

What's in a Sentence? Segmenting Experience in Japanese Narration

Patricia M. Clancy
University of California, Santa Barbara

In his work on the verbalization of experience, Chafe (1979, 1980, 1994) described the sentence as a multi-clause unit having distinctive syntactic and intonational properties. Sentences in a narrative, he proposed, do not represent pre-existing cognitive units, but rather are created on-line as part of the verbalization process. In this paper, I follow up on Chafe's seminal research with a developmental study of sentence production in Japanese narratives.

Using the pear film methodology, narratives based on a 7-minute video from the "Sazaesan" television program were elicited from 60 children (aged 4-7 years) and 10 adults. To gain insight into the factors that motivate and constrain the production of sentences during narration, the Sazaesan stories were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively for sentence length, content, and coherence.

Analysis of sentence length indicates that the ability to create a distinct sentence level intermediate in length between the clause and the entire story emerges over time. Several children under six relied on a 'sentence = clause' strategy, as in (1):

- (1) *Ijimeteta no. Soshite ne, asondeta no. Soshite ne, eto ne, byooki datta no.*
'He (the baby) was bothering her (a girl). And then, he was playing. And then, um, she (the baby's mother) was sick.' (story continues)

In contrast, several children of five years or older used a 'sentence = story' strategy, as in (2):

- (2) *Unto ne, saisho ne, Wakamechan ga ne, gakkoo kara kaette kitara ne, unto akachan ga ne, unto ... kutsubako no tokoro ne, unto ippai ne, dashichatte ne, ... (25 clauses) soshite owatta no.*
'Um, in the beginning, when Wakame comes home from school, um the baby um takes lots of things out of the shoe box, (24 clauses), ... and then it ended.'

In order to create a distinct sentence level, children must learn the conventions that relate sentence length to story content. Content analysis reveals that narrators who could produce intermediate-level sentences tended to use very long sentences when recounting a cohesive event series with a goal or outcome, e.g., a set of disruptive events leading to a decision to inform the baby's parents. On the other hand, reporting dialogue or providing evaluations elicited short sentences, e.g., *Moo omoshiroi n* 'It was really funny.'

The placement of sentence boundaries sheds light on the cognitive process of sentence production. Analysis of the internal coherence of sentences was carried out to determine whether the material within sentences typically corresponds to a single unit of narrative structure. The units examined ranged in scope from entire episodes to episode-internal components such as goal, attempt, outcome; action, reaction; question, answer. Results indicate that although sentences do not usually encode a single narrative unit, narrators do tend to place sentence boundaries at the ends of narrative units, regardless of the scope of the unit. Supporting Chafe's original proposal, these results are consistent with a production model in which narrators decide where to place sentence boundaries as they create narrative units during the verbalization process.

References

- Chafe, W. 1979. The flow of thought and the flow of language. In T. Givón (ed.), *Discourse and Syntax*, 159-181. New York: Academic Press.
- Chafe, W. 1980. The deployment of consciousness in the production of a narrative. In W. Chafe (ed.), *The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production*, 9-50. Norwood, NJ: Albex.
- Chafe, W. 1994. *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.