

Linguistics 103

Language Structure and Verbal Art

"Sharing Time": Children's Narrative Styles and Differential Access to Literacy
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Michaels observed children doing "sharing time" in a first-grade elementary school class during an entire academic year. She observed that the teacher "Mrs. Jones" had certain tacit expectations about what was an appropriate "share":

1. Objects were to be named and described, even when in plain sight
2. Talk was to be explicitly grounded temporally and spatially
3. Minimal shared background or contextual knowledge was to be assumed on the part of the audience.
4. Thematic ties needed to be lexicalized if topic shifts were to be seen as motivated and relevant.
5. A story was supposed to be about "one thing" only.
6. Topics appropriate for sharing were supposed to be "really ... really, very important ... and sort of different", i.e. topics of general interest.

Burt's share, example of "topic-centered discourse":

Well last Saturday this ... last Saturday well we played against another soccer team
and well the last team we played against we uh lost
and this team this time we they this was the first time that they played against
another team
and it was three nothing and
we were three ...

Michaels then argued that children's cultural background affects their narrative 'style', so that some children, especially in her study African-American girls, departed from the teacher's expectations. The teacher, a white woman, often misinterpreted children's prosodic cues and found their stories hard to follow. As a result, her feedback was less positive and less engaged, while the more "topic-centered" sharing children were given cues of inclusion and support.

Sherry's share:

Yesterday ... my mother-- we took my mother to the hospital
and today she gon' have her baby
and ... and w- my sister gonna see her
and we umm ... and this lady who works there she gave me a um puppet ...
and ... and she gave me somethin' else but I forgot the name
it was a lot of stuff what she gave me
but it ... um, um ... and ... and my -- and she and my mother bought me a purse
before she went to the hospital ...
and she and she say she gon' promise me she gon' uh promise me to come up here
she gon probably come up
she gon' come up to this school

Here Sherry's discourse is "topic associating" rather than single topic-centered.

It is "rhythmically chunked" and she uses the prosodic cue of a sustained pitch followed by a pause to indicate "more to come" and a shift in perspective.

Another story by "Mindy" — a white girl — is met with specific instructions from the teacher about how she expects a story to be told. Mindy is telling a story about making candles. Mrs. Jones says, "Tell the kids how you did it from the very start. Pretend we don't know anything about candles." After Mindy doesn't continue, Mrs. Jones then says, "What did you do first?" and then "What did you use ... flour?"

Mindy then is able to organize her story the way Mrs. Jones wants, as the teacher prompts her with more questions of a specific nature.

Deena's story:

Teacher: Deena, I want you to share some - one thing that's very important, one thing from where you are ... is that where you are ... is that where you were?

Deena: No.

Teacher: OK

Deena: um ... in the summer ... I mean ... w-when um I go back to school, come back to school in September ... I 'ma have a new coat and I already got it ... and ... it's ... it's ... um ... got a lot of brown in it and ... when - um and I 'got it yesterday ... and when ... I saw it my um ... my mother was ... was going some ... where when my ... when I saw it ... on the couch and I showed my sister and I was readin' somethin' out on ... on the bag and my big sister said um close the door my big sister said Deena you have to keep that away from Keisha ('cause that's my baby sister) and I said no ... and I said the plastic bag ... because ... um ... when ... um ... sh-when the um ... she was um (with me) wait a minute ... my cousin and her

Teacher: Wait a minute you stick with your coat now. I s-said you could tell one thing ... that's fair

Deena: This was about my c-

Teacher: OK all right go on

Deena: this was - and today and yesterday when I ... got my coat my cousin ran outside and he ... ran to tried to get him and he he he start -- ... an when he get in when he 'got in my house ... he layed on the floor and I told him to get up because he was cryin'

Teacher: mm -- what's that have to do with your coat

Deena: H-he ... becau- he wanted to go outside but we ... couldn't ... [exasperated]

Teacher: why

Deena: bec- um uh ... because ... I don't know

Teacher: OK, thank you very much Deena ... OK do you understand what I was trying to do Deena, I was trying to get her to stick with one ... thing and she was talking about her new coat. It sounds nice Deena.