

Verbalizing Personal and Fictive Experiences in Narrative Development

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The talk compares personal-experience and fictive narratives produced by Hebrew-speaking preschoolers, schoolchildren, and adults, focusing on two facets of verbal expression: Narrative Temporality and Evaluation. Temporality refers to encoding of distinctions of grammatical tense and mood, as an expression of textual stability by reliance on a single dominant tense versus variability, by means of generalized propositions in timeless present tense or irrealis mood. Narrative evaluation derives from Labov's (1972) notion of "non-narrative clauses" that lie outside the main story plotline, re-constructed for present purposes as follows. Analysis is applied to a broader range of functionally-motivated linguistic elements -- clause-internal lexical and phrasal constructions as well as ones of two or more clauses -- while discursively restricted to interpretive verbal content that reflects the narrator's perspective on and subjective attitude towards the events being recounted, including "story-external commentary" that is not merely descriptive (Berman, 1997).

The data-base consists of five sets of oral narratives produced by native speakers of Israeli Hebrew, ranging in age from preschoolers to adolescence and adulthood, as follows: Two personal-experience accounts, in which participants were asked (1) to recount an incident they had experienced with violence in schools and (2) to recount a quarrel they had had at school, at home, or at work; and three fictive elicitations: (3) the "pear-story" based on a 7-minute wordless film (Chafe, 1980); (4) the "frog-story" narratives based on a 15-page picturebook (Berman & Slobin, 1994); and (5) a series of six pictures (Hickmann, 2003).

Prior research suggests the following predictions. In the domain of temporality, by around 5 years, children will recount events in a clearly narrative mode, relying largely on a single dominant tense, from which they will diverge only as required grammatically by sequence-of-tense constraints; with age, texts will reflect temporal variability with generalized propositions in irrealis mood or timeless present, and personal-experience accounts will rely almost exclusively on past tense forms, with film- or picture-based events optionally treated as ongoing reports in present tense. As for evaluation, young children may adhere largely to predication referring to dynamic activities and events, with some affective evaluation; by middle childhood, and increasingly in adolescence, proportion of event-based material will decrease with more reference to attendant circumstances in which events are embedded, more markedly in personal experience than in fictive accounts, due to the greater personal involvement and more subjective discourse stance.

References

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