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Toward Families of Stories in Context

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This essay addresses three features of Labov's and Waletzky's (1967/this issue; henceforth L&W) important article on narrative: (a) L&W's definition of narrative as a genre dealing with past events, (b) their procedures for data eliciting, and (c) their notion of *evaluation.*

In their classic article on stories, L&W (1967/this issue) argued that narrative provides "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred." Stories in this study were collected in a dyadic interview situation, in response to questions about past events posed by an interviewer. Although the last utterances of a teller's narrative frequently tied back to the interviewer's initial questions, in L&W's study the questions the interviewers put forward were not considered part of the storytelling process. This ignoring of the researcher's impact on the data-gathering process is similar to what happens frequently in cultural anthropology, in which the ethnographer's work in eliciting statements about culture is virtually erased.

In this short essay I describe how ethnography affords the researcher a process for gathering stories that is alternative to interviewing and results in different understandings about the structure that stories exhibit. By examining naturally occurring stories we can see how narrative structure is related to the participation framework of the moment and current social projects, often encompassing multiple participants. Narratives told at different times may be linked to each other. Moreover, some of these linked stories provide for the description of future and possible as well as past events. Stories told in interaction with others (rather than in response to questions a researcher poses) constitute a powerful tool for building social organization, often sanctioning untoward behavior.

Inspired by Labov's studies of "the logic of nonstandard English" (Labov, 1970), as well as his push towards getting the vernacular speech events of a speech

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community, I undertook fieldwork in the early 1970's among working-class African American children in Philadelphia (see Goodwin, 1990). My concern was to document the naturally occurring talk within focused encounters (Goffman, 1961), through which a particular neighborhood group of children built their social order. For a year and a half I tape-recorded the children as they played together on the street, after school, on weekends, and during the summer. Rather than focusing on particular speech events, I instead tape-recorded everything that the children did. I wanted to capture the structure of events in children's lives as they unfolded in the ordinary settings in which they habitually occurred, rather than to control the data-gathering process.

In their study of narrative, L&W found that narratives adhered to a basic structural pattern, which they viewed as inherent to the process of storytelling itself. By way of contrast, in my own work involving ethnographic research, I found that the immediate local context as well as the longer-term social projects (i.e., ostracism) that participants are engaged in are critical in shaping the way events are reported. A storyteller builds her story with attention to the participation structure of the moment; this includes both the current audience and their alignment towards figures in the story, as well as the place of the story within a larger plan of activity. In that stories in naturally occurring interaction are rarely prompted by an interviewer's question about the interviewee, the principal figure need not therefore include the storyteller (the central character in L&W's "danger of death" stories).

When girls in the Maple St. community I studied wish to sanction others in the group who through their actions show they "think they cute" or better than other group members, they initiate an elaborate dispute process called he-said-she-said. In that talking about someone in her absence constitutes a serious breach, a culturally recognizable offense, girls usually frame grievances towards other girls in terms of this offense. For example, girls accuse one another in statements such as "Kerry said you said that I wasn't gonna go around Poplar no more." Stories constitute important ways in which girls learn that they have been talked about behind their backs. Through *instigating*, a girl who will stand as neither accuser nor defendant describes how a nonpresent party was talking about her current addressee behind her back. Whereas within personal narratives it is common for the principal figure to be the current teller, the principal character in instigating stories is generally an absent party.

The larger framework of the he-said-she-said dispute provides organization for the characters in a story, as well as their actions. The teller reports actions of an absent party towards the present hearer. When the present audience changes, so do the cited characters in the story; teller adapts the story continuously to the interaction of the moment.

Stories are often told with the purpose of realigning the current social order. Wanting to create social drama leading to a confrontation, the storyteller attempts

to elicit from the offended party a commitment to confront the absent party. In order to accomplish this, she reports incidents of her own encounters with the absent party and describes how she herself responded in an aggravated manner. She suggests to the listener the type of behavior that is appropriate with the offending party by providing models of her own past interaction, even quoting herself in the past:

Example 1

Bea: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.=*She* was, *she*- was-
       she was in Rochele house you know,
       and she said that um, that-
       I heard her say um, (0.4) um um uh uh
       "*Julia* said y'all been talking behind my back."
       I said I'm a- I'm a say "Honey, I'm *gla:d*,
       that *you* know I'm talking *behind your back.*
       because *I*- because I *meant* for you to know *any*way."
       An' she said, I- said
       "I don't have to talk behind your back.
       =I can talk in front of your *face too.*"

In discussing the role of evaluation, Labov stated (1972) that evaluation, the means by which the narrator indicates "the point of the narrative, its raison d'etre: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at" is perhaps "the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause" (p. 366). As argued by Labov (p. 392), using direct speech in reporting experiences provides a way to intensify certain narrative events, thereby warding off indifferent stances to the reported talk (p. 396). In the interview-gathering situation used by Labov, talk into the narrative by the interviewer was minimal. Consequently, there was very little opportunity to judge how internal evaluative strategies affected audience response; by way of contrast, in naturally occurring interaction it is possible to look at the next utterances of those listening to a story to see if tellers are indeed successful in warding off a "so what?" response. In such recipient response to stories we can locate yet another form of evaluation of the story.

Through stories such as Example 1, told with direct quotation, the teller attempts to encourage a reaction of righteous indignation so that the listener will promise to confront the offending absent party in the future. Immediately upon completion of the prior story, for example, the offended party produces a *future story* in which she projects what she will do when she confronts the offender (Kerry):

Example 2

Barbara: So, she got anything t'say
           she come say it in front of my face. (1.0)
           I better not *see Kerry* today.

I ain't gonna say- I'm-a-say
"Kerry *what you say* about me."

Future stories such as these have social consequences. Following this type of future enactment from the offended party, the instigator informs other people in the neighborhood that such a statement has been made. Subsequently, if the offended party backs down from her commitment, she can be accused of having "moled" or "swagged," which is viewed seriously by the children as loss of character.

In the stories relayed to others in the neighborhood who are not central figures in the upcoming event, the instigator emphasizes the offended party's past statements that are important to the future confrontation, but eliminates or minimizes her own work in soliciting such statements. For example, in Example 3, Bea underplays her own talk in soliciting a statement from the offended party. Although her own reporting prior to the commitment to confront statement (Example 2) had taken some 141 lines of text, she summarizes her own past interaction with a single utterance in indirect speech: "I had told *Bar*bara, what um, what Kerry said about her?" before elaborating in direct quotation the offended party's commitment to confront her offender:

Example 3
Bea: Hey you- you n- you know- You know I- I-
        I had told *Bar*bara, what um,
        what Kerry said about her?
        And I- and she said
        "I better not see um um *Ker*ry, because"
        she said she said
        "Well I'm comin around Maple
        and I *j*ust better not *see* her b'cause I'm-
        b'cause I'm gonna tell her behind her-
        in front of her face and not behind her-
        I mean in front of her *face*."

In the initial storytelling session (Example 1), the crucial events at issue were the actions of an offending party (Kerry). When a story is retold to someone who may be a future witness to the confrontation, a detailed chronology of past events is not key to the activity of involving a listener in some future state of the he-said-she-said event. What is important is the reaction of the offended party to the report of how she was talked about in her absence.

Following the instigator's reports, members of the children's community actively evaluate the insitgator's reportings by building yet a third story type: *hypothetical stories*. In response to stories about the possible confrontation developing, others in the neighborhood who are neither offended nor offending party

express their alignment towards the possible spectacle. For example, Martha, on hearing Bea's story about Barbara's response states:

Example 4
Martha: Can't wait t'see this
          A::Ction. Mm*fh*, Mm*fh*.
Bea: But if *Bar*bara say
          [she
Martha: [I laugh- I laugh I laugh if Kerry say- Bea *s*-
          I laugh if Barbara say, "I *wrote* it
          so what you gonna *do* about it."
Bea: *She* say, she- aud- and she
          and she probably gonna back out.
Martha: I know.
Bea: Bouuh boouh bouuh
Martha: And then she gonna say
          "You didn't *have* to *write* that about me Barbara."
          She might call her Barbara *fat* somp'm.
          Barbara say "Least I don't have no long: bumpy legs and
          bumpy neck. Spot legs,
          Least I don't gonna fluff my hair up
          to make me look like I hadda bush."

Here the girls utilize ritual insults, actions which are rarely used in someone's presence to construct a hypothetical drama. This informing about a past meeting with an offended party thus can recruit potential spectators to the event.

In building the he-said-she-said event, children of Maple Street make use of a whole family of structurally different stories; these stories are deeply embedded within the structure of a larger social and political process. In delivering her stories, the instigator carefully crafts them to elicit from her listeners responses that will promote involvement in a future confrontation. In the case of interaction with the offended party, the instigator's *past stories* generate the offended party's future stories. With other children in the neighborhood, who are neither offending nor offended parties, however, involvement takes the form of playing out hypothetical stories. Each story type is situated within a different kind of encounter, with differentiated forms of hearers and different story characters; however, stories occurring at different times and in different places are linked in a complex speech event, a dispute process.

Evaluative activity occurs not only through the ways in which the narrator recounts past events in direct speech but also the ways in which listeners use direct quotation to build future and possible stories of their own design. If one were to look only at elicited stories, none of the ways in which hearers actively coparticipate

in building subsequent linked stories would be evident. In addition, the ways that stories are used by girls to put people in their place and reshuffle alignments would be obscured.

Still other structural complexities of the storytelling participation frame may occur when stories are told to multiple recipients, not all of whom display the engagement of a rapt listener. Although with the Maple Street girls, responses of recipients promote the spectacle that the instigator attempts to design, in other circumstances hearers may oppose the framework a speaker's actions make relevant (Goodwin, 1997); in such circumstances evaluation can also take the form of byplay or heckling.

Sacks (1963) argued that stories need to be considered in light of ongoing social projects. Within the retold, future, and hypothetical stories examined here, the present interaction and larger social projects of tellers rather than properties of the past events influence how characters and their actions will be depicted. Extended ethnography permits us to see how stories unfold in the everyday events of people's lives and permits us to view language in terms of its functions—in Malinowski's (1923, pp. 312–313) terms, "as a link in concerted human activity."

This is important for anyone seriously interested in the enterprise of ethnography, which relies on informants' accounts of events. Rather than accepting reports as instances of the events they describe, social science researchers need to seriously investigate the process of reporting itself as a situated conversational activity.

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Narrative Structure and Conversational Circumstances

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Labov and Waletzky (1967/this issue; henceforth L&W) established fundamental properties in narrative structure and the linguistic realizations of those structural categories. They made possible the opening up of new questions in narrative analysis, giving grounds for cross-genre, cross-cultural, and developmental comparisons.

Our concern with the conversational context of fledgling and expanded narration has led us to reopen the question of what constitutes a narrative and to address a new question of how production circumstances alter the structural features of a narrative. In eliciting personal narratives, L&W used a prompting frame that called for high-point stories by drawing on the tellers' most shaped, retold, and dramatic experiences. Our concern is with less auspiciously launched narratives, which are incidental to conversation and provide a wider range of types.

When we set out to identify personal experience narratives in natural conversations, we noticed that stories launched into a conversational situation do not exhibit many of the prototypical narrative genre features that were put forward by L&W. They were not always recognizable by criteria such as explicit orientation, presence of a climactic complicating action, or closure of the story line with a resolution. Indeed, sometimes they even lacked temporal juncture. In this article, we examine the conversational circumstances surrounding structural organization both in marginal cases of narrative and in those that display the structure outlined by L&W.

DATABASES FOR STUDY

American Adult Data

The adult data, labeled UC Disclab, consists of 180 transcripts collected in a variety of contexts, but primarily from informal natural groups of friends taped by students in California.

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