

Evaluation in stroke narratives: A study in aphasia

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Accepted 6 July 2006

Introduction

Although narrative structure has been extensively studied in speakers with aphasia, narrative evaluation has been largely ignored. Evaluation is the process of assigning prominence to information in a narrative, by encoding it in a way which departs from the local norm of the text (Polanyi, 1989).

An important function of evaluation is to organize information in the narrative to form a coherent whole (Hunston & Thompson, 2001). Narrative without evaluation is not narrative but rather a report or summary (Linde, 1993), and lacks structural definition (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

Narratives of stroke may be a particularly effective means of examining how individuals with aphasia use evaluation (McKevitt, 2000). First, the literature on illness narratives suggests that the initial diagnosis or onset of illness is frequently expressed as a stage of chaos (Frank, 1995). This commonality of reaction to illness may yield a certain homogeneity of evaluation in stroke narratives. Second, two of the key functions of evaluation are to form one's identity and to express that identity to others (Hunston & Thompson, 2001). When stroke is accompanied by aphasia, both of these functions of evaluation may be altered.

The purpose of this study was to examine narrative evaluation in personal narratives of stroke produced by individuals with aphasia. Specifically, we investigated the range of linguistic devices used by individuals with aphasia to express evaluation in stories that carried a set of common themes.

Methods

Participants

The study included 23 English-speaking individuals with aphasia of mild to moderate severity as assessed by the Western Aphasia Battery—Aphasia Quotient. Time post onset of aphasia ranged from 3 months to 8 years. Age ranged from 46 to 72 years. Eight were men and 15 were women. All but two had at least a high school education. Thirteen were European Americans, and ten were African Americans.

Task

Participants told stories of their strokes. Many were produced as part of a larger narrative elicitation battery, when asked for a frightening experience or for the story of their stroke.

Data set

The 23 stories ranged in length from 5 to 130 propositions. The majority were approximately 40 propositions in length.

Analysis

Data were systematically examined for presence of linguistic devices used to express evaluation. These included overt expressions of affect, e.g., “I was scared/terrified;” repetition; direct speech; statements of negation; and metaphoric expressions. Their distribution within the narrative structure was examined. The themes expressed by the evaluative devices were identified.

Results

Two primary themes were expressed by the evaluative devices in stroke narratives of individuals with aphasia. The first theme focused on losses associated with the onset of stroke, e.g., loss of language, independence, and mobility. The second theme centered on individuals' reactions to the loss, namely fear and confusion. The two themes were often presaged by a theme of a sense of anomaly, e.g., “I had a strange feeling that I was not all there.”

The theme of loss was most frequently expressed by statements of negation realized through a wide range of forms, and was found primarily in the complicating action. These included negation and negative verbs with or without a modal, e.g., “Nothing worked for me,” “I couldn't write,” and “I stopped talking.”

The theme of fear and confusion was expressed most frequently by direct expressions of affect e.g., “That was terrifying,” “I didn't know what to think” “I was scared and confused” “I thought about killing myself” “Nothing made sense” and direct speech “What's wrong with me?” “I need you, Jesus” “Help me please” “Jesus, come on! Stop it OK?” These were found primarily as an outcome, prior to resolution.

Evaluative statements of the theme of loss and the theme of fear and confusion often accompanied each other in close proximity. Many were concatenated or connected with conjunctions.

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Each of the forms of evaluation was often intensified through the use of repetition, either immediate or delayed until the coda, e.g., “That was terrifying. It was terrifying.”

Metaphoric means of evaluation were found primarily in the coda, and evaluated the whole event, e.g., “I am back learning first grade. And it’s like my life is just like a wiped off blackboard.”

Four of the 23 participants produced only evaluation, without a narrative event line, which resulted in discourse of an expository genre, as opposed to a narrative genre.

Discussion

This study adds to our understanding of evaluation as a driving force in the construction of narratives by individuals with aphasia. Participants in the current study demonstrated competent use of evaluation, as displayed by their extensive use of evaluation, and its skillful placement within the narrative structure to achieve coherent expression of key themes. While the preponderance of evaluation was realized by structurally simple forms, such as repetition and simple lexicon, more complex forms were also manifested, e.g., in the form of metaphor.

Moreover, the distribution of evaluative devices within the themes and structure of the narrative implies an underlying systematicity to their use. As noted by Polanyi (1989), use of evaluation must be highly monitored

and designed by the teller. It appears that this ability is preserved in the group that participated in the current study.

Acknowledgments

This investigation was supported in part by the Department of Veteran Affairs Rehabilitation and Research Development program Grant C888-2Ra and NIDCD Grant 1 R03 DC05151.

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