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ENTRY INTO NARRATION: USES OF OPERATIONS OF REFERENCE*

This paper focusses on the prerequisites for the emergence of child narration. The inspiration for this approach comes primarily from two sources: Macnamara's (1972) thesis that the infant brings into the world a deeply rooted attitude to assert perceived states of the world, and Trevarthen's (1980) treatment of the intersubjectivity phenomenon in mother-infant relations, modelled by Neisser (1994), and underlying the development of conversation. The present study looks at the earliest evidence of speech displacement, understood as the linguistic marking of changing states of reality, for which the very young child employs a presumably universal set of referential operations (Brown, 1973) by which to direct own and others' attention. The acquisition of object names provides a new potential for displaced speech relying on mental operations (Bloomfield, 1958; Griffiths, 1975). Lexical items functioning in developing semantic structures serve as the linguistic means by which cognitively stored knowledge of events can be represented in story-like form. A decontextualized two-sentence narrative by a child under three (H. Sacks, 1972) testifies to knowledge about how to tell a story. The empirical material in the paper includes other examples of early narration from the literature as well as illustrations drawn from the author's behavior stream records of two-year-old narrative-like discourse.

Introduction. Starting points

Very early in life – in the first weeks and months – the infant fixes attention on states of the surrounding world and uses devices like gesture, line of regard and vocalization to draw another's attention to the object of interest. This tendency has been known as the intersubjectivity phenomenon (Trevarthen, 1980). Ulric Neisser (1994) proposed a modular system that he called "interpersonal perception/reactivity" which is the basis for the earliest manifestations of ability to communicate. The manifestations of this phenomenon provide good evidence for Macnamara's (1972) thesis that the infant comes into the world equipped with a set of deeply rooted attitudes to assert something, to seek information, to demand of others certain actions. Today it is commonplace to posit the existence of innate competences, including a social competence (Jackendoff, 1994; Pinker, 1994).

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The readiness of infants to indicate something perceived in the world round about them before it can be expressed in words becomes evident by the use of other means. Before the child has sorted out the language code, she is already thinking, classifying, sorting out entities and states of things, and it is the products of these mental processes, and their matches to the changing states of the world, that seem to be priming the desire to express these findings in a way that another can perceive them as well. Before language, when no statements can be made, the infant can accomplish this effect given the complementary side of the expressive act, which is the reactive response of another person.

There is no lack of research evidence to support Neisser's idea of the workings of an intersubjective modular system. We need only mention the neonate's sensitivity to the human face (Haaf & Bell, 1967), the human voice (Lieberman, 1967), the other person's line of regard (Collis & Schaffer, 1975), and many other studies. It seems that the infant is attuned to the attentive adult and, vice versa, the adult is attuned to the attentive infant.

In this brief communication I wish to show the relevance of the above assumption to the topic of this conference: "Children's discourse from a narrative perspective". We shall grant that there are three early prerequisites for the emergence of narrative discourse: the first, the attitude (in Macnamara's sense) to make assertions about the world; the second, the availability of some expressive means to make them communicable; the third, the posited interpersonal perception/reactivity mechanism as the basis of communicative interchange. But there is another fundamental point also to be made from the start, namely, the contextual conditions for realization of these three prerequisites. Here we call upon Levelt's thesis about "the canonical setting for speech", in which – to quote – "parties alternate their contributions, thus creating a running context for the cooperative interpretation and generation of utterances" (Levelt, 1989, p. 68). In such a setting there is a participant context: the speaker is a "participant in conversation" (ibid. p. 29). Levelt also points out the importance of a shared spatio-temporal setting which serves as a source of mutual knowledge to which participants' contributions can be anchored. We are all of us here familiar with the notion of proto-conversation (Bullock, 1979) as well as with Snow's (1977) study of the development of conversation in the early months of life. Following from the above consideration, we make a further assumption about the onset of narrative ability: the original place for the emergence of narrative is the conversational context

The beginnings of displacement of speech

Over sixty years ago Charlotte Buhler (1931) made this observation: "The freedom to deal with things absent is a great advance in the life of the child". Buhler related this advance to the emergence of what she called "the narrative function". She gave as her example of the emergence of spontaneous narration the oft-quoted utterance of her 18-month old daughter Inge who, on return from a walk, told her "*daten lalala*" which she interpreted as: "Soldiers (soldaten) singing". The child had seen soldiers singing in the street (after Lewis, 1971, p. 64).

Today current researchers on early narrative (see Linda and Douglas Sperry, 1996) consider that an indispensable condition of narrative speech is the intention to assert information about events which are displaced from the here and now.

However, to relate the emergence of narrative to speaking of non-present events leaves a great gap in our understanding of how the child begins to displace speech, that is, how the child relates reference about the here and now to dealings with absent referents. Lewis

(1937), in his study of the beginning of reference to past and future in a child's speech, concludes that this is not a sudden step, and occurs largely "under social influence" – or, as we would prefer to say today, in the conversational context.

In our present perspective we shall explore the beginnings of displaced speech in light of the assumptions presented above.

An initial point for emergence of the narrative function could be the child's perceptual readiness to capture changes in states of the world, the ability to note and remark a change from what was, to what is, and from what is to what will be. Grasping these dynamic changes in states of entities, the child can relate them by words like *more*, *gone*, *here*, *up*, *down* (Gopnik, 1984; McCune-Nicolich, 1981). Linguistically, all the child needs to do is to perform operations of reference, as I shall demonstrate from some of my observational data.

The child's world, far from being a static one, is made up of constantly changing temporal states of entities and their spatial arrangements. Displacements in the real world start from simple single mundane changes in the life of the infant: putting on and taking off of shirts and shoes, picking up and putting down of cups and spoons, opening and closing of doors and books, sitting down and standing up, walking and running, sleeping and waking up. The child exists in a constantly moving environment, her own body moving within it, causing and responding to change. Changes are moves forward or backward in time, forward or backward in space.

Most of the mundane changes in the life of the very young child are well coded in the mind, are expected and unworthy of attention or mention. Some such changes, however, may be deemed newsworthy for a particular participant and therefore they evoke an act of reference. For example, some changes may be newsworthy because of their contrastive interest.

Here is an example of both aspects taken from our observational records of the child Mikolaj at the age of one year eleven months:

Situation: Mikolaj has escorted me (a regular biweekly visitor) to the elevator in the corridor, and we have pushed the elevator button. We wait.

As we wait, M comments: *Wina nie ma*
(Winda /windy/ nie ma = Elevator not here)

Now we see the elevator coming up. M comments: *Wina je*
(Winda jest = Elevator here).

Now we see the elevator moving upward. M. comments: *Ni ma*
(Nie ma = not here, gone)

In this illustration, the child has marked the transition of states as they occur in succession. He expects the elevator to stop, since it has been called, but it continues on its way. His use of "*nie ma*" (gone) conveys the expectation of reappearance, which the child conversationally implies for the listener. There is a participant context which gives this series of comments a conversational flavor.

Note that the child makes assertions about what is not there, as well as what is there, and then what again is not there. You may also have noticed that the child, each time he utters "*nie ma*", is using language to refer to absent entities and states. Obviously the child is not lost in time and space! He hasn't lost or misplaced the elevator. He knows it has simply disappeared. It is normal and predictable that an elevator goes up and down, that it stops at given points, that people get on and off. What seems to be so interesting here for

the child is the occasion to display his ability to make assertions, to match them to the state of the world.

As I have already said, it is not only the ability to capture a changing state of the world but the ability to match the word and the world (in Searle's apt phrase – Searle, 1976). In the above example, the child is displaying this ability to perform such a mental operation. To acquire this ability, the child normally and naturally makes a displacement of speech in the accepted sense of the term. (This means that the referenced state of the world is not the same as that which holds at the moment of utterance). It is progress in the use of displaced speech that will take the child along the road to spontaneous narration.

A powerful lever in this direction is the actualization of such mental operations by simple linguistic means, namely, by operations of reference.

Uses of operations of reference

Before semantic expression develops, the infant has recourse to what has been called "operations of reference" to express his communicative intentions (Brown, 1973; Schlesinger, 1971; and others). Extensive data analyzed by Roger Brown and others on children from various cultures and language communities suggest that operations of reference are used universally. Brown boils them down to three basic ones, briefly as follows: "nomination", or a present referent selected by some action calling another's attention to it; "non-existence" or the non-presence of a referent, also termed "disappearance" in the case where the prior presence of the referent is no longer there and there is the expectation of existence; and "recurrence", in the case of a comment or request for a state or entity to reappear or to repeat itself. Thus this operation is the opposite of disappearance. The three forms, according to Brown, make up a semantic set which coordinate with one or just a few recurrent words (in the literature on early formal grammar development they were termed pivot words). Brown, after reduction of the data, shows that very early utterances in all the languages studied concentrate on the same set of meanings or types of semantic functions that develop from operations of reference – Brown, 1973, p. 172. Lexical items emerge within the same framework, as we shall see in a minute.

Operations of reference and a start on narrative discourse

Let us imagine that the child can do more with her ability to express changes in the world by following the flow of changes by means of operations of reference. In our first illustration about the elevator, we have shown how the child monitored the changes as they occurred, and in so doing used the whole range of reference operations – nomination, disappearance, recurrence – to convey a series of contrastive states.

In our next example we find that, with the aid of simply two kinds of operations of reference, the child is able to follow the temporal sequence of changes of reality that make up a whole event. To make this discourse communicable, the child needs to use some lexical items, in this case, two proper nouns – the name of a child referred to and the name of the child's mother. What the speaker does is to map his operations of reference upon the perceived evidence of states of changing reality. All that is needed is to achieve a match of these perceptions with the perceptions of other participants through a joint focusing of attention. The child achieves this by use of referring operations, which are interpreted according to the unfolding scenario.

Situation: Mikolaj (1;11,24) is seated on a rug in the park together with the housekeeper (called Paniunia) and the visiting observer. A few meters away a mother and her little girl are also seated on a rug. Mikolaj is playing with coins.

(Child's mother is talking to Paniunia) M: *Anuniu /Anuni/ mama*

(She says they must be going now)

(Pointing to the child's mother) M: *Pani nie ma (1)*

(The mother is picking up objects getting ready to leave)

(Pointing to the mother) M: *Pani nie ma (2)*

(The child Anunia runs off) M: *Anunia /Anuni/ nie ma (3)*

(The child is caught and is being dressed)

(She runs off again) M: *Anunia /Anuni/ nie ma (4)*

(She is placed in her carriage) M: *Anunia /Anuni/ nie ma (5)*

(Mik runs after the carriage, then returns and sits down)

M: *Anunia/Anuni/ nie ma (6)*

Mikolaj has recounted a whole event as it occurred before his eyes. His initial utterance introduces the speaker: "Anunia /Anuni/ mama" to the participants. In order of their occurrence his utterances refer to successively changing situational states.

- (1) refers to the mother's expressed intention to leave;
- (2) refers to the mother's actions in preparation for departure;
- (3) refers to the child's running off;
- (4) refers to the child running off a second time;
- (5) refers to the child settled in the carriage about to leave;
- (6) refers to the fact that the child and the mother have left.

The topic of the whole event is a departure, recounted as a stream of spatial-temporal displacements. It is recounted as an anticipated action, before it takes place, then during the event, and finally as an accomplished fact. The content of all reference situations is a given change of state of the actors, in which they are about to take their leave, are in fact leaving, or have gone. The narrator simply indicates the fact of the change of situation, but not the content. In this sense it is a story without a semantic structure.

Yet it represents a temporal sequence that matches the changes in reality that are referred to, which is the essence of a story (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

However, while it is story-like, it does not qualify as one, since its content is not represented in language. A story must be told with words, and for this it must be built with words and semantic structure. It must be detachable from the immediate spatio-temporal situation by means of names for things.

Acquisition of a lexicon and a new dimension of speech displacement

We have noticed that operations of reference often require names for referenced entities in order to distinguish, among others, those to which participants' attention is to be directed at the moment of utterance (in the above example: Anunia, mama, Pani). This is

an early function of lexical forms: to identify unique referents. But then, as the lexicon grows and acquires new uses, it begins to take on a life of its own, adding a new dimension to the child's expressive potential. Words can work in a new way: they can evoke the non-present world of persons, actions, experiences, events.

According to Bloomfield, as soon as a lexical form is acquired as a name for a concrete entity, it can begin to function in a 'transferred' sense, to relay information to others (Bloomfield, 1958, p. 30). The lexical form takes on the abstract feature of displacement (*ibid.*, p. 141, 149). Once the child has embarked on abstract or displaced speech, she is able to name an entity in its absence in an informative way. According to Halliday, once the child uses language in its informative function, essentially using language to communicate something to someone who has not known it before, the child has acquired the function which is solely defined by language (Halliday, 1975).

Bloomfield and Halliday, linguists of quite different orientations, both seem in agreement that displaced speech allows the child to use language not only in its informative, but also in its imaginative, make-believe function. It is Halliday, however, who stresses that these functions develop in the contexts of dialogue and narration.

Here, however, we are concerned only with the early uses of lexical forms, first anchored in the here and now and then acquiring the feature of displacement. There are many examples in the pertinent literature illustrating early lexical displacement. Lewis (1971, p. 66), for instance, cited the case of his 16-month-old son who called for "ha" while having his breakfast. The father recognized this to be a reference to the honey jar which was in the cupboard, and which the child wanted access to. The child was using an object name as the nominative type of reference operation presupposing the non-present existence of the named object and bearing the expectation that it would appear given the father's responsive action. Griffiths comments that, as soon as the child uses object names as substitutes for gestures, he has acquired a device that will later allow his utterances to be more intelligible in a wide variety of situations (Griffiths, 1979, p. 117).

This development (the explicit naming of objects to replace the gesture) is that very change which, according to de Laguna (1927, p. 100) – quoted in Greenfield & Smith (1976) – will allow statements to be made about objects in their absence. Atkinson illustrates this with the case of his son who, after the mother had been out of the room for several minutes, approached the father and said "Mummy" with no sign of distress or questioning. The father responded with "Mummy?" to which the child immediately responded "Gone". Atkinson proposes that the function of "Mummy" is "quasi-naming" when the referent is not present and serving as an attentional device – which, he comments, is good conversational practice. In such situations, the author suggests that the child is first merely concerned in establishing an object of shared attention, but once having received assurance that the addressee is attending, as is the case here, the child can then go on to predicate something about that individual. (Atkinson, 1979, pp. 235, 236).

Referring back to our illustration in the preceding section (the "departure" event), we have already shown that displaced speech necessarily involves aspects of the actual communicative situation that may not be directly perceived by the participants. Indicating the temporal sequence of change of states, Mikolaj does not necessarily expect the par-

ticipants to be following each aspect of change as it occurs and so he predicates each consecutive change. He may thus be providing information in the broad sense of making the interlocutor 'aware of something of which he was not previously aware', to quote Lyons (1977, p. 33); cf. also Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995, p. 558. This in effect clarifies the links between each aspect of "*nie ma*" (being gone) which make up the content of the departure event. To accomplish this Mikolaj resorts to use of appropriate lexical items.

Semantic structure and narrative beginnings

Without semantic structure the temporal sequences of states and events cannot be represented in language. The uses of the different types of operations of reference that we have illustrated above to indicate the occurrence of events show clearly that the child's semantic intentions are in place and awaiting realization.

Halliday (1979) was interested in the ability of his son to build a semantic structure as a whole before grammar. He reports the following episode that occurred when Nigel was 19 months old.

tii...? (tree)
o... (= broken)
tikawe (take away)
ogo (all gone)
baba (bye bye)

Halliday provides the following interpretation: the child passes from referring to one event (tree broken) to the next event (take away tree) and the final outcome (all gone, bye bye). The linking in temporal order of a series of events represents a kind of narration comprising a coherent text with a semantic structure. The child earlier displays the ability to build semantic structures, and only later the ability to form the appropriate grammatical structures (Halliday, 1979, p. 72; cf. also Bokus, 1991, p. 44).

Lexical items operating within semantic structures (see Brown, 1973, p. 173, for a basic set of early semantic relations) provide the linguistic resources to represent experiential material in story form, in the sense of recounting a happening or event.

The following illustration comes from our observations of the child Malgosia at the age of one year ten months.

Situation: Malgosia is seated at the tea-table, along with mother, father, grandmother and myself (the observer). Mother feeds the child a bit of ham. Malgosia is holding a teddy bear. Suddenly, with eyes staring into space,

M. announces: *Misio je zupe*
 (Teddybear is eating soup)
 There is no response. A moment passes.
 Then Malgosia adds: *Chodzi misio*
 (Teddybear walks /is walking)
 Now Father reacts: *Aha! Ja wiem!*

and explains that this undoubtedly refers to the homeless dog who used to come to the kitchen door of their summer cottage regularly for food some months earlier. They used to call him "Misio".

The father who undertook to interpret the child's meaning looked for a reference situation non-existent in the present afternoon tea situation. Malgosia gave the clue to the referent she had in mind in her second assertion (a "Misio" that walked and therefore not the toy bear she was holding). Since knowledge of the scene described by the father was shared by all participants present, the child's utterances were comprehensible to all, and were responded to as a contribution to the ongoing conversation taking place around the tea table. The observer took note of the fact that Malgosia seemed satisfied that her intention had been properly interpreted.

The above illustrates a successful evocation of a familiar event, framed in simple semantic structures. It is difficult to characterize the intended sequential connection between the two assertions. But the communicative effect of the second was clearly to help the listeners identify the referent named in the first (which Misio was in question), and thereby to enable the child's assertions to comprise a coherent and true conversational contribution (for fuller discussion, see Shugar, 1998).

The decontextualized story – a giant step forward in narrative ability

So far we have focussed only on spontaneous instances that qualify as prenarrative beginnings. Unquestionably, children make enormous progress in story-telling in conversational frameworks, especially in adult-initiated and supported recounting of events (McNamee, 1979). This is not our concern here. However, our final illustration deals with the child's response to a request:

"Tell me a story".

The following story was offered by a child 35 months old to the author of a book called "Children tell stories" and was reported and discussed by Harvey Sacks (1972). Here is the story:

The baby cried

The mummy picked it up.

Sacks, the ethnologist, commenting on the content of the two consecutive sentences, notes that each reports an occurrence. The occurrences, like the sentences, follow one another in time. The second occurrence is explained by the first. Sacks is interested in this child's story as a recognizable description of activities of people: how babies behave and how mummies behave, and the connections between their behaviors. In telling this story, the child narrator employs her general knowledge of the world built out of her own experience. She also displays her knowledge of how to tell a story. The first sentence has the status of occurrence of a "piece of trouble" relevant to some individual, here, the mother, which qualifies it as a proper beginning. The second sentence is a proper end of the story, namely, a resolution of the trouble. Labov & Waletzky (1967) might also have qualified it as a proper story, given its two basic functions: referential and evaluative. The narrator, telling about a baby that cried, reports the right thing that should happen: for its mummy to pick it up. As concerns structure: there is a beginning, a complication, and an ending, and thus is in itself complete.

In conclusion,

the approach taken to the child's entry into narration is based on consideration of the prerequisites for the narrative function of speech, to use Buhler's term. These are derived

from three widely recognized assumptions: firstly, the deeply rooted disposition of infants to make assertions about their perceptions of the changing world (Macnamara), secondly, the early availability of expressive means for reference to states of change (Brown), and thirdly, the existence of a mechanism for communicative, intersubjective exchange (Neisser, Trevarthen, and others). Early in life children develop intentions to communicate their observations about perceived states of reality as they occur, disappear, and reoccur, intentions that underlie readiness to contribute in conversational contexts.

Exploring the origin of displaced speech we have shown how it emerges as links that relate reference about the present reality to dealings with the non-present. Children noticing the temporal sequences that make up the structure of ongoing events necessarily link the present with the past and with the future. Possessing a kit of operations of reference (nomination, disappearance, recurrence), the child uses such operations as attentional devices for directing joint focussing with others on states of reality, in other words, on reference situations not expressed in language but indicated through attentional sharing. Presenting reference situations this way, and the connections between them, may be considered to underlie the development of semantic structure (Bokus & Shugar, 1996). Words articulated in semantic structure convey referential content without deictic and attentional means. Before words, the child can in this way produce a story-like, perception-driven account of events anchored in the here and now, displaying a latent semantic structure.

Leading child language researchers like Roger Brown, Dan Slobin, I. Schlesinger, and others, claim that the child acquires most of her semantic ideas early and well in advance of the means of normative expression. "The development from first words to the compound sentence is largely a matter of learning how to put more of what is intended into adequate expressible form" (Brown, 1973, p. 168). The child's acquisition of a lexicon and growing ability to build semantic structures will now provide the linguistic means to realize existent semantic intentions. They will render expressible experiences represented in the mind, whose evocation will produce little stories for conversational purposes. Beyond experiential stories, the child will progress to decontextualized narration, derived from her general knowledge of the world, of which the essence is a mental condensation of real life experienced events.

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