

# Narrative research: an introduction

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The *Revista Brasileira de Lingüística Aplicada (RBLA)*, in its eighth year of existence, is now sponsored by FAPEMIG and supported by the Federal University of Minas Gerais, which grants secretarial as well as regular communication support. This journal is indexed at MLA, Linguistics Abstracts, and Language Behavior. RBLA is also available on the Internet at <http://www.letas.ufmg.br/rbla/>. The printed versions are freely sent to the members of the Brazilian Association of Applied Linguistics.



On introducing this issue devoted to narrative research, I understand it is essential to answer two questions, “What is a narrative” and “What is narrative research”?

## What is a narrative?

Different meanings of narrative circulate among us: a story told and retold; a report on real or fictitious events; the report of a series of events in a sequence; a sequence of past events; a series of logical and chronological events, etc. Narratives circulate in oral, written and visual textual versions and have been intensely investigated in Applied Linguistics. See, for instance, the special issue of the *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics*, edited by Benson and Nunan, in 2002, and the book organized by the same authors in 2005. See, also the book edited by Kalaja, Menezes and Barcelos (2008), reviewed in this volume.

For Todorov (1979, p. 138), a narrative begins “with equilibrium, where everything is balanced, progresses as something comes along to disrupt that equilibrium, and finally reaches a resolution, when equilibrium is restored”. But the second state is never similar to the first. The instabilities, the changes and the new equilibrium, always different from the one in the initial phase, can be observed in several narratives in this special issue.

According to Bruner (2002), a narrative involves a sequence of events, mental states, occurrences having human beings as characters or actors. They





may be real or imaginary without losing its force as history. Bruner adds that we were born with a set of predispositions to think and interpret the world in a particular way and also to act upon our interpretations. These interpretations are of paramount relevance to researchers who want to listen to the voice of the participants, that is, the ones who want to develop *emic* research, which is the case of the studies in this special issue.

The narratives found in the research reports in this issue can be classified as reports on personal experiences. For Labov e Waletzky (1967, p.21-22), who worked with oral narratives, a narrative of personal experience is “as a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to”. In another work, Labov (1997) defines a narrative of personal experience as “a report of a sequence of events that have entered into the biography of the speaker by a sequence of clauses that correspond to the order of the original events.” He distinguishes narrative from simple recounting of observations, affirming that “it will turn out that events that have entered into the speaker’s biography are emotionally and socially evaluated, and so transformed from raw experience”. Evaluation is understood as “information on the consequences of the event for human needs and desires”.

Labov recognizes that “the discussion of narrative and other speech events at the discourse level rarely allows us to prove anything. It is essentially a hermeneutic study”. In this new text (LABOV, 1997), he considers that the most important data that he has “gathered on narrative is not drawn from the observation of speech production or controlled experiments, but from the reactions of audiences to the narratives”. Labov’s observation is especially important for us to understand how the authors of the studies gathered together in this volume reacted to the narratives they work with. The narratives are not analyzed on the perspective of their textual organization, but on the perspective of the organization of human experience (see BRUNER 2002). As pointed out by Polkinghorne, “the aim of the study of narrative meaning is to make explicit the operations that produce its particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence”.

### **And what is narrative research?**

Besides history and literature, the natural realm of narrative, many research fields have been using stories to investigate reality (re)construction.



We have already quoted Bruner, in education, and Labov and Waletzky, in linguistics, to mention only two examples of fields which are close to applied linguistics. But references to narrative research can be found in semiotics, medicine, nursing, psychology, psychoanalysis, communication, sociology, information technology, anthropology, philosophy, gay studies, women studies, etc. Just use any web search engine and you will find on the Internet references to narrative research in many different areas.

Clandinin and Connely (2000, p. 20) define narrative research as “a way of understanding experience” involving “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus”. The most common narrative research can be described as a methodology which consists of gathering stories about a certain theme where the researcher will find out information about a specific phenomenon. In order to collect the data, several techniques can be used: interviews, journals, autobiographies, oral recording, written narratives, and field notes. Another form of research is what Polkinghorne (1995, p. 1) describes as a kind of inquiry which “gathers events and happenings as its data and uses narrative analytic procedures to produce explanatory stories”. Summing up, “narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study” (PINNEGAR and DAYNES, 2007, p.5). In other words, analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. In this volume, the majority of chapters focus the analysis of narratives, but articles 9, by Vian Jr., and 4, by Vassallo and Telles, are good examples of narrative analysis.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) point out two dimensions of narrative research: holistic versus categorical and content versus form. The authors explain that the first dimension refers to the unit of analysis, that is, whether excerpts or a complete text is analyzed. The second dimension refers to the distinction between the content and the form of a story. Four combinations are possible: holistic-content; categorical-content; holistic-form; categorical-form. Having these four classifications as reference, we can divide the articles on this volume in the following way:

Kind of research	Articles
Holistic-content	4, 5, 9
Categorical-content	2, 3, 6, 7, 8
Holistic-form	1
Categorical-form	

It is natural that most articles deal with content analysis as applied linguistics concern is language as social practice. Rodrigues-Junior's article can be classified as a kind of *holistic-form* research. He proposes a framework for the analysis of narratives of second language learning. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the author works in the perspective of functional-systemic grammar, an approach which does not disregard meaning.

Articles 4, 5 e 9 present *holistic-content* research. In 4, Vassalo and Telles analyze their own tandem learning histories, the first learning Portuguese and the second Italian. In 5, Barkhuizen and Benson demonstrate how teachers reflected on their narrative writing processes before and after a coursework. Vian Jr., in 9, narrates his lived experiences of designing oral production courses in languages for specific purposes in order to reflect upon his professional experience.

Articles 2, 3, 6, 7, 8 present studies in a *categorical-content* format. In 2, Aragão investigates English language learners' emotions and, in 3, Paiva works with narrative excerpts to identify aspects of language acquisition, understood as a complex system. In 6, Romero investigates three categories – affect, appraisal and judgment – in order to understand prospective language teachers' concepts of learning and teaching. In 7, Borges works with narrative excerpts of narratives written by teachers of four different languages to analyze references to the EFL teaching approaches that remain in their memoirs. She also makes an attempt to identify the influence of these experiences in the narrators' teaching approaches. Finally, Malatér, in 8, focus the professional identity of an English teacher.

The reading of the articles and their respective narratives makes us understand how the narrators construct meaning having their experiences as starting points for narrative production. The narrators “impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (RIESSMAN, 1993, p. 2).

Narrative researchers are always confronted with the question concerning whether the narrator is telling the truth. This question inevitably leads us to another question: Does reality exist or is it constructed? Riessman (1993, p. 8) says: “Investigators do not have direct access to another's experience. We deal with ambiguous representations of it – talk, text, interaction, and interpretation. It is not possible to be neutral and objective...”

In this special RBLA issue, the reader will find teachers' and learner's stories and different approaches to their analyses. As each text is open to

different possible readings, we hope that the “truth” brought up by narratives of lived experiences and by the researchers’ narratives gathered in this volume can assign, in collaboration with the reader, new meanings for the questions associated with teaching and learning languages. After all, as Riessman (1993, p. 22) points out, “narratives are interpretive and, in turn, require interpretation.”

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