

# Narrative skills and literacy learning<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines the storytelling narratives produced by four children, two low-income African-American first graders and two middle-income white first graders. The means of analysis Hicks employs is a text analysis based upon the delineation of lines into groupings, referred to as *stanzas*. Hicks calls into question the characterization of either group of children as having intrinsically more oral or literate styles of narration. Hicks points out subtle differences in narrative styles which may help to explain the mismatch between community and classroom styles of discourse.

## Introduction

A conservative view of "what is literacy" would equate literacy with simply the ability to comprehend and produce written texts. Advocates of this view would propose increasing levels of achievement in relation to literacy skills, from simple decoding skills to the more complex ability to synthesize meaning from extended prose texts. And yet, research on the relationship between oral language and literacy suggests an even more complex picture of literacy. Sociolinguists and child language researchers have suggested that full participation in literacy also requires knowledge of specific kinds of discourse. In particular, researchers have suggested that children's interactions with various forms of narrative discourse can be an important determinant of their success with classroom literacy activities (Heath, 1982;1983; Michaels, 1981; Michaels and Collins, 1984; Snow, 1983; Wells, 1985; 1986).

Research on sociocultural issues in literacy education has begun to address the thorny problem of the discrepancy in levels of school success among members of different sociocultural communities. It is no secret to either researchers or practitioners that children from some low-income communities are more likely to experience difficulty as they make the transition to literacy-based school activities. Various reasons for this problem have been addressed in the literature. One explanation, and that which most strongly motivates the present research study, is the possibility that children from some sociocultural communities bring to the classroom different

ways of organizing their knowledge through narrative. Heath's ethnographic research (1982; 1983) has suggested that low-income African-American children and middle-income white children are exposed to different kinds, or genres, of narrative discourse at home. Thus, children from different communities may bring different repertoires of narrative skills to the classroom.

At issue is the effect these sociocultural differences in narrative skills have on children's performance in classroom literacy activities. In other words, are these differences in narrative styles the culprit for the literacy-related difficulties that children from some communities face? And, if so, why? Michaels (1981) and Michaels and Collins (1984) have suggested that, indeed, differences in styles of narration can be an obstacle to African-American children's full participation in classroom literacy events. The reasons suggested by Michaels and Collins are twofold. First, the narrative styles of African-American children are intrinsically more oral in nature, in that events are not centered around a central organizing topic (as is the case with mainstream middle-income speakers). Second, the narrative styles particular to African-American children may conflict with the discourse of literacy instruction (i.e., the discourse styles of the classroom teacher). In this paper, I would like to examine further this relationship between oral narrative styles and literacy learning.

In the present study, I will examine the storytelling narratives produced by four children, two low-income African-American first graders and two middle-income white first graders. The means of analysis which I employ is a text analysis based upon the delineation of lines into groupings, referred to here and elsewhere as *stanzas* (Gee, 1986; Hymes, 1981; 1982). The narratives which are the subject of analysis were obtained in two settings, in which children from two communities were given a series of narrative tasks (Hicks, 1988; In press,a). In the present study, I examine children's responses to the task of telling a *story* based upon events seen in a silent film. In light of the results from my analysis, I will call into question the characterization of either group as having intrinsically more oral or literate styles of narration. I will, however, point out more subtle differences in narrative styles, differences which may help to explain the mismatch between community and classroom styles of discourse.

#### Narrative Development in the Preschool Years

A review of the research on narrative development in the preschool years suggests that all children develop a *repertoire* of narrative skills in their primary language learning environments. Children's ability to represent events through narrative arises in the rich settings of their interactions with peers and family members. The cognitive and linguistic ability to narrate a series of events can be linked among very young children to events which are experienced on a regular basis. Children develop repertoires of knowledge about recurring events in their lives: eating, playing, sleeping, grocery shopping. Out of this repertoire of event knowledge develops skill in

talking about past, present, and future events (Gerhardt, 1988; Nelson, 1978; 1986; Nelson and Gruendel, 1981). Thus, the cognitive ability to represent events has its origin in children's interactions in widening social settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McNamee, 1979; White, 1970; White and Siegel, 1984).

Children's repertoire of event knowledge is not, however, limited to one means of representing events. As children move between a range of social interactions, they also experience different ways of representing their knowledge through narrative. Researchers examining young children's narrative skills have in fact documented a wide range of narrative skills among preschoolers. Through conversations about past and present events, children develop what Stoel-Gammon and Scliar Cabral (1977) have termed the *reportative function*, or the ability to make references to personally experienced events (Eisenberg, 1985; Engel, 1986; Fivush, Gray, and Fromhoff, 1987; Fivush and Fromhoff, 1988; Miller and Sperry, 1988; Ninio, 1988). Young children also, however, develop the ability to talk about fictional events through their fantasy play (Applebee, 1978; Hicks and Wolf, 1988; Rubin and Wolf, 1979; Sutton-Smith, Botvin, and Mahoney, 1976). It therefore seems to be the case that the acquisition of a repertoire of narrative skills forms part of the social and cognitive development of all preschoolers.

A good deal of cultural variation in children's narrative skills has also been documented in the child language and sociolinguistic literature. As noted earlier, Heath (1982; 1983) has reported differences in the kinds of narratives children from different communities experience in their primary language learning environments. Additionally, Watson-Gegeo and Boggs (1977) found in their research among Hawaiian children a style of narration which was highly collaborative in nature. Finally, Scollon and Scollon (1980; 1984) reported that young Athabaskan speakers produce narratives in which there is a high degree of audience participation and in which the narrator is not a detached ("fictionalized") self. Thus, cultural variation in styles of narration also appears to be an important facet of children's development of narrative skills.

The fact that children bring different repertoires of narrative skills to the classroom may have important consequences for literacy education. As Michaels (1981) and Michaels and Collins (1984) have suggested, there may in some instances be a cultural mismatch between the discourse of literacy instruction (i.e., the teacher's discourse styles) and the narrative skills particular to children from "non-mainstream" (i.e., children from other than middle-income white) communities. Even though children from non-mainstream communities unquestionably bring repertoires of narrative skills to their classrooms, these children still may not have access to some forms of school-based knowledge.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The narratives which are the basis for the present analysis were collected at two separate elementary school locations. The first setting for data collection was a private elementary school in the vicinity of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Children in this school were for the most part members of middle-income families in which one or both parents worked in professional job settings. The second setting for data collection was a public elementary school in the vicinity of Wilmington, Delaware. Children in this school were largely members of working class or low-income families, although the school also drew upon a housing development of mostly middle-income families.

The data collection in the private elementary school formed part of a larger research project examining primary school children's narrative skills. The project was based upon Heath's ethnographic research on language learning in three communities (1982; 1983). The project was designed to examine primary school children's abilities to perform language tasks which drew upon a range of narrative genre skills. More specifically, the project was focused on the abilities of children in grades K-2 to produce three generically distinct kinds of narratives (Hicks, 1988; In press,b). The results from analyses of these data have suggested that primary school children have only nascent abilities to draw upon their genre knowledge in language tasks designed to elicit specific narrative genres. The results did reveal, however, that for many primary grade children the task of telling a story is one which elicits a story-like text, with formulaic phrasing and intonation, evaluative clauses, discussions of character internal states, and character dialogue (Hicks, In press,c). Thus, for children in grades K-2, the task of telling a story is apparently a familiar one.

The second research project represents an attempt to extend this research to members of something other than mainstream middle-income community settings. In this second study, first graders from a public elementary school also performed three narrative tasks. I identified children from low-income families through participation in the school's free lunch program. Although it was not my original intent to base this comparison study on ethnicity, I did find that the majority of children participating in the free-lunch program were members of African-American communities. The research on language development in the preschool years, as noted earlier, suggests that African-American and white children are exposed to different ways of representing events through narrative. Thus, I decided to focus this second study specifically on low-income African-American first graders.

Children in both research settings were given identical narrative tasks. Children were shown a shortened (14 minute) version of the silent film, "The Red Balloon", and were asked to perform three tasks: a) provide a simultaneous *eventcast* (sportscast) as they rewatched a three-minute segment from the film, b) provide a factual *news report* of the events in the film, and c) tell the film's events as a *story*. As a facilitation of their understanding of the tasks, children were

provided with an opening script for each task. These opening scripts are shown in the appendix. For the storytelling task, children were also given as a prop a "storybook", having one large picture from the film on its front cover (a closeup of the main character -- a young boy -- putting the balloon's string in his mouth) but only blank white pages inside.

The film shown for the two projects is a classic children's film in which the very few words spoken are in French (the boy calls to the balloon on several occasions). For the purposes of the study, the film was edited, so that a number of subplots were excluded. This edited version of the film consisted of the basic sequence of events shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sequence of Events in "The Red Balloon"**

1. A boy finds a red balloon tied to a lamp post.
2. He takes a bus on his way home, and the balloon follows the bus.
3. After leaving the bus, a gang of boys tries to take the balloon from him.
4. The following day, the boy goes to church with an elderly woman (grandmother?), and the balloon follows.
5. The boy and the balloon are taken out of church by a guard.
6. The boy goes inside a bakery and leaves his balloon outside.
7. The gang of boys steals his balloon.
8. The boy recaptures his balloon from the gang, and the gang of boys chases the boy and the balloon.
9. The gang of boys surrounds the boy and pop the balloon.
10. A large number of balloons come down to the boy and carry him into the sky.

Fifty-eight children from the private elementary school (twenty first graders) and twelve children from the public elementary school (all first graders) performed the narrative tasks. In the present analysis, I will examine in detail the story narratives produced by two first graders from each of the two communities. These four children were chosen as being representative of highly skilled speakers from their communities. All four children produced stories which were coherent and engaging texts.

In the analysis of narrative texts, the way in which one determines the boundaries of individual utterances (or lines) constitutes an important methodological decision. Various criteria have been adopted for delineating utterances in studies of children's narratives: clausal (predicate) structure (Berman and Slobin, 1986); intonation and breathing boundaries (Scollon and Scollon, 1981); "idea units", or tonal groups corresponding to speakers' cognitive chunking of words (Chafe, 1980); and, with very young children in particular, episodes of talk about events (Miller and Sperry, 1988). In this study, I will base my analyses of texts upon a delineation of what Gee (1986) has referred to as *lines* and *stanzas* (see also Hymes, 1981; 1982). Lines are individual utterances within the narrative, most often simple clauses (at least in the case of children's narratives) which terminate in a rising or falling pitch glide. Stanzas are groupings of lines,

determined in part from common topics or themes and in part from structural, lexical, and intonational parallelism found between contiguous lines. An analysis based upon lines and stanzas enables one to address sociocultural differences in how children thematically and structurally organize their narrative tellings. In other words, it is not simply the relations existing between utterances which are of importance in the analysis of narrative texts. Rather, it is the organization of sets of utterances, or what Hymes refers to as the "grammar of experience" (1982).

The delineation of lines and stanzas within texts is not a linguistic "given", in that there is no one defining set of characteristics on which to base one's analysis. Some elements of language can easily be determined on the basis of a simple constitutive feature, as in the case of the -ing ending which marks progressive aspect. In text analyses, however, the analysis is based rather upon constellations of linguistic features which lend evidence for a particular structural analysis. In the text analyses which follow, I will draw upon patterns of grammatical, lexical, and prosodic similarity as I attempt to determine how lines are grouped within texts. In fact, the determination of groupings of lines within the four texts examined is a central part of my analysis. I would like to end this discussion of analytic methods by stressing that the analyses in this paper are interpretive in nature. That is to say, although I in each instance provide support for my particular textual analyses, the possibility exists that other equally plausible analyses exist for each of the narratives in question. This does not, in my view, undermine the analyses presented. In fact, anthropologists and cultural critics have recently begun to call into question the existence of empirical "facts", suggesting that multiple interpretations should form part of what Rosaldo (1989) terms the "remaking of social analysis" (see also Clifford, 1988, for a discussion of similar issues).

#### Ways of Telling Among Two Groups of First Graders

In this analysis section, I would like to examine in detail the narrative texts produced by two children from each of the communities described above. Each of the children whose texts are analyzed here is a skilled narrator who tells a logically connected and engaging story. There are subtle differences between the narrative styles found among the two groups of children. I will in a later discussion section characterize this difference as one of the narrative *stance* which children assume with respect to events. Such subtle differences in children's stance with respect to events may reflect cultural values and speech styles acquired in their primary language learning environments. The main purpose of the analyses in this section, however, is to illustrate the complexity and sophistication which exists in the texts among *both* groups of children. Such sophistication, in my view, suggests that both groups of children have discourse skills which should prepare them well for interactions with written texts.

The Narrative Skills of Two African-American Children

This study is in part a study of group and in part a study of individual differences in children's ways of representing events through narrative. To say that members of any one sociocultural community share the same styles of narration would clearly be an overstatement. Individual members of communities may, however, share similar styles of telling events. These similarities, and also differences, in speakers' styles of narration can best be traced through a detailed analysis of the texts produced by individual speakers. In this section, I will examine closely the narrative texts of two African-American children. The two children who are the focus of this section demonstrate unique, individualistic ways of narrating the events seen in the film. A common thread which emerges among these two children, however, is that of an emphasis on providing detailed evaluative information about the events in the film.

The first narrative examined is that produced by Brenda. The text shown below represents Brenda's response to the task of telling a story based upon the film's events (see appendix). I have attempted in my transcription of this text to delineate lines and stanzas. The delineation of lines and stanzas below represents an interpretation based upon Brenda's use of prosody and intonation (an integral part of her speech performance), the structural parallelism which exists among lines, and also the topical continuity existing within stanzas.<sup>2</sup>

Brenda: Storytelling Narrative

Stanza 1

the little boy and his balloon went on^  
on to their business  
and until^ his friends came from school  
and tried to get! the balloon  
they got it twice!

Stanza 2

but the little boy kept catching! it  
'cause the little boy cared! about his balloon  
and the balloon^ cared about him  
everytime he would let the balloon go  
the balloon would fly^ on behind him

Stanza 3

and I have a book in my hand called The Red Balloon  
which we're talking about  
but there's no # pictures or words  
and the little boy's right here with 'im  
and on the balloon it says "The Red Balloon"

Deborah

can you read some more from your book?

Brenda  
yes!

Stanza 4

and # the little boy climbed^ up a rail to get the balloon  
and that's the way he found it [staccato]

Stanza 5

he was going through the alley  
runnin through the alleys  
so that his friends from school couldn't get! it  
they were jealous because they didn't have a balloon

Stanza 6

they stepped! on it  
and they ## they shot! at it  
and then^ they stepped! on it  
and the balloon^ busted

Stanza 7

and then all^ the balloons in the whole city-state got together  
and (he) got all^ the strings  
and flew around the state

Stanza 8

and that was the end of the story [very staccato]

In Stanza 1 above, Brenda first provides an orientational statement which sets the scenario for the events in the narrative. The repetition of *on* links the two statements within this stanza, as does the thematic topic centered on the events that were occurring prior to the first encounter with the boys. In fact, her use of *until* in line 3 of this stanza probably indicates that the events in the first two lines were protracted in nature. The rising intonation on *until* also helps to alert the listener to an upcoming dilemma: the boy's "friends from school" throughout the film make attempts to take his balloon away from him. This dilemma is strongly asserted in lines 4 and 5, in which Brenda makes use of a repetitive intonational structure (*get!*, *twice!*). Thus, Stanza 1 appears to function as a statement of a basic problem in the film. The boy and his balloon are prevented from moving freely about because of repeated stealing attempts on the part of the boy's school friends.

Stanza 2 appears to be, thematically speaking, a partial resolution to this dilemma. In spite of the repeated attempts on the part of the boy's school friends, the young boy was able to hold on to his balloon because of a unique caring relationship between him and his balloon. The discourse marker *but* signals the beginning of this thematic contrast in Stanza 2. The use of the habitual auxiliary *kept*, the stative verb *cared*, and the modal *would* mark a non-narrative temporal structure within Stanza 2. In addition, a structural and intonational parallelism existing between contiguous



lines in this stanza signals its separate existence within the narrative. The repetition of key subject phrases (*the little boy*), patterns of intonation and stress (*catching!*, *cared!*), and verbal phrases --

'cause the little ^ boy cared ! about his balloon  
and the balloon ^ cared about him

-- are examples of parallelism within Stanza 2. Thus, one finds strong evidence for internal thematic and structural consistency within Stanza 2.

Stanza 3 represents a departure from a narration of the events occurring in the film. Here, Brenda steps momentarily out of her role as narrator of events and comments on the book used as a prop for the narration task. In response to my question --

Can you read some more from your book?

-- Brenda provides a statement which I would interpret as a re-orientation of the events in the film. In the first two stanzas, she has provided both a statement of the dilemma in the film and also a timeless statement about how that dilemma was resolved. In Stanza 4, she takes the listener back to the initial events in the film, perhaps as a way of moving once again into the sequential narrative. This narrative strategy, in my opinion, represents a skillful manipulation of the actual sequence of events in the film. It serves as a thematic link between her previous statements in Stanza 3 about the storybook prop and the upcoming topics of Stanzas 5 and 6. Recall that children were given a storybook facsimile for the storytelling task. On the front cover of the "storybook" was a picture depicting the boy climbing up a post to get the red balloon. Thus, in Stanza 4, Brenda manages to weave the events depicted on the storybook cover into her ongoing narrative. This narrative "move" successfully takes the listener back into a discussion of the film's events.

In Stanzas 5-7, Brenda relates the climactic events which occur towards the end of the film. In Stanza 5, she provides a set-up for the action which occurs in Stanza 6. Stanza 5 consists of two couplets, each having structural and thematic similarities. In the first couplet, the action of the boy running is stated once in the first line (*he was going through the alley*) and then again in the second line of Stanza 5 (*running through the alley*). Then, in the third and fourth lines of this stanza, Brenda provides two evaluative statements explicating why the gang of boys wanted the balloon in the first place. The parallelism which holds within couplets in Stanza 5 reinforces its thematic unity. As a whole, Stanza 5 serves as an evaluative statement which prepares the listener for the climactic events to come.

In Stanza 6, Brenda narrates the final destruction of the balloon. In a series of stressed complete verbs, she relates this emotionally-packed climax. As was the case with earlier stanzas, the lines within Stanza 6 have a distinctive parallel structure. Lexical items (*stepped*), patterns of intonation (stress on complete verbs), and thematic subjects (*they* = the gang of boys) are

repeated in individual lines within the stanza. This structural parallelism reinforces the thematic topic of Stanza 6: the balloon's demise.

Stanza 6 is followed by a series of three lines in Stanza 7, in which Brenda provides the resolution to this state of affairs. The shift in topic is signalled by a shift in thematic focus to *all* the balloons, and subsequently to the boy who gets all the balloons. Finally, in Stanza 8, Brenda once again exits the narrative and brings closure to her text. Speaking in the voice of one who is now removed from events, she again moves out of the sequential narration of events. Her rendition of the events in the film is thus a skilful manipulation of narrative perspectives and of temporality (Wolf and Hicks, 1989).

A striking feature of Brenda's narrative text is its elaborate evaluative structure. Stanza 2 is devoted entirely to a discussion of the unique relationship existing between the boy and the balloon. The full implications of this relationship are established when Brenda states that the balloon followed the boy under its own volition. In addition to this special relationship between the boy and the balloon, the motivations of the boy's school friends (the gang of boys) are clearly explicated in Stanza 5, in which Brenda explains the other boys' feelings of jealousy towards the boy. Thus, far from being a sequential listing of events, Brenda's text represents a skillful weaving of mainline events and evaluative statements.

The second narrative text examined in this section is that produced by Sherrie. Like the narrative produced by Brenda, that produced by Sherrie is also extremely rich in terms of its evaluative structure. Sherrie's narrative consists of a series of stanzas which are three-four lines in length. An interesting pattern which emerges within stanzas is a set of two-three narrative (sequential) lines followed by an evaluative statement. Thus, in the narrative shown below, Sherrie continually moves between mainline sequential events and explications of those events.

Sherrie: Storytelling Narrative

Stanza 1

the re(d) // the boy he was walkin to // he was gettin on the busstop  
and then # he saw the red balloon  
and then he got it^  
because he wanted it to be his friend

Stanza 2

and # he / and he tried to keep it everywhere he went  
but he couldn't  
because it kept / 'cause it kept flyin out of his hand  
and uhm # the balloon always comes down  
so people can catch it

Stanza 3

and then there was boys^  
and they tried to // and then they stepped on the balloon^

and # and then // he // the boy was a little bit sad^

Stanza 4

and then # all these balloons flied out of people's hands  
and / and he got it  
and then he was happy

Even though Stanza 4 appears to represent the events occurring at the end of the film, additional stanzas do follow Stanza 4. In Stanzas 5 and 6 below, Sherrie returns to an earlier scene in which the boy was looking for the balloon that the gang of boys had stolen from him.

Stanza 5

and uhm # he / he was going / he was going by uhm / he was goin by some xxxx  
[unintelligible on tape]  
so he can try to get his balloon  
'cause he was lookin for it

Stanza 6

and then the boys keep takin it away from 'im  
'cause they wanted it to be their friend too^\_  
so # they just # tried to keep it away from the little boy

It is unclear, however, whether or not these last two stanzas were intended to be part of her narrative. It may be the case that Sherrie felt compelled to continue her narration, given that the task was one of telling a story to an adult listener. Perhaps she felt something more was expected of her. I will for the purposes of my analysis here consider all six stanzas as part of her text, even though Stanzas 1-4 constitute the plot line from beginning to end.

In Stanza 1, Sherrie relates the events occurring at the beginning of the film, in which the boy finds the balloon on his way to a bus stop. The first line in this stanza is an orientational statement for the events to come. The last line in this stanza not only explains why the boy got the balloon in the first place; it also provides a thematic focus for the text. The theme of the relationship (friendship) between the boy and the balloon in fact permeates Sherrie's text. The structural pattern seen in Stanza 1, a set of sequential event lines followed by an evaluative statement, is one that is found in additional stanzas in her story. In particular, Stanzas 3 and 4 exemplify this pattern.

Stanza 2 is devoted almost entirely to background information about the balloon. Thematically, this stanza seems to function primarily as a statement about the magical properties of the balloon. The boy was unable to hold on to the balloon since the balloon continually flew out of his hands. This stanza represents, in my view, a skillful exit from the mainline events in the story. Considered in the context of Stanza 1, Stanza 2 provides the essential thematic plotline of the events preceding the climactic final scenes from the film. A boy finds a balloon and wants the

balloon to be his friend. The balloon, however, has the magical property of being able to fly on its own.

In Stanzas 3 and 4, Sherrie narrates the crisis events which dramatically alter the state of affairs set up in Stanzas 1 and 2. In Stanza 3, she introduces the gang of boys with an existential statement (*and then there was boys*). Then, a critical problem is introduced: that of the balloon's destruction by the boys. Rather than simply stating this problem, Sherrie provides a statement about the boy's reaction to the problem (*the boy was a little bit sad*). In Stanza 4, she narrates the resolution to this dilemma. The boy gets additional balloons. Then again, Sherrie provides an evaluative statement of the boy's reaction (*and then he was happy*).

Stanzas 5 and 6 are perhaps best viewed as flashbacks, particularly since it is unclear whether or not they should be included as a part of the story. In Stanza 5, one finds again the pattern of a sequential mainline statement followed by an evaluative explication. In the first line of this stanza, Sherrie describes the scene in which the boy was starting to look for his balloon. She then in the second and third lines explains that he was walking in order to find his balloon. In Stanza 6, an additional dilemma is narrated. The gang of boys were continually taking the balloon from the boy. The issue of friendship re-emerges, with Sherrie stating that the gang of boys also wanted the balloon to be *their* friend. These two "flashback" stanzas provide additional valuable information about the motivations and actions of the gang of boys.

Sherrie's oral narrative represents a sophisticated weaving of narrative voices throughout her text. Rather than simply describing the events in a sequential manner, she provides extensive information about the internal states and motivations of the actors involved. In addition, Sherrie provides in Stanza 2 an elaborate description of a central and important theme in the film: that of the balloon's magical self-propelling abilities. The stanza structure of a set of sequential lines, followed by an evaluative statement, is representative of her emphasis on the causal links which underlie events in the film. In her text, virtually every stanza contains an explanatory statement.

The two first graders, whose texts have been examined in this section, without question have individualistic ways of representing the events seen in a wordless film. However, I would at this point in the discussion like to point out some commonalities which are evidenced in their texts. First, in the two stories, individual lines seem to be grouped in stanzas sharing common topics and, frequently, structural and intonational patterns. In Brenda's text, lines within stanzas often contained repetitions of lexical items and prosodic variations. In Sherrie's text, lines within stanzas often were representative of an interesting pattern of narration-evaluation. The patterns of lines within stanzas seen in the texts of these two first graders support research suggesting that prosodic and structural repetitions are an important facet of the oral texts of African-American speakers (Foster, 1989; Gee, 1986; Heath, 1983).

## Hicks: Narrative skills

An additional commonality which emerged through an analysis of the two narratives was that of their intricate evaluative structure. Rather than simply listing the sequential events from the film, both children included extensive information about character internal states and motivations. In both texts, entire stanzas were devoted to providing background information about the salient relationship depicted in the film (the friendship between the boy and the balloon) and about the magical self-propelling properties of the balloon. This emphasis on providing extensive evaluation of events in the narrative might be characterized as a more intimate narrator stance. In fact, this particular narrator stance enhances the story-like quality of the texts, since underlying character feelings and motivations are an integral part of engaging stories.

### The Narrative Skills of Two Middle-Income White Children

The texts of two middle-income white children represent a homogeneous style of narration which emerged among this group of children. The narratives produced by children from this school community tended to be sequential *lists* of the events occurring in the film. There was in general a great deal of attention given to detail, so that the narratives of this group of children also tended to be lengthier than those produced by the African-American children in the study. These detailed narrations also tended to be more factual in nature: a blow-by-blow description that closely matched the events occurring in the film. In addition, the evaluative comments in these texts often represented a more distant perspective on events, since they were rendered more from the vantage point of an omniscient observer.

The narrative produced by Allison below is an example of such a performance among the middle-income white children. Allison tells a rather lengthy version of the film's events; indeed, she manages to detail nearly all of the main events in the film. There does seem to be a stanza structure which is evidenced throughout her text. As was the case with the narratives produced by Brenda and Sherrie, the delineation of stanzas can in part be determined on the basis of thematic topic. In Allison's narrative below, however, individual stanzas also appear to be marked by the use of adverbial phrases (*when, the next day*) and by evaluative statements. Her text is reproduced in its entirety below.

#### Allison: Storytelling Narrative

##### Stanza 1

and so he climbed up # and up the thing that it was tied to  
and he got it undone  
and so he took it to the bus stop  
and the little boy # let the balloon go # off^ into the air  
and it followed right^ behind the bus  
as if it was a person gliding down the street

Stanza 2

and # when they got to the little boy's house  
the little boy # he knew there was some bullies down there that wanted to pop^ the  
balloon  
so he got # the balloon  
and he sent it off into the air  
and it went up up  
and waited^ # near a window

Stanza 3

and the next day # he went with his grandma to the church  
and the church guard said "no # you can't come in!"  
"no balloons allowed!"  
and so he went out  
and walked away with ....  
and the bullies had thought of a sly^ plan to get! the balloon  
so they thought it over

Stanza 4

and the boy^ he went # near a candy store  
and he looked^ at it  
and reached in his pocket  
and said "hmmm # this is about enough money to have something to eat"  
so he went inside to get something  
leaving the balloon outside

Stanza 5

and the bullies came along  
and grabbed the balloon  
and took it away

Stanza 6

and the little boy # when he came out  
the balloon was gone  
he looked all^ over the place  
and then he # began walking one way  
he looked around # after a little while

Stanza 7

and then he stopped  
and turned back the way he came  
and then ## he saw where the balloon was  
and he went in # into the place  
and # he saw the balloon in there  
and he got the balloon  
taking it from the bullies

Stanza 8

and he went to a # to a small crack in between two buildings with the bullies a little  
behind  
and then he went down a stairway with a dog near it  
and he went right down  
and he saw the dog  
the rest of the bullies still^ after him

Stanza 9

and # then ## he ran away some more  
and the bullies got him and the balloon  
and they got the balloon  
and began shooting // throwing rocks at it  
and # and the balloon lost most of its helium

Stanza 10

and # when it was down on the ground the // one of the boys stepped! on it  
so it popped all the way  
and they left him alone  
and the boy felt like crying  
but he didn't

Stanza 11

and finally # all! over the neighborhood # all! the balloons! came  
and they came to him  
and he tied them to him  
and he rode up up into the air  
and over rooftops and over things

Stanza 12

and I don't know^ what happened to 'im then  
but he just sailed away for all I know

An interesting pattern emerges across stanzas in her text. The beginnings and endings of stanzas can in a number of cases be determined on the basis of Allison's use of temporal adverbials and also her use of stative descriptive statements. In Stanza 1, a series of completive actions (*got, took*) are followed by a descriptive metaphor. This metaphor serves as an evaluative statement which also brings closure to the particular set of events in Stanza 1. Allison's use of expressive intonation (*off^ into the air*) and her metaphorical comparison of the balloon (*as if it were a person ...*) seem very literary in nature. In fact, we shall see that the use of literary (storybook) phrasing is one linguistic technique which she uses to structure her narrative telling.

Stanza 2 begins with a temporal adverbial phrase (*when they got to the little boy's house*) which sets the scenario for a new series of events. The second line in Stanza 2 is also orientational (evaluative) for this particular stanza, in that it states a basic dilemma which underlies the story: that of the gang of boys who also want the balloon. Interestingly, the information that the gang of boys *want* to pop the balloon is presented from the perspective of what the principal character (the little boy) *knew*. In this sense, the locus of the emotional state of one set of characters is transferred to the cognitive state of another character. The young boy's reaction to his knowledge is presented as a series of responses, the end result of which is the balloon waiting near a window. Thus, in Stanza 2, a structural pattern of a) temporal adverbial (= orientation), b) series of events, and c) resultive state is introduced.