# Ordinary events

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In most sociolinguistic studies of the speech community, narratives of personal experience play a prominent role. Within the sociolinguistic interview, narratives are one of the primary means of reducing the effects of observation and recording. In dissecting the stylistic shifts within the interview, narratives consistently show a shift towards the vernacular—that is, towards the first-learned style of speech that is used in every-day communication with friends and family (Labov 2001). Many of the results of this concentration on narrative are incorporated into the figures on style shifting of linguistic variables (Trudgill 1974, Cedergren 1973). Because the elicitation of narrative is such an important methodological step, attention turned to narrative structure (Labov and Waletzky 1963, Labov 1972). The distribution of linguistic features in the construction of narrative has been the focus of a number of studies (e.g., Schiffrin 1981, Silva-Corvalan 1973). Several recent publications have focused on the narratives as a whole (Laforest 1996, Butters 2001).

More than anyone else, Ron Macaulay has brought to the forefront the emotional and social dimensions of personal narrative (1991). In his exploration of the discourse features of the Ayrshire dialect, narratives play the most prominent part—not only in the discourse particles that are tied to narrative structure, but in the way that linguistic constructions are used to convey the full emotional impact of the events being recounted. The impact of his work is considerably heightened by the quality of the many narratives that he cites in full. From the outset, Macaulay realized the importance of the central themes of human experience in his sociolinguistic interviews; as an interviewer,

he was able to draw forth the full eloquence of the Scots speakers of Ayrshire and Glasgow.

## The narrative.

This report will deal with a single narrative recorded by Macaulay. It was originally reported in his paper on “Polyphonic monologues,” dealing with the role of direct quotation in narrative (1987), and then incorporated into his1991 book in Chapter 11 on “The Use of Quoted Direct Speech.” I have been thinking about this narrative since I first read Macaulay’s paper, re-telling it to various audiences, and re-analyzing it from several points of view. It is told by Ellen Laidlaw, whose narratives are cited at many points in Macaulay’s work. Laidlaw was 69 when she was interviewed in 1978. She was from a solidly working-class background: the daughter of a coalman, who left school at 16, and was twice married to men who held manual jobs at a local factory. The narrative concerns her father’s death. Laidlaw’s mother had been taking care of him in his final sickness. Though it is a narrative of personal experience, the experience is her mother’s, as retold by the daughter. It was introduced by an abstract: “He just lay doon on the settee and turned over and that was him gone, and then told in detail.

The story is reproduced below in the transcriptional style that is useful for the narrative analysis to follow. Each independent clause is lettered as a separate line, and all finite clauses dependent on it are indented below.

(1)

Ellen Laidlaw: An account of her father’s death

a And it was an exceptionally good afternoon,
b and she put him out in a basket chair, sitting at the window ootside in the garden.
c She went in on the one bus
d and came back on the same bus,
because the conductress says to her, "Thought you said
you were going for messages [shopping]", she says.

e "So I was."
f "Well," she says, "I'm awful glad I'm no waiting on you," she says.
g "You coudnae have got much
because you've got the same bus back."
h "Ach well," she says, "I don't like the idea of leaving him too long,"
i and she went up the road.
j She noticed his basket chair was there,
k but he wasnae there.
l She never thought anything aboot it,
because it was too warm.
m She thought he'd naturally gone inside,
n and when she went in,
he was lying on the settee.
o And she's auld-fashioned, very tidy, very smart.
p Everything had to go in its place.
q She took off her coat,
r hung it up,
s put away her shopping bag,
t and she says, "It's rather early for wer tea—wer dinner,
so I'll go and ask him if he wants a coffee."
u And she made the coffee,
v and she went through
w and shook him to ask him if he wanted tea.
x And he dropped off the settee in front of her.
y And she just--her mind just broke,
z and she's never known what it is since.

Macaulay points out that this extraordinary story must have been reconstructed from Laidlaw's mother's account, even if her mind had been disordered as a result of the events. We find several indirect quotations from her mother (j, l, m) but also direct quotation (e.h, t). The quoted exchanges with the conductress (d,e,f,g,h) might have

been from her mother, but they also could have been from the conductress. It is this reconstructed conversation that is the focus of Macaulay's analysis. The dialogue, and particularly (h), provides a dramatic anticipation of the tragedy.

> By the use of quoted direct speech Laidlaw has transformed what would otherwise have been a straightforward third-person account of her mother's actions on the day that her father died into a dramatic narrative in which the perspective varies with different speakers. (1991:192).

In what follows, I would like to pursue Macaulay's insights further by considering the relation of this dialogue to the central problem of polarization and integration of the participants. Though we begin with the assumption that the events reported did in fact occur, the account is indeed "constructed," as Macaulay points out. Following the model of Labov 1997, I will attempt to show that this construction is best understood as built upon the skeleton of causally-linked events that is required for the creation of any narrative structure. The "reportable" events form a selection of the events that we can infer did occur but also include a variety of events that are not in themselves reportable and are not part of the causal chain required for a coherent narrative. These "ordinary events" will be the main focus of this account: how they relate to the central narrative task of conveying the narrator's experience to the listener.

## Temporal organization and evaluation

Following the method of Labov and Waletzky 1967, we can first examine the temporal organization of the narrative. The *Orientation* is confined to a single clause (a), which establishes the time. The place and the participants are incorporated in the first narrative event of the *complicating action*, (b), which introduces her mother, her father and the situation: a sick man left alone on the front porch of the house. The action continues to the final resolution (x), the negative evaluation of that resolution (y), and the coda (z) which brings us back to the present with the present perfect clause modified by *since* [that happened]. The analysis is not so simple,

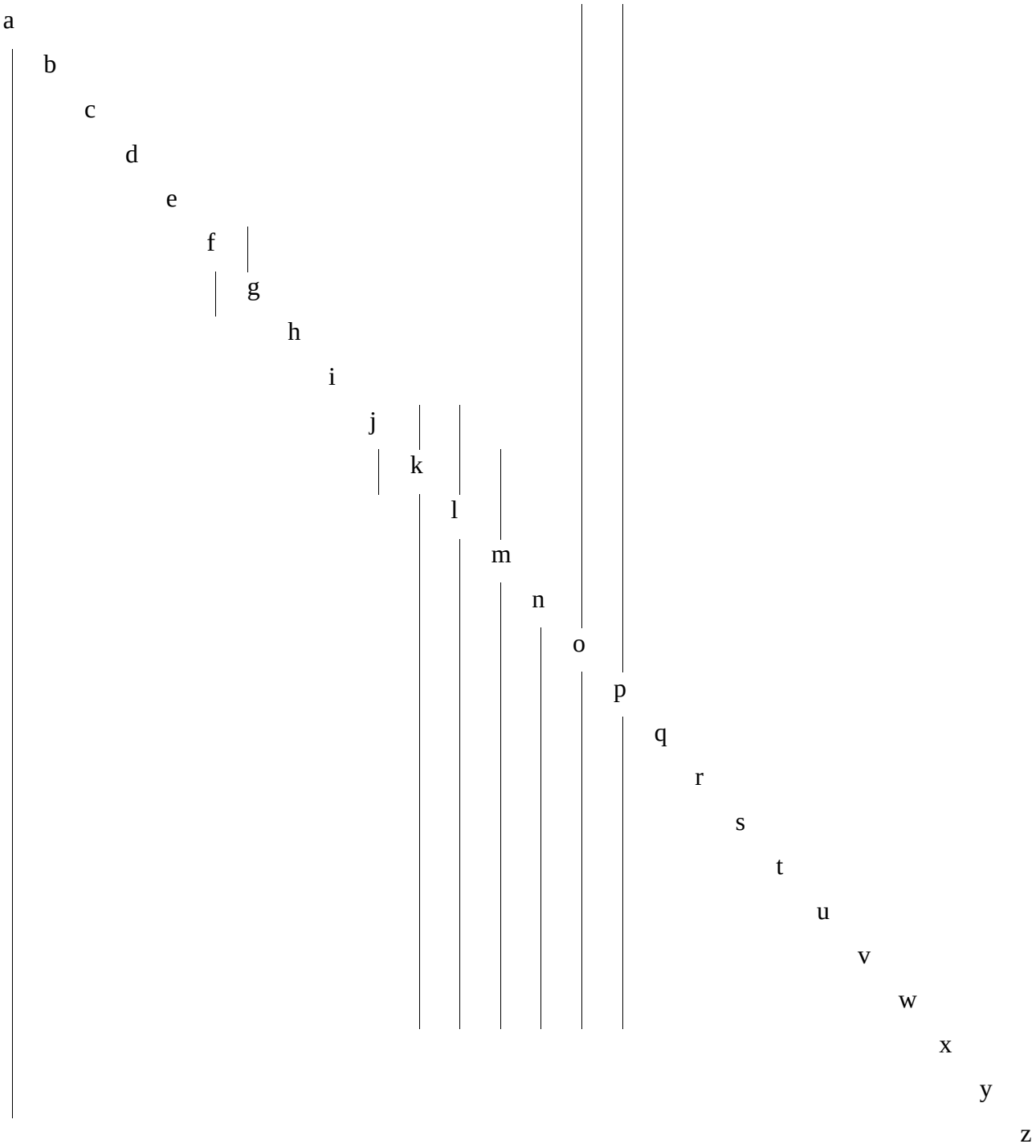
however, since the sequence of temporal junctures is broken by a series of clauses with extended temporal ranges, as shown in Figure 1.

This series plainly forms an *evaluation section.* It deals with the perceptions, thoughts and character of the protagonist, and is marked nu irrealis predicates. Clause (j) reports the perception of a negative situation. Clauses (k-m) continue in an irrealis mode, reporting misperceptions that prevailed through w, and terminated only with the tragic event ( x). Clause (n) is another restricted clause, reporting the situation that continues again through (w)—her father's location on the settee in the living room. There follow the two free clauses (o,p) that describe her mother's general character—material that might have been placed in an orientation section. A glance at (2) makes it plain that this evaluation section delays the advancement of the action, a delay that would normally precede and evaluate the main point of the narrative.[1]

However, there can be no doubt that clause (x) is the central point of the narrative, and the evaluation section is separated from it by a long series of less important events (q-v). What follows in the analysis will attempt to account for this displacement of the evaluation section.

[1] The displacement of the orientation clauses (o-p) downward in the narrative is a not uncommon device for evaluation, postponing information that interprets events to the place where they are most relevant. Whether or not this characterization of her mother continues to the very end of the narrative, beyond the death of her father, is not known.

(2) Temporal ranges of clauses in “An account of her father’s death.”



## The assignment of praise and blame.

Narratives that center on conflict, violence, sickness and death are normally concerned with the assignment of responsibility for these events, and this narrative is not an exception. Many such narratives are constructed to polarize the participants, so that the protagonist conforms to all community norms and the antagonist violates them. But narratives told by a family member, like this one, are frequently organized as integrating narratives, told in a way that minimizes guilt, and relieves participants of responsibility for the outcome.

The issue in the Laidlaw narrative is evident: her mother left her father alone: if she had been present when he suffered whatever attack was responsible for his death, she might have been able to prevent it. It is not unlikely that this sense of guilt and dereliction of duty contributed to her mother's mental decline.

The narrative construction is plainly designed to mitigate this guilt on four counts:

(a) She brought him outside because it was an exceptionally pleasant afternoon .
(b-h) She did her shopping as quickly as possible because she did not wamt tp leave him alone.
(j-m) When she saw his chair empty she thought that he had gone inside because it was too warm, and her conjecture was confirmed by seeing him (n) on the settee.
(t-w) Her following actions were only concerned with his welfare.

The dramatic dialogue (d-h) identified by Macaulay as anticipating the tragedy testifies most strongly to her mother's concern, Her mother states plainly, "I don't like the idea of leaving him too long," but the strongest testimony comes from the third-party witness, the conductress, who volunteers the opinion that her mother had shopped so quickly that she "coudnae have got much." This is further confirmed by the objective fact that she returned on the same bus that she had taken to town.

This section of the narrative therefore integrating rather than polarizing, mitigating the assignment of blame for her father's death. The actual quotations may have

been provided by her mother, by the conductress, or by Laidlaw herself from more fragmentary indications.

## Participant actions

To understand the narrative construction as a whole, it is useful to consider the chart of participant actions (3). This correlates the overt actions of the three participants as reported by Laidlaw (excluding reported internal thoughts). The capital letters at left label the correlated time periods in which participants' actions are correlated. The actions in brackets are not reported by Laidlaw, but are necessary additions that are inferred from the others and are not correlated exactly with the overtly reported events.

Laidlaw's mother is in contact with her father at three points in the narrative: when she first put him outside, when she saw him lying on the settee, and when she shook him. zzzdhe is in contact with the conductress during the conversation on the bus returning. In almost all narratives of personal experience, we view the actions through the eyes of the narrator. In this narrative of vicarious experience, the animator (Laidlaw) allows us to view the action through the eyes of her mother. As in the more general case, no flashbacks are permitted, and we learn about events that took place outside of her mother's view only as she gets evidence of them.

As a result of this ironclad "no flashback" rule, we cannot place the critical actions of Laidlaw's father in time. At some point between A and J, her father became ill, went inside, and lay down on the settee. The exact time when he died is not known: he may or may not have been alive when his wife saw him lying on the settee. He might actually have died at any time after she entered the house and during the unmeasured length of time it took to put away the shopping, that is, between K and R.

(3) Chart of participant actions in the Laidlaw narrative.

| | HER FATHER | HER MOTHER | THE CONDUCTRESS |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | sat outside | put him out | |
| B | [became ill] | went in on bus | |
| C | [went inside] | [shopped] | |
| D | [lay on settee] | [got on bus] | “I thought you were going shopping” |
| E | [died] | “So I was” | |
| F | | | “I’m awful glad I’m no waiting” |
| G | | | “You couldna have got much...” |
| H | | “I don’t like leaving him” | |
| I | | came back on bus | |
| J | | noticed he wasn’t there | |
| K | seen on settee | went in | |
| L | | took off coat | |
| M | | hung it up | |
| O | | says, “I’ll go...” | |
| P | | made coffee | |
| Q | | went through | |
| R | dropped off | shook him | |
| S | | mind broke | |

The assignment of guilt is therefore not fully resolved by the fact that the period of shopping B to I was as short as possible, as the conductress testified. The assignment of responsibility involves the concept of causation. It will be helpful to move to a more abstract form of analysis and examine the causal relationship between the events involved.

## The causal skeleton

In order to understand the narrative construction better, it is helpful to reconstruct the basis on which the narrative is built (Labov 1997, 2001). We begin with the concept of a *reportable narrative* and *reportability*. It is generally true that most turns at talk are occupied by short utterances, usually a single sentence or less, while narratives require much longer turns, and the automatic re-assignment of speakership to the narrator when other turns intervene (Sacks 19??). Events that are socially ratified as justifying such extended turns and re-assignment are *reportable* and narratives that include such events are reportable narratives (Labov 1997).[2]

Any given narrative is constructed about a *most reportable event*: that is, an event that is the least common and has the largest consequences for the welfare and well-being of the participants. *Reportability* is then the joint product of frequency and effect upon the welfare of the participants. Except under the most unusual circumstances, death is a most reportable event.[3] Though there can be some disagreement about which of several competing events is the most reportable in some narratives, clause (x) is the most reportable event of the Laidlaw narrative.

When a person decides to tell a narrative, it is usually a decision to describe the most reportable event. Laidlaw had made the decision to give an account of her father's death. However, it is obvious that a narrative that simply replicates clause (x) would not be a narrative in the sense defined here. This is not simply because of the need for temporal junctures, implying more than one event. It is also a product of the inverse relationship of reportability and *credibility*. To the extent that an event is reportable, it is also uncommon, rare and unlikely. The more unlikely it is, the less credible. This inverse relationship between credibility and reportability creates the major problem of narrative construction. For unless a narrative is one of the special genre of "tall tales," rejection as

[2] Reportability is not of course an invariant feature of events, but relative to many features of the social situation: competition with other concerns, relation of the participants, and setting. Thus almost any event may be reportable at a family dinner, while only a small number are reportable to a committee of Congress.

a falsehood is equivalent to total failure for the narrator with a consequent loss of social standing.

The problem of establishing credibility for the most reportable event is equivalent to answering the question, "How did this [extraordinary thing] come about?" It is therefore necessary to provide an answer in the form of some preceding event which was the cause or motivation of the most reportable event. This is a recursive process: this preceding event must be explained in turn, and an answer must be provided to the question, "and what brought *that* about?" A solution to the problem of narrative construction therefore requires the narrator to locate an event in the series which does not require such a motivating precursor, an event for which the question "Why did you [or he] do that?" is meaningless or silly. All narrators do in fact solve this problem, and they do locate such an event. It is in fact, the *orientation* of the narrative, which describes a setting or situation that is a common, expected and ordinary event. The answer to the question, "Why would you set your father out in the basket chair on a good afternoon?" is "That is what I would always do on a good afternoon!" and any person who would ask such a question would rightfully be covered with confusion.

The basic narrative procedure for creating a narrative about a [most] reportable event can be summarized as a recursive *rule of narrative construction*:

(4) Given an event $r_i$, that is unaccounted for, locate an event $r_{i-1}$ for which the statement "$r_n$ happened because $r_{i-1}$" is true.

This rule produces a *narrative chain*, a skeleton of events linked by their causal relations. It is terminated when the event is not "unaccounted for." As we have seen, the events that are found in orientation section are accounted for: they need no accounting since the behavior of the participants is expected given the time, the place and their characer. When a most reportable event $r_0$ is input to the rule, it produces the a chain of n events:

[3] This social fact is the basis of Macbeth's response to the report of his wife's death, "There would have been time for such a word." The pressure of competing events was so great, that this death was not then reportable.

(5) $r_0$ $r_{-1}$ $r_{-2}$ . . . . $r_n$

The narrative chain is in effect a causal theory of the narrative. For any given person telling any given narrative, the rule of narrative construction provides the required answer to the *initial question*, "Where shall I begin?" which is the Orientation $r_n$. We sometimes hear this question in so many words, but an overt formulation is not required., No narrative can be told until the initial question is answered.

There is of course no single answer to the initial question, any more than there would be a single solution to providing an event $r_{i-1}$ to the rule of narrative construction. Different narrators will construct different causal chains and arrive at different orientations. On reflection, one can see that the orientation, which seemed at first glance to be the least interesting and least evaluated part of the narrative, is in fact the basis of the narrator's causal theory, and the ordinary events that comprise the orientation carry great significance in the ultimate assignment of praise or blame.

What follows the most reportable event? The series of complicating actions that follow the most reportable event can be called the *resolution* of the narrative, but it is not yet clear to me if the *end* of the narrative can be characterized by an event with specific characteristics. In any case, a narrative is normally terminated by a *coda* which brings the narration's point of time back to the present, and is not a part of the narrative chain.

Following this logic, we can isolate the narrative chain of the Laidlaw narrative as six events drawn from the 26 narrative clauses as shown in (6).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (6) | $r_0$ | x | He dropped off the settee [dead] in front of her |
| | $r_{-1}$ | w | because she shook him to ask him if he wanted coffee |
| | $r_{-2}$ | t | because she had made him coffee |
| | $r_{-3}$ | n | because when she saw him lying on the settee |
| | | l,m | she thought he was all right |
| | $r_{-4}$ | c,d | because she had gone in and returned in a hurry |
| | $r_{-5}$ | b | because she had left him in the basket chair |
| | $r_{-6}$ | a | because it was an exceptionally good afternoon. |

In the story as told, the event $r_{-3}$ is the crucial event that leads to the catastrophe $r_0$: that Laidlaw's mother thought her husband was alive and well. In the story as told, this conviction is first formed when she sees that the basket chair is empty (j,k) and persists when she sees him lying on the settee (n), and this is the motivation that leads to the causal chain $r_2$-$r_1$-r. In the narrative chain (6) the individual events of (l,m,n) are combined into a single event $r_{-3}$. In a similar way, the various events of the shopping trip (d-i) appear as the single event $r_{-4}$, that she went and returned in a hurry.

The construction of the narrative chain then permits the telling of the story as the *inverse narrative chain* (7)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (7) | $r_{-6}$ | a | Because it was an exceptionally good afternoon |
| | $r_{-5}$ | b | she left him in the basket chair |
| | $r_{-4}$ | c,d | and so she went and returned in a hurry |
| | $r_{-3}$ | l,m | so she thought he was all right |
| | | n | when she saw him lying on the settee |
| | $r_{-2}$ | t | so she made him coffee |
| | $r_{-1}$ | w | so she shook him to ask if he wanted coffee |
| | $r_0$ | x | and he dropped off the settee [dead] in front of her. |

The inverse chain (7) would be an acceptable and coherent narrative from the point of view of causal structure. It is intelligible and coherent. But it does not include any evaluation of the events, and it omits many of the overt actions of the participant action

chart (3). In order to understand narrative construction, we must consider how these various elements are incorporated into the causal chain, and what their contribution is to our understanding of the final catastrophe (x-y).

## Elaborating the narrative chain

The narrative chain (6) abbreviates the shopping trip to a single clause, omitting entirely the conversation with the conductress (d-h). The conversation embodies observations about her mother's actions after the fact: they do not motivate these actions or influence the actions that followed. We have already seen the motivation for their inclusion as evaluative material; they provide a third-person confirmation that her mother made the shopping trip as short as possible. Furthermore, the conversation allows her mother to state her own position, that she"didn't like the idea of leaving him too long." The first half of the narrative is therefore dominated by this addition to the narrative chain, which shows Laidlaw's mother as conforming to norms of appropriate behavior.

The second such elaboration is the expansion of r-3 into the step-by-step series of j,k,l,m. In the initial chart of temporal ranges, this section formed part of the narrative's evaluation section, and there is no doubt that this elaboration is evaluative. The negative

l She never thought anything aboot it

contrasts the real event (that she thought he was alive and well) with an alternative reality in which she would have thought something was wrong and behaved differently. One can easily reconstruct a situation where Laidlaw's mother told the story to her and blamed herself at this very point: she *should have* thought that something was wrong. This elaboration gives the justification for her thinking that all was well (that since it was warm, he must have gone inside), and seeing him on the settee (n) only confirms her earlier formed opinion and motivates what follows. While the first elaboration relieves her mother of guilt for having been away too long, the second shows her coming to a wrong conclusion for which she might have been blamed, and undoubtedly blamed herself.

The third elaboration returns us to the anomaly first noted in this narrative: that the evaluation section is widely separated from the most reportable event by a series of narrative clauses:

q She took off her coat,
r hung it up,
s put away her shopping bag,
t and she says, "It's rather early for wer tea—wer dinner,
so I'll go and ask him if he wants a coffee."
u And she made the coffee,
v and she went through

The events underlying these narrative clauses did not appear in the narrative chain, because they are not causally linked to what follows them. None of the causal connections in (8) hold:

(8) w she shook him to ask him if he wanted tea
v because she had gone through
u because she had made the coffee
t because she had said, " . . . . I'll go ask him"
s because she had put away her shopping bag
r because she had hung it up
q because she had taken off her coat

Rather, these events are *implementations* of what preceded them.

(9) p Everything had to go in its place
So
q she took off her coat
r and she hung it up

s and she put away her shopping bag

t and then she says, “I’ll go and ask him if he wants a coffee”

So

u She made the coffee

v and she went through

w and she shook him

The actions indicated by (q, r, s) are sequential, but are each connected in parallel as implementations of the general principle expressed in (p). The actions indicated by (u, v, w) form a second temporal sequence that are all implementations of the intention expressed as (t).

These implementations are *ordinary events*. None of them are reportable in themselves, nor are they required to explain why the event following them occurred. There are no limits to the number of such implementations that can be inserted between any two causally linked actions. For example, we might have had

(10) q She unbuttoned her coat

q’ And pulled her arm out of the right sleeve

q’’ and then the left sleeve

q’’’ Then she took it by the collar

r and hung it on the hook

The insertion of these ordinary events poses the same kinds of problems that were faced in the original analysis of the role of irrealis verbs (Labov and Waletzky 1967). If a narrative is an account of what actually happened, why do we find clauses dealing with what did not happen? The answer given was that these irrealis verbs evaluate the events that did occur by comparing them with an alternate reality in which other events take place. Here we are faced with events that are not reportable in themselves, and are not required to complete the chain of causation on which the narrative is built. Why are they there? or to put it more concretely, what is their effect?

The insertion of these intermediary, implementing actions has the effect of slowing down the forward movement of the narrative, just as if it were in slow motion. It has the same evaluative force as any other linguistic device that suspends the action: parallel progressive verbs, negatives, or free clauses. Altogether, they represent the slow accomplishment of a narrative event whose completion triggers the one that follows.

Attention to small and ordinary events is a common device used by the directors of films to heighten tension in anticipation of an attack or an imminent catastrophe. As the camera focuses on these ordinary events—unlocking a door, entering a room, preparing a meal—events which have no evident interest in themselves, the audience is alerted to the fact that something terrible is about to happen. In this respect, narratives of personal experience have more in common with film than with extended works of literature. In Laidlaw's narrative, the sense of oncoming harm has already been signaled by the exchange with the conductress. The insertion of the sequence of ordinary events (q-v) intensifies further the effect of the extraordinary denouement (x,y).

Thus the contrast of the ordinary and the extraordinary is a third evaluative device in this narrative construction. As in other effective narratives of personal experience, these are simple events and they revolve about basic objects. Laidlaw's mother did not hang up a "light spring coat with a belt in the back"; she hung up her coat. She did make a "steaming pot of good, strong java"; she made coffee. This is the warp and woof of experience, free of literary devices. Indeed, it is the very objectivity of these objects and events that adds to the credibility of the story and intensifies the emotional content.

In this story, the ordinary events play a dual role. In addition to the sense of delay and expectation, they underline the terrible effect of the catastrophe upon Laidlaw's mother. The critical unknown of the story is the time of her husband's death. It might have taken place during the abbreviated shopping trip. In that case, her mother's tidy, deliberate actions would have no effect upon anyone but herself. But it is also possible that her husband was alive when she came back to the house. In that case, if she had gone immediately to him she might have been able to help—giving him medicine, calling for an ambulance, or at the very least being on hand to comfort him in his last moments. One can imagine the heavy accusation that Laidlaw's mother must have laid against herself: "If I had only. . ." Though the first elaboration relieves her of any charge of careless

neglect, and the second protects her from being seen as a foolish or thoughtless woman, the third brings home with force the burden of guilt that this terrible event laid upon her. It is with the style of a loving daughter that Laidlaw says, “she's auld-fashioned, very tidy, very smart.” Her narrative gives us a deeper understanding of why “her mind just broke, and she's never known what it is since.”

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