

The Structure of Stories

Investigation of Labov's story structure

William Labov's structure of stories

Labov recorded volunteers narrating stories and proposed the following structure for telling stories verbally.

Element of narrative	Function
Abstract	Summarises or previews the story to follow
Orientation	Establishes the vital context for the story - who is involved and where events take place.
Complication	A problem causes the story to develop towards a crisis.
Resolution	The problem or crisis is removed, happily or otherwise.
Evaluation	The significance or importance of the events of the narrative.

Testing Labov's structure.

Task 1: find a well-known 'fairy tale' or 'folk story' online e.g. *Jack and Jill* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. These stories have a history of being told orally. See if it follows Labov's structure.

Task 2: Examine the recording of Mr. Brown's story (on the next slide), made by students in 1996. How accurately does Labov's model describe the structure of Mr. Brown's narrative?

Mr Brown's story 1/2

right Ok then I'm going to tell you a story about me when I was about um probably eight (.) my dad was a joiner then so he owned a van and he took me and my sister to Flanborough docks in the van (.) when I think about it now I don't know exactly what happened (.) but um anyway my theory is my younger sister pushed me off (.) so anyway I landed on my ankles no I mean I landed on my feet and straight away I heard my ankles snap and it bloody hurt (.) I mean it hurt a lot (.) so while I was kicking and screaming my dad and sister had to carry me to my dad's van (.) now I thought we should be going to hospital but my (.) dad knew best and took me home (.) a few days later I was in agony (.) my mum had had me (.) uh (.) she's had me walking round like there was nothing wrong (.) well eventually she took me to the doctors and he asked me to climb on the bed and jump off (.) so I did it then he said ha ha ha did it hurt ha ha ha (.)

Mr Brown's story 2/2

I sort of managed to get out a um (.) no (.) ahhh (.) so he said well there you go then there's nothing wrong with you (.) so I limped out close to tears while mum thanked the doctor for proving her right (.) well to cut a long story short five weeks later I was still in pain so we went to the hospital (.) it turned (.) it turned out I'd broken both my ankles and I had had to spend the next two weeks in plaster (.) I can't remember how long (.) it was (.) well (.) ha ha (.) an experience (.) I'll never forget cos my sister felt terrible and was (.) and she was really nice to me after that (.) it's good that I can laugh about it now though (laughter).

Testing Labov's structure.

Task 3: What function do the following phrases have in retaining the listener's interest and underlining the structure of the story: 'Right ok then', 'So anyway', 'Well eventually', 'Well, to cut a long story short'?

Task 4: carry out your own investigation. Record and transcribe a friend/family member telling a story of their own. Once transcribed, see how well their narrative fits Labov's structure. To ensure your data is as authentic as possible:

- Don't tell your subject you are researching story-telling techniques. Maybe say you are doing a project on childhood memories.
- Always ask permission to tape and transcribe their words. You can tell them the actual purpose afterwards.

Making conclusions

Task 5: write a short summary of what you have taken away from your experiment. Is Labov's structure of stories accurate? If not, what changes could be made to his structure?