

The Language of Life and Death

The Transformation of Experience in Oral Narrative

William Labov



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107656819

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First published 2013

Printed in the United Kingdom by Bell and Bain Ltd

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Labov, William.

The language of life and death : the transformation of experience in oral narrative /
By William Labov.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-107-03334-4 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-65681-9 (Paperback)

1. Discourse analysis, Narrative. 2. Storytelling. 3. Narrative (Rhetoric)

I. Title.

P96.N35.L33 2013

808'.036–dc23

2012045220

ISBN 978-1-107-03334-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-65681-9 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/9781107033344

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It could be argued that the narrative art itself arose from the need to tell an adventure; that man risking his life in perilous circumstances constitutes the original definition of what is worth talking about.

Paul Zweig: *The Adventurer*

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Preface

As a sophomore at Harvard in 1945, I took a beginning class on Homeric Greek with Eric Havelock, the scholar who later became a dominant figure in classics studies through his *Preface to Plato* and other work. We had been reading of the unquenchable laughter that arose among the gods when the affairs of Hephaestus, Ares and Aphrodite were exposed. Havelock turned to us and asked, "Why are the gods such comic characters?" There was a pause; no one spoke. He continued, "Because if you're not going to die, nothing important can happen to you."

Acknowledgments

In putting this book together, I have received help from several sources that do not all appear in the references. Gerald Prince has introduced me to the many domains of narratology that have been developed since my first efforts in 1967. Robin Séguy read the manuscript with meticulous care and used his deep knowledge of narrative to restore a sense of order to the complex web of citations. My daughter Alice Goffman read a near-final version and contributed much to my effort to say what this book adds up to. Henry Glassie gave me needed orientation to the interpretation of the traditional tale "In vain I tried to tell you." My wife and colleague Gillian Sankoff has been a continuing source of insight into the cultural and emotional issues involved and helped reduce the many errors to a reasonable number. My indebtedness to the narrators who provide the substance of this book is so obvious that I shall not mention it here; but see the last sentence of the book on this point.

1 Introduction to the language of life and death

In the late afternoon of July 29, 1963, I was talking to a retired Jewish postman named Jacob Schissel, in his brownstone house on New York City's Lower East Side. I had reached the point in the interview that dealt with serious matters, and I asked, "Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of being killed? Did that ever happen to you?" Schissel answered "Eh no, at no time" but then added, "Wait a second, let me contradict myself. Yes, once." I said, "What happened?" and Schissel said, "My brother put a knife in my head." I said, "How'd that happen?" and Schissel then told me the story.

This was just a few days after my father had died
and we were sitting shiva.
And the reason the fight started,
he saw a rat out in the yard
– this was out in Coney Island –
and he started talk about it.
And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee
and I told him to cut it out.
'Course kids, y'know, he don't hafta listen to me.
So that's when I grabbed his arm
and twisted it up behind him.
When I let go his arm,
there was a knife on the table,
he just picked it up
and he let me have it.
And ... I started bleeding – like a pig.
And naturally first thing to do, run to the doctor,
and the doctor just says, "Just about this much more,"
he says, "and you'd a been dead."

As I was leaving, going down the stairs, I heard Mrs. Schissel say, "That's a clever young man." I remember being puzzled. I didn't do anything clever, I thought to myself. But something important must have happened on that Monday afternoon.

As a setting for this inquiry into the language of life and death, it may be helpful to ask how I came to ask Schissel that question. It was a logical outcome of my own personal history and the route I followed in entering the field of linguistics. I had spent eleven years as an industrial chemist, formulating printing inks, and, though I was good at it (inks I formulated are still selling well), I wanted to work in a field where you could publish your good ideas when they worked, instead of burying them with other proprietary information. My earlier efforts at writing drew my attention to language, and linguistics attracted me as a field for people who really wanted to know how language worked.

At that time, most of the data for this field came from introspection: a linguist would put the question (most likely, to himself) "Can you say this?" or "Can you say that?" I thought that the field might be put on a more solid footing if it were based on what people actually said in everyday life. A wonderful instrument, the tape recorder, had recently been made available (from German patents obtained at the end of World War II), but linguists weren't using it. I bought one (a Uher, then a Nagra) and set out to record a random sample of New Yorkers across all social classes.

The kind of language I hoped to record was something like the language I had been used to hearing from the men in the printing ink factory at lunch time: free flowing, joking, loud, argumentative, full of stories and friendly insults. But I found that when the speaker was face-to-face with a microphone, the speech that emerged was more compressed, more guarded and less interesting. People said what they thought you wanted to hear, and said it in a way that they thought you wanted it to be said. This was a particular problem in New York City, where the local dialect was highly stigmatized, and the shift away from it to a more formal style produced strange and irregular efforts at the correction of sounds, grammar and vocabulary.

Over the next few years I developed a variety of techniques to reduce this level of formality – getting people to argue with each other, talk about the games they played as kids – but the most effective way was to elicit personal narrative. I noticed that the level of formality was distinctly reduced when people were talking about their personal experience – events that had actually happened – rather than their general opinions. When the narrative centered on really important experience, the level of formality dropped even further.

The question on the danger of death that I asked Schissel was particularly effective. This was clear in another interview on the Lower East Side with a 16-year-old Irish-Italian boy named Eddie Delaney, from a lower-working-class family. He was a very careful and guarded speaker. After his brothers had talked about their experience, I asked him "What happened to you?" He answered:

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.

At this point, Eddie's breathing became very heavy and irregular; his voice began to shake, and drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. Small traces of nervous laughter appeared in his speech. (My interventions are in parentheses).

I never prayed to God so fast and so hard in my life ...
(What happened?)
Well, I came out all right ...
well, the guys came up
and they got me.
(How long were you up there?)
About ten minutes.
(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 nuttin'.
I was shakin' like a leaf.
Sometimes I get scared thinkin' about it ...
but ... uh ... well, it's training.

At the point where I first observed the sweat standing out on Eddie's forehead, there was a dramatic change in the linguistic variables that register style. His use of the variable (ING) switched from the standard *-ing* to colloquial *-in'* (*nuttin'*, *shakin'*, *thinkin'*); he used double negative (*I couldn't touch nuttin'*), and he dropped the technical and formal vocabulary that he started with (*secured*, *parted*). Only at the very end did he pull himself together and return to the formal style that he felt was appropriate for an interview.

One might ask, why is one style better than another? Why the effort to record the least formal style? My answer is that there is one style of speech that is superior to all others – from the linguistic point of view – which we call the *vernacular*. It is the form of language first learned, most perfectly acquired, which we use automatically and unthinkingly in conversation with family and intimate friends. It is the most systematic and rule-governed: the formal language we acquire later in life never shows the same intricate regularities, and we often find ourselves embarrassed to discover that for many years we have been mispronouncing a word that was only learned in reading. Most importantly, the vernacular is the basis for historical continuity and regular linguistic change: it is the form of language that is inherited from parent to child over generations. The history of a language is the history of its vernacular.

One might also ask why interview at all? Why not just record the stream of speech at the dinner table, on the street, at the post office, in a barber shop, at the laundromat, over card games? Indeed some very important work has been done this way.¹ But the individual sociolinguistic interview is an indispensable tool for many reasons. It obtains the best sound quality, needed for the study of phonetic variation; it obtains the large volume of speech needed for quantitative studies of grammatical variation, and allows us to gather the demographic information needed for socioeconomic studies. Most importantly, these interviews are the necessary basis for a representative study of large speech communities, that allows us to track social stratification and the age differentials that are our most useful indicators of linguistic change.

Principles of interest

The interviews generated in sociolinguistic studies are designed, then, to simulate spontaneous conversation, but not the desultory conversation that prevails when there is nothing interesting on the table. We give considerable attention to what makes speech flow at a high level of intensity in everyday life, in pursuit of the general question "Why does anyone say anything?"

There are of course endless sources of local interest that people like to talk about, in sports, politics, food, music and fashion. But themes that are most useful in a general program for priming the flow of speech involve three universal centers of interest: death, sex and moral indignation. These three drive the flow of speech in every language and every culture, but surface in a wide variety of forms, depending on what is appropriate in local social norms. Thus we can expand these concepts into a range of possible topics around which the currents of speech may flow:

- Death and the danger of death: violence, fighting, sickness, fear, dreams, premonitions and communication with the dead.
- Sex and relations between the sexes: dating, courtship, proposals, marriage, breaking off relationships, affairs, intermarriage.
- Moral indignation: assignment and rejection of blame, unfairness, injustice, gossip, violations of social norms.

As we will see, many narratives combine two or even three of these themes. The confluence of interest will flow strongly into the concept of *reportability*, which is an essential element of the study of narrative. At this point it may be asked, do we need a theory or proof of a theory to support what has just been

¹ See the long-term studies of "Springville," Texas, by Cukor-Avila and Bailey (1995); and the recording by Arvilla Payne of the speech of Carol Meyers over the course of an entire day, analyzed in Hindle (1980).

said about principles of interest? The narratives that will be put forward in the chapters to follow will be the argument, and if they should fail the test of interest for any given reader, they and this book as a whole may be rejected out of hand.

The study of narrative

As the field of sociolinguistic inquiry developed, narratives of personal experience became more and more important. The narrative itself became a focus of linguistic interest. And as the range of linguistic inquiry gradually broadened, the analysis of discourse became a prominent part of the field, although it never developed the precision and complexity of the central areas of grammar and phonology. Various types of speech events were studied – sermons, lectures, arguments – but of these the narrative turned out to have the most clearly defined properties, with a beginning, a middle, an end and an internal structure that can be described with precision.

In 1967, I published a paper on "Narrative analysis" with Joshua Waletzky (henceforward, L&W)² that has been widely used as a basis for further studies of the narrative genre. In 1997, a special four-part issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (now *Narrative Inquiry*) reproduced this paper along with thirty-eight others commenting on or related to it. I've published a dozen other papers on narrative since then, with results, techniques and analyses that will be integrated into the text of this volume.

Narrative studies and narratology have grown enormously in the past half century³ and taken different forms in different fields: not only in the literary domain, but in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and folklore.⁴ A good proportion of this work makes reference to the L&W paper. Two basic themes from that original paper are most often referred to:

- A fully developed narrative begins with an abstract, an orientation with information on persons, places, times and behavior involved; the complicating action; an evaluation section, which identifies the point of the narrative; the resolution; and a coda, which returns the listener to the present time.
- The importance of evaluation in adult narrative, which compares the events that actually happened with those that might have but did not happen.

² Labov and Waletzky (1967).

³ E.g. Genette (1972), Chatman (1976), Greimas (1977), Prince (1982, 1994), Fludernik (1996), Pratt (1997), *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1991–1997, *Narrative Inquiry*, 2000–2012.

⁴ A selection of works from the various disciplines includes: in philosophy Ricoeur (1984), in psychology Goldman et al. (1999), in anthropology Ochs and Capps (2001), and in folklore Dundes (1984).

On the other hand, there are other aspects of the L&W approach to narrative that are echoed less frequently in the literature:

- A definition of narrative as a particular way of recounting past events, by matching the order of narrative clauses with the original order in which those events occurred. Thus narrative, as defined by "temporal juncture," is only one of many ways of dealing with the past. Much of the literature deals with material that L&W would not consider narratives in this sense.
- A focus on the capacity of narrative to transmit to listeners the emotional impact of the central events of the narrator's experience – the matters of life and death that are the focus of this book. In everyday life, people often recount fragments of the day's events to their familiars in unremarkable and ordinary conversational exchanges, and much of the literature deals with such events – quite properly for a discipline that would grasp narrative skills in the most general sense. But certain aspects of narrative construction are brought to the fore by accounts that engage the central matters of life and death, and for the reasons outlined above, these were the primary materials on which the L&W analysis was based. And these are the topics of this book.

This volume continues the tradition of the early L&W approach to narrative in an effort to understand the profound interest generated in listeners by certain narratives, elicited in the course of sociolinguistic interviews, from ordinary people who are not known as gifted storytellers. These are not polished productions that have been many times rehearsed. There is often evidence (as in the case of Jacob Schissel) that they have not been told before.

The primary data on which this book is based are not the narratives themselves, but their effect on listeners when they are retold. Archetypical is the story that Schissel told me in 1961. Since then, I have retold the story to many audiences, small and large, as Jacob Schissel told it to me. I sometimes introduce it in this way: "I'm about to tell you a story. As I begin, this room will become completely silent. The usual little noises that people make, shifting in their chair, turning pages, coughing, whispering, will stop. And that silence will continue for some time after I'm finished. Now you might think to yourself, 'Well, I'll just drop my book on the floor, right in the middle of the story.' But you won't."

Many retellings have proved me right on this, with audiences as large as several thousand, or as small as two. At one such event, a burst of noise was heard in the middle of the story. It was from a playing field outside the auditorium, which had become so silent that noise from outside was suddenly audible.

Retelling stories in public is an odd experience, perhaps no different from that which actors experience in delivering their lines to an audience. Over the

years I have tried hard to understand the effect that Schissel's story has on the audience, speaking through me. I am writing this book because I think I have some part of the answer.

I am at a disadvantage in this printed format. Some part of Jacob Schissel's personal style that comes through in oral retelling will be lost. You yourself will have to judge whether I am right in saying that this narrative – the substance of the matter and the way it is told – is inherently interesting. If you agree, we can proceed to the next question: why does Jacob Schissel's story have such a profound effect upon us?

Narrative dimensions

Ochs and Capps begin their study of conversational narrative⁵ by establishing five dimensions along which narratives can be placed: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity and moral stance. They characterize the default narrative as one that occupies an extreme position on these five dimensions:

1. Tellership: one active teller;
2. Tellability: highly tellable account;
3. Embeddedness: relatively detached from surrounding talk and activity;
4. Linearity: temporal and causal organization;
5. Moral stance: certain, constant moral stance.

This is a good description of the subject matter of this book. With few exceptions, the narratives will be told by a single teller, without strenuous competition from the floor. The contents are all matters of life and death, which are identified with a high degree of reportability. There is some back channel activity, but the connection with the surrounding conversation springs from a question asked by the interviewer. Most importantly, the narratives in Chapters 3–11 all follow the definition of *narrative* put forward in Chapter 2, which involves an organization of discourse that matches the linear order of events in real time. Finally, these events are presented in a manner that maximizes a given moral position of the narrator, sometimes polarizing or sometimes minimizing the conflicts among the characters.

There is no doubt that much is to be learned by studying more fragmentary narratives in which tellership is divided, reportability is minimal, the stream of speech is much divided, and no clear point of view emerges. In most conversations, people refer to past events in one form or another, in ways that are not far from the basic narrative organization that is described here.⁶

⁵ Ochs and Capps (2001: 20).

⁶ Ochs and Capps (2001), Riessman (2002).

The sociolinguistic interview is an ideal context to elicit the archetypical narrative.⁷ This volume will focus upon ten narratives recorded in my own interviews. An equal number are drawn from sociolinguistic interviews conducted by students in courses on "The Study of the Speech Community" and particularly LING560 at the University of Pennsylvania from 1972 to the present. The sociolinguists aim for a conversational style, initiated by an exchange of small talk that carries the setting as far as possible from the formal questionnaires that are used in survey research. Yet this is not a typical conversation that might show an even balance of speakership among the participants. A sociolinguistic interview is considered successful if, in nine out of ten jumps to some point in time, the subject is heard and not the interviewer. One way of achieving this result is for interviewers to let the subject know as quickly as possible that they are interested in whatever he or she has to say. Throughout the interview, they follow the Principle of Tangential Shifting, based on Ruth's statement to Naomi: "Whither thou goest, I go."⁸ To guide and stimulate this conversation they traverse a network of conversational modules which contain questions of the following sort:⁹

- "Were you ever in a situation where you thought to yourself that you might not make it, where you said to yourself, 'This is it'?"
- "Was there someone in your family who used to have the feeling that something was going to happen, and it did happen?"
- "Did you ever get blamed for something you didn't do?"
- "Did you ever get into a fight with a guy bigger than you?"
- "Did you ever have a dream that really scared you?"

Such yes/no questions do not in themselves evoke a flow of speech; the answer that follows is usually a simple "yes" or "no." But given a positive response, interviewers then have available one of the most powerful tools in their armory: the question "What happened?" If the speaker has already committed to the existence of such an event, he or she is more likely to launch into the narrative than if the interviewer had said, "Would you please now tell me about one of the most important experiences in your life?"

The interview situation, then, provides an ideal setting for the elicitation of narrative under the full control of the narrator. The interviewer is attentive, interested and has conveyed the idea that he or she has no other goal in life more pressing than to listen to what the speaker has to say, no matter how long it takes. We know of course that the narratives will show

⁷ Labov (1984). ⁸ Old Testament book of Ruth, 1:16.

⁹ Experienced interviewers often stimulate response and enhance the conversational nature of the exchange by volunteering a (short) experience of their own.

"audience design"¹⁰: to some extent, the speaker shapes the form and content of the narrative according to what the listener is expected to know. But given this favorable setting, many speakers will produce a more expanded account of the events than if they had to compete for the floor in a general conversation.

The question has been raised as to how often such full-formed narratives (the "default" narrative of Ochs and Capps) are to be found in everyday life.¹¹ At this writing, I have just come from a Christmas party at the home of family friends where "The falling out" (see Chapter 5) was recorded three years ago. Six people were gathered in the small kitchen. For a good quarter of an hour, the floor was held by a 40-year-old man who told with great gusto a series of stories about his sexual adventures with his wife before they were married, and their encounters with his wife's father who at one point returned unexpectedly to the house. The three narratives were reportable in the highest degree, though they would not be tellable¹² in some other gatherings. There was much laughter from the group, four of whom had heard the stories before,¹³ but there was no competition for the floor, only encouragement to continue. This is one of countless such occasions where I have observed the unrecorded flow of full-formed archetypical narratives in everyday life. For our present purposes, recording is essential, since we are concerned with the details of the linguistic construction that transform experience in the interests of the teller.

A great deal is to be learned about narratives from observing how they are inserted into such a competitive situation, and the field of narrative studies has recently developed a strong interest in "small stories" which are located some distance from the Ochs and Capps default narrative. As Bamberg and Georgakapoulou describe them, such small stories may be brief efforts at telling that are seen as part of the speaker's efforts to establish a given identity, "fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world." They may be "very recent or still unfolding events ... immediately reworking slices of experience." The events involved are not necessarily interesting in themselves.¹⁴

Recent work on narrative makes reference to "a debate between proponents of big story research and supporters of small story research."¹⁵ This can be fruitful, in pointing to the limitations of each. In big stories, the effects of audience design are not so obvious and may be missed. Small stories are often compressed under competition for the floor, and the full development of the moral position of the narrator may be obscured. Both types of narrative have

¹⁰ See Bell (1984). ¹¹ See Schegloff (1997). ¹² See Norrick (2005).

¹³ His wife was standing beside him throughout.

¹⁴ Bamberg and Georgakapoulou (2004). See also Bamberg (2006), Georgakapoulou (2008).

¹⁵ Helsig (2010: 274), Freeman (2006).

much to tell us about human experience. As Freeman points out, they tell about different regions of experience: one that involves the quotidian workaday world of incidents and exchanges, of routine talk about this or that, and another that involves a kind of holiday, in which one takes the time to consider what it is that's been going on.¹⁶

In both types of narrative, one can observe the narrator's efforts to transform experience in the interest of the teller. This volume will focus on the linguistic implementation of those efforts. At the same time, the relation of our stories to the real world of the past will be defended, beginning with the working principle that narrators do not lie, given the rich store of devices for transforming reality without lying.

From the study of big stories, we will learn much about the underlying forms of narrative construction and the shape of fully developed narratives. In the forest, trees are crowded together, pressing against each other in ways that limit their horizontal spread. In an open field, we often see a great oak, maple or chestnut at its fullest development, its limbs reaching out under a gigantic symmetrical dome. The narratives of this volume are more like the trees in an open field than those of the forest. There is nothing unnatural about their development; big stories are not the creation of the interview format. We find many such full-fledged extended narratives in recorded conversations, where a single speaker holds the floor for an extended period until the story comes to its natural end.¹⁷ One big story, "The falling out" (Chapter 5), is jointly told by a pair of sisters, with competition for the floor that gradually shifts as the experience of one becomes dominant over the other.

Many of our big stories are quite brief, sometimes as short as eleven clauses. They deal with a single situation in a single setting, and when they come to an end there is no doubt that the story is over.¹⁸ We will also encounter much longer narratives that continue over a series of times and places before the fundamental problem is resolved. These will be presented as "epic narratives," the focus of Chapters 6–9. The scope will be extended further in the following chapters, which consider sagas and true epics. Finally, we will consider the narrative style of certain well-known historians, who have complete control over how much and how many facts will be presented, yet are conscious of the scrutiny of future generations, who may or may not accept their selection.

¹⁶ Freeman (2006: 137).

¹⁷ This does not mean that no one else speaks. As Sacks (1992) points out, back-channel responses do not claim the floor, and the performance of the narrative is effectively a claim to return the assignment of speakership to the narrator until the narrative is completed.

¹⁸ As we will see in the treatment of temporal organization (Chapter 2), narratives often are concluded with a coda, which returns the time of reference to the present time of the conversation, obviating any further implementation of "What happened?"

The questions I will try to answer

The narratives to be presented here are marked by their inherent interest; they do not need any excuse to occupy the reader's time. Indeed, this presents a problem for the analyst, in that the eloquence of the text will upstage whatever I might want to say about it. Nevertheless, I will be posing questions about these narratives that in turn have their own inherent interest. In each case, an examination of the narrative construction will help answer the question "How does the narrator succeed in transferring his or her view of experience to the listener/reader?" To do this, I will develop techniques for reconstructing the most probable series of events reflected in the account given by the narrator, noting events that are omitted and created in the narrative. This will in turn give us an outline of how the speaker uses narrative techniques to shape and transform those events, assigning praise and blame to the actors in a particular normative framework, without departing from a true account of what in fact happened. In every case, we will engage in an effort to reconstruct the causal sequence of events that preceded the construction of the narrative, and see how that construction was built upon it.

Chapter 2 offers an array of tools for the analysis of oral narrative which will be used to outline the structural features of the narratives to follow, and addresses the functional questions presented here.

Each of Chapters 3 to 5 focuses on narratives with a common theme, relatively short, a single episode in which a good part of the experience of the speaker is transferred to the listener.

Chapter 3 will present five narratives that begin with verbal interaction and shift suddenly to a high level of violence. Beginning with the story of Jacob Schissel, the analysis will search for a causal account of the escalation of violence and the assignment of responsibility for it.

Chapter 4 deals with six narratives in which participants are suddenly brought into contact with the fact of death and the bodies of the dead. The assignment of responsibility for these traumatic experiences will be a central question for the narrative analysis.

Chapter 5 concerns four narratives that present evidence of information transmitted from the dead. The narrative analysis will deal with how the choice of linguistic forms serves to augment the force of the evidence both for those who believe in such a possibility and for those who do not.

Chapters 6–9 are devoted to narratives of larger scope, told by working-class women each occupying a separate chapter. These comprise numerous episodes in which the narrator conducts a struggle of epic proportions against a broad range of opponents and obstacles.

In Chapter 6, Margie Knott of Tyneside in Britain gives an account of her violent encounters with the neighborhood and their eventual resolution.

Chapter 7 presents the childhood experience of Gloria Stein, an African-American woman whose family were the first to move into a white neighborhood of South Philadelphia, and, when the neighbors stoned their house, how her mother dealt with the situation.

Chapter 8 comes from a study of the older Jewish community of Philadelphia. Rose Norman gives an account of the many steps needed, in the midst of the Great Depression, to find the money to pay for the funeral of her younger sister.

Chapter 9 is devoted to a fourth epic narrative, an account by Mary Costa of the sudden and unexpected death of her 18-year-old daughter, and the impact of that death on the wider South Philadelphia community.

Chapter 10 deals with five narratives extracted from a conversation between two elderly residents of Cache County, Utah, in which the antagonisms of neighbors is generalized to a community-wide dispute over the honors paid to the living and the dead at the end of World War II.

Chapter 11 introduces the question as to whether epic poets draw upon the skills developed in the delivery of oral narrative in constructing their work. It reviews the resolution of the Homeric question by Parry and Lord, through their account of the essentially oral character of the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It then considers that subgenre of epic in which the hero is an outlaw, and draws an analogy with the heroic rhetoric of an African-American outlaw.

Chapters 12–15 examine the use of narrative techniques by historians, in descriptions of past events which develop an emotional impact comparable to narratives of oral personal experience.

Chapter 12 briefly shows how a professional historian talks about the past, using the tools of oral narrative, and introduces the narrative style of the first historian, Herodotus.

Chapter 13 deals with the account by Thomas Babington Macaulay of the execution of the Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of Charles II, who had attempted to seize the throne of England on the death of his father.

Chapter 14 presents the account of the death of Elizabeth I by S. T. Bindoff in his *Tudor England*.

Chapter 15 focuses on the narrative techniques of the author of the "Court History of David" in the Old Testament – 2 Samuel, dealing with the rebellion and death of David's son, Absalom.

Chapter 16 reviews the general schema for narrative analysis used in this volume, and projects an inquiry into how these principles apply more generally to our understanding of human story-telling capacity, with a discussion of the emotional residue of the narratives studied here.

These chapters will introduce a number of new tools for narrative analysis, and apply them to many different stories. The main purpose of this work, however, is not to develop a better theory of narrative, or to understand the narratives themselves. It is to understand ourselves – and how we think about life and death. We will find this out by a close study of how people convey the central experiences of their lives in narrative form.

David, I am encouraged by the detailed parallels between the history of Essex and the history of Absalom to think that both accounts respond to real-life pressures.

It is generally understood that the Court History of David was constructed by partisans of the House of David, even though there is very little evidence outside of the Old Testament for this political entity. It is also said that the Jewish people have a particular love for David as portrayed in Samuel and Kings because of his faults as well as his strengths. In this respect, the affair of Bathsheba looms larger than David's unlimited, almost self-destructive weakness for Absalom.

In this respect, Episode 5 is a recognition of that weakness. Joab here appears as a reasonable person. We see his patience strained to the limit by the almost maniacal affection of a father for a son who has laid one plot after another, against his power and against his life. All that he is asking is for David to reappear in public and review his troops in recognition of the fact that they have offered their lives to defend his cause.

So much for political logic. We know from the aftermath that David never forgave Joab, although he had to keep his griefs private. Nor do we forgive him. In spite of all his arguments, Joab remains a scheming rascal: in his dishonest appeal to the man who saw Absalom hanging in the oak; in his sending a substitute to protect his favorite; in humiliating the king with his military power. There is no part of Joab in these events that reaches out to our humanity. The king does so with a single word, which speaks to us as strongly as his mourning cries that have been so often quoted:

76 Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well [*Sholom*]!"

...

79 The king said, "Is it well [*Sholom*] with the young man Absalom?"

16 The narrative view of death and life

The central focus of this book is on the narrative techniques used to convey the life experience of one human being to another. The book is also centered about the termination of that life, and speakers' ways of dealing with the reality of death: when their own lives are in danger, when death suddenly overtakes someone close to them, when they are faced with the certainty of an oncoming death. The oral narratives presented here are not a random sample of those told in this domain. On the contrary, they are a selection of the most interesting and effective from thousands that have been elicited, recorded and transcribed in the course of fifty years of sociolinguistic research by me and my students. As such they are prototypical rather than typical. Although the research tradition they are drawn from is largely quantitative, this is not a study of variation in narrative structure,¹ but a logical account of the generation of that structure.

The logic of narrative analysis

The following eight-point schema is proposed for the analysis of any given narrative or episode of a narrative. It draws upon the concepts developed in Chapter 2 and the results of applying these concepts in Chapters 4–15. It is to be understood here that "narrative" designates "oral narrative of personal experience" and that the extent to which the schema applies to other narratives will vary.

1. A narrative is identified by the existence of temporal juncture.
2. A narrative is about a reportable event, which has the greatest effect upon the lives of the participants.
3. The most reportable event is connected through a reconstruction of a recursive chain of causally connected events terminating in an initiating event which has no cause.

¹ Though I have done a quantitative study of the development of evaluative devices by age (Labov 1972).

4. The narrative begins with orientation to times, places, persons and behaviors in which the initiating event is embedded.
5. The narrative is constructed with complicating actions which follow the reconstructed chain of events to the most reportable event and to a resolution of its consequences.
6. At any point in the chain, the narrative may show
 - a. instrumental actions that facilitate a following action rather than cause it
 - b. further orientation that is relevant for a following action
 - c. predicates that indicate intention to perform a following action
 - d. ordinary events that suspend the progression along the reconstructed chain of causality.
7. A narrator may omit an action from the reconstructed chain of events which is not in the interest of the teller
 - a. by providing an excuse for that behavior
 - b. by a failure of memory.
8. A narrator may evaluate the results of a given action by
 - a. adding a description of an alternative possible state of affairs with irrealis predicates (negatives, futures, conditionals)
 - b. insertion of simultaneous predicates describing the same situation
 - c. statements attributed to third-person witnesses
 - d. evidence of relevant material objects
 - e. emotional predicates attributed to the narrator.

The size of the narrative unit to be considered depends upon the limitation of an episode to a particular time and place and the identification of a most reportable event within those limits.

This schema may be useful in achieving comparability in the discussion of oral narratives of personal experience, and the extension of this point of view to a wide range of narrative. But it is aimed at a structural analysis and only point 7 touches on the crucial questions of how events are transformed in the interests of the teller. There are very many particulars in such an analysis, and many of them involve the serendipitous exploitation of particular features of the language being used.

Credibility and causality

There are many matters of detail that contribute to the transfer of experience that marks the successful narrative. But essential to that success is the listener's acceptance of the events as credible. Chapter 2 developed the inverse relation between reportability and credibility. Here it may be helpful to stress the direct relation between credibility and causality.

Across the many narratives in this volume, the common mode of analysis is to begin by asking, "What is this story about?" and so locate the most reportable event. We then reconstruct the mental processes that lie behind the response to the question that must be answered by every narrator, "Where shall I begin?" This reconstruction is the plot of the narrative, a series of remembered events that are linked to each other as cause to effect, culminating in the most reportable event and its resolution. Given the unusual character of the outcome, the reconstructed plot makes it understandable, and therefore credible.

For the historian, credibility is (almost) everything. Chapter 13 cited vigorous attacks on Macaulay's credibility on matters of fact. Lord Acton, Marx and Churchill leave little room for Macaulay as an analyst of history, though they concede much to his skill as a teller of tales. My own use of Macaulay's work is to see how historians make use of the techniques of personal narrative in reconstructing the events of the past. We may ask if Monmouth, before mounting the scaffold, did give his toothpick case to his servant and did say, "Give it to that person." The groundwork for us to believe that is found in his earlier claim that he and Baroness Wentworth were a wedded pair in the sight of God, a statement that so offended the bishops that they refused to administer the sacrament to the dying man. We readily believe that a man who would risk his soul for a woman's love would not end without sending her a last remembrance of it.

The credibility of a narrative is not, then, equivalent to a firm belief that the events reported did in fact take place in just the form described. An historical inquiry of that sort would pursue the question of who heard Monmouth say these words, as reported in what document to be found in what location. A credible narrative is one in which the sequence of events is plausible in accordance with what we know of human behavior. This links in turn with the discussion of plot in the narratological literature as a sequence of high probabilities rather than strict causation.² In fiction, credibility is extended to *verisimilitude*.

I have argued that credibility is an essential component in the transfer of experience in personal narrative. This immediately returns us to the major question of literary theory: how experience is transferred in fiction. To what extent does the reader experience the events of a novel, or the watcher of a film relive the events on the screen? And what degree of credibility is required for this to happen? As I argued in Chapter 2, a narrative that is transparently untrue – a tall tale or a cartoon – may be entertaining but not moving.³

² Chatman (1978). ³ See Bauman (1984).

Negation and the coloring of a parallel universe

The concepts of parallel universes and multiple histories have become a common theme in physics and popularizations of physics in science fiction.⁴ It is curious to find, at the end of this exploration of personal narrative, a parallel to this cosmological construct. From the outset, the role of negation in the evaluation of narratives has been seen as the evocation of parallel universes (L&W). As specified in 8a of the schema, narrative uses negation and other unrealis moods to evaluate what did happen by comparison with what might have, but did not, happen. The real world is evaluated in comparison to the alternate world of unrealized possibilities. In the great majority of the narratives reviewed here, negation is the major evaluative device, from "The Norwegian sailor" in Chapter 3 –

- 11 An' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head
12 Your throat's cut."

– to Donald Wise's evaluation in Chapter 10 –

- 29 'cause had he not run that damn stop sign,
none o' us had got caught!"

We can appreciate the linguistic power of negation in narrative when we compare it to the visual resources of film. How would the dramatic force of the final lines of "The Norwegian sailor" be conveyed by the camera except by repeating the words of the verbal account? The same consideration applies to Donald Wise's conclusion. A film convention can show that there is no one in a room by panning slowly from one end to the other. Another device can show that no one alive is at a given site by letting a phone ring for six or seven times without being answered. But the alternate universe in which Alway did not run the stop sign is a purely verbal construct.

Negation is one of many linguistic devices that are used in personal narrative to evaluate, and so convey, the experience of the speaker to the listener. It does not arrive as a colorless translation of the original experience. We have seen narrators make use of many features of their native language to transform events in their own interest and in the interests of the actors they are closest to. This is not a dishonest transformation, but a perfectly natural series of choices among the options offered by the language: the active versus passive voice of the verb, zero causatives, permissives, discourse markers and various degrees of embedding in complex syntactic structures. Among these options, the most frequent and effective is the choice of reporting an event or leaving it implicit in the context of an excuse, a request or a denial.

⁴ Sawyer (2010).

This choice of what to report or not report is effected most often by the termination of the recursive process of reconstruction and the decision on where to begin.

An unsolved problem for many narrators is to account for the initiating event. Embedded in the setting of the orientation – by definition ordinary behavior that does not have to be accounted for – is that first event that triggers the entire series leading to the most reportable event. In Gloria Stein's narrative, the stoning of the house reflects a well-known white reaction to African-Americans moving into a new neighborhood. Margie Knott portrays neighborhood conflict as inevitable and as a natural process that requires self-defense. For some narrators, the initiating event is portrayed as pure chance, but this can be seen as a choice among other options. The rat that ran out in Jacob Schissel's yard in Coney Island is a chance event as the story is told, though more careful consideration suggests that it was only one of many occasions in which Schissel's brother violated the protocol of sitting shiva. Shambaugh gives no explanation for the irrational behavior of the Norwegian sailor, though a broader ethnographic view suggests that it was a not uncommon response to gender separation in the setting of the working-class bar.

The emotional residue of narrative

It was said at the outset that the data on which this book is based is the interest generated in readers by these narratives, and, when all is done, the residual emotional impact on the reader. After all, the creation of such empathy is the main aim of narrative – the transfer of one person's experience to another.

Although our narratives have a common focus on matters of life and death, the impact on the reader takes many different forms. Each chapter has its own emotional tone in response to matters of life and death. Narratives of escape from death, like most of those in Chapter 3, are sober. They do not display the happy relief from anxiety that is sometimes reported in the literature.⁵ These narratives are selected primarily for the degree of impact on the listener, and this impact depends primarily upon the objectivity of a report from third-person observers, as in the accounts of Jacob Schissel, Harold Shambaugh and Charles Triplett. The terse, matter-of-fact delivery of these narratives has much to do with their effect on listeners. The near-death experience speaks to the reality of death, and so triggers a response from the most central human emotions.

⁵ There is a great deal of interest in the traditional report of one's life passing before one's eyes in life-threatening situations, and many discussions of such temporal slowing under stress can be found on the internet. See also Chesterton (1909: Ch. 6). Experimental work of neuropsychologists finds no changes in temporal resolution under stress, but retrospective reports suggest that the period lasted longer (Stetson et al. 2007).

Chapter 4 dealt with the confrontation of death completed by those to whom death has not yet come. They report traumatic experience when the normal modes of keeping death and dead bodies at a distance are violated. Given such a violation, the narratives must deal with the question of who was at fault. Ellen Laidlaw's narrative wrestles with the overwhelming guilt that unseated her mother's mind. Ross Hawkins still remembers, some sixty years later, the long ride home next to the dead body of the chauffeur, its legs flopping up and down over the end of the wagon. The narrative of Donald McCaffrey leads him to relive grief for a lost son and the ironic pain of his misunderstanding of what was being announced.

The narratives of premonitions and communication with the dead in Chapter 5 have an entirely different tone. A sense of wonder surrounds these accounts, for believers and unbelievers alike. Any indication that information about the future has filtered through to us from some unknown source will serve to undermine the chief character of death: its finality. The elusive death notice in the *New York Times* carries such information, and in so doing, challenges every listener to penetrate an unaccountable mystery. In "The falling out", Ron is shaken – or frightened – by the realization that his dream about Mike was more than a dream. These confrontations with death do not carry the grim weight of the Chapter 4 narratives. They generate a wide range of reactions, from astonishment to a rush of good feeling. We have no difficulty in accepting Henry Guyton's exhilaration when he recognizes the angel of death in the form of his oldest son.

The longer epic narratives of Chapters 6–8 are also centered about violence, the danger of death and the consequences of death. But their central theme is the triumph of the individual in overcoming a series of obstacles, one after the other. In Chapters 3–5, our protagonists are thrust against the force of circumstance, and react as best they can. In Chapters 6–9, protagonists rebound against those circumstances, and leave us full of admiration for their ability to deal with the world, each in their own way: Margie Knott, Gloria Stein, Rose Norman and Mary Costa. Chapter 10 presents a string of narratives from Cache County that are aimed at El, who responds with a continuous flow of back-channel agreement. To what extent he absorbs the moral indignation that animates the speaker's narratives is an open question.

The historical chapters, 13–15, return to a more direct confrontation with matters of life and death. All three strike a note of high seriousness. The writers are moved to drive their literary skills to the utmost, as in the extraordinary sentence of Macaulay quoted at the end of Chapter 13 and the final sentence of Bindoff quoted at the end of Chapter 14. I am moved by their eloquence, and I find it hard to hide my emotion when I read these passages aloud.

On the contrary, I have no such difficulty in delivering the stories of Chapter 3. Each time I retell these accounts of near-death experience, the brief sentences pass through me without the slightest hesitation, and I find myself speaking for Jacob Schissel and Harold Shambaugh as if I were them. I never cease to be astonished at the powerful effect on the listeners of this other person's experience flowing through me. Though I have shown how the telling is adjusted in the interest of the teller, there is no make-believe or fiction here. The sober, matter-of-fact delivery of such narratives reflects a recognition of the reality and inevitability, not of the death escaped, but of the death that is to come. Jacob Schissel is dead now. Though I have no way of proving it, I am convinced that in this early account, we can hear the calm and reflective style which he would surely use in confrontation with that later death.

The high seriousness of the historians is characteristic of the speakers as well. The only light note is struck by Tom Tarentino's account of the 60 cc Yamaha in Chapter 3. Each of the narrators talks directly to us with a level gaze. This is a book without humor. There is no sarcasm, irony or indirection. There is nothing that would suggest that the speakers do not mean what they say. It is conceived as a testimonial to the value of asking a serious and straightforward question and receiving a serious and straightforward answer.

This book has exposed the reader to a wide range of speakers and writers, each with his or her strengths ... and no doubt weaknesses, though I am less concerned with these. Most of them use language effectively in the narrative mode. It is my hope that you will use this study, not only as a way of understanding narrative, but as a means of widening and deepening your acquaintance with the human race, and furthermore that you will admire these people as much as I do.