Earthquake Narratives
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Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on The Place of Morphology in a Grammar (1992), pp. 157-165

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Introduction

In linguistics, the study of narrative theory has been greatly influenced by Labov; the discourse genre he called "narratives of personal experience" (Labov 1972) is well-accepted in the linguistic community. In Labov's fieldwork, narratives of this type were elicited as a way to obtain samples of casual speech, but were ultimately used as the basis for Labov's theory of narrative structure.

I would like to suggest that within this discourse genre (narratives of personal experience) there may be identifiable subgenres, whose linguistic differences are related to their narratives' content. In this paper I will posit the subgenre "earthquake narratives," and explore the evidence for such a distinction, keeping in mind the implications this has for Labov's theory. My work is based on interviews done with 14 people who experienced the 1989 earthquake in northern California.

Background

On October 17, 1989, the San Francisco Bay Area experienced its second largest earthquake of the century. The quake, which measured approximately 7 on the Richter scale, caused some 65 deaths and $7 billion in property damage. Although its epicenter was in Santa Cruz County, it was felt over a vast stretch of land, causing very serious damage 50 miles north in San Francisco and Oakland.

At the time of the quake I was living in Michigan, but was in close touch with family and friends back in the Bay Area, in particular because the World Series was being played there. The evening of October 17th I turned on the TV a few minutes late, about 8:15 pm, and discovered, instead of baseball, a rerun of a sitcom and the words "Game 3 of World Series Postponed Due to Major Earthquake in San Francisco Bay Area" running along the bottom of the screen. I stared at the words in shock.

That's my earthquake narrative.

Two months later, home for Christmas, I began to collect some of the more typical narratives I was hearing about the quake. I taped interviews with 14 people, all either friends or members of my family, none of whom had experienced anything more serious than broken glass and collapsed bookcases. All my subjects were middle-class, all but 2 were white, and all were native speakers of English. The chart below shows the distribution of age, sex, residency (California native, longtime resident, newcomer) and the county in which the subject experienced the earthquake (Sonoma, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, or Santa Clara).

Age	Sex	Cal nat	lng res	new	Sonoma	Marin	SF	San Mat	NSClara	SSClara
77	F		X		X					
69	F		X						X	
43	M		X							X
40	F	X								X
39	F	X							X	
33	M		X				X			
29	F	X				X				
29	F	X								X
28	M		X					X		
27	F	X					X			
25	M			X				X		
14	F			X					X	
6	M	X								X
3	F	X								X

Narrative Structure

As an aid to discussion , a sample earthquake narrative is presented in (1) below.

(1) *December 1989, subject's living room, 4 people present in all.*
Katherine, 77 yrs, Sonoma County

Oh.. all right..
we were sitting here like this
getting ready to watch the.. baseball game
and things started to.. shake
and I said "Oh!
Santa Rosa's having a little earthquake."
[all laugh]
Nothing moved.. except as the house moved
[Interviewer: "uh huh"]
M- nothing fell..
nothing rolled over..
nothing like that.
then there was a pause
then there was a jolt
I was sitting here
and when the jolt came I got up
and said "I'm going to get out of here"
and I went out on the deck
and John was over there in his chair
and he followed me out
and we got out there
and that hummingbird feeder was going like this
(makes swinging gesture with hand)
swinging hard.
so I went down the steps
but I wasn't in any great hurry
by the time I got to the bottom of the steps it was quiet
nothing was going except the hummingbird feeder.
so I came up back upstairs..
and.. there was no power for about two minutes.
so then I knew.. when the TV screen was black..
that it wasn't a little Sa- Santa Rosa earthquake

According to Labov, a narrative consists of six possible parts: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result/resolution, and coda. The narrative in (1) lacks an abstract, as do all my quake narratives, probably because I gave my subjects their topic. Labov's cue to his subjects was to say, in the middle of a conversation, "were you ever in a situation where you were in danger of being killed?" Because this was a more general cue, it often led to the subjects beginning with a brief summary, such as "yes, one time my brother tried to shoot me" and then proceeding to tell the whole story from the beginning. My observation is that when earthquake stories come up naturally in conversation they often still lack an abstract, but the narrator may say something like "I was in San Francisco" or "I was in the shower" before really beginning to tell the narrative. Such a comment, which can be difficult to distinguish from what Labov terms 'orientation', may function like an abstract for an earthquake narrative. When Labov's subjects prepared to tell their stories, they knew that their audience did not know time, place,

cause, or anything else about the situation. When people share quake stories they are all talking about the same twenty seconds of the same day in the same general area -- but one key piece of missing information is exactly *where* each person was.

In the narrative in (1), we can say the orientation is lines 12 and 13. Result/resolution is a bit harder to pinpoint -- maybe lines 36-41? To decide this, we must first decide what the 'resolution' of an earthquake narrative is -- the end of the quake? the discovery of collapsed bookcases? Everything else in the narrative is complicating action and evaluation, which can be very hard to pull apart, as even Labov admits. 'Complicating action' is what happens in a narrative, and 'evaluation' is the narrator's attempt to show his/her audience why this narative is important and why they should listen to it -- what its point is, in other words. This narrative as I have given it to you lacks a coda (a way of showing that the narrative is over), probably because it *isn't* over. In (1) I only present a part of the speaker's narrative -- she actually went on talking for quite awhile after this about how she felt afterwards, what happened to various members of her family, and what she thought about some of the really disastrous things that had happened, until the tape finally ran out. For some speakers, the 'coda' consisted of a sigh or a shrug of the shoulders. An example of a full-fledged Labovian-style coda from another one of my speakers is given in (2).

(2) *Rick, 28 yrs, San Mateo County*
415 so and that's my earthquake story
416 [Interviewer: "OK"]
417 probably longer than most [laugh]

A recent revision of Labov's theory is presented in Johnstone (1990). The main improvements in Johnstone's structure are the elimination of result/resolution and evaluation -- the first because not all personal experience narratives have resolutions, and the second because evaluation, although an important part of personal narratives, is not really a part of their structure. Evaluation is mixed in with everything else, and can involve things like word choice and intonation. Johnstone also shows that orientation and complicating action (which she calls 'narration') can be intermingled, although it is normal to begin a narrative with orientation. She also makes it clear that the 'abstract' is the narrator's route from conversation into narrative, and the 'coda' is the way back out again.

Johnstone's structure, like Labov's, is intended to be very general, applicable to a wide variety of narratives. However, since my aim in this paper is to discuss one specific type of narrative, earthquake narratives, I can afford to be more specific about their structure. Earthquake narratives follow a very neat pattern: below I present an outline of an earthquake narrative, based on 12 of the 14 examples in my data (the 3-year-old did not tell a typical earthquake narrative and one of the adult speakers did not tell a complete narrative). I omit discussion of 'abstract' and 'coda' from this outline because I feel my interview style affected my collection of these (if you aren't having a typical conversation, you probably won't get typical conversation markers), although my comments above on typical earthquake narrative abstracts should be kept in mind. The line numbers given refer to the narrative text in (1).

(i) I was X place, doing X (lines 12-13)
(ii) the quake began (line 14)
(iii) I responded in x way, as did objects and people around me (lines 15-35)
(iv) the quake ended (line 36)
(v) I felt X/realized X/saw or found out X had occurred (lines 37-41)

I will discuss each of the parts of this outline in detail, referring to the 12 typical narratives on which this outline is based.

Part (i), a kind of orientation (or perhaps abstract, see above) is a crucial part of an earthquake narrative. Katherine's narrative, in (1), is somewhat atypical, being only 2 lines long (12-13). However, she was interviewed in exactly the spot where she experienced the quake, so she could say "We were sitting here like this" and convey quite a lot of information. In several of the narratives I collected, the orientation continues throughout the story, as needed, to explain various events, but no one skips it at the beginning. It seems to be required. You can't just begin with "Well, the room started shaking." In the 12 narratives, orientation ranges from 2-22 lines (average 8.5 lines). Longer orientations were given by the two speakers who were at Candlestick Park during the quake, and another speaker who talked a lot about how strangely her dog acted before the quake. The other speakers generally said where they were, possibly including something about the construction material of the building they were in, whether other people were around, and what they and others were doing just before the quake. Two other examples of part (i) are presented below. (3) is a brief version and (4) is somewhat longer. In both cases I have included the first line of part (ii) in italic to show the transition from (i) to (ii).

(3) *Harry, 43 yrs, Santa Clara County*
19 well..
20 I was sitting at work.. in Sunnyvale.. inside of a building.. two-story building..
21 and..the walls started to shake..

(4)*Teresa, 29 yrs, Marin County*
9 OK.. we were all having a meeting..
10 it was in the afternoon after we had let the kids off..
11 and they were all playing.. in whatever place they were playing..
12 and we were all sitting inside in the.. small conference room..
13 in one of those old buildings (laugh) made of cement..
14 you don't know how well they're reinforced..
15 we were sitting in there in our meeting
16 and all of a sudden we felt this shaking..

Part (ii) is the beginning of the earthquake, the transition from normal life to earthquake. All 12 speakers make reference to this, although only 9 introduce it specifically. Katherine (line 14) is an example of a specific introduction, while Nora in (5) refers to it without introduction.

(5) *Nora, 14 yrs, Santa Clara County*
8 And.. um.. we had just.. we had just turned the TV on..
9 and we were moving the furniture around..
10 when.. when it started..

Part (iv), the transition from earthquake back to normal life, seems to be optional; not all speakers specifically mention the quake's end. Four don't mention it at all, four mention it without introducing it, and four specifically introduce it. Examples of these three types are given below. In (6) Teresa moves from a discussion with the interviewer about whether or not she saw the ground moving, right into what she did after the quake, with no mention of it having ended. Joanne, in (7), refers to the end but does not actually say "it ended"; Nora, in (8), does.

(6) *Teresa, 29 yrs, Marin County*

74 so we all came back inside to finish our meeting up

(7) *Joanne, 29 yrs, Santa Clara County*
31 So then.. once the earthquake had ended,
32 I had to.. had to have the courage to go into the room where we'd had a lot of damage

(8) *Nora, 14 yrs, Santa Clara County*
30 And then it stopped..

Parts (ii) and (iv) are boundaries around the action of the narrative. The content of a quake narrative can be roughly divided into two parts -- what happened while the quake was going on, and what happened after it stopped, although the edges of these can merge. An important goal of quake narratives seems to be to describe all changes that occurred in things important to the speaker, and the relevant details are inserted throughout the narrative as they occur to the speaker.

Part (iii) -- what happened during the quake -- averages 23 lines with my 12 speakers (the range is 3 to 64). There seem to be six basic subjects touched upon in this section, as follows:
1. what the speaker thought;
2. what the speaker felt;
3. what the speaker did;
4. what other people/animals did;
5. what things moved, etc.;
6. what things didn't move.

The last subject (6) is only discussed by half the speakers, while 1-5 are mentioned by all but one or two of the speakers (except 3 -- "what the speaker did" -- which everyone discusses).

Part (v) can vary the most, depending perhaps on how much damage the speaker's surroundings suffered and how long it took him/her to get home, but also possibly just on how much the individual speaker felt like talking. Many different things are discussed in part (v) -- what the speaker thought and did right after the quake, what other people did, what things were broken or out of place, what he/she did the rest of the day, how he/she felt later on (even several weeks later). This part often includes miniature earthquake narratives the speaker heard from other people, or comments on the major tragedies of the earthquake and the media reports.

Getting home, if the speaker had been away from home during the earthquake, was always a part of the narrative, perhaps because the damage suffered by one's home feels like part of the damage suffered by oneself -- or perhaps just because it was so hard to get home because of all the traffic. Omitting the little kids, who had very short parts here, and one speaker who talked for a long long time, the average length of part (v) is 70 lines -- 50 for speakers who were at home, and 90 for speakers who were away from home at the time of the quake.

Other similarities

Earthquake narratives have many other things in common. In quake narratives, people's attention is focussed in different ways and on different things than usual. Now, in normal conversation, we usually talk mainly about people. We talk about ourselves and others, and the things that people are involved in, like politics or religion. If we aren't talking about people we might talk about something that we interact with intensely -- our car, for example, or our computer -- usually something with moving parts, incidentally. However, most of us rarely talk about the walls of our home, for instance, or the linoleum -- unless something is wrong, something needs fixing. In an earthquake, this all changes. Inanimate objects become very

interesting to us, because they begin to move. Thus, earthquake narratives are full of talk about normally inanimate objects.

In the narrative in (1) there are some examples of this -- line 14 "and things started to shake", lines 32-33, 37 describe the hummingbird feeder, and line 40 mentions the TV screen. Some other examples are given below.

(9) *Stephen, 25 yrs, San Mateo County*
76 and um I remember books were falling out of the bookshelves
77 and there was a big bookshelf right in front of me
78 and I was just holding onto it cause I didn't want it to fall on me.

(10) *Nora, 14 yrs, Santa Clara County*
49 and lots of pots and stuff went flying around the room..

(11) *Harry, 43 yrs, Santa Clara County*
21 and.. the walls started to shake..
22 the ceiling started to move..
23 the floor started to move..

Another thing worth noting, on this point, is that during a quake people feel that the earthquake is in control and they are to some extent helpless. This may be another reason why things seem almost as important as people in earthquake narratives. People's actions are not as interesting as they may be in other situations, because people are not in control.

This discussion can be illuminated by bringing in the concept of frame, which emerged in the 70's from research in artificial intelligence and was developed by Minsky (1975). A frame is a sort of blueprint for normality that we hold in our mind for every object or situation we are familiar with. So, a typical American's frame for a kitchen, for example, includes a stove, refrigerator, sink, cupboards -- but probably not a piano. Frames are very culture-specific, in fact sometimes person-specific. When we observe something that violates our frame for a given situation (such as a piano in a kitchen) we are very interested in it, look at it a lot, and talk about it. Any unusual occurrence will violate frames, but an earthquake is special in that it violates many very basic frames -- such as how furniture ought to behave.

A sign, in my earthquake narratives, that speakers had experienced frame violation, is the large number of negative and/or contrastive statements that appear -- things like "I thought it was X -- but instead it was an earthquake". Some examples of these are given below. Paul, in (12), talks about how surprised he was when the ground began to move, and the contrast between his feeling that he must be dizzy and his subsequent realization that he was experiencing an earthquake. Andrew, in (13), seems to be saying that he thought it was a tornado, but it turned out to be an earthquake. Joanne, in (14), contrasts the expected behavior of falling pictures with hers, which orbited, while Teresa, in (15), describes the conflict between a teacher who doesn't realize there has been an earthquake and students who are behaving in a manner which is appropriate in an earthquake but inappropriate otherwise.

(12) *Paul, 33 yrs, Candlestick Park*
35 um.. so anyway.. uh while I was walking back with the hot dogs
36 the whole.. you know ground began to move.. a *lot* ..
37 and uh.. it was very surprising
38 because you know.. you don't kind of expect that sort of thing to happen
39 uh.. the first feeling was that.. that I was going to pass out

40 but then I realized that it wasn't me..
41 it was really the stadium

(13) *Andrew, 6 yrs, Santa Clara County*
16 And so... this is what happened... z z z z
18 It shook!
19 but.. like.. a tornado was coming..
20 but it was an EARTHQUAKE..

(14) *Joanne, 29 yrs, Santa Clara County*
61 and all the pictures that are on the mantle
62 not.. didn't just fall on the floor
63 they actually made a a orbit
64 and ended up in the back of the fireplace.

(15) *Teresa, 29 yrs, Marin County*
49 But the *kids*.. they were in the dorm..
50 that *were* in the dormitories..
51 went rrrrunning outside to the parking lots..
52 and this teacher started screaming at 'em
53 cause I don't know what the teacher had been doing but didn't..
54 she didn't *realize* that there had been an earthquake
55 and so she was like "what are you doing.. running out of the dorms
56 you're supposed to be in there at quiet time"..
57 and they're all like "no it's an earthquake (laugh)
58 we're doing what we're supposed to"..

This last example (15) points up another interesting aspect of earthquake narratives. Earthquakes, though unexpected at any given moment, do occur periodically in California, and so residents have frames for earthquakes as well. Several subjects made remarks that showed what an unusual earthquake they thought this one was. Katherine's narrative, in (1), is full of these. Lines 15-16 introduce a contrastive statement that outlines her whole narrative, ending with lines 40-41. She at first thought she was feeling a small earthquake probably centered in nearby Santa Rosa, but then realized that it was more serious than that. Some other examples are given below. Paul, in (16), mentions having had an opinion about the earthquake's size, probably based on previous experience. Gail, in (17), says that she decided it was "just a normal earthquake". Note that Stephen, in (18), although a newcomer to the state, had a frame for earthquakes based on what he had heard about them, but then realized his frame didn't fit this quake.

(16) *Paul, 33 yrs, Candlestick Park*
53 uh and I just.. I wasn't really frightened
54 I didn't realize it was a big earthquake..
55 I honestly thought it was just.. you know..
56 the it was a pretty small earthquake..

(17) *Gail, 39 yrs, Santa Clara County*
257 so I thought: well.. I guess it was just an earthquake..
258 I guess I'm I'm just making a big deal out of it.. you know..
259 just a normal earthquake.
260 So I went back to work..
261 and I was working away..
262 and then Harry came in with this -- *look* on his face (laugh)

263 and I was: uh-oh (laugh)
264 and he says: we better get out of here (laugh) *now*.

(18) *Stephen, 25 yrs, San Mateo County*
39 so it's gonna be fun
40 my first real earthquake
41 well I suddenly realized it wasn't fun
42 because all these people were *so scared*

I believe that one reason the narratives I collected are so full of this type of remark is that all the speakers knew they were speaking to another Californian, myself, who perhaps still held in her mind the old frame for earthquakes. They may have been trying to convince *me* that this earthquake was special.

Discussion

When I began the analysis of these narratives, it was with a specific question in mind: are these narratives a type? -- that is, do I have the right to call them earthquake narratives, hypothesize a "typical earthquake narrative", etc.?

Well, as I have pointed out, earthquake narratives have many things in common, in terms of structure, focus, etc. Another thing that may give me the right is the immediacy of people's responses when I asked them to tell me about the quake. I gave a variety of cues -- "tell me about the earthquake"/ "tell me what it was like for you" / "tell me your earthquake narrative" -- but got extremely similar results. People knew what I was asking for and were ready to give it. This is not always the case when one tries to collect a specific type of narrative.

Why should it be true for earthquake narratives? Well, after an earthquake, people like to tell each other about their experiences of it. "Where were you? What was it like for you?" Earthquakes are experienced by a large number of people, but each person's experience will have been different depending on exactly where he/she was at the time. For some reason part of the bonding together that occurs after a serious earthquake takes the form of sharing descriptions of experiences. Thus, when I did my taping, two months after the quake, all my subjects had probably told their stories many times to many different people and were able to rattle off a version with ease.

So maybe earthquake narratives deserve to be called a genre. Maybe. Or perhaps, as has been suggested to me, they should be considered part of a genre called "disaster stories". However, in my searches through the vast muddled literature on narrative I have found descriptions of two other types of narrative that remind me of earthquake narratives, one reported on by a sociologist and the other by two psychologists. The first is "accounts of paranormal experiences" (Wooffitt 1991). These narratives remind me of earthquake narratives because of their explicit description of what was happening before something odd happened. Wooffitt refers to this as the phenomenon of "I was just doing X... when Y". Also, the 'something odd' seems to control the narrative in the same way an earthquake controls an earthquake narrative. I quote a brief example in (19) below:

(19) (Wooffitt 1991, pp 271-272)
6 X an' I was standing right there
7 on the platform (.7) waiting
8 for this damned train to come (.)
9 Y all of a sudden (2.3)
11 I (.) began to feel as total
12 totally (.) absolutely (.)
13 insubstantial that is

14 I had no bodily feeling whatsoever

The other type of narrative that reminds me of quake narratives is called flashbulb memories (Brown & Kulik 1977). This is the -- where I was when I heard JFK was shot -- where I was when I heard about Pearl Harbor -- type of narrative. The experience was so affecting that the experiencer retained an apparently photographic memory of the time, including what he/she was doing, where he/she was, what he/she was wearing, etc. A brief example from the article is given in (20) below:

(20) "I was seated in a sixth-grade music class, and over the intercom I was told that the president had been shot. At first, everyone just looked at each other. Then the class started yelling, and the music teacher tried to calm everyone down. About ten minutes later I heard over the intercom that Kennedy had died and that everyone should return to their homeroom. I remember that when I got to my homeroom my teacher was crying and everyone was standing in a state of shock. They told us to go home." (Brown & Kulik 1977, pp 74)

Neither of these articles gives enough data for me to compare my earthquake narratives with them carefully -- and in any case, Brown & Kulik collected written narratives, not oral ones -- but they suggest that earthquake narratives may be part of a network of types of narratives -- narratives about unexpected disturbing experiences, perhaps -- that share something in common in the way of content, and, as a result, structure.

You will remember that Labov based his theory of narrative structure mainly on one type of narrative -- Danger of Death. It seems possible that he would have gotten somewhat different results if he had used another type of narrative. In the search for truth about narrative, it would be worth trying to figure out what types of personal experience narratives exist in our culture, and how they differ.

I should mention here something that I haven't brought up before: I think my conclusions about earthquake narratives are very culture-specific. Remember that I had an extremely homogeneous group of subjects. I think you would get rather different narratives from people in another culture -- or even another part of our culture -- and it would be very interesting to compare earthquake narratives across cultures to see what stays the same and what is different.

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