

‘All of Our Stories are Our Own’: Investigating the Structure of Brief Personal Experience Narratives from Pakistan

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Abstract

Narratives provide a structured medium to construct and collect human experiences into a sequential word order. The current qualitative study employs the method of narrative analysis to investigate twenty-five narratives, belonging to the Pakistani context, obtained from the collection of narratives archived on ‘The Humans of New York’ blog. Labov’s Natural Narrative Model (1972) was applied to decipher the similarities and differences in structural foundation lying within these accounts as compared to those structural patterns outlined by the model itself. The findings revealed the introduction of the stories to mingle with the main plot and complicating action of the tale, instead of significantly separating them one-by-one. Furthermore, the orientation and complicating action portions are detailed structures, comprising of three and more statements, and include evaluation embedded within them. Such discovered patterns highlight the importance of investigating and learning about the structure of narratives, particularly for the English language teachers and learners; it enables them to construct their stories, whether spoken or written, in accordance with the emerging patterns and makes them realize how different elements of the story bring about different functions.

Keywords: Narrative Analysis, Textual Structure, Personal Experience Narratives, Pakistani Narrations, English Language Learning

Introduction

Analyzing narratives insightfully enables us to develop an understanding of the way in which the particular author has constructed meaning and represented his / her experiences for the reader to comprehend. According to Riessman (1993), when narrators are giving words to their experiences, they

are actually compiling them into an order and making sense out of them. In such a way, these experiential stories do not simply remain tales; rather, they take the shape of a definite pattern and structure which has a proper beginning, middle and ending to it. helps us to understand how people develop coherence, structure and meaning in those

narrations. Furthermore, they enable the researchers to reflect on the manner in which the narrator negotiates through language.

The genre of narrative research has gained significant importance in the field of educational research, especially because pedagogues themselves are narrators (Moen, 2006); they incorporate personal experiences within their lectures to help the students relate with the novel information and knowledge being delivered to them in class. They need to be aware of how to fittingly construct an exacting story, to make it fully attention-grabbing for their students. Moreover, the knowledge of narrative research is also of value for the English language learners as they require awareness on how a narrative is constructed in the target language as it will enable them to give words to their own experiential stories, allowing them to improve their communication skills too.

Literature Review

Narratives are one of the first discursive genres to be analyzed as a part of language-based studies (Barbara, 2001). Discourse analysts have consistently been investigating it for enhancing the understanding of narrative structures, their particular functions and their variety with reference to the particular culture and context they come from (Son, 2008). This genre, particularly, is characteristically human in nature, because it is this living specie which makes sense of its world through communicating stories. Furthermore, according to Barbara (2001), human beings grew their sense of rationality through utilization of this medium as well. Thus, Polkinghorne (1988) rightly remarks that there are no human beings without narratives in our world.

Labov (1972) explains that narratives formulate a set of clauses, which follow the sequence of the actual happened narrative event. In other words, if a text fulfills the

structural criterion then it will be termed as a narrative. Within the structure of a narrative, the independent clauses are connected through a ‘temporal juncture’ (Hogan, 2011, p. 547). This particular juncture exists only in those cases where a modification in the order of the narrative clauses, produces an alteration in the interpreted meaning of the story and its sequence.

Understanding the structure of a text is of necessary importance for any reader because it enables him / her to comprehend those particular notions which the author actually wanted to commune (Meyer, 1999). In other words, the responsibility of the writer is to produce a coherent text and the function of the reader is to endeavor to craft the obtained information in a rational way. In such a way, studying the narrative holds a significant value, being part of the text genre, in general.

The renowned framework developed for critically analyzing the structure of a narrative is Labov’s *Model of Natural Narrative* (1972). This model was developed as a study originating from hundreds of discourses of speakers in various social contexts. Labov (1972) postulated this framework by separating the recurring main elements of each narrative’s structure. These constituents include the following: ‘abstract’, ‘orientation’, ‘complicating action’, ‘resolution’, ‘evaluation’ and ‘coda’. The ‘abstract’ implies that the narration has started. Furthermore, it attempts to briefly summarize the beginning and also tends to attract the attention of the audience (Simpson, 2004). Then comes the ‘orientation’, which basically explains which individuals are involved in the tale, along with elucidating the time and location of the particular event which is about to be narrated. After commencement of the ‘orientation’, the next part is the ‘complicating action’ which explicates the actual happening of the story, that is, the key incident. Then, the ‘resolution’ expresses

the narrative account's final significant happening. After this, the 'evaluation' section explains the function of narrating this particular anecdote. This part helps validate the necessity of the narration's existence in the first place. However, according to Simpson (2004), this part is taken as an optional feature in some narrative contexts and can be omitted by the storyteller. Lastly, the concluding part of the story is termed as 'coda'. It gives a pointer that the story has concluded and, many a times, it is a general statement giving a moral implicative out of the aforementioned event, or a feeling of timelessness.

Narratives have been explored and scrutinized from various perspectives by scholars, around the world. However, within the scenario of Pakistan, very few research initiatives have been taken for exploration of the genre of the narrative. Among these, one is a study by Hashwani (2013) in which the researcher investigated narratives for exploring the development of personal and professional identity of English teachers belonging to Karachi. The study concluded that the respective instructors felt pride in bearing their professional identity; also, it further concludes that the respective pedagogues took pleasure in varying their language choices and linguistic repertoires according to various social contexts which they encounter in their day-to-day life.

Moreover, there is another study conducted by Siddique (2010) on particularly the narratives themed on colonial displacement. These stories reveal that the pre-partition Muslim culture was widely misrepresented and manipulated deliberately by the British imperialists due to their lack of understanding of the real essence of Islam and its practices. Thus, this investigation emerges as a perspective changer in multiple ways; this further expounds the significance of studying narratives in particular as well.

Methodology

An understanding of the narrative structure is essential for comprehending how humans assemble their lives' occurrences and negotiate their perspectives through connected words and phrases. The qualitative means bringing such an interpretive approach to the study; this approach allows the investigator to infer a phenomenon based on the meanings, representations and notions provided to him/her (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Moreover, such an interpretative approach for studying the experiential narratives of the Pakistani community, in particular, becomes necessary for illustrating the struggles faced by the particular narrators and will address how they reflect back on the significant experiences of their lives.

There is a wide variety of the types of narratives; diverse disciplines have formulated diverse models to explain the existence of narratives. Multiple fields, including history and social psychology, have focused on those accounts which are extracted from interviews (Thornborrow & Coates, 2010). Keeping this perspective in forefront, the current study utilizes this particular genre as the units of analysis. The study adheres on the narratives from Pakistan brought forward by the blog known as *Humans of New York* (www.humansofnewyork.com) being run by Brandon Stanton. These were gathered by Stanton in the year 2015 during his visit to Pakistan. Stanton said, in an interview with university students, "What I am always looking for is what that person has told me that nobody else has told me... and that's normally not an opinion and it's normally not a philosophy; it's almost always a story; because we all share similar philosophies, share similar opinions on a lot of different issues but all of our stories are our own" (UCD - University College Dublin, 2014). This point is a significant validation of every narrative bearing unique

content and diverse representation of each individual's identity.

Narrative research is understood to be an exploratory and descriptive study in nature (Sandelowski, 1991); it tends to investigate the structure, meaning and representation illustrated within the tales; and, it attempts to explain, interpret and synchronize the narratives with respect to its particular setting and situation. Data consisting of twenty five narratives was randomly sampled out of a population of thirty four narratives compiled and uploaded by Brandon Stanton on his blog www.humansofnewyork.com. The data were limited to facilitate the qualitative nature of the study and for bringing an insightful linguistic repertoire out of the analyzed samples.

The study incorporated the technique of narrative analysis. This methodology treats the particular narratives as a source of defining tools of the narrator's social reality (Etherington, 2000). In the field of narrative research, researchers often encounter the question of the truthfulness of the story being told. To answer this question, Riessman (1993, p. 8) poses another question: "Does reality exist or is it constructed?" There is no definite answer to it. In other words, only language is the way in which we can access the other person's experiences and make sense out of it. And this language comes to us through narratives, which is one of the many types of communication in the world of humans. Furthermore, Riessman (1993) accepts the fact that whenever one is dealing with a conversation, a text or an interpretation etc, he / she cannot be completely sure of its neutrality and objectivity. Keeping these perspectives in forefront, the current study selected those texts which are fixed, documented and available for public access for ensuring a stable analysis of the selected narratives.

When it comes to studying the structure of narratives, the work of William Labov (1972) is pioneering; he analyzed everyday

narratives and formulated a six step pattern which is also observable in a well-constructed narrative. These six elements are as follows:

1. **Abstract:** An optional statement which arrives at the start and informs the receiver about the commencement of the narration.
2. **Orientation:** The proclamation(s) which help the addressee to understand who the main characters are, when, why and where is the story happening.
3. **Complicating Action:** This part covers the main events or the plot of the story.
4. **Resolution:** It explains the turn of events after the main event. In other words, the last key incident of the story is narrated in this component.
5. **Coda:** This element sums up the narrative and highlights that the story has reached its culmination point.
6. **Evaluation:** It consists of comments of the narrator on any particular aspect of the story, signifying the necessity of recitation of the incident.

Every story was analyzed on the basis of the guidelines provided by the aforementioned framework. Furthermore, the new patterns which emerged from the Pakistani data were also compiled.

Results and Discussion

Narratives from Pakistan proved to be insightful on many different levels under the guidance of Labov and Waletzky (1967)'s outlined framework. Firstly, we will discuss the structure of the studied narratives. The *abstracts* are usually quite brief and do not necessarily summarize everything, rather they provide the function of hinting to the reader that the story is now about to begin and immediately make the reader enter into the author's created world. For instance, one narrative's abstract starts like this: "*There were no paved roads here when I was a boy.*" The statement is in passive voice, which implies that the narrator immediately wanted to bring the

issue of having ‘no paved roads’ first before explaining the time period which he belonged to. Another abstract explicates the aforesaid pattern: “*Education changed the lives of my entire family.*”

Contrary to this, another narrative begins with a rather straightforward declaration of the self: “*I wanted to be a singer.*” Similarly, another tale emerges as: “*I grew up in the village behind me.*” Another begins like: “*My life is on repeat, everyday.*”

Furthermore, it was discovered there are ample *abstracts* which are intermixed with *orientations* and *complicating actions*. For instance, a story begins as: “*When I was working on my doctorate, I discovered on the last day that my thesis was ten pages short...*” Here, the narrator gives a summary of the event which happened (i.e. this story is about her doctorate thesis and a crisis which happened with it); also she orients the reader about when, what and with whom it happened (i.e. on her last day of doctoral thesis submission, ten pages were missing); furthermore, it presents the complicating incident within it too (i.e. an incomplete thesis was a matter of disaster which set hurdles for the author). Plentiful narrations incorporate this structure of presenting three elements collectively; for instance, a narrator embarks on his story in the following words: “*I just found out we’ve been evicted.*” This statement emerges as *abstract*, since it summarizes the story and hints the starting of a tale. Additionally, it includes *orientation* as it familiarizes the readers to the narrator’s struggle and also shows the turn of event happened in her life, which is the *complicating action* of the story (i.e. eviction from the house). Furthermore, the key incident of the story is also summarized within this single statement. Another story begins as: “*I was born paralyzed from the waist down.*” Furthermore, a tale embarks as: “*We lost their mother to a heart attack recently.*” Another begins like: “*My father passed*

away a year before I got married.” Another tale initiates as: “*Shortly after we were married, I got tuberculosis and rashes broke out all over my body.*” Thus, these examples present the similar aforementioned pattern.

When it comes to *orientation*, the narratives are distinctly elaborate in explaining the details. Besides, they are not usually structured into single statements; rather at least two to three sentences participate in culminating the *orientation*. For instance, a narrator explains the tough life he had to undergo during his childhood in the following words:

“*We had to walk for 3 days to get to place that only take 2 hours now. There was never any money for school. We had no wealth or property. Beginning at six years old, I cleaned dishes at a restaurant until 9pm. Then I would go to sleep again...*”

The main twisting event does not become a part of this portion; rather, it comes after it. In other words, the function of intricately explaining the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ of the story is of elevated importance here, for the narrator. Furthermore, this elaboration is an invitation to involve the reader deeply into the narrative, to make him/her a sturdy part of it. There are certain instances where the evaluation is laid out within the orientation. One can see that, for instance, in the marked sentence in the passage below:

“*I’d saved for that tractor for three days. When I finally bought it, I was so happy. Things seemed to finally be moving forward. I was working [on] crops and making money.*”

The narrator inserts his emotions and comments while narrating about the time when he bought the tractor. This elucidates the narrator’s emotional attachment for the tractor, which he makes the reader realize too, through the use of *evaluation*. Another *orientation* instance is presented below, of a blind man who visited India and familiarizes the reader about that incident:

“When I got off the train, a man offered to polish my boots at the railway station. He was very nice to me. When he heard where I was going, he offered to take me there. Along the way, we stopped to take a dip in a stream.”

Here, again, we observe insertion of evaluative comments within the middle of the orientation portion of the story. This helps the reader to comprehend the story at a much deeper and intimate level. Furthermore, the man stresses the goodness of the man in this part of the story to reveal his innocence in lack of understanding the evilness behind that man, because later that ‘nice’ man would take away all his possessions in the story.

Similar to the elaborative *orientation* in these Pakistani narratives, the *complicating action* also consisted of lengthy details. For instance, in one narrative, a girl explains her love for singing, but society’s lack of appreciation of her art forces her to leave it for good. This complication is explicated in the following words:

“But the community put so much pressure on my mother. My father passed away when I was twelve. And everyone kept telling my mother that a girl could not be something like a singer without her father’s permission. My father wouldn’t have minded. He was always supportive of me. But my mom was so worried about what people would think. She begged me to stop.”

The evaluative comments are visible within this portion of the story as well. Within this passage, they have been underlined. These evaluative observations explicate the narrator’s point of view and justification regarding the incident. She wants to explain that she really wanted to go for singing and she believed that her father would not be against this practice, had he been alive. Also, her mother’s feelings are also explained by the narrator as a source of evaluation of the circumstances at that time.

Another example explains the detailed explication of the *complicating action* into a number of clauses and sentences:

“When I got out of the water, he had disappeared. He’d taken everything. I started screaming and crying. I heard some kids in the distance, so I tried to walk toward them, but it was hilly and thorny, and I kept falling down. When I finally reached them, they didn’t understand Urdu.”

Here the writer explicitly explains the conditions which complicated this particular incident. Furthermore, when we come to the resolution portion, brief statements are observed. Also, these terse sentences often underlie an imperfect solution to the discussed struggle in the story. This highlights the continuing effort of the protagonist. For instance, a narrator explains his story on how his entire childhood was spent under the wicked spell of poverty. The story imperfectly resolves when he starts to believe that everyone lives under the same conditions: *“So, I grew up thinking that the entire world was like our valley.”* In another story, a girl narrates her passion for singing but the society and her mother force her to stop pursuing it. Thus, the story reaches its unhappy and unexpected resolution point in the following words: *“She [mother] grew so nervous that I finally told her, ‘It’s OK, Mom. I’ll stop.’”* In another tale, the storyteller explains how worst financial conditions struck her after husband’s death. She explicates the last key event of the account in the following words: *“Now I sleep on the floor of a relative’s house, and during the day I sit here and beg to pass the time.”* Such resolutions do not naturally fit in the exact definition of the *resolution* as Hatch (1992) terms them as the points where the protagonists arrive at their target. However, in the Pakistani context, these are more of simple dead-ends which the narrators faced and can be proposed to be as a *decision* or *culmination point* for the

story's complicating actions, in the framework of Labov (1972).

According to Hopkins (2010), *coda* signals to the reader that story is about to end, and typically leaves a statement with a timeless sense for the addressees. This designated pattern is followed by some Pakistani narratives. For instance, a narrator talks about how he had no money and had to eat food with his poverty-stricken aunt and uncle's family, which made him guilty as if he was stealing their share. To conclude his tale, he says: "And eventually the cold grew stronger than the guilt." This statement leaves a general timeless line for the reader, following the pattern outlined by Labov (1972) and the words of 'and eventually' signal the ending. In another story, the narrator talks about how she lost her child and feared her next child would be lost soon too. She ends her tale in the following words: "Everyone kept telling me not to worry. I thought it was happening all over again." In this statement, the word 'it' refers back to the original story and thus, completes the cycle of the tale. Other stories are devoid of this element and suddenly reach to a halt after *resolution* or an *evaluation* component.

The *evaluation* part can enter at any part of the story. That is why; we see evaluative comments inserted within the other five Labovian elements of the selected narratives, as discussed previously. However, at certain points, the evaluation appears in closing stages of the tale as well, and, frequently, for the purposing of explicating the narrator's feelings. For example, a narrator spoke about her husband's death and evaluated it in the following words, at the end: "When I talk about these things, my heart begins to sink. If I stay quiet, I feel OK." In another tale, the narrator, who is a blind man, evaluates his sad condition: "If I dwelled on how lonely I am, I'd have died a long time ago." Here, again, evaluation is used as a means to expression of personal sentiments.

Thus, the current study establishes the unique structure developed within the selected Pakistani narratives. The six components of Labov's Model (1972) are differently patterned and organized within these stories from the usual. Furthermore, the study aims to aid the students of English language in learning how to critically view the structure of a text.

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