

An examination of the relationship between social practices and the comprehension of narratives*

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Abstract

This paper argues, with the help of an experiment, that the comprehension of narratives is as influenced by the social practices of a culture, as the production of narratives is. I argue that the social practices of the white American middle-class culture not only influences the way 'mainstream' people tell stories, but also the way they comprehend them. I also argue that someone practiced at producing texts in a certain way, and not familiar with a given alternative way, will have a harder time comprehending the structures in text produced in the alternative way.

Keywords: discourse analysis; narratives; literacy; cultural differences.

Introduction

In his article 'Two styles of narrative construction and their linguistic and educational implications,' James Paul Gee (1989) examines two stories, one told by a white child (called 'Sandy') and the other told by a black child (called 'Leona'). He argues, along with Scollon and Scollon (1979, 1981) that 'narrative style is associated with one's cultural identity and presentation of self' (Gee, 1989: 299). As Gee and others (Labov, 1972; Tannen, 1989) have characterized storytelling in 'vernacular black culture', narratives are performances wherein the speaker uses a rich set of devices (sound effects, dialogue, the historical present) to give a theatrically involving rendition of the narrative. Narratives are not mere linear reports of 'facts', they are stories with rich plots and richly elaborated images and themes (Briggs, 1984; Hymes, 1975; Bauman, 1975). Narrators use 'poetic' devices, like repetition, parallelism, and sound play (Lord, 1960), and they expect the active participation of the audience in their storytelling. Some of these features are due to the continuing ties black