



University of Tikrit

College of Education for Women

Department of English

Subject: General English Language

Stage : 2nd Year Students

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Title of Lecture : Narrative: An Introduction

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s there has been a huge amount of interest in, and speculation about, the nature of narrative. This may well be a function of our information society, where communication and the means of communication have become increasingly important to societies, organizations, and individuals alike. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies (e.g. Chafe 1980; Levi-Strauss 1972) suggest that narrative is a basic and constant form of human expression regardless of ethnic origin, primary language, and enculturation.

Narrative is an important topic in Discourse Analysis and Semiotics. In Education, narrative methods have made significant inroads in teacher training and professional development, in schools, and as a research methodology. There has also been interest in using narrative as a device for structuring e-Learning materials. Much of the literature is concerned with fictional narrative which is not necessarily relevant to real-world contexts.

The Function of Narrative

Events that take years may be summarized and briefly disposed of in a narrative, while crucial events taking milliseconds could be blown-up, pored over, described in meticulous detail, to form the bulk of the telling. In this way we can claim that a narrative must always be subjective (White, 1981:14). This subjectivity, this *point of view* of the narrator shapes every element of the narrative.

The selection of events, the relative importance attached to each, and the way in which subjective time is managed are all entirely dependent upon the point of view of the narrator. A narrative is a *re-presentation* of reality from a particular perspective. It is a whole, an internally consistent, self-contained unit of expression; reality reconfigured in order to create meaning.

Abbott (2002: 3) says that narrative “is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” and that the ability to manage time “fluidly” within a narrative allows “events themselves to create the order of time.” Polkinghorne’s definition of narrative (1988:13) is that it “is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite.” Chatman has said that the common features of all narratives are “order and selection” (1978:28) and, based on work by Piaget, discusses how narratives display three structural properties: wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation. It is *whole* because although “events and existents are single and discrete, [...] the narrative is a sequential composite” and “unlike a random agglomerate of events, they manifest a discernible organization.” *Self-regulation* “means that the structure maintains and closes itself” and *transformation* refers to the process of

selection and ordering itself i.e. the way in which events may be combined and recombined in different ways (Chatman, 1978 :20-22).

Oral Narratives

In this paper Labov and Waletzky identify five structural features which they term Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda (which would prototypically occur in that order). The *orientation* sets the scene, the *complication* would be the main body of the narrative describing the action or events that occurred. At the narrative approaches its climax an *evaluation* section is inserted which “reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units compared to others” (Labov and Waletzky, 1997:32). The evaluation would be followed by the climax of the narrative, the *resolution* or outcome. Labov and Waletzky point out that the insertion of an evaluation section at this crucial point in the narrative is an important structural marker without which “it is difficult to distinguish the complicating action from the result” (ibid.:30). The *coda* “is a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment” (ibid.:35). Labov adds a sixth element, the Abstract, which begins the narrative and briefly states “not only what the narrative is about, but why it was told” (Labov, 1999:234).

Narrative: a Summary

- 1: Narrative is the primary means of comprehension and expression for our experience of events changing over time.
- 2: Narrative time is subjective, not objective; elastic, not metronomic.
- 3: Event selection and event sequencing are two crucial functional elements of narrative construction, and they are reciprocally related to the subjective experience of time described in the narrative.
- 4: A narrative is re-presentation of reality from a particular perspective: reality reconfigured to express meaning.
- 5: Oral narratives always have structure. The prototypical six-part structure as described by Labov and Waletzky includes Abstract, Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda.
- 6: In practice this structure is subject to reconfiguration as meaning is socially situated.
- 7: Narrative is implicated in the efficient organization and encoding of memory.
- 8: Narrative is implicated in planning and problem-solving abilities.

One final point is that expression through the means of narrative is a *creative* or *imaginative* act. When we say that events are selected, ordered, and reconfigured we are talking about a creative activity. When we say that

oral narratives are spontaneously redesigned to suit specific social situations we are talking about a creative act. When we say that experience is organized for encoding in memory we are talking about a creative act. Planning, problem-solving, and simulation are primarily imaginative acts. In each case it is *meaning* that is created: sense, order, and design imposed upon raw experience or even, as Dijk suggests, new meaning that is “not a property of the individual constitutive parts” (Dijk ,1980:15) i.e. original thought, *invention*.

Conclusion

Establishing narrative as a meaning making structure, and described research that shows how sophisticated and highly developed our capacity for narrative is. In doing so we have seen how it plays a crucial role in the establishment of socially negotiable meaning, identity, and memory. We use it imaginatively for planning and problem-solving.

