ANALYZING 4CHAN’S “GREENTEXT”: DOES GREENTEXT ADHERE TO LABOVIAN ORAL NARRATIVE?

INTRODUCTION

What is “greentext”?

- Greentext is practiced exclusively by users of 4chan.org
- Greentext is most commonly used to cite or quote posts from other users, but it is also used to tell stories

LABOVIAN ORAL NARRATIVE

Telling stories is something everyone does. According to Labov, they must:

- contain a “most reportable event” that, “requires a person to occupy more social space than in other conversational exchanges – to hold the floor longer, and the narrative must carry enough interest for the audience to justify this action.” This determines the narrative’s “reportability” (1997)
- contain at least one temporal juncture (if the order of the narrative’s clauses were to be rearranged, the narrative’s meaning would change) (1997)
- contain “credibility” which Labov defines as: “the extent to which listeners believe that the events described actually occurred in the form described by the narrator” (1997)

FRAMEWORK OF ORAL NARRATIVE

Oral narrative has a framework made up of a specific clausal structure, the main clauses of which are:

- Abstract – “an initial clause that reports the entire sequence of the events of the narrative”
- Orientation – “gives information on the time, place, of the events of a narrative, the identities of the participants, and their initial behavior”
- Complicating action – “a sequential clause that reports a next event in a response to a potential question, ‘And what happened [then]?’”
- Evaluation – “an assessment of actions by a juxtaposition of real and potential events through the use of irrealis predicates (subjunctive)”
- Validation – “a validation of the most reportable event by enhancing credibility through the use of objective witnesses”
- Coda – “a final clause which returns the narrative to the time of speaking, precluding the potential question, ‘And what happened [then]?’” (1997)

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, I examined the structures of greentext stories and compared them to Labovian oral narrative framework. I also examined syntactic features of greentext and assessed the medium’s credibility

DATA

THE STRUCTURE OF GREENTEXT

The example above contains five out of the six clauses Labov lists as components of oral narrative. It does not contain a clause of evaluation. In the dozens of examples examined, no examples of subjunctive were found outside of quotations.

DISCUSSION

Syntax

- Most phrases used in greentext stories have verbs as their heads – it is rare to find full tense phrases outside of quotations
- The “>” symbol functions as a quasi-conjunction. All of the examples given so far, as well as the ones below, are still logical if one replaces “>” with “and.” This is typical of spoken narrative as well

Credibility

- Labov states one should not assume the narrator is lying because it is unproductive and because it is harder to lie than to tell the truth
- The nature of 4chan, where anonymity is valued above all else, forces one to question the credibility of “greentext”

In the example above, the “Thug Life” picture of Carlton:

- provides a contextual element that allows the reader to assume the following narrative is most likely going to be exaggerated and humorous
- However, not every greentext comes with a picture, and almost none include pictures of Carlton

CONCLUSION

Although greentext is more than capable of meeting Labov’s requirement of a “minimal narrative” (at least one temporal juncture), it does not possess the capacity to adhere to its complete structure, mainly due to the lack of evaluation. Additionally, the nature of the internet, and especially the nature of 4chan, where anonymity is valued above all else, forces readers to question the credibility of every greentext story. However, this does not mean that greentext should be viewed as a “lesser” form of storytelling.

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