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"Sharing time": Children's narrative styles and differential access to literacy

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ABSTRACT

A discourse-oriented classroom activity in an ethnically mixed, first grade classroom is studied from an interpretive perspective, integrating ethnographic observation and fine-grained conversational analysis.[1] "Sharing time" is a recurring activity where children are called upon to describe an object or give a narrative account about some past event to the entire class. The teacher, through her questions and comments, tries to help the children structure and focus their discourse. This kind of activity serves to bridge the gap between the child's home-based oral discourse competence and the acquisition of literate discourse features required in written communication.

Through a detailed characterization of the children's sharing styles, evidence is provided suggesting that children from different backgrounds come to school with different narrative strategies and prosodic conventions for giving narrative accounts. When the child's discourse style matches the teacher's own literate style and expectations, collaboration is rhythmically synchronized and allows for informal practice and instruction in the development of a literate discourse style. For these children, sharing time can be seen as a kind of *oral preparation for literacy*. In contrast, when the child's narrative style is at variance with the teacher's expectations, collaboration is often unsuccessful and, over time, may adversely affect school performance and evaluation. Sharing time, then, can either provide or deny access to key literacy-related experiences, depending, ironically, on the degree to which teacher and child start out "sharing" a set of discourse conventions and interpretive strategies. (Urban communication, ethnic/subcultural differences in discourse style, the transition to literacy, American English.)

INTRODUCTION

Schooling in this society represents a special set of institutionalized activities that center on the acquisition of general purpose skills, the most important of which is literacy. As such, classroom activities can be studied as a series of goal oriented exchanges between teacher and children in which the overarching concern with

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literacy and literate-like behavior influences the nature of the face-to-face interaction (wherein the skills of literacy are presumably acquired). Given the widely publicized fact that many children are not acquiring literacy skills to a level that meets official notions of minimum adult competency, it is important to ask, first, what skills are involved in literacy and, second, what activities within the school setting provide or deny access to the kind of instruction and practice needed to acquire these skills.

In order to be regarded as literate in school, children must be able to shift from the face-to-face conversational discourse strategies appropriate in the home, to the more written-like strategies of discursive prose. This entails learning to adopt a non-face-to-face perspective with respect to one's audience by making explicit any relevant background knowledge (rather than assuming it to be shared), and lexicalizing or grammaticalizing all information that in oral discourse would be carried over nonlexical channels via prosody, pitch register, nonverbal cues, and so on (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 1976). Thus in making the transition to literacy, children must learn more than sound/symbol correspondences and mechanical decoding skills. In addition, they must acquire new discourse strategies for indicating distinctions between new and old information, signaling cohesive ties, topic shifts, emphasis, and perspective within and across topics.

Acquiring a literate discourse style is not equally easy for all children. For one thing, some children come to school with a discourse style that is closer to the literate standard of the school and hence have less to learn in this regard (Collins & Michaels 1980). Second, there is evidence to suggest that when a child's oral discourse style is at variance with the teacher's own literate style and expectations, interaction between teacher and child is often asynchronous and marked by interruptions and misinterpretation of semantic intent. This child, over time, often does not gain access to the kind of instruction and practice required to develop a more literate discourse style (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz 1979; Au 1980).

The work I will report on comes out of a larger ethnographic study of communication in both school and home settings, in which I served as a participant observer in an integrated, urban first grade classroom. One of the major tasks of language-related ethnographic research is to move from holistic observations to material that lends itself to fine-grained linguistic analysis. In the study of naturally occurring interaction, the question of *focus* inevitably arises. That is, one must decide what activities will be recorded and what segments of the recordings will then be selected for detailed analysis. I have attempted to solve this problem by using a case study approach oriented toward *key situations*. This notion of key situation, as developed in the work of Fred Erickson (1975) and John Gumperz (1976), holds that life in complex, stratified societies offers certain "gatekeeping" encounters that determine access to occupation, official redress, and educational opportunities. Within such situations, group specific differences in dis-

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course strategies or style can assume great importance because misunderstanding frequently results in denial of access to some social opportunity.

Educational settings are rich in such key situations. Individuals are called upon to display verbally some knowledge or proficiency at recurring communicative tasks and are then evaluated on the basis of this performance in ways that cumulatively affect their placement and access to learning opportunities. These key situations and communicative tasks must be identified through detailed ethnographic observation, focusing on a segmentation of the classroom day and an analysis of the participant structures that characterize the various speech events throughout the day. This ethnographic work then suggests strategic sites whereby the interactional processes of successful or unsuccessful communication can be observed, recorded, and contrastively analyzed as case studies. These findings can then be related to educational outcomes such as teacher evaluations or standardized test scores.

SHARING TIME AS A KEY SITUATION

On the basis of my early ethnographic work in the first grade classroom, "sharing time" (also called "show and tell" in some classrooms) appeared to be just such a key situation. It was a recurring classroom activity, where children were called upon to give a formal description of an object or narrative account about some important past event. The teacher, through her questions and comments, tried to help the children focus and structure their discourse and put all their meaning into words, rather than relying on contextual cues or shared background knowledge. Sharing time was a potentially rich practice ground for using *literate* discourse strategies, serving to bridge the gap between the oral discourse competence the child brought from home and the acquisition of literate discourse features required in written communication. As such, sharing time could be seen as a kind of *oral preparation for literacy*. However, there appeared to be evidence of differential treatment of children. Some sharing turns generated more successful teacher/child collaboration than others, and hence some children seemed to get more practice using literate discourse strategies than did others.

On the basis of these early impressions and initial hypotheses, I began systematically to audio and videotape sharing episodes and do detailed conversational analysis of individual sharing turns. The data that I will report on are a representative sample of narrative accounts by the first graders, selected from over 50 sharing sessions recorded during the course of the entire school year.

SHARING TIME AS A SPEECH EVENT

Sharing time took place every morning in this particular first grade classroom within the context of a larger episode, which I refer to as "rugtime," a time

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when the children assembled on the rug for various teacher-structured activities such as taking roll and doing the calendar. During this time the children were expected to sit quietly on the rug, listening attentively.

Sharing was a clearly bounded speech event, opened formulaically by the teacher (whom I will call Mrs. Jones), saying "OK, who has something important [exciting, special] to share?" To get a turn, children raised their hands and waited to be nominated by the teacher, but while another child was sharing, anyone could call out short, topically relevant comments from the rug. The only explicit rules for sharing were: 1) no sharing about TV or movies because it takes too long, and 2) no sharing about private family matters, such as quarrels. Very early on, children were urged to tell about events that had already taken place.

Once a child was called on, he or she went to the front of the rug and stood next to the teacher who was seated on a chair. The teacher was actively involved in each turn, holding her arm around each child as he or she talked, holding the floor for the child (e.g., "Excuse me, it's Merle's turn"), and freely interjecting questions or reactions to the child or group at large.

That the children saw sharing time as a unique speech event was evidenced by their use of a highly marked intonation contour. This "sharing intonation" was an integral feature of sharing discourse and occurred in *no other* classroom speech activity (other than role-playing sharing as a part of "playing school"). In this particular classroom, which was half white and half black children, I have identified two contrasting, but very comparable intonation patterns, both clearly identifying the talk as sharing-talk. The pattern used primarily by the white children was characterized by vowel elongation and a gradually rising intonation contour, stretching over the last word or two of a tone group. The accompanying utterance was often a syntactically complete, independent clause where an adult speaker would often use falling intonation. For example,

Ahab:[2] I got this Chinese Checker's ga:me . . .
for my birthda:y . . . and . . .

The second intonation contour was used exclusively by the black children and very pronouncedly by some of the black girls. It occurred in exactly the same environments (independent clauses), and was characterized by vowel elongation and a lilting high rise/mid-fall contour. For some children this sharing prosody involved rather sharp pitch modulations, giving the talk an almost singsong quality. For example,

Sherry: October my mother gonna have her ba:by . . .
and I want it to be a gi:rl . . .

Both contours seemed to indicate "more to come" and were generally followed by a significant pause. This perhaps served to ward off comments from peers or teacher, allowing the child some extra time for planning. The contours were used

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primarily at the beginning of a turn (as the child introduced the topic), where perhaps more planning was required or the talk most ritualized as sharing-talk.

There was also evidence of the use of a lexical formula. In giving a narrative account, children often began by saying

Yēsteřda:y... or Yēstérda:y...

depending on which intonation contour they generally used. That this was formulaic, rather than circumstantial, could be seen in the cases where children corrected a false start. For example,

Bob: Yesterday... I mean... I mean.. when I went to Arkansas [which had happened a year earlier]

Deena: Yesterday... I mean it was last night...

Using such a formula served several discourse purposes. First, it served to ground the talk temporally, the importance of which was repeatedly emphasized in Mrs. Jones's comments. Second, it established a *frame* that helped the child in structuring, and the listeners in interpreting, the discourse as event- or person-oriented "accounting."

THE TEACHER'S SHARING SCHEMA

From preliminary analyses of sharing turns, it became obvious that the child's discourse could not be analyzed in isolation. The teacher played a crucial role in structuring the child's discourse and providing an example of the kind and form of discourse that she considered appropriate. When the child neglected to provide explicit temporal or background information, for example, Mrs. Jones provided a slot for it by asking a specific question, such as "When did you go to the beach?" or "What beach did you go to?" In analyzing these queries and comments to the children, it became evident that she had an underlying schema of what constituted "good" sharing and that this schema had an implicit literate bias.[3] The teacher's schema for sharing, while having something in common with everyday notions of narrative structure and logical temporal sequencing, was far more restrictive. Her schema required that the account take the form of a simple statement and resolution centering on a single topic. Importance was attached, not to content per se, or to the sequentially ordered structure of a narrative, but rather, as in simple descriptive prose, to clarity of topic statement and explication. While Mrs. Jones never explicitly stated these requirements, her questions and comments indicated that what she was looking for was a decontextualized account centering on a single topic, whereby:

1. objects were to be named and described, even when in plain sight;
2. talk was to be explicitly grounded temporally and spatially;
3. minimal shared background or contextual knowledge was to be assumed on the part of the audience;

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4. thematic ties needed to be lexicalized if topic shifts were to be seen as motivated and relevant.

The teacher's notion of sharing was thus far removed from everyday, conversationally embedded accounts, which depend upon their situated character for much of the detail. In the teacher's schema, this kind of detail had to be fully lexicalized and explicated.

CHILDREN'S SHARING STYLE

I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the discourse style used by the children in doing sharing, in particular as it conformed to or violated the teacher's underlying schema of what counted as appropriate and adequate sharing. Just as there was an identifiable difference in sharing intonation used by the black children and white children, I found corresponding differences in discourse style. The discourse of the white children tended to be tightly organized, centering on a single, clearly identifiable topic, a discourse style I will call "topic centered" (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz 1979). Thematic development was characteristically achieved through a linear progression of information, providing focused description of a single event or object. This style closely matched the teacher's own discourse style as well as her notions about what constituted good sharing. For example,[4]

1 Burt: well 'last Saturday / 'this . . . last Saturday / well
2 [we: 'played / a'gáinst /
3 Student teacher: [sh sh
4 Burt: another 'soccer tea:m / and / well the 'last team we 'played
5 agáinst / we uh lo:st / and this tēam / 'this tîme / 'we /
6 'they / 'this was the 'first tîme / that they ,played against
7 another teâm // 'and 'it 'was / ,three nòthing / and ,we were
8 thrèe //[5]

In this turn, Burt focuses on a single event, providing temporal grounding (last Saturday), with no significant shifts in temporal or spatial perspective. The account is lexically cohesive and explicit in that there are frequent repetitions of key lexical items (team, played, time). Furthermore, there is a high degree of topical cohesion in that key items refer to a discrete cultural routine, "playing a game" (involving teams, scoring points, and winning or losing). Prosodically, this turn evidences a characteristic pattern found in many topic centered sharing turns. Sustained rising tones are used to establish the scene or perspective. Changing contours (both rise-falls and fall-rises) are used to elaborate on the topic, and low falling tones are used in closing.

In contrast to a topic centered style, the black children and particularly the

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black girls, were far more likely to use a "topic associating" style, that is, discourse consisting of a series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes. The topic associating style was generally characterized by an absence of lexicalized connectives other than "and" relating the anecdotes, and no explicit statement of an overall theme or point. While topic shifts *were* signaled prosodically, this kind of discourse was difficult to follow thematically for those who, like the teacher, expected the narrative to focus on a single topic. These sharing turns gave the impression of having no beginning, middle, or end, and hence, no point at all. The result was that these children seemed to "ramble on" about a series of loosely associated, commonplace occurrences. Further analysis of these turns, however, indicates that these children were not simply "free" associating, or skipping from topic to topic in a random and unmotivated manner. Rather the anecdotes were all linked implicitly to a particular topical event or theme. This "thematic focus" was never overtly stated but had to be inferred from the series of personal anecdotes. Thus thematic development was typically accomplished through anecdotal association rather than linear description. For example,

1	Sherry:	,Ye:sterda:y / ... my 'moth-- / we 'took my mother to
2		the hospital / and to'day she gon' have her ba:by /
3		... [and / ... and w- my ,sister ,gon'na see her /
4	ST:	[Ooooh
5	Sherry:	and 'we u:m / ... and this 'lady who ,works·there /
6		she gave me a um / ,pup'pet ... [and / ... and she ,gave
7	ST:	[Oooh
8	Sherry:	me 'somethin' else but I forgot the name / it was a ,lot
9		of ,stuff what she ,gave me but it / .. u:m [um [...]
10	C:	[[...]
11	Sherry:	... and / ... and / 'my-- and she and my 'mother 'bought
12		me a purse / be'fore she went to the ,hos'pital / .. and
13		she / and 'she / and she say she gon' promise me / she

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14 gon' uh / 'promise me to come 'up here / she gon' probably
p p

15 come up / she gon' come up to this school //
p ^

In this turn, there are several examples of shifts in perspective at the level of temporal and spatial grounding as well as with regard to focal characters. Sherry begins her turn (lines 1-3) talking about her mother, moving fluidly from the past (taking her mother to the hospital) to the present (when her mother is having her baby), on to the future (when her sister will visit her mother). In lines 5-10, she shifts perspective away from her mother entirely, but keeps the setting constant, focusing on a lady (at the hospital) who had given her several presents. In lines 11-15, she shifts back to her mother, telling two anecdotes that are both temporally and spatially unrelated. She focuses first on a present her mother had given her (*before* going into the hospital). This topic relates thematically to the previous "gift" anecdote, a connection that a literate adult might have lexicalized explicitly, saying, "And speaking of presents, before my mother went into the hospital, she . . . " Sherry then shifts to the future, away from the hospital, to the possibility of her mother coming to her school for a visit (presumably with the newborn baby). Though the baby is not overtly mentioned, its "understood" status creates an implicit link to the earlier hospital-related anecdotes. This link could have been made explicit by saying, "And after my mother gets out of the *hospital*, she's promised to bring the *baby* up to my school."

While the precise connections between the separate anecdotes is never explicitly stated, each of the major shifts in perspective *is* signaled prosodically with a pause followed by a sustained pitch on "and" or "um" (in lines 3, 5, 11, and 12). As is characteristic of topic associating discourse, Sherry's account is rhythmically chunked, with pauses, holding pitches, and vowel elongation differentiating subanecdotes, rather than sharp rising and falling contours delineating beginning, middle, and end (as was the case in Burt's topic centered account). This kind of rhythmically chunked, topic associating discourse is evidently difficult to follow for those who, like the teacher and student teacher, expect the discourse to focus on a single topic and to be prosodically marked with sharp rising contours (signaling "more to come") or falling contours (signaling full closure). On two occasions, in this example, the student teacher misreads Sherry's use of a sustained pitch followed by a pause, as a signal of discourse closure, whereas for Sherry, these cues indicate "more to come" and regularly accompany a shift in perspective. This misreading results in a mistimed back channel cue ("Oooh") overlapping with Sherry's "and" (in lines 4 and 7), creating a break in Sherry's rhythmic pacing as she continues her account.

It is worth noting that discourse styles similar to what I have called topic associating have been reported among other minority speakers. Scarborough (personal communication) noted this style in black children's oral fantasy stories. In Erickson's study (1971) of a group of black adolescents in an informal discus-

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sion, he found that connections between topics were rarely overtly stated. Rather, implicit themes could be inferred from a series of concrete examples, a mode of expression he called "the logic of the particular." Cooley (1979) reports similar findings in his study of speech making styles of Native American college students.

INTERACTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SHARING STYLES

Topic centered

With children who used a topic centered style, Mrs. Jones was highly successful at picking up on the child's topic and expanding on it through her questions and comments. In the following topic centered narrative account, a single topic, making candles at day camp, is introduced and elaborated upon. Both the teacher and the child have a shared sense of what the topic is and are able to collaborate in rhythmically synchronized exchanges, maintaining a high degree of cohesion within and across turns. The teacher is able to build on the child's contributions and help her produce more focused and lexically explicit discourse:

1	Mindy:	When I was in 'da:y cámp / we made these / um candle:s /
2	T:	You máde 'them? /
3	Mindy:	And uh / I-I 'tried it with 'different colors / with 'both
4		of them but / 'one just came out / 'this one just came
5		out blue / and 'I don't know / what this color is /
6	T:	'That's neat-o // 'Tell the kids 'how you do it from the
7		very start // Pre'tend we don't know a 'thing about candles //
8		... OK // What did you do first? // What did you use? //
9		Flour? //
10	Mindy:	Um... there's some / hot ,wax / some real hot wax / that
11		you / 'just take a string / and tie a knot in it // and
12		'dip the 'string in the um wax //

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13 T: What makes it uh have a shâpe? //

14 Mindy: Um / you just shape ,it //

15 T: Oh you shaped it with your hând // m̄m̄ //

16 Mindy: But you have / 'first you have to 'stick it into the wax /
acc

17 and then water / and then 'keep doing that until it gets to

18 the size you ,want·it //

19 T: ÔK // 'Who knows what the string is for? // ...
p

In this sharing turn, Mindy introduces her topic with temporal and spatial grounding (line 1), while holding up two small candles in her hands. She uses distinctive sharing intonation (sustained rising tones and vowel elongation), pausing after a low rising tone on "candles." Mrs. Jones comes in at this point, saying "You made them" with a high rising contour on "made," signaling pleasant surprise, in the form of an echo question, as if to say "Oh my, did you really make them (by yourself, by hand)?" Mindy does not overtly respond to the question (i.e., she does not produce the canonical Yes/No response to a Yes/No question). Instead she continues her discourse beginning with "and" in line 3, which suggests that this turn is directly linked to her previous turn. She goes on to talk about the color of the candles, a theme that bears little relation to Mrs. Jones's comment in that it refers to an essentially peripheral step in the process of making candles. In lines 3-5, Mindy relies heavily on anaphoric pronouns ("it," "them") and deictic forms ("this," "this one"), which are by definition rooted in the context of speaking. There is minimal lexical elaboration, but because she is holding the candles up for everyone to see and gesturing with one hand and then the other, one would have no problem filling in the semantic information.

Mrs. Jones waits until Mindy pauses on a low falling tone (on "color") and reiterates her interest in the actual process, but this time, does so more explicitly. She provides a clear and elaborate set of guides for how she wants Mindy to talk about making the candles. "Tell the kids how you did it from the very start. Pretend we don't know anything about candles." The last remark is of course an instruction to assume no shared knowledge and to be as explicit as possible. Mrs. Jones then pauses and gets no response. She rephrases her instruction as a question, "What did you do first?" She pauses again and follows with an additional clue by offering an obviously wrong answer to the question, which nonetheless suggests to Mindy an example of the type of answer she has in mind. "What did you use? . . . Flour?" At this point Mindy responds, building upon the base that the teacher's questions have provided. She describes what she used

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(''hot wax'') and the steps involved. In addition to a description of the sequencing of activities involved in the business of making candles, this passage introduces several context-free lexical items (''some hot wax,'' ''a string,'' ''a knot''). The use of lexical items provides explicit information about the activity and the materials used in candle making. This contrasts with the use in the preceding turn (lines 3-5) of anaphoric and deictic items that rely on context for interpretation. Additionally the use of definite and indefinite articles grammaticalizes the distinction between new and old information: ''*some* wax'' and ''*a* string'' become ''*the* piece of string'' and ''*the* wax'' (lines 10-12).

When Mindy pauses on a low tone, Mrs. Jones asks a further question about how one goes about shaping the candles. Mindy responds somewhat uninformatively saying, ''You just shape it.'' The use of ''just'' and the low falling pitch on ''shape'' (giving the utterance unmarked declarative force), implies that *how* you shape it goes without saying. Mindy thus relies on her listeners to ''fill in'' what she left unsaid, that you simply shape candles with your hands. Mrs. Jones evidently has no problem making the correct inference. She begins line 15 with ''Oh'' as if to say, ''I see,'' and then repeats the gist of Mindy's utterance, this time making explicit what Mindy had merely implied.

Mindy does not overtly acknowledge Mrs. Jones's contribution (that is, she does not say, ''That's right, with your hands''). However, there is tacit acknowledgment in that Mindy begins her next turn with ''but,'' used not as a contradiction or denial marker, but rather to mean something like ''Yes, that's right, *but* there's something more to add to that.'' Thus Mrs. Jones's comment, ''with your hands'' now stands as part of the account and is referred to by Mindy *as if* she herself had uttered it. Mindy then builds on Mrs. Jones's contribution to round out the description of the process, filling in several important steps that come *before* the shaping of the candles. ''But you have, first you have to stick it into the wax, and then water, and then keep doing that until it gets to the size you want it.'' In this way, we can see how this procedural account is a joint production. Mindy's comments in lines 16 to 18 acknowledge and build upon Mrs. Jones's contribution in line 15, which in turn builds on and fills out an earlier contribution of Mindy's.

Several things are notable about this episode as a whole. Most of Mrs. Jones's questions occur when Mindy pauses after a low falling tone. Such pauses indicate some kind of closure. Hence Mrs. Jones's questions occur at the end of a complete unit and are not seen as interruptions. Furthermore, her questions descend from general to specific, until a level is reached at which Mindy can and does respond appropriately. Lastly, the teacher's responses and clarifications build on Mindy's contributions.

It is important to note that Mindy's discourse in response to Mrs. Jones's questions and comments is far more complex than the spontaneous utterances produced without Mrs. Jones's guidance. Thus we can see in this example how a shared sense of topic and a synchronization of exchanges enable the student and

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teacher to collaborate in developing a lexically explicit and coherent account of a complex activity.

Topic associating

With many of the black children, on the other hand, the teacher appeared to have difficulty discerning the topic of discourse and predicting where the talk was going. Her questions were often mistimed, stopping the child mid-clause. Moreover, her questions were often thematically inappropriate and seemed to throw the child off balance, interrupting his or her train of thought. In the cases where the child continued to talk, these turns were often cut short by the teacher, who jokingly referred to them as filibusters on occasion. It is important to stress at this point that these are not isolated occurrences but well-established patterns that were characteristic of sharing time interaction over the course of the entire year.

Teacher principles: "Importance." Mrs. Jones was sincerely concerned about helping these children develop what she considered a more appropriate sharing style. She successively introduced two specific pedagogical techniques to curtail topic associating. Early in the year, she began to emphasize the notion of "importance," stating that appropriate topics for sharing were events that were "really, really very important . . . and sort of different," that is, topics that would be of general interest.

In spite of Mrs. Jones's insistence on "importance," all the children had some difficulty with this notion. For example, early in the year a child raised his hand to share, and when Mrs. Jones asked, "Is this very, *very* important because we don't have much time this morning?" the child replied, "I don't know if it is or not but I want to say it anyway." However, children who used a topic associating style *appeared* to have far more difficulty selecting "important" topics to share about.

In analyzing many of these turns, though, it becomes clear that it was not that the topics of discourse themselves were inherently trivial or uninteresting. Rather, the rhetorical style used made it seem as if there was no topic whatsoever. In asking the children to tell about "important things," the teacher was tacitly assuming that the children understood how to do the actual telling in a literate style – that is, telling about one thing only and in such a way that it sounded important. Simply reminding the children to talk about important events did not provide them with the criteria for either topic selection or discourse style. "Telling about important things" was, in effect, a *gloss* for topic centered accounting. It made sense only if one had a topic centered schema to begin with.

"One thing." Later on in the year, Mrs. Jones began regularly to invoke a new sharing principle: that the children should tell about only one thing. While this rule of thumb was somewhat vague, it provided a clearer prescription, in line with her implicit schema, than did her emphasis on importance. However, as the

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following example illustrates, this second approach also failed to elicit the desired sharing style.

1 T: Deena / I want you to ,share some- one^thing / that's 'very important //.
2 one / thing // from 'where you are // . . . is 'that where you a:re // . . .
3 is that where you were //
4 D: no //
5 T: OK //
6 D: um // . . . 'in the su:mme:r / . . . I mean / . . . w-when um / I go back to
7 school / I come back to school / in Septe:mber / . . . I'ma ,ha:ve a new
8 coat / and I already got it // . . . and / . . . 'it's / . . . u:m / . . . (. . .)
9 got a lot of bro:wn in it // . . . a:nd / . . . when- / um / and I 'got it
10 ,ye:sterday / . . . and when . . . I saw it / my um . . my mother was . . was
11 ,going some . . where / when my . . when I saw it / . . . on the cou:ch / and
12 I showed my si:ster / and I was 'readin' somethin' out on . . on the ba:g /
13 and my 'bi:g sister said [(. . .)
14 C: [um close the door
15 D: my 'big sister said / 'Deena you have to keep that away / from Keisha /
16 'cause that's my ,baby sister / and I said no // . . . and I said the
17 'plastic ba:g / . . . because / . . . um / . . . when / . . . u:m / . . sh-when the
18 um . . she was u:m (with me) / wait a minute / . . . 'my / cou:sin and her
19 [(. . .)
20 T: [wait a minute // you stick with your coat now // I s-said you could tell
21 'one thing // . . . 'that's fair //
22 D: 'this 'was 'about my [c-
23 T: [OK [all right / go on
24 D: [this was-

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25 D: and today / and yesterday when I . . got my coat / my cou:sin ,ran outsi:de /
26 and he (. .) ran to 'tried to get him / and 'he / he he start- / . . . an' when
27 he 'get in- when he 'got in my house / . . . 'he 'layed on the floor / and I
28 ,told him to 'ge:t up be,cause he was cry:in' //
29 T: mm-what's that 'have to do with your coat //
30 D: h-'he . . . 'becau- he 'wanted to go outside / but we . . couldn't // (exasperated)
31 T: why //
32 D: 'cau:se my mo:ther s-wanted us to stay in the house //
33 T: what does that have to do with your coat //
34 D: bec- um uh
35 C: (whispers)
36 D: because / . . . . 'I don't know //
37 T: OK // [thank you very much Deena //
38 C's: [(talking)
39 T: OK / do you under,stand what I was trying to do // Deena / I was trying to
40 get her to stick with one / . . . thing // and she was talking about her /
41 C's: coat //
42 T: new /
43 C's: coat //
44 T: coat // it sounds nice Deena //

In this example, Mrs. Jones begins with a clear prescription of what she wants from Deena, combining both strategies, with emphatic stress on "one thing." This is evidence of her well-grounded expectation that Deena will launch into topic associating discourse. In line 6, Deena begins her turn, explaining that she has already gotten a new coat that she will be wearing when she returns to school in the fall. Her discourse is rhythmically chunked and marked by vowel elongation and high holding pitches at regular intervals, falling on the beat of an even tempo. From my analysis of Deena's other sharing turns and discourse in other settings, it is clear that this is not her typical narrative accounting style. Rather it

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appears to be discourse that serves to orient or qualify a person-oriented narrative. In line 9, her discourse changes rhythmically and prosodically into typical narrative style, a style I have identified in narrative accounts during sharing time as well as in peer/peer conversations outside the classroom. As Deena shifts into narrative prosody, there is a corresponding shift in syntax as well (from future and present tense verbs to simple narrative past). It appears that the early talk about her coat is a preamble or descriptive aside, setting the scene, so to speak, for a narrative account. There is further evidence that the preamble is separate from her narrative in that Deena says "yesterday" with marked sharing intonation in line 10. As was mentioned earlier, "yesterday" is used frequently as a sharing time formula at the very beginning of a narrative account. In Deena's case, however, the formula occurs in the middle of her talk, just as she begins the narrative proper.

It appears that the teacher misses this transition to the narrative proper, seeing Deena's talk about the plastic bag and her sisters as peripheral and only loosely related to the topic of her new coat. But in line 18, when Deena begins to talk about her cousin, the teacher loses the thematic thread completely and interrupts her, telling her to stick with her original topic, her new coat. Deena responds in line 22 that the talk about her cousin is in fact related to her coat. She even tries to make this connection explicit when pressed, saying, "and yesterday when I got my coat, my cousin ran outside." However, Mrs. Jones is looking for a lexically explicit, thematic connection, not a narrative listing of temporally contiguous events. Mrs. Jones continues to press for an explicit semantic link until Deena gives up and sits down.

The question still remains as to just what the connection was between Deena's cousin and her new coat and how that related to her sisters and the plastic bag. There are several possible interpretations.

It may be that Deena saw the connection between her sisters and her cousin as a simple temporal one. Both related to the coat in that they both happened "yesterday," the day she got her coat. If this were the case, what Deena intended could have been spelled out for Mrs. Jones by saying, "Yesterday I got my new fall coat and now I'm going to tell you about a couple of different things that happened to me at that time." This, of course, would have been a direct violation of the "tell about one thing" constraint.

Another interpretation is that there was a semantic connection between topics and an overarching thematic logic to the narrative that was never made explicit. While this is an attractive alternative, there is very little actual evidence for an implicit theme that would relate the second narrative subanecdote (Deena's cousin) with the preamble (her new coat). However, there does seem to be a thematic connection between the first subanecdote (her sisters and the plastic bag) and the preamble, but the relationship is never explicitly stated. Deena mentions "the bag" as old information (using the definite article) in line 12, relying on her listeners to make the connection between new coats and the plastic

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bags that they often are wrapped in. And although Deena mentions having to keep the bag away from her baby sister, the potential danger of smothering is never stated outright. Deena continues her narrative saying, "and I said, 'no'... and I said, 'the plastic ba:g'." Here, she uses a high rise-fall contour on "nô" and the same contour with emphasis and vowel elongation on "bâ:g." Thus Deena uses a prosodic cue to signal something like "you know what I mean" and relies on her listeners to "fill in" the implied maxim about keeping small children from putting plastic bags over their heads. This is quite similar in effect to Mindy's utterance "you just shape it," which also draws on shared knowledge and cooperation on the part of the audience. The difference is that, in Mindy's case, the teacher made the connection lexically explicit *for* her, whereas with Deena, the connection was left implicit.

The connection between Deena's cousin and the other topics is not at all apparent on the surface. It must be kept in mind, however, that from the time Deena first mentioned her cousin (line 18) until she sat down, she was interrupted twice mid-clause (lines 20, 23) and questioned three times (lines 29, 31, 33) by Mrs. Jones. There is evidence from other sharing episodes that this kind of questioning with topic associating children often interferes with their train of thought, causing the child to stop talking or revert to one or two word responses. Deena may have had one idea in mind but may have been unable to express it in the face of Mrs. Jones's questions.

A third interpretation of this sharing turn is that Deena's cousin had nothing whatsoever to do with her coat; Deena simply wanted to continue talking, and was picking up on whatever topic came to mind next. This, it turns out, was the interpretation Mrs. Jones gave to this and other topic associating turns. She saw the problem as a matter of planning at the level of discourse content, that is, topic selection. When asked what she made of these turns, she explained that these children didn't really think about what they wanted to say in advance and were simply talking "off the top of their heads, thinking up things to say as they go along." I get similar responses when I play this and other topic associating turns to other middle class informants.

In order to evaluate these competing interpretations, I decided to go to Deena herself, play her the tape and ask her what she thought was going on and what she had intended to communicate in this sharing turn.

During the course of the interview, many of the unstated connections in her discourse were verbalized and clarified. First, Deena explained the link between her cousin and her new coat, saying that her cousin was "a *bad* little boy, and when he came back in the house, he started to put his hands on my coat, ... and his hands was *dirty*!!" Second, when questioned about the link between her baby sister and the plastic bag, Deena hesitated momentarily whereupon her 10-year-old sister (also present during the interview) chimed in, saying, "My mama say keep plastic out of Keisha's reach, 'cuz she might put it over her head," with which Deena quickly agreed. Thus it appears that for Deena, there *was* an

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intended semantic link between the coat and the two subtopics in the narrative, her cousin and her baby sister. In one case she was protecting a young child from the coat and in the other case, she was protecting the coat from a young, messy child.

Whether these links would have been verbalized during the course of the original telling had Mrs. Jones not interrupted or questioned Deena is a moot point. What is important is that the teacher and child were unable to collaborate on elaborating the topic and making these connections fully explicit.

Moreover, during the interview Deena expressed a keen sense of frustration about being interrupted during sharing time. She saw this as an indication that the teacher was simply not interested in what she had to say, explaining, "she was always stoppin' me, sayin' 'that's not important enough,' and I hadn't hardly started talking!" Her older sister recalled similar frustrations from her sharing experience five years earlier.

One final point emerged from the interview. Deena had interpreted Mrs. Jones's questions (lines 29, 33) quite literally, thinking that Mrs. Jones wanted to know *more* about her cousin and what he had to do with her coat (explaining in the interview, "She probably wanted to know, like, did he *do* something to it, or *what*?"). In fact, however, Mrs. Jones was not asking Deena to talk more about her cousin, but rather, she was indirectly trying to get her to leave him out of her account altogether and stick to a topic centered description of her coat. This is evident in Mrs. Jones's final comments to the class (lines 39–40), "I was trying to get her to stick with *one thing*." Deena, however, had interpreted these questions within her own topic associating schema.

It is worth noting that this particular sharing turn occurred at the very end of the school year, after repeated occurrences of topic associating discourse and repeated attempts on Mrs. Jones's part to elicit topic centered accounts. It may well be that Deena's preamble about her coat was an attempt to accommodate the teacher's demand. This kind of narrative preamble does not occur either in her early sharing turns or in her informal narrative accounts with family members or friends. However, the teacher was unable to follow the transition from preamble to narrative as it was not marked prosodically or lexically in a way that she could interpret. As a result, Deena's effort went unnoticed and unrewarded.

Thus it appears that the two were working at cross purposes. Mrs. Jones was looking for topic centered discourse (similar to that in the preamble) while Deena was building up to a topic associating narrative account whereby the overall point had to be inferred from a series of subanecdotes, without any overt statement of the topic. Each was working within her own sharing time schema; without a shared sense of topic, and a shared set of discourse conventions, collaboration was unsuccessful. Mrs. Jones's indirect attempts at instruction were misinterpreted and Deena's use of topic centered discourse (in the preamble) was not reinforced. Misinterpretations such as these, on the part of both teacher and child, may explain in part why topic associating strategies persisted over time,

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despite the fact that children like Deena got frequent opportunities to share and were generally able learners, as shown by their improvement over the course of the year in other literacy-related skills, such as handwriting or spelling.

CONCLUSION

These two examples are representative of stable patterns of differential treatment, characteristic of sharing time interaction over the entire school year. In one case, a shared sense of topic and a synchronization of questions and responses enabled teacher and child collectively to create an account that was lexically and grammatically more elaborate than what the child would be likely to create on his or her own. In the other case, lack of a sense of topic, differing narrative schemata, and apparent misreading of prosodic cues resulted in asynchronous pacing of teacher/child exchanges, fragmentation of the topic, and misevaluation of intent on the part of both teacher and child.

I do not mean to imply that the difficulty Mrs. Jones experienced with topic associaters like Deena was due either to prejudice or to incompetence. She was, to the contrary, an excellent teacher, highly regarded by the principal, her peers, and myself as well. Rather, the problem appeared to relate more generally to differences in ethnic and communicative background, leading to unintentional mismatches in conversational style.

It is worth noting that on one occasion, in my role as participant, I had to lead sharing time, and in spite of my heightened analytic awareness of topic associating strategies, I found myself unable, on the spot, to follow this kind of discourse thematically and ask appropriately focused questions. I simply let the topic associating children talk until they were finished, and at one point I found myself saying, "Just one more thing because we're running out of time."

There was also a black instructional aide in this classroom who on one occasion as well led sharing time. While the aide was in general a less skilled teacher than Mrs. Jones, during this particular sharing time session she was better able to pick up on the narrative intentions of the topic associating children, ask them thematically appropriate questions, and help them round out and organize their narrative accounts.

The consistent problems that Mrs. Jones had with certain children during sharing time had to do, not with attitudes, but with automatic, unconscious processes at the level of discourse, stemming from a mismatch between teacher's and child's prosodic signaling system and narrative schemata. Such mismatches, over time, resulted in differential amounts of practice doing literate-style accounting for black children and white children in this class. Inasmuch as sharing time is an activity that promotes the development of prose-like oral discourse, such differential treatment may ultimately affect the children's progress in the acquisition of literacy skills.

The processes I have studied in sharing time interaction appear to be systema-

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tic and general. Furthermore, as these findings begin to be linked to ethnographic study of home and peer play settings, there is initial evidence that the topic associating narrative strategy derives from home-based narrative experience and expectations.

My approach in this study has been to identify key, recurring discourse activities in the classroom and to develop hypotheses about ethnic or subgroup differences in discourse style that, over time, could lead to adverse educational outcomes. The primary effort at this stage has been to develop systematic, replicable ways of documenting such processes, using an interpretive approach that focuses on interaction from a number of different perspectives:

1. as ongoing interaction in a particular context;
2. retrospectively, given knowledge of short- and long-term outcomes and after-the-fact interviews with participants;
3. analytically, looking at signaling mechanisms at the level of prosodic cueing and discourse expectations.

It is of course premature to make sweeping statements about specific educational outcomes, based on this analysis of sharing time in a single first grade classroom. However, the interpretive perspective and methods of conversational analysis set forth in this study can now be used to test these hypotheses in a larger number of classrooms and at a variety of grade levels.

NOTES

1. Work on this paper was supported by the School/Home Ethnography Project (NIE grant #G-78-0082). From start to finish, this study has been a collaborative effort. Jim Collins worked closely with me on an earlier draft of this paper, providing insights, helpful criticisms, and editorial assistance. I would also like to thank John Gumperz, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, and Dell Hymes for encouragement and insightful suggestions regarding the analysis and final presentation of the findings. And finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Jones and her first graders for making this study possible.

2. The children, like Mrs. Jones, are referred to pseudonymously.

3. I say "implicit" here because Mrs. Jones did not appear to be consciously aware of any connection between sharing time and literacy, nor was she able explicitly to characterize her "schema" of what constituted "good" sharing. When asked about her goals for sharing time, she talked very generally about the value of learning to stand up in front of a group and talk clearly.

4. In illustrating topic centered versus topic associating styles, I have selected turns between the student teacher and a child, because the student teacher was far more likely than Mrs. Jones simply to let the children talk, without interjecting questions and comments, thus minimizing interactive phenomena and collaboratively produced accounts. These turns provide a clearer picture of the children's spontaneous and unassisted narrative accounting styles.

5. The method I have used in analyzing prosody derives from the work of John Gumperz and John Trim (ms.) and grows out of the British work on intonation. (See Ladd 1980 for a critical discussion of this approach.) Initially, speech is chunked into tone group units (i.e., segments with a single, continuous intonational coutour). These units are then designated as *major* tone groups (ending with some indication of closure) or *minor* tone groups (signaling "more to come"). Second, points of intonational prominence are located; the primary peak of the tone group being the *nucleus*, with peaks of lesser prominence identified as secondary *heads*. Third, pitch contours (rising, falling, level, rise-fall, fall-rise, etc.) are indicated on the tone group nucleus, and pitch level is indicated for the heads (either high or low). One then systematically examines the use of prosody within and across clauses, looking for relationships between tone group chunking, nucleus contour, and clausal (syntac-

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tic and semantic) structure. In doing this kind of prosodic analysis, grammarlike consistency or unity of meaning cannot be assumed. Rather, one looks for general patterns in the use and functioning of prosodic cues within and across speakers, in relation to particular discourse tasks (such as giving a narrative account).

The notations used in transcribing prosodic and paralinguistic cues were developed by Gumperz and his collaborators based on Trim's work. In this system, tone group boundaries are indicated as major "//" or minor "/." Within the tone group, pitch contour on the nucleus is indicated as follows: "ˎ" low fall, "ˋ" high fall, "ˏ" low rise, "ˊ" high rise," ^"rise-fall," ˇ"fall-rise. Secondary heads are "ˈ" high or "ˌ" low. Paralinguistic features are indicated as follows: a) shift to high pitch register "ɼ" or shift to low pitch register "ɩ" (both applying to the entire tone group), b) pausing ".." indicating a break in timing and "..." indicating a measurable pause, c) vowel elongation ":" following the elongated syllable, d) speech rate: "acc." indicating accelerating tempo, and "dec." indicating slowing down, e) loudness over an entire tone group is indicated by "p" (soft) or "f" (loud). Doubling of any one of the above symbols indicates extra emphasis.

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