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Where Should I Begin?

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THE QUESTION THAT FORMS the title of this chapter has been asked by most of us as we are just about to deliver a narrative. It is not put to the listener but is directed inwardly, to the self as author of the narrative. Whether or not the question is formulated explicitly, it must be answered by everyone who tells a story.

The answer may seem obvious: "Begin at the beginning." But how does the storyteller discover that beginning? And is there more than one possible beginning for any given story? The pursuit of these questions will tell us something more about how narratives are constructed through the prior construction of a causal chain of events. It will also show how the transformation of events in the interests of the teller is facilitated by his or her decision on where to begin.

An answer to "Where shall I begin?" requires a process of *narrative preconstruction* (Labov 2006), which must precede the delivery of any narrative of personal experience. An explication of that process begins with the concept of *reportability.* Given the fact that narratives occupy more conversational space than most turns at talk, it appears that certain events and sequences of events carry enough social interest to justify that occupation, whereas others do not.[1] The normal narrative is centered upon a *most reportable event:* the event that is the least common and has the greatest consequences for the life chances of the actors involved. But a report of the most reportable event is not itself a narrative. Consider the turn of talk:

(1) Jacob Schissel: My brother stuck a knife in my head.

This utterance is not a narrative. It is treated by the listener as an *abstract,* indexing the existence of a narrative in which is the most reportable event. It is normally followed by a request for that narrative:

(2) WL: How'd that happen?

The answer to this question is usually the narrative itself, which is more than a description of the most reportable event: It is a request for the causes of the most reportable event, or an accounting of it. Even when (2) takes a less explicit demand for an accounting, "What happened?" the narrator understands it as a request for more than a string of events, but a sequence that satisfies the demand for *credibil-*

ity. The fundamental dynamics of narrative construction are built on the inverse relationship between reportability and credibility: the more reportable an event, the less credible (Labov 1997). A narrative may be dismissed by listeners if it is not deemed reportable, with the responses "So what?" "Et puis?" "Y que?" and their equivalents. It may also be dismissed as a fabrication unworthy of attention if the causal accounting delivered by the narrator is considered inadequate.[2] A certain amount of attention must then be given to establishing the credibility of the most reportable event. If we identify the most reportable event as e_0, the narrator must identify some prior event e_{-1} that answers the question, "How did e_0 happen?" and stands in a causal relationship to e_0. This is a recursive process. Given e_{-1}, a prior event e_{-2} is required that stands in a causal relationship to it and answers the question "How did e_{-1} happen?"

Any answer to the question "Where shall I begin?" requires a termination of that recursive process. Narrative preconstruction can be terminated when it encounters an event e_n with no immediate or obvious cause. This may be termed the *initiating event,* because it initiates the chain that leads to the most reportable event. As we will see, this initiating event may be viewed as mysterious and puzzling or as trivial and unimportant. An answer to the question, "How did (e_{-n}) happen?" would be "I don't know. We were only, . . ." followed by a description of ordinary behavior. We will call this behavior the *initial matrix* i_0, for which the question "Why did you do that?" would be heard as foolish or inappropriate. Given the identification of the most reportable event e_0, the causal sequence e_{-1} . . . e_{-n}, and the initial matrix i_0, the narrator can begin the process of *narrative construction.*

In the framework for narrative construction developed in Labov and Waletzky (1967), the first building block is the "orientation," which provides information on the time, the place and the actors involved in the narrative.[3] It also provides information on what the actors are doing in this ordinary situation: behavior that is expected and needs no explanation. The orientation is built upon the initial matrix i_0.

Narrative preconstruction necessarily precedes narrative construction. It does not have a unique termination. As we examine various narratives of personal experience, it will appear that the choice of e_n and i_0, arresting the causal chain at a particular link in the sequence, is not strictly determined. The decision on where to begin is a major element in the construction of the narrative in the interests of the teller. At first glance, the orientation section of the narrative is only a domain of factual information, with less evaluative material than any other section. Yet location of this orienting information determines more than anything else the assignment of praise and blame for the causal sequence that leads to the most reportable event.

The Norwegian Sailor

In several analyses of narrative structure, I have dealt with Harold Shambaugh's account of the Norwegian sailor. Shambaugh, a thirty-one-year-old resident of Columbus, Ohio, had traveled widely in the service. In a discussion of the use of common sense, he mentioned several occasions when quick reactions were called for, including one in South America.[4]

(3) (What happened in South America?)

a Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin'
b And uh this Norwegian sailor come over
c an' kep' givin' me a bunch o'junk about I was settin' with his woman.
d An' everybody settin' at the table with me were my shipmates.
e So I jus' turn' aroun'
f an' shoved 'im,
g an' told 'im,
h I said, "Go away,
i I don't even wanna fool with ya."
j An' nex' thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me,
k An' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head.
l Your throat's cut."

Listeners generally agree that the most reportable event e_0 is the cutting of Shambaugh's throat by the Norwegian sailor. As in most effective narratives of personal experience, we learn about this in the same way that the narrator does, the information delivered in clause l. The event e_0 itself occurs just before clause j. If we were dealing with a purely temporal reconstruction, it would appear as (4). Here the sequence of events proceeds backwards in time, moving from the most reportable event e_0 to the initiating event e_3. The past perfect is used for this purpose, the English tense that is specific to reverse movement in time.

(4) Temporal reconstruction of "The Norwegian Sailor."

e_0 This Norwegian sailor cut my throat.
e_{-1} I had refused to listen to him.
e_{-2} He had complained that I was sitting with his woman.
e_{-3} He had come over to the table where I was sitting
i_0 I was sitting with my shipmates drinking

But the temporal events do not necessarily show the causal links that are related to credibility. We can capture the necessary preconstruction as a sequence of causes if these events are related with the subordinate conjunction *because,* as in (5).

(5) Causal preconstruction of "The Norwegian Sailor."

e_0 This Norwegian sailor cut my throat.
e_{-1} because I refused to listen
to his complaint
that I was sitting with his woman
e_{-2} because he came over and complained
i_0 when everyone at the table where we were sitting
were my shipmates

(5) provides is a simpler set of connections. The violent act e_0 was caused by Shambaugh's refusal e_{-1}. As the arrow indicates, that refusal was the result of the event e_{-2} that the complaint was embedded in a matrix that contained no justification for it. The initiating event, the Norwegian sailor's complaint, is seen as inexplicable and irrational.[5]

The construction of the narrative on the basis of preconstruction (5) is shown as (6). In the actual construction, complaints and refusals are both shown as multiple events. The quasi-modal *kept* implies a repeated series of complaints condensed into b, c and the refusal e_{-1} is expanded into the five clauses e, f, g, h, i, which may have been interspersed with the repeated complaints.[6] The importance of the location of the orientation for the narrative is underlined by the elaboration of the orienting material in clause d.

(6) Narrative construction of "The Norwegian Sailor."
(OR = orientation; CA = complicating action; EV = evaluation)

OR	i_0	a	Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin'
CA	e_{-2}	b	And uh this Norwegian sailor come over
		c	an' kep' givin' me a bunch of junk about I was settin' with his woman.
OR		d	An' everybody settin' at the table with me were my shipmates.
CA	e_{-1}	e	So I jus' turn' aroun'
		f	an' shoved 'im,
		g	an' told 'im,
		h	I said, "Go away,
		i	I don't even wanna fool with ya."
EV	e_0	j	An' next thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me,
		k	An' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head.
		l	Your throat's cut."

The inexplicable character of the initiating event, the complaint of the Norwegian sailor, justifies Shambaugh's refusal as the only rational course of action, and the choice of the initial matrix excludes any prior events that might have been relevant. But there is an alternative set of possibilities that we can project from other discussions of typical patterns of behavior in this situation. In a later exploratory interview in Liverpool, a working-class man in his early twenties gave me this insight on bar room behavior:

(7) Joe Dignall's explication of a similar matrix in Liverpool.

> A lot of fellas, if they're with a gang, they let their birds sit with their mates, while he stands up at the bar with his mates, talkin' about things. And you could go up, start chattin' this bird up, and next thing—y'know, you're none the wiser. An' she's edgin' yer on, on, you're a nice fella, you've got a few bob. Great! And—you're chattin' it up there, you're buyin' her a few shots . . . Next thing, eh, a fella comin' there over there, "Eh ay lads, what are ya doin?" Well YOU don't know he's goin' with her, so you tell HIM to push off. Next thing he's got his friends—his mates on to you, an' uh . . . you're in lumber! You've either got to run, or fight!
>
> —Joe Dignall, Liverpool

An alternate scenario for the events in Buenos Aires, suggested by (7), is that there was at least one woman nearby, possibly at the next table, and that he or others at his table had bought drinks for them, without realizing that they had previous connections with Norwegian sailors at the bar. The expression *come over* indicates the kind of bar-hopping with separation of the sexes that Dignall described. In this view of the situation, the escalation of violence e_0 is an expected consequence of ignoring a valid complaint. In a number of other cases, a sudden explosion of violence is the result of treating someone in an interaction as a nonperson and the refusal to pursue a complaint by continued verbal interaction has violent consequences (Labov 1985).

In this situation, Shambaugh's choice of initiating event and initial matrix was consistent with the view of his behavior as a reasonable reaction to irrationality, rather than a mistake in judgment. His own view of the incident takes one step further:

(8) It taught me a very valuable lesson. Like now if I'm settin' at some place drinkin' and somebody comes up bothering me an' I shove him, I stand up and hit 'im. I don't like the idea of somebody bein' behind me that's mad at me, even my own brother.

He told me that he still had the knife at his house, which made me think that there was more to the story:

(9) As a matter of fact, one of my shipmates killed him. He didn't mean to, just meant to stop him. . . . He picked up one of the big oak chairs down there, hit him in the head with it.

Jacob Schissel's Story

In the course of my study of the Lower East Side of New York City, I interviewed a retired Jewish postman in a brownstone house. Again, a response to a question on the danger of death elicited a narrative that has proved to have a strong emotional impact on listeners. The abstract has already been cited as (1); the full narrative is given as (10).

(10) Jacob Schissel's narrative of the conflict with his younger brother.

(What happened then?)

a Eh—my brother put a knife in my head.
(How'd that happen?)
b Like kids, you get into a fight
c and I twisted his arm up behind him.
d This was just—uh—a few days after my father died
e and we were sittin' shiva.
f And the reason the fight started,

g He saw a rat out in the yard—
h this was out in Coney Island—
i and he started talk about it.
j And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee,
k and I told him to cut it out.
l 'Course kids, y'know, he don't hafta listen to me.
m So that's when I grabbed his arm
n and twisted it up behind him.
When I let go his arm,
o there was a knife on the table,
p he just picked it up
q and he let me have it.
r And . . . I started bleed—like a pig.
a And naturally first thing to do, run to the doctor,
t and the doctor just says, "Just about this much more," he says,
"and you'd a been dead."

The preconstruction of Schissel's story must plainly have begun with (1) as the most reportable event. The series of causal relations is shown in (11).

(11) Causal preconstruction of Jacob Schissel's story

e_0 My brother stuck a knife in my head
e_{-1} because I twisted his arm up behind him[7]
e_{-2} because he said something
e_{-3} because I told him to stop talking
e_{-4} because he was talking about a rat
e_{-5} because he saw a rat in the yard
i_0 when we were sitting shiva in Coney Island after my father died

The initiating event e_{-5} is again one with no prior cause relevant to the narrative. This disturbance initiated by the rat occurred in the initial matrix of sitting shiva (meaning "seven"), the Jewish custom of honoring the dead for seven days, where the seven principal relatives stay at the home of the deceased and receive visitors.

This story is again marked by an extraordinary escalation of violence, and it requires some searching to understand what caused that violence. Though most stories of conflict show a polarization of participants, exaggerating the difference between protagonists and antagonists, Schissel's story is of another kind. The form of telling tends to integrate the participants, obscuring the sources of conflict.

The result of narrative construction in (12) shows how the narrative is built upon the results of preconstruction. Schissel first creates another abstract, which serves to mitigate the conflict as if it was in fact not reportable—the fight as simply the kind of thing that kids tend to do. He then builds the orientation: the time is just after his father has died; and from the definition of shiva we know that the place is Schissel's home, all other members of the family are participants, and the activity is minimal: sitting quietly in the living room and partaking of the food and drink that friends and neighbors have brought to the house. Three other elements of the orientation are postponed and interspersed with the complicating action.

(12) Narrative construction of Jacob Schissel's story.

(What happened then?)

ABS		a	Eh—my brother put a knife in my head.
	(How'd that happen?)		
ABS		b	Like kids, you get into a fight
		c	and I twisted his arm up behind him.
OR		d	This was just–uh–a few days after my father died
	i_0	e	and we were sittin' shiva.
		f	And the reason the fight started,
CA	e_{-5}	g	He saw a rat out in the yard—
OR		h	this was out in Coney Island—
CA	e_{-4}	i	and he started talk about it.
OR		j	And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee,
CA	e_{-3}	k	and I told him to cut it out.
	e_{-2}	l	'Course kids, y'know, he don't hafta listen to me.
	e_{-1}	m	So that's when I grabbed his arm
		n	and twisted it up behind him.
			When I let go his arm,
OR		o	there was a knife on the table,
CA	e_0	p	he just picked it up
		q	and he let me have it.
	e_1	r	And . . . I started bleed—like a pig.
	e_2	s	And naturally first thing to do, run to the doctor,
EV	e_3	t	and the doctor just says, "Just about this much more," he says, "and you'd a been dead."

The causal connection between actions e_{-5} and e_{-4}—seeing the rat and talking about it—need not be made explicit. This is the kind of thing that kids do. But Schissel's consequent reaction e_{-3} ("Cut it out!") is not so immediately obvious. The narrator assumes that the listener is aware of the conventions of sitting shiva: "Visitors have an obligation to remain silent unless the mourner initiates conversation. The mourner is allowed to remain silent, and if so, this shall be respected by the visitors. Any conversation that does take place shall typically be about the deceased."[8]

In e_{-3} Schissel undertakes to enforce this norm. The action e_{-2} that follows is obscured. Instead of the actual quotation, the narrator substitutes an excuse for his brother's conduct. Whatever was said, it triggered the explosion of violence in clauses m, n, p, and q. Even here, the report of the action is mitigating: the

murderous attack with a knife is presented in an idiom that is the obverse of agency: "He let me have it."

What then did Schissel's brother say that had such a profound effect? Several decades of reflecting on this matter led to a suggestion that has met with general consensus. What his brother said was something equivalent to "I don't have to listen to you! You're not my father and you can't tell me what to do!" A story which first seems to resemble the conflict between Cain and Abel then shifts to the paradigm of Jacob and Esau, engaged in a competition for their father's birthright. Though Schissel's manner of telling the story may shift this struggle to the background, it seems likely that this sequence of events was not triggered by something besides the rat in the yard. We must assume a longer history of conflict that dates back some time, perhaps even before their father's death.

It follows that Schissel's decision to begin with the incident of the rat in the yard is not the only possible one. If he had chosen to rehearse a longer history of arguments between him and his brother, the outbreak of violence might have seemed more predictable. As it is, any longer-term conflict is placed out of view, and what we hear is a frightening outburst of uncontrollable anger, all the more compelling because it is unpredictable.

The Falling Out

Over the years, our family has had extensive contacts with another Philadelphia family, headed by a husband and wife. The husband Frank died suddenly of a heart attack, some fifteen years ago. Among their children are twins, now young women in their early thirties with children of their own. Along with various accounts of their family history, I had heard mention of an event that occurred just after their father's death. It concerned the possibility of communication with the dead, a theme of many other stories that had been told to me and my students over time. I pressed one of the twins, Melinda, for a complete account of what happened, and she agreed to have me record her version. Her sister Melanie was present, and made a number of cooperative additions along the way, but here I am giving Melinda's account only.

(13) The Falling Out: Melinda's version.

a Well, I'm gonna give you a small history.
b My father's best friend, he—when we were young
c His name was Ray,
d and uh they had a falling out, the parents,
because their dog bit my sister
e and they didn't talk after that incident.
f So, you know, my father died unexpectedly
g and Ray was in surgery on his knee in the hospital the same day
my father died
When he woke up from his surgery

h he said to his wife Linda
who was also my mother's best friend
he said, "Lin, I had a dream,
that Frank came to me,
and said, "Let bygones be bygones.
Like—forget it. It's over."
i And then she said to him, "Ray, Frank died today."
j The man was like a ghost.
k He came to the hospital—I mean to the funeral, on crutches
because he was so freaked out by it
m He was really quite hysterical.

The location of the most reportable event in this story becomes clear in retelling it to various audiences. The report of the dream in clause h does not tell listeners that something unusual has happened until Linda informs Ray in clause i that Ray has just died. At this point there is a rapid intake of breath from most listeners. The narrative develops that evaluation with clauses j and m; even more than the listener, Ray is affected by the fact that i follows h. Like other narratives of premonition and communion with the dead, "The Falling Out" deals with the flow of information and the coincidence of two sources of information. Two streams of information are delivered in rapid succession through different channels: external source through Linda, internal source through Ray, and crucially with Ray preceding, h preceding i. The commonsense expectation would be that Ray first heard of Frank's death, and then Ray dreamed about Frank. But if Linda's source of information did not reach Ray, what did? In narratives like "The Falling Out," it is the failure of the expected source that is in focus. The narrative does not use a formulation that assumes communication with the dead: "Frank appeared to Ray in a dream and said to him. . . ." Rather, it quotes Ray's report "I had a dream . . ." and challenges listeners to avoid the inference that the figure in the dream was Frank, and not a memory of him.

The preconstruction of "The Falling Out" (14) then establishes Linda's statement as the most reportable event e_0. The cause of this event is a complex combination of preceding events. First, that Linda informed Ray of Frank's death e_0 because e_{-1} Ray had dreamed about Frank and the inference from e_{-2} that he did not know of Frank's death when she learned about it because he was in surgery. She might have delivered the news of Frank's death at some other time, but its relevance was foregrounded by the account of Ray's dream. First, if Ray had already learned that Frank had just died, the dream would have been motivated and would not have required any further explanation. Second, this is coupled with background information from the initial matrix i_0 that Ray had not communicated with Frank for a long time. If Ray had habitually been in communication with Frank, the dream would have been a minor coincidence. It is the combination of the sequence e_{-1}, e_{-2}, and i_0 that leads to the evaluation of the most reportable event e_0 as e_1—"The man was like a ghost":

(14) Preconstruction of "The Falling Out"

e_1 Ray realized
that Frank had come to him after death
e_0 because Linda told Ray that Frank was dead
e_{-1} because { Ray had dreamed that Frank had come to forgive him
and Linda knew that Ray did not know
e_{-2} that Frank had died
because he was in surgery
when Linda learned that Frank had died
e_{-3} because Frank had died when Ray was in surgery
i_0 and Ray had not communicated with Frank for a long time
because they had had a falling out
e_{-4} because their dog had bit Frank's daughter
i_0 though they had been best friends before that.

Given this preconstruction, Melinda's construction of the story follows as (15):

(15) Narrative construction of "The Falling Out," Melinda's version.

ABS		a	Well, I'm gonna give you a small history.
OR		b	My father's best friend, he—when we were young
		c	His name was Ray,
	i_0	d	and uh they had a falling out, the parents,
	e_{-4}		because their dog bit my sister
	i_0	e	and they didn't talk after that incident.
CA	e_{-3}	f	So, you know, my father died unexpectedly
	e_{-2}	g	and Ray was in surgery on his knee in the hospital
			the same day my father died
		h	When he woke up from his surgery
	e_{-1}		he said to his wife Linda
OR			who was also my mother's best friend
CA			he said, "Lin, I had a dream,
			that Frank came to me,
			and said, "Let bygones be bygones.
			Like—forget it. It's over."
	e_0	i	And then she said to him, "Ray, Frank died today."
EV	e_0	j	The man was like a ghost.
RES	e_1	k	He came to the hospital—I mean to the funeral, on crutches
			because he was so freaked out by it
EV		m	He was really quite hysterical.

We are not concerned here with all aspects of narrative art: Melinda's dramatic expansion of e_{-1} and the contrasting brevity of e_0 in clause i or the interweaving of temporal information with the succession of events. It is the location of the orientation that is our focus. The state of "falling out," the breach of communication among people who were best friends, does not satisfy the usual definition of orientation as a situation that needs no further accounting. Melinda does embed one piece of causal explanation, e_{-4}, in clause d: "Their dog bit my sister." This still does not satisfy the normal expectation of an explanation for why best friends—husbands and wives—should not have talked for a long time. Further inquiry in the family establishes the time gap as thirty years.

Let us free the preconstruction from the flow of information that is so important in (14) and simply present the facts as in (16):

(16) e_0 Frank came to Ray in a dream and forgave him
e_{-1} because Frank died
e_{-2} and Frank had not forgiven Ray for thirty years
e_{-3} for the fact that Ray's dog bit Frank's daughter

The unforgiving character attributed to Frank in this sequence is not the focus of Melinda's version (15). Instead, the act of forgiveness is highlighted, resting on the initial understanding that the families had not communicated for a long time. When I inquired further into the causes of the breach, I learned that some time after the dog bit Melinda's sister, Frank asked his wife, "Have you heard from Linda?" She said "No." "That's funny," he said, "I haven't heard from Ray either." Shortly after this, Frank instituted suit against Ray for Melinda's hospital bills.

These events give us a better understanding as to why the breach was such a permanent one. But they do not explain why Ray did not call and ask how Melinda was getting on. Given the earliest stage of the initial matrix, the initiating event was the dog's attack on Melinda. Was this an unpredictable event? On further inquiring, I learned from Melinda's mother that the dog was considered vicious and had already attacked and killed a neighbor's dog. Knowing more about Frank's temperament and temper, I think it is possible that hard feelings between him and Ray began with Frank's demand that the dog be put down, and that the distance between the families followed Ray's refusal. Melinda's mother gave some support to this conjecture. In any case, Ray's distancing and Frank's following suit clearly indicates some hostile interaction between him and Ray shortly after the attack.

The orientation as Melinda constructs it is built upon the information she had. The events surrounding the dog bite occurred when she was eight years old, and the story is built upon the family traditions that have survived over the years. The focus of the story is not upon Frank's character or the disagreement that alienated the two families. The spotlight is entirely upon the eerie coincidence of the death and the dream. The image of Melinda's father that emerges from this version is limited to his act of forgiveness. It is just and fitting that the story be told in this way, because all who knew Frank remain saddened by his early death. His friends and his children

think of him often, and it is comfortable to hear his words emerging, "Let bygones be bygones. Forget it—it's over." If the orientation had been placed earlier, and the acts to be forgiven were preserved in greater detail, it would have been a different and an angrier Frank who emerged. I like the narrative as it is, even if the falling out is not fully explained to those who would pry further into it.

The Notice in the *New York Times*

In the mid-1970s, Tony Kroch (1996) carried out a series of twenty interviews with upper-class Philadelphians, which became integrated into the study of language change and variation in Philadelphia (Labov 1980, 2001). In the course of his work, he posed questions that we commonly use to elicit accounts of premonitions. The narrative is presented as fully constructed in (17), with the sections, events, and clauses included in a format similar to (6), (12), and (15). Like the preceding narrative, it concerns the experience of the older generation, as passed on in family tradition:

(17) Narrative construction of "The Notice in the *New York Times*"

(Kroch: In some families there's someone famous for being able to tell what was going to happen before it happened; was there anybody in your family like that?)

ABS		a	Yeah, there is an instance.
OR	i_0	b	Dad was being driven out from town—ah—by his chauffeur.
		c	This was a good many years ago.
		d	And he had the *New York Times,*
CA	e_{-8}	e	and he read in the *New York Times*
		f	and noticed that—
			the death of a person whom he knew
			but he knew was a very close friend of George Jensen.
		g	George Jensen lived in Chestnut Hill.
	e_{-7}	h	So Dad said to the chauffeur,
			"Stop at Mr. Jensen's house on the way home
			'cause I want to commiserate with him."
	e_{-6}	i	So they did stop
	e_{-5}	j	and Dad went in
		k	and Dad said,
			"George, I'm so sorry to hear about the death of—"
		l	I don't know his name,
EV	e_{-4}	m	and George Jensen said
			"I don't know
			what you're talking about,
		n	If he had died,
			I would have been one of the first people to know."

CA	e_{-3}	o	And Dad said,
			"Well it's in the newspaper,
		p	I'll go out to the car
		q	and get the newspaper."
	e_{-2}	r	Went out
		s	and got the newspaper,
		t	came back
	e_{-1}	u	and he and George went through the newspaper,
EV		v	No sign of this death notice,
CA	e_0	w	And just as they were finished perusing it,
			the telephone rang from somebody in New York
			telling George Jensen that,
			guess
			he'd died.
EV		x	But there was nothing in the newspaper,
RES	e_1	y	Dad brought the newspaper home.
	e_2	z	My sister—
			guess George was home at the time—
			and I all went through the newspaper, meticulously,
EV		aa	Couldn't find anything.

This construction of an account of a premonition has a considerable impact upon listeners, including those who do believe that communication across the final barrier is possible and those who do not. Many aspects of effective narrative construction are exemplified in (17). The effect of the narrative is heightened by the confident use of an elaborate and precise vocabulary: *commiserate, perusing, meticulously.* Negatives are artfully placed to intensify the evaluation of the events in clauses m, n, v, x, and aa. The narrative syntax is prototypically simple, but complexity is concentrated in the evaluative clauses. This is particularly marked in the delivery of the most reportable event e_0 in clause w, which combines seven predicated propositions into one sentence, as sketched in figure 1.1.

The key temporal clause, "just as they were finished perusing it," is left dislocated to initial position. The temporal relations of sources of information play the same crucial role as in the previous narrative, "The Falling Out." Information from an internal source (perception of the *New York Times*) antecedes the flow of information from an external source (the telephone). The unreliable character of the internal source is comparable to the dreamlike character of Ray's information, but the fact that it precedes and predicts the external source is equally mysterious and challenging. A preconstruction of this story in (19) shows a long chain of causal connections but begins with a temporal conjunction of the telephone call e_0 and the failed search in the newspaper e_{-1}.

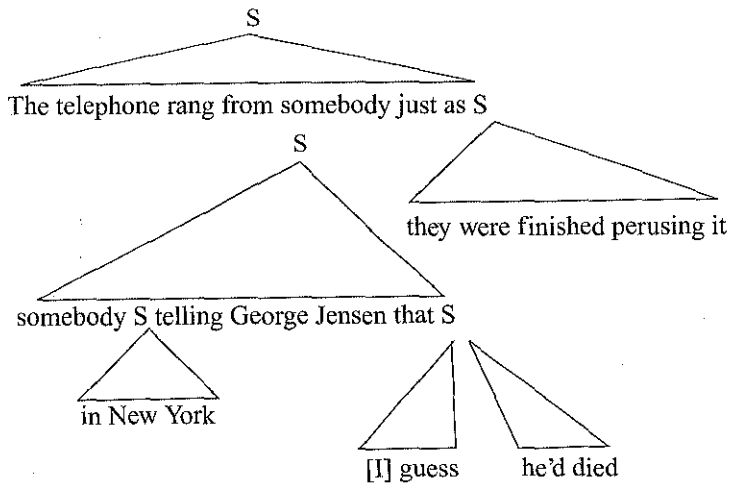

Figure 1.1 Predicated Propositions in Event e_0

(19) Preconstruction of "The Notice in the *New York Times*"

e_{-0} Someone in New York called with the information that this man had died
e_{-1} just when my father had searched for a death notice in the newspaper
e_{-2} because he had brought it in from the car
e_{-3} because he said the death notice was in the newspaper
e_{-4} because George Jensen denied that this man had died
e_{-5} because my father told him he was sorry the man had died
e_{-6} because they stopped at George Jensen's house
e_{-7} because my father wanted to commiserate with him
e_{-8} because my father had read in the *New York Times* that this man had died
i_0 when he was driving home with his chauffeur.

The preconstruction establishes the initial matrix as the ordinary event i_0, the narrator's father being driven home from work; we are not reasonably entitled to ask, "Why did that happen?" The initiating event e_{-8} is the notice in the *Times,* unusual enough to trigger the sequence of following events, and given without any preceding account or explanation. In this construction of the story, it just happens to occur in this ordinary context.

If we were to probe further into this initiating event, we might ask, "How well did your father know this man?" "Did your father know that this man was sick or in danger of death?" George Jensen's denial that the man had died did not preclude the possibility that his death was likely. These skeptical considerations are foreclosed by the selection of the orientation. It seems clear that the narrator's father did not see in the *New York Times* what he thought he saw, but the reasons for this illusion are hidden. This is not to suggest for a moment that there is a false bottom to this construction. Rather, the striking coincidence of illusory perception and hard news is told in a way that maximizes its effect upon the listener through the decision to begin with that particular homeward journey. If the family tradition had included a counter to such skeptical questions, the orientation might have been shifted backward in time.

The Program for Narrative Construction

Assembling the considerations advanced in this study of four narratives, we can begin to put together the outlines of a program for narrative construction:

- A narrative of personal experience is a means of transferring the experience of events, as originally encountered by the narrator, to listeners in a form adapted to the evaluative norms of speaker and listener.
- To accomplish this end, a narrative must move forward in time from some initial point to the resolution without flashbacks.
- Before beginning a narrative, a narrator must construct a chain of events, each the cause of its successor, that links the most reportable event of a narrative to an initiating event set in an initial matrix that needs no further accounting and is not in itself reportable.
- The narrator begins the narrative with an orientation section, which incorporates the initiating event into a static situation with no previous history. Accepting the orientation as needing no prior explanation is equivalent to accepting the narrator's theory of the causes of the reportable events.
- The first narrative event that follows the orientation is presented without prior cause, because the ordinary events of the orientation do not generate reportable events:
- This Norwegian sailor come over . . .
- There was a rat out in the yard . . .
- My father died unexpectedly
- and Ray was in surgery . . .
- He noticed the death of a person who . . .

The manner in which the chain of narrative events is transformed into narrative clauses will of course depend upon the linguistic resources of the speaker's language. In any case, our understanding of this process will be illuminated by a reconstruction of the chain of causal connections between the most reportable event and the orientation selected by the narrator. Our review of other possible orientations pointed toward earlier alternatives rather than later ones. In less dramatic narratives, we may find later alternatives more attractive. Some narrators pursue the chain of relevant events further than necessary into the domain of ordinary occasions. As we move backwards in time, relevance diminishes and the claim to speakership may falter. In the more dramatic narratives that we have considered here, the impact of the most reportable event is intensified by the brevity of the chain that precedes it. Digging further into the past in our preconstruction may make the end result more credible but therefore less surprising. The selection of orientation and initiating event demands

good steersmanship in navigating between the menacing Scylla of disbelief and the yawning Charybdis of ho-hum.

NOTES

1. Or as Sacks (1992, vol. 2, 3–5) pointed out, justify the automatic return of speakership to the narrator after the interposition of other turns in the form of back channel or other comment. The concept of reportability is of course relative to the social situation and competing claims for speakership.
2. Excluding of course the special genre of tall tales, where the demand for credibility is canceled.
3. Following the abstract, if there is one. An abstract need not be considered as part of the narrative itself.
4. In this notation, each independent clause (together with its subordinate clauses) is lettered separately.
5. The notion that the behavior of drunken Scandinavian sailors is irrational and unpredictable is widespread in vernacular narrative.
6. The verb phrase of clause e, *turn around,* is frequently used in narratives of personal experience to elaborate the description of activity when no literal motion of the body is necessarily implied.
7. Clause m, "grabbed his arm," is not a separate element in the causal chain, but an instrumental specification which increases the sense of activity. In this respect, it is similar to "turned around" in clause e of "The Norwegian Sailor."
8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sitting_shiva#processealthgrades.com/.

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