

Narrative of Personal Experience Structure in Oprah's Show 2011

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Abstract

This research attempts to investigate narrative structure in oral narrative particularly in Oprah's Show from a sociolinguistic viewpoint. Narrative is said to be universal in the sense that it is found in all times and places. There is no society or culture without narrative. Oral narrative is organized in a specific order. The research aims at studying and analyzing this order. In addition to that, it highlights the importance of narrative in conveying some moral messages to people who are listening to the story. The study is divided into two parts; theoretical and practical. The theoretical part draws on presenting a survey of literature which includes definitions and explanations of some related terms. The practical part is concerned with the analysis of the selected data. One episode from Oprah's Show is chosen for the analysis. The analysis of the data is carried out on the basis of Labov's (1972) model. The results show that (1) oral narrative depends mostly on real stories and participants.(2) Oral narrative follows a certain order and contains elements that are not found in written narrative such as, abstract and evaluation.

Keywords: Narrative, Oprah show, sociolinguistics, story

التركيب السردى للتجارب الشخصية في برنامج اوبرا 2011

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الخلاصة

يتقصى البحث الحالي التركيب السردى في السرد الشفوي في برنامج اوبرا شو من ناحية لغوية اجتماعية. يعد السرد ظاهرة عالمية موجودة في كل مكان وزمان. اذ لا توجد حضارة او مجتمع يخلو منه. يطرح السرد عادة وفق ترتيب معين. يعنى هذا البحث بتحليل ترتيب السرد. بالاضافة الى تسليط الضوء على اهمية السرد في اىصال بعض الرسائل الاخلاقية للمجتمع. يقسم البحث الى جزئين: نظري وعملي. يقدم الجزء النظري شرح وتعريف لبعض المصطلحات ذات العلاقة. في حين يعنى الجزء العملي + بتحليل النصوص المختارة. تم اختيار حلقة واحدة من برنامج اوبرا للعام 2011 لغرض التحليل واستند التحليل على نموذج لابوف (1972). اظهرت النتائج 1. ان السرد الشفوي يستند بصورة رئيسية على القصص الشفوية وابطالها 2. ان السرد الشفوي يتم وفق ترتيب معين ويضم عناصر لا توجد في انواع السرد الاخرى كالخلاصة والتقييم.

1. Introduction

Narrative is a particular type of discourse that can be simply defined as "telling a story". Narrative, whether written or spoken, relies on information from the past and links it to the present and future (Justice,2004, p. 1). Barthes & Duisit (1975, p. 237) state that the

evolution of narrative goes back to the very beginning of mankind's history, it is found in different forms and different genres. All human beings find interest in narration even if they are of different backgrounds. Narrative is very similar to real life in the sense it is not restricted to only good or bad side of literature. The present study is limited to the analysis of one type of narration, narration of personal experience, this type of narrative employs real participants talking about their real experiences. The narrators follow a particular procedure in telling their stories.

1.1 What is a Narrative?

Churchill & Churchill(1982) cited in Sandelowski (1991, p.162) demonstrate that narratives are stories that comprise a chronological order of events and how those events can be useful for the narrator to capture the relationship among past , present and future experiences. Narratives include a cluster of clauses and phrases that have at least one sequential occasion (Labov 1972,p.360).

Velleman (2003, p.1) considers a narrative or a story as an explanatory genre in the sense that narrative is not only recounting events but also making these events intelligible. For example; when you ask someone to tell his story, you want him to give an explanation for what happened to him

Potter (2014,p.3) states that narration is used every day and by everybody, when sending an e-mail to a friend telling him what happened during a holiday or when we explain an incident we have seen or heard of, even if we get a car accident, we need to tell the story to the police or the insurance company.

Potter (2014, p.4) continues that narration could be a useful tool in college also; it helps to enhance the students' writing skill. For example, if a student is asked to write about the Iraqi war, he can enrich his paragraph by referring to some personal experience or stories from real life. Hence, the purpose of a narrative is to tell a story in which the writers talk about their feelings, thoughts, or actions. They create a story that will be of interest to the readers, and at the same time carry some ideal message. Narrative can be presented in different forms and through various media such as novel, films, telling a story and painting. It consists of a story which includes events, characters, setting, discourse, plot and how the story is "communicated" (Chatman 1978).

1.2 Story and Narrative

Coffey & Atkinson (1996) make a distinction between story and narrative. They think that all stories are not transferred to us directly, we always pick them up through narrative discourse. While a narrative is a representation of events that consists of the story and narrative discourse, a story is a sequence of actions that are represented by a narrative discourse. The events of the story are important to both; the storyteller and his/ her audience. They serve to understand social and cultural properties. A narrative enables us to comprehend the way in which a narrator puts his story in front of the audience and why he still remembers and tells others about it.

Denzin (1989a, 1989b) cited in Sandelowski (1991,p. 163) noted that a story is "a fictional production" since it results from certain concord between the narrator's mind and the events he experienced. In other words, a story expresses the narrator's attitude towards

individual experiences. Narration, on the other hand, is more truthful as it brings these experiences to the context and puts them in front of the audience.

1.3 Components of Narratives

All narratives share some components that must be present in all stories. Janovsky (2016) refers to some important components of narratives. These include:

1. **Characters** are the people who participate and create the conflict in the story. The story often has two kinds of characters 'the protagonist' or the hero of the story, and an "antagonist", a character who is usually against the protagonist. Both the protagonist and the antagonist serve to complicate the actions of the story
2. **The plot** is the events or the actions of the story. Every story should have a plot which refers to the conflict between the two opponents and how they react to the events.
3. **Conflict** is the most important element in the story which always occurs between the opposing forces in the story. The conflict has a big role in creating enthusiasm in the story.
4. **The setting** is the time and the place where the events take place. Time is important to determine the type of the conflict in the story.

1.4 Types of Narratives

A narrative could be spoken or written. Whether it is spoken or written, the purpose is to tell a story. Written narrative is mostly more imaginative than spoken. The author employs his talent as much as he can to attract the reader and to raise his suspense in order to make his story more entertaining. Oral narrative sounds to be more real. People tell stories about their life; the characters are real people talking about their own experiences. Yet this does not mean that all oral narratives are real, We all heard stories from our parents in our childhood and most of those stories were imaginative. Remenyi (2005) states that storytelling is a basic tool for people that enables them to share experiences and knowledge as it provides a good opportunity to both the narrator and the listener to travel back through time and place. Adults used to tell stories to children even before writing was invented. Later, most of these stories were written down, either exactly as they have been told or with some changes in the setting, characters, and events. The written narrative could be very useful in the classroom because it improves the students' writing skill. It can also offer supporting evidence for a piece of writing especially when the student includes some personal events or stories about what happened (Potter,2014,p.3). Oral narrative on the other hand provides a good background for learning. We can learn about history, culture, the people who came before us and get knowledge from their experience. It also provides an opportunity to run into other languages and traditions (Koven , 2004)

2. Narrative, Structure, and Organization

A narrative structure consists of two things: the content of the story and the form used to tell a story. These two elements are described as a story (raw material) and a plot (the form of telling a story). According to Velleman (2003,p.1), what makes a story good is the way in which its events are organized and how these events are properly connected with respect to cause and effect.

Lynne and Phadke (2011) state that any narrative starts with an introduction that contains the main idea and presents a good background of the whole story. The introduction must be put in a way that attracts the reader's attention. Then comes "the body paragraph" which can be

presented either in chronological order or in the order of importance, starting from the less important events, going towards the climax and resolution. In both cases, the paragraph should have a topic sentence that expresses and elaborates the main idea of the paragraph.

It is worth noting that narration is not only listing events or summarizing experiences. but it should also be amusing from the beginning to the end. To accomplish this goal Lynne and Phadke (2011) present some elements that can help to build a stronger body paragraph such as;

1. Including conversation; this can help to put the writer's experiences in front of the audience.
2. Using descriptive language, by making use of the five senses. This can portray a dramatic picture in the reader's mind.
3. Transitions; using transition words or phrases such as *next, finally, during, after, when, and later*, to connect the sentences and paragraphs. Using transitions is necessary to follow and to transit from one idea to another.

The last part of the narrative is the conclusion by which the reader realizes why the story has been told and what knowledge the writer gets from telling this story(Lynne and phadke, 2011).

Narrators tell their stories in different ways. They use different techniques of narration according to the message they want to convey. The following section presents a survey about these techniques.

2.1 Technique of Narration

All narratives are distinguished by two aspects; a story and a storyteller. The first aspect is defined and explained in the previous sections. The second one (the storyteller or the narrator) is more important than the story. The events of the story are not always seen through the eyes of the author. Forster (1927, p.34) believes that the writer can talk about his characters as well as through them In accordance with these different types of techniques of narration are introduced. The most common distinction according to the storyteller is that of "person" (to tell the story in the first or third person).

The first person narration is employed when the story is told by one of the characters in the story. The narrator describes his experience from his own point of view using *I* (the first person singular) or *we* (the first person plural). Accordingly, the first person narration seems to be more subjective. The third person narration is to employ what Leech & Short (1981, p. 266) call the impersonal style of narration "where reference by the author to himself is avoided", and that's why it is more objective. The author describes what happened to somebody else, he is only an observer or a narrator. The author is not a participant in the action. In this technique, the story is told in the third person using *he, she, and they*. Some linguists refer to the technique of narration as "narrative modes" first-person, or third-person. Generally, in the *first-person narrator*, the narrator tells the story depending on his feelings, opinions, and how he views the events and other characters. By contrast, the *third-person narrator* is an alternative that does not require the writer to reveal all that a first-person character would know. It gives an overview of the world of the story, looking into the characters and their backgrounds in the story (Albrigh 2016).

Sometimes the events and the setting of the story require more than one narrator; this is called multiple narrations where the story is told by different narrators from different viewpoints. Wolfgang (2012) believes that multiple narrations are very helpful in creating a dramatic sense, he demonstrates that multiple viewpoints provide a change in the attitude and contrast to, the

protagonist's outlook in a way that intensifies conflict, enhances a story's scope and adds to a novel the rich touch of real life.

Moreover, multiple narrations help the audience to watch how the characters evaluate the same situation in different ways. This technique or mood is mostly used in telling real stories. Every participant talks about his own role or experience in the story.

3. Narration of Personal Experience

A narrative can be defined as a method of telling events from the past, in a way that the arrangement of narrative clauses matches the real arrangement of events in the story (Labov,2004,p.1). The narrator is not an observer talking about people and events from his own viewpoint, but rather one of the characters or mostly the hero of the story. He is talking about what happened to him and to another character in the story. Narratives of personal experience are first performed by the sociolinguist William Labov in the 1960s. He works on a sociolinguistic interview. The interviewers give the chance to the narrator to talk about his personal experience as it is without any change or variation to the formal interview setting, because any change may result in an inaccurate awareness by the audience of the real interviewee's concepts and backgrounds (Howald, 2011,p.12). Narratives of personal experience reduce the effects of observation to a minimum.(Labov,2004,p. 2) In this kind of narrative, the participants need to be human or have human qualities and act like humans van Dijk (1972). Quasthoff (1980) cited in Junquera (2010, p.11) states that in a conversational narrative, the narrator should be one of the characters in the story whose function is not only reporting events, but also making his narration credible in order not to be rejected by the listeners. For Labov (1972) narrative cannot be successful if it lacks credibility; the more reportable the narrative is, the less credible it tends to be.

3.1 Labov's Narrative Categories

William Labov is an American linguist, he was born on December 4, 1927. He conducted research on narratives. After collecting data, He concluded that people follow a particular narrative structure when telling stories. This structure is called Labov's Narrative Categories. His theory is one of the most influential theories in sociolinguistics. In his essay "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax"(1972,p.370) he presents six narrative categories in face-to-face storytelling:

1. Abstract - How does it begin?
2. Orientation - Who/what does it involve, and when/where?
3. Complicating Action - Then what happened?
4. Resolution - What finally happened?
5. Evaluation - So what?
6. Coda - What does it all mean?

Sometimes this arrangement is violated either by embedding two or more elements together or by changing their order.

According to Labov's theory, a narrative normally begins with an *abstract* which sums up the main idea of the story. Usually, the abstract comes at the beginning of the interview either presented by the interviewer or by one of the narrators after the interviewer's first question. It is the initial clause in a narrative that reports the entire sequence of events. Then comes the *orientation* by which all the elements of the story: the characters, the time, the place, and the

actions are introduced and recognized. The orientation section provides answers to the possible questions, “who? when? where? what were they doing?” (p.364)

The third category in this model is *complicating action*, it is the core of the story, all the events are presented to the audience, the problem reaches its climax. It consists of narrative clauses that review the main events in the story and lead up to the climax which is the maximum suspense in the story. It is the core of the story that informs about the coming events and answers the potential question 'what happened then?' (Labov, 1997)

After complicating the action, comes *resolution* in which everything must be revealed. The narrator needs to give solution to every mentioned problem. The *resolution* or *result* releases the suspense and tells what finally happened. It often starts with the last narrative clause of the complicating action, and explains how the complication was solved (Labov, 1997). When providing the resolution, the narrator proceeds to finish his story by giving *evaluation*. Evaluation provides justification for what happened. It provides an answer to the expected question, “So what?” Why the story is being told and what is the narrator getting at (Labove, 1972,p.366). The elements that serve as evaluation attracts the audience attention and encourages them to keep listening and allow the narrator to continue telling his/her story. A good storyteller uses this device well to produce narratives that hold the audience interest and prevent listeners from asking 'So what?' (Labove, 1972,p.366)

The last element in the narrative is *coda*. *Codas* are free clauses found at the end of the narratives that signal the end of the story. They may be simple and straightforward statements, such as —"That's it" or "That was one of the most important", *Codas* close off the narrative. Sometimes *codas* do not seem to be connected to the main story, but they serve the purpose of bridging the gap between the events in the story world at the end of the narrative and the present moment (Labov, 1972, p. 365).

4.Data collection, and Analysis

4.1 The Oprah Winfrey Show

The Oprah Show is an American syndicated talk show that is hosted and produced by Oprah Winfrey. It is one of the highest-rated talk show in American television history. It started Sep8, 1986, for over 24 seasons and nearly 5,000 episodes.

4.2 Data Selection and Analysis

One episode from Oprah's Show is selected to be the data for this study. The episode is entitled “TORTURED BY HIS OWN FAMILY: THE SIX-YEAR-OLD CHAINED IN A CLOSET” and aired on 15th April 2011. This episode was chosen for this study, because to the researcher's opinion, all Labovs' six categories are very clearly shown in its narrative.

The oral interview is converted to a written text for the purpose of analysis in order to refer to it whenever it is necessary.

4.3 Analysis of the text

This section is concerned with the analysis of the text following the narrative model presented by Labov 1972 which has been reviewed in the previous section. The model is conducted to analyze the narrative of personal experience (a person told his own story). In the selected episode, there are more than one narrator. Three narrators who are real participants in the event tell the story. Each talks about his own role in the story. The interviewer , Oprah, has a role in telling and commenting on some of the events. The following section presents the analysis of the text with reference to the six categories of Labov's model.

4.3.1 Abstract and Orientation

The show starts with the following presentation by Oprah.

While living in a small Indiana town 6 years old Clayton was terrorized and brutally abused by the very people who were spouse to protect and care for him. His father Joseph and stepmother Carmen. For months Clayton was locked inside in airless dark bathroom closet often for 24 hours at a time.

In this extract the abstract and the orientation are combined together. Oprah doesn't start with an abstract as most narrators do when they choose to create suspense and doesn't not give many details about the story. Oprah gives complete information about the central character of the story, his name, his age, where he lived, what happened to him and when. By doing this she provides an orientation that answers the potential questions (*who, where, when, what*) of the story.

4.3.2 Complicating the Action

Then Oprah complicates the action by referring to what happened later when she says:

For months Clayton was locked inside in airless dark bathroom closet often for 24 hours at a time. Inside the closet there was another horror, the small boy was tightly bound in wire fencing and wrapped and locked in chains. Clayton had to stand for agonizing hours on in even while sleeping his tiny neck and chest had scars from the wire and chains cutting into his bare skin, when Clayton could no longer hold his bodily functions he was forced to go to the bathroom on himself.

This part of narration shows how events are progressing. It gives details about the way in which Clayton was terrorized. Oprah refers to the main events of the story, how they are complicated leading the audience up to the climax. She succeeded in arousing the audience and making them enthusiastic to know more. Reaching this point, the audience are completely tensed and waiting for a resolution. Yet Oprah doesn't give a complete resolution for the problem. She gives only hints about what happened without referring to the details of his rescue. Oprah wants Clayton to talk about his bad experience with his parents and leaves the floor to him, as shown in the following extract:

So as I said Clayton was just six years old when he was rescued from that closet back then he could not speak for himself about his unimaginable ordeal. Today, he is a 19 years old young man and he is telling his story in his own words for the first time you'll be astonished at his resilience. Please welcome Clayton.

Clayton does not start where Oprah stopped, He gives more details about his suffering when he has been locked in that closet. Clayton doesn't tell the story by using the narration technique used by Oprah. He talks about his experience through answering the questions presented by Oprah. When she asks whether he remembered the first time he was put in that closet, Clayton said

I don't, I just remember being in there and then just wondering when am I going to get out and it just seem like forever and eternity that I was in there .

It is obvious that Clayton doesn't answer the question only, but he also tries to express his feeling at that bad situation. He keeps talking about his feeling and suffering whenever he is asked. For example when Oprah asks him : "*Could you ever go and play with other children*" Clayton doesn't answer by *no*, only: Instead, he says:

No, never I wasn't a kid at all.

This phrase " I wasn't a kid at all" has a special effect on the audience who sympathize with him strongly and become very eager to know more. Moreover, when he was asked the following question:

" So you would be screaming in the closet and what would happen when you were screaming in the closet?"

Clayton answered :

"Dish soap, they would just put dish soap in my mouth, they wouldn't rinse it out, they wouldn't. I just had to endure that taste, I still till this day I can't stand the smell of it, just because of."

Clayton does not tell her what happens directly, he adds how he feels when they put the dish soup in his mouth and that he still remembers that bad smell. By using such technique, Clayton succeeds in attracting the audience and arousing their sympathy. Now the audience are eager to know the resolution.

4.3.3 Resolution

All the tension created by complicating the action is released by resolution. Through resolution, the audience are informed about what happened at the end of the story. Resolution always refers to the last clause in the complicating of the action and provides a thorough description of how the complicating is solved at the end.(Junqueira, 2010, p.18)

In the present story, Clayton was rescued with the help of his stepsister who revealed the horrible secret to the police. The resolution is introduced by Oprah in the following extract:

Oprah: After Clayton's 14-year-old stepsister ran away she was picked up by police and tearfully told Deputy Todd Pate what was happening to Clayton. The Kentucky Deputy immediately alerted Indiana authorities who send a caseworker to the home the officer was

shocked when the reports came back saying there was no reason to take Clayton away. Listening to his gut though Deputy Pate came up with his own plan, he told Joseph and Carmen they had to drive across the state line to Kentucky to pick up their daughter hoping they would bring little Clayton with them. When the family arrived the deputy talked with 6 year old Clayton alone and slowly but surely the truth came out. That same day his parents were arrested.

Resolution is completed by Patti , the biological mother's aunt of Clayton, who tells the audience about Clayton's life after his rescue;

He was very skittish child at first and we tried to do anything and everything to make him comfortable we didn't bring up the subject too much with Clayton, we have tried to shield him from his past. We wanted him to be the little boy that he was never allowed to be Holding him, loving him, getting him through the rough nights that he couldn't sleep, just letting him be a child

After listening to this part and revealing the happy end for Clayton's misery the audience are completely relieved and all the tension created previously is released.

4.3.4 Evaluation

According to Labov (1972), *evaluation* is one of the most important aspects in the narration of personal experience. A good narrator has to continue capturing his audience after the resolution by referring to the consequences of his experience and what he has got from this experience to keep himself away from being asked "so what". Evaluation attracts the audience attention to some important aspects in the story.

Evaluation is mostly expressed by using the 1st person pronoun in which the narrator quotes himself talking about his attitude towards what happened as it is shown in the following extracts:

Oprah: Do you remember being in the closet and thinking why?

Clayton: I do, I would just ask myself why, why are you doing this to me, I wondered why, why couldn't I be a normal child. And why I had to be confined and what I did wrong I just never got it, never understood.

Clayton: I was just wondering what did I do wrong, I mean they never specifically explained it to me they just punish me.

Clayton gives another evaluation concerning his whole experience and reveals his present attitude toward the situation. He seems as if he is blaming the society for what happened to him and gives advice indicating that people must be more curious about others.

Clayton: " I just wanted to let everybody know to keep an eye out, people had seen that I had been there at one time and all the sudden I just was nowhere to be found and they just didn't think anything of it, I want people to see, to pay attention actually to look into things like that, I also want to show people that you can come out of being, you cannot let it define you to be a bad person, you have to grow from it and learn from it and be a better person."

4.3.5 Coda

According to Labov (1972,p. 366), codas come at the end of the story, expressed by simple statements such as 'that's it'. It shows the impact of the story on the audience and connects the past experience with the 'present moment'. The coda begins at the end of the last sentence in the story. When presenting Coda, there will be no possibility to ask “and what happened then?”. Codas are expressed by deixis like *that, those, there* which are used to refer to participants and events in the story and contrast with *this, these, here* that are used to bring the reader again to the present. In the selected data the coda is presented by Oprah in the concluding paragraph of the show; see the following extract:

That's fantastic (CRYING). You know why that makes me cry, that makes me emotional because everybody can do something, everybody has the power to make a difference in their own lives and in somebody else's life and that one time you trusted your gut you saved this child's life, you saved his life, really, you changed the course of someone's life by saying I'm not going to let this go.

The above extract signals the end of the story and brings the audience to the present.

5. Conclusions

- Narrative of personal experience relies on real stories told by real participants who talk about their own experiences. The narrators are not professional authors, but when narrating their stories, they put all their feelings and sufferings in front of the audience, making them sympathize and interact with them.
- Labov's six categories are not fixed. In the analyzed story, the abstract and the orientation are combined together.
- There is an explicit and direct evaluation in oral narrative. The events of the story are evaluated through narration.

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