

Introduction

Assessment of discourse production in aphasia has historically depended more on elicited samples of discourse than on spontaneously produced discourse.

The advantage of elicited discourse is that the examiner has knowledge of and control over the content of the target productions, theoretically increasing predictability and test-retest reliability. However, a distinct disadvantage of elicited discourse is its poor ecological validity, i.e., it is not representative of the functional discourse in day-to-day interactions.

In contrast, spontaneous discourse has been recognized for its high ecological validity, and its ability to manifest styles and productions unique to the speaker. However, the interviewer's inability to predict and control the content of the discourse has dissuaded its use in assessment.

An additional deterrent to clinical application of discourse analysis in general has been the labor-intensive nature of common word- and sentence-level analyses, which involve extensive counts and calculations. A broader discourse-level analysis, e.g., one of overall structure, may pose a clinically viable and functionally meaningful supplement to analyses at the word and sentence levels.

With regard to the structure of discourse in the narrative genre, there is already extensive evidence to suggest that the ability to include a setting, complication, and resolution is generally preserved in aphasia. However, a common approach to investigating narrative structure, namely the differentiation between narrative main event line (the temporal-causal sequence of event) and narrative evaluation (speaker's opinions on these events) (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) has not yet been systematically applied in aphasiology. The evaluative dimension may more closely reflect the primary motivation for narration (Polanyi 1985), which speaks for importance of its inclusion in assessment.

This study analyzes (within subjects) repeated narrative tellings (e.g. Chafe, 1998; Norrick, 1997, 1998) by two individuals at different aphasia severity levels to isolate dimensions of stability and instability in the narrative structure of:

- 1) participants' retellings of examiner-specified (elicited) narratives; and
- 2) participants' retellings of spontaneous narratives in different discourse contexts.

Comparison of the stable and unstable narrative structural dimensions in (1) and (2) above provides a means to explore the reliability and ecological validity of narrative structural measures in elicited vs. spontaneous narratives, at different aphasia severity levels.

Methods

Participants

Participants were two English-speaking middle-aged middle-class Caucasian men with aphasia, raised and current living in the Southern United States. One had a moderate to moderate-severe aphasia, and the other a mild aphasia.

Procedure

As part of a larger narrative production battery, each participant produced four narratives:

- 1) Retells of two short fable narratives specified by the examiner. After hearing the narratives as many times as they desired, participants re-told the narratives in their own words. One narrative contained no narrative evaluation, and the second did (in the form of repetition and direct speech).

- 2) An initial telling and a retell of a personal narrative relating the event of his stroke, told on separate days. The first was part of a discussion of life milestones or turning points, and the second followed a request for a personal narrative of a frightening experience.

Analysis

The participants' retells of: (a) the two experimenter-provided narratives; and (b) the participant's own narrative of their stroke experience, were analyzed for their narrative structure as follows:

- 1) A traditional analysis of the completeness of superstructure (setting, complicating action, resolution)
- 2) Analysis of the main event line:
 - (a) Degree of inclusion of the same elements of the main event line, as compared to the original narrative;
 - (b) For included main event line elements, identification of those elements for which propositional content was:
 - similar between original and retelling
 - expanded from original to retelling
 - reduced from original to retelling
- 3) Analysis of evaluation, realized as presence, content, and location of:
 - (a) separate evaluative comments (e.g., 'I was so scared');
 - (b) direct speech (quotes); and
 - (c) repetition and paraphrase of narrative content.

Identification of narrative elements on and off the main event line followed Labov & Waletzky, 1967; and Hunston & Thompson, 1999), and also included consideration of verb form and content, and their relationship to main event line (cf. Olness, in press).

Results

	Elicited Retells	Spontaneous Retell
Individual with moderate to moderate-severe aphasia	1) Superstructure complete 2a) Main event line maintained 2b) Main event line similar between original and retelling 3a, 3b, 3c) 3a, 3b, 3c) No evaluative comments were added. Direct speech and repetition, when included, took the form found in the original.	1) Superstructure complete 2a) Main event line maintained, but poor reference to place, time and person obscured clarity. 2b) Initial portions of retelling were either expanded or drastically reduced, relative to initial telling, and often without success, i.e., nature of event was rendered unclear. Final portions of retell were similar (parallel) in detail to the original telling. 3a, 3b, 3c) Separate evaluative comments were absent. Direct speech ("And damn, you know?") was sometimes replaced main event line. Intra-narrative repetition/paraphrase were not used.

	Elicited	Spontaneous
Individual with mild aphasia	1) Superstructure complete 2a) Main event line maintained, as compared to original 2b) Main event line similar between original and retelling 3a, 3b, 3c) No evaluative comments were added. Direct speech and repetition, when included, took the form found in the original.	1) Superstructure complete 2a) Main event line maintained, as compared to original 2b) Mixture of similar, expanded, and reduced content, although clarity of expansions and reductions of information was good. 3a, 3b, 3c) Separate evaluative comments changed across tellings, and were tailored to the context of elicitation (milestone vs. frightening experience). Direct speech was added at climax of retelling. Intra-narrative repetition and paraphrase were used at various locations, and tailored to context of elicitation.

Discussion

Results of this study provide a preliminary indication that the ability to tailor the structure of a narrative to the context of telling may be reduced in more severe aphasia, despite the presence of an intact superstructure (setting, complicating event, resolution). This reduced ability to formulate the structure of a narrative may take the form of over- or under-detailed elements in the main event line, and misuse or lack of use of means of evaluation (e.g., replacement of main events with direct speech).

The abilities presented in an individual with more mild aphasia may parallel the narrative retelling abilities of individuals with no aphasia (as detailed for non-brain injured individuals in Norrick, 2000).

Moreover, difficulty with structural elements of narrative main event line and evaluation, if present, may not be evidenced in elicited narrative retellings, but rather in more natural and spontaneous retellings of personal narratives in context. This may be related to the greater length and complexity of spontaneous narrative production as opposed to elicited narrative productions.

The narrative structure of elicited retellings appears to be stable, as are certain elements of spontaneous retellings. However, spontaneous retellings may have a greater capacity to reveal an individual's ability to manage narrative evaluation, i.e, the very dimension that drives the telling of narratives in the first place (Polanyi, 1985).

Elicited narratives may be better at displaying intactness of narrative structure across aphasia severity levels. In contrast, the ability of spontaneous narratives to display both stable and context-driven abilities in production of narrative structure may more closely reflect the ability of an individual with aphasia to handle everyday production of narratives-in-context.

References

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