insuring that they are comprehensible and worth recounting. The following extracts (Examples 1 and 2) from a personal experience narrative by an American woman (Johnstone 1990: 68–71) illustrate some of the ways storytellers accomplish these goals.<sup>2</sup>

### Example 1

- 1 I'll tell you about the lesser of the two evils.
- 2 Uh, it was when Pete was in the hospital
- 3 and I think it was our very first snow
- 4 because it was the first week in December and uh,
- 5 when Grandma and I left the hospital it just started snowing,
- 6 just this real light wet snow
- 7 and the ground wasn't froze yet.
- 8 And we were just visiting and talking,
- 9 and going along,
- 10 and the road didn't seem to be slippery whatsoever, just, you know.
- 11 But I was going thirty, forty miles an hour,
- 12 I wasn't going very fast,
- 13 and we were about a mile south of South Whitley,
- 14 and we had already climbed one hill,
- 15 out there you know where, uh,
- 16 where, uh, Jakob lives, Jakob Meier.
- 17 Ok, uh,
- 18 we had already gone over, uh, up that hill
- 19 and then this next one,
- 20 where the school bus driver lives.
- 21 I can't think of his name right off.
- 22 But right there at the crest of that hill,

- 23 the car started SLIDING,  
 24 and the minute it started sliding I knew we were heading for the ditch,  
 25 and there was nothing I could do to control it.  
 26 I hit the brake,  
 27 I hit the brake lightly,  
 28 and I hung on to the wheel,  
 29 and we went UP this embankment,  
 30 at least six foot embankment.  
 31 And then I thought 'Oh MY GOSH,  
 32 GRANDMA!  
 33 Grandma are you all right?'  
 34 You know,  
 35 I mean that's what my thinking was,  
 36 I thought 'OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD' is all I could say. [laughs]  
 37 And it came back down again  
 38 and we SWIRLED AROUND, I don't know,  
 39 a couple times anyhow,  
 40 and the car stopped,  
 41 and the car was still running.  
 42 And I looked to see if Grandma was all right  
 43 and I said 'Are you okay?'  
 44 'Yes,' she says,  
 45 'I'm all right now,  
 46 there's nothing wrong with me.'  
 47 And I said 'Are you SURE you're okay?'  
 48 You aren't, you didn't hurt your head or anything?'  
 49 'No no no, I'm all right.'

The protagonist then drives the car into town, where neighbors notice that it is damaged and missing its license plate, and she recruits a policeman to accompany her back to the scene of the skid to retrieve the license plate and check for damage to a fence she thinks she may have hit. The story ends this way:

## Example 2

- 111 And we found the license plate, uh,  
 112 many many feet away from where it was,  
 113 and of course then the fender had to be replaced.

The narrator begins with what L&W call an *abstract*: 'I'll tell you about the lesser of the two evils' (line 1). Story abstracts consist of a clause or two at the beginning of the narrative summarizing the story to come. The abstract announces that the narrator has a story to tell and makes a claim to the right to tell it, a claim supported by the suggestion that it will be a good story, relevant to the ongoing talk, perhaps suspenseful or entertaining, and thus worth the audience's time and the speaking rights the audience will temporarily relinquish. *Orientation* in a narrative introduces characters and

the activities they are involved in ('Grandma and I' [line 5]; 'we were just visiting and talking and going along' [lines 8–9]; 'I was going thirty, forty miles an hour' [line 11]) and setting, temporal ('it was when Pete was in the hospital' [line 2]; 'it was the first week in December' [line 4]) and spatial ('we were about a mile south of South Whitley' [line 13]; 'where the school bus driver lives' [line 20]). Orientation often occurs near the beginning but may be interjected at other points. *Complicating action* clauses are narrative clauses (often in the simple past tense) that recapitulate a sequence of events leading up to their climax, the point at which the suspense is resolved ('the car started sliding [line 23]/I hit the brake [line 26]/and we went up this embankment [line 29]/and then I thought "Oh, my gosh, Grandma! Grandma, are you alright?" [lines 31–33]/and [the car] came back down again and we swirled around [lines 37–38]/and the car stopped' [line 40]). These clauses refer to events in the world of the story and, in the world of the telling, they create tension that keeps auditors listening. The *result or resolution* releases the tension and tells what finally happened (Grandma was alright but the car was damaged). Often just before the result or resolution, but also throughout the narrative, are elements that serve as *evaluation*, stating or underscoring what is interesting or unusual about the story, why the audience should keep listening and allow the teller to keep talking. At the end of the story, the teller may announce via a *coda* that the story is over, sometimes providing a short summary of it or connecting the world of the story with the present ('and of course then the fender had to be replaced' [line 113]).

In 'The transformation of experience in narrative syntax' (Labov 1972: 354–396; henceforth 'Transformation'), L elaborated on L&W's account of evaluation, which had been treated in the earlier article mainly as a structural section of a personal-experience narrative.<sup>3</sup> L showed that evaluation may occur in free clauses that comment on the story from outside ('and there was nothing I could do to control it' [line 25]) or in clauses that attribute evaluative commentary to characters in the story ('I thought "OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD" is all I could say' [line 36]). Evaluation can also be embedded in the narrative, in the form of:

- extra detail ('it just started snowing/just this real light wet snow/and the ground wasn't froze yet' [lines 5–7]);
- suspension of the action via paraphrase or repetition ('I hit the brake/I hit the brake lightly' [lines 26–27]);
- 'intensifiers' such as quantifiers ('at least six foot embankment' [line 30]);
- elements that compare what did happen with what did not happen, could have happened, or might happen ('the lesser of the two evils' [line 1]);
- 'correlatives' that indicate what was occurring simultaneously; and
- 'explicatives' that are appended to narrative or evaluative clauses.

L&W showed that a certain kind of personal experience narrative has a predictable, describable structure. The larger argument in which this claim was embedded was that linguists must pay attention to the social context of talk in order to answer fundamental questions about syntax and semantics. L&W and ‘Transformation’ linked linguistic structure on several levels to pragmatic and interactional function. In addition to identifying larger functional sections such as abstract and orientation, L&W pointed to the way in which some verb tenses (simple past, simple present, sometimes past perfect but not present perfect) tended to characterize narrative clauses, and how evaluation could be accomplished through direct quotation and repetition and by suspending the action with a string of non-narrative clauses just before the resolution. ‘Transformation’ discussed the usefulness of continuous aspect for orientation clauses and showed how a long list of linguistic features, including comparatives and negatives, could serve evaluative functions.

However, two aspects of this work have subsequently led to confusion. One of these has to do with the meaning of the term *narrative*. For L, a ‘narrative’ was a sequence of clauses with at least one temporal juncture, but a ‘complete,’ ‘normal,’ or ‘fully-formed’ narrative – also often referred to simply as a ‘narrative’ – included such things as orientation and evaluation as well. For L&W, the two uses of *narrative* refer to two levels of analysis, ‘narrative’ in the first sense being a necessary part of ‘narrative’ in the second sense. L&W discussed both ‘minimal’ and more elaborate types. Some subsequent analysts have found it helpful to substitute another term, such as *story*, for the second sense. But many have continued to adopt the same term – sometimes *narrative*, sometimes *story* – both for any talk representing a sequence of past events and for talk specifically meant to get and keep someone interested in listening to a recounting of events. The lack of a single, clear definition in L’s work helped insure that the meaning of the term *narrative* has continued to be up for grabs. Not all of the scholars who claim to draw on, supplement, or correct L’s framework use the term *narrative* in either of the ways L does, and sometimes it is not clear how the term is being defined.

A second source of confusion has been the normative sound of some of L’s terminology, and, partly in consequence, the normative way in which his analysis can be read. L’s claim to be describing ‘the normal structure of narrative’ or characterizing ‘fully developed’ or ‘complete’ narratives has led some to suppose that L was making more universal and/or more judgmental claims than may have been intended. This has led some scholars to fail to see that the fact that stories arising in different contexts turn out to be different actually does more to support L’s claims about the connection between narrative form and contextual function than to debunk them.

## UPTAKE AND CRITIQUE OF 'ORAL VERSIONS'

Labovian narrative analysis was quickly adopted in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, first by L's students and then more widely. Coming as it did in the midst of a 'narrative turn' across the human sciences, Labov's work also resonated with scholars in other disciplines who see narrative as a fundamental way humans make sense of the world, particularly among those interested in the interactive creation of selves and social identities in discourse (Bamberg 2010; Goodwin 1990; Ochs and Capps 2001). Inevitably, the uptake has been selective. For the most part, the linguistic aspects of L's work on narrative – its illustration that units of language larger than sentences can be described structurally and the ways in which it explains details of linguistic structure in terms of narrative function – have not been what most resonated with other scholars. This is in part because most of the research that has taken up L's work on narrative has not been focused on the nature of language, but rather on questions about identity formation, socialization, and social interaction.

### *Narrative syntax*

One early strand of work that drew on L's *did* take up L's project of describing linguistic structures that play particular roles in personal experience narrative. Several studies published in the late 1970s and early 1980s explored how the 'historical present' (HP) – the use of the present tense to refer to events or actions in the past – works in narrative. Traditional analyses of the HP explain its use as a way of making events appear to be happening in the present, as the story is being told. Wolfson (1978: 32) pointed out, however, that the English 'present' tense is, in fact, timeless in reference and that the HP always alternates with the past tense (1978: 34). Wolfson claimed that what is communicatively significant is the switch between past and HP, which operates 'to partition off important events or points in the story from one another' (1978: 36). Taking this argument a step further, Schiffrin (1981) showed that the HP is almost completely restricted to narrative complicating action clauses, where the temporal reference is clear and does not need to be encoded in the verbs. Schiffrin claims that it is only switches from HP to past tense that serve the partitioning function Wolfson describes. When the switch goes from past to HP, the function of the HP is evaluative in Labov's sense, serving to underscore the unusual or surprising events which give the story its point (1981: 59).

### *Variation in narrative*

A second strand of work that took up part of L's agenda extended the study of sociolinguistic variation to narrative, comparing personal-experience stories across groups of people defined in demographic terms. Polanyi (1985)



proposed a way of deriving the basic tenets of American culture from an analysis of personal experience stories by Americans. Polanyi identified 'key events' by looking for the most heavily evaluated narrative clauses and 'crucial contextualizing information' by looking for the most heavily evaluated orientational material. Etter-Lewis (1991) described personal storytelling by African-American women, and Riessman (1988) compared narratives by an Anglo-American woman and a Puerto Rican, showing how social class and ethnicity shape the women's experiences and ways of recounting them. Other studies have compared narrative across geographical and cultural space. Blum-Kulka (1993) compared dinner-table storytelling in American and Israeli families, finding that middle-class American families tended to ritualize the telling of stories about the day, particularly by the children, while in the Israeli families storytelling was more collaborative and more evenly distributed among family members. De Fina (2003) explored how people narrating disorienting experiences, such as clandestine border crossings, deal with the difficulty of providing orientation details, such as times and places.

Narrative has been described as one occasion for the performance of gendered identities through the reproduction of socially sanctioned roles. Sociolinguists working mainly with middle-class whites in the U.S. and the U.K. have found differences in plots, strategies, and participation structures between narratives told by women and ones told by men. For example, Coates (1996) showed that British women have a tendency to tell self-deprecating narratives. Johnstone (1993) found that the American men and women she studied constructed different worlds in their stories via different plot types and different use of constructed dialogue and detail. The story about 'the lesser of the two evils' extracted in the previous section (Examples 1 and 2) was told by a middle-aged woman. Like a number of the women's stories, this one began with a formulaic abstract which sets it in a traditional context ('the lesser of the two evils' [line 1]). The story is situated in a world of social interdependence: the protagonist acts in concert with others, the neighbors and the policeman, and her first thoughts, as she represents them, are of others ('And then I thought "Oh MY GOSH, GRANDMA! Grandma are you all right?"' [lines 31–33]). Throughout the story, details about people are more frequent than details about times, places, or events. The narrator situates the story temporally through a recollection about a person: 'it was when Pete was in the hospital' (line 2). Orientational details about places are also keyed to people: 'a mile south of South Whitley' (line 13) is more specifically located as 'out there you know where, uh, Jakob lives, Jakob Meier' (lines 15–16) and 'the next hill' is 'where the school bus driver lives' (line 20). This is a story about social interdependence and about luck. It constructs a world in which real people, people with names and personal identities, are centrally important. The protagonist is the hero of the story only in the sense that she is the person to whom the events happened; she did not create the disturbance around which the story revolves, and she is only one member of a community of people who



resolve the disturbance through talk and by helping. The men's stories, by contrast, were more likely to be about competitions in which the protagonists acted alone. They rely on objects rather than on people, objects which are sometimes described with the same level of detail the women's stories provide about people, and the sources of power in the men's stories are not collective but rather involve the protagonists' willpower, intelligence, or physical prowess.

### *Genres of narrative*

Studying narrative in settings other than sociolinguistic interviews led other scholars to supplement or alter L&W's framework or abandon it altogether. Some of this work claims that it can be more difficult than L suggests to distinguish narrative from other genres. Herman (2001) argues that while temporal juncture is necessary in order for a sequence of clauses to be interpreted as narrative, it is not sufficient, and that it is thus hard to draw a line between narration and description. Other scholars have found it useful to distinguish multiple narrative genres, both in everyday conversation and in more formal contexts. For example, Schiffrin (1990) analyzes recountings of experiences used to back up positions in argumentative sequences, which she calls 'argumentative narratives.' Carranza (1999) describes habitual narratives, characterized by the absence of punctual events, illustrating that such narratives can be used to make a point about the significance of past experiences. Baynham (2003) analyzes generic narratives, or narratives describing prototypical sequences of events with no specific protagonist. Holmes (2006) discusses anecdotes, illustrating how they contribute to workplace interaction, while De Fina (2009) proposes 'accounts' as a cover term for narratives told in response to interviewers' questions. A great deal of attention has also been devoted to various forms of retelling (Norrick 1997; Schiffrin 2006). Other scholars suggest the value of studying 'narratives' that are not, on the face of it, about the past. Goodwin (1984), for example, explored the functions of accounts of future and counterfactual events, and research on 'small stories' (see below) broadens the purview of narrative study even further.

### *Narrative in interaction*

L's model of the structural components of personal experience narrative is based entirely on talk by a single person, the narrator. Although the idea underlying the model is that personal experience narratives are designed for audiences, in interactions, L's analyses do not consider actual contributions by the audience and other participants or details about the interactional context in which the narratives were performed. L&W's description of the elements of a 'fully-formed' personal-experience narrative was based on an analysis of monologic narratives collected in sociolinguistic interviews, and the authors

did not claim that the model would be equally useful for all narrative genres. Due in part to the lack of terminological clarity discussed above, subsequent applications of the model did, however, tend to privilege a view of narratives as texts without contexts.

Thus, the most widespread criticism of L's model has come from scholars who attend to narratives as they arise in particular interactional contexts. Much recent work on the linguistics of narrative looks beyond the generic functional requirements of monologic storytelling, exploring how the structure of a narrative is affected by its particular context. Research in this framework examines how the structure of stories reflects the fact that stories perform social actions and asks how audiences are involved, directly or indirectly, in their performance and construction. Attention to the interactive co-construction of narrative has also led to increased attention to the kinds of minimal and fragmentary narratives that are created in settings such as legal testimony and online chat. In keeping with the move towards interdisciplinarity in discourse analysis, discourse analysts are also paying increasing attention to the functions of narrative in social practices and processes such as identity formation and the discursive construction of evidence, morality, community, temporality, and place.

Research that takes an interactional perspective examines how the structure of narrative reflects the fact that stories perform social actions (Schiffrin 1984, 1996) and how audiences are involved, directly or indirectly, in their construction (Norrick 1997; Ochs, Smith and Taylor 1989). In particular, work in Conversation Analysis (CA) provides a view of narrative as highly embedded in surrounding talk, collaboratively created and deeply sensitive to shifts in participation roles. According to Sacks, 'stories routinely take more than one turn to tell' (Sacks 1992: 222). Stories need to be introduced, closed, and generally tailored to the context of talk and its participants, thus they require conversational work. Analysts of talk in the CA tradition have emphasized the importance of story prefaces and closings (Jefferson 1978) and of sequential embedding, showing how narratives are linked with both preceding and following talk. As Goodwin (1984) illustrates, storytellers design their stories with their audiences in mind and may privilege certain conversational participants over others. Interactionally-oriented analyses of storytelling have shown that participants other than the primary narrator may influence the telling of a story in fundamental ways, for example by acting as co-tellers (Lerner 1992), by negotiating evaluations (Ochs and Capps 2001), or by demonstrating appreciation (Mandelbaum 1987).

Another interactionally-oriented approach to personal experience narrative involves the analysis of 'small stories' (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2007). In this body of work, the term *small stories* is used to describe a variety of non-prototypical kinds of narrative, including tellings of ongoing, future, hypothetical, or already-shared events; allusions to previous

tellings; deferrals of tellings; retellings; and refusals to tell. In this 'projection' (Example 3), for example (Georgakopoulou 2006: 89), two girls, F and T, 'draw on shared past narrative worlds, in order to support and legitimize their own projected version of events.' (The conversation is in Greek; I include only the English glosses here and have simplified the transcription.)

### Example 3

- F: No, the moment he sees us he'll say, eh, 'What's up girls? Come out for a coffee?'
- F: We'll tell him yes, come for a coffee, Pavlos will then say 'Come sit with us.'
- F: Pavlos will insist, he'll ask, 'They are not imposing, Makis, are they?'
- F: To begin with, we'll say 'No, guys.'
- F: We don't want to impose,' right?
- T: Then Pavlos will say, 'Girls DO SIT DOWN, SIT DOWN.'

In this sort of small story activity, according to Georgakopoulou, stories are less performances of self and more aimed at creating shared expectations. There is accordingly less need for the kind of evaluation that makes a story tellable and more focus on the point of the story.

### *Narrative, self, and identity*

Many analysts have asserted the fundamental role of narrative in the constitution of the human self, seeing the telling of life stories as the locus for the creation of coherent identities (McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1988). As Linde (1993: 3) puts it, 'in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story.' Social constructionists, like the contributors to De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg (2006), likewise argue that coherent and stable personae are the outcome of interactional self-presentation, as there is no 'true self' pre-existing storytelling. Bamberg (1997a) proposes that identities are adduced and created through 'positioning' on three levels:

- The first level involves positioning in the tale-world: how the narrator is represented as a character in a story-world *vis-à-vis* other characters.
- On the second level, narrators position themselves *vis-à-vis* their interlocutors in the ongoing interaction, and are in turn positioned by them.
- On the third level, narrators are positioned and position themselves with regard to cultural models of personhood that circulate in their environments, shaping what kind of person they represent themselves and are represented by others as being.

Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) discuss the conversation excerpted in Example 4, between an adult moderator (Mod) and several adolescent boys,

Martin (Ma), Victor (V), Stanton (S), and Wally (W). I have edited and simplified the transcription to make it more readable.

#### Example 4

- Mod: So what what, what, guys, what what is it that, sticks out, eh, that you like in girls?
- Mod: Is it uh the, eh the cute face?
- Mod: Is it the personality?
- V: No I remember once, I remember one weird thing ... I can't tell it though
- S: COME ON
- V: I promised my friend I wouldn't
- Mod: Okay, then we won't. Then we won't. If it is promised then, that's what we talked about. No no no.
- V: but I don't care
- Ma: Is he at this school?
- V: Oo, that's why, he's not at the school so you guys can't know about him.
- Mod: Okay. [material omitted]
- V: It's about what this, what my FRIEND likes about a girl  
[material omitted]
- V: Can I like, someone say it for me coz I don't want to say it.  
[material omitted]
- W: I'll say it
- V: I will [let] him say it ((Vic stands up, bends toward Wally, smiling))  
[material omitted]
- V: ((Vic whispers into Wally's ear, Wally then laughs))
- V, W: ((laughing))
- W: There's this cute girl that lives on his street and ((signals quotation marks with his hands)) HIS FRIEND said that, said that um look, he looked at her legs and she was wearing a dress and he said, 'WHOOA.' Even though I think it was YOU. ((points at Vic))
- Mod: ((signaling quotation marks back to Wally)) hehehehe
- V: ((shakes head 'no')) It wasn't me.
- Mod: Never never wouldn't, Victor wouldn't do, so legs, legs good good looking legs, that's something. What about, what about personality?
- V: 'It wasn't me', hey I'm Shaggy, 'it wasn't me.' ((dancing-move upper body))
- all: ((all boys laugh))

There are just two narrative clauses, in Labov's sense, in this narrative: the protagonist looked at the girl's legs and said 'Whoa!' Victor is understood to be the principal and author (Goffman 1981: 124–159) of the story, but he distances himself from the story by refusing to animate it, 'borrowing' Wally's voice instead. The story's protagonist is represented as an anonymous 'friend' of Victor's. Victor positions himself on the first level,

then, as a character in the story only insofar as it was told to him. On the level of positioning in the interaction at hand, Victor engages his audience by announcing that he has a story to tell and that it is tellable ('weird'), and then further engages them by refusing to actually tell it. As Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008: 388) put it:

Victor's interactive moves show tellability as something that is interactively achieved. ... [Victor's] allusion to a (tellable) story has already catapulted him into the telling role of an expert on the topic under scrutiny; positioning himself as someone who has something to share (expert) but is reluctant to do so may have consequences for the future interactions among the participants.

On the third level, self-positioning *vis-à-vis* circulating personas, Victor borrows a line from a then-popular rapper, Shaggy ('It wasn't me'), to claim a nonchalant, uncommitted persona, ironically calling into question his own previous insistence that the protagonist was a friend, not Victor himself.

### *Revisiting Labov and Waletzky*

Many of the scholars mentioned above are represented in a 1997 special issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* edited by Michael Bamberg, entitled 'Oral Versions of Personal Experience: Three Decades of Narrative Analysis' (Bamberg 1997b). The original L&W article was reprinted here, along with short commentaries on it by 47 scholars and a response by L. The collection makes it clear how influential L&W has been in a number of disciplines. L&W resonated with psychologists who were looking for ways to understand human experience that went beyond the positivistic experimental-quantitative approaches that had dominated the field. According to Bruner (1997: 64), it 'set many [psychologists] thinking about the cognitive representation of reality imposed by narrative structure on our experience of the world and on how we evaluate that experience.' For Riessman (1997), the discovery of L&W offered an alternative to the coding-and-counting thematic analysis she had been trained to use in analyzing sociological interviews. For Imbens-Bailey and others in educational research, as for scholars in various other fields, L&W provided new techniques for generating research material:

Data in the form of narratives of personal experience have been found to offer the researcher many advantages, including the opportunity to uncover topics and themes important to study participants that would have remained unknown and consequently unanalyzed by the researcher using a fixed interview schedule to gather data. (Imbens-Bailey 1997: 344)

However, the commentaries also make it clear that scholars who cite L's work do not always share his research agenda. More of the commentaries describe research about when and why people narrate than describe research like L&W's about the formal characteristics of narrative and their functional

basis. A number of the commentaries argue, with research discussed above, that not all of the formal/functional elements identified by L&W occur in all narratives, that other sorts of tellings besides the 'fully-developed' narratives L&W studied should also fall within the purview of narrative analysis, or that L&W's framework fails to account for the way narrative arises in interaction as a collaborative process. Two of the commentaries critique L&W's implicit assumption that events pre-exist narrative (Briggs 1997; Hopper 1997). In L's formulation, the defining feature of personal experience narrative is that a sequence of clauses is matched to a sequence of 'events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' ('Transformation': 360). Hopper and Briggs point out that experience does not occur in the form of sequences of events; it is in narrative that experience is temporalized, represented as a series of discrete events. As Briggs puts it, rather than assuming that narrative 'recapitulates' events, 'a major task of the analyst should be assessment of the degree to which ... experience is objectified as a series of bounded events' (1997: 178).

Several commentaries argue that the idea of 'evaluation' – the most difficult element of narrative to define in structural terms – is the most significant part of Labov's framework. According to Bruner, L&W's discussion of evaluation is 'nothing short of breathtaking' (1997: 65). Linde claims that 'evaluation ... is exactly the locus of the most important social and communicative action' in narration (1997: 282); Daiute and Nelson (1997) argue that, for a child, learning to evaluate in L&W's sense is learning what the world is like and what one's place is in it.

## LABOV'S LATER WORK ON NARRATIVE

L's contribution to the 'Thirty Years After' volume (Labov 1997) introduced some of the concerns he would elaborate in his later work on the topic (Labov 1981, 2001, 2007, 2013). L continues to focus on producing 'a logical account of the generation of [the] structure' of personal experience narratives (Labov 2013: 233) and highlighting how clause-level grammatical choices can signal that structure, and he continues to base his analysis mainly on monologic narratives that arose or were elicited in interviews, claiming that 'big' stories like these are neither uncommon nor unnatural in everyday life (2013: 10). L continues to treat experiences and events as pre-existing their narration, so that narratives 'transfer' experience from teller to listener. However, returning to the formulation of 'Transformation,' he subtitles his 2013 book *The Transformation of Experience in Oral Narrative*, putting the focus on how remembered experience is adapted to the teller's identity and rhetorically shaped to appeal to its audience. In this book, L elaborates on how narrators draw on the resources of language to 'display events that have been evaluated and absorbed into the life history of the tellers in a way that supports their status as respectable and competent persons' (Labov 2013: 81) while making the events seem both believable enough and surprising enough

to keep audiences listening. Because personal experience narrative must both 'maximize a given moral position of the narrator' (2013: 7) and engage listeners emotionally, narrators must also assign praise and blame to their narrated selves and to other characters in the narrative.

In L&W, 'tellability' was discussed mainly in terms of evaluation, story-internal ways of highlighting the significance of particular aspects of the reported events. In his later work, L talks about tellability in terms of characteristics inherent in the events. L points out that a narrative people will listen to needs to be both reportable and credible, but that reportability and credibility are in inverse relation. A reportable event must be out of the ordinary, which makes it less likely to be credible. Thus, in 'preconstructing' a narrative, the narrator chooses the most surprising (and thus least credible) event (this is the 'most reportable event') and then works backward in time to an event that was routine (and therefore credible); the narrative is then generated by narrating these events in the reverse order, so that the narrator will have established credibility before presenting the unlikely, surprising event that is the crux of the narrative. L also devotes considerable attention to how talk can constitute action. In many narratives, he argues, something someone says forms the crux of the action, leading to a sudden escalation of violence.

L pays sustained attention to the particular linguistic resources that narrators draw on to do these things. Here, as in L&W and 'Transformation,' he discusses how negation and other ways of evoking 'parallel universes' work as evaluative devices. 'Options offered by the language' (Labov 2013: 226) that can be used to 'adjust the responsibility assigned to a given chain of events' (2013: 37) include the choice between active and passive voice, the use of explicit causatives versus ways of representing events as if they were causeless, the insertion of 'pseudo-events,' and the elision of events in the 'preconstructed' chain the narrative is based on. Elsewhere, L discusses other structures that can help shape memories into narratives that serve the purposes they need to serve: permissives, discourse markers, embedding and syntactic complexity, and tense and aspect. Analyses of particular narratives include observations about their themes and about the cultural and material contexts of the events they are about and the situation of their telling, as well as close linguistic analysis aimed at showing how narrators recruit features of language to make their narratives striking and memorable.

L's later work on narrative makes explicit links to his effort, throughout his career, to celebrate the vernacular. In his work on narrative, as in his work on language change, L highlights the linguistic skill of ordinary, often working-class people and the systematicity of their speech. L's 2013 book focuses on narratives about serious matters involving life and death: times when people died, premonitions of death and near-deaths, sagas consisting of multiple narratives about life-changing confrontations and long-standing conflicts. It is in narratives like these that people display the full range of their ability to shape their identities and capture others' imaginations. L wants readers to



marvel at how ordinary people manage to tell such powerful, gripping stories. To this end, in the final chapters of the book, L compares personal experience narratives with the 'epic style' of the *Iliad*, with historical accounts by Herodotus and others and with the Old Testament account of the death of Absalom. While these analyses are less convincing than the analyses that precede them – they are short, somewhat superficial, and much less focused on language – they make the point that ordinary people are every bit as resourceful in transforming experience into narrative as these narrators are, and that the talents of the best historians in fact have vernacular origins.

## DISCUSSION

Labovian narrative analysis entered academic conversation at a fortuitous time. As Chomskyan syntactic theory was taking center stage in the American linguistics of the 1960s and early 1970s, several alternative strands of thought were emerging in response to it. There was growing interest among non-Chomskyan linguists in functional accounts of linguistic structure and in the systematic, rule-governed nature of 'everyday' genres of talk and face-to-face interaction. Labov's work resonated with linguists like these and quickly became required reading for students in the U.S. and elsewhere who were drawn to the emerging field of discourse analysis. In part because of the canonical status of L&W, some subsequent discourse analysts have felt the need to position themselves as 'post-Labovian,' suggesting thereby that their approaches have succeeded where L's failed. But linguistic analyses of narrative continue to demonstrate L's fundamental insight that the linguistic form of a narrative is shaped by its interactional function.

The uptake of Labovian narrative analysis in fields such as psychology and anthropology reflects the fact that the central research questions in these fields are not about language. What resonated for discursive psychologists, linguistic anthropologists, and others was L's illustration that oral narratives by ordinary people were worthy of and amenable to scientific study. The uses they made of this insight drew many of them far away from L's focus on language, and sometimes references to L's work seem little more than lip service. But whether or not the people who cite L's scholarship share his research agenda, Labovian narrative analysis has played a key role in legitimizing the study of everyday talk across the human and social sciences.

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## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Anna De Fina, my co-author on a handbook chapter from which parts of this article are adapted (De Fina and Johnstone 2015). That project brought me up to date with research on narrative and forced me to begin to articulate the relationship between Labov's narrative analysis and the

scholarship that arose from and responded to it. I am also grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* and to two anonymous reviewers. Finally, vielen Dank to Susanne Oberholzer for her translation of the abstract.

2. Throughout, transcriptions are aimed at readability. Small caps indicate loud or otherwise stressed speech. Material in double parenthesis describes non-verbal activity accompanying speech.
3. Waletzky did not continue to work with Labov or in linguistics. He became a documentary film-maker and a performer of and expert on Klezmer music.

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