



# The Privilege of Narrative for the Study of Developmental Processes



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Family talk surrounds young language-learning children. This speech may be parsed into many types of events and practices including personal narrative and topic-centered conversations. Personal narrative is robustly practiced and highly valued by caregivers (Miller et al., 2005; Miller et al., 1990). Narrative exacts more representational demands on the young child (Sperry & Sperry, 2000) since it involves topics not situated in the here-and-now. Narrative is also a significant intermediary skill between vocabulary development and emergent literacy skills (Curenton & Justice, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rowe, 2012).

In addition, oral narrative has long been considered a fertile ground for the development of concepts of self and other within a cultural framework (Bruner, 1990; Miller et al., 2012; Miller & Cho, 2018; Nelson, 1989; Ochs & Capps, 2002; Sperry & Sperry, 2021; Wang & Leichtman, 2000).

## Goal of This Study

Given the potential impact of decontextualized narrative talk, the question arises to what extent do very young children possess an implicit understanding of this discourse form as existing apart from their everyday, topic-centered conversations? Is narrative special, or privileged, in their understanding of ongoing speech?

## Hypotheses:

- H<sub>0</sub>: There are no differences in the level of complexity (as measured through events, states, and goals) between topic-centered conversations in the here-and-now and narratives told by European American children in rural Indiana.
- H<sub>1</sub>: There are differences in the level of complexity between topic-centered conversations in the here-and-now and narratives told by European American children in rural Indiana.

## Method

This study is a corpora analysis of an existing data set from a working-class community in Indiana.

**Design:** The original study was ethnographic in approach and longitudinal by design, situated with children's homes. Extensive field work the community was completed before data collection began.

**Participants** included 15 children 18-42 months in Jefferson (European American community in rural Indiana), 7 boys and 8 girls.

## Procedures

- Prior to the beginning of this analysis, verbatim transcripts were made of half-hour segments of naturally occurring talk.
- A total of 135 transcripts representing 67.5 hours of data were analyzed.
- Narrative-like displaced-event episodes were identified (at least one displaced event and one other topically relevant utterance by child).
- Rates of episodes were determined (# per hour).

## The Present Project

### Procedure

- First, topic-centered conversations in the here-and-now were identified following procedures used in prior research to identify narrative. Each conversational episode needed to include one event and one other related utterance stated by the child in contiguous speech.
- Next, each conversational child utterance was coded as an event, state, goal, or other. Data were tabulated for comparison with narrative data analyzed in earlier work.

Table 1. Description of narrative elements.

| Narrative Element | Definition   | Example  |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Event             | Verb expresses an action occurring in the here-and-now.  | Robbie (26 months): <i>I bite Bre-Bre.</i>                     |
| State             | Verb indicates a state, condition, ability, or feelings. | Brittany (38 months): <i>I know how to do it like that.</i>    |
| Goal              | Verb denotes a need or desire.                           | Evan (26 months): <i>I want green</i> (referring to a crayon). |

## Results

Figure 1. Rate (per hour) of topic-centered conversations in the here-and-now and narratives told by children.

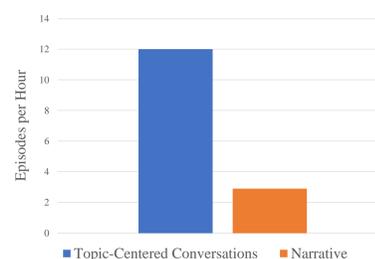


Table 2. Mean number of complexity elements across two contexts.

|        | Narrative | Topic Centered Conversations |
|--------|-----------|------------------------------|
| Events | 3.6       | 3.5                          |
| States | 1.7       | 1.6                          |
| Goals  | 0.2       | 0.6                          |

## Discussion

- The null hypothesis is accepted; there are no differences in complexity (as measured through events, states, and goals) between topic-centered conversations in the here-and-now and narratives told by European American children in Indiana.
- These results would suggest at least one of two possibilities: (a) narratives in this age group have not yet emerged as special forms of discourse set apart from ordinary conversation; or (b) children do implicitly understand the nature of maintaining a topic and do so equally well across displaced and here-and-now contexts. More work is needed to tease apart these options.
- In addition, the data reported here do not distinguish between new elements and repeated elements. Future work needs to separate these categories as a higher proportion of repeated elements within here-and-now contexts might suggest that narrative contexts are implicitly recognized as special or different from here-and-now contexts.
- Future work will expand the amount of data within this corpus that is considered and compare all results to similar data from an extant Alabama course. Prior work (Ellis & Sperry, 2015) has demonstrated that the Indiana and Alabama children told equally complex narratives despite the Alabama children telling far more narratives per hour. If these results hold true across all data, it may lend support to option b, namely that children implicitly understand the nature of topic-centered speech and talk accordingly.

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