

Labovian Interpretation of “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”

Chikako Tanimoto

In “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax,” William Labov analyzes the structure of the narratives of personal experiences in the ordinary conversation. Defining narrative “as one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (359-60), Labov suggests that a fully developed narrative is made up of the following sections: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda. As to the grammatical aspect of the narrative, Labov indicates syntactic simplicity in narrative, and says that a narrative clause is in the simple past tense. He also suggests that the basic narrative consists of the sentence adverbial, the subject noun phrase and the verb phrase. According to Labov, “since syntactic complexity is relatively rare in narrative, it must have a marked effect when it does occur” (378). “Departures from the basic narrative syntax,” he says, “have a marked evaluative force” (378). Then, he investigates following four syntactic features which are closely linked to the narrative: intensifiers, comparators, cor-relatives, and explications.

Although Labov analyzed the narrative in ordinary conversation, some critics have applied his model to the literary works. For example, Mary Louise Pratt, in *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, applies Labov’s analysis to first-person narrative novels and short stories such as Henry Miller’s *Plexus*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and Herman Melville’s “Bertleby the Scrivener,” and examines how these works present orientation, abstract, coda and evaluation. According to Pratt, Labov’s “subdivision of the narrative into six main components corresponds very closely indeed to the kind of organization we are traditionally taught to observe in narrative literature” (51). After examining the structure of literary narratives according to Labov’s model, Pratt says: “even this brief comparison is enough to show that literary and natural narratives are formally and functionally very much alike” (66).

J. E. Bunselmeyer also applies Labovian analysis to Faulkner’s works in “Faulkner’s

Narrative Syntax.” Contrary to Pratt, however, Bunselmeyer discusses the narrative syntax which creates tones and point of view in Faulkner’s narratives. Focusing on evaluative elements in Faulkner’s works, Bunselmeyer says: “the evaluative stance varies from comic detachment to empathy with a character’s contemplation; these differences in tone and point of view area created by different syntactic styles” (424-25). In the contemplations in Faulkner’s novels, Bunselmeyer points out foregrounding features such as negatives, appositives, double modifiers, comparisons, and or-clauses, and says as follows:

Faulkner’s contemplative style, which draws readers into the process of thought and evaluation, is marked by many of the syntactic features noted by Labov in the evaluative sections of natural narratives, literature’s closest kin. (425)

On the contrary, as to the comic style, he suggests thus:

Faulkner’s comedy is free of these stylistic features. The comic passages are marked by a very different syntactic style that does not suspend the action, but rather pushes in onward by piling up individual events. (426)

Applying Labovian analysis of evaluative syntax, Bunselmeyer efficiently discusses Faulkner’s comic and contemplative tones from the syntactic point of view.

As I have seen the successful examples of Labovian interpretations of literary works in Pratt’s and Bunselmeyer’s essays, it is an acceptable attempt to apply Labov’s theory of the natural narrative to literature. In the following part of this paper, I will examine “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* according to Labov’s model.

Firstly, I will discuss the structure of *Canterbury Tales*, focusing on the relationship between the author, the reader, and the text. Understanding this relationship would help us know how appropriate it is to apply Labov’s model to the Wife of Bath’s narrative. As to this relationship, Pratt, discussing how “the literary speech situation” engages the speaker and the audience, says that the speaker invites the audience to join in the contemplation, evaluation and response to the narrative. Suzanne Fleischman also pays attention to the relationship between the speaker, the audience, and the text in *Tense and Narrativity*. She suggests that fiction is the

“formation of an *embedded communicative context* with a fictional Speaker and the Hearer” (107), and clarifies the relationship between the author and the reader:

WRITER [Speaker (text) Hearer] READER (107)

On the other hand, when diegetic story-telling (*skaz*) occurs in the fictional speaker’s story-telling, the frame of the fiction is figured out as follows:

WRITER or COMPOSER [Speaker 1 {speaker 2 (text) hearer 2} Hearer 1] READER or LISTENER (123)

As for the structure of *Canterbury Tales*, it has stories within a story:

CHAUCER [a pilgrim {wife of Bath (text) other pilgrims} Hearer] READER
fabula *skaz*

As we see above, the Wife of Bath is a fictional story-teller. In this sense, as long as she has her audience, although both she and her audience members are fictional characters, it is appropriate to consider her narrative functions as a narrative in ordinary conversation. Moreover, since the Wife of Bath talks about her own experiences in the Prologue, it is also appropriate to employ Labov’s definition of the personal narrative to discuss her story-telling. When the Wife of Bath recaptures her marriage experiences, she, like other story-tellers in the Labovian model, is “deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events” (Labov 354).

The first eight lines present the abstract of her narrative:

‘EXPERIENCE, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynough for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage;
For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,
Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve,--
If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee,--
And alle were worthy men in hir degree. (ll. 1-8)

Besides this abstract, the whole narrative is composed of three parts, each of which

is structured as an independent narrative. The first part deals with her first three husbands, the second part her fourth husband, and the third part her fifth husband. The following quotations are abstracts and codas of the first and the third parts of the narrative:

- (a) The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;
Unnethe myghte they the statut holde
In which that they were bounden unto me.
.....
They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire;
For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously. (ll.197-223)

Swiche manere wordes hadde we on honds. (ll. 451-52)
Now wol I speken of my fourthe housbonde.

- (b) Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle.
God lete his soule nevere come in helle!
And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe;
That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,
And evere shal unto myn endyng day.
.....
I trowe I loved hym best, for that he
Was of his love dangerous to me. (ll. 503-14)

I prey to God, that sit in magestee,
So blesse his soule for his mercy deere. (ll.826-27)

As we look at the differences between the structures of the first part (a) and the third part (b), we perceive how the Wife of Bath develops her narrative technique. Although (a) has its abstract and coda, it does not have explicit actions. While most of the speech is her embedded evaluation, her narrative gives us no explicit idea of which of the three husbands she is talking about. It is because she does not characterize a particular person, place, time, or action. Consequently, she does not clearly recapture her particular experience in this part. The point of her narrative is how she manipulated her first three husbands.

On the contrary, the third part of her narrative (b) has a complete plot which includes complicating action and resolution in addition to abstract and coda. This part includes two episodes: one is that she went to the field with Jankyn and the other is that Jankyn beat her. Describing each episode, the Wife of Bath indicates the concrete times, places, characters and actions. While she does not mention the names of her first four husbands (a), she calls her fifth husband by his name (b). Especially, when she tells the episode in which Jankyn beat her, her narrative is fully developed to include the six elements that Labov indicated: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda.

Abstract By God! he smoot me ones on the lyst,
 For that I rente out of his book a leef,
 That of the strook myn ere wax al deef. (ll. 634-36)

Orientation Upon a nyght Jankyn, that was oure sire,
 Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire,
 Of Eva first, . . . (ll. 713-15)

Resolution But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
 We fille acorded by us selven two. (ll. 811-12)

Coda After that day we hadden never debaat.
 God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
 As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
 And also trewe, and so was he to me. (ll. 822-25)

During the whole narration in "Prologue," the Wife of Bath improves her narrative technique, and finally achieves the fully developed type of narrative which includes abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda, showing the effects of the event on the narrator. The development of her narrative structure in "Prologue" is worth noticing since it reflects the structure of her whole narrative, which achieves the fully developed narrative structure.

Throughout the narrative in "Prologue," the actions are often suspended, and in such occasions, her speech is directly turned to her audience. Actually from line 9 to line 162, the action is suspended while she justifies her marrying five times to

her audience. According to Labov's model, these lines are the external evaluation in which "the narrator can stop the narrative, turn to the listener, and tell him what the point is" (Labov 371). In this external evaluation, the Wife of Bath introduces passages in the Bible several times, and gives them her interpretations to suit her own convenience: she interprets the passages in the Bible in order to justify herself who has not been a good wife:

Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette
 That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?
 Now wherewith sholde he make his paiement,
 If he ne used his sely instrument?
 Thanne were they maad upon a creature
 To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure. (ll. 129-34)

Besides the external evaluation, the Wife of Bath employs the syntactic evaluation for her justification.

	Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve,--

Repetition	Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve!
Future	Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal.
Negative	For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al.
Explicative (qualification)	Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon,
Future	Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon,
Explicative (causal)	For thanne, th'apostle seith that I am free To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.
Negative	He seith that to be wedded is no synne;
Comparative	Bet is to be wedded than to brynne.
Explicative (qualification)	What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye
Question	Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy?

Question	Wher can ye seye, in any manere age, That hye God defended mariage
Imperative	By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me.

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Mode	For hadde God comanded maydenhede, Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede.
Mode	And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,
Question	Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?
Explicative (qualification)	But nathelees, togh that he wroot and sayde
Quantifier	He wolde that every wight were swich as he,
Quantifier	Al nys but conseil to virginitee. (ll. 6-82)

These external and grammatical evaluations are employed to indicate the following point:

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.
I have the power durynge al my lyf
Upon his propre body, and noght he. (ll. 154-59)

Another point of the Wife of Bath's narrative is how she had manipulated her five husbands. To emphasize this point, she also employs external, embedded, and grammatical evaluations.

Negative	The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde; Unnethe myghte they the statut holde In which that they were bounden unto me.
External	Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee!
Embedded (evaluative action)	As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
Negative	And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor. They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
Negative	Me neded nat do lenger diligence To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.
Explicative	They loved ne so wel, by God above,
Negative	That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!

Mode	A wys womman wol bisye hire evere in oon To gete hire love, ye, ther as she hath noon.
Explicative (causal)	But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond, And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
Question	What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese, But it were for my profit and myn ese?
Explicative	I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
Quantifier/Embedded (quote antagonist)	That many a nyght they songen “weilawey!”
Negative	The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe, That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe. (ll. 197-218)

In this sequence, her employment of the negative sentences is remarkable. Even the questioning sentence implies her negative answer. In this succession of the negative sentences, the Wife of Bath completely rejects what is conventionally required of a good wife: she refuses to be diligent to win her husbands' love and to show her reverence to them; she refuses to put any value on their love; she refuses to keep them pleased. However, while the negative sentences in lines 205-14 convey her rejection of the conventional idealism of the married life such as mutual love and reverence, lines 217-18 represent the social judgment: she could not get the bacon offered to a couple who had lived together in perfect harmony. As the Wife of Bath rejects the social ideal, the society refuses to admit her attitude as a good example. Yet all of these negative sentences indicate how different the Wife of Bath's attitude is from the conventionally esteemed one. The employment of the negative sentences implies that the married life should not be like hers.

As I have discussed above, “The Wife of Bath's Prologue” presents a Labovian model of the narrative which shows abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Contrary to Labov's model, however, the Wife of Bath's narrative includes several episodes which presents a more complicated structure than Labov's model does:

Prologue

[general idea about marriage {episode 1} {episode 2} {episode 3 (3a) (3b)}]

general idea (5 marriages): abstract, evaluation

episode 1 (3 husbands): abstract, action, evaluation, coda

episode 2 (4th husband): abstract, orientation, action, evaluation, coda

episode 3 (5th husband): abstract, evaluation, coda

3a (going to the field): orientation, action, evaluation, resolution

3b (quarrel): abstract, orientation, action, evaluation, resolution, coda

Labov does not present such a complicated narrative structure, nor does he discuss the structure of the episodes within the narrative. However, as long as each episode in the Wife of Bath's narrative follows the Labovian model, we can still apply his analysis to her narrative.

So far, I have examined "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," regarding it as an independent narrative. In fact, her prologue is followed by her tale which also has the complete Labovian narrative structure showing abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Furthermore, the prologue and the tale are combined into one long narrative. The whole narrative presents the following abstract and coda:

Abstract 'EXPERIENCE, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage; (ll. 1-3)

Coda and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyes
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry uygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (ll. 1258-64)

In this large narrative frame, the prologue presents the evaluative elements to the tale. The Wife of Bath's narrative in her prologue supports her tale's evaluative point: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above" (ll. 1038-40). In this sense, we can identify the prologue as the external evaluation of the tale. Labov does not mention that two completely constructed narrative parts as themselves can be combined into one narrative, nor does he mention that one completely structured narrative part can

be the external evaluation of another set of narrative. In this sense, Labov's analysis still has its limits.

Works Cited

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