

# Narrative Structure Analysis: A Story from “Hannah Gadsby: Nanette”

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**Abstract**—According to Labov’s (1972) narrative elements, this paper attempts to analyze one narrative of Hannah Gadsby’s farewell stand-up show. And will discourse how a comedian combines humor with the idea in a story. Narrative structure analysis is one of the most crucial discourse types. In a stand-up show, the comedian prefers to use anecdotes to enhance their performance. Good comedians can present not only humor but their own unique viewpoint in narratives. Concentration is placed on the narrative structure to find out the relationship between humor and the speaker’s voice. It reveals that the six narrative elements can be found in Gadsby’s oral narrative. By combining the narrative elements, Gadsby expresses her consideration of females’ social situation in a humorous story. The function of her narrative is more than entertainment. This paper also found that when analyzing the speaker’s humor, the audience’s response is also a useful reference. Recording audiences in the transcript as the second speaker can bring the audience into Labov’s narrative framework analysis.

**Index Terms**—narrative structure, Labov, stand-up show, Gadsby, female

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in human lives. People may fail to live without the existence of language. Words can create stories. People use stories to share experiences and repeat the past. ‘Narrative’ can be viewed as a more formal name for ‘story’. People express narratives through various approaches such as oral, written and musical, but spoken stories tend to serve a personal and rational purpose (Tracy & Robles, 2013). People talk, people make stories. They use oral narratives to present their ideas. In linguistics, the narrative is one of the earliest discourse types analyzed, and it has always been one of the most studied ways of what people do with conversation (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). Linguists are interested in analyzing narratives; some theories were provided. The structural, linguistic analysis of narrative is one of the famous approaches. It focuses on the function of a single clause in the overall structure (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).

The stand-up show is a kind of comedic style. The audience receives information from the speaker’s vivid oral presentation. Comedians make people laugh via humorous monologue and are likely to complete the monologue through a series of stories and jokes. It is interesting to note how a comedian combines humor with a narrative to achieve a performance.

This paper applies Labov’s framework to analyze one oral narrative of “Nanette.” That show was the farewell of a famous Australian comedian—Hannah Gadsby, in June 2018, which has been nominated for the 71st Primetime Emmy Awards. Gadsby has won many awards in comedy festivals, such as the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and the Adelaide Fringe. “Hannah Gadsby: Nanette” won the Barry Award (best show) and obtained a high score in IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes. The research will first analyze the structure of Gadsby’s oral narrative from six aspects (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, results, and coda), which are provided by Labov (1972). Then, finding how Gadsby combines these narrative elements into a humorous story. Finally, discovering Gadsby’s voice behind the entertainment story, which is the primary purpose of the narrative.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative has been one of the main themes of humanities and social sciences since the middle of the 20th century (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). In linguistics, the narrative has always been one of the most intensely studied subjects in what people do through their talk (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). “A narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can ‘learn’ (Toolan, 1988 pp. 8).” It can be viewed as a genre, including a sequence of events (Arciuli & Brock, 2014).

In the early-mid 1950s, the West had two interrelated but different narrative structures. One came from Russian Vladimir Propp; the other was Claude Lévi-Strauss’s. “while Propp’s approach to characterizing the universal features of folklore is like that of formal syntax, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1955, 1964, 1966) is more similar to formal semantics (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).” After that, several philosophers and literary theorists applied these two ideas in their research about narratives in the late 1960s (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). There were two main assumptions concerning them; one believed that narrative could be separated from the event itself, the other was about abstract, viewing as the

same the structures and meanings which seem different. These two ideas were common in America and became the main discourse work in the 1960s (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).

William Labov's research in narrative has been particularly influential in American work (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). He regards the narrative as "one method of recapitulating experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) occurred (Labov, 1972 pp.359-360)". Labov and Waletzky (1997) aim to find the underlying semantic structure of narratives in a "formal" way. In the book "Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience," they believe that "the most fundamental narratives structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experience (Labov & Waletzky, 1997 pp.12)". Based on that idea, Labov and Waletzky (1997) asked people to tell stories about their dangerous and embarrassing experiences. By applying these data, they provide several essential terminologies of narrative structure analysis.

The stand-up show is live. Gadsby speaks in front of the audience and uses her real story to perform. Based on the audience's reaction and evaluation from the media, Gadsby, an able comedian, delivers her humorous story successfully. Labov's framework is useful for analyzing Gadsby's triumphant story and examining whether her narrative has a complete structure. It is also worth discovering the effect of each narrative element in the whole story.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. *Object*

The object of the study is the transcript of one narrative of Hanna Gadsby's stand-up show—"Nanette." It lasts for 1 minute and 65 seconds. The narrative is the first story of the show; it is worth analyzing how Gadsby uses a short story in the first ten minutes to engage with the audience, revealing her own voice, and in that, to tell or even persuade the audience using the emotion of humor. Since aiming to analyze the narrative's humor, the interaction between audiences and the speaker cannot be ignored. The transcript of the narrative generally follows Conversation Analysis conventions (Clift, 2016) so that the performance of Gadsby and the reaction of the audience can be shown.

#### B. *Main Terminologies of Narrative*

Labov and Waletzky (1997) have presented a framework for analyzing the personal experience narrative. It is easy for the research to distinguish whether Gadsby's oral account is a narrative and how to divide the narrative into different clauses. The research can also analyze Gadsby's story via those clauses' various functions. The detailed explanation of terminologies that the study applies is as follows.

Labov (1972) views the minimal narrative as a sequence of two clauses that are temporally ordered. If the order of these clauses is altered, the original semantic interpretation will be changed. For example, "I punched this boy/ and he punched me (Labov, 1972 pp.360)". These two clauses consist of a minimal narrative. If changing the order of them, it will become "This boy punched me, and I punched him (Labov, 1972 pp.360)". The original meaning has been changed. Labov (1972) also provides another term which he calls temporal juncture. He explains that a minimal narrative involves a single temporal juncture (Labov, 1972). Labov distinguishes (1972) different clauses according to their functions in the narrative. For example:

- a I know a boy named Harry
- b Another boy threw a bottle at him, right in the head
- c And he had to get seven stitches (Labov, 1972 pp.361)

According to Labov, a series of temporally ordered clauses will consist of narrative clauses (Labov, 1972). That means the story will change if the narrative clause is re-ordered. In these three clauses, only b and c are narrative clauses. If clause c is placed before clause b, the order of the action changes. The meaning of the narrative will be altered. In contrast, clause a has no temporal juncture. That means clause a can be altered to be in any order without changing the meaning of the narrative. Clause a can be defined as a free clause that is not limited by any temporal juncture (Labov, 1972). There are also other clauses which are named the subordinate clause and the restricted clause. Subordinate clauses can be viewed as clauses with identical displacement (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). For example, "If you didn't bring her candy to school, she would punch you in the mouth (Labov, 1972 pp.362)." If placing "she would punch you in the mouth" in the front of the clause, the original semantic interpretation remains. On the other hand, Labov (1997) defines a restricted clause as a clause that is without freedom to be moved or temporally ordered in the strict sense. In other words, the restricted clause cannot be placed in any order as a free clause; however, the restricted clause is more flexible than a narrative clause because a restricted clause can move between some clauses according to the specific meaning of the narrative.

#### C. *Narrative Structure (Labov)*

Several narratives that hold temporal junction and involve beginning, middle, and end are generally complete. However, Labov (1972) provides a "fully developed" model of narrative structure, which contains six aspects: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution and coda. The study uses these six narrative elements to analyze Gadsby's narrative clauses and discourse the effect of the narrative section in the story. A full explanation of these elements is as follows.

When a person is trying to tell a story, it is common to hear the abstract first, which can summarize the whole

narrative (Labov, 1972). For example, “(Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in danger of being killed?) I talked a man out of Old Doc Simon, I talked him out of pulling the trigger (Labov, 1972 pp.363)” The speaker uses only one clause to sketch his whole story. Secondly, orientation provides a series of free clauses filling in background information, including characters, time, physical background and situation. It generally happens at the beginning of the story; however, the narrator will place it into the middle if necessary (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the tense of orientation in English is generally the past progressive (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).

Labov (1972) points out that complicating action can be viewed as a series of clauses. Each of them tends to describe an event in a temporal sequence of events. Result or resolution transfers the information of tension and the end before the real end of the story. It can occur throughout the narrative and has the function of evaluating, stating and underscoring what is interesting or unusual (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). Evaluation represents the narrator's comments on the action from outside the story world (Labov, 1972). It can be either narrative clauses or non-narrative clauses. The coda indicates the end of the narrative. It can also include a summary of the story (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).

#### IV. DISCUSSION

A narrative always starts from the abstract; it can be regarded as the summary of the whole story (Labov, 1972). Gadsby begins her story from the abstract. “I told a story about the time this young man had almost beaten me up because he thought I was cracking on to his girlfriend.” Gadsby first uses one subordinated clause to summarize her story. That clause introduces to the audience that the narrative is about a young man, a fight and Gadsby. It simplifies the whole story and shows the main points to listeners.

After that, Gadsby provides a restricted clause: “Actually, that bit was true, got that right” after “he thought I was cracking on to his girlfriend.” This clause cannot be put in any place as a free clause, but it can move to some specific place. For example, there is another “trying to crack on to my girlfriend” at the end of the narrative. If the clause is placed after these words, the meaning of the story will not be changed. According to Labov (1972), evaluation is more likely to be the expression of judgment. The speaker uses it to highlight the essential elements of the narrative. The restricted clause is Gadsby's evaluation of what the young man thought. The speaker admits the motive for talking to the young man's girlfriend. It is interesting to note the reaction of the audience, they laugh<sup>1</sup> after Gadsby's evaluation. That means the comedian delivers the humor successfully. Through inserting an evaluation after the abstract, the audience is persuaded to laugh by the comedian.

Next to the first evaluation, there is the second evaluation: “but there was a twist.” Gadsby provides this narrative clause to start the story. The speaker also indicates listeners that the most humorous point of the narrative is the “twist”. This clause tends to catch the attention and interest of the audience.

After these two evaluations, Gadsby provides the orientation, which can help the listener identify the place, time, characters and activities. In the narrative, the speaker says, “It happened late at night, it was at the bus stop, the pub had closed, it was the last bus home, and I was waiting at the bus stop, and I was talking to a girl.” Gadsby uses free clauses and narrative clauses to complete the orientation. These clauses provide information about the characters— a girl and me; time— late night; place— the bus stop; situation— the pub had closed, waiting for the last bus. Moreover, it is interesting that the most essential character— the young man is not introduced by the orientation but the abstract. That means sometimes abstract can replace the part function of the orientation.

Gadsby gives an evaluation after providing the orientation. “You could say flirting, I don't know.” This narrative clause has the same function as the first one. The speaker sets a punchline again in the evaluation. Listeners laugh<sup>2</sup> since Gadsby admits that she was trying to flirt not to talk to a girl.

The complicating action can be viewed as “then what happened (Labov, 1972 pp.370)”. Complicating clauses are narrative clauses and tend to reappear some events (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). After the third evaluation, Gadsby shows a series of complicated actions to describe what has happened in her story. The complicating actions are as following:

- a “And out of nowhere, he just comes up” (complicating action: comes up)
- b “And starts shoving me going” (complicating action: shoving)
- c “And he goes ‘keep away from my girlfriend.’” (complicating action: goes)
- d “And she just stepped in going: ‘whoa, stop it, it's a girl.’” (complicating action: stepped)
- e “And he's gone, ‘oh, sorry.’” (complicating action: gone)
- f “He said: ‘oh, I'm sorry, I don't hit women’” (complicating action: said)
- g “he said, ‘what a guy’” (complicating action: said)  
I don't hit women,  
How about you don't hit anyone  
Good rules of thumb.
- h “he goes: ‘sorry I got confused’” (complicating action: goes)

<sup>1</sup> 1 (see appendix: transcript Line 8)

<sup>2</sup> 2 (see appendix: transcript Line 20)

Based on these actions, there is no doubt that the young man was rude and he had no respect for Gadsby. His words were vulgar and humiliating. The young man tried to hit the speaker, but his girlfriend dissuaded him. The reason why he stopped his action was simple: he hits guys; he does not hit women. Through the description, Gadsby did not give a response to the young man's words. As a speaker, she only provides an evaluation—"I don't hit women, how about you don't hit anyone, good rules of thumb."

Evaluation helps the narrator to indicate the point. It shows "the *raison d'être* of the narrative (Labov, 1972)", which means the aspect of evaluation in the narrative is related to a situated value system. Gadsby puts her loud personal voice in this evaluation. The young man's action is a kind of sexism; he distinguishes women from the human beings. His protection ideology means he does not put women and men in the same social status. In his idea, women and men are unequal. But women are not the weak; women are the other sex, which is different from men. The young man does not hit women, should men be hit? This is also the unequal treatment of men. From the narration, the young man had no idea at all about Gadsby's name, he treated a stranger with swear language and planned to hit the stranger. "how about you don't hit anyone." This is the speaker's irony at the young man's action. She uses a humorous tone to hit back perfectly. The audience laughs<sup>3</sup> after Gadsby's evaluation; this means the speaker's humor is delivered successfully.

Result indicates the information before the real end, and it can have the function of evaluating (Labov, 1972). "now I do understand I have a responsibility to help lead people out of ignorance at every opportunity I can." That sentence is not only the information before the end but also the evaluation by the speaker. Coda indicates that the story is over (Labov, 1972). The coda of Gadsby's story is "But I left him there, people. Safety first". After hearing that sentence, the audience laugh again<sup>4</sup> realising the speaker's humorous satire of the young man.

Gadsby shows the audience her wisdom and humor successfully in the whole narrative. However, there is still a question. Why did not Gadsby use her intelligence and do something to hit back in the narration? She could use some action to fight back, but she kept silent to that experience of youth. Perhaps she lets the young man shame her into silence. Does that mean she was afraid of that rude person?

The answer might be yes. At the end of the narration, Gadsby said she tried to keep safe. In other words, the young man's language and actions scared her. The truth of Gadsby's story might be full of fear, violence and rudeness; the young man has almost assaulted her. It is hard to imagine how brave she is to transform that fear into humor and share the story on the stand-up stage with the audience. What people can get from the story is not only the entertainment value but also personal growth. In the narrative, young Gadsby might be scared to admit her orientation and hit back at the person who insulted her. However, today's Gadsby stands on the stage as a lesbian and shares her story with confidence. The audience laughs often in Gadsby's story. The most frequent punchline Gadsby uses is about her orientation. For example, in the first evaluation, the audience laughs<sup>5</sup> because Gadsby admits to flirting with a girl. The speaker prepares the way for many jokes about lesbian. She never denies her orientation and is brave enough to demonstrate it to the public.

Moreover, it is obvious to note Gadsby's voice behind the narrative. She desires equality between women and men. In the story, the young man stopped his rudeness when his girlfriend told him Gadsby is a girl. Does that mean girls are different from guys, they stay in another section which keeps away from guys. But guy involves two kinds of sex, men and women. Gadsby uses a funny tone to say, "it's a girl." The audience laughs. It is hard to guess the reason why listeners laugh; however, it is easy to know Gadsby's consideration of women's social status. She recombines her unpleasant memories and uses humor to parcel the story on the comedy stage. The intention is not for fun or gaining the audience's sympathy to show how poor or helpless she was. Gadsby is trying to attract listeners' attention to note the female's situation in today's society. The same as what the young man did in the narrative, the sex of women is being ignored in many events. It is not fair for females but also males. As the study mentioned earlier, the young man does not hit women, should men be hit?

## V. CONCLUSION

The study aims to find out how does Gadsby combine humor with her idea in the narrative. Labov's framework is a good method to analyze a stand-up show's story. The abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result and coda tend to be found clearly in the short story. In the comedy, Gadsby demonstrates/uses? humor mainly via inserting the evaluation. She puts the predictable punchline into the evaluation. The audience is persuaded to laugh in almost every evaluation. On the other hand, the speaker begins with abstract, orientation and end with coda. This order makes the story easy to deliver so that the audience can follow Gadsby's step.

However, there is a limitation when applying Labov's narrative structure to analyze the stand-up show's narration. Audiences' reflection is useful to measure the effect of the story, but Labov's six narrative elements concentrate more on the narrative itself. Putting the audience into the transcript as a second speaker is a good way to settle this problem.

Moreover, Gadsby guides the audience to laugh throughout the narrative; it seems that her story is provided only for entertainment; however, the speaker aims to transfer her consideration of females' social status. She finds and disagrees with the unfair treatment between males and females. In the show, she tells about her unpleasant story and shares it in a

<sup>3</sup> (see appendix: transcript Line 37)

<sup>4</sup> (see appendix: transcript Line 49) <sup>5</sup> (see appendix: transcript Line 8)

humorous way. Gadsby puts what she was afraid of in front of the public. Her bravery and growth can be seen clearly. However, the intention of the speaker is not herself. She expects the public to note the young man's discriminatory practice concerning women. That action exists not only in the story but also in society. To be treated equally is Gadsby's real expectation. The appearance of Gadsby's narrative is a comedy, but the point behind it is a woman's voice, she desires equality, not the neglect or special treatment.

## VI. SUGGESTION

In future research, it is worth noticing the effect of other speakers when applying Labov's framework to a live show. Their reactions may affect the narrative. Although the audience almost does not participate in the speaker's performance by talking, the audience still tends to become the second speaker in the show because their reaction to the performance is also a kind of language. For example, it is possible for the narrator to change narrative styles or even the content when the audience shows signs of boredom such as whispering to each other.

## APPENDIX 1. TRANSCRIPT

Link to the data: <https://www.netflix.com/au/title/80233611> (09:58-11:23)

1. G I to: :>ld a< I told £ a story £ about the time,
2. G this young: man
3. G had almost beaten me up.
4. G Because he thought(hh)
5. G I mean .hh
6. G he thought I was<sup>5</sup> to his girlfriend .hh well  
>Actually that< bit was true ↓ [got that right]
7. A [(hhh)]
8. G But(0.5) there was a twist.
9. G It happened late >at night< >it was(0.3)at<,
10. G the bus stop
11. G you know the pub had closed↑
12. G it was the last bus £ home £ ↑
13. G and I was £ waiting £ at the bus stop
14. G .hh and I was TALking to a girl.
15. G an:d I (0.2)
16. G you: know:
17. G You could say: flirting↑
18. G [o I don't know o]
19. A [(hhh)]
20. G (0.5)an::d,
21. G £ out of nowhere £
22. G he just comes up↓ and starts shoving: ME going
23. <sup>6</sup> YOU <sup>7</sup> (0.4)<sup>8</sup>
24. G An:d £ he knows goes £
25. G KEEP away from my girlfriend you<sup>9</sup>
26. G And(0.2)and she just steeped in going <whoa:, stop↓it
27. G it's a gi::rl>
28. G and he's gone, [“OH↓ sorry”],
29. A [(hhh)]
30. G (1.2)he said sorry oh I'm sorry >I↓ don't< hit women↑
31. G he said↑
32. G WHAT↓ a guy::
33. A (hhh)
34. G(0.9)>£ I don't £< hit women↑ (hh)
35. G How about you don't hit anyone↓
36. A (hhh)
37. G (0.7)Good rules of thumb
38. G he goes, SO:rry(hh) I got confused I: thought,

<sup>5</sup> vulgar words which mean flirting.

<sup>6</sup> swear words

<sup>7</sup> swear words

<sup>8</sup> insult words to guy.

<sup>9</sup> insults words to guy

39. G you were a <sup>10</sup>  
 40. A (hhh)  
 41. G (0.8) ↓trying to \_\_\_\_\_ <sup>11</sup> my gi:rl:friend  
 42. A (hhhh)  
 43. G (1.5)now >I do<(0.6)I do understand,  
 44. G I have a responsibility to help lead people out of  
 ignorance↑o at every opportunity I can,  
 45. G but I LE<sub>2</sub>ft him there pe<sub>2</sub>ople  
 46. A (hhh)  
 47. G (1.1)sa:fety fi:rst

## APPENDIX 2. KEY OF THE TRANSCRIPT SYMBOLS

**Transcriptions generally follow Conversation Analysis conventions (Clift, 2016)**

- a. Temporal and sequential relationships [ ]  
 b. Numbers in parenthesis indicate silence (0.5) indicates half a second's silence  
 c. Aspect of speech delivery  
 Contour, not necessary at the end of a sentence.  
 A comma indicates "continuing" intonation, not necessarily,  
 Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis word  
 Capital letter means particularly increased loudness **WORD**  
 Quite or soft o o  
 Falling intonation contour (letter) No:  
 Rising intonation contour (letter) ;  
 Rise of full in pitch ↑↓  
 Talk between them is compressed or rushed > <  
 A stretch of talk is markedly slowed or drawn out <>  
 d. Hearable aspiration is shown where it occurs in the talk  
 The more 'hh' is, the more aspiration hh  
 'smiling voice' £ £  
 Inbreaths .hh

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<sup>10</sup> insults words to guy

<sup>11</sup> vulgar words which mean flirting