

A Study of Sharing Time With First Grade Students: Discourse Narratives in the Classroom  
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A Study of Sharing Time With First Grade  
Students: Discourse Narratives in the Classroom

"Sometimes the world doesn't need  
to know about everything, right?"  
-- 1st grade teacher at sharing time --

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For children, entry into the adult conversational world requires a lengthy apprenticeship which is developed partially through the ways in which adults interpret and respond to messages from children (Ryan, 1974) and partially by direct teaching of narrative accounting skills. Such skills begin to be taught formally when the child enters school in speech events such as "show and tell" sessions, where an object is used as a focus for a single child to present an account to the whole class.

The child's problem in these sessions (and subsequent similar occasions) is firstly to select from the multiplicity of things to tell about, as the quotation above suggests. Secondly, the child must present information in a form which is interpretable to others who do not share the child's background knowledge and assumptions and so develop a sense of how to present this selected information to an audience. It is these two problems of selection and discourse form which we will explore in this paper, as they occur in sessions of show and tell, which is called "sharing", in a particular first grade classroom.

#### Models of narratives

The literature on narratives does not usually treat narratives as a part of everyday conversational exchange but as speech events somewhat separate from other kinds of talk. The exception is the model developed recently by Becker & Polanyi which simplifies and builds upon the Labov-Waletzky model of narrative structures. Labov suggests that there are six structural components to a story: 1) abstract, 2) orientation, 3) complicating action, 4) evaluation, 5) resolution, and 6) coda. These syntactically and semantically organized elements represent the necessary temporal sequence of any story. The elements must occur in their designated order with the exception of evaluative devices which can occur in any of the segments. Most other models of narratives similarly take the form of a structured organization of elements which account for temporal sequencing but vary in the degree and extent to which the structures compose necessary and definable parts of the narrative. We can, in fact, distinguish between those approaches that emphasize hierarchical structure and those that focus on the linear flow of elements.

Story grammars make use of the structural elements of a story but see these as specifically hierarchically arranged, where the elements are part of a necessary entailment of levels and story

parts. Chafe (1979), on the other hand, suggests that stories are more linearly organized, focusing not on elemental organization but on the real-time production of stories where an element grows out of another and gets related to the story line in different ways in retelling. This flow model approach allows for fuzziness in the presence or absence of any one structural element and in the boundaries between them.

#### Oral tradition versus literate tradition differences

Both these approaches can be seen as having something of a literate bias, in that they assume that narratives whether orally presented or written will follow the same rules of form. Moreover it is assumed that oral narratives can be analyzed from a written transcript showing at best only hesitation phenomena and the rudiments of intonation afforded by punctuation. Folklorists, however, who have worked more specifically with the oral presentation of narratives, albeit usually within a ritual storytelling context, have found that oral narratives are built around formulas of content, syntactic form and meter which allow for the rapid production of sequences necessary in oral composition (Lord, 1960). This work has shown the difficulty of translating into writing an oral performance, which depends upon the paralinguistic presentation (stress, intonation, and pitch) to carry essential information (MacClendon, 1977). These findings have influenced our study of the materials from the children's sharing time.

#### Sharing -- some ethnographic background

Sharing takes place every morning in this particular first grade classroom, within the context of a larger episode which we refer to as "rugtime", a time when the children assemble on the rug for various teacher-structured activities such as taking roll, doing the calendar, etc. During this time the children are expected to sit quietly on the rug, engaged in what Cook-Gumperz (1978) has called "attentive listening."

Sharing is a clearly bounded speech event, opened formulaically by the teacher (or student teacher), saying "OK, who has something important (interesting, exciting, special, etc.) to share?" or simply offering the floor to the person whom the teacher has designated the "special person" (a different child each day).

To get a turn, children raise their hands and wait to be nominated by the teacher, but while another child is sharing, anyone can call out short, topically relevant comments from the rug.

In anticipation of sharing, some of the children bring in objects from home to talk about, ranging from books or toys to a new article of clothing worn by the child. But the children are not required to bring in things to share (as is the case in some classrooms with organized sessions of "show and tell"), and many children simply share about a recent experience.

The only explicit rules for sharing are: 1) no sharing about TV or movies because it takes too long, and 2) no sharing about private family matters, such as quarrels, etc. Very early on, children were urged to tell about events that had already taken place.

When a child is called on, he or she goes to the front of the rug and stands next to the teacher who is seated on a chair. The teacher, whom we will call Mrs. Jones, is actively involved in each turn, holding her arm around each child as he or she talks, holding the floor for the child (e.g., "Excuse me, it's Merle's turn.") and freely interjecting questions or reactions to the child or group at large.

#### Sharing as a unique speech event

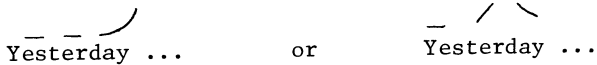
That the children see sharing-time as a completely unique speech event is evidenced by their use of a highly marked intonation contour. This "sharing intonation" is an integral feature of sharing discourse and occurs in no other classroom speech activity (other than role-playing sharing as a part of "playing school"). In this particular classroom, which is half white and half Black children, we have identified two contrasting, but very comparable intonation patterns, both clearly identifying the talk as sharing-talk. The contour used primarily by the white children is a gradually rising contour, stretching over the last word or two of a tone group. The accompanying utterance is often a syntactically complete, independent clause where an adult speaker would often use falling intonation. This particular curve seems to indicate "more to come" and is almost always followed by a significant pause. This perhaps serves to ward off comments from peers or teacher, allowing the child some extra time for planning. For example,

Ahab: I got this Chinese Checker's game ...  
 for my birthday ... and .....

The second intonation contour is used exclusively by the Black children and very pronouncedly by some of the Black girls. It occurs in exactly the same environments (independent clauses), and can be characterized as a lilting high rise-mid fall contour, also generally followed by a pause. The contours are used primarily at the beginning of a turn (as the child introduces the topic), where perhaps more planning is required, or the talk most ritualized as sharing talk. For some children, especially for those who use the second contour, this sharing prosody involves rather sharp pitch modulations, giving the talk an almost sing-song quality. For example,

Sherry: October my mother gonna have her baby, ...  
 and I want it to be a girl ...

There is also evidence of the use of a lexical formula. In telling about past events, children very commonly begin by saying:


  
 Yesterday ...                      or                      Yesterday ...

depending on which intonation contour they generally use. That this is formulaic (rather than simply a function of the fact that children want to talk about the immediate past) can be seen in the cases where children correct a false start. For example,

Bob: Yesterday ... I mean ... I mean .. when I went to Arkansas [which happened a year earlier].

Deena: Yesterday ... I mean it was last night ...

It turns out that using such a formula serves several discourse purposes. First, it serves to ground the talk temporally, the importance of which is repeatedly emphasized in Mrs. Jones' comments. Secondly, it establishes a frame that helps the child in structuring, and the listeners in interpreting, the discourse as event or person-oriented "accounting".

#### Sharing -- narratives or not?

There is no clear cut answer to the question of whether sharing is a narrative because sharing discourse evidences certain features that have been considered basic to narrative discourse while systematically lacking others. In the cases where the child does event-oriented accounting (as opposed to object-focused, "show and tell" type discourse), the order of reported events generally conforms to the order (presumably) in which the events occurred. Inasmuch as this is a necessary and overriding characteristic of narrative discourse, we feel inclined to treat this talk as a particular variant of narrative discourse. For example,

- 1 Martin: Yesterday/
- 2 ... 'Burt/.. and 'I was at 'Burt's house/
- 3 and um/.. 'this 'dog was 'running across the street/
- 4 ... and uh/
- 5 T: What did?
- 6 Burt: 'This dog [
- 7 Martin: [was 'running across the street/
- 8 and a car runned him over/
- 9 and/.. and he/and he fell/.. down
- 10 and he was screeching/

- 11 Martin: 'then he died/  
 12 and 'then his mom / put him on a board/  
 13 and 'then the 'bus came/  
 14 and he [and he got  
 15 Burt: [called, called for help//  
 16 Martin: called for help//  
 17 T: I'm sorry. Life isn't all fun and pleasantry is it?  
 18 Martin: It was a 'lost dog//  
 19 T: That's a very [sad --  
 20 Burt: [It was a "lost dog"//  
 21 Martin: So the guy who owned him/doesn't know/[he was dead//  
 22 T: Really? Right,  
 23 that's very sad. That makes me feel very bad. But  
 24 life's like that. We can't pretend it isn't can we?  
 25 C's: No.  
 26 T: 'cause things like that do happen. Sorry.

Martin's discourse, produced collaboratively with Mrs. Jones and Burt, shows a great deal of rhythmic synchronization. The discourse can be analyzed as containing an orientation section (lines 1 and 2), complicating action (lines 3-11), a resolution (lines 12-16), and a coda (lines 18, 20, and 21), which also serve as Martin's evaluation of the discourse. Mrs. Jones provides her own evaluative comments (lines 17, 19, 22-24, and 26), which differ in form from Martin's. Martin's comment "It was a lost dog." (line 18) adds additional information about the dog, which ties lexically back to line 3, where Martin originally mentions "this dog". His comment, then, serves several purposes. It adds new and important information about the dog, brings the narrative to a close (also indicated by pronounced falling intonation), and evaluates the discourse implicitly, as if to say, "It's especially sad because it was a lost dog." Mrs. Jones does not overtly respond to this comment, perhaps because she interprets it merely as additional detail rather than as Martin's evaluation and point in telling the story. The comment is then repeated, more loudly and with emphasis by Burt, and then further elaborated on by Martin (line 21), who again evaluates by means of providing additional information. Mrs. Jones then makes explicit the "point" of Martin's story (lines 22-24). She accomplishes this by referring to the event as a whole, standing outside the actual account, whereas Martin's and Burt's evaluative comments are an integral part of the account, and hence remain indirect.

Labov has noted that a common trait of middle class narrators is that they often use explicit evaluation. That is, they interrupt their narrative midstream, turn to their listener and explicitly state their "point". Mrs. Jones, who uses this strategy in evaluating the children's talk, often fails to see the implicit evaluative force of the children's remarks and even, on occasion, misses their point entirely. In providing explicit evaluative comments (as with Martin) or prodding the children to produce their own (as will be seen later with Walter), she may be providing the children necessary training in making their talk more explicit and hence less dependent on context, shared assumptions, and background knowledge for correct interpretation.

While clearly a narrative-account in structure, this kind of discourse deviates systematically from narratives generated in a normal conversational setting, in the following ways:

1) The floor is held for the child by the teacher, as a rule of sharing etiquette. For example,

Deena: Today, when I go home um ... and um ... and I see my baby sister ...

Student Teacher: Excuse me. Walter, it's Deena's turn right now. Could you please listen.

Deena: When I go home tod .. today and see my baby sister ...

Once a child has the floor, he or she is allowed to finish (in general), so that "boring the audience" is not an overriding concern of the speaker. It does happen on occasion that when a child is considered too long winded or unfocused, a child on the rug may comment on this (e.g., Walter: How many of them rocks is she going to show us?) or more commonly, Mrs. Jones intervenes and quickly brings the turn to an end.

2) The child is not expected to tie his or her topic to the previous discourse. The relevance constraint requires only that the discourse topic be "appropriate" to sharing, that is, some kind of personal account or description of an object. Thus the constraints on demonstrating relevance and topic tying are far looser than is normally the case in conversationally embedded narratives.

3) The child's talk does not have to stand by itself as a fully formed narrative. Rather, as our first example shows, sharing turns are highly collaborative. Mrs. Jones interjects questions, comments, and reactions, often providing slots for orienting or evaluating the discourse, if this information is not explicitly provided by the child spontaneously. For example,

- 1 Walter: I<sup>1</sup>went to the --/beach/  
 2 ... and I found<sup>1</sup>/this little thing<sup>^</sup>/in the water//  
 3 T: For goodness sake. What is it?  
 4 Walter: Huh?

- 5 Doral: [A block,  
 6 C's: [A block, a block  
 7 T: A block. W[hen did you go to the beach?  
 8 Carl: [I--  
 9 Walter: [I went to--  
 10 Carl: [I have tons of those blocks [--  
 11 Walter: [I went to--/the 'Santa  
 Cruz beach//  
 12 T: You did? When? O-Over the weekend?  
 13 Walter: [Nods]  
 14 T: Oh wow. I bet it's nice down there. Wasn't it?  
 15 Walter: Yeah. (breathy)  
 16 T: Was the water cold?  
 17 Walter: \Yeah.  
 18 T: It's always cold down there, thank you.

In this example, Walter holds up a weather-beaten wooden block and says he found it during a trip to the beach. Mrs. Jones then asks a series of questions that structure his presentation for him so that it contains the following pieces of information (and no more):

1. the name of the object found in the water,
2. the name of the beach,
3. when his visit took place,
4. that it was nice there, and
5. that the water was cold.

Walter here begins his account with an orientation that could easily lead into a narrative. The teacher's contributions, however, rather than helping him develop this narrative, serve to turn his performance into a restricted account that contains explicit orientation and evaluation but no complicating action whatsoever. In this respect, it is closer to object-focused, "show and tell" type discourse than to event-oriented or narrative accounting. Furthermore, the teacher's responses seem to throw Walter off balance so that the descriptive information which is part of this limited account ends up being supplied by the teacher. The child does not get the kind of practice that the previous child did.

#### The teacher's model -- a literate bias

Both these examples demonstrate that the child's discourse cannot be analyzed in isolation. The teacher plays a crucial role in structuring the child's discourse and providing an example of the kind and form of discourse that she considers appropriate. In analyzing Mrs. Jones' comments in response to the children, it becomes evident that she has an underlying model of what constitutes "good" sharing, and that this model has an implicit literate bias.

However, this teacher's model has little direct correspondence with traditional notions of narrative structure, but rather, takes the form of a simple statement and resolution centering on a single topic. Importance is attached, not to content per se, nor to the sequentially ordered structure of an account, but rather, as in simple descriptive prose, to clarity of topic statement and explication. What the teacher seems to be looking for is a decontextualized approach to any topic, whereby:

- 1) objects are to be named and described, even when in plain sight;
- 2) talk is to be explicitly grounded temporally and physically;
- 3) discourse is to be tightly structured so as to highlight one particular topic (which then makes it sound "important");
- 4) thematic ties need to be lexicalized if topic shifts are to be seen as motivated and relevant.

The teacher's notion of sharing is thus far removed from everyday accounts which depend upon their situated character for much of the detail. In the teacher's model this kind of detail must be fully lexicalized and explicated. The teacher's expectations thus seem to be shaped by adult notions of literate description. It is probable that such a literate bias puts many of the children at a disadvantage, particularly the Black children, who may be, relatively speaking, less familiar with "prose-like" oral style. Moreover, many of these children have a way of doing narrative accounts that does not include the strict temporal and causal chain ordering constraints of literate narrative.

#### Children's discourse style

We now turn to a more detailed analysis of the discourse style used by the children in doing sharing, in particular as it conforms to, or violates, the teacher's underlying model of what counts as appropriate and adequate sharing.

Just as there is an identifiable difference in sharing intonation used by the Black and white children, we have found corresponding differences in discourse style. The discourse of the white children tends to be tightly organized, centering on a single topic or series of closely related topics, a discourse style we have called "topic-centered". For example,

- |   |                  |                                      |
|---|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Jenny:           | Yesterday/                           |
| 2 |                  | my mom/                              |
| 3 |                  | ... and/ .. my whole family/         |
| 4 |                  | went with me/... um/... to a party/  |
| 5 |                  | and/... it was a Thanksgiving party/ |
| 6 |                  | ... where ... and ... we .. um ..    |
| 7 | Student Teacher: | mm                                   |
| 8 | Jenny:           | my mom/                              |

- 9 Jenny: ... we had to/um .. get /...dress up as  
Pilgrims/
- 10 ... and my 'mom made me this hat /for a  
Pilgrim//
- 11 Student Teacher: Oh great.
- 12 T: Try it on model it for us. Let's see how  
13 you'd look as a [ Pilgrim.
- 14 Jenny: [ I don't want to//

In contrast to a topic-centered style, the Black children are far more likely to use a "topic chaining" style; that is, loosely structured talk which moves fluidly from topic to topic. This style resembles that found by Scarborough in Black children's stories (personal communication). For example,

- 1 Sherry: Yesterday/
- 2 ... I 'went /... yesterday/
- 3 ... yesterday when I 'came home from 'school
- 4 my grandmother was over there /.. and my 'auntie/
- 5 ... 'and /... my grandmother/
- 6 ... we 'goin' /to stay down/ at ... 'her house
- 7 when my 'mother have her baby//
- 8 Student Teacher: [ Oh.
- 9 Sherry: [ And um my 'other cōusin /... and my /um /... uncle /
- 10 'he gon' to pick up 'his /... son /
- 11 a .. and /we goin' 'trick 'r treatin'//
- 12 Student Teacher: Oh that sounds like fun. [ OK, thank you.
- 13 Celena: [ Uh, we gon' go
- 14 trick 'r treatin' [ too.
- 15 Student Teacher: [ OK Peter.

In this example, we see shifts both in topic and temporal orientation in lines 1-7, moving from the past (who was at Sherry's house when she got home from school) to the future (associating her grandmother with the time in the near future when she would be staying at her grandmother's house). At the point of the topic change, there is a 1.5 second pause (after the word "auntie") and a high, level pitch on "and", features which for some children regularly accompany a topic shift. While there are no explicit

lexical or syntactic markers to indicate a topic shift or to relate the two topics, the repetition of "my grandmother" is intonationally marked, indicating the semantic association across topics. However, a literate adult, telling a similar story, might indicate the shift to the new but related topic lexically, by saying, "And speaking of my grandmother, ..." The further shift in perspective that occurs in line 9 (the shift in focus away from her grandmother to other relatives) is not marked overtly in any way. The juxtaposition of the two pieces of information (staying at her grandmother's and going trick or treating) and the use of the same tense indicator ("goin' to") forces one to infer that the two activities are related temporally. This relationship might be marked lexically by an adult as "And while we're at my grandmother's, my uncle is ..."

We now look at another sharing turn where trouble arises, due to the mismatch between the child's style and the teacher's implicit model. In this case, Deena moves fluidly from topic to topic without making explicit the thematic ties connecting (or separating) the various topics. Deena is known for producing this kind of loosely structured discourse and some of her longer turns have jokingly been referred to as "filibusters" by Mrs. Jones.

- 1 Deena: Um ... I 'went to the bēach/.. 'Sūday/  
 2     ānḁ/'to MacDōnalds/  
 3     and/'to the pārk/  
 4     ... and/.. I 'got this for my/.. bīrthday//  
 5     ... My 'mother bought it fōr me/  
 6     .. and um/... I ḁād/.. um/.. tūo 'dollars' for my 'bīrthday  
 7     and I 'put it 'in hēre/  
 8     .. and I 'went to 'where my friē-nd/  
 9     .. ,named Gī Gī/  
 10    ... 'I went ,over to my ,grandmother's 'house with her/  
 11    ... and um/..... she was on my bāck/  
 12    and 'I/.. and 'we was ,walkin' around/  
 13    ... by my house/  
 14    .. and um/... 'she was heā--vy/  
 15    She [was in the 'sixth or 'seventh grade//  
 16 T:       [OK I'm going to stop you. I want you to talk  
 17            about things that are really really very important.  
 18            That's important to you but tell us things that are  
 19            sort of different. Can you do that? And tell us what

- 20 T: beach you went to over the weekend.
- 21 Deena: I went to um ... um .....
- 22 T: Alameda Beach?
- 23 Deena: Yeah.
- 24 T: That's [ nice there huh?
- 25 Deena: [ I went there two times
- 26 T: That's very nice. I like it there. Thank you Deena.

Deena here begins with explicit temporal and physical grounding, by telling without much specificity what she did on Sunday. She then shifts gears radically to object-focused discourse about a small purse she had brought from home, embedding it in person-oriented talk that shifts focus away from her birthday present to an activity related only temporally (if at all) to her birthday (playing with a girlfriend). She begins to tell about her activities with her friend but is stopped just before she gets to what on the basis of her prosody appears to be the "point" of her discourse, the fact that she was able to carry her friend, fully twice her age, around on her back (and Deena is a tiny six year-old). The lack of any lexicalized markers other than "and" between topics makes the discourse difficult to follow thematically for those who, like the teacher, expect the narrative to focus on a single topic. It gives the impression of having no beginning, middle, or end, and hence no point at all. Perhaps for this reason, Mrs. Jones (in line 16) interrupts Deena and explains what she considers to be appropriate topics for sharing: events that are "really, really very important ... and sort of different", that is, topics that would be of general interest.

In spite of Mrs. Jones' insistence on "importance", all the children have some degree of difficulty understanding what is meant by important. For example, early on in the year a child raised his hand to share and when Mrs. Jones asked, "Is this very, very important because we don't have much time this morning," the child replied, "I don't know if it is or not but I want to say it." It must be noted, however, that the white children have far less difficulty with this notion than the Black children.

The Black children in the class (especially some of the girls) tend to use a topic-chaining discourse strategy, stringing together with "and" a long series of loosely structured topics. The result is that they may seem to "ramble on" about a series of commonplace occurrences. However, if we take a closer look at many of these turns, we see that it is not the topics of discourse that are inherently trivial or uninteresting, but rather that the rhetorical style used makes it seem as if there is no topic whatsoever. Taken by themselves, each separate topic discussed by Deena above would have counted as highly appropriate: activities on a Sunday, a birthday present, and acrobatics with a friend.

The problem with Deena's presentation is more one of discourse form than of content. In asking the children to tell about "important things", the teacher is tacitly assuming that the children understand how to do the actual telling in a literate style--that is, telling about one thing only and in such a way that it sounds important. Simply reminding the children to talk about important events does not provide them with the criteria for either topic selection or discourse form centered around a single topic.

For the white children in this class, who already have more elements of the schema for topic-centered style, the teacher is better able to collaborate with them and so build on their narrative intentions. With the Black children, on the other hand, the teacher's questions lack rhythmic synchrony and therefore must often be seen by the children as interruptions. Most importantly, the teacher's comments do not build on what the child already knows and so provide the necessary guidance and synchronized collaboration that would lead to the acquisition of an expanded, lexicalized, topic-centered style.

It is important to note that, in this classroom, a child's general discourse style does not reflect or predict reading ability. Among the children in this class, Deena, who has consistent problems doing appropriate sharing, is one of the very best readers. Furthermore, while Deena's reading, math, and spelling skills have all shown marked improvement over the course of the school year, her sharing discourse style has remained unchanged. And so, while sharing can be seen as an oral preparation for literacy, this has, as yet, had no influence on her progress in reading. However, Deena's topic-chaining oral discourse style may, in time, greatly interfere with her ability to produce literate-sounding descriptive prose. Just what effect Deena's non-prose-like oral style will have on her participation in school activities such as sharing or creative writing, and correspondingly on the teacher's evaluation of her performance in class, remains to be seen from what she does in the second and third grade, where discourse style and ability to write cohesive prose assume increasing importance.

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>Prosodic and paralinguistic cues are transcribed using a simplified form of a system developed by John Gumperz and his collaborators, based on Trim's work. In this system, speech sequences are first divided into tone groups or intonational phrases. A phrase can be marked by a minor, non final boundary "/" or a major or final boundary "//". Within a tone group we indicate: 1) location of the nuclei: (i.e., the syllable or syllables marked by change in pitch) " \ " low fall, " \ " high fall, " / " low rise, " / " high rise; 2) other accented syllables in the tone group, " | " high, " | " low; 3) paralinguistic features

such as a) shift to high pitch register "↑" or shift to low pitch register "↓" (both applying to the entire tone group), b) pausing ".." indicating a break in timing and "... " indicating a measurable pause, c) speech rate; "acc." indicating accelerating tempo and "ret." indicating slowing down, d) loudness over an entire tone group is indicated by "p" (soft) or "f" (loud). Doubling of one of the above symbols indicates extra emphasis.

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