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Do Men and Women Narrate Personal Regret Experiences Differently?

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Abstract

Narrative is the principal means of encoding and conveying personal experiences. The current study aims to investigate the personal regret narratives of Turkish university students regarding their personal experiences and to evaluate these narratives from a gender-based perspective. To this end, 116 Turkish university students have participated in this study and the selected personal regret narratives are analyzed within the frame of Labovian narrative categories: abstract, orientation, complicating actions, coda, evaluation and result or resolution. In addition to the existence of these categories, their organizational patterns are also compared with respect to the gender of the participants. The evaluation of the narratives demonstrated that all the narrative components are employed by the Turkish university students; however, female students seem to be more inclined to connect their experiences to daily events or other events in their lives by applying coda more frequently than male students using language as independence symbol instead of employing it to develop intimacy as female students do. The results of this study might contribute to discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and social psychology as written regret narratives allow us to have a deeper understanding of how Turkish students organize their experiences which reflects social, discursual and cognitive dimensions.

Keywords: discourse analysis, gender, narrative structure, personal experience

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Introduction

Language and gender are seen as part of a socialization process that is continuously reconstructed through interactions. From birth, individuals are assigned identities and must adapt to societal traditions by internalizing their norms. In this case, it could be said that the

roles and norms imposed on women and men may lead to a variety of labelling on them. As language is a reflection of society, it is integral part of a culture. The indicators of reality that exists in a specific culture are reflected through a language. For this reason, giving different roles to men and women in the society and power imbalances between the genders have differentiated the use of language.

Relations between gender and language have been the focus of linguists, who have studied language research from a feminist point of view since the 1970s. Thus, the phenomenon of women and language, especially with the start of the feminist movement, Second and Third Wave Approach, it was brought to the agenda and studies have been started widely on this subject. At the core of the first studies carried out in this period, "The language used by the woman is different from the language used by the man because the position of the woman is lower; it shows the dominance in the male language "(Jespersen 1922; Labov, 1972; Lakoff 1973, 1975; Trudgill, 1974; Zimmerman & West 1975; Fishman 1980; O'Barr & Atkins 1980; Spender 1980; Coates 1989; Mills and Mullany, 2011).

One of the pioneering researchers, Otto Jespersen (1922) explained the deficiencies of woman language. When the Second Feminist Wave was on the agenda in 1970s, Lakoff (1973) argued that women are subjected to injustice in two ways in terms of language behavior and language use. In his *Language and Woman's Place* (1973) article, the weakness of the woman and their secondary position in society are discussed regarding their influence on woman language. Specifically, Lakoff claimed that women are expected to act thoughtfully and politely instead of expressing their feelings and thoughts clearly. In addition, he also drew attention to the common features of female language and its differences from male language (e.g. politeness of female language, indirect speech, proper language use, tag question use, employment of intensifiers and empty adjectives and avoiding profane language use). In a similar vein, feminists have argued that, as norms are determined and dominated by men in the world, differences in women language are always perceived as a underestimation and a deficiency. In this context, researchers proposed that women language differs from men language for different purposes (Coates,1989; Coates & Cameron 1989; Tannen 1990). In the book *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), Tannen argued that men utilize language as a power and high-status symbol, whereas women employ it to develop intimacy in social relations.

In the Third Wave, there is a general view in language and gender studies that the language used by women plays an important role in forming their identity. Researchers in this period criticized the previous studies which ignored the similarities and differences between the language of men and women in the context the language was used. With this new approach, women-centered language studies are investigated at discourse level rather than word/sentence level and explained how gender is formed through language (see also Cameron, 1990,1995; Buttler, 1990,1993,1997,2004; Wodak, 1997; Goodwin, 1998; Sunderland, 2004; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Holmes, 2008).

The researches in the Third Wave laid emphasis on the broad community of practice as well as gender and power relations. It could be stated that researches have been conducted with the idea that language is a social phenomenon that adapts the norms and traditions produced in an ideological system as gender-appropriate behaviors. For instance, Ecker and McConnell-Ginet (2003) investigated various language-related phenomena such as reversal, intonation, intuition, and the potential for causing confusion within societal contexts. Language is intricately linked to societal events, encompassing public discourse, behavioral forms, and even humor. To illustrate, certain jokes encode culturally specific assumptions; for example, jokes about "blondes" typically evoke images of women rather than men. Furthermore, "stupid blonde" jokes specifically target women, and a shift in who makes these jokes—from men to women—has been noted, challenging traditional gender dynamics (Holmes, 2012). This shift

is significant for analyzing gendered language forms in social interactions and for challenging social stereotypes, which may also manifest in narratives.

Özyalvaç and Bilgin (2024) discuss how women's identities are subjected to male-dominated language practices throughout the modernization process and highlight the dominance of masculine perspectives in language, society, and historiography. Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003a-b) argue that gender construction can be examined through narratives, as life stories, gossip, jokes, and personal anecdotes inherently contain gendered elements. Analyzing such narratives can reveal gender differences within speech communities and practice communities. For example, Kristof and Wudunn (2010) collected women's stories to perform a gender and narrative analysis, uncovering aspects of gender politics. Similarly, Sunderland (2004) described gender-related discourses by analyzing familiar and recurring patterns in narratives, demonstrating how narrative paths can elucidate gender differences in speech within a Western context. Sunderland also posited that these gender differences in narration might be partially attributed to biological factors, suggesting that further analysis of narratives from other cultures could either support or challenge these conclusions.

Previous gender-based studies in the Turkish language have shown that male and female participants encode and decode linguistic items differently across various contexts and genres (Aydın & Ercan, 2021; Candan, 2021; Güçlü, 2017, 2019; Okyar, 2021; Önem, 2016). For instance, Önem (2016) investigated gender differences in the length of requests among Turkish speakers using a Discourse Completion Task with 54 students and found that female participants used more words in their requests compared to male participants. Similarly, Güçlü (2019) examined refusal speech acts in TV dating programs and found that women use more euphemistic language while men are more direct in their refusals. Additionally, Okyar (2021) identified vocabulary learning strategies employed by Turkish EFL learners; and found that female students reported greater use of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and affective strategies when compared to male students.

1.1 The Concept of Narrative

Narrative could be defined as one of the ways through which human beings recount their past events. Since language is one of the ways by which human beings transmit their personal experiences and stories, narratives could be regarded as the basis of communication among people. In other words, narratives pave the way for sharing experiences, reconstructing personal experiences and cultural transmission. The use of language for communication as well as the need for expressing opinions about thoughts and life related issues lead to narrations. As Dubi (2020) puts forth, we employ narrative styles and stories in daily life to convey the idea that authors or speakers are expressing their personal opinions. Some of the definitions of the term “narrative” is as following: “stories gather people around them, dialectically connecting people and social movements” (Labov & Waletzky, 1967); “reporting past events that have entered the biography of the narrator” (Plummer, 1995); “life story, account, discourse” (Labov, 2006), “recording human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007; Gimenez, 2010). As enunciated by the scholars, it could be inferred that narrative mostly focuses on the sharing of personal experiences from narrators’ perspective. It also seems that stories about personal events are reflected by different text types. For instance, forms of narrative consist of parables, myths/epics, poems, tall tales, novels, short stories, plays, and news to give information or lessons and to entertain the addressee. Therefore, narratives could be oral or written forms, which means that they could be elicited from naturally occurring data such as records, interviews, biographies (life stories) and ordinary stories told or written by people to share their daily experiences.

1.2 Narrative Analysis

As a broad and multidisciplinary research area in linguistics, narrative analysis has been the focus of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, conversation analysis, and cognitive and discourse studies by means of structural and functional approaches (van Dijk, 1993). The structural analysis lays emphasis on the construction of the personal narrations in terms of formal linguistic structures. For the structural and functional analysis, the book by Propps (1928-1968) *Morphology of the Folk Tale* is regarded as the first important figure collecting the Russian folk tales and revealing the common narrative structures employed in family and life stories. On the other hand, from a functional Labovian perspective (1972), narrative components including abstract, orientation, complicating actions, coda, evaluation and result or resolution may indicate the cohesion and coherence of the narration through linguistic devices. It means that small parts constructing the whole text may give more information about the whole story. From functional approach, it appears that Riessman's (1990) gender divergence on the divorce stories is also seen as a leading figure in searching male and female narration differences in personal narrations. As it is assumed that personal and relational stories mirror the mind, the similar and different patterns utilized in the narrations reveal the narrative knowledge. Thus, the narrative analysis of Riessman (1993) representing social identities and Liblicch and colleagues' (1998) analysis of the internal organizational patterns of stories are also valuable studies in regard to linguistic choices and coding narrations. On the other hand, Shiro (2003) seems to make a fictional narration analysis from a third-person perspective. The analysis by Shiro could be regarded as an omniscient view through which personal experiences are conveyed. In another study, Bates (2004) researched narrative and episodic interviewing methods revealing information about human behaviours and identifying the narrative elements created by Labov (1972).

Recent studies in Turkish gender-based narrative analysis have explored various aspects of gendered narratives. Özyıldırım (2018) examined personal fear narratives and gender relations within the framework of Shiro (2003). Oktay (2010) investigated personal fright experiences among children from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds using Labov's (1972) categories.

1.3 Labovian Approach to Narrative Analysis

Labov and Waletzky (1967) has become the influential figures in sociolinguistics by laying emphasis on personal narratives. In Labovian sense, narrative focuses on the past experiences of the human beings. Despite the fact that Labov (1972) agreed upon describing small cohesive units and linguistic components as important for the existence of narration, he rather suggests that the linguistic units are particular reflections of a whole structure organizing its small components in a top to bottom fashion. Therefore, Labov (1972) proposed a model for narrative analysis by arguing that there are certain stages in a fully-formed narration. In this model, he attempted to account for narrative in regard to the representations of certain personal events and experiences by focusing on six elements: abstract, orientation, complication action, evaluation, result/resolution and coda.

The questions addressed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) for the six components involve abstract: "What is the story about?"; orientation: "Who, when, where, how?"; complicating action: "Then what happened?"; evaluation: "How or why is this interesting?"; result / resolution: "What finally happened?"; coda: "Is more narrative necessary for ending?" In more detail, the functions of these components can be explained from the perspective of Labov and Waletzky's (1967) arguments. At the stage "abstract", readers are prepared to the text by indicating certain themes of the narration. For instance, *Once upon a time*, is a generic term

employed in folktale narratives. At the “orientation” stage, readers are oriented regarding the information about the participants, place of events and when the actions are realized. Accordingly, the readers are provided with referential and deictic expressions. This stage is followed by “complicating action” which consists of a problem eventuated in a crisis. The problems raised at the orientation stage become complicated and unpredictable. The conjunctions employed to demonstrate temporal relations and unexpected relations such as *and...then; but...all of a sudden*. The stage implicating the result between complication and resolution is the “evaluation” stage which is the significant part of narrative as a narration will be incomplete without evaluation. Specifically, it reports whether events taking place are dangerous, terrifying, attractive, (un)usual, weird, amazing or extraordinary. Attitudes, opinions and thoughts of the narrator is represented at this stage by denoting events and their emotional perspectives. The “resolution” stage demonstrates how narrator solves the problem. Temporal sequential relations and causal conjunctions could be detected at this stage. The stage indicating that narration has ended is “coda” in which the reader makes final remarks about the events by turning to the starting point of the narrative, namely to the abstract stage. The implications of coda could be seen in shift in tense (past to present tense) or general expressions and interpretations for such events.

1.4 The Significance of Narrative Analysis in Linguistics

The purpose of analyzing narratives is to understand how individuals shape and reflect their stories or personal experiences through ideologies, identities, and socio-cultural relations. Narrative analysis allows us to extrapolate and better understand certain personal experiences and the meaning conveyed through them systematically. It also opens windows into life of human beings confronting the constraints of circumstances. According to the literature, narrative analysis allows researchers to explore the "active, self-shaping quality of human thought and the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, p. xiv).

Narrators make use of specific linguistic means to convey their thoughts and interact with the listeners. Furthermore, personal problems that people show in their narrations, such as divorce, fearful, dangerous memories, pressures on females and bereavements, give us information about the social, psychological and historical processes. Thus, narrative analysis is significant for “individual and collective action and meanings, as well as the social processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed” (Laslett, 1999, p. 392).

1. The Aim of the Study and Research Questions

Following the gender-related narrative differences and Labovian (1972) narrative categories, this study is an attempt to investigate the regret narratives written by Turkish male and female university students. This study differs from the earlier studies in that it involves a different culture and a language other than Western studies. Therefore, this study might contribute to the identification of similar and distinct patterns in regard to gender-related narrative studies. In parallel to this aim, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of narrative categories do Turkish native speakers employ in their regret narratives?
2. How is the distributional pattern of Labovian narrative categories in regret narratives produced by Turkish native speakers according to their gender?
3. Do the regret narratives significantly differ according to gender based on the following categories: abstract, orientation, complicating actions, coda, evaluation and result?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 116 students in total; however, the analysis showed that only 78 of the regret narratives could be involved in the study. Specifically, texts composed of only a few sentences are eliminated as the Labovian categories are not available. Therefore, a total of 78 university students (40 female and 38 male) at the undergraduate level formed the study participants. Their age range is between 18-24. All the participants are native Turkish speakers and are selected as volunteers using the convenience sampling technique.

3.2 Data Collection

The current study's data were gathered from Hacettepe University, located in Turkey. As for the elicitation of the data, in their usual class hours, the participants willing to share their experiences were first oriented to think about their regrets. Then, they were asked to write about the most regretful personal experiences that they had in their lives. They were given almost 20 minutes to write their regret stories.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study used both qualitative and quantitative analysis as narrative analysis is mostly about how meaning is constructed through experiences, which could be analyzed with a qualitative approach to evaluate the concrete life situations, and a quantitative approach may represent realistic results for the data analysis. In addition, descriptive statistics, including Chi-square and frequency analysis, were employed in the analysis of the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

This paper has focused on the regret narratives elicited from Turkish university students and revealed how they represent their regrets in their narratives and how they shape their narrations on the basis of Labovian narrative structure. Table 1 illustrates the types of narrative components deployed by the participants in their regret narratives and their frequency distribution.

Table 1: Gender-based distribution of the Labovian functional categories in regret narratives

Labovian Functional Category	Percentage of categories (female participants)	Percentage of categories (male participants)
1. Abstract	27 %	37 %
2. Orientation	11 %	14 %
3. Complicating action	13 %	10 %
4. Result or Resolution	11 %	9 %
5. Evaluation	24 %	23 %
6. Coda	14 %	7 %

The Table 1 clearly shows that all of the Labovian functional categories were utilized by both male and female participants in their regret narratives. Accordingly, the data analysis demonstrates that both male and female students included in the study have well-developed writing skills in regard to producing structurally organized narratives as they organize their experiences in the form of narratives.

As for the frequency distribution, the data analysis reveals that there is a quite parallel distribution among the six categories employed by male and female participants when all the narratives are evaluated separately. Accordingly, Table 1 illustrates the following findings.

In the analyzed regret narratives written by Turkish female and male adults, *the abstract* summary of the whole story is the most frequently used Labovian functional category. This means that this category is really an essential part of the written regret narratives. *Evaluation* is at the second rank regarding its existence in the regret narratives of Turkish male and female students. According to Bell (1991), *evaluation* is how the story's significance is established in personal narratives. While *the coda* is the third most frequently used category in female narratives, it is not the coda but *orientation* in male narratives. *Complicating action* is the fourth most frequently applied category in both male and female regret narratives. *The result* is the fifth mostly used category in female and male narratives. At the same time, *orientation* is the least used category in female narratives, and in male narratives, it is not orientation but the *coda*.

A notable finding is that the category least employed by female participants is *orientation*, which provides details about time, place, and people. This contrasts with previous studies suggesting that women typically use more detailed language (Litosseliti, 2014). Another remarkable finding is that the least employed category by male participants is *coda*. Given that *coda* is a word/s that signal/s the conclusion of the narrative, it could be said that the male participants avoid ending their narratives. The fact that male and female students' verbal descriptions of their regret experiences share almost a parallel distribution demonstrates that the nature of narrative productions is similar from a gender perspective.

A Chi-square test was run to compare the type and number of narrative categories employed by Turkish male and female speakers. Table 2 illustrates the results.

Table 2: Chi-square test results of the regret narratives

Labovian Narrative Category	Value	df	p
Abstract	.241	1	0.623
Orientation	.032	1	.859
Complicating Action	1.223	1	.269
Result	1.884	1	.170
Evaluation	.182	1	.669
Coda	5.325	1	.021

Based on the results of Chi-square test, it could be inferred that there is a statistically significant difference between the male and female participants in their employment of *coda* in the personal regret narratives ($p < 0.05$). According to the statistics, female participants tend to use more *coda* to conclude the narrative as shown in two different extracts below, which were taken from the written firsthand narratives of male and female Turkish speakers, respectively:

Extract 1 (Male 16th):

Abstract	<i>Üniversitenin ilk yılında derslere düzenli katılmayıp o sene ara vermem yanlış bir karardı.</i> “It’s a wrong decision for me not to follow the lessons regularly at the first class of the University.”
Evaluation	<i>Ve o sene okula ara verip yapmak istediğim şeyleri okula devam ederken de yürütebilirdim.</i> “And that year without taking a break from school, I could do what I wanted to do while attending school.”
Orientation	<i>İki dönem aradan sonra okula tekrar adapte olmak zorlayıcı bir süreçti.</i> “Re-adapting to the school after a two-semester break was a challenging process.”
Evaluation	<i>İlk yılın hatalarını ilerleyen yıllarda telafi etmek yorucuydu.</i> “It was exhausting to make up for the mistakes of the first year in the following years.”
Complicating Action	<i>Bir dönemde birden fazla dönemin dersini aldığımdan her bir derse ayırabildiğim süre azdı.</i> “Since I took the courses of more than one semester in a semester, the time I could allocate to each course was less.”
Result	<i>Bu da notlarımın olabileceği kadar yüksek olmamasına neden oldu.</i> “This made my grades not as high as they could be.”

As can be observed in the sample narrative extract above written by a male participant, all of the categories were used except one; *coda*. The absence of *coda* in male’s narrative shows that the author does not prefer connecting the events in his narrative to his daily life or other events in his life; accordingly, it could be understood that male participants abstain from going out of the narrative frame which includes only the events and ideas relating to their regret

experiences. Another data extracted from a female participant’s regret narrative is presented below:

Extract 2 (Female23rd):

Abstract	Küçükken abimi kapının arkasına sıkıştırıp karnını ısırıp korkutmuştum. “When I was little, I squeezed my brother behind the door, biting his stomach and scaring him.”
Complicating Action	<i>Daha sonra kanadığını görüp korkup ağlamaya başladım ve annelere abimin beni dövdüğünü söylemiştim.</i> “Then I saw her bleeding and started to cry and I told my parents that my brother beat me.”
Result	<i>Abime çok kızmışlardı, şu an karnında dikiş izi var ve çok kötü hissediyorum.</i> “My brother was very angry, now I have a suture on his stomach and I feel so bad.”
Orientation	<i>O zaman ne yaptığının farkında olmasam da daha sonrasında çok pişman oldum.</i> “Even though I didn't realize what I was doing then, I regretted it afterwards.”
Evaluation	<i>Hatırlamasam da birçok şey yapmışımdır diye düşünüyorum. Abim şu an bile biraz içine kapanık ve bunun benimle ilgili olup olmadığı konusunda emin değilim, ama çok kötü davrandığımı biliyorum.</i> “I think I've done a lot of things even if I don't remember. My brother is a little withdrawn right now and I'm not sure if this is about me, but I know I've been very bad.”
Coda	<i>Birkaç kez özür diledim, gülüp geçti ama hala düşünüyorum.</i> “I apologized a few times, laughed but I’m still thinking about this.”

In Extract 2, six categories of a fully formed narrative could be seen in female’s regret narrative. This finding could stem from the fact that women and men construct their narrations through language differently (Litosseliti, 2014). The study reveals the essential role of narratives in revealing the social and cognitive differences in the regret narratives of male and female narratives especially in regard to the use of *coda*. As also supported by Climate (1997), female writers give importance to developing and maintaining relationships with their readers. On the other hand, male writers do not aim to achieve intimacy with their readers which is compatible with the arguments suggested by Tannen (1990). She puts forth that men’s language conveys the reality of independence while women use language to make connection with their listeners or readers and achieve intimacy. The finding of Kaplan and Farrell’s (1994) study goes in line with the present study’s findings as it reveals that women have desire to keep the communication going. In this study, the female students achieve this fact with the use of *coda* in their regret narrative while male students desire to achieve consensus.

Conclusion

The goal of the present study is to examine the Turkish regret narratives and to investigate the influence of gender differences on the use of Labovian narrative categories. All of the narrative categories, namely ‘abstract, orientation, complicating action, result, evaluation and coda’ are found in the regret narratives written by native Turkish speakers regardless of the gender difference. The distribution of narrative categories is almost parallel in female and male regret narratives. In both groups, abstract and evaluation categories are the most frequently observed components; specifically, abstract is followed by evaluation category. The other common point in regard to the distributional pattern is about the fourth and fifth most employed categories; complicating action and result respectively. The only difference detected in the distributional pattern is related with the orientation and coda categories. While the orientation is the least used category in female narratives, it is not the orientation, but the coda in male narratives. A statistically significant difference between the male and female groups is detected in terms of the coda stage in their regret narratives. The analysis revealed that female participants tend to use more coda to conclude the narrative.

As this study is small-scaled research, the participants are limited to the university students aged between 18-20. In order to better understand the personal and educational development of the students further narrative studies could be extended to the analysis of personal writings in other education levels, ages and cultures. In addition, socio-economic status and gender relation in personal narratives could be taken into account in a future study. As enunciated by Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (1992), although there have been a lot of researches regarding language as a social practice, so much progress about this issue has not been detected yet. Considering the narratives written by the Turkish university students, we have noticed that most of the regrets that they have experienced are based on the family and friendship relations, which also give implications for the further studies in social psychology. In addition, investigating the narrative construction of the males and females may give us insight into the communication strategies in the personal relationships. We believe that conducting further research on narrative and gender could better show us cues about solving interactional problems in cultural and intercultural communities.

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