THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HIERARCHICAL ORGANISATION IN NARRATIVE

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This paper looks at the incipient hierarchical organisation of a fictional story told by a bilingual child at age 6;11 and then at age 7;11 in his two languages (Spanish-English). I follow Bamberg & Marchman's proposal (1991) of deducing this hierarchical organisation from the linguistic markers the speaker places at different points in the narrative. The child in this study clearly follows an iconic order to relate the events in the foreground making extensive use of temporal connectors. At age 7;11, he starts giving his story another higher type of organisation by motivating key episodes in relation to the global theme and he starts encoding linguistically some subepisodes within this global theme. His productions have been examined in the light of the narratives told by his American father and his Spanish caretaker. The linguistic devices the child is starting to use, in each language, follow the usage of both adults in this study.

1. Introduction

Telling a narrative involves the sequencing of events, frequently following chronological order. This sequence of events in iconic order constitutes the foreground of the text and the other non-temporal material constitutes the background. A different type of organisation is also necessary in narrative texts, and that is the hierarchical strati-fication of the story. Adult narrators have extracted regularities from stories heard over the years in their culture and have formed a schema which is stored and retrieved when telling a fictional story (Mandler 1984). Schemas are organised hierarchically with less-relevant schemas embedded into more relevant ones. In this paper I follow Bamberg and Marchman's proposal (1991) of tracing this hierarchical organisation through careful inspection of the linguistic devices used by narrators to signal (albeit

unconsciously) to the audience the particular structure imposed on the story. This hierarchical type of organisation involves weighting the relative importance of a specific episode in order to integrate it into the whole. The acquisition of this process of structuring a narrative into a hierarchical system has been shown to be slow (Berman & Slobin 1994).

This paper presents the description of the linguistic devices used to segment episodes and to include them as part of a whole, which a child age 6;11 employs in his two languages (Spanish-English). The child's narrative texts are revised again in his productions a year later and I show how the development, irrespective of language dominance, advances at a slow pace.

2. Subjects and Data

The child, Jan, is a boy living in Barcelona and born in a bilingual family (Spanish-English). At the time of the recordings, he was 6;11 and 7;11.

Two adult stories are also considered so as to propose a possible endpoint towards which the child may be making his way: the child's English-speaking father and the child's regular baby-sitter.

He told the narratives following the 24 pictures in the picture-book called *Frog, where are you?*, which presents two protagonists (a boy and a dog) who are confronted with a problem needing a solution (the overnight disappearance of their frog), several attempts at solving the problem, and an outcome (they finally find their frog). Within this global structure, the different attempts at finding the frog are embedded within the global theme of this story, which is a search theme.

The linguistic devices examined are the ones which outline the beginning of the theme, the end of the theme, and those which tell the listener that a new instance of the search is starting.

3. The Outer Boundaries of the Search

3.1. *Starting the Search Motif*

The global theme of the story is the search for the lost object. In picture 3 the boy realises the problem (the frog has gone) and the search starts in picture 4. When the search begins, adults have been shown to encode it linguistically. The two adults in this study have done it as follows:

- In Spanish, marking inceptive aspect:
    empezó a buscarla por toda la habitación

- In English, the use of "everywhere":
    "oh no, look!, the frog's gone!". *They looked everywhere*

Bamberg & Marchman, in their study of English and German adults, found out that English speaking narrators did not use inceptive aspect as commonly

as Germans did. However, their English narrators used "everywhere" and "all over" to mark that the general search theme starts and that the subsequent instances of search will be "nested" (their terminology) or embedded within.

Jan, age 6;11

In picture 4, he mentions the search theme in both narratives, but very marginally:

then the boy looked in the boot   y buscaron a la rana

There is no linguistic marking to show that the search is actually the global theme of the story.

Jan, age 7;11

He establishes the global theme of the search and he does it in the way characteristic of many English speakers, using "everywhere".

and they looked everywhere

Jan also explicitly provides the boy's justification for looking in the boot:

and the boy looked in the boot to see if he (the frog) was there.

In the Spanish version the boy starts the search looking in **both boots**:

después miraron por debajo de las botas

This already involves a degree of abstraction because the boy is depicted as looking in one boot. Bamberg & Marchman (1991) also report adults using the plural at this point as signalling to something more than what is actually depicted in the picture: the general search theme.

3.2. *Finding the Frog*

In order for the episode of the finding to be meaningful and to be globally motivated it should state, at least, the following elements:

(1) the search comes to an end: the boy finds the frog.

(2) the frog is probably the same as the one causing the search. If not, it should be clearly stated that it is not.

(3) the motivation for the frog's escape, which will round off the whole story.

(4) additionally, the fact that the boy takes the runaway frog back, and despite this, they all still look happy calls for some explanation.

In the Spanish adult narrative we find the four elements:

> *y encontraron a la ranita, pero no estaba sola, (...) Entonces el niño entendió por qué se había marchado la ranita. Porque tenía una familia en el bosque, y como la ranita también quería mucho al niño, le dio a uno de sus hijitos para que lo cuidara y no estuviera solo.*

The English adult includes three of the four elements:

> *(...) what do they see? Two frogs, the mummy and the daddy frog, and the boy is happy to see his frog, (...) and they keep looking and they see the mummy and the daddy frog have a whole bunch of baby frogs, (...), but he doesn't want to take away his frog cause then they'll all be without a mummy and a daddy, so he takes one of the baby frogs.*

Jan age, 6;11

> *(...) y habían muchas ranas, pero creo que no estaba la rana suya. Se fueron aquí. Escondido aquí estaba la rana.*

His mentioning "la rana suya" means that the actions of the boy are still directed towards finding the frog that he lost at the beginning of the story. The search has come to an end because they have found the frog. However, the motivation for the frog's escape is missing, as is the fact (actually depicted in the picture) that they take a frog home.

(...) and he saw two frogs, a daddy and a mummy (...). Then out came the little frogs and the boy is still happy. Then the frog helps him to look where is the frog.

In his English story, the finding is hinted at in the fact that one frog helps him to look (to find) where his frog is. The use of the definite article also points to the idea that he finds the missing frog. There is no motivation for the frog's escape or for the fact that he takes a frog home again.

Jan age, 7;11

> *(...) y vieron dos ranas, y les preguntaron si tenían hijos. Se los enseñaron y uno de ellos eran el suyo.*

He uses the verb "ver" for "encontrar" but the fact that one of the frogs is his, closes off the search theme. However, there is still no explanation offered for the escape and how to reconcile the fact that everybody is happy, despite the boy taking a frog home again.

> *(...) and saw two frogs, a daddy and the mother (...). And then they asked him if they had little boys, and they had, and one was the one that they had, and they were friends of him.*

In the English version there is a similar combination of the verb "see" plus the possessive, which indicates the closure of the search motif with the finding of the initial frog. In the last part of this episode there is a good attempt at justifying the fact that the boy is taking one of the frogs home again (they were friends of him).

4. The Inner Structure of the Search

Once the global theme has been established as 'a search', the individual episodes of the narrative will be particular instances of the general search. These instances will be unsuccessful attempts at finding the frog until the last one when the goal is finally achieved. After each unsuccessful instance, the search starts again and the motif is re-established.

At the linguistic level, the two adults in this study mark the re-establishment of the global motif.

The Spanish adult re-establishes the search motif, often by giving the result of the previous episode, and by the use of inceptive aspect:

> *al no encontrarla, el niño se asomó a la ventana, y empezó a llamarla*

Another linguistic device that this adult uses to mark episode boundary is "entonces", which establishes that one episode is complete and the beginning of the next is starting:

> *y el niño tuvo que bajar a ayudar al perrito y ver que no se había hecho daño.Entonces se marcharon los dos al bosque a buscarla.*

The English adult has another way of establishing the hierarchy of the narrative. He uses the progressive aspect profusely (30 tokens), especially for the verbs related to the search motif. Once the problem has been established (the disappearance of the frog), the boy sets off to try and find the frog and the story becomes an account of what the boy is doing at every moment in order to find it. The global theme is running through the story and therefore there is no need to re-establish it with each new episode. In the following example, this adult finishes the previous episode with the result of the search and starts the new episode without a linguistic device to mark it. However, the use of the progressive in this instance is not so much a descriptive mode, but it may be interpreted as a particular instance of the search, given that the use of the progressive is associated with verbs of looking for the frog throughout the story:

> *he was calling everywhere, he was walking in the woods behind his house and he was calling for the frog everywhere, but he couldn't find the frog (result). (new episode) The boy is looking in a little hole in the ground ...*

This idea of a running theme is reinforced by the fact that the English adult has only one instance of an inceptive verb in relation to the search for the frog. The other instances of aspectual verbs are to denote the continuation of the search:

he kept looking for his frog; the boy keeps looking and looking for his frog.

Jan age, 6;11

In both versions, the connector that Jan uses most is a temporal one "y después", "and then", resulting in a very linear narrative with no hierarchy of episodes. There is no closing of episodes, either. However, Jan keeps alive the theme of the search in most episodes.

There are some instances of "entonces" to signal the beginning of an episode, but at this age, he uses them to demarcate the outer limits of the global search. One instance occurs when the orientation to the whole narrative is finished and the problem starts with the boy and the dog going to sleep, that is, when the narrative proper starts (*y entonces el niño y el perro se durmieron*). The other instance occurs when the search has finished and the boy goes back home (*y entonces se fueron así diciendo adiós*). If the linguistic marks are to be taken as signs of some sort of mental organisation, it is clear that in his schema, there is a global theme which is a search problem that has a beginning and an end. However, he does not subdivide the global theme into different instances of the search.

Jan, age 7;11

There is no significant difference in the linguistic delimitation of episodes with respect to the recording of the previous year. However, in the Spanish version, there are now three instances of "entonces" after the main topic has been established. Two of them have the same function as the Spanish adult's, that of initiating a subepisode within the global search:

(1) *y el perro seguía encajado en el cristal. Entonces el perro se cayó ...*

The other instance, in conjunction with his prototypical particle 'después', is used to open the episode with the owl:

(2) *y entonces después el niño se montó en un árbol*

In the English version there is a slight decrease in the number of occurrences of "then" (at age 6;11, 23 tokens in 65 clauses; at age 7;11, 20 tokens in 67 clauses) but it still remains the preferred connector together with "and" or zero connector.

At this point, it would be interesting to cite Bamberg & Marchman's study (1991) of the encoding of reinstantiations of the search in German and English-speaking adults. They found that English adults seem to use a much greater variety of means to encode reinstantiation than Germans, who very frequently use the ready-available particle "weiter". English does not have such a clear candidate to encode reinstantiations linguistically. This seems to be the case of the English-speaking adult of this study who used a variety of means while the Spanish-speaking adult used mainly "entonces" and "empezar a". This would mean that the child has a clearer model of how to mark explicitly different subepisodes in Spanish than in English.

At age 7;11, in Spanish, he is beginning to mark subepisodes (see (1) above) or even mark re-instantiations of the search (see (2) above) with the use of "entonces". In English, the use of "then" has decreased but there is no other candidate to substitute it, and therefore there is no apparent attempt at a hierarchical organization.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of the linguistic devices that the child in this study has employed, it seems that the organization of the narrative into foreground and background was already established at the time of the first recording. The child follows the iconic order to relate the events in the foreground with the help of temporal connectors such as "después", and "then". Another kind of superior organization starts to emerge in the recording at age 7;11, with two adult-like uses of "entonces" to mark subepisodes within the global search theme. This incipient hierarchical organisation is clearer in his Spanish narrative, one possible reason being that this language seems to have more defined linguistic means to encode subepisodes. Moreover, at age 7;11, this child seems to start needing to state clearly the motivation of the characters' actions, and their causes and consequences, in order to give a particular episode its appropriate hierarchical weighting within the story.

Works cited

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