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Subject Area - Linguistics

William Labov

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William Labov's model of narrative analysis differs from some of the earlier approaches in that his method focuses on oral narrative instead of written text. Earlier linguists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, believed in a structural approach. This meant that language had to be approached as a fixed, clearly defined set of symbols, which furthermore had to be studied in isolation.

However, later linguists, among them Uriel Weinrich, Labov's mentor, believed that the structural approach failed to assist us in understanding "the transition of a language from state to state" (Labov 1972:xv). Labov's focus has been to study language as it is spoken, as a fluid and constantly changing dynamic.

Most of Labov's model of narrative analysis is based on his belief that "one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs" (1972:3). He feels strongly that observing and recording sound changes is not enough to understand the process of change—that one has to view that change within the context of the community in which it is being made, as it is being made.

Using this theory, he carefully chose communities where he felt he could do this most effectively. He conducted the first of several in-depth studies in Martha's Vineyard, a small, closed island community located in Dukes County, Massachusetts. Labov saw Martha's Vineyard as an ideal study site primarily because it was very self-contained. In addition, it was physically isolated, located three miles from the mainland.

For his next series of studies, Labov selected parts of New York City. One particular area he focused on in the New York City study focused on Black English as it was used in certain parts of the city, specifically Harlem. Although Harlem did not have geographical distance from New York the way Martha's Vineyard did from Massachusetts, racial and socioeconomic boundaries made it an isolated community in its own way.

The main points of Labov's model were first published in 1972 in an essay entitled "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax." In this essay Labov introduces and explains what he sees as the six main parts of a narrative. He discusses each part as a tool which we can use to analyze narrative patterns, to help recognize recurring themes and ideas.

The six main parts of Labov's model are: abstract; orientation; complicating action; evaluation; resolution; and coda. It is not necessary that all six of these be present in every narrative; for example, some narratives will not have an abstract, while others may not have a coda. Additionally, these components need not appear in a specific order, and each may be present in a variety of ways—these factors are also considered in the final analysis.

Labov uses the term "abstract" to refer to the introductory part of the narrative. This may be, literally, an "abstract," or a brief summary of the events; or it may be simply a line or two that will spark the reader's interest. The role of the abstract

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is to attract the listener's interest, and to get the listener to want to hear the rest of the story.

The next stage is called "orientation." During this phase the speaker gives the listener information about the setting of the story. For example, the speaker will introduce and describe the people or characters who will interact in the story, as well the setting (the place the action occurs) and the time frame. For the story to be valid and understandable to the reader, it is essential that he or she be informed of the time and place in which the narrative unfolds.

Following orientation is the "complicating action." This refers to the actual events of the narrative, the occurrences that move it ahead. Complicating actions may be physical actions. They may also be statements spoken aloud, or they may be thought acts

"Evaluation" refers to the point, or reason, the narrative is being told, and it can be done in a number of ways. "Evaluations" may be specifically and clearly stated, or they may be implied.

"Internal" evaluations are those revealed while the story is taking place, while "external" evaluations take place outside the immediate action of the story (for example, after the story is told).

Another evaluation technique is the "embedded evaluation." This can be an explanation offered by one of the people in the story, or by the storyteller directly. In addition, it may also be an event in the story.

Following this is what Labov calls the "result" or "resolution": this, basically, is the conclusion. At this point the narrator indicates that the story has come to a close, that a final action has occurred.

Finally, there may be a "coda." By "coda" Labov means that the narrator points out the relevance of the story by connecting it with every-day life, or with other events or actions that fall outside the story frame. The coda does not always have to be present. It may also be present without being explicitly stated.

One of the issues to be discussed concerning Labov's model for narrative analysis is the method of data collection, since "the means used to gather the data interfere with the data to be gathered" (Labov 1972:43). The interview itself may be considered "public speech." However, even within this realm, there are other conditions to be considered. For example, does the relationship of the interviewer to the interviewee affect the latter's speech patterns? Does the use of a recording device affect the interviewee's choice of words, perhaps make word selection more formal than it ordinarily would be? One way of monitoring this is to compare the subject's speech patterns during the course of the interview with his or her speech patterns outside the interview setting. For example, the interviewer could also observe the subject while he or she is relaxed with peers or family members in a less formal setting.

Labov's model has strongly influenced language studies since its introduction in 1972, and it continues to be influential in additional settings. With the widespread growth of the internet, we now have a new, informal sort of communication. Linguist Michael Toolan suggests that Labov's model is a useful tool in the analysis of internet writing. Internet writing is often less formal than academic or other types of writing, but more structured than spoken language.

Thus, Labov's model remains effective today. As language itself continues to grow and change, it is quite probable that Labov's model will grow to accommodate that change, and to continue to be a useful tool in years to come.

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