

The Roots of Narrative: Discussing Recent Events with Very Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of recent events (DREs) by mother–infant dyads were investigated. Three groups of Hebrew-speaking subjects were videotaped when the infants were 10, 18 and 26 months old. Mothers focused on a small set of events to comment on, e.g. the transformation of an object, the children's falling, or the completion of an action. They tended to mark a recent event by an exclamation or a formulaic expression when the children were very young, gradually switching to true descriptions of events with the older children. Children did not adopt exclamations for marking recent events, preferring true lexical items which they used in short formulaic expressions. DREs are important contexts for highlighting noteworthy events in the flow of experience, and for facilitating the acquisition of some of the means for discussing events, e.g. verbs in the past tense. However, this context is less adequate for the learning of the establishment of the topic of a narrative, independent of the present situation.

INTRODUCTION

A relatively unexplored aspect of the development of narration in children concerns the understanding of what the reference of this type of discourse is. Whereas all speech functions by establishing and modifying some shared social reality (Rommetveit 1974; Goffman 1976), one of the key properties of narration is that it establishes and develops some reality that is divorced from the immediate social situation of either the narrator or the listener. In Bloomfield's terminology, narrative discourse is displaced speech (1933). The question is, how do children come to be able to grasp the divorce of the "exhibited universe" (Ducrot 1972) from their immediate "here-and-now" while at the same time learning the formal means by which narration is carried out?

Adult speech to very young children is notoriously present-oriented; i.e. its topic is almost exclusively either a joint focus of perceptual attention shared by the child and the adult, or else it deals with the management and performance

of ongoing activities (*cf.* Snow 1972, 1977a). Such "here-and-now" speech does not present a difficult conceptual problem for the young child: There is no divergence between the reality established as the topic of talk and the immediate social reality, as the two are identical. However, such present-oriented talk does not constitute a good learning situation for the acquisition of narrative skills. The present, ongoing event is given in "here-and-now" talk, presupposed rather than evoked, described, or represented. The grammatical and stylistic devices by which narrative conjures up a separate reality are absent from this type of talk.

True narrative is almost totally absent from speech addressed to very young children. In the first two years or so, picture-books are mostly utilized as sources of visual stimuli to be enjoyed for their own sake or as props for the teaching of vocabulary (e.g. Ninio and Bruner 1978). It is only with older children that the scenes depicted are described as events, or that the narrative line of the book is followed (Snow 1983; Wheeler 1983). Bedtime stories are also a later development. Mention of past events, plans for the far future, discussions of hypothetical situations and phantasy games are equally rare at this age.

The conclusion from this analysis could be that children's entry into the narrative mode of thought and discourse (Bruner 1986) is a relatively late development, lacking a developmental history extending back to the first two years. Indeed, most investigations of the development of narrative discourse in children begin their investigation of the phenomenon in the children's third, fourth or fifth year. However, the roots of narrative are nevertheless present in the early years. Even prior to the stage where parents attempt to elicit from their children personal report narratives (Wells 1981; Cox and Sulzby 1982; Schieffelin and Eisenberg 1984), there occur in the parent-child context conversations where language is used to describe and evoke some non-present reality, as it is in true narratives. One of these possible candidates for the role of an antecedent to narrative are discussions of a recent event, a type of discourse possessing a transitional status between discussions of the "here-and-now" and true narratives.

Some of what passes for discussion of a joint focus of attention in analyses of adult-child discourse is actually a discussion of an event that had happened a very short while prior to the discussion, rather than concurrently with it. For example, adults frequently comment on an attention-grabbing transformation of an object, such as a tower of blocks collapsing. Such comments usually follow the event referred to rather than describe it while it is still going on. On the one hand, such discussions are similar to narratives in that they take as their topic an event that is no longer physically at the focus of visual or auditory attention, and as such, any description of it is an evocation of a reality separate from immediately given. On the other hand, the events that are the topic of such

discussions can be easily assumed to be at the centre of consciousness of the listener, just as they are in the case of a discussion of a joint focus of perceptual attention, and therefore the task of establishing the topic is much simpler than in the case of, for instance, talking about a past event. Discussions of a recent event, are, therefore, transitional phenomena, bridging the gap between “here-and-now” talk and narrative. Tracing the developmental course of such discussions in early adult-child dialogues could provide an insight into the learning that enables children to enter into narrative discourse at a later stage.

METHOD

Subjects and Data Collection

Twenty four Hebrew-speaking mother-infant dyads were videotaped in their homes, engaged in activities of their choice. The observational sessions lasted 30 minutes. A third of the infants were approximately 10 months old at the time of the observation, a third, 18 months, and a third, 26 months. All mothers were of the middle-class, of at least postsecondary education. Half the infants in each age group were male, half female.

Coding

All maternal and child utterances were coded for the type of verbal-communicative act the speaker intended to perform in uttering the utterance, using a very detailed category system developed in the study (Ninio and Wheeler 1984). The system categorizes talk on three levels: According to the type of relation the talk interchange as a whole has with the interactive context (e.g. discussions, action negotiations, performances of verbal games, clarification of meaning episodes, or event markings of various types); according to the conversational status of the utterance (i.e. opening moves, positive and negative responses, and elaborations); and according to the illocutionary force of the utterance (e.g. requests, statements, agreements, thanking, disapprovals, etc.). Coding was assisted by having the mothers view the videotapes of the session and describe in detail what had happened in the session from their perspective.

Discussions of recent events (DREs) were defined as talk exchanges consisting of utterances that were either markings or descriptions of an event that had happened immediately before. Excluded were socially obligatory speech acts such as thanking or apologizing; evaluations of past acts by the listener; and clarification demands about an unclear verbal or nonverbal communication, that is, utterances that referred to recent events but had a non-discussive force.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maternal Discussions of a Recent Event

Fulfilling our expectations, discussions of recent events were more frequent than discussions of the non-present in the youngest and the middle age-group (6.3% vs 1.2% of all maternal utterances on average in the 10-months group, and 4.8% vs 3.1% in the 18-months group). It is only in the oldest age-group that a sizeable proportion of maternal utterances had the non-present as its topic (9.8%), surpassing the proportion of utterances discussing recent events (4.0%). It seems that DREs, even when strictly restricted to descriptions and markings, are a more suitable type of conversation with children in their first and second year than discussions of the non-present, of which narrative is just a subtype.

Another trend worthy of attention is the decrease in the proportion of DREs, accompanying the increase in the proportion of discussions of the non-present. No such complementary decrease is observed in the proportion of utterances discussing a present focus of attention, a type of utterance that actually increased in proportion in the period observed (18.8%, 24.3% and 25.4% in the 10-, 18- and the 26-months groups, respectively). Although the decrease is slight, it seems as if DREs were a more popular type of utterance with mothers of the very young than with mothers of older children.

In order to examine in detail the conduct of DRE conversations, 5 coded protocols from each age group were randomly selected, and talk interchanges that had as their topic a recent event, further analyzed.

The number of DRE episodes initiated by mothers in the different groups is presented in Table 1. We have seen before that utterances which are DREs account for a slightly decreasing proportion of all maternal utterances as the children's age increases. That statistic counted all utterances that belonged to conversations about recent events, including responses to the children's contributions. The same decreasing trend appears when we look at the number of different events mothers chose to comment on spontaneously, regardless of the number of utterances they made, and excluding events the children chose to comment on. Whereas in the youngest age group, each mother commented on average on 17.0 events, this decreases to 9.4 events in mothers of 18-month-olds, and to a further 8.4 in mothers of 26-month-olds. As with the total number of utterances, the event count reveals that DRE is a verbal act especially favoured with mothers of 10-month-olds.

Examination of the content of the DRE conversations revealed that recent events could be commented on in two different ways: They could be marked by an exclamation or formulaic expression, or else described by a declarative

sentence. For example, the fall of an object to the floor could be marked by the exclamation Boom!, or by the sentence, Nafal., i.e. "It fell down". The difference between the two is in the relationship the utterance has with the event. Markings signal or acknowledge the occurrence of an event. They are contingent on the occurrence of the event but do not indicate it since the event is not represented verbally by the utterance. Descriptions, on the other hand, are declarative utterances that refer to the event and predicate something of it. The latter, but not the former, have truth conditions; a marker can be inappropriately employed when the event it acknowledges did not actually occur, but since the event is not described, markings cannot be falsified.

Talk interchanges in which mothers commented on a given recent event were classified according to the type of comment made, i.e. marking, description, or both. In a given episode, one or more comments of a given type could be made. Table 1 presents the breakdown of all episodes initiated by mothers, according to the type of comments used. Also presented in the table is the average number of DRE episodes initiated by mothers, discussed above.

Table 1
Distribution of Discussion of Recent Event (DRE) Episodes Initiated by Mothers, by Type of Episode and by the Age of the Children

	Age of Children (months)					
	10		18		26	
	(n = 5)		(n = 5)		(n = 5)	
Type of DRE	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD
Markings	62.1%	10.3	55.6%	31.3	41.2%	14.4
Markings + descriptions	18.3%	12.3	21.0%	11.8	6.3%	6.0
Descriptions	19.5%	12.4	23.4%	22.6	52.5%	16.1
Number of episodes	17.0	12.2	9.4	2.9	8.4	3.0

There is a sharp increase in the proportion of episodes consisting solely of descriptions in the speech of mothers to the oldest age-group, and a parallel decrease in the proportion of episodes consisting of either markings alone or of a mixture of markings and descriptions. Whereas in the DREs addressed to two younger age-groups episodes containing some markings make for about 80% of all episodes, in mothers of 26-month-olds this proportion drops to less than

50%. That is, markers are a favoured form of commenting on recent events with mothers of the very young, but this form of expression is in part replaced by true descriptions of the event when the listener is older.

In a further examination of this phenomenon, episodes at which mothers commented on an event by marking it, either with or without also discussing it, were further broken down as to the type of event marked. Of 123 events examined, all but 2 belonged to one of 5 basic types. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of Marking DRE Episodes Initiated by Mothers by Type of Event Marked and by the Age of the Children

Type of Event	Age of Children (months)					
	10		18		26	
	(n = 5)		(n = 5)		(n = 5)	
	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD
Hearer's falling	39.1%	9.2	24.2%	22.9	4.0%	8.9
Transformation of object	26.5%	18.5	29.8%	26.3	30.7%	27.0
Exertion of effort	18.6%	16.4	34.2%	31.0	0.0%	0.0
Swallowing of food	11.3%	21.8	3.3%	7.5	6.7%	14.9
Completion of action	4.4%	9.9	8.5%	13.2	58.7%	38.2

In mothers of 10-month-olds, the most frequent event marked was the child's falling, bumping into furniture, stumbling or coming to a similar misfortune. Some pure marking utterances were the following:

Hoppa!

Oppa.

Hopps!

Hoppla, hoppla, hoppla, hoppla, hoppla, hoppla, hoppla!

This type of event gradually dropped out as a stimulus for marking, probably because the event occurred less often with older children.

Another popular event with mothers of the younger children that completely disappears with the 26-month-olds is the exertion of effort in some act

such as in jumping, pushing or kicking. Some examples of this type of marking were in the following:

Hoppa!
Hopp, hopp
Oh-ah!
Tuk, tuk.

The third type of event that shows a relatively higher frequency for mothers of the very young is the swallowing of food. Some examples of such markings were:

Hamm!
Am!
Aah!

Transformations of objects, e.g. their falling, bursting, breaking, etc., was popular to about the same extent throughout the age-period studied. Such markings were of the form:

Hoppa!
Hoy!
Oy, oy!!
Boomm!
Vaoo!

The proportion of completions of actions dramatically increased from an average of 4.4% in the case of the youngest age-group, to 58.7% in the case of the oldest. Some examples were (with a free translation from Hebrew):

Hine	Here.
Dai.	Enough.
Nigmar.	All done.
Zehu.	That's it.

It appears that mothers use markings of events with very young children as a means of segmenting the flow of actions and happenings in the child's environment, and thus actually defining for their children what sorts of happening are events. Such primitive "event casts" (Heath 1983) could fulfill an important role in socializing children into a shared perception of reality with others in their culture, and moreover, could be the first opportunity for teaching them which events to choose for inclusion in descriptions of reality, i.e. in narratives.

It is interesting to note that mothers seem to extend the class of events that are conventionally defined as worthy of mention, such as speaker unintentionally hurting hearer (marked by an apology); speaker receiving a service from hearer (marked by thanking); speaker coming into hearer's presence or leaving it (marked by greetings); speaker noticing hearer's eating (marked by polite wishes for a good appetite, as in "bon appetit"); hearer's sneezing (marked, in Hebrew, by a specific blessing for good health); and so forth. As we have seen, such an extension is aimed specifically at younger children in their first and second year, and seems to mostly disappear by the time the children are beginning their third year. The only exception is marking action completion, but then this type of marker has a conventionalized form in adult-adult discourse as well. That the quasi-conventionalized markers are restricted to the first two years strengthens the impression that they arise from the needs of mothers to extend the range of events they can talk about with very young children. Similar phenomena have been reported by other investigators of maternal conversations with young infants (e.g. Snow 1977b).

In a similar manner to the above, mothers' descriptions of events were analyzed as to the type of event described. Of a total of 81 different events spontaneously described by mothers, all but 3 could be sorted into the same categories of events as those marked by mothers. Except for one category, described and marked events were not only of a similar type but often were

Table 3
Distribution of Descriptive DRE Episodes Initiated by Mothers, by Type of
Event Marked and by the Age of the Children

	Age of Children (months)					
	10 (n = 5)		18 (n = 5)		26 (n = 5)	
Type of Event	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD
Hearer's falling	21.3%	13.6	20.6%	18.0	0.0%	0.0
Transformation of object	24.0%	33.2	42.1%	8.4	5.0%	11.2
Exertion of effort	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0
Swallowing of food	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0
Completion of action	54.7%	40.7	37.3%	11.2	95.0%	11.2

literally the very same events, both marked and described in the same interchange. The only difference was in the category of action completion: Descriptive statements were descriptions of actions completed rather than comments on the event of their completion. There is obviously a continuum of meaning on which these two categories lie, so that some of the distinction is arbitrary. However, action descriptions were rarely formulaic to the same extent as action completion markers were. Table 3 presents the breakdown of mothers' descriptions, by type of event.

Out of the 5 types of events marked by mothers, only three were also described by them: The listener's falling; transformations of an object; and completed actions. Events involving the exertion of effort or the swallowing of food by the listener, were never described.

As with markings, descriptions of children's falling dropped out with the oldest age-group. There were also many fewer descriptions of object transformation for this group than for younger children. In the oldest group, descriptions of completed actions made up for almost all DRE episodes.

DRE episodes that consisted of a mixture of markings and descriptions seem to function as a transitional procedure for progressing from marking to description. An examination of such episodes revealed that in 24 out of 25 cases, markings preceded description in the episode. Some examples are given below.

Hoppla, hoy, hakapit nafla.	Hoppla, hoy, the spoon fell down.
Oy, af.	Oy, it flew away.
Booms. Trach. Habalon hitpotzetz.	Booms. Trach. The balloon blew up.
Oy! Kibalta maka?	Oy! You got hurt?
Hoppla, Shachar nafal.	Hoppla, Shachar fell down.

First, the exclamation marks the event as having occurred, presumably alerting the child to the mother's noticing it, then a true description is given. Such descriptions can be thought of as substitutions for, or else translations of, the less conventional markings. The co-occurrence of the two types of comments in the same turn at speech constitutes a miniature lesson in conventional forms for noticing a given event.

True discussions of recent events contained opening moves that were relatively stereotyped, routinized questions and statements about what had happened. A semantic analysis revealed that without exception, such utterances included a word that encoded the action, happening, or transformation that was the essential feature of the event. Many of these expressions encoded nothing else: They consisted of subjectless verbs in the second and third person singular, in the past tense. In Hebrew, verbs in the past tense get inflected for person, therefore the omission of the subject is not a grammatical error, or at least not

for sentences where the grammatical subject is the addressee. Following are some examples of this type of utterance. It should be mentioned here that Hebrew does not have a present perfect tense and the simple past is used where, in English, the present perfect would be. The translations use either simple past or present perfect, the latter to better approximate the appropriate English usage. Other adjustments to English are presented as words in parenthesis.

Yatza.	(It) came out.
Af.	(It) flew (away).
Nafal.	(It's) fallen (down).
Hitpotzetz?	(Has it) blown up?
Hitchalakta.	(You've) slipped.
Nafalta?	(Have you) fallen?
Nigavta?	(Have you) wiped (it)?
Matzata?	(Have you) found (it)?
Shapachta?	(Have you) spilled (it)?
Lichlachta?	(Have you) dirtied (it)?

Except for person, which gets marked by an inflection on the verb, these utterances encode only a single aspect of the event, the action or transformation that is at its core. Interestingly, in some of these utterances mothers use transitive verbs with obligatory objects as if the object were not obligatory, (e.g. find, spill, wipe, dirty, make, etc.). The effect of this usage is to create a quasi-intransitive version for the verb, similar to the (normative) English **eat**, as in **Have you eaten?** Although such constructions are sometimes found in adult-directed colloquial Hebrew as well, they appear with surprising frequency in "motherese" talk, possibly as part of mothers' general tendency for shortening and simplifying their utterances. Thus, the most simplified type of description consists of utterances that encode the event as single-argument, intransitive act or happening, sometimes even in departure from the formal rules of Hebrew grammar.

Other, relatively more fully formed utterances, consisted of simple N + V constructions, naming the object or person to whom the event occurred, and the transformation they have undergone. Such agent-action or patient-happening combinations were, for example:

Habalon hitpotzetz.	The balloon blew up.
Habalon nikra.	The balloon got torn.
Hakapit nafla.	The spoon fell down.
Hataklit hitlachlech.	The record got dirty.
Habuba hitgalgela.	The doll rolled (off).

In some of the utterances, the action and its object were encoded in addition to the (inflectionally) encoded actor, as in:

Matzat buba?	(Have you) found a doll?
Achalt chol?	(Have you) eaten sand?
Heveti kadur.	(I've) brought a ball.
Asita po kova?	(Have you) made a hat here?
Matzanu svivon.	(We've) found a top.
Kibalta maka?	(Did you) get hurt? (literally, 'did you get a blow?')

There were a few utterances in which actor, action and object were all encoded verbally, as in:

Ata shapachta chalav.	You've spilled milk.
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Another frequent occurrence was the question *Ma kara?*, i.e. "What happened?", with which mothers frequently started an episode of DRE. Often, this question was followed by a yes-no question or an outright statement describing the event. There were so many of these questions that they could be considered generalized markers that some notice-worthy event has occurred. The same question form was routinely used to enquire for the reason for the child's crying or for the meaning of other nonverbal communicative behaviours, in addition to the events considered here.

Mothers use a small vocabulary of verbs in order to describe the small subset of actions and happenings they pick out for discussion. The most frequently used verbs, and the ones that were used by two or more mothers in the sample, were (in decreasing order of frequency), fall, happen, do (or make), find, get, spill, finish, bring, go, arrive, come, put in, take out, put, and the existential be. These verbs accounted for 71.6% of all occurrences of verbs in the maternal corpora. Less frequent verbs were become, blow up (reflexive), close (transitive), cough, dirty (transitive), eat (transitive), enter (intransitive), fly (intransitive), forget, get dirty, get lost, get out, get torn, get up, have one's fill, lose, open, put, pass (intransitive), put in order, roll over (intransitive), see, slip, smear, spoil, stop oneself, take, throw, turn over (transitive), turn over (intransitive), and wipe.

Interestingly, DREs are the only type of talk interchange that have one-word utterances that are verbs used non-requestively, that is, in a declarative mood (Ninio 1985). This finding strengthens the impression that DREs are important contexts for the modelling of the use of verbs, and verbs in the past tense in particular, as names for actions and happenings for very young children. Except for this type of conversation, verbs are only used for

requesting or suggesting action in the one-word utterance corpora of this sample. Not only is the type of match between the utterance and the event quite different in the two cases, but the latter verb forms are, in Hebrew as in English, either in the imperative or the infinitive, and can be formally quite different from their declarative counterparts.

In summary, mothers' models for discussing a recent event consisted, on the most part, of exclamatory and formulaic markings or else of very simple descriptive utterances that encoded the action, happening, object and patient of the event under discussion. Of these, the action or transformation that a person or object underwent was the event element most frequently encoded in the utterance. Basically, DRE conversations seem to be the preferred context for the teaching of a declarative verb vocabulary and for the teaching of the descriptive uses of verbs in general.

Children's Discussions of a Recent Event

Examination of the children's spontaneous comments on recent events reveals that this type of verbalization is absent from the speech of 10-month-olds, accounts for 1.8% on the average of all utterances of the 18-month-olds, and 3.9% of the 26-month-olds. By comparison, the same children discussed a joint focus of attention in 22.6%, 34.6% and 29.8% of their utterances, respectively.

There are very few DRE episodes either initiated or participated in by the 18-month-olds; their mean number is only 1.2 per child. Because of the low frequency of the behaviour, its breakdown is not worth examining in detail.

The 26-month-olds seem much more skilled at this behaviour. They initiated 7.8 DRE episodes on average ($SD = 5.0$), just about the same number as their mothers. They also participated in a further 2.0 episodes of this type, of those initiated by their mothers.

Table 4 presents the breakdown of all talk episodes in which the 26-month-olds either participated or else initiated the DRE exchange, by type of comment.

The breakdown of the children's contributions by type of comment reveals that the great majority (87.5%) of these were descriptions rather than markings. That is, although children are exposed to many examples of marking as a verbal response to recent events, they seem not to pick up such expressions as their own brand of verbalization in the same circumstances.

All episodes of marking initiated by the children were analyzed as to the type of event marked. In both age-groups where spontaneous markings were found (18 and 26 months), the only events marked by children were completions of actions.

Table 4
Distribution of Discussion of Recent Event (DRE) Episodes in which the
26-month-olds Participated, by Type of Episode and Type of Participation

Type of DRE	Type of Participation					
	Initiator		Participant		Total	
	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD
Markings	14.5%	14.2	19.4%	17.3	12.5%	13.8
Descriptions	85.4%	14.2	80.6%	17.3	87.5%	13.8
Number of episodes	7.8	5.0	2.0	1.9	9.8	5.6

That children are especially sensitive to markings of action completion has been demonstrated before (*cf.* de Lemon 1981). However, the absence of markings of any other event demands an explanation. One reason for the discrepancy between the events marked by mothers and by children could be the differential availability of events to mark. Even if children learned that you mark your listener's swallowing food by "amm" or your listener's stumbling and falling by "hoppa", there were very few if any opportunities for them demonstrate this learning, simply because mothers did not fall and very rarely ate or drank during the observational period. It is true that children could have marked their own, as opposed to their listeners', falls and swallowings, but strictly speaking mothers did not model self-reflective marking and this therefore cannot be expected of the children. No such explanation exists, however, for the children's not marking the transformation (e.g. falling) of objects, an event neutral as to its relation to the observer and amply modelled by the mothers.

There is, however, an important difference between markings of action completions and of other events: Whereas all other events are marked with standard but nonlexical exclamations such as hoppa, oy, boom, hamm and the like, action completions are marked by true lexical items such as hine (here), zehu (that's it), nigmar (all done), dai (enough), and the like. Although the expressions used to mark action completion are in the most part frozen idiomatic one-word forms that lack true referential meaning, just like the English that's it, nevertheless, by contrast to the expressive, onomatopoeic exclamations, they are, or consist of, true words. It is an interesting hypothesis that exclamations are not picked up by children as their own form of expression

while true words are, even though in both cases the utterances function as markers.

In the case of markings, form and event marked are confounded, since all events but action completions are marked by exclamations, whereas action completions are only marked by lexical phrases or words. The two can, however, be differentiated in the case of true descriptions of recent events, where all forms used were, by definition, true words. If the explanation for children's nonmarking of other events except for action completions is indeed the form of the expression rather than the events themselves, we should expect them to comment on other events using true descriptions rather than exclamations. If, however, the reason for their exclusions of other events is something to do with the events themselves, we should not expect to see them comment on these events using true descriptive statements either.

In order to test these competing hypotheses, we have looked at the events spontaneously described (as opposed to merely marked) by the children.

In the 18-month-old group, the only events described were object transformations. In the 26-month-old group, action descriptions accounted for the majority of cases (73.6% on the average, $SD = 25.8$), object transformation descriptions accounting for the rest (18.3%, $SD = 19.2$). No other events were ever described by these children.

It seems as if the explanation for children's not marking events other than action completions is to be accounted for in two ways. As to listener's falling, swallowing food or exerting effort, these were neither marked nor described by the children, suggesting that the events were not of the type that children had opportunity to comment on. As to object transformations, since children described them but did not mark them with an exclamation, it seems as if they indeed tend to avoid using exclamation markers even if these are modelled for them, preferring true lexical items.

This finding is rather interesting in that it raises the question, what are the differences between exclamations and true lexical items so that children are able to consistently differentiate between them in acquisition? One difference could be that exclamations have a less consistent phonetic form than true words. Mothers used a wide range of variants for exclamations such as *hopp*, marking the fall of objects, such as *hoppa*, *opp*, *opps*, *oppale*, etc. These variations in form could signal for the children the non-conventional character of exclamations. In the second place, there was some difference in the prosodic characteristics of exclamations and of descriptions, in that exclamations were higher pitched, had a rising intonation contour, and were louder than descriptions. Thus, there are several formal features of exclamations that distinguish them from true words. The same wasn't true for markers of action completion, these resembling other

lexical items in their phonetic and prosodic features.

However, the main reason for children not adopting exclamations could be functional, rather than formal. Examination of the corpus reveals that mothers used them differently from descriptions: Exclamations were conversational void-fillers, something to say in order to be having some sort of a conversation. Descriptions were more in the way of truly commenting on an event that has captured both participants' attention. It appears that children do not take on the role of filling conversational gaps at this age; rather than grabbing at any opportunity at saying something, they keep their limited conversational energies for occasions when they really have something to say.

An examination of the descriptive sentences used by children to remark on object transformations revealed that they had a formulaic character similar to action completion markers, such as *nafal*, i.e. "(it) fell-down" or *nishpach*, i.e. "(it) got-spilled", both one-word expressions in Hebrew. These expressions inevitably lacked a grammatical subject; that is, the patient of the transformation did not get verbally expressed. The same was true for children's action descriptions: Many of these were one-word expressions involving a small set of basic action verbs, predicating that the speaker has hit, closed, took apart, found or made something. It could be said that since the verb was inflected for the first person singular, these expressions did encode the actor of the action through morphology if not through syntax. However, it is more correct to say, in the absence of contrastive inflections for other persons, that these were special lexical forms for describing the past action of the self, rather than truly inflected verbs. In the entire child corpus, there were only two instances where a verb (the same verb, to *find*) got inflected contrastively by the same child.

Even the children's more complex descriptions, consisting of two or more words, had a severely formulaic character. A particular child typically used one or two basic sentence-frames for reporting on a variety of events, for instance the "(I) made an X" frame, or "(I) [verb] this" frame (e.g. "(I) opened this", "(I) closed this" and "(I) found this"). Such use of canonical sentence-frames for encoding of events by young children has also been pointed out by Slobin (1981).

The verb vocabulary used by these children was very similar to the one modelled by mothers. The most frequent verbs were find, do (make), fall, close, throw and see, while the less frequent ones were be, fall apart, hit, get found, get lost, open, put, say, spill, take down, take out, take picture and tie.

The children in this sample rarely encoded the objects of actions. When they did, e.g. within the sentence-frames describing transitive actions mentioned earlier, they mainly used pronouns (in the accusative) for referring to the object of the action. In the 13 different types of utterances produced by all the

26-month-olds (discounting repetitions) in which the object of action was encoded, only 2 had a noun rather than a pronoun in this role. It seems that children rely heavily on the situational availability of the referent and its easy identifiability, which is rather appropriate when the event described is a very recent one, one whose participants (persons or objects) are still in the immediate environment. It can however turn into a problem if such linguistic habits are transferred to discussions of the non-present and to true narratives, where reliance on deixis is inappropriate. It is an intriguing possibility that some of the problems children have along these lines in their early narratives stem from such a transfer from the DRE context.

It seems as if discussions of recent events are a relatively successful context for learning the rudiments of narrative-making. First, children learn to recognize discrete events in the stream of experience. Second, they learn which type of event is worth mentioning to a conversational partner. And lastly, they learn a basic vocabulary and grammar for commenting on past events, i.e. for naming the most central elements of these events. Such rules are directly derived from the simple utterances modelled by mothers in the same circumstances.

DRE conversations seem to provide an especially important opportunity for the learning of verbs in the declarative mood and in the past tense, and in general, for the learning of the descriptive, rather than the requestive, use of verbs. Such learning is made possible by the high situation-boundedness of such conversations, which minimizes the problem of establishing the topic of an event-descriptive statement.

However, the very same factor of high situation-boundedness that makes possible the acquisition of the relatively complex linguistic form of a verb in the past tense, makes for a less than optimal teaching situation for the acquisition of other aspects of narrative-making, such as the establishment of the topic of discourse and the control of reference. In DRE conversations, the topic can be assumed to be already established and the objects of reference shared, a fact that allows for a high level of laconicism and much reliance on deixis. A transfer of such stylistic devices to true narratives could be at the bottom of, e.g. young children's excessive reliance of deixis in early narratives. Moreover, a true narrative relates a series of events rather than a single simple event, whereas the opposite is true of DRE conversations. DREs do not teach a child how to create event structure and may actually introduce the expectation that single events are sufficient content for narrative. That is, however facilitative early conversations are of the acquisition of component skills necessary for later, more complex accomplishments, the development of true narration also requires a certain breaking away from the linguistic habits acquired in contextualized discourse, whether its topic is the actual here-and-now or a very recent event.

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NOTES

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