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Title: *Metacognitive verbs in narrative speaking: Acquisition in adolescents*

Format: Paper or poster

Abstract:

The development of narrative speaking – or storytelling ability – is a long and gradual process that begins in early childhood. By age 5, most children can tell simple stories about real or imagined events, and many of them enjoy sharing anecdotes with peers. Nevertheless, narrative speaking continues to develop during the school-age years as children encounter increasingly complex stories in the classroom which they are expected to read, retell, and discuss with their teachers and classmates. Although much has been learned about narrative speaking in children ages 5 to 12 years, less is known about adolescents.

The purpose of this study was to examine narrative speaking ability in adolescents, a population that has been relatively neglected by researchers when compared with preschool and school-age children. The participants were 40 adolescents (mean age = 14 years) with typical development who spoke American English as their primary language. Each adolescent was interviewed using a narrative task that involved fables. Fables were employed in the study because they are short stories that attempt to teach lessons in ethics through the actions of animals that talk and behave like people, often concluding with a moral message or proverb. Although superficially simple, fables are actually quite complex because they focus on complicated mental states and events such as fear, pride, wisdom, and sacrifice. Hence, when adolescents are asked to retell and interpret fables, they can be expected to use complex language, including metacognitive verbs – or words that refer to acts of thinking, knowing, and feeling (e.g., *understand, fear, realize, assume, enjoy*) – and complex syntax. When these two aspects of language co-occur in speaking or writing, this is taken as evidence for the *lexicon-syntax interface* in development.

For the narrative task, the adolescent listened to two fables by the Greek storyteller Aesop, and retold each one. After retelling a fable, the examiner asked questions that prompted reflection on the philosophical and figurative meanings of the story and a critical analysis of the moral message being conveyed. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed for the use of metacognitive verbs and complex syntax measured in terms of mean length of C-unit (MLCU) and clausal density (CD).

As predicted, the narrative speaking task elicited a wide variety of metacognitive verbs, ranging from simple and early-developing words (*know, think, believe, feel, guess*) to those that were more advanced (*agree, approve, plan, pretend, deserve, decide*). Overall, the adolescents produced a mean of 0.55 metacognitive verbs per C-unit (MCVP) (SD = .15; range = 0.19-0.95), indicating that on average, about half of their C-units contained a metacognitive verb. The analyses also yielded strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation coefficients between MCVP and MLCU ($r = .63, p < .0001$) and between MCVP and CD ($r = .70, p < .0001$). In other words, adolescents who produced a greater number of metacognitive verbs per C-unit also produced longer and more complex sentences. Hence, the study supports the lexicon-syntax interface in the development of narrative speaking in adolescents.