A corpus-based analysis of East African English fiction and oral narratives

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fiction, oral narratives, narrativity model, East African English, narratives, corpus-based, register variation, L2 English

Abstract

The paper analyses two registers, fiction and oral narratives, in a second language variety of English using a model developed to identify discourse with a narrative focus. The research question relates to how and which linguistic features are used in East African English narratives. The present study comprises the corpus-based analysis of four feature groups in fiction and oral narratives, namely agency, causation, contextualisation and evaluation. WordSmith Tools 4.0 was used to analyse 16 linguistic features that form part of the four overarching feature groups. Examples of fiction and oral narratives from the East African English corpus are analysed to illustrate how the model functions. The results show that some of the features are preferred in written discourse, whereas others are more typical of spoken discourse. Eight linguistic features frequently co-occur in both fiction and oral narratives. Overall, the model is sufficiently robust to identify text with a narrative focus.
1. Introduction

Conversation and narratives are the ‘super-genres of discourse,’ (Nair, 2003: 3). In this paper, I look at oral narratives and fiction in a corpus of East African English to see how and which linguistic features are used in spoken and written discourse.

Narratives are the product of a basic human tendency to make sense of real or imagined experiences. Narrativity is the ‘the primary way in which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes,’ (Richardson, 1990: 118). Richardson’s (1990) definition hints at the powerful and widespread use of narration as a means to make sense of experiences. Bundgaard (2007: 253) also reflects on the widespread use of narratives in our lives. Narratives are found in all cultures and are a problem-solving technique in many contexts such as in the assessment of medical case histories, testimony in court, or in news reports (Herman, 2003b: 163). Narratives are ‘polyfunctional’ (Herman, 2003a: 2) and do not serve a sole purpose such as entertainment. Tomasello (2008: 283) regards narratives as a universal venue for information sharing and the expression of attitudes. Ong (2004: 158 [1982]) states that oral narratives universally educate the youth; have aesthetic value; are used in acts of celebration; strengthen group identity; and keep lore alive. Lwin (2010: 359) describes the traditional oral storytelling scene as one where a small group of people are engaged in the act of telling a story. In this context, contact and engagement with the audience is direct and immediate (Lwin, 2010: 359).

The paper compares spoken and written narratives in a second language (L2) variety of English. The aim is to illustrate how the model can be used to identify text with a narrative focus in spoken or written discourse. The analyses are performed using a model developed by Terblanche (2011). I analyse the two prototypical narrative registers, fiction and oral narratives, in the East African component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-EA). Sixteen linguistic features or ‘micro-level indicators of narrativity’ were chosen for analysis based on the model developed in Terblanche (2011). The features are ‘micro-level indicators of narrativity’, because they do not function on the level of the overarching structure of a narrative text, nor do they encompass stylistic devices such as repetition or imagery. Rather, the linguistic features in the model are used to encode narrativity across stretches of discourse. In the next section, previous research on East African English narratives is discussed.

2. Previous research on East African English narratives

A study by Van Rooy, Terblanche, Haase and Schmied (2010) hinted that narrativity is expressed using different linguistic features in East African English compared to British and American English (as described in Biber, 1988). This finding led to a study where I developed a model to examine which linguistic features are used in East African English registers with a narrative focus. In Terblanche (2011), I analysed linguistic features hypothesised to be central to narration across 22 spoken and written registers of ICE-EA. The features were grouped according to agency, causation, contextualisation and evaluation. These feature groups embody the structure of
narratives: something happens (causation) to specific people (agency) in a particular time and place (contextualisation) which elicits certain attitudes and emotions (evaluation). This definition of narratives is based on Semino and Short (2004: 20), who explain that narrative texts ‘relate a series of at least two time-sequenced and causally related events involving one or more specific individuals.’

The first feature group, namely agency, concerns the people who either instigate or are affected by the events. This feature group was included, since Longacre (1976) argues that narratives are agent-oriented. The second feature group, causation, concerns events that are the result of cause and effect. Causation was included, because Semino and Short (2004: 20) state that narratives describe causally related events. The third feature group is contextualisation and it refers to the grounding of events in time and space. As Tomasello (2008: 284) and Verhoeven and Strömqvist (2001: 2) note, the contextualisation of a narrative depends on a time frame and spatial setting. Lastly, evaluation concerns the reactions and attitudes people have towards the events. Labov and Waletzky (2003 [1967]) and Labov (1972: 371) indicate the central role evaluation plays in personal narratives. In addition, Nair (2003: 11) affirms that narrative builds *emotional significance* ‘through purely linguistic means.’

Terblanche (2011) established that narrativity is a gradient phenomenon in East African English that is present to a greater or lesser extent across registers. In other words, a binary distinction between ‘narrative and non-narrative concerns’ (as found in Biber, 1988) was rejected. A continuum emerged where some registers had a clear narrative focus, such as fiction, social letters, oral narratives and legal cross-examinations, whereas other registers had other primary foci and did not focus on narration, for example academic writing and instructional writing. To illustrate, Example 1 has a narrative focus with many agency features, namely *proper nouns for persons* (Hawksins, Africans, Queen Elizabeth), *pronouns* (he, him) and *activity verbs* (leave, steal, return and make). Contextualisation features in Example 1 are *past tense verbs* (made and left).

1) Hawkins left with the Jesus’ to steal some more Africans and he returned to England with such dividends that Queen Elizabeth made him knight. <NT-ESS8T>

The present paper is an application of the model (Terblanche, 2011) to two registers, namely fiction and oral narratives. The methodology is discussed in the next section.

3. Methodology

3.1 The corpus

In total, ICE-EA comprises 1.4 million words of spoken and written English from Kenya and Tanzania. However, the paper deals only with the two registers that have a prototypical narrative focus and have the highest scores for spoken and written discourse of all 22 registers analysed in
Terblanche (2011). The subcorpus in this study comprises 100,912 words from fiction and oral narratives in ICE-EA. In other words, the results reported here are for the subcorpus labelled ‘spoken and written narratives’. To my knowledge, it is the biggest corpus of spoken and written East African English narratives currently available.

The number of texts for spoken discourse (10) is considerably lower than for written discourse (46). The ICE-EA spoken component as a whole had to be reduced compared to other ICE corpora, because of difficulties with data collection (Hudson-Ettle and Schmied, 1999: 6). In the study, the results were normalised and standardised before interpretation to compensate for differing text lengths and word frequencies in the two registers. More detail on the calculations will be given in Section 3.3.

3.2 Analysing the features

A functionalist, corpus-based approach was used to analyse the 16 features in the study. The features are proper nouns for persons, first person pronouns, second person pronouns, third person pronouns, activity verbs, causative subordinator because, non-finite causative clauses, emotional stance verb feel, epistemic stance adverbials, evaluative adjectives, modals and semi-modals, place adverbials, time adverbials, present tense verbs, past tense verbs and perfect aspect. The linguistic features were analysed as micro-level indicators of narrativity. Nonetheless, no claims are made that these features are only used in narrative texts, or always signify narratives, independent of the discourse context.

First, the entire ICE-EA corpus was part-of-speech tagged using CLAWS7. Secondly, the features were analysed in WordSmith Tools 4.0 (Scott, 2004). Semi-automatic and manual extraction techniques were used. A brief discussion of the concordance analyses is presented in Tables 1-4.
Table 1: Analysing the agency group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proper nouns for persons</td>
<td>Proper nouns for persons function as a sample group for all the human nouns or agents. Human agents in the active voice were included, because passives were deemed peripheral to narratives. One of the major functions of the passive voice is to demote the agent of the verb and give topic status to the patient (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan, 1999: 477).</td>
<td>Humphrey, Maliki, Pamella, Sandeere etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person pronouns</td>
<td>Biber et al.’s (1999: 328) list was used. As in Biber (1988: 225), contracted forms were included for all the pronoun features, but unlike Biber (1988), the possessive pronouns mine and ours were included.</td>
<td>I, me, mine, we, us, our, ours, myself, ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person pronouns</td>
<td>A list from Biber (1999: 328) was used.</td>
<td>you, yours, yourself, yourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person pronouns</td>
<td>The pronouns in Biber et al. (1999: 328) were analysed. As in Biber (1988: 225), the pronoun it was excluded. The pronoun it usually refers to non-humans, except when referring to a baby.</td>
<td>she, he, they, her, hers, him, them, his, their, theirs, himself, herself, themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity verbs</td>
<td>The 49 most common activity verbs in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al. 1999: 367) were included in the study.</td>
<td>make, get, go, give, take, come, use, leave, try, send, sit, walk, carry, eat, wear etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Analysing the causation group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causative subordinator</th>
<th>Because is the only subordinator that functions unambiguously as a causative adverbial (Biber, 1988: 236). The causative subordinator because and the variant 'cause were extracted.</th>
<th>because, 'cause, cos*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-finite causative clauses</td>
<td>Non-finite causative clauses that have two grammatical patterns were analysed. Pattern 1 consists of the verb + to-clause. Pattern 2 consists of a verb + noun phrase + to-clause, or be + the past participle of the verb + to-clause (Biber et al. 1999: 703-704).</td>
<td>get, afford, arrange, deserve vote + to-clause OR appoint + noun phrase + to-clause OR be + elected + to-clause etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Analysing the contextualisation group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place adverbials</th>
<th>A combination of 40 place adverbials from Biber (1988: 224) and Biber et al. (1999: 561) were analysed. Words with other major functions such as in or on were excluded. Existential there was deleted. All the fixed expressions that do not refer to a place were deleted, e.g. above all, the above-mentioned, so far (where it refers to time) etc.</th>
<th>here, there, away, behind, inside, outdoors, upstairs etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time adverbials</td>
<td>A combined list of 36 time adverbials from Biber et al. (1999: 561) and Biber (1988: 224) were analysed.</td>
<td>now, then, again, always, still, today, never, ago, tomorrow, already etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present tense verbs</td>
<td>Lexical verbs in the present tense were extracted.</td>
<td>am, do, have, sings etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense verbs</td>
<td>A distinction was made between past tense forms and past participle forms and the latter were deleted. Past participle forms occur in the perfect aspect, participial clauses and passives. Perfect aspect was counted as a separate linguistic feature in the next section.</td>
<td>were, did, had, sang etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect aspect</td>
<td>Manual work was done to delete have as a main verb. Two grammatical patterns were included: firstly, have + (optional adverb/s) + past participle; and secondly, have + noun/pronoun + past participle. The second pattern occurs when the perfect aspect is used in questions (Biber, 1988: 223).</td>
<td>have / had + past participle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Analysing the evaluation group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Analysing the evaluation group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modals and semi-modalns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stance verb <em>feel</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative adjectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic stance adverbials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Standardisation and normalisation of the data

The results reported in the paper are from the more comprehensive study in Terblanche (2011), where the scores for 22 ICE-EA registers were standardised and normalised (see Table 5 below). The standardisation process ensured that the features could be compared across registers. Scores were normalised to compensate for differing text lengths. By standardising and normalising the scores, it was possible to make comparisons between features (e.g. present tense verbs versus past tense verbs), as well as between registers (e.g. fiction versus oral narratives). The total for the 16 features with positive standardised scores for fiction and oral narratives were used to compute the average standardised scores in the Results section. The total score per register was used to determine which features are associated with narrative discourse and whether specific features were used in either the spoken or the written mode.
4. Results

Table 5: Standardised scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature group</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Oral narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Proper nouns for persons</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First person pronouns</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second person pronouns</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third person pronouns</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activity verbs</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causation</td>
<td>Causative subordinator</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-finite causative clauses</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualisation</td>
<td>Place adverbials</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time adverbials</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present tense verbs</td>
<td>-0.91</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past tense verbs</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perfect aspect</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Modals and semi-modals</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional stance verb <em>feel</em></td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluative adjectives</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Epistemic stance adverbials</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>13.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

In the discussion, selected features with notable results will be discussed. First, the total standardised scores per feature group is examined. Next, examples from fiction and oral narratives are analysed.
Graph 1: Total standardised score per feature group

As the graph shows, the features associated with agency, namely proper nouns for persons, pronouns and activity verbs have higher scores in fiction (5.44) than in oral narratives (3.45). In the causation group, oral narratives (2.42) have significantly higher scores than fiction (-0.1). The standardised scores show that fiction uses the causative subordinator because less than oral narratives. The contextualisation group has the most comparable scores for the spoken (4.01) and written mode (4.22). In other words, the features that are included in this group, such as time adverbials and place adverbials, are indicative of prototypical narrative text irrespective of the mode. The evaluation features are more frequent in oral narratives (3.29) than in fiction (0.63). The nature of spoken discourse offers an explanation – there is an emphasis on feelings, attitudes and emotions in oral narratives (Labov and Waletzky, 2003 [1967] and Labov, 1972). In the next section, I analyse fiction and oral narratives.

5.1 Fiction

Eleven features have positive scores for fiction: past tense verbs (2.53), third person pronouns (2.40), proper nouns for persons (1.37), activity verbs (1.22), place adverbials (0.92), perfect aspect (0.90), emotional stance verb feel (0.82), time adverbials (0.78), first person pronouns (0.62), evaluative adjectives (0.22) and non-finite causative clauses (0.11). Example 2 below is a typical extract from ICE-EA fiction from a short story published in a Tanzanian newspaper. Because novels in Tanzania are not written in English, Hudson-Ettle and Schmied (1999) included short stories published in newspapers. These short stories are therefore not written by well-known published authors such as those included in the Kenyan subcorpus. The agency features, namely activity verbs, first person pronouns, third person pronouns and all the proper nouns for
persons are in bold. The evaluation feature bright (third last paragraph) is an evaluative adjective and is in bold italics and underlined. The contextualisation features are past tense verbs, time- and place adverbials and perfect aspect. These features are underlined in the example. Only the features that were analysed in the study are marked, so some features are not annotated, e.g. the place adverbial ‘to Kilimanjaro’.

2) ‘What’s it for?’ ‘Find something for X-mas. And please put it in your pocket!’ He was very lucky for hardly had he put it in his pocket when the door was opened and Humphrey on his usual unexpected visits, entered! ‘Oh Gado, how do you do?’ He liked this boy and in fact he had some plans for him: ‘Do you have some time Gado we can go to Kilimanjaro for tea?’ And it became habitual.

On the evening of the same day, Humphrey visited Maliki. The latter was preparing for his Christmas Moshi trip. After some talks, Humphrey asked for Gado. He came and Maliki exited. ‘Gado, I want you to help me something but before I tell you, promise that you won’t tell anybody even Maliki!’ Humphrey asked. After some hesitations, Gado promised. Humphrey told him that he wanted to hire him to keep an eye on his wife. He’ll pay him tremendously! Gado couldn’t understand what was wrong with this rich couple. He recalled the previous morning when Pamela gave him twenty thousand shillings for nothing important. The curiosity of exhuming the hidden life of them, prompted him to accept the duty he was asked. <…>

A week later Pamela called Gado. She gave him ten thousands more! ‘Go and buy a card for your girlfriend,’ she said. ‘I don’t have a girlfriend,’ Gado replied. ‘Then I’m your girl. Look, I have bought you this for you my boyfriend!’ And she handled him a parcel.

‘I’ll invite you in for X-mas dinner. Now leave!’ Gado understood and left instantly. The parcel had a very expensive pair of English shoes. Also there was a very beautiful Christmas card. She’d written: Gado truly you mean a lot to me. I love you. With all my love - Pamela!
The telephone rang at six in the evening. ‘What are you doing Gado. Pamela had just reminded me that you’re all alone there, why can’t you come and kill the night with us?’

Similar thing re-happened on the New Year eve. Humphrey was drinking whisky while Pennina accompanied him. They were watching video. When she served him and Humphrey getting drunk, she drugged him through her long beautiful coloured nails. Several seconds later Humphrey was snoring while the heroine Pamela went upstairs with Gado!

‘I’m a bit pleased now Gado. However, I’ll find a trick in this year that we’ll have it more often and free!’

But it didn’t come out until the Easter of the fifth year. Maliki decided to send Gado to deliver some money to their father. When Gado told Pamela, she got a very bright idea. It was last February when her doctor got a transfer to KCMC Moshi, and Humphrey was yet to find the substitute.
She told Humphrey about her medical check up. While he thought it over, he visited Maliki. Fortunately, he was told about Gado’s planned trip. “When?” He was more than excited. ‘<---I’m> still looking for his fare.’

‘Never mind about that. I’ll pay for his return ticket. What’s if he stays for a week, <-/y’know> he didn’t go there for X-mas!’ ‘I have no objection, maybe if he has.’<W2F013T>

An extract from Francis Imbuga’s novel Shrine of Tears is given below to show how a published Kenyan author employs the features. Note the frequent use of the agency features proper nouns for persons and third person pronouns. The contextualisation features in Example 3 are underlined, namely time adverbials, place adverbials, past tense verbs and perfect aspect:

3) Sandeere, the woman who had spoken first as the procession approached the shopping centre, spoke again and this time her words attracted considerable attention <…> ‘She is shy,’ Sandeere said. ‘She doesn’t know how to meet her grandmother with her eyes closed. They should send someone home to ask Nyamusi to speak, to ask her to welcome her granddaughter home.’

‘Sandeere is right. Do you people know that?’ another woman spoke. ‘What about Minayo here? Is she not the youngest from that womb? Let her speak to Kanaya on behalf of Nyamusi. Kanaya will hear Minayo’s words.’ Soon there was general agreement among the women who had travelled in the minibus that Minayo should speak to Kanaya and appeal to her to release the wheels of the bus. Minayo agreed to speak to Kanaya on behalf of her eldest sister and was subsequently briefed on what to say by a few older women. <W2F008K>

The total score for all the agency features in fiction is 5.44, and features that are frequent in Examples 2 and 3 include proper nouns for persons, first person pronouns, third person pronouns and activity verbs. Person-centred narratives or dialogue often uses first person pronouns. Activity verbs are included in the model, since they usually require human agents and are associated with news reports, conversation and fiction in L1 English (Biber et al. 1999: 378). In the present study, Example 2 frequently uses activity verbs to describe the unfolding of events or actions, e.g. ‘hardly had he put it in <-_the> <+_his> pocket when the door was opened.’ The frequent use of contextualisation features is reflected by the time- and place adverbials in Example 2, such as ‘On the evening of the same day’ and ‘there.’ The contextualisation of narratives takes place in a spatial setting and time frame (Tomasello, 2008: 284; Verhoeven & Strömqvist, 2001: 2). The frequent use of time- and place adverbials in the examples, and in East African fiction overall, affirm Tomasello’s and Verhoeven and Strömqvist’s claims. Regarding tense use and contextualisation, the examples are characterised by the frequent use of past tense verbs. Biber (1988: 223) associates perfect aspect with narrative or descriptive texts, and the perfect aspect is frequently used in ICE-EA fiction. Example 3 also makes use of present tense verbs in dialogue, e.g. ‘Sandeere is right.’ The use of present tense verbs in dialogue is typical of fiction in general. The narrativity features that denote causation, namely non-finite causative clauses and the causative subordinator because, do not occur in Examples 2 and 3. The next section is a discussion of oral narratives in ICE-EA.
5.2 Oral narratives

Thirteen features have positive scores for oral narratives: *causative subordinator* because (2.58), *epistemic stance adverbials* (2.55), *first person pronouns* (1.56), *present tense verbs* (1.27), *time adverbials* (1.22), *third person pronouns* (1.19), *place adverbials* (0.86), *past tense verbs* (0.86), *second person pronouns* (0.7), *activity verbs* (0.64), *emotional stance verb feel* (0.29), *modals and semi-modals* (0.24) and *evaluative adjectives* (0.21). Example 4 has many of the features that co-occur in oral narratives:

4) $B>$ Well yah I have these memories living with my grandfather who was a very very old man and I remember he used we used to go there to be sent there to cultivate by my parents you know. We had a piece of land there it was about fifteen kilometres away from home. So I had the chance of living in a round thatched hut where everything took place there cooking. The fire-place is there. My grandfather is there. In the evening he would be telling us stories because he was a warrior my grandfather. He had been fighting. When he was a young man he was a warrior. In fact he had a big dent here and he had a nickname because of the dent. This dent he got fighting with the Maasai. You know the Kikuyus and the Maasais. They used to have tribal wars and he used to go fighting and even brought a wife from Maasailand. So he used to tell us all these stories about fighting with the Maasais all kinds of things and I was so fascinated. You know there was no light there was nothing. The fire would be small dying there in the middle of the ah. It was so wonderful. And then during the day there were those girls you know we used to call them they used to wear these calico sheets you know. Not modern dress tribal traditional. And we would go collecting firewood. In fact you know in there is a place where I’m talking about insects you know. You somebody’s saying you take a heap of insects like this you go around your head seven times. This is something did I went there with that girl in the forest to collect firewood and she showed me all these these black insects you know. A heap like this. Yah you know also when I was writing you know I as I was writing that novel I had a lot of problems within myself. And in fact I remember I was weeping sometimes as I was writing that time I was weeping weeping weeping. So I don’t know but maybe the reflection of what I was feeling at that time I don’t know.
The contextualisation features that are used in the example are present tense verbs, past tense verbs, time adverbials and place adverbials. Agency features in the extract are personal pronouns, proper nouns for persons and activity verbs such as go, get and wear. The evaluation features typical of oral narratives in Example 4 are the emotional stance verb feel (‘what I was feeling at that time I don’t know’), modals and semi-modals, and epistemic stance adverbials (‘And in fact I remember’). Causation is expressed by the causative subordinator because (‘he had a nickname because of the dent’) which occurs once in the extract. Contrary to fiction, oral narratives also use linguistic features associated with interpersonal interaction, rather than narration per se. Present tense verbs (1.27) have a higher positive score than past tense verbs (0.86) in oral narratives, which reflects the spoken nature of the register. Ong (2004 [1982]) relates that oral narratives universally focus on present events, rather than the unchangeable past. On the one hand, this may explain the high standardised scores for present tense verbs in ICE-EA oral narratives. On the other hand, present tense verbs are also used to express generalities or opinions and share information, rather than narrating. Example 5 from oral narratives uses the present tense to share information and state generalities or opinions:

5)  Uh I don’t think there is any discrimination in the publishing houses as such
    I think the situation is simply that fewer women have been writing again for obvious reasons that probably
    I don’t know what the situation is now
    but there have been less educated women
    because it is only very recently that we are beginning to see many many girls
    you know going to school
    In certain districts in this country you’ll find there are more girls in school than boys at certain levels in the primary school <S1A030K>

In general, the past tense is preferred in narrative discourse (Toolan, 2009: 120; Biber, 1988: 223). The present study shows that fiction uses the past tense (2.53) more than the present tense (0.86). Conversely, oral narratives have a higher score for present tense verbs (1.27) than past tense verbs (-0.91). These results indicate a difference between spoken and written narrative discourse – whereas East African English fiction follows a ‘conventional’ route when it comes to tense use in narration, East African English oral narratives are more interactive and involved. This explains the frequent use of the present tense in the spoken narrative register. The interpersonal focus of the deictic here and now in oral narratives reflects a shared context between the speaker and hearer(s). Therefore, the register necessarily has more of an interpersonal focus than fiction. Oral narratives use the present tense to maintain interpersonal relations, and past tense verbs are used intermittently as a means to understand and recount experiences.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of East African English fiction and oral narratives presented here indicates the model is sufficiently robust to identify registers or sections of texts with a narrative focus in spoken and written discourse. The 16 linguistic features discussed in the present paper contribute towards a
narrative focus in fiction and oral narratives. Both fiction and oral narratives use these linguistic features to a greater or lesser extent to make sense of experiences and come to a better understanding of events. Nonetheless, as the preceding discussion has shown, the linguistic features associated with narrativity are not used across the board. For example, the present tense is frequently used in oral narratives, but is not associated with narrative focus in fiction, except in dialogue.

Overall, eight features have positive standardised scores for both spoken and written East African English narratives. These features are first person pronouns, third person pronouns, activity verbs, time adverbials, place adverbials, past tense verbs, emotional stance verb feel and evaluative adjectives. The above-mentioned features are indicative of narrative focus in ICE-EA irrespective of the mode. In other words, when these features co-occur frequently, it is likely that there is a narrative focus.

The quantitative results presented here show that East African English narratives use lexical and syntactic means to tell stories that are hypothesised to be universal in English narratives. A limitation of the study is that until tested on data from L1 English or other second language varieties of English, one cannot assume that these features are typical of all English narratives. Future research should compare L1 and L2 narratives, as well as different L2 varieties, to test whether the features are found in all English-medium narratives. If this proves to be the case, the model may be useful in the development of narrative skills for learners, as well as the stylistic analysis and comparisons of authors or genres.
The term register is used where some scholars would prefer genre, but according to Lee (2001: 10), these terms essentially cover the same ground. Both Lee (2001: 10) and Biber (1989: 5) regard genres as a concept established by consensus in a particular culture.


For a detailed discussion of the 22 ICE-EA registers, please refer to Van Rooy et al. (2010) or Hudson-Ettle and Schmied (1999).

In context, Jesus does not refer to Christ. The 16th century explorer John Hawkins set sail in the Jesus of Lubeck on an expedition.

The sharp brackets indicate the name of the text file from ICE-EA.

Note that the standardised and normalised scores were calculated for all 22 registers and not only for fiction and oral narratives. This means that Terblanche (2011) identified these two registers as the prototypical spoken and written registers with a narrative focus. However, in the present article the calculations were based on 16 features common in both these registers as opposed to the 11 core narrativity features in Terblanche (2011).

Available at http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws/.

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References


