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Personal experience narratives in three West African sign languages: the influence of time-depth, community size and social interaction

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PART III
NARRATIVE DEVICES

Chapter 4 – Narrative devices used in the evaluation component

4.1 Introduction

As explained in the previous chapter, Labov & Waletzky's (1967) narrative structure model is divided into five components: the abstract, the orientation, the complicating action, the resolution and the coda. The **evaluation** component is a boundless component that acts as a second layer embedded in the structure of the narrative. It brings the story to life and shows how the narrator feels about what has happened and why the story is worth being watched. It invites the audience into the narrator's personal experience.

To clarify the difference between a narrative with and without evaluation clauses, I present an example of my own experience in two versions: (1) a temporally-ordered narrative without evaluation, and (2) a narrative that is equivalent in basic events, but with evaluation clauses added (Table 21).

Table 21. Example of a personal experience narrative without and with evaluation clauses¹⁸

(1) Narrative without evaluation ↓	(2) Narrative with evaluation ↓
Abstract	
I have a snake phobia and there were so many when I went snorkelling.	
Orientation	
I have a phobia of snakes. I had gone on holiday to Brazil for Christmas. It was very hot there and it was the best time for diving or snorkelling in the sea and watching the sea life. I always did that and always took my diving goggles and fins with me. It was one of my favourite hobbies.	
Complication	
The first time I snorkelled there I saw snakes and went back to the beach. Then I tried another beach further away and saw snakes again. There were people who had also seen snakes in the	I was so excited, as soon as I got to the beach, I put on my diving goggles, grabbed my water camera and put on my fins. I went into the water. I was so happy and calm. The sea gives me so

¹⁸ The italics indicate here my own translations into English.

sea.	much peace. I started to swim and I saw very colourful fish and took pictures. I got close to some corals and saw in a hole a long, curly white thing with brown spots, I didn't know what it was, the first thing I thought was "Could it be a moray?", but it was too thin to be a moray. I got a chill, I thought I'd better get out of there. I got out of there and focused on the fish but there was something very similar again and this time very visible: it was a snake. I panicked. I wasn't far from the beach, so I quickly got out of there. My friend who was on the beach asked me "What happened?" and I told her "There are snakes everywhere!". My love for the sea is very deep and I didn't want to give up, so I tried another beach further away and saw snakes like that one again. There were really a lot of them. There were people saying "Here is a snake!", over and over again by several people on the beach.
Resolution	
I gave up on going snorkelling during those holidays.	Even though, I loved to do snorkel I couldn't do it anymore during those holidays. It was really frustrating, but the fobia of snakes was stronger.
Coda	
Since then, I have avoided diving in warm waters.	

In the two versions presented above, the one that is catchier and better at holding the audience's attention is the one containing evaluation phrases. For example, adding what I was feeling at the time ("I was so excited", "I was so happy and calm"...) turns the story more emotional and helps the audience relate to it. Riessman describes the

evaluation as the “soul of the narrative” (1993, 3). However, evaluation is complex. Labov (1972) addresses this complexity by introducing different types of evaluation, as described below. To preview later chapters, these types of evaluation are relevant when analysing different devices for how signers make narratives engaging.

4.2 Background on the evaluation component

As seen in the previous chapter, the evaluation corresponds to the most crucial component of a narrative, enhancing it and making it appealing to an audience. To turn it more engaging, the storyteller can use different narration modes. Dramatic force is conveyed especially by expressing the character’s viewpoint, whether by enacting actions (e.g., pretending to look inside a box) or quoting lines (e.g., “she said, ‘I don’t know what that is!’”). Of course, the storyteller’s perspective on the experience can also be communicated directly to the audience (e.g., “At that point, I didn’t know what was happening”).

Since the evaluation concerns arising the emotional intensity of the interlocutors, it was first situated by L&W between the complication and the resolution, i.e., in the climax, where the action is suspended (1967, 37). Later, Labov (1972) maintained that the evaluation is usually centred at the apex of the narrative, but found that it also can occur throughout the remaining components.

4.2.1 Overview of evaluation types

Labov (1972) followed up on his previous work with Waletzky by describing and further classifying the evaluation component in more detail. He suggests different types, four of which I focus on for this study. Narrators can interrupt the narrative to address the audience to add comments or clarifications (**external evaluation**); they can dramatise actions to express what characters do (**evaluative action**); they can quote feelings or characters’ lines in monologues or dialogues (**embedding of evaluation**); or they can suspend the action to draw attention on a relevant part of the narrative (**evaluation by suspension of the action**).

External evaluation is when the narrator interrupts the narrative and turns directly to the audience to add a comment, as in the following examples by Labov (1972, 371): “It was the strangest feeling because you couldn’t tell if they were gonna make it; but it was quite an experience”. According to Labov, this can be considered the most simple evaluation type since it is generally used by less skilled storytellers.

Evaluation by suspension of the action is when the narrator interrupts the emotional flow of the story to enhance an aspect crucial to the story’s point in separate sentences

without changing the temporal sequence. The embedding of evaluation type can also imply a suspension of the action.

Evaluative action is when the narrator tells what the characters do. It is dramatised action, as in the examples: “I was shakin’ like a leaf” (ibid., 373); “And we were sitting with our feet, just sitting there waiting for this thing to start. People in the back are saying prayers” (ibid., 374).

Embedding of evaluation is when the narrator tells what the characters say. Here, the narrator can quote sentiments, the main character talking to someone else or lines told by other characters. Thus, to enhance the dramatic effect, it may involve self-talk, as in thoughts or monologues (“I just closed my eyes I said ‘Oh my God, here it is!’”), self-quotes addressed at someone else (“I say, ‘Calvin, I’ll bust your head for that’” [ibid., 372]), or other characters’ quotes, in dialogues (“Lloyde Burrows, said ‘You better pack up and get out because that son of a bitch never forgives anything once he gets it in his head.’” [ibid., 373]). Labov adds that the technique of embedding the evaluation in quotations is used especially by highly skilled storytellers (ibid., 373).

Labov also describes a type of evaluation so embedded in the narrative structure that it becomes part of the syntactic construction itself, called **internal evaluation**. Labov indicates that only the most fluent storytellers can use internal evaluation. I will not look into this specific evaluation type, since it focuses on syntactical elements (intensifiers, comparators, correlatives and explicatives [ibid., 378-393]) which are beyond the scope of the present analysis on narrative devices. However, it is important to keep in mind that because it is so embedded within the discourse structure, it frequently cooccurs with the other evaluation types. For instance, **intensifiers** involving gestures (“I say [sound] like that; and the rock say [slap!]”), **expressive phonology** prosody (And we were fightin’ for a lo-o-ong ti-i-me, buddy), **onomatopoeias** (Powww!!; shhh!), **quantifiers** (He had cuts all over; I knocked him all out in the street) and **repetitions** (“And he didn’t come back, and he didn’t come back”) are specific linguistic elements likely to occur within the embedding of the evaluation type.

4.2.2 Analysis of evaluative devices in sign language narratives

Labov’s (1972) evaluation component has been analysed by some of the authors that studied personal experience narratives, namely Wilson (1996) and Mulrooney (2009) in American Sign Language (ASL) and Sohre (2017) in Romanian Sign Language (LSR).

Wilson, in her analysis of the Tobacco Story, distinguishes the external evaluation, where the narrator comments on the narrative events, through the use of **lexical signs**

(1996, 161). She then focuses mainly on evaluative clauses in both internal and embedded evaluation (Wilson subsumes both under the umbrella term internal evaluation [ibid., 165]), expressed by repetitions, aspectual inflections and expressive phonology (prosody). In the signed modality, the latter corresponds to pantomimes and iconic facial expressions (e.g., surprised, innocent, stern) which are called **constructed action** by Metzger (1995). For instance, in the narrative Wilson analysed, instead of using the ASL lexical signs for ‘look’, ‘chew’ and ‘spit’, the signer embodies the character by miming the actions themselves (ibid., 163). Besides such constructed action, Wilson argues that **role shifts** and **constructed dialogues** (Tannen 1989), are also evaluative devices in reproducing dialogues. These will be discussed in more detail in the following Chapter 6.

Mulrooney attributes the evaluation component to the signer’s adoption of different roles in the story, whether as the narrator or as a character. She finds that while in the **narrator’s role** telling the audience about what happened, ASL signers provide contextual information by using **lexical signs** and certain **classifiers**, i.e., handshapes representing semantic features of referents (Frishberg 1975). When humans are represented as **entity classifiers**, this typically occurs in a reduced scale), as if on a stage in front of the signer. In contrast, when in the **character’s role**, signers guide the audience to experience the past event through constructed actions and constructed dialogues (2009, 34) and the action takes place in the scale of the real world (real scale).

In her analysis of ASL narratives, Mulrooney views the structural components differently from L&W, and she renames the evaluation component as elaboration, where signers “provide additional detail and make a narrative more than a mere sequential list of events.” Telling not only what but how or why something happened to engage the audience with the narrative can be expressed by both the narrator’s and the character’s role (ibid., 98). Thus, a signer can be looking up, embodying a character and, simultaneously, as the narrator, uses a lexical sign to express shock (2009, 38).

Mulrooney finds six types of information that can be included in the elaboration of sign language narratives: (1) **addressing the interlocutor** to ascertain comprehension of the story (ibid., 124–125); (2) **providing supplemental information** to clarify aspects of the story to the audience (ibid., 123); (3) **describing objects**, topography and spatial arrangements between entities (ibid., 120–122); (4) **describing movements** of entities (ibid., 105–114); (5) **expressing emotional** responses (ibid., 118–120); and (6) **constructing dialogues between characters** (ibid. 114–117). Since the first three types are mostly produced within the narrator’s role they correspond to the external evaluation, while types (4) and (5) can be either external or conveyed by a character through constructed action. This contrasts with constructed

dialogues that are entirely embedded within the narrative through character embodiment.

Similar to the ASL narratives, in LSR narratives, Sohre also found embedded evaluative devices such as **sentiment quotes** (e.g., in the signed passage translated as, “I was upset and I was broken-hearted” [2017, 54]) and **constructed dialogues**, such as the dialogue with a doctor saying to a deaf person that he could not drive (ibid., 55).

Table 22 summarises the findings of the three authors that studied the evaluation component in personal experience narratives in sign languages: Wilson (1996), Mulrooney (2009) and Sohre (2017). This table also relates the evaluation types defined by Labov (1972) to the specific devices used in sign languages and to the signer’s roles. I do not include in this table the internal evaluation as observed by Wilson, since it is out of the scope of this study.

Table 22. Evaluation types in sign language narratives, with corresponding devices and roles

Evaluation types	Devices in sign language narratives	Role	Study
External evaluation	Lexical signs, Classifiers	Narrator	Wilson (ASL; 1996), Mulrooney (ASL; 2009)
Evaluative action	Constructed action	Character	Mulrooney (ASL; 2009)
Embedding of evaluation	Constructed dialogue, Role shift	Character	Wilson (ASL; 1996), Mulrooney (ASL; 2009), Sohre (LSR; 2017)

The clear distinction between evaluative devices depending on whether the signer is a narrator or a character points again to the importance of cues given by the direction of the **eye gaze** (see also §3.2.2 for the role of eye gaze related to structural components). Besides being an important cue to identify narrative components (Study 1), eye gaze also is informative about which signing perspective is being used (Study 2) and if the signers are enacting more than one character at a time during role shifts (Study 3).

Moreover, it is possible to relate the signer's roles to time; that is, **real time** versus **narrative time**. If the storyteller is looking directly at the audience as the narrator, the time is the actual present (real time), but if the eye gaze turns away, the story leads the audience to the past tense to the experience lived by the characters (narrative time). Thus, eye gaze is a crucial marker of narrative structure in sign languages, and therefore very important for interlocutors to track to follow a story, as well as important for researchers to track by encoding it in their analyses.

Bahan & Supalla (1995) examined the influence of eye gaze in the story *Bird of a different feather*, told by Bahan himself (Bahan & Supalla 1992). Here, they found three types of eye gaze marking narrative functions played by the storyteller: (1) gaze at the audience, (2) character's gaze and (3) gaze at the hands.

When there is a **gaze on the audience**, the narrator acknowledges the audience's presence. While inside the story, the narrator can still make comments and evaluations. However, when the narrator moves the gaze away, the audience is informed that the narrator is leaving such a role and is moving into playing a character.

When the storyteller embodies a character, the audience is no longer looked at but is instead witnessing the **character's gaze**. If more than one character is present, the signing storyteller embodies the role of a first character and slightly orients their body toward a second character, which is imagined to be located at some specific point in space. The first character may also enter into dialogue with the second character as if talking to a real person. When the latter responds, the signer shifts roles (i.e., role shift), moving the head towards the opposite direction as if talking to the first character.

Finally, Bahan and Supalla found that when the ASL storyteller's **gaze is on the hands**, the signer is not playing the role of the narrator or a character but is instead part of the narrative events. It can depict an event or describe objects and actions playing out in the signing space, as if on a stage in front of the signer. They argue that when the eyes focus on the hands moving in the space in front of the signer on this reduced scale (e.g., with a hand representing a character in an event), it no longer belongs exactly to the narrator nor the character, but is instead deeply embedded in the narrative in a way unique to sign languages (1995, 179). At the same time, this use of reduced scale may not exist in all sign languages (Nyst 2007), so it is not known if eye gaze on the hands will be observed in narratives in the three sign languages in the current study. In sum, it is possible to conclude that the eye gaze behaviour plays an essential function in marking the moments when the storyteller is the narrator, a character or is doing a description.

4.3 Research questions

As seen in Study 1, narratives should be organised according to a prototypical structure and dramatically enhanced by a climax. Considering the importance of the evaluation component to the expression of emotional intensity, the following studies look at the narrative devices as the instruments responsible for conveying dramatic force, not only within the climax but throughout the narrative.

To answer the main research questions related to sign language age, community size and interaction patterns between deaf peers, I compare the narrative devices in the three African sign languages studied here. I aim to observe whether those factors influence how signers turn their narratives compelling through modality-specific evaluative devices.

It may be important to briefly address what appears to be a potential contradiction in expectations from spoken languages on the one hand and sign languages on the other, in terms of what counts as skilled storytelling. From Labov's work on storytelling in spoken languages, we would expect that external evaluation will be used more often by less skilled. Yet, for sign languages, it might first appear that the simplest and therefore least-skilled way to tell a story in a signed language would be through pantomime, acting out all the parts in an event, which would be akin to the evaluative action. Therefore, in the following analyses, I assume that in sign languages the external evaluation might be as simple as the evaluative action.

The main question to all three studies is **How do signers of the three sign languages enhance their narratives through particular evaluative devices?** This is then specified for each study.

Study 2: Signing perspectives

Research question 2: **To what extent do signers of the three sign languages produce signing perspectives to enhance their narratives?**

Hypothesis: Signers naturally use constructed actions in the first person, unlike the reduced scale perspective. The reduced scale will probably have developed over time and frequent socialisation and will, thus, not be found in LaSiBo (see Chapter 5).

Study 3: Role shift and constructed dialogue

Research question 3: **To what extent do signers of the three sign languages produce role shift and constructed dialogue to enhance their narratives?**

Hypothesis: Narrative devices may require time and regular social interactions to develop. Therefore, emerging sign languages with little socialisation between peers, i.e., LaSiBo, may still need to be able to shift between roles and construct dialogues (see Chapter 6).

Study 4: Animal depictions

Research question 4: **To what extent do signers of the three sign languages depict the animal's size and shape to enhance their narratives?**

Hypothesis: Narrative devices may require time and regular social interactions to develop. Therefore, signers using only on a few occasions their young sign language with each other, like the ones from Bouakako, may still need to be able to clarify to the audience what the animal looks like to turn the story more interesting (see Chapter 7).

To answer the question in the three studies on narrative devices I analyse them following specific terms based on the literature, which are described next.

4.4 Correspondences between evaluation types and signed narrative devices

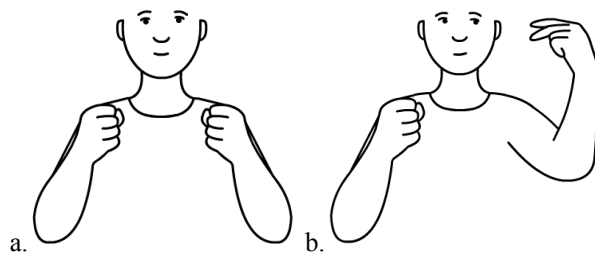
This section sets up the next three studies, going deeper into systematising the correspondence between evaluation types described by Labov (1972) and narrative devices in sign languages. Such a relationship is based on previous work done in personal experience narratives by Wilson (1996), Mulrooney (2009) and Sohre (2017). Besides the evaluative devices, Table 23 includes the cues to identify them in sign languages, namely the signer's role as indicated by the direction of eye gaze and the kind of signs used.

Table 23. Correspondences between evaluation types and signed narrative devices

Evaluation types	Spoken languages (Labov 1972)	Signed devices	Role	Cues	Study
External evaluation	Addressing the audience to add information	Descriptions of entities and spatial arrangements	Narrator	Gaze on audience Gaze at the hands Lexical signs Classifiers	2 4

Evaluation by suspension of the action	Calling attention to a relevant part of the narrative	Descriptions of entities	Narrator	Gaze on audience	4
Evaluative action	Dramatising actions	Constructed action, Role shift	Character	Character's gaze	2 3
Embedding of evaluation	Quoting sentiments, in monologues and dialogues	Role shift, Constructed dialogue	Character	Character's gaze	3 4

Study 2 analyses the **signing perspectives**, i.e., how the story elements, especially the characters are portrayed, throughout the narratives. Signing perspectives involve both constructed actions and descriptions, expressing mainly the evaluative action. This is the case of the **real scale perspective** including constructed actions produced overtly (in Figure 42a) or combined with narrations; **multiple perspectives** representing the interaction between two or more characters at the same time (in Figure 42b); and **simultaneous perspectives** concerning the expression of the same character in both the real and the reduced scale (in Figure 42c). The latter two perspectives usually imply the cooccurrence of constructed actions and classifiers. When real scale or multiple perspectives express lines in self-talk or dialogues they are an embedding of evaluation. Although they are included here they are analysed in detail only in Study 3. Finally, the **reduced scale perspective** refers to spatial arrangements (in Figure 42d) in external evaluation.



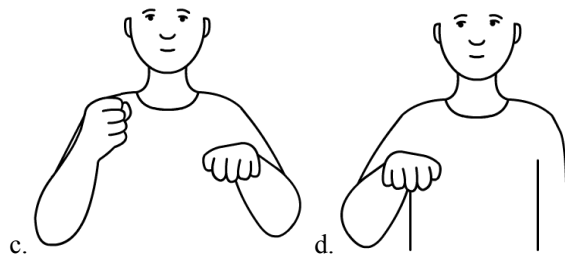


Figure 42. Signing perspectives: representing ‘driving’ by (a) holding the steering wheel in a real scale perspective; (b) holding the steering wheel and using a classifier for ‘being looked at by someone else’ in multiple perspectives; (c) holding the steering wheel and using a model-sized classifier for ‘moving car’ in simultaneous perspectives; and (d) using a model-sized classifier for ‘moving car’ in a reduced scale perspective

Study 3 focuses on role shifts, i.e., changes between characters, and constructed dialogues, which add emotional intensity. **Role shifts** may refer to the interaction between characters without necessarily involving dialogues. In these cases, actions are dramatised, or constructed as evaluative action. **Constructed dialogues** may also include self-talk. Either way, this device is an embedding of evaluation produced always within the character’s role.

Study 4 analyses the **descriptions of the animals** in the narratives, considering that they represent the main point of the collected accounts of animal attacks. In this sense, depicting the size and shape of the animal encountered is expected to add dramatic force to the narrative. In this evaluation by suspension of the action, the sequence of events is interrupted to enhance the antagonist in the story. Signers may **suspend the narrative** thread to look at the audience as the narrator to depict the animal. Otherwise, they can tell how the animal looks like within a **self-talk** or a **dialogue**, as a character in an embedding of evaluation. When the animal is presented to the audience by the narrator with the intent of **clarification** rather than of conveying emotional enhancement, it is instead an external evaluation. In all animal descriptions, the analysis focuses on specific **size and shape depicting signs**.

Since the evaluation involves both the narrator’s and the character’s roles, which have been thoroughly discussed in the previous study concerning the narrative structure, Table 24 aims at making clear the engagement of those roles in the different narrative devices, distinguishing them from neutral narrations told without any particular enhancements.

Table 24. Narration roles involved in the evaluative devices of Studies 2, 3 and 4

	Character	Narrator
STUDY 2		
Signing perspectives		
Real scale		
- overt constructed actions	x	
- partially overt constructed actions	x	x
Multiple (two or more characters)	x	x
Simultaneous (one character in two scales)	x	x
Reduced scale		x
STUDY 3		
Role shift	x	
Constructed dialogue	x	
STUDY 4		
Size and shape depictions	x	x
Neutral narrations		x

Having established the bridge between Labov's evaluation types and the narrative devices analysed in this thesis, I will no longer focus on the evaluation types per se but rather on the corresponding devices. Of course, it is crucial to keep in mind that these devices are evaluative. Hence, they aim at turning the narratives more compelling each in its way. In each study, the analysis will look at the extent to which they are produced in the three sign languages. Having clarified how the three studies on narrative devices relate to evaluation types, I move next to Study 2 on signing perspectives.