10. WHY DO WE NEED EVALUATION DEVICES ANYWAY?∗

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INTRODUCTION: EVALUATION AND STORIES

The theory of evaluation devices has been one of the most influential theories in the area of narrative structure and comprehension. Labov’s (1972) seminal study of the phenomenon has generated a huge amount of research regarding the use of evaluation devices in various social contexts, (Polanyi 1978), in literary as well as non-literary narratives (e.g., Reinhart, 1995; Shen, 1985), and in its role in development (e.g., Peterson & McCable, 1983).

In general, this theory, which forms part of Labov’s theory of oral narratives, assumes that relating the sequence of events is not the only function the story fulfills. Another central function is the evaluative function, i.e., conveying to the reader the purpose or the ‘point’ of the story – its raison d’etre, why it is being told at all, and what the narrator intends. This function is essential, since the sequence of events by itself is not necessarily interesting. Furthermore, the sequence does not allow one to infer the story’s raison d’etre, a function fulfilled by what Labov defines as evaluation devices.

Most studies of these evaluation devices have focused on their formal aspects as well as on their distribution along the text continuum (e.g., Labov, 1972; Polanyi, 1978). However, the very function of “evaluation” remains somewhat vague. What exactly does one mean by the idea of “signalling the ‘point’ of the story”, or it’s raison d’etre? I would like to elaborate on various aspects of the evaluative function.

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I. Language and discourse

EVALUATION DEVICES THEORY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Let me start (for the sake of readers less acquainted with Labov’s notions), with a brief description of the major evaluation devices. (The reader familiar with these devices may skip the present section). This brief description is based on Reinhart (1995), who introduces a redivision of Labov’s original set of evaluation devices. Recall that Labov’s general distinction is between external evaluations (that is, direct commentary of the narrator about the importance of a certain event), and internal ones. The latter consist of two major groups (see Reinhart, 1995), namely, I. Equivalence; II. Comparatives

I. Equivalences are of two sorts: (a) semantic equivalences: e.g., synonyms, and (b) repetitions, e.g., lexical repetitions of the same lexical item, syntactic and prosodic repetitions. These repetitions stress certain meanings which are thus marked and can be assigned to the neutral events in the story. Consider, for example, the following sentences excerpted from a fight story generated by one of Labov’s informants (that will be analyzed later on). These sentences are full of lexical, syntactic and semantic repetitions (bolded in the following pairs of sentences):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JJ</th>
<th>I tried to kill ’im–over one cigarette!</th>
<th>KK</th>
<th>I tried to kill ’im. Square business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Or:</td>
<td>MM You know, all of a sudden I went crazy!</td>
<td>NN</td>
<td>I jus’ went crazy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or:</td>
<td>OO An’ I jus’ wouldn’t stop hittin the motherfucker.</td>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Dig it, I couldn’t stop hittin’ ’im, man, till the teacher pulled me off o’ him.</td>
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II. Comparatives are of two sorts: (a) metaphorical expressions in which there is a comparison between two states or objects, one of which actually exists, and (b) modalities, a term referring to comparisons between an actual state and a state which is wished for, feared, existed in the past, or is morally condemned, etc. Both in metaphorical expressions and modalities, the actual situation (state or event) is evaluated by the non-existing situation through the comparison. For example, an actual event is interpreted not merely as a neutral event – which would be the case without the comparison – but rather as one which has never happened, or a highly desired one, etc. This is the sense of evaluation used here. For example, in the previously mentioned story one of the characters says:

* I mean – I mean we supposed to be brothers, an’ shit . . . ”

Here, the speaker compares the actual state (in which he refuses to share his last cigarette with his rival) with a state he wishes for (in which the narrator would share with him the cigarette). Furthermore, this sentence also uses a metaphorical comparison between the relation he expects to have with the narrator and that between two brothers.