CHAPTER 8

Beginning the Study of Narrative

8.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, we have seen how narrative can play a role in the discourse produced by candidates in the exam context. We have seen that while narrative is not called for in the exam, both L2 and L1 English speakers taking the exam chose to produce narratives frequently. Those narratives seem to vary in their nature – we saw in Chapter 7 that a wide variety of narrative types are apparent in the short-text MDAs undertaken in Chapters 2–6. However, so far our approach to narrative has been expressly bottom-up; with the exception of the imposition of discourse unit boundaries and part of speech tagging, our analysis has looked for form-to-function relations and, through our interpretation of those, we have developed the view of narrative outlined here. Yet there is a great deal of published research on narrative. To what extent do our findings cohere with, illuminate or clash with research on narrative? We will explore this in the first part of this chapter.

Accordingly, this chapter provides a brief background regarding narrative (Section 8.2) and how it relates to our findings so far, the sociolinguistic view of narrative that informs our approach (Section 8.3) and the role of narrative competence in SLA (Section 8.4). Following from contextualising our findings regarding narrative with other research on the topic, we will probe the use of narrative in a more focused way, examining how learners structure narratives in their discourse within this context in Chapter 9.

8.2 Narrative in Linguistics

Narrative, or the telling of stories, is a widely accepted universal of human discourse. For example, Schiffrin (1996: 167) describes narrative as a 'pervasive form of text', Labov (1997: 396) asserts that narratives 'play a role

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in almost every conversation' and Thornborrow (2012: 51) argues that narrative discourse is 'pervasive in most contexts for social interaction'. This claim of pervasiveness is certainly mirrored in the findings in Chapter 7, where narrative was present, at times in multiple forms, across all three corpora studied.

It is perhaps due to its seeming pervasiveness that narrative represents such a widely researched, yet ill-defined, topic of enquiry. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012: 1) point out, the study of narrative 'tends to be a minefield of multiple and at times competing perspectives'. This picture is further complicated by the 'multiplicity of terms that have been used to refer to narrative', whereby the term '[n]arrative is often used interchangeably with "story", "life story", "account", "discourse", "narration" and "tale" with little or no difference in meaning' (Gimenez, 2010: 200). Gimenez also observes how the term 'narrative' itself is commonly used to refer to different phenomena, including 'the telling of something', 'a story' or 'stories', as well as 'a method of analysis as in "narrative inquiry"' (Gimenez, 2010: 200).

Our approach to narrative here not only embraces this diversity of views, but also seeks to make some sense of it. We have seen through Chapters 2–7 that, using the short-text MDA method, we persistently recognise sequences of text that are narrative-like. However, the nature of those narratives varies functionally, which guides the different labels we applied to them. That is one way in which diversity in narrative is attested in our data. Yet we may also perceive another way in which narrative varies. When reading our transcripts, we came across narrative sequences which seemed to incorporate, but stretch beyond, the discourse units that we saw. In other words, we had some cause to believe that the basic level of discourse unit that we were exploring could be configured in such a way as to create macro-structures in which coherent sequences of discourse units could combine to make a much larger macro-structure that might be perceived as being a narrative. Consider the following sequence from the discussion task of a Spanish student taking a grade 8 exam (file 2_8_SP_30), representing two discourse units. The break between the discourse units is shown by a short dashed line. The turns are numbered as we will be referring to specific turns when discussing this example later in the chapter.

While the two discourse units are clearly separate, there is cohesion at work across them – they form a continuous discussion of events on a holiday in Scotland. A discussion of a search for the Loch Ness monster straddles the two discourse units. This is apparent in the short-text MDA of these discourse units – setting aside the length dimension (D1), the first

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S (1): a coldest day I remember erm the following day we spent erm all the time in in the surroundings of Inverness
E (2): mm
S (3): in Loch Ness and
E (4): mm
S (5): <anon type='name'/> was er searching the Nessie every
E (6): mm
S (7): every <pause length='short'/> in all the time and in even with the <unclear text='sonar'/>
E (8): mm
S (9): <unclear text='but er in'/> and he er saw something
E (10): mm so do y=
S (11): yes

E (12): do you believe in the Loch Ness monster?
S (13): no h-he saw this <laugh/>
E (14): ah
S (15): the only Nessie we we cou= we could see
E (16): yeah erm mm
S (17): er Nessie erm I don't think so
E (18): mm
S (19): if I I really
E (20): I think if erm if there had been a Nessie they'd have found him by now <laugh/>
S (21): <laugh/> mm it's a mystery and
E (22): mm
S (23): it's a
E (24): mm
S (25): it's a
E (26): mm
S (27): interesting thing but I
E (28): mm
S (29): I don't know
E (30): mm
S (31): I don't know really <laugh/>
E (32): mm

Figure 8.1 A narrative split across two discourse units.

discourse unit is markedly Descriptive and Affective (D2) as well as having the hallmarks of an Informational Narrative (D4).[1] It is not quite so readily apparent in the second discourse unit – the most marked dimensions here are Descriptive and Affective (D2) and Seeking and Encoding Stance

[1] The relevant dimension scores for this discourse unit are – D2: 0.289; D3: 0.053; D4: 0.226; D5: 0.084.

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(D4). Yet read together, the second discourse unit is clearly building on the story started by the first – we are finding out more about elements of what happened, but in a context where that information is wrapped in a reflection on the existence or otherwise of the monster. The two discourse units could easily be summarised as the tale of two people who went to visit Loch Ness, one searched for the monster that is reputedly there and thought that they saw it. The other person did not see anything and remains open-minded about the existence of the monster. The discourse unit analysis allows us to see the shifting balance of the story being recounted, from a more narrative-heavy first part to a second part rooted more in stance. But the two parts go together to make a whole that is coherent.

So, while the discourse units combine to form what we may call a narrative (i.e. the story of a visit to Loch Ness), at the discourse unit level the functional weight of narrative varies. Is there a way in which this higher level narrative structure might be made clearer than this simple example allows? To do that, we will seek to explore diversity in narrative in another way – at the structural level.

The view of narrative so far has focused on the micro- and macro-structural levels, with the discourse unit being the ceiling at which we halted our approach to narrative. Yet what would happen if we were to select another encoding system and overlay that on the data – might we see how different approaches to describing narrative may be, in fact, compatible, and made to appear different purely because of the ontological approach we have applied to the description of narrative? To begin to explore these questions, we will now introduce a model of narrative which is not necessarily bound by an upper limit of one discourse unit – the model proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1997).

8.3 A Sociolinguistic View of Narrative

Our reason for selecting the model of Labov and Waletzky (1997) for our study is that it is both long-standing and widely used. In this section we will introduce the origins of this model and trace its development to the present day. In doing so, we will also consider some criticisms of it.

Following the emergence of structuralism, (socio)linguistic interest in narrative was triggered by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky and their pioneering research into the structure of oral narratives. In 'Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience', Labov and Waletzky (1997) analysed the structure of stories told by street-gang youths in the context of

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research interviews. These elicited narratives all centred on the same topic, as each participant was asked to recount a life-threatening event. On the basis of these narratives, Labov and Waletzky advanced a formal approach to the study of narratives of personal experience, the goal of which was to account for the presumed rigid semantic deep structure of personal narratives – as previous structuralist researchers had done – but also to relate any observable surface differences in the narratives to the narrators' 'social characteristics', such as their gender, age and ethnicity.

Labov and Waletzky (1997) and Labov (1972) found that stories elicited in sociolinguistic research interviews evidenced a similar structure, on the basis of which these authors established a structural model for exploring oral narratives in this context. According to Labov and Waletzky (1997: 15), temporal sequencing is the 'defining character of narrative', with the narrative events linked by narrative clauses. Narrative clauses are clauses which contain 'a verb in the simple past tense or, sometimes, the historic past tense' (Thornborrow and Coates, 2005: 3). According to this model, which for economy of expression we will refer to as the Labovian model, not every clause found in a narrative qualifies as a narrative clause, but a clause can be considered a narrative clause if its order, relative to other narrative clauses, 'cannot be changed without changing the inferred sequence of events in the original semantic interpretation' (Labov and Waletzky, 1997: 14). The sequencing of narrative clauses often matches the sequence of the events being described (also referred to as 'actions', van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983: 56). In other words, the events described in narratives are usually told in the order of occurrence. For Labov, a narrative is not any instance of talk about events or the past, but it is specifically talk in which a sequence of clauses is matched to a sequence of 'events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' (Labov, 1972: 360).

Research carried out since Labov and Waletzky's model was created has shown that not all narratives follow a rigid structure in which the order of narrative clauses reflects the order of the events they describe. Indeed, narrative clauses can also be sequenced in more creative ways, moving backwards and forwards in time for particular rhetorical or artistic effects, as has been observed, for example, in some literary texts (Toolan, 2008). Whether a narrative recalls events in their actual order of occurrence or not, a key consideration is that the sequencing of events can shape their resultant representations (Swales, 1990). For example, Toolan (2001) points out that if we take the sentence, 'John fell in the river and had two whiskies' but reverse the order of the narrative clauses, so that the sentence reads, 'John had two whiskies and fell in the river', we are left

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with a sequencing of events that implies a degree of causality (that John fell in the river *because* he had two whiskies) that couldn't be inferred from the original version. At the same time, Page (2012: 9) reminds us of the 'elasticity of narrative', advocating that we be mindful that readers and listeners are 'remarkably adept in recognizing story-like qualities in texts that do not conform exactly to definitions like Labov's'.

In addition to containing narrative clauses, Labov and Waletzky (1997) and Labov (1972) also observed a series of components that are regularly found in narratives. Between these studies, Labov and Waletzky proposed a model that predicts that a narrative can be divided into – and so analysed according to – the following six components: *abstract*, *orientation*, *complication*, *evaluation*, *result* and *coda*. According to Labov and Waletzky, to count as a narrative it is not necessary for all six components to be present; only the *complication* and *result* are deemed to be essential (as is the case with the two-clause stories just discussed). Nevertheless, we will provide a brief introduction to all six of these components here.

8.3.1 Abstract

The abstract, found at the beginning of the narrative, consists of a clause or two which summarise the story that is about to be told. It is an optional element which performs the function of informing the audience that the narrator has a story to tell and making the claim that they have the right to tell it, inasmuch as it will be an interesting story that is worth listening to.

8.3.2 Orientation

Orientation provides background information, introducing the characters, settings, location and time of the narrative – that is, it orients the audience to the 'who', 'where' and 'when' of the story. Orientation usually occurs towards the beginning of the narrative but can also feature at other points where needed.

8.3.3 Complication

The complication, or 'complicating action', clauses are narrative clauses which describe a sequence of events that lead up to a climax or result. These clauses occur in the main body of the narrative and create tension to keep the audience's attention until the result.

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8.3.4 *Evaluation*

Evaluation reveals the attitude that the narrator holds towards the story and the events they are describing and can perform the function of indicating why the story is interesting or 'tellable'. According to Labov (1997: 404), the evaluation section tends to occur between the complication and the result, typically 'before the most highly evaluated action or "point" of the narrative'. Rühlemann (2014: 25) argues that evaluation is the 'most decisive' section of a narrative. However, it is also arguably the most complex element, as it can both constitute a section and can also permeate all other sections of the narrative. Labov (1972: 369) thus proposes a two-fold notion of evaluation as: (i) a set of evaluative linguistic devices found anywhere in the narrative; and (ii) a structural component that occurs directly before the result – that is, the climax – of the story. Evaluation can manifest in various ways. It can occur in so-called free clauses that comment on the story from an outside perspective (e.g. 'looking back, it was crazy') or in clauses that attribute evaluative stances to characters involved in the narrative (e.g. 'I said, that's terrible!'). In addition to these explicit manifestations of evaluation, De Fina and Johnstone also note the following, more embedded, means through which evaluation can be accomplished in a narrative:

> [E]valuation can be embedded in the narrative, in the form of extra detail about characters, suspension of the action via paraphrase or repetition, 'intensifiers' such as gesture or quantifiers, elements that compare what did happen with what didn't happen or could have happened or might happen, 'correlatives' that tell what was occurring simultaneously, and 'explicatives' that are appended to narrative or evaluative clauses' (De Fina and Johnstone, 2015: 154)

8.3.5 *Result*

The narrative's result relieves the tension by relating what finally happened, which usually involves telling how the events resolved themselves.

8.3.6 *Coda*

Finally, at the end of the story, the narrator might announce that the story is over and perhaps provide a short summary of it. The coda is often used to return the verbal perspective of the narrative back to the moment of narrating (i.e. the present). Like the abstract, the coda is an optional element.

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The Labovian model has provided the basis for much narrative analysis, prompting a surge in narrative research that continues to this day (see Bamberg, 1997; De Fina and Johnstone, 2015).[2] The model retained (and elaborated) the valuable insights provided by structuralist thinkers but was also ground-breaking in its view of narrative as a form of social interaction capable of performing significant interpersonal functions and identity work. This initiated a swath of sociolinguistic studies into the kinds of interpersonal and identity work that is performed through the telling of narratives, for example De Fina's (2003) study of identity construction in immigrants' narratives. Labov and Waletzky were also the first narrative researchers to consider the influence of the teller's identity, with research since exploring how identity aspects such as age, gender, ethnicity and social class influence the forms and functions of narratives (Johnstone, 2006). Furthermore, Labov and Waletzky's decision to develop a model based on, and so suited to, narratives told in a specific context (i.e. sociolinguistic interviews about life-threatening events) gave rise to a greater consideration of the role of the situational affordances and constraints of the contexts in which narratives are told (and collected for research) in shaping those narratives.

Though the influence of Labov and Waletzky's work cannot be questioned, sociolinguists and discourse analysts have also directed some criticism at the Labovian model, drawing attention to some of its limitations. The staunchest criticism in this regard is arguably provided by researchers interested in narratives that occur in everyday, more naturally occurring contexts. Although Labov and Waletzky's analysis was pioneering in considering the ways in which narrators tell their stories with their audience(s) in mind, and has provided a useful starting point for a great many studies of narrative since its inception, one limitation of their model is that it assumes a monologic picture of narratives as involving

[2] Although Labov and Waletzky's work in narratives has been the most influential in terms of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, it is worth noting that other researchers made important contributions to the study of the formal and semantic structure of narratives and stories around the same time. This includes, for example, work by Clancy (1980) and Tannen (1980) comparing the forms and functions of narratives across languages, Hymes's (1981) work recovering the original structure of Native American myths and folktales that had previously been transcribed by ethnographers using Western paragraph conventions, and van Dijk and Kintsch's development of macro-structures and macro-rules as models for the ways in which narratives are understood (van Dijk, 1977, 1980; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978). See De Fina and Johnstone (2015: 154–155) for a more detailed review of the contribution of these and other studies of narrative carried out at around the time as Labov and Waletzky's research. See Rühlemann (2014) and Brookes et al. (2022) for examples of the approach being applied in corpus analysis.

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only a single teller and no contribution from the audience (Langellier, 1989). As seen in the discussion of the Narrative function in the TLC in Chapter 4, co-construction of narrative is observed in the corpus (see Example 43). So, in accounting exclusively for the clauses produced by the teller, their model is not optimal for approaching the locally situated nature of narrative discourse – in other words, the tendency for narratives to arise within the context of ongoing talk in interaction (Schegloff, 1997). Indeed, research into conversational interactions suggests that the Labovian structure, consisting ideally of a progression from the optional abstract to complication, evaluation, result and then the optional coda, is often not borne out in narratives in conversation (Georgakopoulou, 1997). This is not too much of a surprise, given that Labov and Waletzky's work was based on largely monologic narratives elicited in the context of sociolinguistic research interviews and they did not claim that their model was equally applicable to all types of narratives. However, as De Fina and Johnstone (2015: 155–156) observe, subsequent applications of their model did focus largely on single-teller narratives and 'tend[ed] to privilege a view of narratives as "texts" without contexts'.

In a similar vein, Edwards (2014) argues that imposing the Labovian model onto any narrative can be limiting. He suggests the possibility for the categories in their model to perform functions not observed by Labov and Waletzky, or at least which they observed to be performed by another of their categories; for example, the potential for the *orientation* section of a narrative to not only provide background information, but actually recount some of the main events around which the narrative is centred. Moreover, Edwards points out that there is a high degree of idealisation involved in categories like *complication* and *evaluation*. Edwards thus warns against imposing any pre-formed categories on narrative data (or any other type of data, for that matter). It could be argued that the note of caution is supported by the variety of narratives discovered in the exploration of our three corpora – while accounting for them with a single model of narrative may be appealing, we should bear in mind that viewed in terms of a form-to-function mapping, we see diversity, not uniformity, in the functions of the narratives, in our corpora at least.

Criticisms of the Labovian model as rigid and context-bound have proved to be productive in motivating the development of alternative, more interactional models of narrative which draw on the tradition of conversation analysis to provide more detailed accounts of multi-authored tellings (Thornborrow, 2012). A notable example is the more contextualised account of narrative proposed by Ochs and Capps (2001), who reject

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a binary, scalar model of narrative in favour of a more flexible framework that is sensitive to the propensity of narratives to 'combine different dimensions in more or less canonical patterns' (Page, 2012: 11). They propose five dimensions along which narratives can be analysed: *tellership* (whether the story is told by a single teller or multiple tellers), *tellability* (the value of the story as highly worth telling, or seemingly irrelevant), *embeddedness* (the extent to which a story can be detached from or embedded in its context), *linearity* (the structural qualities of a story as closed, temporally sequenced, or open-ended and multilinear) and *moral stance* (the narrator's attitude towards reported events, which may be certain or fluctuating) (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 20). The model proposed by Ochs and Capps shares certain concerns with Labov and Waletzky's model, such as structural features (in *linearity*) but is clearly more concerned with contextual factors like tellership and embeddedness. This model has been popular among researchers exploring multi-party narratives and has contributed much to our understanding of the characteristics of interactional narratives. In her study of narratives in social media, Page (2012) shows how the structural narrativity of social media stories contrasts against canonical literary narratives and the types of spoken, elicited narratives studied by Labov and Waletzky, while some platforms of social media enable and others constrain the narrative dimensions identified by Ochs and Capps.

Another alternative to the Labovian approach is the 'small stories' paradigm (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Where decades of research on narrative had followed in Labov and Waletzky's footsteps by studying so-called big stories, such as the 'danger-of-death' narratives that Labov and Waletzky examined in their research, studies of small stories emerging in the twenty-first century elucidated the forms and interpersonal and relational functions of the more everyday narratives that relay comparatively mundane events. The term 'small stories' is also more inclusive as far as the diversity of narratives is concerned, as it encompasses a wide range of narrative activities that fit less well with the Labovian model and, as such, have been under-represented in research, such as 'tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, retellings, and refusals to tell' (De Fina and Johnstone, 2015: 157; see also Chałupnik, 2021).

These alternative research strands and approaches, and more besides, were in many cases inspired and motivated by the Labovian model and have addressed some of the main criticisms that have been directed at it. Hence, today, discourse analysts have at their disposal a wide array of

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theories, concepts and approaches for analysing verbal narratives of various forms, told in various contexts. While the Labovian approach is not necessarily suited to studying *every* type of narrative, and it may require adaptation for the study of multi-authored narratives, it nevertheless remains one of the most popular analytical frameworks for scholars both inside and outside of linguistics, and is likely to be *the* most frequently used framework for studying single-teller verbal narratives; as Thornborrow and Coates (2005: 3–4) point out, '[s]ociolinguistic research has provided some important conceptual models of oral narrative form which have been consistently drawn upon over the past forty or so years. Of these models, Labov's [...] analysis of the structure of oral narrative has proved to be a robust formal description of both elicited and non-elicited stories.'

Yet, the work stemming from Labov and Waletzky's model has not addressed *all* of its shortcomings. In particular, the emphasis placed by early models on the structural analysis of formal elements of narratives has led to the tendency for narratives to be examined as isolated, self-contained texts. While such an approach might be appropriate for studying individual narratives, it limits the extent to which connections can be established between the personal narratives under study and the social issues that they evoke, which play a role in shaping them. As Gimenez (2010: 199) puts it, 'analysing narratives in isolation has largely overlooked the discursive connections that can be made between groups of narratives or discourses produced in the same sociolinguistic context and the social patterns which frame and sustain them'. Here, quantitative approaches trained on larger narrative datasets may be useful for drawing parallels.

Certainly, in response to this final criticism, our choice of the model is well-motivated. We want to explore narratives in a specific context – a spoken language examination. We are also looking at the structure imposed by the model not in isolation, but in the context of other structures shaping discourse in this context; namely, discourse units and their functions. This perspective reveals that narratives need not be monolithic – if we use elicited narratives as our data, as Labov and Waletzky did, then we may well elicit monolithic narratives in which the different subparts of the narrative, once identified, account for the whole spoken sequence. However, that is not what we find in our study.[3] In an echo of the discussion of meso-structures in Chapter 7, we find that narratives may be woven into other structures in discourse and need not be contiguous. We see that the

[3] A finding in line with long-standing observations of the differences between elicited and spontaneously occurring informal narratives—see Wolfson (1976), *inter alia*.

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different elements of the Labovian model of narrative may straddle the micro- and macro-structural levels, presenting a different perspective on narrative than that which our analyses so far have provided. There is also no requirement, of necessity, of narratives described by this system to be bound by a single discourse unit.

Overall, the adoption of a different perspective on narrative presents a 'surprise', or potential for significant challenge, to our analysis so far. This is a possibility that all rigorous research in corpus linguistics should embrace (Partington et al., 2013). The same holds for the model of narrative used – it was not designed with discourse units in mind, for example. Our experience is that, not only do the two structural approaches to discourse survive the surprise, but they are, in fact, revealed to be complementary. At the same time, both may be reconciled with the short-text MDA of the discourse units.

We will explore the meshing of the approaches in more detail in the next chapter. For now, we can illustrate the point briefly by considering again the two discourse units presented in Figure 8.1. While we were able to conceive of these as a narrative, the short-text MDA view saw the first unit as distinctly narrative-like in part, but this was not the case for the second unit. The Labovian view allows us to account more clearly for the sense that a narrative was present across both discourse units. Thinking in terms of their analytical framework, the first discourse unit contains an orientation from the student, beginning: 'the following day we spent erm all the time in in the surroundings of Loch Ness' (turn 1). It also contains a complication relating to searching for 'Nessie' (turn 5). It concludes with a resolution 'and he er saw something' (turn 9). So, the discourse unit does contain what looks like a narrative. Note that the realisation of the narrative remains at the micro-structural level and that the individual elements of it are not directly contiguous. Further, it is important to observe that elements relating to this narrative spill across into the second discourse unit – the resolution is restated 'h-he saw this' (turn 13). Following from that, a coda for the narrative is produced: 'the only Nessie … we could see' (turn 15). So, there are small narrative elements in the second discourse unit, but the bulk of the utterances in these discourse units do not relate to narrative. So, far from invalidating our view of discourse units as structural units in discourse, the Labovian approach allows us to see how narrative is realised within and across macro-structures in discourse.

But what of the short-text MDA? We could argue that its failure to acknowledge the narrative elements in the second discourse unit was some form of failure of the approach. However, this would be to misunderstand

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the nature of the analysis. It must firstly be remembered that the short-text MDA is placing a discourse unit (or a turn, at the micro-structural level) on all dimensions simultaneously. While we have, as a helpful abstraction, identified some discourse units as being prototypical of a discourse function, we must always remember that the short-text MDA is helping us to understand the relatively heterogeneous functional purpose of any discourse unit by mapping it onto all dimensions. As we argued when looking at meso-structures in Chapter 7, the discourse units may have a primary function, but we can also see mixed functions within them—a view entirely in line with the initial top-down coding of discourse units undertaken by Egbert et al. (2021). So, the short-text MDA, in noting the relative salience of narrative elements in the first discourse unit relative to the second, is accurate. In the second discourse unit, while we may see narrative elements from the Labov and Waletzky model appearing, these are few and short. Relative to the function that Informational Narrative is in tension with on Dimension 4, Seeking and Encoding Stance, narrative is a lesser feature of this discourse unit. So, the two analyses in tandem are mutually corroborating but, crucially, also complementary. In the second discourse unit in particular, we see the faint trace of a discourse function, Informational Narrative, which is drowned out by a greater weight of utterances contributing to the function of Seeking and Encoding Stance. The Labovian model allows us not simply to see these, but also to characterise those narrative elements.

Does this view hold if we shift to the micro-structural short-text MDA? May that more accurately identify the short sequences of narrative *in situ*? Looking at the learner turns which build the narrative, we see eight turns; six in the first discourse unit and two in the second. In the first discourse unit, we immediately see some issues for the turn-based micro-structural analysis – it is a close fit for the narrative analysis, but not a perfect one. For example, the orientation which begins the narrative starts midway through turn 1: 'a coldest day I can remember erm'. So there is not a clear mapping of turn to narrative structural elements. Likewise, backchannels from the examiner can bisect learner turns, splitting a narrative element into two turns, as happens when the examiner produces the backchannel 'mm' (turn 2) splitting one orientation across two learner turns (turns 1 and 3). Nonetheless, the match of turn to narrative element is closer than discourse unit to narrative element, and in many cases the mapping is one-to-one– for example, turn 15 is all and only coda. What happens, then, if we shift to looking at the turns including, or constituting, narrative elements, approaching them through the turn-based micro-structural analysis established in Chapter 2? Table 8.1 shows the short-text MDA of

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Table 8.1 *A micro-structural short-text MDA of the narrative in Figure 8.1.*

Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4	Dimension 5	Turn
−0.419	−0.125	−0.228	−0.333	1
−0.168	−0.099	0.005	0.025	3
−0.389	−0.195	0.047	−0.067	5
−0.275	−0.105	0.036	0.022	7
−0.172	0.097	−0.179	−0.037	9
0.069	0.01	−0.018	0.027	11
0.026	0.023	0.099	0.19	13
−0.127	0.044	−0.112	−0.003	15

the learner turns in Figure 8.1, linked to narrative elements in the Labovian model (Dimension 1 omitted).

This shows the point about the blend of functions making up an analysis well. We could focus on the relatively high scores for negative Dimension 2 in the table, indicating an Involved function for the turn. Yet this would be to neglect the positive Dimension 5 scores, indicating narrativity at the micro-structural level. The best approach is to look at the table as a whole and to say that, when viewed in terms of narrative elements at the micro-structural level, this narrative seems to generally rely on an Involved style, touches upon the Irrealis frequently (positive Dimension 4) and is composed of a mix of Narrative and Non-Narrative turns (Dimension 5). In short, narratives seem to be composed of functionally heterogeneous turns, working in concert to deliver a macro-structure – narrative. This macro-structure may align with discourse units and, at that level of aggregation, be viewed through a short-text MDA. However, the goals of the Labovian-inspired analysis are slightly different than those of the short-text MDA, as reflected in the uncertain mapping between the two. However, that mapping, while uncertain, can be productive and deepen our understanding of the Labovian model, as our exploration of the data in Figure 8.1 shows.

So, Labov and Waletzky (1997) provide us with a way to further investigate narrative in our data that aligns well with the approach taken so far. The reason for our focus on narrative is somewhat bottom-up – we kept encountering narrative-like functions in our analysis in Chapters 2–7. Before moving in the next chapter to using the Labovian model, we will first consider one further question – should we have been surprised to encounter narrative in learner speech? In the following section we will briefly survey the position of narrative in SLA research to answer that question.

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8.4 Narrative Competence in Second Language Acquisition

The salience of narrative in the analyses in Chapters 2–7 is in part a reflection of, but also a vindication of, the focus on narrative that has been taken by research in SLA. Narrative competence, in the context of SLA research, is a critical domain that is understood as the ability to comprehend, construct and convey stories or narratives in an L2 (Berman and Slobin, 1994). It constitutes a measure of a learner's proficiency, specifically their capacity to engage with discursive practices, culture and society. This competency represents an integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic abilities, allowing learners to tell stories effectively in their L2 (Canale and Swain, 1980).

Within SLA research, narrative competence has gained prominence given the narrative's natural place in human communication and its inclusion of complex linguistic structures and cultural nuances (Labov and Waletzky, 1997). The notion offers a wide spectrum of understanding language-learning progress, as narratives are seen as a 'microcosm of language use', capable of demonstrating a learner's competence in grammar, discourse, pragmatics and more (Pavlenko, 2006). In this context it is interesting that the findings presented so far in this book have, at times, supported the view that narrative competence in an L2 and proficiency are positively linked, in particular in the analysis of Dimension 4 in Chapter 4.

Key elements of narrative competence include the ability to maintain narrative coherence and cohesion, select culturally and contextually appropriate narrative conventions and employ various narrative strategies to convey meaning (Lund, 1991). The learner must also understand and convey temporal and causal relationships, participant roles and sequences of events, besides being able to tailor the narrative to the audience's expectations and cultural norms (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). The construct of narrative competence is often evaluated through narrative performance, which involves creating and retelling both personal and fictional stories. Assessment of narrative performance is complex and can focus on both micro- and macro-structural competencies. Micro-structural assessment involves evaluation of lexical richness, syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy, while macro-structural assessment examines the discourse's overall organisation, including the coherence of events and the logical progression of ideas (Norris and Ortega, 2003).

Numerous theoretical perspectives have been proposed to explore the development of narrative competence in SLA. Interactionist and sociocultural theories suggest that narrative competence development is heavily

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influenced by interaction with competent speakers and is shaped by sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Swain, 2000). Meanwhile, the cognitive approach posits that the development of narrative competence is linked to cognitive processes such as memory and attention (Baddeley, 1992).

Empirical studies have illuminated factors influencing the development of narrative competence in L2 learners. For example, previous language knowledge (especially in related languages), cultural background and the level of exposure to the target language can all shape the development of narrative competence (Kupersmitt and Berman, 2001). However, despite the growing understanding, it is worth noting that this area is far from being fully understood, mainly due to the complex and multifaceted nature of narrative competence (Schank and Abelson, 1995).

In sum, then, narrative competence can be considered a pivotal concept in SLA research that captures a learner's ability to comprehend, create and convey stories in an L2. It provides an essential lens to understand and assess a learner's proficiency in the target language, integrating linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic competencies. Future research is needed to uncover the full range of factors influencing narrative competence development and to design effective teaching strategies to support this. While this book has, in Chapters 2–7 coincidentally and in Chapter 9 consciously, started to fill the deficit of studies considering narrative in learner language, much more needs to be done.

So, there are two impetuses for our focus on narrative in the next chapter. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 7, narrative is pervasive in the analyses we have carried out. So, there is, so to speak, a bottom-up drive to focus on narrative. Yet, and secondly, there is also a top-down drive to focus on narrative – what we see in the bottom-up analysis is what SLA researchers have argued we should see. Specifically, narrative is closely linked to proficiency and is a key communicative resource acquired and used by L2 speakers. Accordingly, in the chapter that follows we will explore narrative in our corpus data in more detail. In doing so, we will follow the Labovian approach to narrative described earlier in this chapter, while accepting its limitations – crucially, we will not only look at single-speaker narratives (see also Rühlemann, 2014). We will look at narratives through a structural lens, identifying and annotating narratives that fit the Labovian model, irrespective of whether the narrative is constructed solely by the examinee or co-constructed by the examinee and the examiner. In so doing, we gain the benefit of being able to use a well-established overarching model of narrative for our investigation while simultaneously avoiding one of the most notable drawbacks of that model.

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