

Explicit and Implicit Communicative Strategies
in Children's Narratives*

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1. Introduction

The present study represents an interim report on ongoing research into the nature of the social differentiation of English in Calgary. The data discussed here were gathered in interviews in Victoria School, an elementary and junior high school in a working and lower class district of Calgary. While an ultimate aim of the broader investigation will be the establishment of some correlation between socio-economic status of speaker and language use, this paper will not address such problems. In the appendices are given two sets of narratives elicited from grade six girls (12 and 13 years old) in Victoria School. The data were recorded in a session in which three girls (all friends and members of the same class) and I were present. The narratives came in response to my request first for a story about some "exciting experience" known to the student and second for information about games played by these girls away from school.

2. Narrative Structure

Following Labov (1972) I distinguish between two extremes of narrative. His "minimal narrative" is defined "as a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation . . . ; a minimal narrative [thus] is defined as one containing a single temporal juncture." (1972:360-1) His fully-formed or extended narrative possesses the same "real-life temporal sequence" (Cook-Gumperz 1977:114) as the minimal narrative but is structurally more elaborate, containing as many as six components:

1. Abstract
2. Orientation
3. Complicating action
4. Evaluation
5. Result or resolution
6. Coda.

The label "narrative" might most conveniently be applied to "stories" in the usual sense of that word. Given Labov's temporal ordering condition, however, we may consider any body of connected speech a narrative which exhibits such ordering, without regard to whether a "story" is related. Cook-Gumperz (1977) has thus used narrative as a label for the instruction-giving of children in an experimental situation which she studied. She noted, in fact, that owing to the greater stylistic possibilities afforded by the story-telling narrative, the latter might reflect less well than instruction-giving the temporal ordering condition.

*A slightly different version of this paper was given at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, February, 1979, and will appear in the proceedings of that meeting.

3. The Extended Narrative

In the appendices two types of narratives are illustrated -- in Appendix A there is a somewhat extended narrative which gives a vicarious account of an "exciting experience" and uses many but not all of Labov's narrative components; in Appendix B I have included portions of the interview in which three minimal narratives occur. Each of these latter conforms to Labov's minimal condition for "narrativehood", in that it contains a temporal sequencing, which, if violated, would destroy the continuity of the narrative. The components of "The Cheetah" (the longer, more fully-formed narrative) are labelled in the appendix. This narrative contains no abstract or (verbal) evaluation; the latter component is perhaps missing since this is a vicarious account rather than the report of the experimenter of the incident. There are several false-starts which represent to me an attempt by the speaker to be as explicit as possible -- to state, for example, the reason why her father's friend had this "cat", what sort of animal it was, how things stood with the neighbours, etc. Overall, however, the appropriate temporal sequencing of events is maintained. Additionally, this speaker evidenced some skill as a story-teller in that her, in Kernan's terms (1977:91), "expressive elaboration" (including the use of prosodic features such as emphasis and, in two cases, falsetto) considerably heightened the impact of the narrative on the listeners. Having oriented us to the situation in which she heard the story and to the pertinent background underlying the episode, she moved to the result very rapidly and concluded the story not with a verbal but with a prosodic coda. The final clause of the narrative "that he killed the cat" is spoken with increasing rapidity and emphasis, a sort of crescendo and accelerando, followed by a muted giggle. All of this signals the end of the narrative.

"The Cheetah" represents, in general, an effective example of communication. The narrator structured her story well, told it expressively (for which she received an approving response from her audience) and she told it explicitly. The latter point is very important. There is essentially nothing of importance which is left implicit in her account -- from the specification provided for Spot Cash Income Tax to the background details which form part of the discontinuous orientation component in the narrative proper. If one were using Bernstein's categories, restricted and elaborated code, this narrative, though the performance of a working class child, would have to be labelled elaborated. The narrator perceives and takes into account the needs of her audience, assumes very little shared knowledge and structures a maximally explicit narrative. At the end of the story both she and her audience (including one adult) are satisfied that something has been communicated.

4. The Minimal Narratives

The minimal narratives (all of which are statements of the rules for various kinds of skipping) are less satisfactory from the adult perspective. Three such narratives are given in Appendix B. It is clear from these, and from other information not included here, that these girls are definitely aware of the rules of the games and, in fact, of a taxonomy

of skipping games. The rules for "normal skipping" are fairly explicit; those for "double dutch" are less so; and those for "Chinese skipping" are highly implicit. Relative implicitness in speech can be seen as associated with a communicative strategy on the speaker's part which is based on an assumption that a body of knowledge is shared by speaker and addressee. There are several ways in which a linguistic text can exhibit an implicit communicative strategy. In these narratives such a strategy is seen in the use of exophoric (or situational) reference (as in "you just wrap it around like this") and of specialized (or ritualized) vocabulary (as in "double dutch", "underbums", "high skies", etc.). From a Bernsteinian perspective, then, these accounts of skipping rules are increasingly restricted -- that for "Chinese skipping" being the most so. The audience reaction to these narratives did not, however, (apart from my own adult bewilderment) betray any lack of comprehension. It was clear that the narrators' assumption of shared knowledge was accurate with regard to a majority of the audience. Even my attempts to elicit further elaboration on the rules ("It's still hard to figure out how you would do that.") only succeeded in my getting a repetition of the rules from another girl.

5. Communicative Competence

5.1 Communicative Effectiveness

I would suggest that the effectiveness of the communicative strategy underlying "The Cheetah" and the ineffectiveness (from my adult perspective at least) of that underlying the games narratives result from a difference in the communicative competence of these girls and the adult listener. In the games narratives one can point out perhaps three areas in which the communicative competence of the children and the adult differed. Firstly, there is the relative appropriateness of an implicit communicative strategy for the task at hand; it worked for the children as audience but not for the adult. Secondly, there is perhaps an underlying level (below that of strategy) at which the decision was taken whether or not to make the account explicit; this I would call the level of communicative perception. At this level of choice there would be some difference between adult communicative competence and that of the girls. This level may be seen as closely related to or as a function of or as indistinguishable from a process wherein a speaker, in some sense, takes a reading of the audience, addressee, or other relevant aspects of the speech situation, based upon the (third) parameter of "shared knowledge". If there is a perception that knowledge is indeed shared by all concerned, then a more implicit communicative strategy will result. A perception that no such body of knowledge exists would ideally result in a more explicit strategy. I would claim that some process such as this underlay the selection of the two strategies by the girls.

5.2 "Knowledge" and "Use"

Hymes (1972a:282) claims that (communicative) "competence is dependent upon both (tacit) *knowledge* and (ability for) *use*." Each of these

major components can, of course, be seen as multifaceted. I suggest here, for example, that Hymes' *use* might correspond -- at the very least -- to levels termed communicative perception and communicative strategy. *Knowledge*, the underlying, fundamental component, might be seen as containing, among other things, (1) grammatical information, (2) one's norms of interaction and interpretation (Hymes 1972b:63-64) -- which might govern a speaker's behaviour in particular speech situations --, (3) "personal background knowledge" (Gumperz 1977 :191) and other similar factors, which have been proposed in the literature. *Knowledge* itself, in this view, could be claimed to consist both of "facts" and of "rules" for employing those facts. Individual differences between speakers with regard to their performance in specific speech situations might be seen as resulting from certain differences in *knowledge* -- both with respect to "facts" and with respect to "rules". Cazden, discussing individual differences among children, noted that "if what the child says in a given situation is functionally inadequate, the cause may lie in a conflict between the requirements of the present and the residue of his past." (1967:145). Further she pointed out that "the child's perception of the function of speech in a given situation [is] affected both by aspects of that situation and by his individual history of being in speech situations, making responses and receiving reinforcements." (145). At the level of communicative perception, where I would claim that some "reading" of the speech situation takes place and is interpreted in terms of the speaker's experience and norms, differences in terms of strategies adopted thus would possibly result from individual differences in "experiences" and associated "norms of interaction and interpretation".

In general, a perceptive speaker, one who is attentive to the needs of an unknown (and possibly unknowledgeable) audience, might be expected always to choose an explicit communicative strategy. There are, however, more aspects to a speech situation than simply a speaker, audience, addressee, etc. In some cases it may be that one of these other aspects overrides that of participant; the needs of an "unknown other" may thus become of secondary or no importance. If we consider, for example, certain more or less immutable speech acts (such as, poems, riddles, some jokes, etc.), we must attribute their form not to the application of a communicative strategy by a speaker based upon perceived audience needs; rather, we have to attribute this invariant form to their status as *special* speech acts (*genres*), which have their own rules. To alter many such speech acts in order to satisfy audience needs might well destroy their integrity. The specific form (and, to some extent, content) of a stretch of speech may thus depend upon any one or a combination of several factors. This is probably true for all speakers.

5.3 Communicative Strategies

It is possible to point out several ways in which the communicative competence of adults and children typically differs with regard to the perceptions and strategies underlying speech acts and the forms those acts take. Cook-Gumperz, in the study alluded to above, discusses the relative importance of the *semantic-syntactic channel* and what might be termed a

paralinguistic-situational channel. She notes that adults tend to background the latter channel, while children rely on both channels to convey and interpret meaning (1977:104). She goes on to suggest:

that the possibility of *foregrounding* the semantic-syntactic channel, as the *dominant* and *socially* recognized carrier of meaning, is a particular skill which develops gradually after the initial acquisition of some semantic-syntactic competency. This sociolinguistic skill, to foreground a part of the meaning components of the message, involves the ability to state the purposes of the verbal activity itself . . . such that there will be a gradual dominance of the channel of *lexicalized intent* over other sources of interpretive information. (1977: 105)

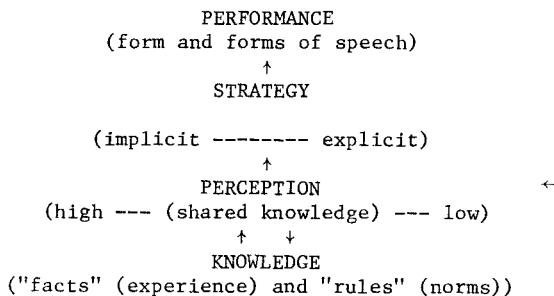
I would suggest that the narratives under discussion here afford examples both of the foregrounding of the semantic-syntactic and of the paralinguistic-situational channel. "The Cheetah", as demonstrated, is structured with a maximal foregrounding of the semantic-syntactic channel and is thus the product of an explicit communicative strategy. The games narratives, on the other hand, rely on situational reference, specialized vocabulary and, additionally, were uttered in a sort of sing-song voice which may characterize ritualized instruction-giving. They were the product of an implicit communicative strategy, not appropriate for adult speech.

The girls' reliance on a communicative strategy which does not maximize the semantic-syntactic channel and is, for an adult, not adequately communicative can be seen as owing to the fact that these speakers have not yet fully acquired adult-like communicative competence. The task they were given (namely, to relate the rules of certain games) required communicative skills they did not possess. They were asked to discuss (in an explicit way) topics which for them are normally embedded in a particular situation, involving knowledgeable (or potentially knowledgeable) participants and certain props (ropes, elastics, etc.). In selecting an implicit strategy to talk about these games, they failed to disembed the speech act from its usual situation. That talking about the games was not a particularly unnatural task for them is seen in the fact that their explanations were coherent (though not explicit) and that verbal activity did not diminish. They were not at a loss for words. In essence, exigencies imposed by the topic at hand overrode any consideration of individual audience need (even when this need was made explicit). Additionally, the somewhat ritualized character of the rules (similar to but not identical with that of a poem, song, etc.) -- especially of the rules for "Chinese skipping" -- may have contributed to this ignoring of the communicative needs of the audience. (Another factor which, in addition to topic, might be relevant here is the function of the speech act. "The Cheetah" could be seen as a manifestation of an "expressive" function; the games narratives might be categorized as "instrumental" or (with Halliday 1978) as "regulatory".)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to return to some of my remarks above on the nature of communicative competence. Below I include a model of what I

understand by this term. With Hymes and many others I see performance as being an aspect of the larger entity -- communicative competence. The characteristics (or form) of a particular linguistic performance seem to me to presuppose some sort of underlying communicative strategy. I assume a continuum of strategies arrayed along a dimension of explicitness. I see the level of strategy as underlain by communicative perception. Communicative perceptions are readings of the speech situation in the light of the experience and norms (or knowledge) of the speaker. I array them here along a dimension of "shared knowledge", though this label may not be entirely satisfactory. Communicative knowledge, as mentioned above, may contain both "facts" and "rules". Both of these aspects might be expected to differ from speaker to speaker, especially from child speaker to adult speaker. One of the differences in this area would surround the relative appropriateness of Cook-Gumperz's semantic-syntactic and paralinguistic-situational channels. The rules for the use of these modes of encoding meaning could be expected to vary considerably between such speakers. One of the most significant aspects of the assimilation of children to the (sociolinguistic) culture of adults might thus consist in their acquisition of rules regarding the appropriateness of the two channels and of explicit and implicit communicative strategies.



- Examples: (1) Implicit strategy (based on assumption of high degree of shared knowledge and exhibiting exophoric reference): She stands there.
- (2) Explicit strategy (low shared knowledge and endophoric reference): The teacher stands between the two teams.

Some Aspects of Communicative Competence

Appendix A

An extended narrative: "The Cheetah"

O [my dad he works at Spot Cash Income Tax, where you cash your T-4 slips in, and so one day he was at work and -- he a -- there's this other guy, Todd, he works with him in the same office and he asked Todd to come over and eat with us on Sunday, so he did. And then he, like, he told us about his future life when he lived out in Bowness and, no it wasn't Bowness, in B.C. And then he told us that]

A [one day he was workin' on this playhouse for his two girls and then so he was workin' on it and they had, they were look-]

O [he just came back from a sailing trip 'cause he was a sailor then and he was lookin' after his buddy's -- I forget what kind -- it's related to a cheetah -- they're great big things like this and they're as playful as a kitten, a cat, and they're as playful as a kitten . . . And then one day -- they live right next door to some people that had a great big tomcat and the tomcat it got out of the window and that tomcat it always beated up on the kids]

A [and so one day it got scratching the kids and that other cat he was looking after it got out there and tore the tomcat apart and then so the kids went in there and said: /Dad can we keep that animal?/ and they said, and he said: "No!" and "I'm just lookin' after it." And he said: "Why you guys so excited about it now? Before you hated it." And then he said: /'Cause he just killed that tomcat next door./ And then he looked out the window and said: "Where's the mess it left?" And then the oldest girl said: "I cleaned it up." And then they said: "Then where's the skin of the cat?"

R [And they said: "We buried it right away so the neighbours wouldn't know that c [he killed the cat!"]]

Narrative Components:

O = orientation
A = complicating action
R = result or resolution
C = coda.

(In the narrative // = falsetto and underlining = increased emphasis and speed)

Appendix B

The minimal narratives:

(1) Normal skipping:

Student: Like for normal skipping, you get a skipping rope and you get two turners and they turn the rope and you jump it.

(2) Double dutch:

Interviewer: That's normal skipping. What other kind of skipping do you have?

Student: Oh, I know -- there's blue bell, cockleshell, . . . , double dutch . . .

Interviewer: What is double dutch?

Student: Double dutch -- you get two turners and they each have two ends of the rope. Like one person gets both ends . . . and the other person gets the middle of the rope and they turn like this or else for "dolly" you can go like this and then you double dutch!

(3) Chinese skipping:

Interviewer: Somebody told me about Chinese skipping. How do you do that?

Student: You get a bunch of elastics and you put them together and . . . You can use 500 and a 1000 or any 'mount.

Interviewer: So what happens when you do uh . . . ?

Student: You just put 'em on the ankles then the knees then the waist then the hips then the underwaist then waist and underarms and you just jump over it . . . but when you get to headsies you just use pinkies. I can jump up to pinkies to get over high skies.

Interviewer: It's still hard to figure out how you would do that . . .

Another student: You step inside of it and then you spread your legs around 'bout that much and then 1 2 3 4 then in and out and then you get it up to the knees and then you do the same and then to the waists and -- no -- underbums -- then you get underbums and then you get waists and you get underarms and then you get necks, and then ears, then heads, then high skies.

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