

# The Sociolinguistic Analysis of People from Rasht who belong to different Social Classes by using Labov and Waletzky's Story Component

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### ABSTRACT

We all know that a certain story may be told differently by various people. It is interesting to know whether a person's social characteristics and career have any possible effect on the way they tell a story. Therefore, the main aim of the present research study is to investigate whether there is any correlation between the social class of different people and the way they tell a story. To this aim, 15 people with different social classes, 5 janitors, 5 teachers and 5 doctors of medicine, were selected randomly. They were all from Rasht and asked to describe one terrible story of their lives. Then by using Labov and Waletzky's story component, the gathered data were analyzed. The results indicated that there is no significant correlation between the social class of the participants and the way they tell a story. In other words, according to the gathered data, no fixed pattern was found for the way different people who belong to a specific social class tell a story.

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### Introduction

One important part of the human evolution is related to the ability of communication. Communication is a significant part of our life. As a kid, we all learn to communicate with the surrounding world. And, language is a noteworthy part of communication. Different countries use various languages. However, we can see that even one language can be conveyed in different ways. In other words, people from different backgrounds and social careers may speak the same language differently.

Language is usually used to perform many communicative functions. In the 'transactional view', the function of language is to communicate and transfer information and facts. In this sense, language is mainly 'message oriented'. In other words, the message that is transferred is important and necessary.

In the 'interactional view', the function of language is to start and keep the social relationships among people. In such a function, no important information is transferred. And a famous example of the interactional communication is talking about weather.

Sociolinguistics refers to the study of language which is related to society. In other words, sociolinguistics is the study of the impact of every side of society, such as cultural norms, expectations, context, the way language is used and the impacts of language use on society. According to Hudson (1996), "Like other subjects sociolinguistics is partly empirical and partly theoretical- partly a matter of going out and amassing bodies of fact and partly sitting back and thinking. (p. 1)"

Labov and Waletzky (1967) were the first researchers to investigate the examination of people in their analysis of oral narratives of personal experiences.

In other words, they gathered true stories from the narrators' lives by using sociolinguistic interviews (Ouyang & McKeown, 2014).

In the present research study, Labov and Waletzky's story component is described. A new corpus of narrative structures, which are gathered from different groups of people by using interview, is analyzed according to Labov and Waletzky's story component. The main aim of the present study is to discover whether people who belong to different social classes differ in telling a story.

### 2. Review of literature

By looking at the word 'sociolinguistics', we can realize that it is made of two words; sociology and linguistics. However, sociolinguistics and linguistics are different from each other. Linguistics considers the structure of language without paying attention to the social context in which the language is learned and used. Also, linguistics pays attention to the rules of language. While sociolinguistics studies the ways that these rules can make contact with society e.g. the ways that the same utterance can be said in different forms by different groups in society. The results of a sociolinguistic research study are related to the theory of language structure e.g. the meaning and the grammar of a language.

Sociolinguistics differs from sociology of language in that the focus of sociolinguistics is the effect of the society on the language, while the sociology focuses on the language's effect on the society. These two types of studies have overlapped as well. Researchers can choose one of them according to their interests in 'society' or 'language'. Or they can choose according to their skills in analyzing linguistics or social structures (Hudson, 1996).

It seems that sociolinguistics should be related to the people in society. However, each society consists of individual people. And each individual can play a part in the society.

Both the individual differences and the social cooperation can improve the society. Each of us has different abilities and ideas, so each individual is very important to the society. As societies are improving, we respect each other's freedom more and more. People can have their own opinions, and can live the way they like (Hudson, 1996).

According to William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1997), it is so challenging to analyze narratives since they belong to complicated products of oral traditions.

Myths, folk tales, legends, histories, epics, toasts, and sagas seem to be the results of the combination and evolution of simpler elements; they contain many cycles and recycles of basic narrative structures; in many cases, the evolution of a particular narrative has removed it so far from its originating function that it is difficult to say what its present function is. (p. 3)

"When we concentrate on the description of a particular language, we are normally concerned with the accurate representation of the forms and structures used in that language." (Yule, 1985, p. 124) As a speaker of a language, we can not only recognize the correct and incorrect forms and structures, but also recognize different styles of speaking which belong to various social groups.

"William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) took an entirely different approach by asking the question "How do people tell each other stories in everyday life?" (Renkema, 2014, p. 193) The main aim of their study was to discover whether there is any relationship between the social features of the storytellers and the structures of the stories. To this aim, Labov and Waletzky gathered stories from people from various social classes. They could not find any satisfactory way of dealing with the structural differences. However, the results of their study indicated information regarding the structure of stories.

Labov and Waletzky gathered stories from 600 participants who belonged to different social classes. Labov and Waletzky asked the participants whether they have ever been in a deadly danger. The following is two examples from the gathered data.

Labov and Waletzky: Have you ever been in a deadly danger.

Participant:

1. Yeh I was in the Boy Scouts at the time
2. and we was doing the 50-yard dash
3. racing
4. but we was at the pier, marked off
5. and so we was doing the 50-yard dash
6. there was about 8 or 9 of us, you know, going down, coming back
7. and going down the third time, I caught cramps
8. and I started yelling: "Help!"
9. but the fellows didn't believe me, you know,
10. they thought I was just trying to catch up, because I was going on or slowing down
11. so all of them kept going
12. they leave me
13. and I started going dow
14. scout master was up there
15. he was watching me
16. but he didn't pay me no attention either
17. and for no reason at all there was another guy, who had just walked up that minute
18. he just jumped over
19. and grabbed me

That was an example of a story in everyday life. Let's look at the second example.

Labov and Waletzky: Have you ever been in a deadly danger.

Participant: Yes

Labov and Waletzky: What happened?

Participant: I'd rather not talk about it

Labov and Waletzky: Could you tell me as much as possible?

Participant:

1. Well this guy had been drinking too much
2. and he attacked me
3. and my friend came in
4. and ended it

As can be seen, the second example is much briefer and contains less information. By comparing the stories of the narrators, Labov and Waletzky classified a five-component story structure. Their classification contains five main parts as follows:

1. Orientation
2. Complication
3. Evaluation
4. Solution
5. Coda

By looking at the above-mentioned examples and the classification, it can be realized that "Labov and Waletzky theory of oral narrative defines a story as a series of ACTION clauses (events), of which at least two must be temporally joined." (Swanson, Rahimtoroghi, Corcoran & Walker 2014, p. 172) To have a better understanding of this classification, it is better to briefly describe these five components. It is worth mentioning that all parts of the classification may not appear in a story or even the order may not be as it is expected.

### 1. Orientation

A narrative story usually begins with an Orientation. It introduces and identifies the people in the event, the time, the place, and the attitude. The orientation part can give answers to the probable questions, "who? when? where? what were they doing?"

By considering the first example, the sentences from 1 to 7 can be taken into account as the orientation section. This part is to some extent optional. "Labov and Waletzky point out that this component is often left out stories told by children and adults with limited verbal skills." (Renkema, 2014, p. 195)

### 2. Complication

The complication is the main part of the story. By considering the first example, the sentences from 8 to 13 can be taken into account as the complication section. This part usually contains a problem which ends in a crisis. The events which have started in the orientation somehow go wrong. There is a sudden change to the ordinary sequence of the events and the following happenings are to some extent unpredictable.

This section may finish with a result. Labov and Waletzky mentioned that it is usually hard to draw the result from the story; therefore, it is vital to consider the meaning of the story (Renkema, 2014).

### 3. Evaluation

The complication of the story contains an evaluation (Renkema, 2014). Labov and Waletzky (1967) mentioned that the evaluation is the part that makes the story important. This part happens between complication and solution; therefore, it makes the reader or listener wait for the next part while they do not know what will happen next. Labov believed that

evaluation is an obligatory part without which the story remains incomplete.

By considering the first example, the sentences from 14 to 16 can be taken into account as the evaluation section.

“Evaluation devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy: or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual – that is, worth reporting.” (Labov 1972, p. 371)

Rothery (1990) provided a list of the semantic features of the evaluation part:

1. The expression of attitudes or opinion denoting the events as remarkable or unusual;
2. The expression of incredulity, disbelief, apprehension about the events on the part of the narrator or a character of the narrative, including highlighting the predicament of a character;
3. Comparison between usual and unusual sequences of events in which participants in the narrative are involved;
4. Predictions about a possible course of action to handle a crisis or about the outcome of events (Rothery 1990, p. 203)

#### 4. Solution

Solution comes after the evaluation. By considering the first example, the sentences from 17 to 19 can be taken into account as the solution section. In this part, the listener or the reader are told how the problem is solved.

#### 5. Coda

Coda can be considered as the closing sentences. The story teller usually produces the coda to go back to the beginning of the story; for example, ‘That’s what happened to me’. By reading or hearing the coda, the reader or the listener realizes that the story is told. In other words, the coda indicates the finality of the story. It can be realized that this part is not necessary, and it may not be mentioned by some speakers or writers.

There are surely differences between the social characteristics and the way of talking while different people tell stories; however, Labov and Waletzky were not able to indicate it. But, it is still worth trying to discover the probable pattern in the stories told by different people.

#### 3. The study

The present study aims to investigate whether there are any significant differences between the people who belong to various social classes and the way they tell a story.

It may be a difficult task to accurately classify the people’s social classes. In other words, there may be some people that are hard to decide which class they belong to. Moreover, there is no fixed classification for people’s social classes. We can consider a social hierarchy. In this hierarchy, the highest part belongs to those people with the highest income, the best education and the admired profession. The lowest part belongs to those people with the least income, the least education and the lowest admired job or even no job.

Another classification of social classes can be classified into three general parts; upper class, middle class and lower class (Bernstein, 1971; Mahalingam, 1998). As mentioned before, there are no fixed criteria, and these terms are general, and sometimes it may get hard to decide which class a person belongs to.

#### Participants

The participants of this study were intentionally selected from three occupations including janitors, teachers and doctors of medicine. Fifteen participants were participated in this study willingly. The following table gives adequate information about the participants.

Janitors	Teachers	Doctors of medicine
5	5	5

#### Instrument

In this study, a fixed question (i.e. What is the most terrible event of your life?) was asked orally by the researcher. The participants’ answers to this question were the data of this study. The gathered data was analyzed by using Labov and Waletzky five-component story structure.

#### Procedure

First, fifteen participants with different careers were selected randomly. Each of these participants was considered to be a representative of a specific social class. In other words, janitors, teachers and doctors of medicine are representative of low, middle and high social classes. Then each of them was asked to describe the most terrible event of their lives. Their stories were recorded and later analyzed by using Labov and Waletzky five-component story structure.

#### 4. Results

In this part of the study, all of the gathered data are analyzed by using Labov and Waletzky five-component story structure. Moreover, for better understanding of the results some tables are also provided.

Three groups of various people were participated in this study. From each group, one example of the story is provided. Here are three examples taken from the collected materials.

##### Example 1

The researcher: What is the most terrible event of your life?

A janitor: Well, I had a friend; and I knew him for almost 20 years. He was more like a brother to me. He worked a lot, and he was mostly tired. One night, he wanted to cross the street; but he was not careful. And a car hit him. The driver was a decent man. He took him to the hospital. But it was too late. I lost my best friend. That’s the most terrible story of my life.

##### Example 2

The researcher: What is the most terrible event of your life?

A teacher: I’m a patient man and a good driver. One day, I was driving in a crowded street. And my friend was sitting next to me. We were stuck in a traffic jam. However, a rude driver behind me put the blame on my driving skill. He went out of his car to beat me, and I was about to do the same. However, my friend made me calm down, and asked me to stay in the car. That rude driver said some bad words to me, and I did not react. By looking at the mirror, I noticed that he had a knife, and I realized that my wise friend saved me from being hurt by a stupid driver.

##### Example 3

The researcher: What is the most terrible event of your life?

A doctor of medicine: Last year, I attended a conference in Malaysia. I was waiting so long to share my article in this conference. As soon as I got there, my wife called me and told me our son was in a mortal danger. I panicked, and I wanted to go back as soon as possible. However, the next flight was in three days. I blamed myself for leaving the country. I could do nothing but pray. I called my colleagues and asked them to help my son. One of my colleagues who is also my best friend helped my son. My son underwent surgery on his brain, and I arrived to Iran after the surgery. Luckily, everything went well, and my son is OK now.

The following table shows different components of the above-mentioned examples.

**Table 4.1. The analysis of the example 1.**

Orientation: Well, I had a friend; and I knew him for almost 20 years
Complication: He was more like a brother to me. He worked a lot, and he was mostly tired. One night, he wanted to cross the street; but he was not careful. And a car hit him.
Evaluation: The driver was a decent man.
Solution: He took him to the hospital. But it was too late. I lost my best friend
Coda: That's the most terrible story of my life.

**Table 4.2. The analysis of the example 2.**

Orientation: I'm a patient man and a good driver.
Complication: One day, I was driving in a crowded street. And my friend was sitting next to me. We were stuck in a traffic jam. However, a rude driver behind me put the blame on my driving skill.
Evaluation: He went out of his car to beat me, and I was about to do the same.
Solution: However, my friend made me calm down, and asked me to stay in the car. That rude driver said some bad words to me, and I did not react. By looking at the mirror, I noticed that he had a knife, and I realized that my wise friend saved me from being hurt by a stupid driver.
Coda: ----

**Table 4.3. The analysis of the example 3.**

Orientation: Last year, I attended a conference in Malaysia.
Complication: I was waiting so long to share my article in this conference. As soon as I got there, my wife called me and told me our son was in a mortal danger. I panicked, and I wanted to go back as soon as possible.
Evaluation: However, the next flight was in three days. I blamed myself for leaving the country. I could do nothing but pray.
Solution: I called my colleagues and asked them to help my son. One of my colleagues who is also my best friend helped my son. My son underwent surgery on his brain, and I arrived to Iran after the
Coda: ----

Now, to have a better understanding of the gathered data, the following table is provided. Each component of the Labov and Waletzky's story structure is separated.

**Table 4.4. The participants' report of the components of the story structure.**

Participants	Orientation	Complication	Evaluation	Solution	Coda
Janitor 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
Janitor 2	×	✓	✓	✓	×
Janitor 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Janitor 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
Janitor 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
Teacher 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 3	×	✓	✓	✓	×
Teacher 4	×	✓	✓	✓	×
Teacher 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Doctor 1	×	✓	✓	✓	×
Doctor 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
Doctor 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Doctor 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Doctor 5	×	✓	✓	✓	✓

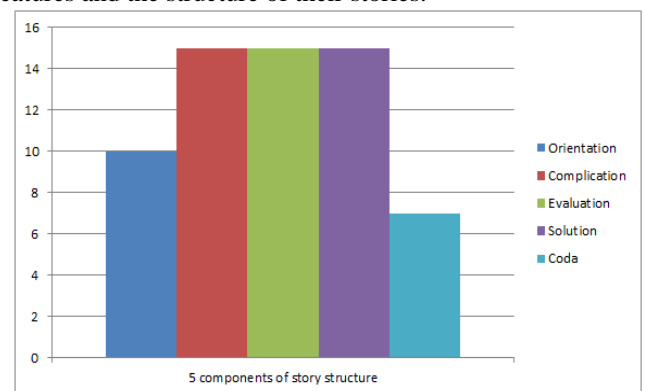
The above-mentioned table indicates the participants' report of the components of the story structure. There is a similarity among all of the participants. Three sections, which are complications, evaluation and solutions, existed in all of the stories of the participants. It can be concluded that no matter what the career and the social class are, everyone is likely to use these sections. And, these sections can be considered to be the most important parts which cannot be omitted. However, the other two sections, which are orientation and coda, seemed to be used without any fixed pattern. In other words, the careers and social classes are not likely to influence the use of these sections. Moreover, it can be suggested that these two sections are not believed to be significant in telling a story.

The following graph is a visual representation of the results of the present study.

As can be seen, the three sections, which are complications, evaluation and solutions, were used more than orientation and coda. Moreover, orientation was used more than coda. It can be concluded that orientation and coda are the least significant sections in the story structure. And, coda is considered to be less important than orientation.

To sum up, the final result is rather similar to what Labov and Waletzky have achieved. In other words, neither the Labov and Waletzky's study nor the present study was able to

find any apparent correlation between the narrator's social features and the structure of their stories.

**Figure 4.1. The gathered data regarding the story components.**

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In other words, neither the Labov and Waletzky's study nor the present study was able to find any apparent correlation between the narrator's social features and the structure of their stories.

### 5. Conclusion

As mentioned before, Labov and Waletzky pointed out five components of telling a story. These five parts include 'orientation' (i.e. what the story is about, who, when and where), 'complication' (i.e. then what happened?), 'evaluation' (i.e. how or why is this interesting?), 'solution' (i.e. what finally happened?) and 'coda' (i.e. story closing). The present study aimed to discover whether there is any correlation between the social class of people and the way they tell a story. The results showed that there is no correlation between the social characteristics and the way different people tell a story. However, the results may be due to the possibility that Labov and Waletzky's story structure is not complete enough to be used to distinguish different people. It is believed that psycholinguistic perspective is also needed for conducting such a research study.

The absence of any particular difference between social classes in this study may be due to the fact that some other elements should be taken into consideration in order to distinguish the difference, such as body language, intonation, etc, which are all paralinguistic elements. Also the result could be different if some factors such as gender or age could be taken into consideration. There could be a difference if there was a limitation in age or gender.

There are some recommended areas and possibilities for further research and future work that are indicated by the present study. It is suggested that researchers conduct an experimental study in order to investigate a similar study and use more number of participants from different social classes.

Moreover, there are other frameworks for analyzing stories such as using psycholinguistic approaches or organizational approaches. It is also suggested to analyze story telling with other approaches and frameworks.

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