

Storytelling for Children- How Stories are Negotiated Through Language

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is human. Humans connect, express their experience, share it and gain knowledge about the world and realities they inhabit through the narrative in which story is the most commonly used form. Humans learn from narration of each other. This is truer of children who imitate their parents in all aspects of life. In countries like India, where there are hundreds of linguistic groups, confusion in government policy over the language of education and confusion in society over which language to prioritise for living and which one for livelihood, parents and children face some tough challenges. Parents are educated in one language, their children in another; they together inhabit a space that is seldom dealing in one language. The same applies to script. It is now an accepted fact that Indians inhabit a multilingual world.

We are also aware that in India the aural and oral communication and media universe dominates. However, with digitisation, we are now faced with the opportunity and the challenge of dealing with a highly visual and graphic media universe. This now means that an average Indian, especially the ones living in cities, inhabit a multimedia media universe as well. Give our variety in cultural and social values we inhabit a multimodal and multivalent reality. This plurality of being is part of our everyday living.

As our day-to-day communication gets more digitised and mediatised our challenge of storytelling is going to be much more. How will this affect the narrative practices between parents, teachers and children? Are we to tell stories differently now? Are we to mediate our everyday narratives for our own children? Are we headed towards better communication or a communication gap, despite the technological advances and increasing access to media and communication technology? These questions led us to study storytelling between parents and children. Do they understand what is being said? Or do the children language the stories that have been told and interpret them differently?

This study, using an experimental method and qualitative methodological approach, investigated the effect of language on the understanding and interpretation of stories on children.

Keywords

Storytelling, Communication, Children, Language, English, Oral Storytelling.

1. Introduction

India was always a land of many languages. In India, we are dealing with communication, one of the aspects of which is language, in an environment that has formed over hundreds of centuries. Being multilingual and being diverse in a dynamic communication and media universe is part of life in India as much as it is for a student and a teacher in an Indian classroom.

Most of the language tradition in India has been oral. It is an important aspect of the Indian view of language where even thinking is seen as internal speaking, intrapersonal communication, to which not enough breath energy has been added to make it manifest and where writing is merely codes that can never perfectly represent all the nuances of the spoken word. The action of speech begins as spontaneous, natural sound and then moves on to become sophisticated and refined speech whose final adornment is poetry. (Coward, 1997)

When George Grierson undertook the linguistic survey of India, he documented 179 languages, defined by him through a test of mutual unintelligibility, and 544 dialects, which he placed in five language families. (Grierson, 1927) In 1961, the Census of India, listed 1652 mother tongues. In the next census of 1971, this number was reduced dramatically to just 108! This was because by a strange reasoning, only languages spoken by more than 10,000 people, were officially acknowledged. The 2011 census, which is the latest, came up with some very significant numbers. Let us see how this census defined mother tongue and what were the instructions to the enumerators while collecting data on language.

The mother tongue was defined as a) the language spoken in childhood by the person's mother to the person; b) if the mother had died in infancy, the language mainly spoken in the person's home in childhood; c) in the case of infants and deaf mutes, the language usually spoken by the mother; d) in case of doubt, the language mainly spoken in the household. The enumerators were instructed to a) record the mother tongue in full, whatever was the name of the language returned by the respondent and not to use abbreviations; b) determine if the language returned by a person is a dialect of another language; c) not to try to establish an relationship between religion and mother tongue; d) record the language as returned by the person as her/his mother tongue and not enter into any argument and record any other language than the one returned and e) if there is reason to suspect that in any area, due to any organised movement, the mother tongue is not being truthfully returned, then report the matter to officers for verification. The enumerators were also instructed that it was possible that a household may consist of persons related by blood or of unrelated persons or a mix of both, it was absolutely necessary to ask every person his/her mother tongue because the mother tongue of each member of a household need not necessarily be the same and could be different for different members in the household. The number of raw returns of mother tongues totalled 19,569. These were subjected to a 'thorough linguistic scrutiny, edit and rationalization' and this resulted in 1369 'rationalised' mother tongues and 1474 names that were treated as 'unclassified' and

relegated to 'other' mother tongue category. After this an inventory of classified mother tongues returned by 10,000 or more speakers were grouped under 'appropriate languages' at the all India level and the final tally was 121. It is important to note that the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India only comprises 22 languages. (OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR GENERAL, 2011)

In 2014, scholars and activists from across the country got together to produce the People's Linguistic Survey of India. The survey is a project initiated by Prof Ganesh N Devy, founder of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre in Vadodara. So far, a total of 37 volumes of the survey have been published. This survey has identified 780 languages to date. (Kuruville, 2017) The survey is dedicated to every Indian who a) said that your language is as much a language as mine; b) who learnt to live in peace with neighbours speaking different languages; c) who migrated into distant language zones, neither rejecting the new nor giving up one's own; d) who reminded the learned that speech is perennial, scripts incidental; e) who agreed that a single nation is possible even when love for the nation gets expressed in a multitude of tongues and; f) who, being the last speaker of one's language, spoke the last few words with birds and trees lest the words that shaped the mind perish forever... (Devy, 2014)

Given the multilingual environment that an average Indian child grows up in the researcher was intrigued by the question of how stories are negotiated through language by children? T. The study focused on how individual groups of children reacted to the oral execution of stories in English. The study looked at whether language was a variable when students tried to negotiate with an orally told story in English.

1.1. What is Storytelling?

Storytelling predates writing. Narrating one's experiences, feelings and thoughts is as old as humanity. From the cave paintings to the digital images, from carvings and etchings to the writing on bark, leaves, paper and now digital spaces, humans have always been narrating. India's storytelling tradition dates several centuries back. The Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, the Upanishads as well as the nine darshanas or schools of philosophy all come from a storytelling tradition.

Storytelling as a pedagogical tool has been well documented. Especially digital storytelling has become an area for investigation now. (Kuyvenhoven, 2009) (Condy, 2015) The role of storytelling in learning languages, introducing children and society at large to different and foreign cultures has been an area of study. (Teresa Cremin, 2017) (Luongo-Orlando, 2001) A story or narrative in its broadest sense is anything that is told or recounted, normally in the form of a causally linked set of events or happenings, whether true or fictitious. Stories are a medium for sharing and a vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts to an audience. Through stories we explain how things are, why they are, and our role and purpose within them. They are the building blocks of knowledge and can be viewed as the foundation of memory and learning. Stories link past, present, and future and telling stories is an intrinsic and essential part of the human experience. Stories can be told in a wide variety of ways, which can be broadly categorised as oral, written and visual, and are so all-pervasive in our everyday lives that we are not always aware of their role as a tool of communication in all societies (Group, 2005)

1.2. Why Storytelling?

"Storytelling is, we must remember, the oldest and most universal art-form in the world, that preceded the more sophisticated developments of literature and books, education, religion, drama and the media. Before there were schools or churches, theatres or bookshops, there were stories and storytellers in homes and communities. Storytellers enjoyed quite high status in many societies, as sources of wisdom, genealogical authorities, teachers of morality, entertainers and sustainers of beliefs, values, attitudes and customs. Storytelling has had many functions in the history of mankind, ranging from pastime and amusement to serving as an adjunct to survival and personal development." (Douglas, n.d.)

Oral storytelling is a non-mediated way to tell a story, which implies the co-presence of teller and listener and determines the ephemeral nature of the narrative event (Carmelo, 2015). Oral storytelling receives its essence from the quality of interaction between the storyteller and the listener. "When a story is read, the primary reference for the communication event is the text, as fixed upon the page. In a storytelling event, the words are not memorized, but are recreated through spontaneous, energetic performance, assisted by audience participation and interaction" (Rebecca Isbell, Joseph Sobol, Liane Lindauer, April Lowrance, December 2004).

Communication through words in itself is storytelling as one relives an experience with the help of words that is audible in nature. Communication between individuals, groups, masses and the information we receive that's audible in nature can all be considered as storytelling. (Group, 2005)

1.3. Oral Storytelling and Language Development

Oral storytelling is the use of vocal chords to bring out the essence of the story to entertain the listener. The storyteller tells the story aloud without any memorized script but in his/her own way reciting it by vocalization, characterization, narration and mimetic action (Mello, 2001).

Researchers found that hearing stories has helped improve the language skills of the child and has been able to improve both the reading and writing skill of the child. Therefore, it becomes extremely important for educational institutions and parents to read out stories for the children to improve their language skills. It becomes important for the storytelling form of teaching to be available to students in higher classes as well. (Mello, 2001) Indian classrooms are multilingual although the medium of instruction, that is the textbooks, may be predominantly in one language. The case with children in such a multilingual environment and language development can be very interesting if properly studied. The school as well as their home environment hugely influence children

coming to school. In India it is common for children to have a different tongue at home with parents and family, another with peers, friends and yet another at school. It is also quite likely that the students may have to engage with multiple scripts.

Children walk into their class environment with a huge impact of their homes upon their skills of understanding and negotiating with their own mother tongues and English (Harden-Thew, 2014).

“Children find entertainment value in watching stories unfold with their hearing and visual senses and, therefore, it becomes important for narrators to be able to present the stories to the children with the help of pictorial narratives. However, reading the stories aloud and allowing them to imagine pictures in their heads encourages them to read the storybook or the novel for themselves.” (Gallets, 2005)

Storytelling plays a major role in developing a student's writing abilities. By hearing and reading the storybook, children are able to develop their grammar and vocabulary immensely. (Fatma Alkaaf, Ali Al-Bulushi, 2017)

2. Aim of the Study

The study is aimed at understanding and describing whether a story told in a language that children communicate in most with their peers and parents is understood best by them or not. Does the language they are educated in influence their understanding or does the language they communicate in the most influence negotiation and engagement with the story?

3. Methodology, Method and Sample

The study for this paper was conducted in an English and Marathi medium school each. The study is descriptive and experimental. The study had a qualitative approach and the students were aged 9 to 13 years from both English and Marathi medium schools in central Mumbai.

The researcher recorded the entire interaction on a digital camera and this audio-visual was studied to identify themes in the discourse. The researcher visited both the schools and interacted with a class of 50 students each by narrating a short story to them.

The story, recited entirely in English, was about a young girl named Asha, aged 10, who didn't like studying. Her mother would coax her to study whereas Asha disliked running between school and tuition classes. A dialogue between Asha and her mother was narrated to the students. Asha's father helped her conduct an experiment wherein he asked her to place a potato and an egg into a bowl of water and place it on the gas stove. Asha was asked to observe what happened to both the potato and the egg. She finds that the hard potato has become soft and the breakable egg has become unbreakable after the process of boiling is completed. Asha's father then asks her to place a tea bag into the water and asks her to observe the change. She finds that the colour of the water has changed due to the insertion of the tea bag. The moral of the story narrated to the students was that they were in the process of boiling and could reach their full potential once they were done with their studies. After the narration the students were asked who their favourite character was and why and then they were asked to recite the story in their language of comfort. Both these activities were meant to get insights into their understanding and interpretation of the story.

This entire process was recorded on a digital camera kept at one corner of the classroom in such a way that the entire class could be seen. The children could see the camera and were aware that they were being filmed. The findings are presented below.

4. Limitations and Delimitations

The sample was restricted to two schools in the same vicinity. In a study like this one would assume culture would play a role but we did not choose that as a variable to study. We have defined medium of the school as the language in which the textbooks of the core subjects were available in and taught from. We did not look at whether teachers communicated in the medium of instruction most of the time or whether the students communicated in the medium of instruction most of the time. We have not specifically asked what the mother tongue of the children was.

5. Findings and Analysis

We first looked at the attention of the children. This was one of the ways in which we could discern if the children engaged with the storytelling. The majority of the students were attentive. They held the gaze of the storyteller and when questions were asked or they were asked to respond they did so. A small number were distracted by the need to drink water, or push a book into the bag. The students from the English medium school were distracted more often than those from the Marathi medium. This could be because they had their books right in front of them. Some even began writing something even as the story was being narrated. It later transpired this was their homework. A few were distracted by the presence of the camera recording and were found looking into it most of the times.

The minority who got distracted were able to catch up with the story. This was demonstrated by the fact that they could respond to the storyteller as she asked questions during the recitation. The questions were about the names of the characters or a general question on whether they were listening or whether they understood or a little informal talk and little questions of affirmation.

One of the students who appeared distracted throughout the storytelling was able to recite the story precisely when asked to do so later.

We next looked at what they liked in the narrative, especially the characters. The story had three characters – a father, a mother and a little girl. Barring a very few, most liked the character of the father while not being favourable to the mother and the little girl. They explained that they favoured the father because he taught the girl.

We then asked the children about the language.

The children from both the English and the Marathi medium schools were categorical that they would have understood the story better if it had been narrated in Hindi or in Marathi. Moreover, the students from the English medium school told that they would've been able to connect with the story better if it were told in Hindi. The students from the Marathi medium school said that they would be able to understand and connect better with the story if it were told in Marathi because that was their mother tongue as well as language of education.

We next asked the students to recite the story. They were told they could use a language of their choice. The children of the English medium school responded and recited the story in Hindi and those from the Marathi medium responded and recited the story in Marathi. Two of the students from the Marathi medium school recited the story in Hindi. None of the students were able to recite in English though some tried to. The students also used more gestures than the storyteller had used.

6. Conclusion

Even as we conducted the study, we could see that while the medium of instruction in the school was either English or Marathi the students were using a different language, Hindi, for communication with peers and parents and even teachers. To confirm this, we asked the children which language they communicated in most in school, with peers and at home. After interaction with students from the English and Marathi medium school it stood out that they communicated in Hindi and those from the Marathi schools also communicated in Marathi. However, none of them communicated in English. We therefore now hypothesise that students are able to connect in the language they communicate in the most with their peers and parents than the medium of instruction in schools.

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