

A functional approach to Narrative Analysis

5 big questions

1. NOISY NOTS: Who are we NOT?

One of my favorite ways to approach any text is simply to scan through a text paying attention to negation. People say almost as much about who they AREN'T as who they are, what they DON'T say/believe/do as what they do, or what DIDN'T happen as what did.

- Who is "othered" (explicitly / implicitly)? Why?

Take a step back:

- Ask yourself what is NOT being said here?
- What stories are not told? Why? What meaning does this send?

2. Positioning: How is the audience positioned?

Positioning is a dialogic process, but even in monologic texts, positioning moves are present. What linguistic choices can you observe that contribute to positionings which construct & convey institutional values, personal relationships, individual & group identities?

- How are you positioned as reader? Are you assumed to be an expert? If so, how, about what? Why?

Within the world of the story, what dialogic positioning observable?

- How are characters in the storyworld positioned relative to main character / relative to each other? What does this accomplish?
- What referring expressions are used to reinforce? Inclusive / exclusive pronouns?

3. What is the frame?

Language always comes with a "frame" a sense for "what is going on here?" For George Lakoff (who studies messaging in the political sphere) every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework, (classic cognitive linguistic example: *Don't Think of an Elephant* - makes everyone think of an elephant.) Begin by looking for messages contained in referring terms and labels used. Think of "illegal immigration," which he very aptly points out is a label that is "anything but neutral." The word "illegal" invokes a legal frame, when indeed immigration could just as easily be defined as an employment problem, a civil rights issue, and a humanitarian concern. Framing the issue as a legal one defines immigration in a very particular way, constrains the discussion around the issue, and ultimately limits the solutions that may then be found to address it.

So, one way to begin is simply to go through the text paying attention to referring expressions and labels, asking yourself how these frame. Some more framing cues:

- What metaphors evoked?
- Where is the deictic center? Whose POV is adopted? What pronouns serve to reinforce this?
- What Jargon? Acronyms? What knowledge presupposed?

4. What is this text's relationship to time?

A narrator can give off subtle cues about perspective including being connected to history, living in the present moment, or being forward-thinking, and there are many ways that language can be implicated in this. First, look for references / imagery involving the past, the present, or the future. Next dig deeper for more subtle ways that relationships to time may be cued:

- What verb tenses used (alternation of verb tenses)?
- Adverbs? Deictics: "now / then"
- Discourse markers that suggest temporal / causal relationships among ideas/ events.
- Evaluation – is it internal or external (is the narrator evaluating from within the world of the story or from the interactional encounter?)
- Repetition – can give a reading of timelessness, universality

5. Whose voice(s) are represented? How? Why?

Here is where your training as a sociolinguist comes to bear most straightforwardly. As we well know, you cannot speak (or write) without adopting a style, so what aspects of style might we observe here?

- Style alternation?
- Uses of constructed dialogue (voices of self /others)

Some key resources:

- Gumperz, John J. 1999. On interactional sociolinguistic method. In S. Sarangi & C. Roberts (eds.) *Talk, Work and Institutional Order*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. pp. 453-471.
- Holmes, Janet. 2005. Why Tell Stories? Contrasting Themes and Identities in the Narratives of Maori and Pakeha Women and Men. In Scott Fabius Kiesling and Christina Bratt Paulson Eds. *Intercultural Discourse and Communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Jefferson Gail. 1978. Sequential aspects of storytelling in conversation. In: Schenkein J (ed.) *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*. New York: Academic Press pp. 219-248.
- Labov W (1972) The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. In: *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 354-396.
- Labov W and Walletsky J (1997/1967) Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In: Bamberg M (ed.) *Special Issue on Oral Versions of Personal Experience: Three Decades of Narrative Analysis*. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7: 3-38.
- Schiffrin D (1996) Narrative as self-portrait: Sociolinguistic constructions of identity. *Language in Society* 25: 167-203.
- Schiffrin D (2006) *In Other Words: Variation in Reference and Narrative*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vasquez C (2007) Moral stance in the workplace narratives of novices. *Discourse Studies* 9: 653-675.