

Labov's narrative model

Table and exercise adapted from Sample Unit, Simpson, Paul. *Stylistics*. London: Routledge, 2005
<http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/0415281059/>

Table C5.1 lists the six categories, the hypothetical questions they address and their respective narrative functions. The table also provides information on the sort of linguistic forms that each component typically takes. With the exception of Evaluation, the categories listed on the Table are arranged in the sequence in which they would occur in a typical oral narrative. Evaluation tends to sit outside the central pattern because it can be inserted at virtually any stage during a narrative. Evaluation is also the most fluid of the narrative categories stylistically: it may take a variety of linguistic forms depending on what particular evaluative job it is doing. However, the insertion of evaluative devices is generally very important as it helps explain the relevance of the central, reportable events of a story. A fully formed narrative will realise all six categories, although many narratives may lack one or more components.

Table C5.1 Labov's model of natural narrative

Narrative category	Narrative question	Narrative function	Linguistic form
ABSTRACT	What was this about?	Signals that the story is about to begin and draws attention from the listener.	A short summarising statement, provided before the narrative commences.
ORIENTATION	Who or what are involved in the story, and when and where did it take place?	Helps the listener to identify the time, place, persons, activity and situation of the story.	Characterised by past continuous verbs; and Adjuncts (see A3) of time, manner and place.
COMPLICATING ACTION	Then what happened?	The core narrative category providing the 'what happened' element of the story.	Temporally ordered narrative clauses with a verb in the simple past or present
RESOLUTION	What finally happened?	Recapitulates the final key event of a story.	Expressed as the last of the narrative clauses that began the Complicating Action.
EVALUATION	So what?	Functions to make the point of the story clear.	Includes: intensifiers; modal verbs; negatives; repetition; evaluative commentary; embedded speech; comparisons with unrealised events.
CODA	How does it all end?	Signals that a story has ended and brings listener back to the point at which s/he entered the narrative.	Often a generalised statement which is 'timeless' in feel.

Practice with the model

This story, which took well under a minute to tell, is a fairly compact example of a natural narrative – even if the storyteller has a somewhat sniffy attitude to the events described. In the transcription, pauses are indicated by three dots while other relevant glosses are placed in square brackets.

Beside each chunk of the story are five boxes, corresponding to five of Labov's categories.

Evaluation has not been included because, as noted above, this component tends to permeate the other categories and can occur throughout a narrative. Read the story through now and identify which category is which by writing...the name of the component in the box to the right of the relevant piece of text **Then go through the story again, underlining Evaluation devices.**

... well erm a weird one [i.e. episode] happened to me a couple of years back ...	
y'know when I was working in Belfast at the time ... I was out for erm out for a drive in the car the weekend y'know of the May Bank holiday I think it was ...	
erm ... I picked up a hitchhiker thumbing a lift to Derry, rounabout Toome [a village] ... I wouldn't often do that, mind you , but well I didn't mind the company that day. Rounabout Magherafelt [another village], yer man puts a cigarette in his mouth and looks at me, like sort of inquiring y'know ... so I pushed in the dashboard lighter in the ... [inaudible] When it popped out, I handed it to him but, b'Jesus, after him lighting the fag he sorta glanced around like puzzled and ye wouldn't believe it, he opened the window on his side and ...	
chucked the bloody lighter out into the field!	
There's not much you can say about a thing like that, is there?	

Hymes, S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G rubric for the ethnography of speaking

Setting and Scene

"Setting refers to the time and place of a speech act and, in general, to the physical circumstances" (Hymes, p. 55). The living room in the grandparents' home might be a setting for a family story.

Scene is the "psychological setting" or "cultural definition" of a scene, including characteristics such as range of formality and sense of play or seriousness (Hymes 55-56). The family story may be told at a reunion celebrating the grandparents' anniversary. At times, the family would be festive and playful; at other times, serious and commemorative.

Participants

Speaker and audience. Linguists will make distinctions within these categories; for example, the audience can be distinguished as addressees and other hearers (Hymes 54 & 56). At the family reunion, an aunt might tell a story to the young female relatives, but males, although not addressed, might also hear the narrative.

Ends

Purposes, goals, and outcomes (Hymes 56-57). The aunt may tell a story about the grandmother to entertain the audience, teach the young women, and honor the grandmother.

Act Sequence

Form and order of the event. The aunt's story might begin as a response to a toast to the grandmother. The story's plot and development would have a sequence structured by the aunt. Possibly there would be a collaborative interruption during the telling. Finally, the group might applaud the tale and move onto another subject or activity.

Key

Cues that establish the "tone, manner, or spirit" of the speech act (Hymes 57). The aunt might imitate the grandmother's voice and gestures in a playful way, or she might address the group in a serious voice emphasizing the sincerity and respect of the praise the story expresses.

Instrumentalities

Forms and styles of speech (Hymes 58-60). The aunt might speak in a casual register with many dialect features or might use a more formal register and careful grammatical "standard" forms.

Norms

Social rules governing the event and the participants' actions and reaction. In a playful story by the aunt, the norms might allow many audience interruptions and collaboration, or possibly those interruptions might be limited to participation by older females. A serious, formal story by the aunt might call for attention to her and no interruptions as norms.

Genre

The kind of speech act or event; for our course, the kind of story. The aunt might tell a character anecdote about the grandmother for entertainment, but an exemplum as moral instruction. Different disciplines develop terms for **kinds of speech acts**, and speech communities sometimes have their own terms for types.