

NARRATIVES REVISITED: THE CASE OF NARRATIVES OF RECURRENT EVENTS

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Abstract

This article will be devoted to examining the discourse structure of conversational narratives which, it will be argued, share certain characteristics with the discourse structure of anecdotes, such as the event line, the orientation, the evaluation, etc. The question which will be posited is whether these texts could be designated as anecdotes. It will be argued that because of the absence of a complication-resolution format which is considered as an obligatory nucleus for an anecdote these texts do not meet the criteria of anecdote-like status. The analysis will also highlight the fact that this particular variety of narratives can be found in great numbers in ordinary, everyday conversation.

Keywords: Narrative, anecdote, discourse analysis, storytelling, naturally-occurring conversation

Introduction

Narratives have been defined in Labov's seminal paper as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred" (Labov, 1999: 359); in other words, they are a reconstruction of a series of events "organised chronologically in terms of what happens after what" (Martin & Rothery, 1981: 7) . A narrative, according to Labov, consists of six distinguishable components: an abstract, an orientation, a complication, an evaluation, a resolution and a coda, each having their own role to perform. The abstract offers a summary to the oncoming story, but it is noncompulsory, i.e. some narratives do not contain an abstract. The orientation fills in information about the character(s), the place and time of the story. The complication/complicating action forms the main body of the narrative and gives the actions or chronological events in the story, usually using verbs of action in the simple past or simple present. The evaluation specifies the point of the story and explains the reason the story is worth

telling. The resolution answers the question, “what finally happened?” and the coda, which again is not always present in a narrative, returns the story to the turn-by turn conversation.

Anecdotes are a sub-type of narratives⁸ because, besides a complication and a resolution, anecdotes also contain evaluative and expressive speech devices, direct speech and conversational historical present. Another very important characteristic of anecdotes is their humour which is couched not only in their content, but also in their formal structure⁹.

Analysis of Data:

An anecdote has been defined as a humorous account of some real incident (s); it contains a **complication** and a **resolution/punch line** and direct reported speech which is usually re-enacted by the teller. Bauman’s (1986: 55) definition, where he suggests that

the anecdote may be defined as a short, humorous narrative, purporting to recount a true incident involving real people...,

foregrounds similar ideas. He maintains that anecdotes have a truth value, and, structurally, they are built upon reported speech which brings out the humour in them.

In an attempt to attain a full understanding of anecdotes and their discourse structure, a body of conversations was compiled¹⁰, and the texts these conversations reveal present a rich focus for the investigation of this type of discourse.

This paper will explore conversational narratives which display anecdotal features, in order to show that despite the inclusion of such features as the event line, the evaluative framing devices and the orientation, these narrative texts are not considered to be anecdotes. They are not regarded as anecdotes because of the absence of a complication and a resolution.

One of the short humorous narratives from the data is the following, which is taken from a group of female participants talking after a day’s work¹¹. This example was regarded by S, the main speaker in the excerpt, as a story when she helped me transcribe it:

S: do you think policemen spat at

G: yeah

⁸ This is my own definition of the term “anecdote”. I take “narratives” to be a generic term which includes sub-types, one of which is “anecdotes”.

⁹ The structure of anecdotes I am referring to here pertains mainly to their ending. They culminate in a punch line and are received with laughter from the participants.

¹⁰ A corpus of data consisting of long stretches of natural informal conversations was collected (a total of 16 hours 50min).

¹¹ Two of the participants are university students and the third is a nurse.

*S: I told a policeman to f** off once c'z he shouted at me when I was running shouted knees up or something*

S/G/F: hahahahahahahah

S: I get really cross when people heckle me when I'm running

G: och I get heckled on my bike

The first observation one can make is that this extract begins with a question:

S: do you think policemen get spat at

This question sounds similar to the category “story-prompt” which frequently appears before anecdotes in chat shows (Alaoui, 2010). However, as opposed to story-prompts this question is asked by the same participant (S) who produces the passage under discussion while the other participant, speaker (G), answers the question by a simple “yeah”, affirming her belief and agreeing that “policemen do get spat at”.

Second, this text is analogous to an anecdote, since it includes an event line. However, it does not completely reach story-status. It would be a story if it followed this pattern because the above invented passage relates the events in the order they happened:

I was walking down the road one day and this policeman shouted at me

*knees up or something so guess what I turned around and told him f** off*

It has an **orientation** (in the first clause); it uses direct speech (that of the policeman and that of the speaker). More importantly, it incorporates a **complication** (the policeman shouting at the speaker) and **resolution/punch line**. Because of the manner it is narrated in the actual text, the passage is construed as an **abstract/orientation** in that it could be heard as explanatory material, while the real anecdote could be told at a later stage. There is no sense of **complication-resolution**, since this text contains a single main clause with a single main verb “told” in

*I told a policeman to f** off...*

There could be some controversy about the status of the verb “shouted” in

Shouted knees up

In other words, it is not certain whether the above verb is a repetition of the same verb which occurs a little earlier in the passage:

C'z he shouted at me when I was running

or it is the main verb of a main clause with an elliptical subject,

(he) shouted knees up

Even if the second option is taken, i.e. that the above clause is a main clause, and hence the text would have two main clauses rather than one:

1. *I told a policeman...*

2. *(he) shouted knees up*

the text would still not achieve story status, because it does not have a **complication-resolution** since telling the policeman to “f** off” (complication?) is not resolved by his shouting “knees up”. It is more likely to have been the other way around: policeman shouted “knees up” (complication), as a consequence she told him to “f** off” (resolution).

Therefore, despite the inclusion of some narrative features, this text does not attain story status. This is due to the lack of chronological order in the event line; in other words, the order of the events does not match the order of the clauses, thus suppressing the sense of **complication-resolution**. Another rationalisation for it being a non-story, and this is valid only in so far as the first option is taken, is that the text has only one main clause with a narrative verb, whereas a fully-formed anecdote should have at least two main clauses: one for the complication and the other for the resolution.

Stories of Recurrent Actions

In the corpus of data collected, there are a number of examples which at first glance might be regarded as stories, since they have an event line, and sometimes they include what looks like an **abstract** and a **coda**. These cases deal with event lines in the past, and, in this respect, they approach the anecdote schema discussed earlier. However, they cannot be regarded as fully-formed anecdotes because they involve recurrent actions rather than actions which took place at a unique moment in time. In Telling the American Story, Polanyi (1989) refers to this kind of narrative in a footnote thus:

... In a generic narrative, any given event, agent, or object is not unique, but stands for such a class of events, agents, or objects, since the world of the narration is not a unique world, but is rather a class of worlds in which the activities and the circumstances described generally obtain. Generic past time narratives are structures around indefinite past time events encoded in event clauses with generic models such as *would* or *used to*. (Polanyi, 1989: 18)

This is the case of the examples to be analysed below: their time reference frame is “used to” rather than “it happened once”. These narratives are not regarded as anecdotes because the repetitive recurrence of actions suppresses the sense of **complication** and **resolution**.

The first narrative text to be discussed in this section is that of the speaker (M) describing how, as a child, she used to be taken by her uncle to church. This event (being taken to church) was a recurrent one; it is

presented as having continued as a frequent occurrence over a period of time (when she was a child). The narrative begins as follows:

M: *My uncle used to come up an' start preachin' to u:s c'z we weren't par' of his church an' he used to get us to join the church y'know by – when we were kids by bringing us on their Sunday school trips an'- an' by taking us to: the (happiest little home by which we lived)*

As has been suggested before, the main feature in this beginning is the repetitive use of the modal auxiliary “used to”, followed by the infinitive verb:

NP (subject) + used to + infinitive verb

According to grammarians (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1984; Swan, 1984) the form “to be”+*infinitive* refers to past habits and states, rendering a sense of habitual activities which have been repeated over a period of time which is not completed. In this excerpt, there are three main clauses and all three are headed by “used to”; plus the use of the verb “to be” in subordinate clauses:

C'z we weren't par' o' his church when we were kids

Both the use of “used to” and “to be” makes this passage a description of what used to happen. In this respect, it forms an **orientation**, setting up the contest of a story.

The text continues in this mode, so that instead of turning into one specific instance, using for example “one day” or “once”, it simply carries on without interruption these habitual recurrences:

M: *he used to have i' for kids special things for kids b't it was only to get them into the process so we used to go =*

S: = *ehemm=*

M: = *an' quite like it c'z we sang all these songs an' did all these a:ctions an' everythin ((sings))
runn(h)ing ov(h)er(h) runn(h)ing ov(h)er my cups
a' full 'n' running over since the Lord saved
meheheh I'm as happy as(hh) c(h)an be hahahaeh
they didn't do tha:t at our Sunday school so we
thought it was quite good b't we weren't really(h)
(h)int(h)er(h)es(h)t(h)ed (h)in an(h)yth(h)ing(h)
(h)el(h)s(h)e hahahah plus I think you get good
presents at Christmas an' stuff*

As seen from the above, the enumeration of the activities the uncle and the children “used to” do extends throughout the event line. Indeed, the event line is realized in “used to” form, while the rest of the narrative does

not. The single instance where a verb¹², apart from the past form of “to be”, is utilised without the form “used to” is:

We thought it was quite good

This is not part of the event line; it rather comes at the end of the event line, and even though it does not carry a sense of recurrence, it sums up what the children thought of the other recurrent events (going to church, on trips, singing, getting presents). In fact, it comes here as an **evaluation** since it serves as commentary on the events. It can be regarded as a **coda** too because of its position at the end of the narrative; and like a coda, it is introduced by the particle “so”, which signals transition from one mode to another, in this case, from what usually happened, to the children’s assessment of it¹³.

The structure “used to”, denoting a recurrence in the past, is in operation in the following example as well¹⁴:

1. *M: funny that you say that c’z my daughter used to be a real (Adam Ant) fan at that time an’ she must be about four and she used to sing his Stand and Deliver but she couldn’t make out the words so she used to sing stand in the liver [hahahaheh*

L[hahahaha

M: (you’re singing) then we sorted it out =

L: = hahahaha

M: so whenever I saw the video I wanted to lau:gh an’ also she used to have this thing about a horse she was a horse fanatic y’ know so she had this rocking horse she used to go on it with a riding stick an’ a ha:t [hahah

L: [heheh

M: an’ her daddy will make her a tape of all her favourite songs hahah an’ tha: was one o’ them she’d y’know [she is right =

L: [((sings)) stand [in’ the liver hahahaha]

M: [hahahaha] an’ she would go on an’ on for the whole of the tape hahahaha l(h)ik(h)e this fie[:nd]

L: [emm]

M: it’s funny

L: hahahahaha

¹² I am referring here to verbs in main clauses, as for subordinate clauses some verbs in the simple past are used, e.g. ‘sang’ and ‘did’. However, as in the first example analysed in this section, verbs in subordinate clauses are not counted as part of the event line.

¹³ For more information about the use of “so” as a marker of transition, see Schiffrin (1987).

¹⁴ Whole complete texts will be quoted in this section to make it easier to follow the argument I put forward.

There are six instances of the expression “used to” in this example, and because this text is about what this little girl used to do, it seems to be more about a recurrent action than about a specific episode.

The following clause which comes at the beginning of the passage (quoted above)

my daughter used to be a real (Adam Ant) fan

might have been part of the **orientation**, introducing a character (my daughter) and filling in background information about her (being and Adam Ant fan). However, the terms "used to" are repeated over the next lines, thus, summing up a recurring behaviour in the past – although it happened within a fixed period in the past; in other words, the speaker M is talking about a period of time (when her daughter was four) during which a particular kind of recurrent action could be identified.

However, the narrative begins with a preface,

funny that you say c'z...

and the speaker's relating what used to happen then comes as an explanation,

...c'z my daughter used to be...

Interestingly enough, the narrative closes with a near repetition of the preface,

it's funny

which can act as an **evaluation** that assesses the episode, and a coda which ends the narrative and returns it to the present (note the use of the present tense). Thus, the speaker's use of "funny" at the beginning and at the end of the text forms a framing device, a device which can also be found in naturally occurring anecdotes. Furthermore, this episode, even though a recurrent one, seems to work on incongruity: the notion of this little girl with a hat and a riding stick, listening to songs and singing. The mixture of these strange elements (resulting in incongruity), the use of a formal framing device, and the presence of an event line, all lean in favour of this text being an anecdote.

One of the reasons that makes it difficult to categorise this text as anecdote, however, is that the notion of **complication-resolution** does not seem to work with habitual actions. Indeed, the structure **complication-resolution** cannot be imposed on the above text, so that if we list the events involved:

She used to sing all his songs

She used to sing his stand and deliver

We sorted it out

She used to go on it (rocking horse)

Her daddy will make her a tape

*She would go on an' on*¹⁵

we do not find a climax (complication) nor a denouement (resolution). It might have been possible to have this structure of complication-resolution if the text was, for example, about this little girl singing incomprehensible words (complication), ending in her parents' finding out what she was singing (resolution). The absence of **complication-resolution** suggests that while this text is a narrative, it is not a fully-fledged anecdote.

The next example is somewhat more complicated than the ones discussed so far. It does not incorporate any use of terms such as "used to" in the event line; it does, nevertheless, involve a protracted state of events, i.e. it takes place over a long period of time:

M: *but ACTually now that you said that there was someone – there was a woman who emm () who'd been in this kind of state for years and she come-she comes (through) some prison camp an' all that from the wa:r right =*

L: *= emm =*

M: *= bu' she was behaving in this very o:dd way 'n' they've been treatin' her for years bu' they never discovered it w'z actually something in her blood or y' know it w'z one of these kinds o'things that was causing the (variable) it took them years to discover that [c'z they] were busy =*

L: *[yeah]*

M: *= looking at it from this psychological point of view =*

L: *= an'-an' I mean it's-it's[for them it's great business*

M: *[so she went to-she was demented you know she [was more an' more demented]=*

L: *[gets worse an' worse] if they don't catch it*

M: *= I mean-I would've thought one of the first things you would want to do is to check the physical-the whole physical thing before you started doing all this – what is really just kind of () often jokes psychologically heheheheh*

L: *emmm*

The above narrative starts with what could be considered an **orientation**, introducing background information about the character:

*there was a woman
who'd been in this kind of this state
she comes (through) some prison camp
she was behaving in a very o:dd way*

¹⁵ A part of the text I have not included here is, "whenever I saw the video I wanted to laugh". The reason for omitting it is that I feel it is not part of the time frame of the events listed. In other words, it has nothing to do with the story of this little girl on the rocking horse.

they've been treatin' her

These clauses seem to establish the contextualising material for the narrative. The verb "discovered" in

They discovered it w'z actually somethin' in her blood

is the first in the passage to come as a "narrative" verb, as it introduces an independent clause and is in the simple past; it also entails an action.

Despite the fact that the verb "discovered" is the first "narrative" verb in this text, it comes to explain the state of the character in the text. Thus, its role is nearer to that of a **resolution**; it resolves for the hearers why the character in the passage is behaving oddly, and why the psychiatrists have been treating her for a long time without finding the cause.

If the following segment,

They discovered it w'z actually somethin' in her blood

is taken as a **resolution**, then where is the **complication**? Could the **complicating action** reside in the prior clauses, i.e. in the clauses which were considered as **orientation**? Would they perform the role of **complication** even though they are of the descriptive type? Such questions are constantly raised by the texts which the conversational data offer¹⁶. Because of the difficulty of attributing the **complication** to a specific narrative clause, this example is hard to categorise as an anecdote.

Example 4 offers similar features to the ones described above:

L: *I had this uncle he is crazy he is crazy he (lives) in America an' he's-he's been married for forty odd years now an' then he's -it's-my aunt is a twin an' he always says you know he got-he's always joking about all the other women he comes across () my batty uncle in America an' he says O:h he said I married the wrong one I should have been that night with Marion (I might not have recognized her) an' I end up with you old bat for God's sake (o::h my goodness) an' he always came up with stories day after day after day an' my aunt went ((in an American accent)) O::h shut up George hahahahah*

S/H: *heheheheh*

L: *hahahahah .hh an' he's talking an' he says o::h she w'z just like this ((makes a gesture of a woman's shape))an' she was sitting like [an' that was just her head*

S/H: *[heheheheh*

L: *[hahahahah*

S/H: *[heheheheh*

¹⁶ Here I am referring to the naturally occurring conversation which I have compiled and analysed.

The beginning of this passage sets up the context for what comes later in the narrative:

*I had this uncle
He lives in America
He's been married for forty odd years
My aunt is a twin
He always says
He's always joking*

The role of the above material is to orientate, since all the clauses either are in the progressive aspect, include the temporal adverb "always" (which performs a similar role to "used to" in the other narratives), or do not denote an action, but rather a state.

In the next part,

He says O:h he said I married the wrong one...

the switch in tense from simple present (he says) to simple past (he said) could reflect the speaker's move from generalization to a specific episode; that is to say, unlike Wolfson's (1984) notion of tense alternation¹⁷, the tenses in the two above verbs refer to two different time frames. This is enhanced by the disjunct marker "O:h" which shows that the speaker is correcting herself as far as time reference is concerned.

However, just as it looks that the text has moved into a story frame, with the past tense, direct reported speech (plus the re-enactment of the speech patterns of the character), the speaker switches back to the habitual actions of her uncle, with the use of "always" in

He always came up with stories

Then once again there is another switch to the specific in

My aunt went O:h shut up George

Hypothetically, if the passage followed the following pattern,

He said I married the wrong one...

My aunt went O:h shut up George

without the inclusion of "he always came up with stories" in between, the passage would have been heard as an anecdote of a particular time (when the uncle said "....." and the aunt went "....."). Just as it stands, it is not very clear whether the whole text is relating past recurrent actions. The next part in the text,

he's talking an' he says o::h she w'z just like this...

with its return to describing habitual actions induces the prior part to be taken as recurrent actions as well.

¹⁷ Wolfson maintains that speakers alternate the tenses in their storytelling, from past to present tense. This alternation does not reflect a change in temporal reference since the past can be substituted to the present without any change in meaning.

In sum, the narratives of recurring actions do not constitute fully-formed anecdotes. This is due to the fact that their being habitual actions, rather than actions happening at a specific time, precludes the sense of **complication** and **resolution** which is necessary for anecdotes.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions:

The conventions of transcription I am using here are identical to the ones I used in an earlier paper (Alaoui, 2010), and so they are quoted below *verbatim*:

One major point the transcription raises is how much detail one can include in the transcript. Because the main focus here does not reside in the specific features of linguistic production of speech such as pronunciation, intonation, voice quality and the likes, the transcripts do not display these features, except when they make a systematic contribution to the interpretation of anecdotes. There was no attempt at differentiating between accents because this was not regarded as relevant. The symbols used to transcribe the materials are:

= used when there is no interval between two utterances

[*used if they utterance of two or more speakers overlap*
] *used when the overlapping utterances stop overlapping*
[[*used when utterances start simultaneously*
: *if the vowels are lengthened*

() *use of empty brackets if there is some doubt about the word(s) that were spoken at a certain time. Sometimes the words in doubt are given between the brackets.*

(.) *pause which has not been timed*

Used twice. When there is a space left before and after the dash it is used to show that there is a short but noticeable pause. When the dash is used without leaving any space (before and after it), it represents a self-interruption, usually with a glottal stop.

CAP *use of capital letters when the utterance is characterized by high pitch*