

On the nature of direct speech in narratives of African Americans with aphasia[☆]

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Introduction

This study examines the distribution and functions of direct speech in narratives. The data consist of instances of direct speech in personal narratives of a frightening experience produced by African Americans with and without aphasia. The ethnicity of the groups allows one to examine direct speech among users of a high involvement style (Tannen, 1989), which is characterized in part by the use of direct speech (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972). The individuals with aphasia provide insight into how the role of direct speech in narrative may be maintained or altered. There is evidence to suggest that other ethnic stylistic features such as repetition and ethnic morpho-syntax may be preserved in narratives of African Americans with aphasia, even when this entails the production of relatively complex forms (Ulatowska & Olness, 2001; Ulatowska, Olness, Hill, Roberts, & Keebler, 2000). As for direct speech, previous research suggests that the frequency of use of direct speech in narratives may be increased among some individuals with aphasia as a result of limitations in syntactic structure (Berko-Gleason, et al., 1980). However, among those speakers who may already be making extensive use of direct speech as a part of their ethnic style, we do not know whether speakers with and without aphasia differ in the frequency of use of direct speech. Likewise, we do not have information about the distribution of direct speech within narrative, the relationship between narrative length and use of direct speech, and the functions filled by direct speech within the narrative. Answers to these questions may provide insights into the roles played by direct speech in narratives, and the cognitive-linguistic underpinnings of these roles.

Materials and methods

Subjects

Two groups of subjects were drawn from a larger study of discourse in African Americans with and without aphasia (Ulatowska et al., 2001). One group consisted of 13 African Americans

with mild and moderate levels of aphasia (APH). The other group consisted of 15 non-brain-injured African Americans (NBI). These individuals were selected from a larger group of 35 APH and 38 NBI subjects. The basis for selection was that they used direct speech in an elicited personal narrative. Subjects were men and women, middle-aged, of middle to lower-middle socio-economic status, with an education level of one to two years beyond high school equivalency. Most subjects were from the Southern United States.

Task

A personal narrative of a frightening experience was elicited, for its potential to display natural language and ethnic stylistic features.

Analysis

All instances of direct speech in the narratives were identified. The percentage of APH and NBI participants from the larger study who used direct speech was calculated. Presence or absence of direct speech as a function of narrative length, measured in propositions, was recorded. Also, sequences of direct speech were noted, where a sequence was defined as multiple instances of direct speech in a given narrative. Sequences of direct speech were categorized as dialogue or monologue. In addition, the function of each instance of direct speech was categorized as either narrative or non-narrative. Direct speech that fills a narrative function helps to unfold the chronology of events, while direct speech that fills a non-narrative function interprets the events (Vincent & Perrin, 1999).

Results

Thirty-nine percent of the APH subjects and thirty-seven percent of the NBI subjects from the larger study used direct speech in their personal narratives. For both groups, presence of direct speech in the narrative was associated with longer narrative length. Sequences of direct speech were similar in frequency for the APH and NBI groups. However, direct speech sequences of the APH subjects, as compared to those of the NBI subjects, consisted of less dialogue, shorter dialogue, and more internal speech. Proportions of use of narrative and non-narrative direct speech were comparable for the APH and NBI subjects.

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Discussion

The overall similarity in frequency and distribution of direct speech in the personal narratives of the APH and NBI participants suggests a relative preservation of direct speech patterns among individuals with aphasia. This does not necessarily contradict earlier findings of an increased use of direct speech in the narratives of individuals with aphasia. Ethnic style may override the potential effects of aphasia, especially when aphasia severity level is relatively mild and the narrative produced is relatively spontaneous. Yet, subtle differences in functions of direct speech were apparent, as reflected in less frequent use of dialogue sequences by the APH subjects. This may be associated with the cognitive–linguistic complexity entailed by shifts between narrative and dialogic modes. The role of direct speech in narratives of individuals with aphasia should be assessed relative to the ethnic communication styles of the speakers.

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