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Viewpoints in multimodal storytelling: From sensation to narration



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ABSTRACT

This study combines the virtual world of *Second Life* with a classroom storytelling activity to explore the ways in which second language (L2) speakers express narrative viewpoints. Building upon social-semiotic approaches to multimodality, the researcher analyzed 27 transcribed narrative presentations by nine English majors at a university in Taiwan. The L2 students expressed narrative viewpoints through a range of cohesive and evaluative resources. Multimodal analysis revealed a more dynamic organization of visual and embodied actions to enhance speaker stances. Visual compositions and camera techniques could be considered as having textual metafunctions for visual–verbal cohesion. This study may provide insight into multimodal communication and rhetoric aimed at the construction of viewpoint for facilitating the semiotic process from sensation to narration.

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1. Introduction

Viewpoint is the particular stance or position from which a speaker's values and attitudes can be communicated to others. A point of view makes stories interesting and story events coherent (Lowe, 2004). Expressing viewpoint in oral narrative involves various types of evaluations (e.g., Bamberg, 1996, 1997; Dancygier, 2012; Labov, 1972; Mischler, 2008; Schiffrin, 1981; Smith, 2002); however, second language (L2) learners may have yet to develop a wide range of cohesive and evaluative expressions (Pavlenko, 2006; Rubio, 2003).

In contemporary communication, visual and electronic media provide new semiotic resources in a variety of language use contexts. These semiotic resources are multimodal (Kress, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2004); storytellers can use various modes of communication (e.g., language, gesture, images, music, dress) for expressing everyday experiences and cultural values. To understand the systematic opportunities of multimodal communication, this study integrates the virtual reality of *Second Life* with a classroom storytelling activity to explore the ways in which L2 speakers express narrative viewpoints.

This article begins with a review of social-semiotic perspectives on linguistic viewpoint in oral narrative and then onto narrative viewpoints across modalities. These approaches provide conceptual and analytical methods for investigating L2 university students' construction of narrative viewpoints in verbal and visual communication. This author aims to explore the uses and functions of multimodal storytelling in L2 spoken discourse by establishing the semiotic relations between the verbal and visual modes and between the real and the virtual worlds.

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2. Linguistic viewpoint in oral narrative

Language provides semiotic resources for understanding and expressing narrative viewpoints. Semiotics is the study of signs (e.g., objects, actions, and events that convey meanings), and ecological linguists interpret meanings in the context of language use (van Lier, 2004). Taking a semiotic-ecological perspective, van Lier (2004) proposed that stories are vehicles for indexing, enabling language learners to progress from sensation (physical perceptions), to expression (social noticing), to narration (pragmatic success). The developmental perspective on L2 storytelling is understood as a social-semiotic process attributable to participation in communicative activities, through which learners can perceive signs, enact identities and relations, and develop the rhetorical ability of persuasive argument (van Lier, 2004).

To elucidate how language is used in relation to our social and ecological environment, Systemic Functional Linguistics provides a conceptual framework of multidimensional functions in the context of culture and situation (Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2013). The ideational metafunction concerns the speaker's experiences toward content and reality, which can be expressed through participants and topical themes in the mental processes (e.g., affection, cognition, existence, perception, speech). The interpersonal metafunction involves the speaker's attitudes toward participant roles and social relations in rhetorical interaction through modal verbs, modality markers, personal pronouns, and syntactic moods (e.g., declarative, imperative, interrogative). The textual metafunction involves the speaker's organization of language and meaning dependent on context through conjunctive markers, cohesive links, and deictic devices. The three metafunctions as a whole provide a system for analyzing L2 storytellers' semiotic processes.

Viewpoint is central to the construction of linguistic meanings of personal experiences in narratives (Bamberg, 1997). From a pragmatic and discourse-oriented perspective, narrators give evaluative or emotional accounts of actions and events, which involve the positioning of characters and themselves toward multiple relationships between the speaker and the audience, and between role participants for rhetorical purposes and identity formations (Bamberg, 1996, 1997). Viewpoint can be ascribed to the first-person or the third-person speaker through linguistic forms in the discourse contexts of communicative events (quoted and reported speech), mental states (thoughts and beliefs), or particular perspectives and standpoints (Smith, 2002). Whereas the use of past tense and third person suggests omniscient distance between the narrator and the story, the use of present tense and first person creates more immediate access (Dancygier, 2012). In L2 storytelling, while first-person narration enables adult students to show agency and negotiate identities in events (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000), the third person enables them to develop their author and narrator selves (Kramsch, 2000).

In the discursive interaction of storytelling, a speaker's stance and interpersonal meaning is tied to modal expressions. Speakers of English use modal auxiliaries such as *should*, *would*, *could*, and *might* to negotiate their views (Hoye, 1997, 2005), and modal verbs such as *know* and *think* to project speakers' positive or negative stances into the complement clause to form intersubjective viewpoints for the purpose of argumentation (Dancygier, 2012). Such speaker-related positions often involve modal forces of mental acts concerning the validity of information in the here-and-now of the speech situation rather than illocutionary forces of verbal acts in the social interaction between speaker and interlocutor (Papafragou, 2006; Verstraete, 2001). Baumgarten and House (2010) found that complement clause constructions with *I think* as the main process to express the speaker's subjective evaluation are the most frequently used in both L1 and L2 Englishes. However, although L1 speakers tend to use *I think* and *I don't know* as hearer-oriented verbal routines for pragmatic and interactional functions, L2 speakers prefer to use the simple clause construction *I think* as the process of cogitation or thinking and *I don't know* as a marker of the state of insufficient knowledge (Baumgarten and House, 2010). Accordingly, it is pertinent to investigate L2 storytellers' specific choices of linguistic forms in different situational contexts for expressions of subjectivity.

While English narrative is primarily built on the temporal or semantic organization, effective combinations and modifications of prosodic, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic resources help narrators create the scene and mood of the story (Mischler, 2008; Schiffrin, 2009). As events unfold over time, language moves scenes of action from place to place to textually link personal identity or subjectivity to the chronotopes, in Bakhtin's (1981) word, or spatio-temporal coordinates (Schiffrin, 2009). Schiffrin (2009) proposed that textual patterns such as referring expressions, constructed dialog, sensory-based description, the existential *there*, and other deictic devices have reference to persons, objects, and landscapes, which highlight evaluation and add cohesion to the story. The spatio-temporal organization of linguistic and contextual resources provides appropriate perspectives on oral narratives.

3. Viewpoint across communicative modalities

In terms of socially and culturally organized meaning-making resources, multimodality assumes different affordances of modes (e.g., images, pictures, color) with their particular uses (Kress, 2010). Based on an individual's rhetorical interest and purpose in the communicative environment, language and visual representations are used, each in its particular way, to realize similar semantic relations within and across the semiotic modes (Kress, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001). For example, linguistic viewpoints expressed in mental process verbs can be visualized in pictures through angles of vision and spatial dispositions of represented participants (e.g., people, places, and things) to achieve perspectives (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Combining the temporally organized storytelling and actions with the spatially organized layout and locations, the semiotic systems of words and images in dialogic exchanges can create coherence and cohesion (van Leeuwen, 2004).

Viewpoint has been discussed in narrative studies of focalization and in media studies of multimodality. In films and stage plays, focalization is "like a spot light travelling around a stage" (Murphet, 2005, p. 89) to direct or constrain the focus of the

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