

Introduction

The structure of narrative speech, initially, as well as of descriptive speech, subsequently, has been the subject area of study in the science of Linguistics, Text linguistics but also – particularly the past few decades – of Psycholinguistics. It appears that children are exhibiting more difficulties in the production of both oral and written language, a difficulty attributed to insufficient understanding of these two types of language structures (Ramsay, Sperlberg, & Dornish, 2008. Best, Floyd, & Mcnamara, 2008). Researchers (Kim, Samson, Fitzgerald, & Hartry, 2009. Dymock, 2007. Sundermeier, van den Broek, & Zwaan, 2005) put their efforts into determining whether there are certain patterns and structures that define each type of language component, as well as how these can be incorporated and utilized in the learning process by means of play activities.

Scientific background

Back in 1928, the Russian researcher Vladimir Propp, analyzed the plot of 100 fairy tales from his homeland, in order to identify the simplest, undifferentiated narrative elements. His primary aim in writing the "Fairy Tale Morphology" was to scientifically justify the issue of similarity between fairy tales originating from different nations. Thus, Propp stated that dividing fairy tales into their components before elaborating on them, was the preferred way to study them. Scientific research has shown that there are many structural similarities between fairy tales from various nations, and it is for that reason that folklorists use a common rule in classifying them (Balsamo, 2012).

Propp rejected the views of the 'geo-historic school' of thought and the logic that states that fairy tales have a unanimous pattern that should be classified in a strict way. He introduced the idea of a pattern that is no longer continuous but is divided into four elements based on the pairs: fight-victory, problem-solution as well as their coexistence, or their absence, in plot development that results in the formation of many sentences of various combinations.

This acknowledgement results in the creation of variable parts (acting characters) and parts that remain stable (actions, functions) in narration. Thus a new concept is created, "the function," which is "the action of a character, which is defined by the weight of its importance in the development of the tale" (Propp, 1968).

Additionally, Propp was not interested in focusing on what was unique in each story, but in what was common between them. Based on the principles of Formalism, in these tales, 8 basic characters emerged, who acted within situations that unfolded through some 31 total functions. He makes a point that some can be ignored, however, those which remained followed either a strict "linear/institutional" pattern of quotation, or an "exemplary" pattern of reappearing in one or more narrative patterns (Innis, 1985).

The characters found in the tales studied by Propp (1968), can be classified in the following roles: i) the hero, ii) the pseudo-hero, who takes advantage of the hero's actions and seeks to marry the princess, iii) the competitor/the villain, who impedes the hero from achieving his goals, iv) the helper, who provides the (magic) solution to the riddle that has been given to the hero, v) the sender, who informs the hero for what he does not have and sends him away, vi) the donor, who prepares the hero for what is about to happen or offers him a magical object, vii) the princess' father, who sets the hero's mission and identifies the pseudo-hero and viii) the princess (or the trophy), whom the hero wishes to marry but fails to do so due to the villain's doings. Justice prevails at the end of the tale (Propp mentions that the roles of the princess and her father are not functionally distinct).

An initial attempt in developing and structuring children's narratives, taking into consideration Propp's research, is found in Gianni Rodari's book: *The Grammar of*

Fantasy, where “Propp’s deck of cards” is described. Each card represents a function, enabling children to create stories by simply observing the pictures, and narrating them offering their own diversions in plot development.

Once Upon a Story

This specific educational material has been designed on the basis of Propp’s story analysis. It allows children to “invent” their heroes’ actions and functions, either based on their own previous reading experiences (Page & Stewart, 1985) or on the pictures provided. Children can utilize the pictures provided by placing them sequentially, or selectively choosing the ones that will enable them to tell their own unique tale. Sequencing the cards provides not only the correct chronological order of the plot but provides guided narration, thus boosting children’s self-confidence during narration (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). At the same time, their imagination and creative thinking skills are exercised (Grosdos, 2008). “Once Upon a Story” is for school and pre-school aged children. They can work with the cards with their teachers, their parents, their care takers, their friends as well as “play” on their own.

The pictures/cards can be utilized in the classroom on an individual basis as well as in “narration groups” with the participation of the whole class. The cards have been divided into seven categories in order to facilitate better understanding of the narrative structure: 1) The hero 2) Where he lives 3) The aim 4) The obstacle 5) The helper 6) the magic object used during the challenge 7) Success (“And they lived happily ever after”).

Children are asked to choose one card from each group. Then they sequence the cards in front of them in a causative or chronological order and begin their narration. They may omit a group of cards or take more than one card from a group. Children are free to act independently here. They can even describe their chosen cards to enrich their tale. This can also be done by their teacher or any other adult involved with the children. He may follow the same strategy of approaching and developing narrative or descriptive language.

Through cooperation, children may a) develop their vocabulary, b) focus on contributing to the development of the story, c) show respect for other people’s opinion, d) help each other and e) actively take part in the learning process taking place in the classroom.

Picture utilization alone, supports the structure of children’s descriptive language, since the child learns to function like a photo lens which gradually focuses on the picture and processes its elements (Chatzisavidis & Gazani, 2005).

The suggested way of utilizing the educational material, is for children to choose one card from each category, either randomly or not. Then, either in collaboration with the members of their team, or on their own, they start narrating their story utilizing the picture elements and inventing possible ways of action for their heroes. Children’s own experiences may possibly be used during narration, as it is often observed that through narration various memories are often triggered (Koliades, 2005). Newly acquired knowledge is always better understood when incorporated into pre-existing knowledge (Kintsch, 1998).

Depending on the inspiration and the mood of the moment, one is free to escape from the suggested framework, add cards as well as new heroes. Heroes that will be engaged in a simple story, or entangled into as much complicated story as we wish, as long as the tale always end with “And they lived happily ever after!”

On a final note, do remember: There are no mistakes, neither are there rules in fantasy!!!!

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