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LING 2761 – Discourse Analysis

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Final Paper –Regularity of Narrative Allows for Irregularity of Orientation

I. Abstract

The existence of narrative in discourse can be routinely identified and defined. Narratives provide an essential manner of communication in which a speaker is able to relate a sequence of events to the listener. The structure of the narrative, then, serves to enable this style of communication. However, while the structure of a narrative requires some elements, others are not only flexible but optional. Utilizing data from a regularly occurring archetypical discourse, a dinner time conversation of what happened at a weekly dance lesson, I argue that the regularity of the discourse permits irregularity in presenting relevant background information.

II. Introduction

It seems that we navigate many positive and negative situations in life based on shared experiences. These experiences are not necessarily our own but a collective of memories that can only be recounted in our interactions. These are narratives. But these narratives are exchanged in interactions inside a framework. Often, these frameworks are not single instances but rather build upon one another.

This then means this familiarity may offer some allowances and flexibility as to how the . These allowances make use of the familiarity with context. If a particular narrative discourse occurs regularly, such as every week regarding a corresponding weekly event, then the regular speaker of the narrative and the regular listener of the narrative build a common set of information around which the narrative can be delivered. A common set of background information will be established, that these discourses can utilize, without having to be restated each time.

This common set of information, in turn, allows the speaker to deliver the narrative without providing the background information each time. Not only does the speaker not need to reiterate information for each instance of the narrative, but they can also deliver the narrative and then adjust any aspects that are not aligned with the typical events.

I will present a regularly occurring discourse that centers around a narrative exhibiting this exact property of utilizing background information that was not provided in the discourse, but was referenced explicitly after the event of the narrative were relayed. First, a definition and discourses of a narrative and its elements are given. Then, the analysis of a regularly occurring discourse is provided, where I demonstrate that a narrative is present. Then, the aspects of the narrative that serve as the orientation are asserted to happen after the course narrative has been

delivered. I argue that this can be done because this discourse exists in an already established framework because of its regularity.

III. Data

The data comes from a weekday evening in January of 2024. The speakers are the following:

- Allison is a mid-twenties female daughter of Goldie, mid-sixties, and Felix, early seventies. Allison is a dance teacher at Goldie's dance studio.
- Goldie, mid-sixties, has owned and operated a dance studio in the local area of the participants for decades. Goldie is Allison's mother and Felix's wife.
- Felix, mid-seventies, is Goldie's husband and Allison's father.

Allison has just returned to her parent's house and recounts how the lesson went for her mother and father. The family intends to go to dinner afterward.

The participants were recorded with just audio. Felix and Goldie were unfamiliar with recording technology, so an apparent video recording may have put them off. The transcription was written in the staff style. Because the speakers all stayed in a close area for the duration of the recording, it seemed natural to reflect this physical instance of the discourse with a staff transcription. This also allowed for a clear demonstration of overlap. The staff transcription also shows the structure of a narrative at a glance, hence the topic selected. The narrative structure is exemplified by the longer utterances of one speaker, that is periodically, interjected by one of the two listeners. These interjections only take place at markers, such as the end of a clause. The research questions deal with the structure of narratives, and utilizing a staff transcription style allows for identifying who is speaking, which then helps classify the utterances into their narrative categories. The research question is therefore centrally: Does having a narrative discourse that occurs regularly allow the parties involved in that discourse to utilize already established background information? Then, as a follow up, is there flexibility in understanding the narrative, even if background information specific to this instance of the discourse, is given later in the discourse.

No symbolic conventions (other than marking continued utterances) were used. Because the focus is primarily on classifying the narrative utterances and use of identity, it seems sufficient to pay attention to just the words used and less about certain inflections. Additionally, this part of the recording had no major intonation shifts. Any acts that may have influenced speech, such as coughing or laughing, are noted explicitly by being typed out. The spaces in between utterances reflect, proportionally, the time between the utterances.

IV. Analysis of Data

a. Narrative

While everyone may be able to define a narrative intuitively, it is important to establish a definition for the scope here. Labov (1972) describes a narrative as the following: recapitulation "of past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred." (Labov, 1972). Within this definition, there is a temporal aspect:

‘past’ and ‘sequence’ indicate a need for a ‘happening in order’ to occur. This can minimally be satisfied with two utterances: two utterances that are linked in temporal sequence could fit into this definition.

The fact that narrative has a temporal ordering is crucial to its definition: it would be difficult to semantically understand a non-temporally aligned narrative. As a goal of a narrative, the listener’s understanding is important and, as such, the narrative needs to be semantically coherent. This is because, during the narrative, the listener is ‘mapping’ out the speaker’s steps onto an abstract manifestation of time, as in a timeline. This means they are following along, implying a sense of direction. The direction in which the narrative takes place refers to its order.

The order must move through an appropriate time and be respectful of reality. That is, the listener must be able to reasonably ‘infer’ that the events actually occurred. Ordering the utterances as sequential units allows the listener to believe these events happened. Or at least, a listener cannot dismiss the claims based on impossible sequencing. Labov’s definition asserts that the narrative adheres to this timeline structure.

b. Narrative Structure

The following are the classes of utterances that will be utilized for data analysis. Even though they are presented in a typical order of where they may appear in a narrative, it is essential to realize that there is usually a more nuanced approach that should be taken. First, it is not the case that these will always appear in this order. Certain elements must naturally follow one another, but that does not mean utterances cannot be of one class and, after that, never that class again. The opposite is the case. Some utterances will be of one class, then another, and then return to the same class. Second, there need not be a firm distinction in some elements: it could be the case that the elements serve multiple functions.

What is presented here as classes are function categories: the classes are grouped by the function of the utterances. It is certainly possible for an utterance to serve multiple functions. These classes allow for orienting an analysis of data and discussion around that analysis, even though the boundaries and order are not required to be inflexibly firm. By defining these functions and the respective categories, insights into the role of the utterances can be generated, and conclusions can be made based on the established functions and roles.

i. Abstract

The abstract of the narrative is often the first utterance or collection of utterances and plays an interesting and pivotal role in establishing a narrative discourse. At the surface level, it provides a summary of the narrative. The abstract is an encapsulation of the main ideas and themes that the speaker wishes to deliver in the narrative. This is the ‘stage-setting’ part of the narrative, where the speaker indicates the concepts to be presented. Notably, the abstract will include the main point of the narrative: the reason or inspiration for telling the narrative.

However, the speaker will continue the narrative even though the main point has already been delivered. Because the thesis has been presented, and yet the speaker still will provide the narrative, it can be suggested that there is deemed by the speaker to be a utility in constructing

this temporally linked discourse in more detail that is beneficial to the audience, speaker, or some combination of these with the community.

The second role of the abstract is to indicate that the speaker wishes to deliver the narrative, which would occupy a relatively larger space in the discourse than other forms. By encapsulating the main ideas of a narrative into a small, possible individual utterance, the speaker allows the hearers to opt for information. This means two things. The first is that there is an indication from the speaker that they wish to tell a narrative. The speaker offers the abstract to show that they wish to deliver the narrative. Due to the increased amount of content that a narrative requires in a discourse, it is natural to seek some form of unofficial permission to deliver one. This unofficial permission can be requested by providing the abstract.

ii. Orientation

Once the abstract has been given and the speaker can continue with the narrative, the orientation allows the speaker to provide the relevant background details. This does not all have to occur simultaneously and can, indeed, be broken up and distributed throughout the story, as will be argued later. Sometimes, this is deliberate, as a way of creating emphasis, or perhaps a lack thereof, but it can also be accidental or conscious, such as an incorrect assumption of the listener's knowledge or simply forgetting certain background information that may be needed.

The orientation significantly interacts with intertextuality: if the speaker wishes to deliver a narrative that is predicated on one previously in a discourse, certain aspects of the orientation may be omitted. As will be discussed later, the regularity with which a discourse takes place can circumvent the need for orientation. This suggests that there is a level to which a discourse narrative is built upon others within the same international setting.

iii. Complicating Action

The complicating actions are the narrative's core, containing the primary narrative elements. These actions are a sequence of the 'temporally linked utterances' discussed in the definition of narratives. These need to be identifiable in the discourse to diagnose a narrative. The narrative clauses construct the timeline the listeners follow to understand the narrative.

iv. Evaluation

Once at least some of the narrative clauses have been established, they can be evaluated. The evaluation indicates the speaker reason for delivering the narrative. This is the part of the narrative structure provides insight into why the speaker wanted to offer the narrative. It can be reflective of the speaker, the actors in the story, or a synthesis of the speaker's feelings on the events that took place.

Note, again, that there is a requirement for the temporally linked clauses for the evaluation to take place. Neither the speaker nor the audience can evaluate part of the narrative that has not been presented. Typically, the narrative presentation is how the hearer knows of the event, so the timeline of actions formed by the temporally linked clauses must be established before the evaluation occurs.

Different types of evaluations can be offered. In the broadest sense, external evaluation looks at the narrative's events and explains reactions. This evaluation occurs outside the timeline of temporally linked clauses, that is, the narrative. It can be offered by anyone at any point outside the actual narrative. If an evaluation was to be provided inside the narrative, that is, in that timeline, it would be an embedded evaluation. Then, the final form of the assessment would be the evaluative action, which is what actions people take in response to the events.

v. Resolution or Result

A resolution or result will be given to synthesize the narrative. This is the speaker's reformulation of the narrative, similar to the abstract, but one that occurs at the end of the narrative. This can signify the end of a narrative but is still linked to the speaker's perspective. These are the utterances in which the speaker summarizes themselves what the narrative was.

vi. Coda

Finally, the coda of the narrative, which tends to be a smaller number of utterances, sometimes even just a single one, is the speaker's way of signifying that the narrative has concluded and that the elements of complicating actions, evaluation, and resolution have occurred. This collection of utterances also serves multiple functions.

The first function served is a signifier that the narrative has ended. An important distinction between the coda and the resolution is that the resolution/result cases can take place at multiple points of the narrative: complicating actions, evaluations, and resolutions need not occur in a prescribed order. This means that the listeners of the narrative may not be able to interpret when the narrative is concluded in its entirety. The coda serves the function of indicating that this is indeed the final part of the narrative.

Further, naturally, with the signifying of the end of the narrative, the code cedes the speaker's domination of the discourse space. It allows the listeners to either resume normal discourse/conversation or, in some cases, the ones who were listening previously may feel at liberty to deliver their narrative.

c. Narrative in the Data

The first step in the data analysis will be to assert that there is a narrative. Recall, this means that we will be looking for a recapitulation "of past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred." Consider Allison in line 3: "I asked Emma and I was like what's going on and nobody was responding and she does this has been the hardest week of my entire (laugh) life (laugh)." Firstly, note that this is a representation of events, a recapitulation: Allison is presenting the events to the listeners.

We have here three separate events: Allison asking Emma 'what's going on', the event of nobody responding, and then the occurrence of Emma answering. These events are distinguished by the conjunctive 'and' in Allison's discourse. Of course, these events took place about an hour before Allison delivered the narrative, so they are indeed past experiences that satisfy the first

condition. The clauses uttered are naturally verbal, as Allison has spoken them, which matches the ‘verbal’ requirement in the definition.

Now, we must consider whether they are sequential. There seems to be evidence that they are because Allison changes tense: notice how the verb in the first clause, ‘asked,’ is past perfect tense, the verb in the second clause, ‘was responding,’ is past progressive, and the verb in the third clause, ‘goes,’ is present tense. This indicates an order of events, from past to present, reflecting a temporally sequential order.

Each of these clauses reflects a specific moment of her dance lesson. This specificity in describing these moments is the link referred to in the definition. The description of states is specified events that are then linked together by Allison’s use of tense. This results in the fulfillment of the rest of the definition of narrative: the listeners, Goldie and Felix, presume that these events did occur. As will be discussed, this is related to the role Allison plays in the narrative context. For now, we see a distinct fulfillment of each of the required elements to consider (at least) these utterances to be a narrative. This, then, gives us the license to apply the aspects of narrative structure to the discourse and begin to classify cases.

d. Narrative Structure in the Data

i. Abstract in the Data

Recalling the elements of narrative structure discussed, we will look at the abstract first. Consider lines 1 and 2: “Yeah so tonight was good the girls were they were in a very good mood compared ye- last week they were all down and dreary”. This is the entirety of the narrative, just with a shallow resolution. Throughout the rest of the discourse, Allison will just be filling this declaration with specific events (as just evidenced) and justifying the two parts of the statement: that last week, the students were in a low mood, and in the present week, the lesson that had just occurred, the student’s mood had improved.

Also, this statement did not only provide a summary; I argue that it is Allison’s probing for the discourse space to deliver the narrative. Notice how Goldie and Felix both immediately have an utterance prompting Allison to continue with her explanation: “why” (Goldie) and “really” (Felix), line 2. And then, saving for clarification questions, Allison alone speaks for about twenty seconds. This is evidence of a deeper structural element of discourse: Allison delivers this utterance by checking the discourse space for room to present the temporally linked clauses that constitute a narrative. We can tell Allison is checking because she pauses and does not continue speaking until someone responds. If Allison felt able to deliver the narrative, she could have just continued speaking, especially because she opened the entire discourse herself. Further, Goldie’s and Felix’s responses indicate that they have acknowledged this abstract by asking for clarifying information.

Because the utterances in lines 1 and 2 have a surface level of summarizing the narrative and a deeper discourse structural level of establishing the space in the discourse for Allison to deliver a narrative, which she then does, I argue this is the abstract. It keeps with the established elements of the abstract and serves the function of an abstract.

ii. Complicating Actions in the Data

We have already seen a triplet of complicating actions in the data: Allison asked Emma (a question), no one responded, and then Emma answered. These are the temporally linked utterances that serve the function of being the core of the narrative. Interestingly, there does not seem to be another set, even a pair, of temporally linked utterances.

Consider Allison in line 5: “she actually had a conversation um at solo practice that she felt things were tense in her group”. This utterance contains two clauses, but note that one is embedded, signified by a completing ‘that’, setting off an embedded clause. Further, there is no procedural or temporal link to these two clauses. Further, they were not shown to have a distinction in the utterance. Similar logic is applied to lines 8 and 9, with Allison remarking, “Yeah, but I dunno they said they had a talk yesterday, and um, they have a better mindset I guess positive outlook”. Again, this is not temporal linkage because one clause is embedded in the other. This suggests that the core narrative was just a few utterances at the beginning of the discourse after the abstract. The work done here is the ‘core’ of the narrative. It is the actual set of events that discourse is centered around.

iii. Evaluation in the Data

If the rest of the discourse is not the complicating actions, then something else must be filling the discourse. One of the things that does this is evaluation. In line 9, Allison notes a “better mindset”: this is Allison referring directly to her abstract. Once she has delivered her complicating actions, she backs up her claim that the students were of a better mindset. This explains why she wanted to deliver this narrative and plays an explanatory role in the discourse.

iv. Resolution in the Data

This same utterance from Line 8 also seems to summarize and restate both what was presented in the abstract and what was the central theme of the complicating actions. This restatement of the main ideas is in line with the resolution function of narrative structure. Allison is again asserting, this time without a temporal link between utterances or even reference to specific events, that the student’s mindset has improved. Because it is, again, a summary, I argue that this utterance not only works in the evaluation but also in the resolution. Allison seems to deliver an utterance that does both of these functions.

v. Coda in the Data

In Line 11 and 12, note how Allison makes a remark that is not explicitly related to anything mentioned “they’re a little bit strange but”. This utterance comes after one of the questions asked by Goldie. (These questions will be discussed next and are the core of the analysis.) This is the last remark by any speaker on the events at the studio on the day in question.

After this remark, Allison cedes the discourse space to the other participants, and then the subject is changed. Notice how this utterance (“they’re a little bit strange but”) does not reflect on the complicating actions or any of the other previously attested utterances in the functional classes.

This suggests that the utterances are not part of the resolution. Rather, I argue this utterance is the coda. It is the part of the narrative in which Allison signifies that the narrative is complete.

This is done in two ways. The first way is structural. The discourse structure changes after the coda utterance, and Allison no longer speaks most of the time. She signifies a shift in the discourse by doing less talking. The second way is in the content of the utterance. The utterance is not reflective of any aspect of the discourse. I think there is an argument that it is, to some degree, an evaluation. It could be considered an evaluation because it addressed the quality of the students who have been the subject of the narrative. However, it does not reveal Allison's rationale for bringing up the narrative or support any claims made in the abstract. Because there is a structural change, resulting in the end of the narrative, and the content no longer refers to the narrative, I argue that this utterance is the coda.

vi. Orientation in the Data

Recall that the class of orientation serves the function role of providing necessary background information. These are the utterances which prove context or preface to the narrative that occurs. Consider line 11, when Allison says "no Krista was in Florida". This was in response to Goldie incorrectly identifying the number of students Allison had just had in the dance lesson. Correctly identifying the number of students certainly can be considered background information to the narrative. Because a narrative is a recognition of past events, to accurately portray these events, Allison would have had to provide the number of students in the lesson.

But, what is notable and will be the focal point of my argument is that Allison did not make this statement or any other orientation statements until after the narrative.

e. Orientation after the Narrative

As just discussed, there is no evidence that Allison provided orientation before her narrative. If we identify the abstract with lines 1-2 and then the complication actions with line 2-3, we see that there is not intermittent discourse space for giving orientation. Yet, there are some utterances which naturally fall into the class of orientation.

Another example of orientation occurs in lines 8-9, with Allison remarking "yeah but I dunno they said they had a talk yesterday and um the have a better mind set I guess positive outlook". I have already asserted that this is not another narrative. But it is still relevant to the narrative that was already presented. The specific thing that Allison is remaking is a conversation that explains the student's improved mood during the lesson. However, the event presumably occurred before the events of the narrative. This suggests that Allison is doing some orientation after the narrative: she is providing relevant background information after the narrative.

Therefore, a natural point of interest would be to understand why Allison delivered these orientation statements after the narrative. With less technicality, orientation may be thought of a scene-setting: it is the class of utterances that provides the background information so that the story made sense.

I argue that these orientation instances made by Allison after the narrative still provide appropriate background information. But they are not scene-setting; they are scene-adjusting. Consider line 11, right after Goldie says, “All four of them,” Allison immediately corrects her: “No, Krista was in Florida,” restoring the number to the correct amount of three. This is a clear sign that Goldie thought four students were present (which there normally is) but Allison narrative was only about three of them.

Then, in lines 8 and 9, where Allison stated that the students had a talk among themselves, she is not describing some reaction to the event of the narrative she had previously delivered; she is actually stating the cause of the observation and claims she has just made. It would have been logical to state that the students had a meeting and then delivered that narrative, as that was the course of events. However, Allison employs this scene-adjusting orientation afterward.

These kinds of orientation utterances allow Allison flexibility in discourse. She can deliver the narrative and then correct or adjust certain elements of it. This can be prompted by questions like in line 11 or offered by the narrative speaker, as in lines 8 and 9. This again shows the flexibility of the orientation class in narrative discourse.

f. Regularity offers Flexibility

Not only do I suggest that orientation is flexible, but that this flexibility can be attributed directly to the regularity of the discourse. By regularity, I am referring to the fact that this archetypical narrative, that of recounting a dance lesson, draws up past instances of itself to alleviate the necessity of orientation.

Note at the beginning of the discourse, Allison, while delivering the abstract, simply says, “So tonight was good” (Line 1). To an outsider, this would not really refer to anything specific, let alone a dance lesson. Allison goes on to topicalize more with: “The girls were in a very good mood...” This brings the discourse onto the topic of “the girls.” But with the context that Allison had just been teaching a group of girls, it would not be apparent what Allison is meaning with this.

Because Allison has conversations with her parents virtually every week, she can assume that Goldie and Felix know what she is referring to. Remember that Goldie is the studio owner and a dance teacher in her own right. She, Allison, and Felix have known “the girls” for several years. Because this kind of discourse takes place so regularly, and there is a reliability in orientation information remaining the same, Allison is able to deliver the narrative even with omitting the orientation.

But there are indeed orienting structures. When there is a deviation from the standard orientation, Allison can deliver the narrative and then adjust the scene to be in accordance with the specific past events. This is evidenced by Goldie asking that all four students were there. There are usually four students present for Allison’s lesson. Goldie would know this because of her role as director of the studio. And both Felix and Goldie would have been aware of the number of students from Allison’s previous discourses from previous weeks. But, because there was a difference this week, Allison can adjust even after delivering the narrative.

Finally, consider Allison's remark about the "talk" the students had with each other, which set them up for this improved mood in lines 8 and 9. This comes after the narrative, but the scene is adjusted to indicate the reason for Allison's observation. It adjusts the preface to her narrative. Because of the regularity of this discourse, in that Allison delivers it every week, Allison has the ability to offer the narrative and then provide the orientation, in this case specifically, the background information. Allison gives this form a narrative every week, and as such, Goldie and Felix can understand the narrative and receive background information, such as the inspiration for the student's improved mood, after the core of the narrative has been delivered.

V. Conclusion

Here, I have presented a single instance of a regularly occurring discourse, one that recounts events from a weekly event. We see that the discourse is in line with the predicted narrative structure. This structure allows us to analyze the way that the narrative was delivered. Doing this, we see that, interestingly, the background information that was acutely relevant to this particular instance of this discourse was given after the core of the narrative had been delivered.

When the background information, the clauses that fill the role or orientation, are delivered after the core of the narrative, it seems that the speaker is relying on the regularity of the conversation to provide the background information. It is the fact that the discourse takes place in an already established framework of people, places, and events that allows the speaker to rely on the listener's knowledge of events.

The analysis of the discourse here leads to two main topics for future investigation. The first is in reference to motivation. It would be interesting to understand 'why' some speakers choose to provide the background information after delivering the complicating actions of the narrative. Particularly, when a piece of the background is different, it would be interesting to analyze if this is indeed different from repair. The second direction that is a clear candidate for further analysis is the role of intertextuality. Analyses regarding how much intertextual discourse needs to be established would allow us to understand more about the strategies for delivering narrative discourses while flexibly delivering and adjusting background information.

From the regularity, I argue, comes flexibility. The flexibility to provide relevant background information to specific instances of a regular narrative is driven by an already-established set of information. This information allows the listeners to know some things about the narrative and understand it accordingly. This means that the narrative can be given, and any adjustments that need to be made to increase the accuracy can be made after the core of the narrative because the background information is already in the mind of the speaker and listener.

References

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