

Proficiency in Storytelling

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PROFICIENCY IN STORYTELLING

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How to measure oral language proficiency is a key question in the education of American Indian school children. Measures of language proficiency based on written language norms may not be adequate to assess true achievement among these children. Two reasons for the inadequacy are that the home language is often not English, and the cultural background carries a strong oral tradition. Written norms for language proficiency for such children are not based on the language of everyday life.

In an attempt to measure language proficiency in terms of everyday use, I am focussing the analysis on a predominant mode of discourse. Storytelling in American Indian culture is a formal oral tradition with a cast of characters, an array of plots, and a repertoire of formulaic expressions to refer to the characters and their activities. Storytelling is a mode of discourse because it involves stretches of speech longer than sentences with some identifiable unifying features. The intent of the analysis is to analyze stories in a way compatible with the analysis of any mode of oral discourse. Such an analysis can with more certainty be said to measure oral language proficiency because it is generalizable across different modes.

Data Collection

Stories were collected from fourteen Hoopa Indian children, ages three to ten. The children lived on the Hoopa Indian Reservation in Northwest California, and were of Indian ancestry. Their collective Indian ancestral backgrounds were Hupa, Yurok, Karok, Navajo, and Cherokee. Having mixed ancestry is typical of Indian people in Northwest California.

Data was collected from the children in their homes and yards. Data was collected in as natural a way as possible;

it was collected primarily in the mornings after preliminary study indicated mornings were a time when most stories were told. The investigator was present during data collection, since the children tended to gravitate to her. To keep data collection spontaneous, the investigator acted naturally while trying to minimize her participation to the greatest extent possible.

Approximately 130 stories were collected. These stories were not usually ancestral Indian stories; most were personal experiences. Some retellings were non-Indian stories, as when movies or television shows were retold. The data distribution of types of stories indicated that younger children told mostly of personal experiences; six year olds did retell books or television stories. Only older children told Indian stories; this group also told a moderately high percentage of personal experience

stories.

Distribution of stories according to age level and type is depicted in Table I:

TABLE I

Data Distribution: Personal Experiences, Ancestral Retellings, and Retellings of Books, Television Dramas, and Movies.					
	Personal Experiences		Retellings		
	Recent	Long Ago	Ancestral	Non-Ancestral	
Age Group				Books	TV, Movies
Younger (ages 3-6)	44	0	0	7	0
Older (ages 7-10)	39	18	6	11	15

Possible explanations for the predominance of non-ancestral stories are (1) the children hear more non-ancestral stories; (2) ancestral stories are reserved for special occasions. In addition to ancestral/non-ancestral distinction for retellings, personal experiences were classified as recent or about the more distant past. Stories not occurring in the more distant past were considered recent experiences. Younger children did not use temporal markers referring to the more distant past. Older children used markers such as, "long time ago", "when I was (a baby)", and "one time".

Preliminary Analysis

After stories were transcribed, a sample from each age level was chosen on the basis of representativeness and completeness. These stories were compared and contrasted for the purpose of identifying developmental trends. Other stories were also tentatively analyzed. One of the primary guides for preliminary analysis was previous research; another was the investigator's intuitive impressions of marked discourse features. A discourse unit approach was arrived at, wherein stories were seen to consist of combinations of discourse units. Units were identified through discourse patterns; these patterns were comprised of underlying syntactic structures and surface features. No one-to-one correspondences between underlying structures and surface features were observed; rather certain syntactic structures were found more easily in more stories and certain discourse phenomena were observed to combine with some elements in underlying structure.

Underlying syntactic structures have been the concern of previous researchers on storytelling. Three approaches have been developed. These approaches are narrative syntax (Labov, 1972),

story grammar (Rumelhart, 1975), and vertical organization (Chafe, 1977). These three approaches are not necessarily exclusive; they may be complementary. They view underlying structural units from three different perspectives. The following diagrams set forth the different approaches:

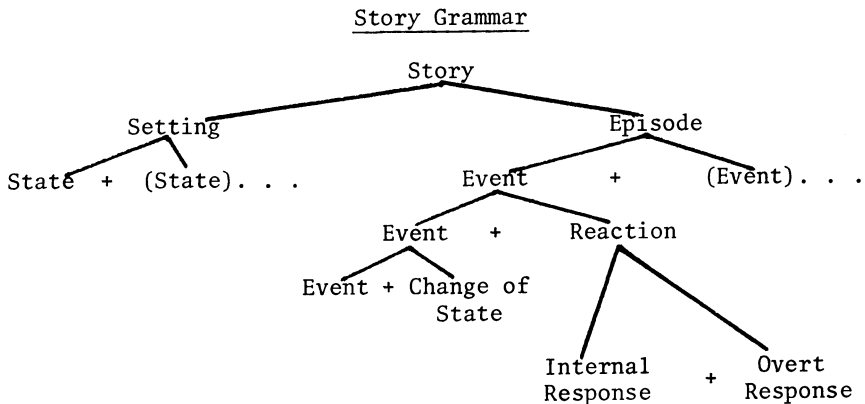
Narrative Syntax

Syntactic slots arranged in a prescribed sequence:

Request + Abstract + Orientation + Complicating + Resolution + C
 Introducer + Action

The above units are derived from Labov's model, with the Request Introducer being added. One characteristic of narrative syntax analysis is that all units are on the same level of abstraction. They center on plot structures. In addition, these units include preliminaries and endings marking stories as special events in ongoing conversation.

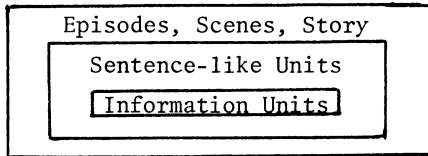
In the story grammar model, syntactic slots are hierarchical:



The tree above represents just one possibility for the hierarchical structure of a story. Other possibilities hinge primarily on different plot structures, such as an Event leading to another Event prior to a Change of State. One similarity between the narrative syntax model and the story grammar model is that both allow for background information and plot. "Orientation" in narrative syntax is similar to "Setting" in the story grammar. Episode includes Complicating Action and Resolution. The difference from the narrative syntax model is that in the story grammar some elements are more general, while others are incorporated as constituents. The higher elements in the hierarchical structure are inclusive of the constituent elements at the lower nodes.

Vertical Organization

Slots are not sequential, but rather smaller ideas contained within larger ones.



The smallest units are complete thoughts. These units may be complete sentences, but most typically the information unit is a clause or phrase, or an elliptical expression. The sentence-like unit, in contrast, may only be a single clause, but most typically is a compound or a complex sentence; this unit spans information units. The largest unit in our data is the story; in other types of narratives, there may be an intermediary unit termed an "episode" or "scene".

Sample Stories

Texts of two stories are presented below. The older child's story appears first, followed by the younger child's story. These two stories are a basis for locating developmental differences in underlying structures.

The Ten Year Old's Story: Carla, 10.9

- (1) C: Could they be stories about Indian devils and all that?
- (2) R: Oh, yeah. (.7)
- (3) C: All right. (.8)
- (4) C: Um (.4) Deanna's mom (.5)
- (5) When she was um (.8) young (1.0)
- (6) Um (.4) her her she had a uncle (.8)
- (7) And he uh a friend of her uncle's um (.5)
- (8) You know Deanna's mom's (.8)
- (9) R: Gwen. (.4)
- (10) C: Uh-huh. (.5)
- (11) Of her Gwen's uncle (.4)
- (12) Um her uncle had a friend and (.5)
- (13) He came over and (.5)
- (14) And Gwen was chopping acorns
- (15) And he came over (.5)
- (16) And he said, "That's a good girl," (0.0)
- (17) You know he was patting her all over on her shoulders (.5)
- (18) Saying, "that's a good girl, (.4)
- (19) Um chopping acorns for your mom." (.7)
- (20) And that next morning (.6)
- (21) Um she woke up (.8)
- (22) And she couldn't move her shoulders or nothing. (1.9)
- (23) She couldn't move at all her arms (.5) and her shoulders (1.5)

- (24) R: /Wow./
 (25) C: /Where/ that guy touched her. (.8)
 (26) R: Wow.

The Three Year Old's Story: Derrick, 3.9

- (1) D: Look it. (.9)
 (2) Look it. (.9)
 (3) Hey. (8.1)
 (4) () two trucks. (.4)
 (5) I got two dump trucks. (0.0)
 (6) R: You do?
 (7) D: Uh-huh. (.4)
 (8) R: Where are they? (1.0)
 (9) D: That (.4) that orange one right there (.9)
 (10) Been playing with it. (0.0)
 (11) R: Oh. (1.0)
 (12) D: Dad bought this new car for me. (.6)
 (13) R: He did? (.5)
 (14) D: Yeah. (1.0)
 (15) Dad bought this (1.1) this thing (.6)
 (16) Knock this guys down. (1.1)
 (17) Whole bunch. (.5)
 (18) R: Knock the guys down?
 (19) D: Mm-hm. Knock 'em down.
 (20) R: Oh.
 (21) D: I got this car.

Transcription notation is as follows:

Pauses

Pause notation refers to seconds and tenths of seconds; digits to the left of the decimal are whole seconds, while digits to the right are tenths of seconds.

Non-medial pauses co-occur with grammatical boundaries; medial pauses occur within grammatical units. Unit (15) contains a medial pause after "this".

Lines not designating pauses are left unmarked because they are not being analyzed for temporal organization unit structure.

The three year old's story is probably not intentional; it occurs during talk that combines comments of ongoing events with recall from the past. The ten year old clearly intends to tell a story; she requests permission to tell a certain type of story. The three year old's story provides evidence for the definition of a minimal story: it is constituted of at least one momentary event situated in the past. The older child's story is illustrative of a more elaborate form. It is a retelling of an Indian devil story; further, it is the type of Indian devil story that is told as a personal history. Such stories gain impact from the storyteller being able to claim that they are "really true".

Alternate Approaches to Underlying Structure

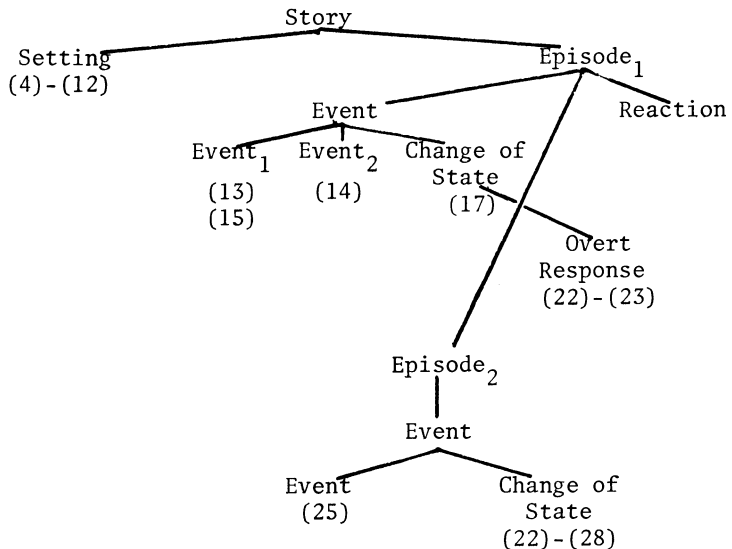
The three approaches will be compared with illustrative diagrams from Carla and Derrick's stories. Using the narrative syntax model, Carla's story would be diagrammed:

Request Introducer (1)-(3)	+ Abstract (1)	+ Orientation (4)-(11) (20)	+ Complicating Action (12)-(19) (21)	+ Resolution (22)-(25)
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The Request Introducer may be entirely separate from the story; in the example above, it is identical to part of the Abstract. The Abstract prepares for subsequent elements; it summarizes the entire story. The Orientation describes background activities preparing for the Complicating Action; the final action is the Resolution.

One of the advantages of the narrative syntax model is simplicity. There is only one level of underlying structure. The request to begin, the abstract, and the background activities are a preliminary to the action sequence. The action focuses on an encounter; there are actions and consequences. The Resolution is stated in terms of adverse consequences to the girl.

Carla's story would be diagrammed in a tree structure according to the generative story grammar:

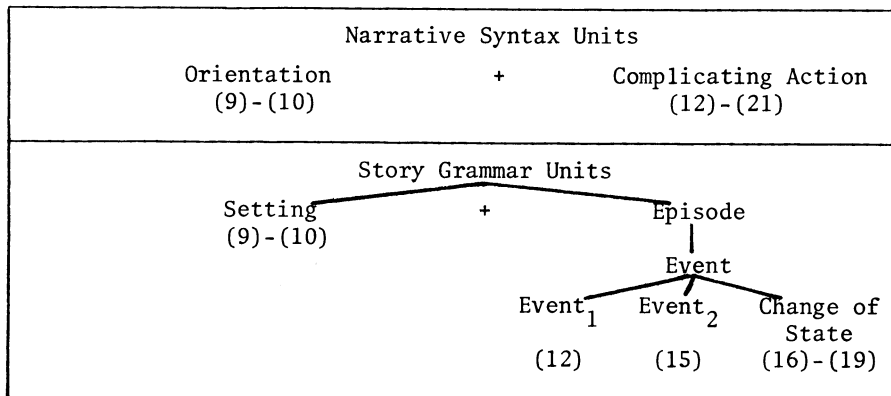


One of the advantages of the story grammar model is that separate episodes are recorded; also, event chains are noted. Events that result in changes of state, for example, are noted. These events are distinguished from events where no definite contingencies are established. The events in units (13) and (14)

are not contingent: the girl is chopping acorns, the man comes over. the Event of chopping acorns neither causes nor allows the event of coming over. Events (13) and (15), however, do have a bearing on (17). Coming over allows the man to be close enough to touch the girl. Contingencies sometimes exist across episodes, as in (22) when the girl is unable to move.

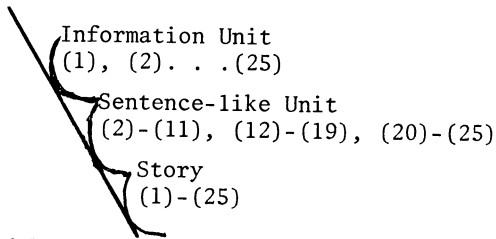
The primary disadvantage of the story grammar model is that it is not easily adaptable to stylistic analysis; formulaic markers, introducers, and other elements are not accounted for. Such elements may be important within a cultural tradition. The story grammar covers essentially what is termed Orientation and Complicating Action and Resolution in the narrative syntax model. The narrative syntax model is preferable for our data because it is more simple and more complete.

The two models are similar in reflecting a story's plot structure. A comparative analysis of Derrick's story indicates the similarity:

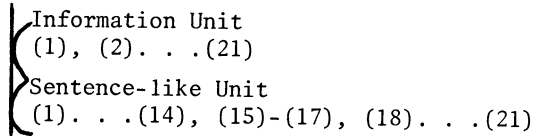


The younger child's story lacks the optional units in the narrative syntax analysis. The narrative syntax model is useful in pointing out the addition of units as one trend in development. The story grammar model can also show an increase in units, but is more limited to events and characters' reactions. Neither model can show developmental changes in surface features.

The vertical organization unit structure takes in the relative span of ideas, from an idea taking the fewest number of words to ideas spanning sentences. With this model, Carla's story would be described:



Derrick's story would be diagrammed:



The basic difference reflected in the comparison is that in Carla's story, information units are combined into sentence-like units. These larger units in turn make up a story. Derrick's story, in contrast, is made up primarily of information units. There is one sentence-like unit, but his story lacks the component structure of the story of the older child.

Underlying Structure and Surface Features

The pause cluster was found to be a central tie between underlying discourse structure and surface features. Pause clusters were found by Chafe to occur at places in stories where planning was taking place. Planning requires a slowing down of the pace of the story, as the storyteller is taking time to think as he talks. Pause clusters can be expected to occur more predictably in older children's stories, rather than in stories told by younger children. Young children are not thought to organize their stories, whereas older children have the verbal ability to introduce their stories, provide background information, and then proceed with the action.

Pause clusters can be expected to correlate with those units of underlying syntax where planning is most logical; the Orientation, for example, would seem to involve planning, since background information is presumably a preparation for a series of actions.

Developmental Hypothesis

The developmental hypothesis aimed at identifying a criterion for oral language proficiency. This criterion was arrived at through correlations between underlying discourse syntax and surface features, since pause clusters were found to be evidence of planning, and Orientations to involve planning almost by definition.

It was hypothesized that pause clusters would co-occur with Orientations in the stories told by older children, and that such a Discourse Unit could be considered a criterion for oral language proficiency.

Descriptive Analysis of a Ten Year Old's Story

The developmental hypothesis was explored in a story told by a ten year old. In addition, the story was analyzed line-by-line for other unifying features. This section will present that analysis; it is based on Carla's story, the text of which is printed above.

The unit that begins the story is a question: "Could they be stories about Indian devils and all that?" This unit summarizes the story. It is an Abstract in Labov's terms; but the unit is more than an Abstract. It is embedded into a request to tell a story. Since it functions as a request, it fills two syntactic slots.

The simultaneous use of two underlying syntactic slots with one utterance is a characteristic of an older child's story. The form of Carla's Request Introducer has also been identified as characteristic of the more advanced speaker. Its form is marked syntactically as a permission request; it involves knowledge of the proper use of models and the ability to use the first person subject when making a request. The earlier appearing forms are imperatives and elliptical expressions (Ervin-Tripp, 1977).

Another characteristic of the story that marks a developmental advance is the use of a turn-taking exchange at the beginning. Such an exchange elicits the listener's assent. The structure of the exchange is as follows:

Request Exchange	Transcript
REQUEST	(1) Could they be stories about Indian devils and all that?
RESPONSE	(2) Oh, yeah.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	(3) All right.

In the next section, the Orientation, the characters are introduced:

- (4) C: Um (.4) Deanna's mom (.5)
 (5) When she was um (.8) young (1.0)
 (6) Um (.4) her her she had a uncle (.8)
 (7) And he uh a friend of her uncle's um (.5)
 (8) You know Deanna's mom's (.8)
 (9) R: Gwen. (.4)
 (10) C: Uh-hum. (.5)
 (11) Of her Gwen's uncle (.4)
 (12) Um her uncle had a friend and (.5)

Characterization is accomplished through a series of interwoven references. These references create an element of unity in

the passage, since they form a pattern. The following diagram illustrates:

TABLE IV Referencing Ties for Three Characters in a Ten-Year-Old's Story			
Information Unit	Characters		
	Girl	Uncle	Uncle's Friend
(4)	Deanna's mom		
(5)	she		
(6)	she, her, her	uncle	he
(7)	her, her	uncle's	a friend
(8)	Deanna's mom's		
(9)	Gwen		
(11)	Gwen's, her	uncle	
(12)	her	uncle	a friend

Referencing ties provide a unit structure through creating ties between information units. Frequently, referencing ties create unity through character configurations. A group of characters will be mentioned throughout a sequence of information units, identifying them as mutual participants in the action. When a storyteller makes use of referencing ties to establish characters, he is using discourse phenomena as a stylistic device.

In the above example, a stylistic pattern is created through frequent mention and through the use of pronouns and other substitutions. The girl is mentioned most frequently: **eight** times. Four times she is identified through the possessive pronoun, "her". An interesting facet of this method of identification is that the girl and uncle are referenced virtually simultaneously. Another interesting, but curious, feature is that although the uncle is mentioned four times, he does not appear in the action. The mention of the uncle suggests another stylistic technique. The storyteller used the device of kinship linking to create a character "set". The man who approaches the girl is not a stranger, nor just a friend. He is a friend of a close relative.

Kinship as a device to create character is also used in connection with the girl. When Carla wants to check to be sure the listener knows who "Deanna's mom" is, she is referring to the character in terms of a kinship linkage.

Stylistic techniques and character-creating devices can be seen as developmental trends. These trends are realized through

reference phenomena put to various functions. The turn-taking exchange forming the Request Introducer is another developmental trend; this trend involves the creation of an underlying discourse structure. Such structures can potentially correlate with patterns of pauses.

The pattern of pauses during the character identification passage constitutes a pause cluster. There are four pauses of .8 seconds or longer. Also, there are three medial pauses in the first three units. Finally, the pauses occur during what amounts to different ways to say the same thing. Repetition of the same idea also performs the slowing down function of the pause cluster. Pauses, repetition, and fillers are included in the more general category, "hesitation phenomena" (Chafe, 1979).

The next series of lines contains a change in the pattern of pausing. In this passage, there are no pauses longer than .7 seconds and no medial pauses. This passage marks a transition from background information to event sequence. The sequence of events is a chain of activities with an implicit cause and effect. The cause and effect is implicit in the sense that no explicit statement of action and consequence is made; the implicit nature of the presentation relies on the listener's knowledge of the Indian devil tradition. In these stories, one character is the Indian devil; he is typically devious in his manner and possessing ill intentions. In Carla's story, he is a so-called friend of the girl's uncle. In one series of events, the initial actions occur:

- (12) Um her uncle had a friend and
- (13) He came over and
- (14) And Gwen was chopping acorns
- (15) And he came over
- (16) And he said, "That's a good girl,"
- (17) You know he was patting her all over on her shoulders
- (18) Saying, "that's a good girl,
- (19) Um chopping acorns for your mom."

In terms of underlying syntax, this passage is Complicating Action. The man comes over, pats the girl on the shoulders and tells her she is a good girl. The inappropriate nature of the behavior comes across through intensifying expressions, such as the phrase "patting her all over". An innuendo of misbehavior is also projected through the repetition of the man's words, "that's a good girl." The storyteller underlines his mannerisms in an attempt to convey his ill intentions.

In the next passage, there is a brief return to Orientation, and then the final action occurs. Orientation appears in the form of a new setting, "that next morning";

- (20) C: And that next morning (.6)
- (21) Um she woke up (.8)
- (22) And she couldn't move her shoulders or nothing. (1.9)
- (23) She couldn't move at all her arms (.5) and her shoulders. (1.5)

- (24) R: /Wow./
 (25) C: /Where/ that guy touched her.
 (26) R: Wow.

The fact that the girl is unable to move is a sign that she has been devilled. Immobility is typically an occurrence in Indian devil stories. According to underlying syntax, the consequence of the man's actions would comprise the Resolution. This is not a Resolution in the sense of a happy ending; however, it is a Resolution in being a typical ending in an Indian devil story. A listener without a knowledge of typical cause and effect sequences in Indian devil stories would doubtlessly experience the story as disconnected and precisely lacking a Resolution.

In the Resolution unit, there is a slowing down of the pace. Pauses of 1.9 seconds and 1.5 seconds occur, and a medial pause occurs also. This pause cluster could be correlated with the Resolution, although the notion that pause clusters are connected with planning would have to be put aside. There is no evidence of planning at the end of the story. Another, more plausible, explanation for the pause cluster at the end of the story is that it is a function of the communicative situation. The storyteller appears to be waiting for the listener's reaction after unit (22); none is forthcoming, however. She then repeats herself in a further attempt to elicit a listener response.

Findings in the analysis confirmed the hypothesis regarding pause clusters. Other findings were that additional surface features were operative in the story. Specifically, referencing phenomena, turn-taking exchanges, and repetitions were found to be unifying devices within narrative syntax slots. The more general finding was, then, that surface features do combine with underlying syntactic structures in stories told by more advanced storytellers and that such correlations represent developmental trends. Correlations between surface features and underlying syntax then become good criteria for measuring oral language proficiency.

Implications for Education

The data presented here has been the basis for demonstrating how criteria for oral language proficiency can be developed. The approach developed has been stated in terms generalizable to other modes of discourse and therefore can be used with other areas of oral language. Arguments, role play activities, and other speech events engaged in by American Indian children can provide supportive evidence for the criteria for oral language proficiency presented here in storytelling. The analysis of modes of discourse can provide the basis for arguing that language should be assessed as it is actually used. Such assessments can be utilized by educators interested in culturally-appropriate methods of determining language proficiency among American Indian children.

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