

Experiment – Storytelling

Description: In an adapted version of the game *Telephone / Chinese Whispers*, the speakers tell a story invented by the researchers one after the other.

Objectives: to elicit narrative strategies and the linguistic resources related to them in larger semi-spontaneous discourse, to elicit linguistic resources used for disambiguation of referents, for contrast and correction in assertions, as well as for the expression of insistence and other aspects of information structure.

Participants

Speakers: 2 (or more)

Researchers: 2 (“technician” + “moderator”)

Materials and preparation

The researchers invent short stories (roughly one paragraph in length, so that telling the story won't take more than 1-2 minutes; 1-3 stories in the indigenous language and the same amount in the contact language – we produced several versions because it was hard to tell with certainty which story was going to work well) that should be unfamiliar to the speakers and that include a large number of words that conform to the metrical control (it would be ideal if they formed part of the words already used in the other games, but if this constrains creativity for the invention of the stories too much, others can also be used). The stories may well be absurd or illogical to a certain degree. It is very important that before the experiment is performed, the stories must have been revised and improved upon through working together with a local consultant (who both speaks the language very well and understands the research objectives), so that the linguistic content of the stories is appropriate in the local variety of the language.

The final versions must be read out loud and recorded in order to obtain acoustic experimental stimuli that can be played to the speakers. The person reading the stimulus texts should be a local native speaker who feels comfortable with this task, for example the local consultant. If there is no tradition of reading in the native language in the community, the researchers must assist a local speaker willing to do the recording, helping her/him by reading a sentence out, and then recording the speaker while they speak the sentence from memory, thus progressing through each story. The objective is to obtain a recorded version of each story (possibly edited together from individual sentences) that sounds as natural and fluid as possible.

The recorded versions serve as initial stimuli in the experiment. This means that we need a computer with speakers for the experiment, so that the recording can be played several times while the experiment takes place.

How to do it

At the beginning, the moderator explains the rules of the game. They must explain that the speakers have different roles: one of them is going to listen to a short story while the other must wait outside; the speaker who listened to the story first will then tell it to the other speaker who was waiting outside, and that speaker, in turn, will then tell it to the moderator. The speakers are informed that what is important is to memorize the content of the story, not the literal wording, and that when it is their turn, they should tell the story as if it was “their” own story, that is to say, in the way that comes most natural to them when telling stories.

The speakers and researchers decide together who will begin (the “first” speaker). The other speaker (the “second” speaker) leaves the recording room until asked to come back inside. They can wait outside alone or in the company of the moderator (so as not to feel lonely or abandoned). The first speaker stays together with the technician, who plays the recording to them from the computer. The speaker tries to remember as much as possible of the story’s content, but it’s not necessary to memorize it word for word. S/he may listen to it up to three times. Afterwards, the second speaker is asked back in. The first speaker tells the story to the second one with as many details as possible, but at the same time they are to tell it as if it was their own story, by which we mean that it is less important whether they omit or add details than it is that they tell the story naturally, the way they would also tell a story in other situations. The first speaker tells the story only once, after which the second speaker has to re-tell the story to the moderator. At this point, it is important that the moderator reminds the second speaker that if there are points at which they don’t know or aren’t sure how the story continues, they should ask the first speaker. The first speaker is also allowed to intervene in the telling and correct the other when they have the impression that the second is telling the story “wrong”. The game is finished once the second speaker has told the story to the moderator to the satisfaction of the first. Everything is recorded, from the beginning to the end.

Another option would be to add more speakers in the chain of story-telling before the final one eventually tells the story to the moderator.

Version 26/06/2019