

Journal of Narrative and Life History. 7: 113-120.

**CONVERSATIONAL NARRATIVES OF CHILDREN:
OCCASIONS AND STRUCTURES¹**

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Orientation

What is a story? The field of narrative development has been plagued by variation in definitions. By narrative-internal criteria, we find that spontaneous early stories are not always clearly recognizable. We often do not find a protagonist and events creating conflict, reference to events in the past, presence of a climactic complicating action, or closure of the storyline with a resolution. Further, the narrative segment is not always demarcated from the preceding talk.

Labov and Waletzky identified so-called "invariant structural units" (1967:1) in a collection of personal histories of danger-of-death events. But such stories are likely to be retold and to develop stable structures with the very features they identified and Labov (1972) summarized: an abstract anticipating the topic, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda. Yet these features have been taken as fundamental in most narrative research since.

In this paper, we will propose that narratives embodying a Labovian structure constitute only a small subset of the extended speech events observed in children's talk. Also, we will show conversational scaffolding (mainly adult probing) fosters expansion of young children's skeletal narratives to include some of these structural components. We will argue that structural complication is not an inherent feature of the narrative genre, but is highly dependent on the conversational occasions and production conditions which surround stories.²

Databases for study

Turkish preschool data. We obtained child-adult conversations at preschool sites³ in Istanbul, Turkey. Both of the preschools had 3 to 5-year-olds, providing around 40 children from whom we taped different kinds of elicited and spontaneous extended discourse. The informal preschool system provided multiple settings such as classroom environments, various organized and spontaneous play groups, and casual chats to search out the early narratives. For the examples included in this paper, we analyzed around 60 hours of audiotaped talk in the two preschools.

Also, to supplement the preschool data with speech from younger children's, some of the cross-sectional data collected by Slobin in 1973, were included, involving an investigator, the target child, and sometimes other adults and siblings.

Locating narratives in transcripts

To identify candidate instances of narrative segments, we employed several methods: computerized search for specific linguistic markers such as temporal connectives, reading over the datasets for larger-level indicators of narrative such as reference to *irrealis* events or past events, prefaces by narrators, prompting by audiences, or audience evaluations. Once we identified narratives, the next step was to look back at the antecedent context to find how the narratives were situated, and how they were occasioned by what was said before. Now we present some examples from our classification of the occasioning conditions that we found to influence narrative features.

Out-of-the-blue (performance) narratives

One type of story that sometimes exhibited a Labovian structure was totally "spontaneous" performance, showing no heed of the surrounding context.

(1) Brain-washing.

During a gymnastic session at the preschool, a four-year old boy spontaneously launched into a dramatic story about his nonexistent younger brother⁴. When Hasan was asked to retell the story the content of the second telling was very like the first, with the same animated tone of voice.

1 Res: tell (it) again.

2 Hasan: my sibling opened medicine/medicine box-- took
(it)? {self- correction}

3 was able to open (it)?

4 broke that lid?

5 ate them up

6 ate all all all (of them) up?

7 Res: a-ah! [=expressing surprise]

8 eee? [=so then?]

9 Hasan: ate them?

10 (the ones) which were mine?

11 (he/she) deserved so got sick

12 Res: then?

13 Hasan: then (we) took (him) to doctors

14 Res: what did (they) do at the doctor's?

15 Hasan: what's this? {re: taperecorder}

16 Res: this-- (we) will listen (to it) later

- 17 Hasan: are (you) going to listen (to it)?
 18 Res: yes. yes.
 19 what did (they) do later at the doctor's?
 20 Hasan: doctors ehh.. ee tube-- (they) inserted a tube towards
 21 (his/her) belly
 22 Res: hmmh
 23 Hasan: and after that e eh.. (his/her) stomach-- e (they)
 cleansed
 24 (his/her) brain.
 25 Res: Uuuuh! [=expressing astonishment]
 26 Hasan: yes!
 27 Res: is (he/she) fine now?
 28 Hasan: ee if (they) hadn't washed (his/her)brain,
 29 he/she would have died {postposed pronoun}
 30 Res: god forbid!
 31 now (he/she is) fine, that means
 32 Hasan: (they) washed (his/her) brain
 33 after that (he/she) got well
 34 and never took medicine without permission again.

Küntay: Eryavuz preschool

The story was told with an enthusiastic animated voice. The temporal sequencing of the orienting events into a personally evaluated complicating action (1-11), the building up of suspense through an extended resolution (20-26), which also receives an evaluation by the presentation of a counterfactual event (28-29)⁵ and the usage of a narrative-ending coda to return to the present time (34) depict all the essential elements of a Labovian story structure.

Con conversationally elicited narratives

Elicited stories are likely to fit some paradigm of a good story, since probing evokes the prototype for tellers. The elicitation signals that respondents have to undertake a performance, and so they are, in some sense, accountable to the public standards for a story in their community. Adult prompts are based on these expectations (McCabe, in press; Peterson & McCabe, 1994)

Most children observed in the Turkish preschools did not produce stories for other children, who gave them no prompts. It was adults who often supported children's elicited stories with prompts to get started and to continue, thus altering the narrative order and scaffolding the normative features. In the following example,

Emre has been talking to the adult researcher (Ad) about a children's entertainment center that he visited over the weekend:

(2) Alligator game prompting (Age: 4;11)

1. Emre: there is a scoreboard, shows our score
2. >Ad: is that so? how did you-- did you make a lot of points?
3. Emre: (I) did
4. but once I won a lot of things
5. that alligator-shooting game did not give us
- 6 because some part of it was broken
- 7 >Ad: is that so? what happened?
8. Emre: got broken
9. we had won a lot of shillings
10. at that time it got broken
- 11 Ad: my gosh!
- 12 Emre: but then-- but at that time then you know
13. those people who are at Piramit --
- 14 those people who control Piramit-- they fixed that
- 15 and then we got all that shilling.

Küntay: Eryavuz preschool

This story has a classic construction with a high point and resolution, but the temporal marking appears to be affected by the adult prompting. The adult question (2) takes the child from a description to a specific event. In answering the question, the child begins by a short reply to the question, yet the *but* signals a newsworthy issue or violation of expectation (4), even as the story is beginning, marked with *once*. The story then begins. The resolution does not immediately follow the complicating action, but the adult question interrupts the flow (7). At this point the child repeats and moves back in time to recapitulate the sequence of winning before the equipment broke, even using a pluperfect affix to mark anteriority before the time evoked by the question, and then points out the problem resolution with a *but then* marker. While eliciting seems to bring out prototypic stories, prompting can alter the temporal sequence by its focusing effect.

Rounds of stories

In many conversational settings, stories implicitly invite related stories from other participants. Umiker-Sebeok (1979), analyzing preschool children's narratives produced spontaneously within natural conversation with other children, found that the most common response to a narrative was similar narrative on the same topic.

. In the following Turkish preschool example, the teacher demonstrates interest by saying "is that so, dear?" (2), setting up the topic of visits to the doctor as interesting for all the children.

(3) Visits to the doctor

Beril (4;0) is one of the two girls in a seven student class. Osman is 4;0. Can is 3;7. It is breakfast time, and all of the children are sitting around a table, with their Teacher (Teach) and the researcher (Res) present.

- 1 Can: my mother took me to the doctor
- 2 Teach: is that so, dear?
- 3 Beril: my mother took me to the doctor, too
- 4 Can: shall I say what (he/she) said
- 5 Can: (he/she) said let him eat waffles a bit later
- 6 Teach: said let him not eat too much waffles, right?
- 7 Can: said let him bite in teeny-weeny bites with his teeth
- 8 and then also pickles..
- 9 Teach: did you get a shot Can?
- 10 no:
- 11 Can: (I) don't really like
- 12 Teach: let him eat little
- 13 little by little
- 14 let him not eat much
- 15 xxx would you like biscuits? {to Res}
- 16 Res: no, thanks
- 17 Beril: Teacher, the doctor told me don't eat anything
- 18 Teach: the doctor?
- 19 but if we don't eat we can't grow
- 20 Beril: no (he/she) said have breakfast but
- 21 don't eat those that your mother brings
- 22 Teach: is that so?
- 23 Osman: my mother did not take me to the doctor's
- 24 Teach: because you aren't sick, right?
- 25 don't get sick, ideally

Küntay: Ubaruz preschool

Beril's story features formal similarities to Can's, such as employing quoted speech of a doctor. Osman then contributes (23) by reporting non-occurrence of the topical event in his life. In the Turkish children's rounds like the above, second narrators frequently claimed to have exactly the same experience as first narrators, down to the same details.

Tactical narratives

Many conversational narratives are produced to support requests, claims, positions in an argument, or gossip about the character of others. A vivid example of the tactical use of narratives was Goodwin's (1990: 243ff) instance of a story told in the midst of a dispute to humiliate the opponent. The structural components of narrative are selectively elaborated as judged by the narrator to be relevant to the broader speech act within which the narrative is embedded.

In a context of a long conversation, Emre has been telling the adult researcher about some horror movies. The adult states (1) a generalizing conclusion that he does not get scared of anything if he can watch such violent movies, a statement Emre challenges by a story.

(4) Scary films (Age: 4;11)

- 1Ad: so you don't get scared of anything?
 2Emre: get scared--
 3 for example I get scared of sey [how do you say]
 4 in the cartoon very good--
 5 at first there was a very ugly man
 6 I didn't get scared of him
 7 but then he got uglier in the film
 8 I didn't watch it
 9 and then I left the TV without turning it off
 10 since I got so much frightened
 11 my mother was in the kitchen
 12 I immediately ran to the kitchen

Küntay: Eryavuz Preschool

The narrative is introduced clearly as an example (3) of the generalization (1) and is constructed as a contrast between a stimulus and non-response (5-6) in agreement with the adult's assumption, and a contrasting (*but then--*) stimulus and fear responses (7-9) in disagreement with her generalization. The next line (9) and then escalates to a more vivid example of fear. The narrative follows a direct reply, is marked as an example, and is punctuated with recurrent challenges to the stimulating question. It never loses its marking as a reply.

Conclusions

As one looks at the storytelling occasions at Turkish preschools, one cannot but notice that story-telling is culturally structured. Firstly, since preschools are

adult-structured environments, adults indirectly control children's entitlements for storytelling through structuring the spatiotemporal organization of the institution. Cook-Gumperz and Corsaro (1977) suggest that young children understand, some socioecological constraints of settings, behaving and talking mostly in expected ways. Locally, young children's narratives seem to be organized around turntaking. That is, although the genre of narrative is often characterized as a continuous speech event which involves a single speaker, the conversational feedback and probings of the adult listener affect the on-line development of the narrative structure of children.

There are also specific production/performance conditions which affect the prototypical structure in narratives, as we see below.

(a) **Retelling.** Stories that are retold already have a basis in form, and a reteller has the knowledge of how the first occasion was evaluated by the audience. Like elicited and hence genre-labelled stories, retellings are likely to conform to culturally reinforced structure.

(b) **Prompting.** Stories that are told in response to narrow questions or to make particular conversational points are more likely to select a time in the narrative to begin which does not entail a build-up or elaboration. But prompts, collaboration, and evaluations from an audience indicate attentiveness and willingness to hear a long story, leading the speaker to turn what could have started as a tactical move into a performance.

(c) **Cues from prior stories.** Children's attempts to top the previous story by incorporating different facets of their similar experiences lead to a pattern of overlapping themes, allowing continuity and elaboration of latent topic, emulations of form, and ellipsis due to presupposition.

(d) **Supporting other speech events/acts.** Narratives that are volunteered to serve functions such as exemplification, justification, explanation, and specifying source of information get structurally organized displaying features marking their pragmatic significance. The telling may include just the high point, or just constructed speech, or just a description.

We propose that only by studying the cline between fledgling and well-formed narratives of children, and avoiding value judgments, ⁶ can we start to pinpoint the nature of the interplay between the cultural, cognitive, social-interactive, and linguistic factors that facilitate development of narrative structure.

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¹For more detail on adult and child data see Ervin-Tripp & Küntay (1997).

²This point was first made by Jefferson (1978).

³Eryavuz Center and Ubaruz Center are pseudonyms for the two preschools serving different social strata.

⁴⁴Hasan's father revealed that Hasan had no siblings, but that a neighbor's son had been hospitalized recently for swallowing some headache pills.

⁵Such usage of postposed third-person pronouns is very rare in Turkish, here signifying ambivalence.

⁶The location and funding of studies of children's narratives within literacy programs risks highlighting features which are valued by literate norms.