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## WHAT DO FALSE STARTS AND SELF-REPAIRS TELL US ABOUT NARRATIVE STRUCTURE?\*

The paper presents an analysis of false starts and self-repairs in narratives told by Polish school-children and adults. Eighty four subjects in four age groups (9–10, 12, 15 year-olds and adults) were recorded while telling a story based on the picture book "Frog, where are you?" by M. Meyer. All kinds of fluency disruptions (hesitations, false starts, self-repairs, and other) were identified. The analysis concentrated on self-repairs and was restricted to those repairs which could shed some light on the process of planning and producing narrative discourse. Only overt corrections were analyzed, i.e. those in which enough phonetic material was produced before the interruption occurred for us to be able to see which originally produced expression was replaced by a new version. 124 such instances of self-repairs were singled out. It was found that self-repairs of this kind are typical of school-children but rarely occur with adults.

The paper presents an analysis of self-repairs including a classification into several categories, among others: change of sequencing, change of perspective, change in temporality, change in degree of condensation of information, etc.

Everyone is eager to produce a good text. "Good" means understandable for the listener, interesting and faultless. Clark and Clark call it an *Ideal Delivery* and describe as a situation "when people know what they want to say and say it fluently" (Clark & Clark, 1977, p. 261). We strive after ideal delivery but we often fail. We change, interrupt and complete our texts. Fluency disruptions are common for all kinds of spoken utterances. On the one hand, it depends on individual characteristics - one may speak fluently whereas another hesitates a lot while speaking, on the other hand, it refers to the whole process of producing an utterance. The planning and executing go in parallel and we often don't have time to think over what we want to say and how to do it. When something goes wrong we interrupt and correct our selves in order to present another or "better" version. It is important to emphasize that the corrections are not always corrections of an error. When we strive after the ideal delivery we correct things which not only are erroneous. They may be inappropriate to the context or we may have got a better idea how to explain something. Levelt (1989) introduces the di-

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stinction between *error repairs* and *appropriateness repairs*. By error repairs the speaker corrects a word or an expression that was wrong. It can be a lexical, grammatical error, or slips of the tongue. But not only errors are corrected. One can replace a non-erroneous expression by another one that is more appropriate to the task or the context.

Every text has a specific structure that van Dijk called **macro-structure** (van Dijk, 1977). Labov and Waletzky define of narrative as a sequence of clauses which include at least one temporal juncture between them. They mention the following components of narrative structure: *orientation*, *complication*, *resolution* and *coda* (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). In the orientation there are presented characters, place, time and behavioral situations. In the complication there occurs an event which is unexpected or rare and it causes all kinds of characters' activities. In the resolution results of this activities are shown (see also Bokus, 1991). According to Labov and Waletzky, not all narratives have a coda. Many of them end with the resolution. The coda serves as a transition of the verbal perspective to the present moment (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

This study is an analysis of false starts and self-repairs which occur in narratives told by Polish schoolchildren and by adults. Sixty-four subjects: 9–10, 12, 15-year-old school children, and adults, told a story based on the picture book "Frog, where are you?" by M. Meyer. The subjects were asked to follow the story presented in the pictures and then to tell it in their own words. I recorded and afterwards wrote them into a computer. While transcribing I noted all fluency disruptions like pauses, hesitations, false starts and self-repairs. It was necessary to listen to every narrative a dozen times or so in order to identify the small parts of the texts that had been changed by the story-teller. But even so, it was often impossible to decipher every hesitation and determine why the teller interrupted and what he/she wanted to change. Either there was not enough phonetic material in the excerpts which the speaker interrupted or it was unclear in the context. When we have got too little information from the speaker to explicitly decode what has been corrected, Levelt calls them *covert repairs* (Levelt, 1989). Even in the case of *overt repairs*, i.e. those in which we are able to identify which prior produced expressions were replaced by new ones, my suppositions referred to the context in order to establish what the speaker originally wanted to say but finally resigned from. It is impossible to follow the whole process of planning an utterance when we have only a small part of the text which the speaker gave up. We could state it explicitly only when the repair occurred after the whole sequence – not a part of it – was produced.

Berman and Slobin deal with narrative analysis from the functional point of view. The functional categories are, among others: temporality, event conflation, or perspective of presented events. To express every category we have different linguistic means. **Temporality** means to place events on a time line and to build temporal connections between them. For this category, we have such means as: tense/aspect distinction, temporal conjunction and subordination or temporal markers. **Event conflation** presents event components more compactly or expanded by such typical means as nonfinite verb forms or subordination. The choice of **Perspective** is presentation of foreground and background in discourse, topic and focus. To express this category we use, for example, active or passive voice (Berman & Slobin, 1994).

Every narrative first has to be planned. My subjects had this facilitated because they could look over the book before they began to tell the story. So when they were producing the narrative they already had at least a global plan. They knew what the story was about and

what had happened. Everybody have his own **frame** for telling a narrative. By a picture book we can either decide to describe every picture in sequence (what the youngest children very often do) or we can opposite activities of the protagonists (the first one did this and the other one that). It is relevant to our individual style that we prefer while telling a story and in every discourse. The events in a narrative build a **sequence**. Some events take place earlier than others. The order depends not only on the location of event in the book but also on the story-teller. He/she can also choose which event he/she would like to mention first.

The speaker can realize his plan in a sequence. But very often it is impossible to do so. He/she stops, retreats, adds something. Some false starts or interruptions follows an error: lexical, grammatical, or other. Other self-repairs concern changes in narrative structure. It is important to realize that all self-repairs which caused changes in narrative structure are not error repairs but appropriateness repairs. The speaker modifies something not because it was erroneous. He wants to achieve the ideal delivery, to present events in another way, maybe better or more appropriate.

In my data 124 self-repairs caused changes in narrative structure. I divided them into seven categories:

### I. Change in the range of provided information

Story-tellers made interruptions often when they wanted to resign from describing an episode or to mention something new. They introduced then some new information without returning to the interrupted excerpt.

1. *Pies zleciał z parapetu ze stoikiem w\* głowie. Chłopczyk był zdenerwowany, [bo - -] i wyjął psu stoik. (1001)<sup>1</sup>*

*The dog fell from the windowsill with the jar on his head. The boy was upset [because - -] and took the jar off the dog (DAT).*

In this case, the speaker wanted to explain why the boy was upset. He described the whole episode in another way. Maybe it was not clear to him what exactly had happened. So he resigned from telling about the broken jar and changed his own plan. The new version was that the boy took the jar off the dog's head.

2. *A psa zaczęły gonić osy i on uciekał. Ale później sowa też zaczęła gonić tego chłopczyka. Gdy ugryzły go osy, [zaczęł - -] ten chłopak wyszedł na kamień taki duży i nabił się jak gdyby na rogi jelenia. (1206)*

*And the bees began to chase the dog(ACC) and he run away. But later the owl also began to chase this boy. When the bees stung him, [began - -] this boy climbed a stone such a big one and got stuck like on the antlers of a deer.*

The story-teller probably planned to describe what the dog did after he had been stung by the bees. But he passed on to another character and another episode. We get no more information about the dog. In my data I found 17 such false-starts.

<sup>1</sup> The first two digits in the brackets decode the age group (09, 10, 12 or 15-year olds), the letters "ad" refer to adults. The second two digits refer to the ordinal number of the subject.

## II. Change of sequencing

Self-repairs occurred when the speaker, after beginning to describe one episode or after making a statement, realized that there was something he/she wanted to mention first. It could be an event which occurred earlier or which the speaker wanted to describe before another one.

3. *I jeleni [pobiegł - -] zabrał go na rogi i pobiegł a piesek chciał go odstraszyć. (0908)*

*And the deer [ran - -] took him by the antlers and ran and the dog wanted to scare him away.*

This interruption occurred because the speaker forgot to mention that before the deer ran away, he had taken the boy on his antlers and then had run with the boy. The story-teller wanted also to place chronologically an earlier event and, after doing that, he carried on with the narrative. The next example is similar. The speaker interrupted his utterance because he wanted to mention something that happened first - in this case it was closing the jar.

4. *Potem poszedł spać [a żaba się - -] nie zatkał tego pojemnika szklanego i żaba się wymknęła. (1211)*

*Then (he) went to bed [and the frog (+refl.pron)- -] (he) did not cork this glass jar and the frog (+refl.pron.) escaped.*

But change of sequencing not only means input of some information that was chronologically prior. It can also happen that the story-teller wants to describe something before another event happened:

5. *Z tego drzewa się wychyliła sowa i wtedy chłopiec spadł a psa dalej goniły pszczoły. Potem [chło- - w - -] sowa usiadła na drzewie a chłopiec wyszedł na kamień taki ... duży. (1210)*

*An owl leant out of the tree and then the boy fell and the bees kept chasing the dog(ACC). Then [bo- - w-] the owl sat down on the tree and the boy climbed up on such a stone ... big.*

The picture does not show that the owl sat down on the tree first and then the boy climbed up on the stone. The boy is already on the stone when the owl is flying to the tree. The story-teller went his own way. He wanted to tell first about the owl and then about the boy.

## III. Change in degree of condensation of information

Condensing events is a skill called by Berman and Slobin "packaging into hierarchical constructions" (Berman & Slobin, 1994). The youngest children build very simple narratives and the sequence of presented events corresponds with their chronological order. Adults can bind the events together and set them in order or build a hierarchy of events. They use subordinations or nonfinite verb forms. In my data the subjects made false starts 24 times and then tried again using a new version - building another hierarchy, or "packaging" them:

6. *Gdy kładł się wieczorem spać, żaba wyskoczyła ze słoika. Nad ranem chłopiec [zob- -] gdy zobaczył, że żaby nie ma, bardzo się zaczął martwić.* (0911)

*When (he) went to bed in the evening, the frog jumped out from the jar. In the morning the boy [noti - -] when (he) noticed, that the frog was not there, (he) got very worried.*

This 9-year-old probably tried to use a simple construction "...In the morning the boy noticed that the frog was not there. He got very worried..." He changed his mind and used a more sophisticated structure - a temporal subordination.

7. *Zaczął skakać do niego a chłopak [zaczął wołać do nory, która - -] zaczął krzy-  
czeć do nory, [gdzie leży - - gdzie b- -] koło tego drzewa, gdzie były pszczoły.* (1218)

*(He) began to jump to it (=beehive) and the boy [began to call into the burrow, which - -] began to shout into the burrow, [where (there) is - - where w- -] near to the tree, where the bees were.*

The speaker was in serious trouble how to describe the situation. He tried twice using relative clauses for describing the burrow and finally he used a prepositional phrase. At the same time he also made lexical corrections – used “shout” instead of “call”, then he probably wanted to replace “is” with “were”. Finally he produced the sentence.

#### IV. Change of perspective

Twenty-two times the speakers resigned using some expressions and introduced a new one which changed the perspective of presented events. Berman and Slobin write: “Foreground and background are not given by the pictures, but are constructed by the narrator” (Berman & Slobin, 1994, p. 7). The speaker has to decide which events or characters to place in the foreground and which in the background.

8. *Za psem latały rozszczone pszczoły. Potem chłopiec wszedł na kamień, gdzie spotkał jelenia, [który - -] na którym się zaczepił.* (1507)

*Irritated bees flew after the dog. Then the boy climbed up on a stone, where he met a deer, [which - -] which he caught hold of.*

In this narrative the story-teller tried to describe the event from the deer’s point of view. The deer should here be the figure and the boy the ground. But the speaker wanted to continue the story from the perspective of the boy: he met a deer and he caught hold of the deer.

9. *A psa zaczęły gonić osy i on uciekał ale później sowa też zaczęła gonić tego chłopczyka. Gdy [pies był już ugry- -] ugryzły go osy, ten chłopak wszedł na kamień taki duży i nabił się jak gdyby na rogi jelenia.* (1216)

*And the bees (NMN) began to chase the dog (ACC) and he ran, but later the owl began to chase this boy too. When [(the) dog had already been stung- -] bees stung him, this boy climbed up on a stone too big and (he) got stuck like on the antlers of a deer.*

This 12-year old probably wanted to use the passive voice “had been stung” and in that way to place the dog as the figure in the event. The speaker decided to leave him in the ground and to expose the bees.

### V. Change in temporality

As mentioned above, temporality means the location of events on a time line and the temporal relations between them. One of the linguistic means for expressing this category is tense or aspect marking of verbs.

10. *Pies zwałił ul z drzewa i z drzewa(=ula) wyleciały pszczoły a chłopiec [wyła- -] wylazł na inne drzewo i zagląda do dziupli. Ten gryzoń dalej się na nich patrzy. No a tymczasem z dziupli wyleciała sowa, przestraszyła chłopca, który spadł.* (ad01)

*The dog knocked down the beehive from the tree and from the tree(=beehive) the bees flew away and the boy (is climb- - (pres.)) has climbed another tree and (he) looks into a hole. This rat is looking at them. And meanwhile from the hole (an) owl flew out, frightened the boy(ACC), who fell down.*

This adult probably wanted to describe climbing the tree and looking into the hole as simultaneous events. He resigned from it and replaced the present tense (wyłazi - is climbing) with past tense (wylazł – has climbed). Doing that he sorts out activities that happened chronologically: climbing (the boy) and looking (the rat). In the new version these are simultaneous: The rat was looking at the boy during the boy’s climbing on the stone.

### VI. Change in punctuation

In some cases the result of false starts was a repetition of the same excerpt. The only difference was a changed intonation. When the intonation in the “replaced” text was falling, in the “new version” it was rising. If the narratives were written the correction could be from a coma to a full stop or from a full stop to a coma. The only possibility in the spoken text is to change the intonation and in that way mark the end of an episode or the continuation of it.

11. *No to pewnego dnia [to był wtorek ...] to był wtorek. No i tutaj siedział sobie chłopczyk na swoim stołeczku.* (1510)

*And one day [it was Tuesday ...] it was Tuesday. And here a boy was sitting on his little stool.*

The speaker clearly wanted to carry on the first sentence, extend it and give more information. She resigned and decided to begin a new sentence after making “the intonation full stop”.

12. *Tam chłopiec znalazł żabę... swoją... z rodziną. [Zabrał młodą żabkę.] Zabrał młodą żabkę – jedno dziecko jego żaby i koniec.* (1212)

*There the boy found a frog... his own... with a family. [(He) took a young frog.] He took a young frog – one child of his frog, and that’s all.*

Here we have the situation where at the beginning the speaker planned to finish the sentence without describing the young frog. Then he completed the sentence after giving more information about it. The intonation in the first version was falling, and in the next it was rising.

## VII. Change in the frame

Some texts are so constructed, that the story-teller describes pictures in a sequential order. In our frog-story this can lead to confusion because the book has 24 pictures with no numbers and it could be difficult to remember the order of the pictures. When somebody tried to use such a frame, he would have to give it up and afterwards did not use numbers of the pictures. Another frame can be to counterpoise activities of one character and another.

13. *Później chłopczyk z psem idą na polanę i szukają tej żabki. I chłopczyk szuka ją w norze a pies próbuje w ulu. Gdy jakies zwierzątko wyskoczyło i ugryzło go w nos. A pies dalej szceka na ul. I w pewnej chwili ul spadł i cały rój pszczoł wleciał na psa. A chłopczyk tym razem szukał w drzewie. Ale i tak nie znalazł. A tam była sowa. I go wyrzuciła. I spadł na plecy. A pies w dalszym ciągu ucieka przed pszczołami. (...) Nagle to był jeleń i spadł na jego głowę. A pies leciał za nim i szcekał. W pewnej chwili jeleń zrzucił chłopczyka i psa do wody. [A - -] Gdy wyszli z wody, chłopczyk coś usłyszał...* (0905)

*Then the boy and the dog are going to the glade and (they) looking for the frog. And the boy looks for it in a burrow and the dog tries in a beehive. Then an animal jumped out and bit him on the nose. And the dog keeps barking at the beehive. Suddenly the beehive fell down and the whole swarm of bees flew onto the dog. And the boy this time looked into a tree. But he did not find anything. And there was an owl. And he threw him out. And (he) fell on his back. And the dog keeps running from the bees. (...) Suddenly there was a deer and (the boy) fell on his head. And the dog ran after them and barked. Suddenly the deer threw the boy and the dog off into the water. [And - -] When they got out of the water, the boy heard something.*

This 9-year-old used this kind of frame - he counterpoises the activities of the characters for a long time. Afterwards he tries to insert in the text again the conjunction "and" (in Polish "a") but interrupts and doesn't use it anymore in his story.

All self-repairs occur in different amounts in all age groups. The table shows us the frequency of separate self-repairs according to age group.

THE CAUSE OF A SELF-REPAIR	9/10-YEAR OLDS (16 subjects)	12-YEAR OLDS (18 subjects)	15-YEAR OLDS (16 subjects)	ADULTS (14 subjects)	ALL
Change in the range of provided information	9	7	6	0	22
Change of sequencing	8	7	6	2	23
Change in degree of condensation of information	3	9	11	0	23
Change of perspective	2	8	8	3	21
Change in temporality	5	5	7	1	18
Change in punctuation	5	4	3	1	13
Change of the frame	3	0	1	0	4

The table shows that self-repairs of this kind are typical for schoolchildren but rarely occur in adults. Among self-repairs by schoolchildren there are small quantitative differences in change of range of provided information, sequencing and temporality. There are fewer differences in punctuation changes and frame changes. The frequency of changes in perspective or in condensation of events rises considerably from two or three by 9/10-year-olds up to eight or eleven by older children. The narratives told by 9- and 10-year-old children have simpler structure than the texts of older children. The older pupils strive after a mature and sophisticated narrative which often fails. Skill in choosing perspective and hierarchically sorting the presented events betokens a high level of maturity in producing a narrative. It requires fluency in use of the voice of verb, subordinations or nonfinite verb forms like gerunds or participles. On the other hand, writing skills influence the language of 12- and 15-year-olds more than of 9/10-year-olds. The older children can already write and read fluently and their spoken texts can be influenced by a written text more than stories told by 9/10-year-olds.

In the comparison of the 4 age groups we can't forget individual differences which can occur in every age group. There are some stories told by 9-year-olds that many 15-year-olds could be proud of. In every age group there were some texts with a lot of false starts as well as narratives, which the speaker interrupted very rarely and did not correct the produced text. But there was no single text where the story-teller did not hesitate at all. Some subjects used more pauses, others spoke more quickly, but they often interrupted and corrected themselves. The corrections of narrative structure were not necessary from the normative point of view. The subjects changed the texts in order to produce a better one. 9-, 12- or 15-year-olds can already tell a good story. Rather they are looking for the best way of producing a narrative and are trying mature expressions or constructions. In self-repairs they modify the texts in order to make them more appropriate. In producing a narrative they show us a bit of their way of thinking: what is more important for them in a narrative and by what kind of linguistic means they want to achieve the target.

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