

Construing Experience: Some Story Genres

J. R. Martin

Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney

G. A. Plum

Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University

FIRST CONTACT

As far as we can recall, we first drew on Labov and Waletzky (1967/*this issue*; henceforth L&W) in the late 1970s when we were beginning to develop genre theory within the general framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Our main sources for thinking about generic structure at the time were Mitchell (1957/1975), the classic Firthian study of buying and selling in a Moroccan marketplace, and Hasan (1977), a seminal SFL paper that focussed on appointment making. Our aim was to develop a social model of genre that generalized across these and other text types (Christie & Martin, 1997; Eggins & Martin, 1997; Martin, 1985/ 1989, 1992; Ventola, 1987), and we appreciated having L&W's work to draw on.

Over the years, their work had a continuing influence on the development of this model, especially with respect to two strands of the research. One strand was community based and oriented to mapping the repertoire of genres through which people enact their lives. Plum (1988, *in press*) in particular was intrigued by the possibility of developing a sociolinguistic interview that was specifically designed to "elicit" genres, including narratives. The other strand was school based (Rothery, 1990) and concerned with mapping the repertoire of genres used by students to succeed in school and to redistribute control of these to students who were not accessing them (Hasan & Williams, 1985/1996; Martin, 1993). Here we were concerned with deconstructing the kinds of narrative students were expected to write and critique (Rothery & Macken, 1991). In both strands, the role of evaluation, flagged by L&W as construing the point of narrative, became more and more crucial.

STORIES IN THE COMMUNITY

As noted previously, Plum's sociolinguistic interview was designed to prompt a range of genres, including narratives; he interviewed 50 members of the "dog fancy"—the community of people who breed and show dogs. Working with reference to the school-based research outlined here (see following), Plum was looking for a range of narratives, alongside the "narrative of personal experience" genre outlined by L&W. Certainly narratives of the type they describe were collected:

Abstract

They're very gentle [Staffordshire bull-terriers]. For arguments sake, like the big boy is an example.

Orientation

We walked through the middle of Fairfield, back when he was about two years old. And there was a fellow in the middle of the street, whacking his little boy. The boy was about four or five years old and he was whacking the daylight's out of him. And I thought to myself, "Poor little bugger," you know.

Complication

And as I walked past, the dog went "whack" and grabbed the bloke on the hand. Never broke the skin or anything; just grabbed him on the hand.

Evaluation

I said, "I'm sorry, mate." I says, "It's you smacking the kid; he doesn't like you smack kids." He said, "I'm not smacking the kid." So I pat the dog on the nose; I said, "Let go, let go." I says, "Come on. Sorry, mate, forget it." He said, "I'm not going to smack the kid, don't worry."

Resolution

And as I walked away, the dog kept walking and all he was doing was walking and looking back at the bloke to make sure he wasn't going to touch the kid again.

Coda

He just sensed that it was unnecessary because the bloke was ... Like smacking a kid is smacking a kid, but when you whack the living daylight's out of him, it's a different sort of thing. (Plum, 1988, in press, Vol. II:213)

The structure (Abstract) ^ Orientation ^ Complication ^ Evaluation ^ Resolution ^ (Coda) was postulated by L&W (1967/this issue, p. 38) as prototypical of the

"complex normal form" of the narrative of personal experience, and Plum found that this structure accounted satisfactorily for 15% of the 134 narrative-type texts elicited in response to four questions aimed at such genres. However, in the vast majority of texts the "crisis" stage of Complication → Evaluation → Resolution—the middle stage of a beginning → middle → end structure—represented neither a crisis, considered the hallmark of a narrative (Sacks, 1972), nor could it be said to comprise the stages Complication, Evaluation, and Resolution. Instead, he found that many texts were organized in quite different ways around a sequence of events to make a point about them, with the positioning and nature of the evaluative language central to a reclassification of narrative genres. On the other hand, Abstract, Orientation, and Coda offered entirely satisfactory accounts of the *beginning and end stages of these texts*.

Three text types were posited as agnate with the canonical narrative of personal experience, namely, *recount*, *anecdote* and *exemplum*:

Recounts deal with a sequence of events that are presented by the teller as *unfolding unproblematically*—irrespective of how unusual, dangerous, tragic, and so forth, they might have been—in a Record of Events. The typical structure of a recount is (Orientation) → Record of Events → (Reorientation), with the Reorientation being both Coda-like, returning the story to the here and now, and Resolution-like, finishing off with a flourish what is potentially an interminable sequence of events, thus making it "tellable" in the terms of Labov (1972) by inventing its own point. Significantly, recounts don't have anything comparable to L&W's suspension of action through evaluation—their evaluative comments being realized prosodically—because they are not about restoring a disturbed equilibrium.

Anecdotes are accounts of a remarkable event, the point of which is to invite a listener to share a reaction—a laugh, a groan, a tear, and so forth, as appropriate. They negotiate solidarity by offering an affectual response to an extraordinary event for the listener or reader to share. The typical structure of an anecdote is (Orientation) → Remarkable Event → Reaction → (Coda), with the Reaction, that is, the aimed-at and shared affectual response, often being linguistically recoded by the narrator through reiteration of a key aspect of the Remarkable Event in order to emphasize its remarkable nature.

Exemplums share a judgment about a noteworthy incident, rather than an emotional response to a remarkable event as in the anecdote. The listener is positioned to approve or disapprove of the conduct of a story's protagonists, and in this respect the exemplum is related to other moralizing genres such as the parable, fable, gossip (and certain "thematic narratives" that project a "message"; Cranny-Francis, 1996; Martin, 1996). The typical structure of an exemplum is (Orientation) ^ Incident ^ Interpretation ^ (Coda), with the tellable events of the story downgraded to a mere incident whose only function is to serve as the raw material for the making of a point that lies totally outside the text.

A synopsis of the staging of these three genres, in relation to the narrative of personal experience, is outlined in Table 1. The comment column captures the positioning and nature of the all important evaluative language.

Looking over some of Labov's data, one can't help wondering whether stories told as anecdotes and exemplums were inadvertently recontextualized by Labov as narratives of personal experience as a result of his interviewing technique—which involved keeping people talking *unself-consciously* with a view to gathering data on phonological and morphological change in progress (rather than storytelling *per se*). Consider for example the following text from Labov (1966, pp. 71–72):

- WL: What happened to you? [following an affirmative response to WL's "danger of death" question]
 I: The school I go to is Food and Maritime—that's maritime training—and I was up in the masthead, and the wind started blowing. I had a rope secured around me to keep me from falling—but the rope parted, and I was just hanging there by my fingernails. I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in my life.
 WL: What happened?
 WL: Well, I came out all right ... Well, the guys came up and they got me.
 WL: How long were you up there?
 I: About ten minutes.
 WL: I can see you're still sweating, thinking about it.
 I: Yeh, I came down, I couldn't hold a pencil in my hand, I couldn't touch nothin'. I was shakin' like a leaf. Sometimes I get scared thinkin' about it ... but ... uh ... well, it's training.

As rendered here, one might well analyze the text as a narrative of personal experience:

TABLE 1
Comparative Staging Across Four Story Genres

Genre	Staging			
	Open	Experience	Comment	Experience
Recount	(Orientation)	Record of events	[Prosodic]	— (Reorientation)
Anecdote	(Orientation)	Remarkable event	Reaction	— (Coda)
Exemplum	(Orientation)	Incident	Interpretation	— (Coda)
Narrative	(Orientation)	Complication	Evaluation	Resolution (Coda)

Orientation
 The school I go to is Food and Maritime—that's maritime training—and I was up in the masthead, and the wind started blowing.

Complication
 I had a rope secured around me to keep me from falling—but the rope parted, and I was just hanging there by my fingernails.

Evaluation
 I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in my life.

Resolution
 ... I came out all right ... the guys came up and they got me.

Coda
 (WL: I can see you're still sweating, thinking about it.)
 Yeh, I came down, I couldn't hold a pencil in my hand, I couldn't touch nothin'. I was shakin' like a leaf. Sometimes I get scared thinkin' about it ... but ... uh ... well, it's training.

Without Labov's interventions the narrator may well have stopped after making the point that he'd never been so scared in his life. The narrator obviously survived to tell the tale, so an explicit resolution stage is not really required, and the story may well have been intended as an anecdote:

Orientation
 The school I go to is Food and Maritime—that's maritime training—and I was up in the masthead, and the wind started blowing.

Remarkable Event
 I had a rope secured around me to keep me from falling—but the rope parted, and I was just hanging there by my fingernails.

Reaction
 I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in my life.

L&W point to the significance of the evaluation in the creation of other types of narrative when they say that "perhaps the most frequent variant [of the narrative of personal experience] is the case where the evaluation ends the resolution: jokes, ghost stories and surprise endings take this" (p. 37). This is again noted by Labov (1982) in the context of two "fight" narratives in which "the evaluation section is placed at the end of the narrative, and merged with the final action or resolution"

(p. 226). However, neither paper discusses this structure, indicative of an agnate narrative genre.

STORIES IN SCHOOL

Our early school research focussed on writing in primary schools, particularly in response to the process writing and whole language programs imported from the United States. We observed (Martin & Rothery, 1984; Rothery, 1996) that the most common of the narrative genres written, and the only genre that one could expect all students to have written by the end of primary school, was *observation*, with recount being the second most common. Observation, with a typical structure of (Orientation) ^ Event Description ^ Comment, states what happened as a single event—collapsing a series of temporally sequenced events into one—and how that event affected the narrator, whereas the recount focusses on telling what happened.

Observation is not only commonly found in the primary school but also in the community, with a very significant difference in frequency between the writing of young children and the storytelling of adults: Whereas observations constituted 57% (1020/1789) of all story texts in the primary school study, they only constituted 18% (24/134) of all narrative texts produced in response to narrative questions in Plum's study. On distributional if not functional grounds, observation must be considered one of the narrative genres.

The recount genre is one that thrives in writing pedagogies in which models of a range of genres are not provided and teacher intervention is proscribed. Here's a typical example, following up a class trip to the zoo (Droga, 1990).

Orientation

One day I went to the zoo ...

Record of events

... and I saw Rhinoceros I moved to a Hippopotamus I touched him and he is hand and he is big and so I went on and I saw the tiger and this man was feeding him it was eating it up Mum tod me mv on and next came then a gorilla. I had a baby gorilla. My mum tod me to move on. I saw a watch. It was S ock.

We also observed that these primary school recounts were remarkably devoid of evaluation. They tended towards flat factual records of experience, and in this respect they were unlike spoken story genres, including spoken recounts, which tend to have a prosody of evaluation running through them. In some secondary English classrooms, the genre reappears in journal and diary writing. These recounts tend to be heavily evaluated, in response to progressive English teachers' concern

with surveilling the personal voice of their students. In the following text, the 15-year-old student deploys this evaluation in opposition to the surveillance of her teacher, to the delight of her peers—and carried on this resistance for most of the year.

Record of Events (& ongoing evaluation)

Fucken Hell man, who the hell told you I liked doing this kind of shit. On Saturday I saw Brian and Brendon and his Girlfriend at Waterloo, I was waiting to catch the bloody bus, anyway they started talking to me so that killed alot of time. Anyway I had to go to the Laundromat Yesterday and I saw my ex-boyfriend man he looks fucken ugly god knows what I went out with him, he looks like a fucken dickhead.

ANY WAYS HE WAS

so ugly only a blind woman would go out with him. I ran into this elderly man that lived down one of my old streets and because I had a bag of clothes the stupid cunt said to us are you running away from home which is bull-shit because the sooner that I got home the happier I would have been. Then my ex-boyfriend comes up which makes it even worse and he starts calling this old cunt a cradle snatching little ass-hole. I mean as if its any of his business, and like this is totally humiliating cause I mean everybody and I mean everybody tried to see who the hell was making all the fucken noise and yes there I was trying to hide my face as soon as possible ...

We found anecdotes and exemplums to be extremely rare. By the end of primary school and into secondary, story writing comes under the influence of the print and electronic media. The challenge for us here had to do with whether Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure could be usefully generalized to the longer written texts that students are expected to write and critique in secondary English classrooms. L&W's narrative structure was used in some materials; Rothery (1994) introduced it alongside some of the alternative story structures reviewed previously. Over time, however, it seemed to us that the notion of complicating action would have to be elaborated to account for the complex pattern of recursive disruptions in longer narratives (Hasan, 1989), and it seemed that a more sophisticated framework for considering evaluation was required (Martin, in press-a, in press-b).

One of the perils of introducing explicit teaching of generic structure, including narrative structure, into the curriculum was driven home to us in some otherwise competent materials produced by the (Australian) Northern Territory Department of Education. Acting without the participation of the relevant functional linguists in Darwin, the following text was used to model L&W's narrative of personal experience structure:

The Orphan Child

Long ago, at a place called Kabbari, a group of people had gathered. An orphan child said he was hungry.

His brother said, "I will go and hunt goanna for you to eat." And off he went.

One of the group gave the orphan some cooked roots of a waterlily to eat. He had never eaten this type of waterlily before. He ate it. He cried for more. There was no more. His cries became louder and louder.

Far out to sea, the serpent heard the child crying. She swam towards the sound, stopping every now and then to listen to make sure she was headed the right way.

Nothing the people could do made the orphan stop crying. On and on he cried.

When the serpent reached the land, she swam under the land, towards the sound. The people tried everything to get the orphan to stop crying. Still the orphan cried.

Suddenly the fire went out as the ground became wet. The people who were sleeping felt cold as the wetness touched their skins. The people knew the serpent had reached them and they were afraid.

The ground became wetter and colder. The serpent burst through the ground and swallowed all the people, every one. She made sure she swallowed the crying orphan first. At this moment the orphan's older brother returned with a goanna on his back. The serpent swallowed him too. Later, the serpent spat everyone out and they turned into rock forms.

This is the origin of the landforms you can see at Kabbari today. High on the escarpment stands the rock figure of the older brother holding a goanna on his back. Way below to his right, is the little rock of the orphan. Behind the orphan child are all the rock forms of the people. Further around is the serpent whose face can be seen clearly in the escarpment. (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1993)

We do not attempt a detailed analysis here as we are not specialists in Australian Aboriginal culture, from which the story has been recontextualized. However, it is obvious from the way the story ends that its function in that culture has to do with the history of land, which is, of course, closely tied up with people's custodial relation to that land. The story has not been told to make a point about an individual overcoming adversity; rather, it uses different kinds of language and structure to encode a fragment of Aboriginal law that bears critically on issues of native title and land ownership. It is salutary to note that one cannot emphasize or repeat often enough in certain contexts the cultural specificity of genres and the dangers of borrowing a text from one culture to illustrate a functional structure from another—however user-friendly to the "other" one wants materials to appear.

CODA

No doubt our close encounters with L&W will continue for some time. Our research underscores the importance of thinking carefully about how narratives are collected and the significance of data collection dedicated specifically to genre research. In the short term, we hope to extend our work on evaluation and more complex event structures, in order to enhance L&W's insight into the significance of the interaction of events with evaluation in narrative. Our feeling is that this kind of work is best pursued in a highly theorized framework (such as SFL), which models language and social context and the dialectic between the two as explicitly as possible—with a view to building rich accounts of narrative and other genres, comparable to the functional descriptions of English grammar provided by Halliday (1994) and Mathiessen (1995) and used as the basis for our analyses.

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