

Linguistic Features in a Spoken Personal Narrative and a Picture Story

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1. Introduction

Shared narratives are considered important for social life to maintain group coherence (Johnstone, 2001). Furthermore, it is believed that storytelling can be used to enhance learning and to improve the linguistic diversity of language use (Koki, 1998). There are different types of narratives such as personal stories, folk tales, myths, histories and epics that can be used in pedagogical contexts. According to Labov and Waletzky (1967), these narratives can take different shapes; however, all seem to contain an underlying story element and a basic structure. Even though there are basic similarities in them, several researchers have observed different aspects of the linguistic features in different types of narratives (Crystal and Davy, 1975; Tannen, 1984; Polanyi, 1982; Clancy, 1982; Dechert, 1983; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008). Analysing these features might be useful to teachers especially in designing pedagogical tasks.

Therefore, this paper aims at examining the linguistic features in a personal narrative and a narrative based on a series of pictures. The analysis is done based on a case study conducted at Lancaster University, UK. This paper includes a literature review, research question, method, results-discussion, pedagogical implications and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Several linguistic features of narratives have been discussed in literature; however, this paper will focus only on five of those linguistic features: structure, personal evaluation and involvement, key settings, background, and grammar which have been widely discussed as main linguistic features.

Labov and Waletzky (1967) have identified six main parts in the structure of a personal narrative: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, results or resolution, and coda. According to them, the abstract provides an introduction to the story by announcing that the speaker has a story to tell. The orientation includes characters, the setting and situation. During the complicating action stage, a series of events is sequenced and sometimes a tense situation is created. In the results stage tension is released by presenting the results. The coda is an announcement to indicate the end of the narration. An evaluation of the events and the characters by the narrator takes place throughout the story. Dechert (1983) has identified five episodes in a picture story. They are; identification of setting, identification of problem object, creation of problem state, transition of problem state to goal state and achievement of goal state or resolution. Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) have also identified a central problem and a solution in picture stories. The two types of structures discussed indicate that primarily picture stories lack abstract and coda, but contain a clear problem and a solution.

Labov and Waletzky (1967) state that there is personal evaluation of the characters and incidents by the narrator in a narrative. This claim is also supported by Polanyi (1982), Gumperz (1982) and Tannen (1982) who link personal evaluation further to the background, view point and attitudes of the narrator. Even though Dechert (1983) also mentions that the participant in his study of a picture story displayed sympathetic emotions towards the loser in the story, it is difficult to identify that

there is a personal evaluation in it because the narrator had not evaluated any other event other than the last one. Furthermore, this evaluation can be considered an external evaluation done by an observer because the last picture used in the study clearly highlights the loser. Taking these views into consideration, it is possible to predict that the personal evaluation might depend on narrator's personal involvement in the story and the latter is possible to happen in a personal narrative than in a picture story.

How the key settings of a narrative are introduced and how different events are linked are two other aspects which are closely related to the narrative structure. For example, the use of *and* in narratives seems to be common and Crystal and Devy (1975, p.88) state that "the continuity of utterances is maintained [by] simple addition of another structure, itself grammatically independent, using a conjunction" and the most common conjunction according to them is *and*. Clancy (1982) and Tannen (1984) also identify *and* as the most common connector used in narratives and state that connectors are vital for thematic progression of narratives. Hence, it is possible to predict that both personal narratives and picture stories might contain *and* as the primary connector.

Tavakoli and Foster (2008) distinguish between the foreground and background which is also a main linguistic feature of narratives. According to their distinction, foreground contains the essential information that forms the discourse and background is a comment on the foreground. Tomlin (as stated by Tavakoli and Foster, 2008) stresses that background information is used by narrators to elaborate the foreground. Tavakoli and Foster (2008) in a study conducted using picture stories have found out that the stories with more background is complex and elaborative. If Labov and Waletzky's (1967) notion of personal evaluation is taken into consideration here, it is possible to predict that a personal narrative might include more background information due to the personal involvement of the narrator in the story. Thus, a narrative could be more complex than a picture story.

Grammatical features in narratives have also been discussed very often in literature. For example, Clancy (1982) identifies that there is less use of third person pronouns in narratives whereas Dechert (1983) stresses more use of the same in picture stories. The latter has also pointed out that the narrators attribute gender to animals and use third person pronouns to refer to animals in picture stories. Researchers on narratives have also discussed some other grammatical features such as articles, determiners (Crystal and Devy, 1969), and word order (Clancy, 1982) which are not discussed in detail in this paper. However, this paper includes a discussion on how the tenses are used in the two types of narratives.

3. Research question

- Are the aspects of the linguistic features used by a narrator in a personal narrative and a picture story different?

4. Method

4.1 Participant

The participant of this study was a 42 years old female non native speaker of English who is following a master's degree course at a UK university. Her IELTS score is 6.5 and has about twenty years

of teaching experience in her country. A listener had also participated in the study who was also a master's student in the same university and also a classmate of the participant.

4.2 Instruments

A personal narrative and a picture story were recorded for the study. The series of six pictures (Appendix 1) used for the picture story contains three characters: two birds and an iguana. The two props in the pictures (a tree and a nest) are obligatory for the story.

4.3 Procedure

The participant was asked to narrate a personal story (about a recent trip) first and then she was given the series of pictures to narrate the story in the pictures. Two minutes each were given before the narration of both stories for her to prepare for the narrations, but note taking was not allowed. She was told that the listener might ask for clarifications during the narration. The listener was informed that she needed to narrate both stories to a second listener and encouraged to respond to the speaker. The first listener was used in the study in order to provide a purpose for the speaker to speak and the first listener was asked to narrate both stories to a second listener in order to provide a purpose for her listening.

4.4 Data Collection

Both narratives were audio recorded and transcribed (Appendix 2). In order to assure the reliability of data, the narratives were transcribed twice and the two versions were compared to identify the discrepancies. Then the redrafted versions were rechecked by a second coder to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of this study highlighted different aspects of the five linguistic features in the personal narrative and the picture story. Differences in the two structures are prominent in the two types of stories. The personal narrative has a clear abstract: *I want to say aboutmy trip*. It also includes a series of events sequenced from what happened first to last. There is not a particular tense situation included in the narration possibly due to the nature of the narration which expects the narrator to explain 'a trip' not a particular 'incident' which might include tense situations. In the results stage, the narrator explains what happens at the end *....after that it was time for going back to go to Harrogate* and the coda comes next: *.... and er it was the Skipton trip*. As Dechert (1983) discusses, five stages are present in this picture story. It starts with a description of the setting of the first picture. In the description of the first two pictures the narrator identifies the objects involved in the problem (tree and nest) and two characters. In the third picture she introduces the problem character ('snake') and identifies the problem and thereby creates the problem state. Then in the description of pictures four and five, the narrator transits the problem state to the goal state. This is evident in the utterance: *.....they are successful....* Achievement of the goal comes in the description of the last picture *..... they could have their babies....* As predicted, abstract and coda are absent in the picture story and it contains a clear problem and solution.

The second prominent linguistic feature is the personal involvement and evaluation of the narrator in the two types of narratives. In the personal narrative, first person singular pronoun dominates over the others with some use of the plural form. The narrator uses *I* throughout the personal narrative to explain her involvement. Third person singular *she* and the plural are occasionally used. In the picture story, third person pronouns dominate. The main characters are referred to by *she/he* and *they*. The narrator uses *I* only on two occasions in the picture story either to give an opinion (*I think*) or to indicate ignorance (*I don't know*). Therefore, personal involvement of the narrator is clearly identifiable in the personal narrative than in the picture story.

Evaluation of the events and characters by the narrator seems to be linked to the personal involvement of him/her in the story. For example, adjectives and adverbs used in the narratives indicate the degree of personal evaluation by the narrator and the adjectives used in the personal narrative are higher in number than in the picture story. There are 17 occasions of adjective use in the former (e.g. *beautiful, shiny, special* and *colourful*) whereas there are only 08 occasions of adjective use in the picture story (e.g. *strong, brighter, big*). The personal narrative also contains adverbs such as *lots of, fortunately* and *unfortunately*, but the picture story does not contain any adverb. The types of adjectives used in the picture story are also primarily useful to describe what is visible in pictures; therefore, the purpose of using them seems to provide a description not a personal evaluation. Therefore, it is apparent that personal evaluation more involved in the personal narrative than in the picture story. Considering both personal involvement and evaluation, it is possible to claim that when the personal involvement is higher, the narrator's degree of personal evaluation of the events and characters also become higher.

Thirdly, the key settings in the two narratives are introduced in two different ways. In the personal narrative, terms such as *after, then* and *after that* are used to introduce the key settings and *when we entered* indicates what happened first and *it was time for going back* indicates the last episode of the story. In the picture story, key settings are introduced giving the number of the picture: *first picture, second part, third part, four, fifth one* and *last one*. The use of 'and' is apparent in both narratives for two purposes: to link the settings and to link the incidents happened in a particular setting. 'And' is used for both purposes in the personal narrative and mainly for the second purpose in the picture story. This leads to the conclusion that *and* is possibly the most common connector in these types of narratives.

The fourth prominent linguistic feature is the background information involved in the two narratives. The personal narrative has more background information at the beginning of the narration. For example, the place, time, what happened, and who involved in the story are described at the beginning. In contrast, only the characters and the setting which are visible in the first picture are introduced at the beginning of the picture story. When the story progresses in the personal narrative, the narrator elaborates the foreground using the background information. For example, she gives a detailed description of what happened in church and the utterance *we told her that none of us are Christians - I'm Muslim and X is Buddhist* is a clear indication of the use of background information. In contrast, the picture story contains only foreground information. The narrator tries to elaborate the basic foreground by using utterances such as *er the back of the the tail of the the tail the snake and one of the legs just shows that er he's er going back*; however, such elaborations are also related

to what is visible in the pictures. As predicted, there is more background information available in the personal narrative and it also consists of more complex grammatical structures such as relative clauses which are absent in the picture story.

The fifth prominent linguistic feature is the use of tenses in the two types of narratives. In the personal narrative past simple and past progressive tenses are used throughout the narration whereas in the picture story present simple and present progressive tenses dominate. The narrator's awareness of the appropriate tense to be used is apparent in the personal narrative in which the speaker does self correction: *but I don't – I didn't*.

In summary, this study indicated that the personal narrative and the picture story contain different aspects of the five linguistic features discussed in the study. The two types have different structures and the former contains more personal involvement, evaluation, background, complex language, adjectives and adverbs than the latter. The former also contains first person pronouns with past tenses and the picture story contains third person pronouns with present tenses. *And* is the prominent connector in both narratives.

6. Pedagogical implication

The different linguistic features visible in the personal narrative and the picture story provide some useful insights to teachers. For example, the tenses used in the two types are different. Therefore, picture stories may not be suitable to practise past tenses as used in Module 10 of the *New Cutting Edge Pre Intermediate* (2005) textbook. Secondly, picture stories might not be suitable for speaking activities which are aimed at increasing oral language complexity. Thirdly, teachers have to be aware that less background information is available for learners when doing a picture story. Thus, learners might need extra support in doing such tasks. Finally, it will be useful for teachers to be aware of the different grammatical features appear in the two types of narratives.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of a personal narrative and a picture story pointed out that the two contain different aspects of the five prominent linguistic features discussed in this paper. Therefore, it is important particularly for the teachers to bear in mind that even though both contain stories, they act in two different ways. Therefore, when designing pedagogical activities using narratives, teachers should pay attention to the aspects of linguistic features that the narratives might produce.

Since the data of this study is based on one narrative each of the two types by only one narrator, it might be difficult to generalise the findings. Therefore, further studies on the same aspects involving many narrators might be useful to validate the claims made in here.

8. References

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Appendix 1

<http://www.phonics.net.au/comprehension-reading-writing-worksheet/>

