

Understanding the glue of narrative structure: Children's on- and off-line inferences about characters' goals

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Abstract

Because characters' goals play a key role in the structure of narratives, the ability to make inferences about goals is essential to narrative comprehension. Despite their importance, no previous studies have examined the process by which children make these goal inferences. In the current study, we examined 6- and 8-year-old children's goal inference making processes through think-aloud protocols. We also examined the product of comprehension, the mental representation of text, through free recall and comprehension questions. The results revealed that children of both ages regularly made appropriate goal inferences while listening to narratives. In addition, the number of goal inferences predicted children's recall of the stories. Thus, children as young as 6 years old are sensitive to the vital role of characters' goals in narrative structure, and they can engage in sophisticated cognitive processing while they listen to narratives to form coherent mental representations of them.

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Characters' goals provide an organizing principle for narratives. They are the "glue" that holds events together to make a coherent story (Bower & Rinck, 1998, p. 112). Goals provide reasons for a character's actions throughout a narrative, and a character's success or failure in achieving his or her primary goal marks the natural conclusion of a story. Because of their centrality, readers or listeners of a narrative must be able to infer the connections between goals and other elements of a story to fully comprehend it.

Despite its importance, there are few studies in which children's ability to make goal inferences has been directly investigated. Moreover, these studies have used off-line measures of comprehension. These measures probe children's understanding only after they have read or heard a narrative,

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assessing if inferences are a part the *product* of comprehension, the mental representation of the text. No previous studies, to our knowledge, have used on-line comprehension measures. These are measures that examine inference making while the comprehender listens to or reads a text, thus assessing the initial *process* of comprehension. Accordingly, the purpose of this investigation is to examine children's developing ability to make inferences about characters' goals on-line as well as off-line. This will provide a more thorough understanding of children's goal comprehension, giving insight into how this sophisticated, yet essential, aspect of narrative comprehension develops.

1. Narrative structure

Characters' goals provide coherence both within and between narrative episodes. A character's goal is conceptually connected to most of the elements of a single episode (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). In a typical episode, the main character's goal will motivate most of his or her actions, and these efforts will result in either success or failure in achieving the goal, marking the end of the episode. Furthermore, goals often provide coherence in multi-episodic narratives by establishing a hierarchy among episodes (Johnson & Mandler, 1980). A character may fail to achieve his or her goal or may foresee difficulties in fulfilling the goal and then establish a subgoal in order to achieve the primary, or superordinate, goal. The subgoal, in turn, motivates the actions and eventually the outcome of another episode.

A typical hierarchical structure is illustrated in the narrative *The Little Boy* (refer to Table 1). In response to losing a pet frog, the protagonist's superordinate goal becomes finding this frog (Event #13). This goal motivates his actions in the first episode of the story. When the little boy fails to achieve his main goal, he establishes a number of subgoals including wanting to see if anything is in the tree (Event #28) and wanting to find the source of a sound he heard (Event #60). The boy achieving his superordinate goal, finding the frog, indicates the end of the narrative.

Key to narrative comprehension is the ability to make inferences to connect goals with actions within an episode and to connect hierarchically related goals with each other. Making such inferences on-line supports the construction of a coherent mental representation of text, a representation that facilitates recall and learning (e.g., Langston & Trabasso, 1998; van den Broek, 1990). To make an inference linking two parts of narrative, such as a superordinate goal and subgoal, both must be in working memory simultaneously (e.g., Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; van den Broek & Lorch, 1993). Thus, goal inferences generally require recalling goals from previous points in the text or maintaining a goal in working memory while reading, both potentially resource-demanding and effortful processes. Furthermore, inferences linking subgoals and actions to superordinate goals are often not necessary to maintain a sense of local coherence in a narrative, an understanding of the most immediate causes of events. Thus, it has been suggested that even adult readers may not regularly make goal inferences on-line (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992).

1.1. The development of goal comprehension and inference making

Despite the potential challenges to making these inferences, there is consistent empirical evidence that adult readers regularly make goal inferences on-line (Albrecht & Myers, 1995; Albrecht & O'Brien, 1995; Bloom, Fletcher, van den Broek, Reitz, & Shapiro, 1990; Dopkins, Klin, & Myers, 1993; Graesser, Burtus, & Magliano, 1995; Long & Golding, 1993; Long, Golding, & Graesser, 1992; Suh & Trabasso, 1993; van den Broek & Lorch, 1993). As a result, goals are central in mature comprehenders' mental representations of narratives. They recall characters'

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