



Early Development of Narrative Skills Revisited: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Stories Told by Toddlers

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Why Study Emergent Narrative?

- Pervasive in conversations at home and school (Heath, 1982; Miller et al., 2012)
- Provides entry into the world of literacy (Snow et al., 1998, Sperry & Sperry, 2021)
- Source of information for development of self (Bruner, 1990, Miller & Cho, 2018; Miller et al. 2012, Wang & Leichtman, 2000)

What Characterizes Emergent Narrative?

- It is event-oriented (Sperry & Sperry, 1996)
- It is observable in natural contexts, whether crib-talk or dinner-table conversation (Nelson, 1989; Ochs & Capps, 2002)
- It is fundamental means for making sense of experience (Ochs & Capps, 2002)

METHOD

- Corpora analysis of two existing data sets of home-based family interaction in two culturally different rural U.S. communities
- Original studies were ethnographic in approach and longitudinal by design, involving extensive field work (Sperry & Sperry, 1996)

Participants

N	Gender	Age Range	Hours of Data	Ethnicity, Community	SES
8	4 boys 4 girls	24-42 mos	12	African American, Alabama	Poor
15	8 boys 7 girls	24-42 mos	35	European American, Indiana	Working Class

Procedures

- Prior to the beginning of this analysis, verbatim transcripts were made of half-hour samples of naturally occurring talk
 - Two-hour videotapes were made every 2 months from 18 or 24 months until 42 months
 - The second half hour was transcribed verbatim
- Narrative-like displaced-event episodes were identified
 - Genre and rates of episodes were determined
- Each child utterance was coded for the number of semantic/syntactic units (SSUs, Sperry & Sperry, 1996)
 - Each SSU was identified as originating in the child's speech or in the interlocutor's speech

RESULTS

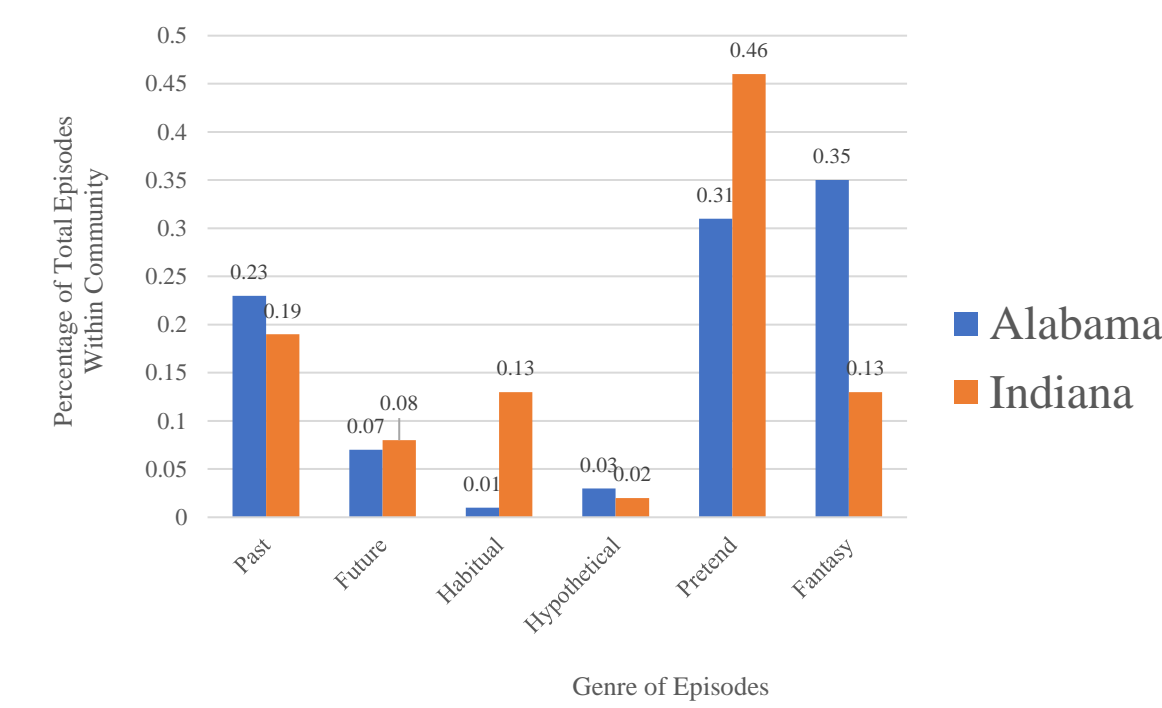


Figure 1. Genre of narrative-like episodes as a percentage of total episodes in two American communities.

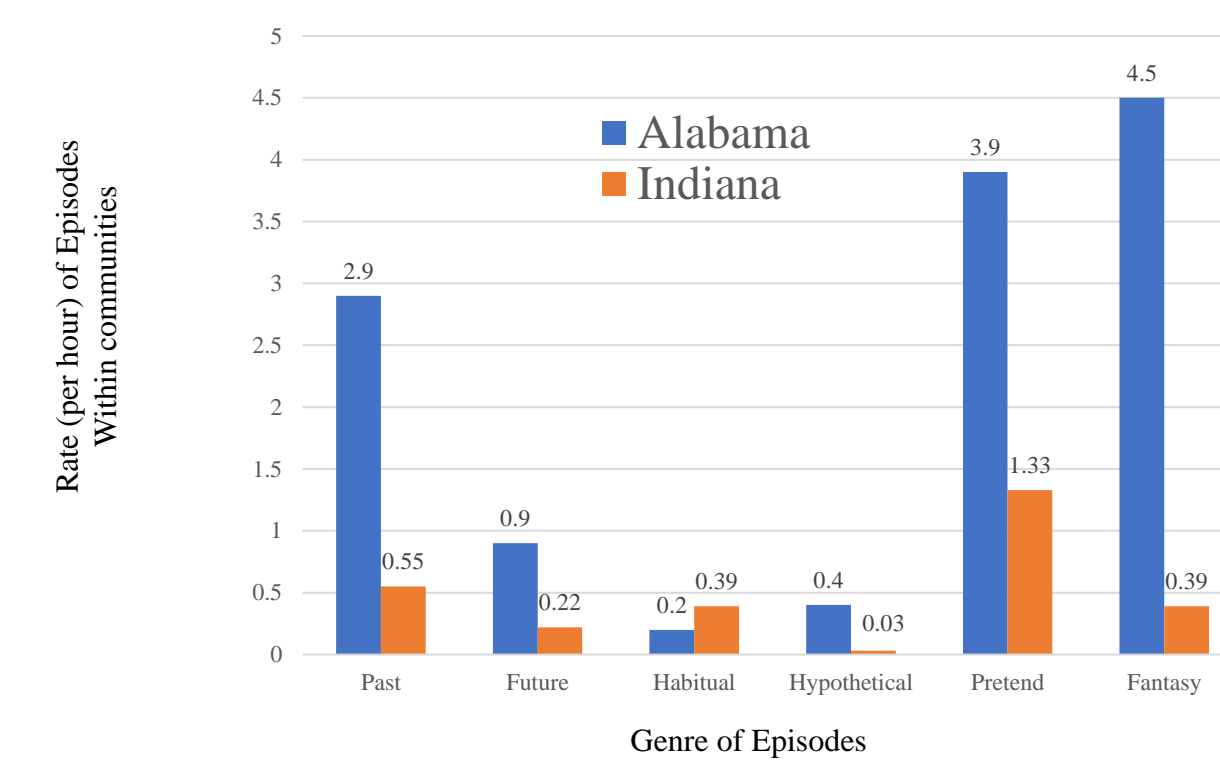


Figure 2. Rate (per hour) of occurrence of types of narrative-like episodes in two American communities (Alabama, n = 154 across 12 hours; Indiana, n = 197 across 67.5 hours).

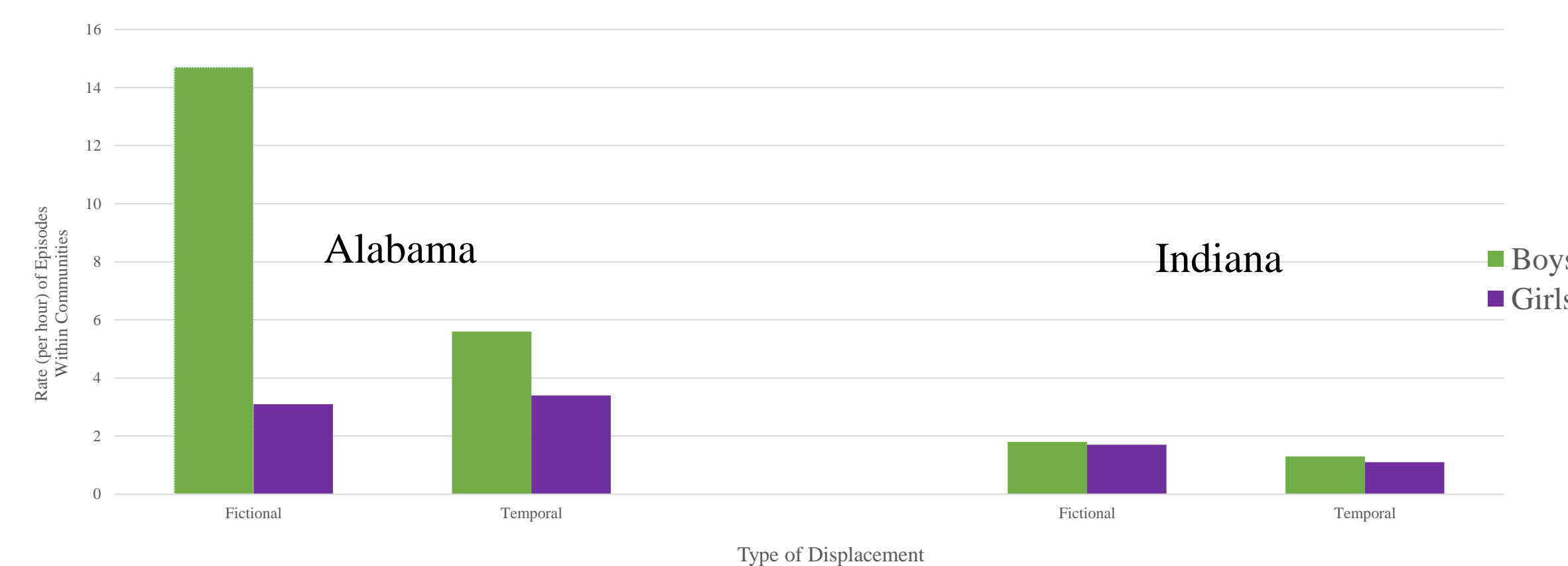


Figure 3. Rate (per hour) of narrative-like episodes (Alabama, n = 154 across 12 hours; Indiana, n = 197 across 67.5 hours) as a function of type of displacement and gender of participant.

		Younger		Older	
		Fictional	Temporal	Fictional	Temporal
Alabama	Boys	.71	.39	.77	.75
	Girls	.58	.32	.90	.36
Indiana	Boys	.88	.67	.88	.86
	Girls	.74	.74	.84	.82

Table 1. Proportion of SSUs introduced by the child as a function of age, type of displacement, and community.

DISCUSSION

- Narrative-like episode are far more common in Alabama homes than in Indiana homes (Figure 2).
- However, the overall proportion of genres is relatively consistent, especially if fictional genres are treated as a group (Figure 1).
 - There is a cultural preference for fictional talk about non-present actors in Alabama as opposed to talk about present actors in Indiana characteristic of pretend play.
- Prior research (Sperry & Sperry, 1996) demonstrated the strong encouragement Alabama toddlers received to tell stories. There does not appear to be that level of encouragement in Indiana homes (Figure 3), but more investigation needs to be pursued.
 - Overall, toddlers between 24 and 42 months to tell approximately 1 temporal and 2 fictional story(ies) per hour without encouragement.
 - This finding is consistent with Sperry and Sperry (2000) who demonstrated that fictional narration is an important zone of proximal development for discourse development in this age range.
- Children create their stories on their own for the most part (Table 1) with little content support from other interlocutors.
 - The principal exception to this observation is temporal storytelling in Alabama where caregivers stressed heavily the importance of truth telling and accuracy and placed high demands on their children to conform to this standard.

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