SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

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SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF CHILDREN'S NARRATIONAL ACTIVITY

The paper presents several studies showing differential effects of narrator-listener relationships on the shaping of narrational activity understood as an interactive process. By manipulating features of participant relationships (shared vs. nonshared access to topical sources of narration, age and status of the listener, the listener's task) the authors have discovered some of the factors responsible for variation in storytelling

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago William Labov posed the fundamental sociolinguistic question for research in any speech community as the need to understand **why anyone says anything** (Labov, 1972, p.180). At approximately the same time, Courtenay Cazden formulated the issue in the following way: „At any one moment, a child decides to speak or be silent, to adopt communicative intent A or communicative intent B, to express idea x or idea y, in form 1 or form 2. The options the child selects will be a function of the characteristics of the speech situation as he or she perceives it on the basis of his or her past experiences. At a time when much attention is focused on how different children respond to a single situation in an experiment or in school - it should be useful to focus attention on how the same children respond differentially in different speech situations" (Cazden, 1973, pp.84,86). For instance, Labov compared two sets of narratives (television programs and personal experiences) and found differences between them in terms of means used by the narrators, why it was told, and what the narrator was getting at (Labov et al., 1968, Vol. 2, p. 297, cf. Cazden, 1973). In their article devoted to narrative analysis, Labov and Waletzky (1967) emphasized that a narrative serves a function of personal interest determined by

a stimulus in the social situation in which the narrative occurs. Narratives are usually told in answer to some stimulus from outside (ibid, p. 34), and narrators have a personal interest in making such response.

In 1979, considering the above research challenges, Bokus and Shugar phrased the following questions for study: What configurational changes in given social situations are decisive in producing the important differences in a child's speech? Can we discover, through experimental manipulation, the minimal and manipulable factors in a conversational situation which will produce reliable changes in the way a child will talk to a listener? (Bokus & Shugar, 1979).

These questions have guided in the design of research situations for the study of children's narrative competence. The key principle was to differentiate situations in which the same child functioned as narrator. Hence we contrived narrative situations in terms of **who** (narrator) is speaking **to whom** (listener), **about what** (topic), and **for what purpose**. We assumed, after Psathas, that the perception of any situation is determined by the internal states of the participants in that situation, which include an interpretative structuring of the social context as experienced by each of the participants (Psathas, 1968, p. 136). This, we thought, determines personal engagement in degree and kind, as well as the task the narrator creates for himself and the expectations he attributes to the listener. These basic assumptions about differentiated perceptions of social situations and their effects have motivated our research on children's story-telling.

Access to topical source. Child-adult studies

Our original study focused on child narration addressed to an adult in two conditions: shared *versus* nonshared source of narrative topic. Fifty-two three-year-old children told a nursery school teacher about a picture. In one condition narrator and listener were looking at the picture together, and in the other condition the narrator talked about a picture which only he or she could see. In the latter instance, the listener's sole means of learning what the picture was about was through the child's narration (Bokus, 1978; Bokus & Shugar, 1979)

Significant differences in both structure and content of three-year-old stories were revealed that depended on the child-adult-picture configuration. In the nonshared picture condition the child's texts were longer and more grammatically complex than in the shared condition. In contrast to Labov and others, who have used the linguistic unit of clause as unit of content analysis, we used a semantic unit of analysis derived from Halliday's text conception (1970, 1975) and operationalized by Shugar (1978), termed the **reference situation**. This concept refers to the situation about which the narrator is speaking at a given moment, and about which information is linguistically formulated. Analyses of children's texts showed that reference situations could be identified in sequential order, and furthermore that the order of comprising each of these texts differed systematically in the two experimental conditions. When child and adult had shared access to the picture topic of the story, the dominant content of the child's story was given in the visual material and was therefore known to the listener, but when picture access was limited to the child only, the story dealt dominantly about content beyond the visual material. Notably, in the two conditions, the children regularly began their accounts in a different way, making a different first choice of reference situations. In the shared picture condition, the children started off with information that was not visually displayed, therefore not known to the listener, and then

chose information that was perceptually shared by both narrator and listener. On the other hand, in the nonshared picture condition, the same child, narrating to the same listener, started off with information directly displayed in the picture and then shifted to reference situations new (to the listener), removed in time and space (imagined, predicted, explanatory, hypothetical). The effect was that these same children told different stories about pictures to the same listener. In the former case, their stories were shorter and structurally simpler (a shorter chain of reference situations), and in the latter, the stories were longer and structurally diversified (a longer chain of reference situations differently constructed). Differences in the choice and ordering of reference situations produced stories varying in semantic complexity according to the child-adult-picture configuration.

Our interpretation of these results of experimental manipulation was the following: the child narrator perceived the social situation as different in the two conditions. What seemed to be decisive for the child was an opportunity in one situation which was lacking in the other. In the nonshared picture condition, the children seemed to enjoy a sense of freedom to assert themselves as competent sources of topical information, as against a sense of adult control in the shared picture condition (Bokus & Shugar, 1985). Let us once again cite Cazden , who referred to a «cognitive condition» activated in the child's mind in conditions of situational opportunity, one of freedom to work with linguistic knowledge (Cazden, 1973). And we added to this: freedom to work with experiential knowledge of the world (Bokus & Shugar, 1985, p.128). Hence we could interpret our results in this way: the child has different expectations about the adult listener in terms of her perception of story information: in one condition, controlling the „old", in the other, open to the „new".

We wondered if the differentiations of narrative texts according to child-adult-picture configuration would be found in settings other than performing a nursery school play task. We therefore experimented with this configuration in a test setting, where the child's task was to recount about a picture as part of the Terman-Merrill test battery. The same two conditions were arranged as in the original study: shared access to the picture (typical for the test situation), and picture access restricted to the child testee (atypical and experimental). The investigation was conducted in mental health counselling centers and included 120 children aged three to five (Bokus, 1991). Using the traditional categories of evaluation of test performance, i.e., itemizing, describing, interpreting, Bokus found a difference dependent on testing conditions in the hierarchies of categories used by the children. Higher order categories were significantly more frequently used in the condition of picture access available only to the child than in the typical condition of adult-child shared picture access. Here again we found that narrational conditions had a determining effect on children's accounts of pictures in terms of structural complexity and content richness. Thus we concluded that the same interpretation applies as concerns the child's perceptions of adult expectations in the test setting as in the play task setting.

A replication of Bokus' original study (conducted on Polish children) was performed in a different cultural community in a similar play-task setting. This study took place in an Australian nursery school (Turnbull, 1980) and produced similar findings (more complex and imaginative, or „new", content derived from the topic source in the nonshared picture condition). Further confirmation of Bokus' findings has come to light recently in another replication of her study (Bałachowicz, 1996). The subjects in this case were mentally retarded schoolchildren aged 8;8–13;6. In this study as in the Turnbull' study, children functioned as more competent sources of information in the nonshared than in the shared situation.

Access to topical source. Child-child studies

Following the design of Bokus' study described in the foregoing paragraph, a similar study was conducted in a peer situation, with children as narrators and listeners. Forty-eight 4-year-old children told picture-based stories to their peers in dyadic situations in a nursery school setting (Modzelewska, 1996). The same set of analyses was applied as those elaborated for the original child-adult study: formal (text length and grammatical complexity) and semantic (choice and structure of reference situations). Results of both these types of analyses showed significant differences in the stories told by the same children to the same listeners in the contrasted child-child-picture configurations, in favor of the nonshared picture condition. As in the original study with adult listeners, texts were longer and grammatically more complex in this condition. Concerning story content, information known to the listener (given in the visual display) was dominant in the shared picture condition, whereas in the nonshared condition information going beyond the perceptually accessible dominated.

So far this accorded with our findings in the child-adult study. But we noted a difference in the shared picture condition in our peer study as compared to the original one. No shift was identified in the choice of reference situations, i.e., from perceptually absent to given (see above) in this condition. Rather the story-teller focused mainly on the details of the picture. But the contrary was the case in the nonshared picture condition. In this condition we observed the same shift we had found in the narrative process with the adult listener, i.e., a shift from reference situations perceptually given in the picture to perceptually absent.

Our conclusion from this study was that, for children narrating to a peer listener, this is also a condition of situational opportunity, one of freedom to work with both linguistic and experiential knowledge. But the children appeared to use this freedom with a different communicative intent as compared to the situation with an adult listener. In the child-adult dyad the narrator has the intention to communicate new information to the listener and at the same time perceives the adult as controlling his or her skills in the role of communicator, being more open or less open to the new (depending on shared versus nonshared conditions). The child wants to express what the adult does not expect the child to know. On the other hand, in the child-child dyad, the narrator has a personal interest in displaying to the listener both linguistic and world knowledge (describing what is shared; interpreting, commenting, evaluating what is nonshared). The child seems to perceive the peer listener as an equal partner who can also narrate in his or her own way what is both shared and nonshared, and can similarly show his or her linguistic and experiential knowledge.

Our studies discussed so far have concentrated on the differential factor in narrational activity of shared versus nonshared access to topic source in cases where participants were child narrator - adult listener (an asymmetrical arrangement) and child narrator - child listener (a symmetrical arrangement). We have inferred from these studies that children as narrators have different expectations about their listeners' reception of their stories depending on such configurations. We then decided to vary some listener characteristics.

Variation of listener characteristics. Peer studies

Our further studies have explored some variations of listener characteristics. We used a modified version of the same basic research design, that is, we conducted listener variation in only one narrative condition, nonshared picture perception (found to have a greater activating effect on children's narrative abilities than the shared condition). The main ques-

tion of interest was: Does the same child differentiate his or her story-telling as a function of listener's age? Listeners were children either younger or older than the narrator. Sixty-five five-year-olds told picture-based stories in one case to a three-year-old listener, and in the other to a seven-year-old. In both cases the age difference was two years (Mościcka, 1994). Listeners after the story-telling were to arrange a set of pictures according to the story they had heard (Wrzesińska, 1996).

Results of the analyses showed that in both cases the narrators focussed mainly on the visual display, but they diverged from the pictorial information more in their stories to the younger listeners than to the older ones. When narrating to the younger listener, the narrators supplemented content missing in the picture, for instance, explaining the action or the motives of the picture heroes, whereas to the older listeners they held more closely to the details of the picture. Differences between listener groups were significant in respect to addition of new information in favor of the younger group. There was also a striking difference in narrators' nonverbal activity monitoring the listeners' attention (more frequent controlling glances to the younger). Further, the manner of story presentation differed. Only to the younger listener group did the narrators supplement their stories by gestures, demonstrating the story action during its oral presentation.

Could we conclude that our narrators perceived their listeners differently, depending on their age relationship? This seemed to be the case. The narrator seemed to attribute different abilities to listeners for reception of the story. We tried to verify this inference, based on our findings, through an interview with the narrators after the story-telling. On the pretext that now, as experienced story-tellers, they could help future naive narrators in a similar task, we asked them how a story should be told to a younger/older child, and why it should be told this way (Wrzesińska, 1996). The results indeed confirmed a differential perception of listeners' needs and abilities according to narrator-listener age relationship, which seemed to underlie the different orientations activated in the narrators' story-telling. Narrators more or less took account of the listeners' task, which, as already mentioned, was to arrange a set of pictures after hearing the story. In the case of the younger listener, their orientation was less to the listener's task and more to the perceived personal needs of the listener („for him to be glad, for her not to cry, for him to understand, for her to get information «not necessarily true»"). As for the older listener, the narrators' orientation was more to the listener's task following the story-telling („for her to remember the story, for him to know exactly, for her to arrange the pictures properly, for the story to be true" - i.e., to match the picture content).

It now seemed to us obvious that the communicative intent of the narrators is differentiated by the age relationship with the listener which has found expression in their differential perception of the listeners' needs and tasks. From this we infer a different communicative intent in narration to younger or older children. The narrator's cognitive state is shaped by his or her interpretative structuring of the age relationship between narrator and listener.

Effect of listener tasks on the narrative process

Since a listener's task, as shown in the above paragraph, turned out to have an impact on the shaping of the narrative process, our next step was to differentiate listener tasks and observe the effects on narrating to same-age listeners, holding to the same nonshared picture condition. In this study fifty-six six-year-olds told picture-based stories to same-age listeners with different tasks. Listener groups were either to draw a story-based picture or

to act out the story as a puppet show after they had heard the story (Siniarska, 1996). As we had surmised, narrators significantly differentiated their stories according to the two conditions. In the drawing task condition, narrators more frequently limited the story to information given in the picture (as if to enable the listener to produce as faithful a version as possible). In the acting-out condition, the same narrators expanded the story to include mental and motivational states of the story heroes as well as providing information beyond that given in the picture, consequently enriching the structure of the story content.

This study showed that child narrators take into account the perspective of listeners in view of their respective tasks, adapting storytelling according to listeners' informational needs. It illustrates that six-year-old children can treat a narrative as a task having a purpose or goal. Not only is narration an activity in itself but it is for a purpose (narrating is to someone, for something to come of it). This seems to be one of the areas needing further exploration with different ages, tasks, settings, etc.

Discussion: Participant and participation structures

In conducting the type of research presented above, we have seen how the relationship between the participants in the narrative situation (and this could apply to any discourse situation) takes on a particular structure on which depends the whole narrational process.

The notion of participant structure, or like terms, is already to be found in the relevant literature. Philips (1972) referred to variations in structural arrangements of speaker-listener interactions in classroom or community settings. Changes in features of participant relationships (age, status, etc.) imply changes in the participant structure of interactive events. The participant structure creates a context, or frame, for choices of ways to participate. Participation is also structuralized, that is, different participatory forms make for interactional variations (Peters & Boggs, 1986). According to Shugar and Kmita (1990), participation structure is not given a priori, but emerges as a realization of the potential inherent in any participant structure. It unfolds in the course of interactivity of speakers and listeners, and results from the interdependency of participant contributions. Thus participation is in the nature of a process that acquires a pattern reflecting the relationship of participants as interpreted by each of them.

Commenting on the studies described here, we have witnessed the differential effects of participant structures (narrator-listener relationships) on the shaping of narrational activity understood as an interactive process. By manipulating participant structures as frameworks for varying the shape of the narrational process, we have discovered some of the factors responsible for variation in story-telling and its effects, all of which depend on the interpretation by participants of their relationships.

Reverting to the questions formulated at the start of this paper, we come to the conclusion that an interactional approach is a prerequisite for a methodology of narrative research understood as a social use of language. This approach is best captured by the conceptions of participant structure and participation structure. For narration (of any kind) is an interactional activity, taking place between people, and only an interactional approach to narrative analysis yields findings that reveal the social factors differentiating the reasons why narrators tell different stories, or tell them differently, in different conditions, to different listeners, and with different communicative intents.

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