

## Introduction

Assessment of discourse production in aphasia has historically depended more on elicited samples of discourse than on spontaneously produced discourse.

The advantage of elicited discourse is that the examiner has knowledge of and control over the content of the target productions, theoretically increasing predictability and test-retest reliability. However, a distinct disadvantage of elicited discourse is its poor ecological validity, i.e., it is not representative of the functional discourse in day-to-day interactions.

In contrast, spontaneous discourse has been recognized for its high ecological validity, and its ability to manifest styles and productions unique to the speaker. However, the interviewer's inability to predict and control the content of the discourse has dissuaded its use in assessment.

An additional deterrent to clinical application of discourse analysis in general has been the labor-intensive nature of common word- and sentence-level analyses, which involve extensive counts and calculations. A broader discourse-level analysis, e.g., one of overall structure, may pose a clinically viable and functionally meaningful supplement to analyses at the word and sentence levels.

With regard to the structure of discourse in the narrative genre, there is already extensive evidence to suggest that the ability to include a setting, complication, and resolution is generally preserved in aphasia. However, a common approach to investigating narrative structure, namely the differentiation between narrative main event line (the temporal-causal sequence of event) and narrative evaluation (speaker's opinions on these events) (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) has not yet been systematically applied in aphasiology. The evaluative dimension may more closely reflect the primary motivation for narration (Polanyi 1985), which speaks for the importance of its inclusion in assessment.

This study analyzes (within subjects) the discourse produced by 28 individuals with aphasia across 14 different contexts, which yields samples of both elicited and spontaneous discourse. The goal is to assess the within-subject variability (or stability) of: a) narrative superstructure (setting, complication, resolution); and b) narrative evaluation, across elicited and spontaneous discourse samples. An additional goal is to assess (across subjects) which tasks most frequently display narrative superstructure and narrative evaluation, and whether the quality of this structure is a function of aphasia severity.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 28 English-speaking middle-aged middle-class men and women with aphasia, 20 Caucasian and 8 African American. Half displayed a mild aphasia, and half a mild-to-moderate aphasia.

### Procedure

Each participant produced discourse in 14 different contexts (elicited contexts higher in list; spontaneous contexts lower in list):

- 1) 5 discourses in response to single pictures;
- 2) 2 discourses in response to picture sequences;
- 3) 2 retells of fable narratives;
- 4) 1 narrative completion (completion of a narrative begun by the examiner); and
- 5) 5 personal narratives (a recently told narrative, a frequently told narrative, a narrative of an out of the ordinary event, a narrative a meeting a spouse or significant other, and a narrative of a frightening experience).

## Analysis

Each of the participants' 14 discourse productions was analyzed for its narrative structure as follows:

- 1) Analysis of the completeness of narrative superstructure (setting, complicating action, resolution)
- 2) Analysis of evaluation (narrator commentary), realized as presence and location of:
  - (a) separate evaluative comments (e.g., 'I was so scared');
  - (b) direct speech (quotes);
  - (c) repetition and paraphrase of narrative content; and
  - (d) negatives, modals, and future tense (categorized by Labov (1972) as comparators).

Presence or absence of these structures was compared across tasks, within subjects. Presence or absence of these structures was also compared across subjects by aphasia severity, for those tasks that most frequently displayed these structures.

## Results

Within-subject task comparisons. Use of narrative superstructure (setting, complicating action, resolution) was usually absent in single picture discourse contexts, but present in the other contexts. However, there were occasional instances in which requests for personal narratives did not result in a narrative discourse, and thus did not display narrative superstructure. Narrative evaluation was most frequent in the personal narratives, and least frequent in the elicited contexts. Evaluation was present in each element of the narrative superstructure.

Between subject comparison by aphasia severity. For those discourse contexts that typically displayed narrative superstructure, the quality of the superstructure did not vary as a function of aphasia severity. For those discourse contexts that typically elicited evaluation, evaluation was present across aphasia severity levels, but the type of evaluation varied as a function of aphasia severity.

## Discussion

Results of this study provide evidence that the nature of discourse elicitation tasks conditions the discourse structure produced by individuals with aphasia. The use of single pictures may be contraindicated when a clinician is attempting to assess narrative production ability. Likewise, when one is assessing narrative evaluation (i.e., the ability to highlight information in a narrative, to make a point with the narrative) personal narratives may be the most desirable, although the topic of the requested personal narrative should be carefully selected.

Narrative structure is also partially conditioned by aphasia severity. While the superstructure appears to remain relatively intact regardless of aphasia severity, the form and use of narrative evaluation may vary as a function of aphasia severity.

Notably, narrative evaluation is regarded by discourse analysts as the *sine qua non* of narrative production. Without narrative evaluation, there can be no point to the telling of the story. If the ability to produce narrative evaluation in aphasia is altered, this may also alter the ability of a speaker with aphasia to convey the point of his or her story.

Findings hold implications for the selection and design of clinical discourse tasks, and for our understanding of preservations and potential deficits of narrative structure in aphasia.

## References

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