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ABSTRACT

This analysis of the structure of children's narratives deals with material gathered from 96 children, aged 3 1/2 to 9 1/2 years, in conversations about events in which they were personally involved. Elements of the narratives and the structural relationship of these elements are examined. Three elements are discerned: (1) chronological recapitulation of events; (2) orientation of the listener to the context of the narrative; and (3) an evaluation of the events which communicates the meaning of the narrator's experience. It was found that children in all ages were able to provide comprehensible, chronologically-ordered recapitulations of their experiences. All of the children provided extensive evaluation. There were no age differences in quantity of evaluation provided, but older children used a greater variety of types of evaluation. Although children at all ages provided orientation to context, they did so increasingly with age. When the position of the three elements in the narratives was examined, orientation was found to be significantly clustered in the first part of the narratives (increasingly so with age) and evaluation significantly clustered at the end. When the timeline of the narration was compared with the timeline of the experience, three major patterns were seen, illustrating a developmental shift in how children of different ages verbally reconstruct their experiences. Narrative structure progresses from a "leapfrogging" pattern (frequent in 4-year-olds), through an "ending at a high point" pattern (frequent in 5-year-olds), and culminates in a classic pattern in which the narrator builds up to a high point, dwells on that point by means of evaluation and orientation, and then resolves the action. (Author/BF)

Structure of Children's Narratives

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Children tell stories about events that have happened to them, about occurrences of importance in their lives. Most previous work has asked children to talk about fairy tales or fables, such as Piaget did, about television plots, or other types of standardized stories. However, work by William Labov and others suggests that people talk very differently about such fictionalized stories than about events in which they were directly involved and which meant something to them personally. Thus, the narratives we elicited were about trips to the doctor, pets being run over by cars, parties and vacations, car wrecks, bee stings, and such unforseen events as the baby-sitter seducing daddy and the neighborhood boys stripping a little girl in a backyard tent. In conversation, we gathered over 1100 narratives from 96 children aged 3½ to 9½ years. These children were predominantly white working class children from a small town in Ohio.

Today I am going to talk about two aspects of narration:

1) Elements of narratives, and
2) How those elements are put together structurally.

A defining element of a narative is a recapituation of the specific events that occurred, that is, telling us what happened. Surprisingly, only

slightly over half of the children's narrative sentences were devoted to this basic function. Most of the remainder of the narrative sentences were devoted either to orienting the listener to the context of their experience, who, what, where, when, etc., or to telling us what the experience meant to them - what we call evaluation.

One might have expected to find a lot of children giving us narratives of the following type: "Well, we went over to her house and then we did the neatest thing! I did the best so I won." The significant point is that narratives such as this which leave out information vital to the listener's understanding of what went on, almost never appeared. All of the children provided a substantial amount of orientation to the context of their experiences, and they provided more with increasing age. We isolated nine different types of orientation. They are described in the appendix. Older children habitually used not only more orientation, but also a greater variety of types. When a principle components analysis was performed using a varimax rotation, we found two factors. The first factor was comprised of references to time, conditions such as weather, tangential information, and imminent events such as a baby about to arrive. All of these types of orientation are not essential for understanding what went on, but they provided a richer more vivid context for the events.

The second factor was comprised of two pieces of information which are essential and which we found to be highly correlated in a different analysis. Orientation as to location of the events, location of specific objects, etc. usually included orientation as to who the participants were, although the reverse was not necessarily true. This is an ecologically valid artifact of our scoring procedure, because whenever location of people was mentioned, as in "We were at John's house," this is orientation to both who and where, and was scored as such.

The other three types of orientation did not load onto any factors. These were a description of ongoing events, important objects or features of the scene of action, and general cases which were related to the particular event described in the narrative.

The third major element of narratives is what we call evaluation, and this is related to the underlying function of narration. Why are the children telling us these stories? In part, they want to tell us about events in their lives. But a major function of narratives is also to tell us about what these events meant to the narrator and how we should consider the narrator himself. In other words, narrators could give us a straightforward, unvarnished account of what happened, but this is almost never what they do. Instead, they heavily evaluate those events. The first two narratives in the appendix illustrate this point. Keep in mind that spontaneous speech, even of adults, is much less smooth than written speech. Both narratives tell essentially the same facts: a child was stung on the foot by a bee. However, one child told a simple recapitulation of the events, concluding with the sentence "I just went in the house and had to have something on it." The second child, however, told how she screamed and she screamed and she cried and she cried. She clearly conveys a sense of the enormity of her suffering. This child suffered more than almost any child in the history of the world has suffered. In addition, it required the efforts of two adults and an adolescent boy to carry this afflicted five year old into her house. This is the epitome of evaluation.

All children heavily evaluated their narratives. Fully half of their narrative sentences were to some extent evaluative. In addition, there were no increases with age in overall amount of evaluation, although older children used a greater variety of types of evaluation. We isolated 22 types of evaluation, which are described in the appendix. A principle components

analysis, using a varimax rotation, was performed, and no factors emerged.

In short, all of us, in our narratives, want to convey some sense of the meaning of the experiences we have. We don't just want to tell our listeners what happened, but rather we want to tell them what those experiences meant to us: how imperiled our life was in one situation, how heroically or amusingly we behaved in another, and how embarrassed we were by a third situation. There are a great many methods to convey this meaning, and children make abundant use of many different ways.

The second question we asked is how the elements of event recapitulation, orientation, and evaluation are put together. First of all, are these three elements scattered randomly throughout the children's narratives? To check this, we divided all of the narratives produced by the children into quarters, and assessed the density of orientation and of evaluation in each quarter by means of a repeated measures analysis of variance.

Overall, orientation is significantly clustered in the first quarter of the narratives. However, this effect is due to older children. While the 4 and 5 year olds produce uniform amounts of orientation in each quarter, children six years old and older increasingly cluster their orientation in the beginning. This is functional for the listener, because, as journalists well know, a story is more sensible when one knows the who, what, where, and when right from the start of the story. Evaluation, on the other hand, was significantly clustered at the end of the narratives, and this was true for children of all ages. Thus, by the age of 6, children show structural differentiation in their placement of both orientation and evaluation.

However, this type of gross analysis masks some important aspects of narratives, as well as major developmental changes.

When you are dealing with narratives, two time lines are involved. First, there is the timeline of the actual experience: in what order did the events

happen? Secondly, there is the timeline of the narration: in what order are the events recapitulated? We looked at the relationship between these two timelines fo the three longest narratives produced by each chiid, since length is highly correlated with complexity.

In the appendix, we have sketched the relationship between the timeline of experience and the timeline of narration for the two narratives we have discussed. Each independent clause is defined as a narrative comment, and is numbered on the transcripts. The number of the comment refers to the order in which it was narrated, and its position along the horizontal line refers to the timeline of the experience. The comments at the bottom of the timelines, within the dotted arrows, are orientative comments that aren't really confined to one event on the timeline. For example, the comment "it got kind of cool one day", in the first narrative, is true throughout the narrative.

If you look at the first narrative, each event was described by one comment, with the exception of one orientative comment which stands outside of the progression of events, and the bee sting itself. On the other hand, the second narrative has a much less direct correspondence between these two timelines. The child repeated her description of the first event, and then dwelled for six comments on the second event, her screaming response to the high point action of getting stung. By her dwelling on this event, the child clearly emphasizes its importance.

The first narrative was quite unusual because of its close correspondence with the order of events in the actual experience. In essence, she simply gave a chronological recounting of what happened. The second child, on the other hand, deviated quite a bit from this straightforward recapitulation of events, and her narrative is an abbreviation of a pattern which has been defined by William Labov and J. Waletsky (1967) and which we will henceforth refer to as the classic narrative.

Narrative C, a story about a child trying to rip his pants, is an example of a classic pattern, and we have diagrammed the relationship between the narration and the actual experience that typically occurs with this pattern. As you can see, the child emphasizes one event: Davids attempt to further rip his pants in gym class. Events occurring prior to this point clearly build up to this high point, and set the stage for it, and later events resolve the high point in some sense, clearing the stage or capping off the experience. In this case, the resolution culminates in the children's value judgment of David. This resolves David's somewhat unusual behavior of trying to split his pants open.

This classic pattern of building up to a high point, dwelling there, and then resolving the high point action, is the one most frequently found by Labov and Waletsky in the narratives of adults. We also found it in the narratives of children even at the age of four. However, as you can see in Table 1, their incidence is low in the narratives of this youngest group. Incidence of this pattern increases with age, and by 6 years it is the most common pattern.

Within this classic pattern, evaluation is more clustered in the middle of the narrative, where the high point is found, than at the end, as it is in the narratives when looked at overall. This is not surprising, since the climax of an experience is typically the most meaningful part.

A more primitive pattern is what we have called, for obvious reasons, "ending at the high point" pattern, and is illustrated by the fourth transcript and timeline in the appendix, narrative D. This is a narrative about visiting the doctor. As you can see, the narrator takes us up to the point of what the doctor did and did not do when she was in his office, dwells on this high point, and then terminates the narrative. There is no resolution. Other children in similar narratives resolved the treatment received at the hands of the doctor by telling about getting a sucker for good behavior, or going to see Grandma on the way home. This ending at the high point pattern was one of the two most

frequent patterns produced by 5 year olds.

The most primitive pattern, which is also the pattern most frequently produced by the 4 year olds, was what we have called leapfrogging, that is, jumping from one event to another but leaving out various major events such that no plausible timeline of the actual experience can be reconstructed. Narrative E in the appendix is an example to a leapfrogging narrative. If you will notice the fourth and fifth comments where the narrator says, "She (her sister) broke her arm, so I, my Dad gave me a spanking", it is obvious that something important is left out. The narrator probably contributed to her sister's accident, which would account for the spanking, but we have no way of knowing how.

Other primitive patterns were found, and are listed in the table. They include the following:

1) Chronology was the most common among these. Such narratives simply listed events, without leaving anything out, but they failed to develop any one of these. There was no high point. This is a dead end of evaluation in structure which is present to some extent at all ages.
2) Dwelling on two events occurred to some extent among younger children, who went over and over these 2 events in no integrated way.
3) Impoverished narratives consisted of so few sentences that they formed no pattern.
4) Disoriented narratives either showed great confusion by the child, or at least were drastically confusing to the listener.

In summary, the three patterns of leapfrogging, ending at the highpoint, and classic narratives most clearly illustrate the kind of shift going on in the sophistication with which children of different ages verbally reconstruct their experience. The development of structure in personal narratives progresses from leapfrogging through ending at a high point (which is a truncated classic pattern), and culminates in the classic pattern where the narrator builds to a high

point, dwells on that high point by means of evaluation and orientation, and then resolves the action. In the classic pattern, the narrative is carefully organized around the highlight of the narrated experience.

Reference

Labov, W., and Waletsky, J. Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In June Helm (Ed.), Essays on the verbal and visual arts. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1967, 12-44.

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Types of Orientation

1. Time
2. Location of events, objects, etc.
3. Conditions (e.g., weather)
4. Who participants were
5. Ongoing events (i.e., sentences in past progressive)
6. Tangential information
7. General cases related to the particular narrative
8. Imminent events (e.g., expected birth of a baby)
9. Objects or features of the scene of action

Types of Evaluation

1. Sound effects
2. Stressors (marked emphasis in voice)
3. Elongators (marked drawing out of words)
4. Exclamations, laughs
5. Repetitions
6. Compulsion words (e.g., "had to")
7. Similes, metaphors
8. Gratuitous terms (e.g., "very," "just")
9. Attention getters (e.g., "Listen," "You know what?")
10. Words per se (e.g., "fun," "ugly")
11. Exaggerations & fantasy
12. Action suspenders
13. Tangential information
14. Negatives & modified negatives
15. Intentions, purposes, desires
16. Hypotheses, guesses, inferences, predictions
17. Results of high-point action
18. Causal explanations
19. Objective judgments (e.g., "Ten dollars is a lot")
20. Subjective judgments (e.g., "That was good")
21. Internal emotional states (e.g., "She was mad")
22. Facts per se (e.g., "I caught the biggest fish")

Transcripts

A. Narrative by an 8 year old girl, designated P:
(On all transcripts, the experimenter is designated E.)

E: Have you ever gotten jabbed with anything?
1 P: By a bee.
E: By a bee. Oh, tell me about it.
2 P: It got kind of cool one day
3 and my grandma came.
4 She called me
5 and she wanted to know where Dennis was.
E: Where Dennis was?
6 P: Yeah, And I ran outside to tell her
7 and I was running
8 and I stepped on a bee.
E: You went outside to tell her and you were running and you stepped on a bee. Ah. Then what?
9 P: Nothing. I just went in the house
10 and had to have something on it.

Timeline for Narrative A:

Event #	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Comment #	3	4	5	6	7	1 8	9	10

B. Narrative by a 5 year old girl, designated L:

E: Have you ever gotten jabbed with anything?
1 L: Uh huh. I got jabbed with a bee.
E: By a bee. Oh, tell me about it.
2 L: See, I got jabbed on my foot.
3 I was barefooted.
4 I screamed
5 and I screamed
6 and I cried
7 and I cried.
8 I screamed
9 and I <u>screamed</u>.
10 Until my next door neighbor came out
11 and my Dad came out
12 and my brother came out.
13 And, they <u>all</u> carried me into the house
14 but after that happened I got to sleep overnight with my neighbor.

Timeline for Narrative B:

Event #	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Comment #	1 2	4 5 6 7 8 9	10	11	12	13	14

C. Narrative by an 8 year old boy; designated R:

E: I was sitting there in English class, looked around to say hello to a friend and I heard this ripping noise and I ripped my sleeve all the way off. Did anything like that ever happen to you?

1 R: No. You know David.
2 he's in third grade you know
3 and when he was doing jumping jacks in gym you know his pants split
4 and in class you know his teacher said, "David what are you doing?"
5 He said, "I'm trying to split my pants the rest of the way."

6 R: It was only this much
7 and he had it this much in class.
E: Oh boy.
8 R: On the bus he was doing like this, splitting it more
9 and he was showing everybody.
10 We told David he was stupid
11 and he said, "No I'm not,
12 you guys are the stupids.

Timeline for Narrative C:

Event #	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Comment #	3	4	5, 6, 7	8	9	10	11	12

- - - - - - - - - - 1 & 2 - - - - - - - - -

D. Narrative by a 5 year old girl, designated G:

E: Did you ever go to the doctor's office?
1 G: Uh huh. No, yes, over Dr. Graham's house, night.
E: You went there? What happened?
2 G: Oh, nothing. Just I sticked around
3 and he told me to come in first
4 and then he ... and ... that's all I had to do
5 and taked me out, out and uh
6 and he put me in the doctor office.
E: Uh huh?
7 G: And I had a cold.
E: You did?
8 G: Last night. Don't you remember?
E: Right.
9 G: And I, I was scared to come in.
10 And he didn't shot me or nothing.
E: He didn't shot you or anything?
11 G: Uh uh. He didn't even shot me.
12 He gave me them, them tiny pills too, just like you.
E: Right, right.
13 G: That's only reason I had.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE CHILDREN'S
THREE LONGEST NARRATIVES

Age	Classic	End at Each Period	Leapfrog	Chronology	Improverished	Disoriented	Dwelling on Events	Misc
4	6	1	14	10	5	4	3	5
5	10	14	2	14	1	2	3	2
6	17	12	2	7	3	1	4	2
7	22	6	0	13	0	0	2	5
8	29	9	0	5	1	1	0	3
9	21	8	2	11	1	1	1	3