

Narratives in News Reports: a Case Study of a News Report in The Times

Jia Wen

School of foreign studies, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, China

**Corresponding author. Email: jrlths@126.com*

ABSTRACT

There is a variety of approaches to the analysis of narratives which has multiple forms such as biographies and autobiographies, news stories, novels, medical case histories and personal letters etc. This article applies Labov model to the analysis of a news report in the Times in order to further explore the characteristics, structure and the function of the narrative and also different forms of speech representation.

Keywords: *Labov's Model; Narrative analysis; Speech representation*

1. INTRODUCTION

When we think of narrative, we often think of it as novels, folk tales, or anecdotes, which we could engage in. We may get involved in a variety of narrative discourses anywhere and anytime. For example, when you are telling an experience of travel in a foreign country, you are just telling a little narrative to your friends. It is quite often that people take the ability of narrating as granted. However, in linguistic studies, the perspectives are not focusing on the issue of taking narrative as a born gift but the linguistic meanings underneath.

In this article, we will discuss the approaches to the narrative in the first section, then apply those theories to a chosen written article in which we will consider the characteristics, structure and the function of the narrative and also the use of different forms of speech representation.

2. RESEARCH METHOD: THE APPROACHES TO THE NARRATIVES

There is a variety of approaches to the analysis of narratives which has multiple forms such as biographies and autobiographies, news stories, novels, medical case histories and personal letters etc. In this article, I will mainly focus on the study of linguistic-oriented perspectives on narrative paying attention to systematic linguistic form of narratives in certain contexts.

Along with narrative analysis is often the study of narrative structures. Labov [5] develops an analytical modal of narrative. The Labov model is the problem-resolution pattern specifying six elements that found in many narratives: (1) Abstract. (2)Orientation. (3)Complicating action. (4)Evaluation. (5)Result or resolution.(6)Coda. An abstract is a short statement of what will be happening later and always starts before the beginning of a story with its function of outlining the main

idea of the story, therefore, it will correctly lead readers to go through the whole story and may also helpful for designing a proper plan for the story; as for an orientation, it usually follows an abstract informing readers of the time, such as 'long time ago...', place, persons, and activities; then followed by complicating events, they are the main events making the story happen. In most narratives, leading characters are always having certain goals and have to conquer some problems in order to achieve it. In this sense, the process of complicating events is the process of solving the problem. The evaluation of the narrative is the means used by narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, and evaluative devices could be found throughout the narrative; and resolution indicates that the problem is solved, lastly, the function of coda is to bring us back from the story world to the moment of telling, which may also contain a moral summarizing the relevance of the story.

As for functions, Labov [5] introduces two functions: referential and evaluative function, the former is trying to inform people of narrator's recapitulation and the latter is gives 'the meaning of the narrative by establishing personal involvement through the evaluation' (Cortazzi) [2]. It is easy to see these functions in oral narratives. Czarniawska and Gagliardi [3] summarize more functions of narratives such as persuasion, explanation, moral teaching and so on.

Narratives also closely connect with the application of speech presentation. The Leech and Short modal (1981) was created in relation to the novel, which contains elements of narrative or narration, narrator's report of *speech acts(NRSA)*, *indirect speech(IS)*, *Free Indirect Speech(FIS)*, *Direct Speech(DS)*, *Free Direct Speech(FDS)*(as cited in Semino and Short) [7]. However, in order to cover the variety of forms of speech, writing and thought presentation, Semino and Short [7] refine Leech and Short's modal and their categories include *Narrator's Representation of Voice (NV)*(minimal reference to speech), *Internal Narration (NI)*, *Writing presentation*; and sub-categories constitute *Narrator's Representation of Speech Acts with Topic (NRSaP)*, *Quotation*

phenomena ('q' forms), Inferred thought presentation ('i'), Hypothetical SW&TP ('h'). Among all the categories, the speech presentation mainly are consist of five modes which are *NV*, *NRSA*, *IS*, *FIS*, and *DS*. In the second part of the article, I will give detailed analysis of these modes and apply to the chosen news report where relevant.

3. AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES AND SPEECH REPRESENTATION IN THE NEWS REPORT

Abbott [1] points out that 'narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events'. Prince [6] expresses the idea that there are three conditions for narrative which are 'temporality' concerning the sequence of events in time, 'causation' meaning the middle action causes the final state, and 'human interest' projecting values and motives to characters in a story (as cited in Cortazzi) [2]. Since 'hard news' defined by Bell (as cited in Semino and Short) [7] as 'reports of accidents, conflicts, crimes, announcements, discoveries and other events which have occurred or come to light since the previous issue of their paper or programme', tend to have strong features of narrative, which are more time-bound and more narrative, more fitting into the three conditions. However, instead of choosing a hard news, I chose a softer piece which also contains issues of crime and conflicts, but the key point is to show a certain view of point by combining a variety of narratives and relevant forms of speech presentation.

In this article, I chose an article titled *when people round here say it's getting better I just think, what planet are you on?* from *THE TIMES*. Although it is about a criminal case, the gist is not to narrate the process of the whole crime but concern the feeling of or impact on people. However, unlike the usual hard news which focuses on the narration the process, this one has more emotional expressions besides giving some small narrative stories, which makes it more like a feature article. I will apply Labov's [5] modal to the analysis of the structure of narratives involved and what their functions are; meanwhile, consider the use of different forms of speech representation.

This news is concerned about the impact on local citizens of Eltham after an infamous murder case "Stephen Lawrence murder" happened. Although the case happened nearly twenty years ago, the two murders Gary Dobson and David Norris have recently been found guilty of Lawrence's murder, and were sentenced on 4 January 2012. Stephen Lawrence was a Black British man from Eltham, south east London, who was murdered in a racist attack while waiting for a bus on the evening of 22 April 1993. After the initial investigation, five suspects were arrested but not convicted. Until 4 January 2012, the two suspects were sentenced with minimum terms of 15 years 2 months and 14 years 3 months respectively. The main interviewee is also a black British which may reveal some hints underlying the news discussed latter.

3.1. Abstract

Firstly, I will describe Labov's stages using this article. Throughout the news, the leading role is a black woman named Samantha Oliva, who is leading journalist walking around the place of Eltham where the incident happens. This article involves more than one narrative, along with Ms Olive, the whole journey would be a narrative story called the 'big narrative' in my article, meanwhile, within her talks, there are many other 'small narratives' inside. The title with sub title is the abstract of the big article:

'When people round here say it's getting better I just think, what planet are you on?'

Stabbings have become a fact in Eltham – but warring gangs, not racists, are to blame, hears Lucy Bannerman

Here in the title, instead of using a summarized sentence, the writer uses a direct quotation from the major interviewee. By using the direct quotation, readers are receiving the information directly from the participants. It is reasonable to believe that the journalist is the real leader in making news, however, the real truthful news are always subject to the direct quotation which is linking us to the original statement. As pointed out by Semino and Short [7], DS is the most frequent category in their corpus, and Thompson [7] highlights that there are two main functions for direct quotations in written articles including the indication of a higher degree of faithfulness to an original language event and the vivid presentation of reported events towards readers (as cited in Semino and Short) [7]. From the title expressed by using direct speech (DS), two functions have been achieved in a certain level. Nevertheless, this title gives us little information therefore we may recognize these two functions in the body passages.

As an abstract, it is responsible to tell readers what the story is going to be about. From this one, we could be informed that this is a story about stabbings in a place called Eltham. And the reason of these criminal acts is supposed to be the results of 'warring gangs'. The main title tells us that some people are not satisfied with current situations, while, for people who are thinking of 'getting better', they are just going on quit well with their life. So far, we still lack of detailed information and it is well-known that news without details cannot be counted as news.

3.2. Orientation

Then the first paragraph from lines 6 to 13 is the orientation part which introduces characters, place and situation. In the Labov modal, orientation necessarily consists of the time, place, persons, as well as their activity or situation (Labov) [5]. Concrete time has not been mentioned, however, there have been continuous reports of which mostly are headlines about the trial of this Eltham murder case in the past few days; people could already gain certain backgrounds. Besides, the purpose of news report is not aiming at tell the stories about the crime and

its trial, but local people's emotional feeling and the discussion of the current situation. All the narratives embedded are working for these purposes. The needed background for this article has already been presented in the first paragraph:

1. *When asked how Eltham has changed since its most infamous murder, Samantha*
2. *Oliver barely pauses to take breath. "Put it like this", she says, "When I was growing*
3. *up, I could count the funerals I went to on one hand." Her daughters are only 17*
4. *and 18 but, she says, "The amount of funerals I take them to, I couldn't tell you.*
5. *I've lost count." The cause of death is nearly always the same: stabbing.*

From above sentences, we found the character Samantha Oliver who is taking the journalist around the place, although some other characters turn out from time to time, she is the leading role all the time. It seems like the whole article is planned in terms of her views because most of time she is the one who keeps telling narrative stories. Here again, the reporter uses direct speech. Usually, in hard news, we seldom can find quotations of statements in the first paragraph which is often used for the introduction of the whole event. Since I have mentioned above that this news article is more feature-like, thus the writer put direct speech into the initial paragraph informing readers of characteristics of this article is more based on personal experiences rather than statistics or data. Asked whether there is any change after the most infamous murder, instead of giving concrete data or lists, Bannerman quotes Ms Oliver's statements in order to show the faithfulness since she has been living here for a long time and witness the change in the number of funerals. From this aspect, we can possibly assume that the incidents alike may not reduce.

In addition, the way she says is also revealing her personal attitudes towards this phenomenon, or say, she put her own evaluation on this issue which brings out another mode of Labov's model: evaluation. Evaluative moments can be traced through the whole article and indicate why the narrator is willing to tell these stories. Labov [5] divides evaluation into four types in terms of 'external evaluation', 'embedding of evaluation', 'evaluative action', and 'evaluation by suspension of the action'. When talking about funerals, she says: "The amount of funerals I take them to, I couldn't tell you. I've lost count." This statement is filling the category of external evaluation which means the narrator stop to tell the listener what the point is. She used 'I couldn't tell you' to turn to the reporter and she lost count due to the increasing number of funerals implicating the bad effects left behind.

3.3. Complicating action/events

The complicating events are the main body of the story, in which is not easy to investigate clear-cut information of the time order in this report. Actually, instead of

describing one big event, the interviewee expresses her opinions by giving many small narratives. By giving many small narratives back and forth, Ms Olive narrates the changes happening from her childhood until now while leading the reporter around the memorial and surrounding houses. In this section, writer again uses a large number of DS and some indirect speeches (IS) and narrator's representation of speech acts (NRSA).

IS is frequently used in the press articles which presents the propositional content of what was said and its function of summarization is often the reason why it is so frequent in news reports (Semino and Short) [7]. After leading the reporter to the spot where Stephen Lawrence died, Oliver says the case shocked the nation (line 8), adding the judgement of its impact on the nation which can be viewed as applying evaluative devices:

8. *"...used to be a one-off. At this time, it shocked the nation." Now, she says, young*
9. *black men being stabbed in London barely make the headlines.*

Then, in the next sentence, Bannerman used ID in line 9 to 11 and 14 to 17, and DS again in the last sentence of the third paragraph, so it is the same in Para. 4. Moreover, in line 12, Ms Oliver quotes herself putting 'what planet are you on' into her own speech, which could strengthen readers' feeling of her disagreement with some people on the topic of current situation.

By using DS and ID alternatively, it is not only beneficial for the diversity of sentence structure but also simplicity of the article. From the three paragraphs, the journalist writes in third person and the majority of the words are written in mode of DS. In this sense, it is easily for readers to see that Ms Oliver strongly believes that racism is no longer the main reason triggering hatred between black and white, however, gangs within community become the criminal. And she is trustful person because she has spent two years as a social worker and is used to be a youth worker when she was young as introduced in Para. 3. Therefore, to a certain extent, her words make this news report reliable and believable.

In the 6 paragraph, Oliver's daughter gives another personal experience of witnessing a battle between black gang members in daylight:

29. *... "They were throwing bottles. There was blood." She ended*
30. *up carrying a bleeding 17-year-old to hospital. "His face was all cut. He needed 31.stitches by his ear. They all make sure they go to different hospitals so they don't*
32. *see each other. It's madness." ...*

This time, instead of using NRSA, the reporter let the daughter expresses her own experience by applying direct speech which is far more direct than been told by her mum. The daughter is not only a witness but also personally gets involved which makes the narrative more truthful and appealing to readers. In this sense, this story is impressive enough to be the climax the whole news. Undoubtedly, in order to attract readers' attention and maintain their

interest for a while, the authors always put the most important in the first section which is often referred to a concept called ‘inverted pyramid’, on the contrary, this article just presents some general narratives about opinions of Ms Oliver and rough description of some events at the first time, then gradually leads readers into more shocking reality’.

In fact, there have been many discussion and debate on the distinction and connection between small and big stories. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou [8] defines ‘small stories’ as an umbrella term that ‘captures a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities such as telling of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared events, but also allusions to telling, deferrals of telling, and refusals to tell’ (as cited in Wilson and Stapleton) [8]. Compared with ‘big stories’ which are usually highly structured and organised narratives, ‘small stories’ meanwhile are often indicating to stories naturally produced during interaction like daily conversation (Phoenix and Sparkes) [9]. During the history of narrative analysis, by and large, due to the huge influence of the Labov model and Labov’s systematically structured analysis of narratives, people tend to pay more attention to big stories which clearly contain features described in Labov’s theories. In the press, the front-page news is always articles with the big narratives which seem to be more attractive to readers. However, the importance of small stories should not be neglected when analyzing narratives.

3.4. Evaluation

In this article, we can find many places applied to evaluative devices, which is one of characteristics of this news report. I have already explained some examples of evaluation in the above paragraphs; the application of it continues to have a significant impact in next three paragraphs.

Since this article is written in the third person, narratives probably may result in the explicit expression of the opinion of Ms Oliver. As the author reasserts the relevance with the murder case again:

39...., *she claims, is that she has more faith*
 40.*that any attackers would face the consequences. “We have come some way, in*
 41.*that I could do something about it, whereas before there was no doing anything*
 42.*about it. Everyone is happy that justice has happened after all these years. But*
 43.*we’re seeing injustice around us all the time. And that doesn’t feel right.”*

Again, the writer uses ID and DS combined together in the above paragraph, the ‘justice’ she mentions is the conviction of the two criminals, which has not been mentioned in this article; therefore, earlier events can serve as background which are prior to the current action. Ms Oliver gives explicit evaluation by comparison with previous situation. In the past, criminals could be acquitted

of a charge only due to defects of relevant laws, after all these years, they get their deserved punishment and people are all happy about that. Nevertheless, Ms Oliver still shows her doubts about it which Stephen Carter in paragraph 9 expresses similar opinion pointing out that there are still forbidden areas in London:

45.... *“I’ve lived here 20 years and I*
 46.*don’t think it’s racist. Go into any part of London, and you’ll find areas you*
 47.*shouldn’t go into,” he said.*

Finally, in the last paragraph, the writer brings us back to the notorious crime, rather than make any practical resolution which is hard to provide considering its involvement of all walks of life, he makes the ending by presenting Carter’s expectation and uncertainty towards the future. The journalist uses FDS at the end:

50.... *“I don’t think it’s going to end here. It’s going to keep going for ever.*
 51.*Or at least until they catch the others.”*

There will be the presence of quotation marks and the omission of the reporting clause in FDS. At the end of the article, Carter’s anxiety leaves reader the final impression of disappointment about the reality.

4. CONCLUSION

Bring everything into a conclusion, this article is not planned to report a big narrative story but to discuss the surrounding issues by giving some small narratives from time to time. In Semino and Short’s study [7], the press section in their corpus is identified by a high frequency of NRSA and IS because of their function of summarization and simplification which is especially useful when space is limited; however, this article constitutes many DS in the majority of its context, in addition, the whole article is written in the third person indicating that the author tries to reduce doubts about the credibility of the source.

Additionally, the application of evaluation is interspersed through the whole article; Ms Oliver conveys her personal perspectives and attitudes now and then during the process of interview. The paper itself is less like a narrative story but formed based on former narrative reports and small stories given by Ms Oliver and her daughter. Although this paper focuses more on the comments on or interpretation of the effects of the crime by local residents, we still can find that in the process of interview in which the writer was led by Ms Oliver visiting memorial spot and nearby community and meet Carter, there are many small narrative stories embedded. Actually, this news is, to a very great event, like a follow-up report of the trial; therefore, it focuses on the question of what happens now and what will happen. In a word, narrative is one of most important genres in news report so that the application of it will enrich our understanding of journalism’s different forms and styles.

REFERENCES

- [1] H. P. Abbott, *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816932>
- [2] M. Cortazzi, *Narrative analysis*. London: The Falmer Press, 1993, p.60. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315067421>
- [3] B. Czarniawska, & P. Gagliardi, *Narratives we organize by*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1075/aio.11>
- [4] E. Gulich, & M. U. Quasthoff, *Narrative analysis*. In Dijk, T. A. (ed) *Handbook of discourse analysis*. London: Academic Press, 1985, pp. 169-192. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470753460.ch19>
- [5] W. Labov, *Language in the inner city: studies in the Black English vernacular*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1972, pp. 371-374. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/089124167600400410>
- [6] G. Prince, *Narratology and narratological analysis*. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1997, 7(1). DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1075/jnlh.7.03nar>
- [7] E. Semino, & M. Short, *Corpus Stylistics: speech, writing and thought presentation in a corpus of English writing*. London: Routledge, 2004. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/fqm030>
- [8] J. Wilson, & K. Stapleton, *The big story about small stories: narratives of crime and terrorism*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 14/3, (2010) 287 – 312. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2010.00446.x>
- [9] C. Phoenix, & A. C. Sparkes, *Being Fred: big stories, small stories and the accomplishment of a positive ageing identity*. *Qualitative Research*. Vol. 9(2), (2009) 219 – 236. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794108099322>