

Discourse levels in Narration and Cinema, American versus Mexican Culture

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Observing cultural distinctions in oral narrations may be helpful in the study of inter- and intra-cultural communications. Cultural divergences in responses to cinematic media may affect the selection of narrative elements and nonverbal behaviors. We report a study of original narrations of a film story (The Pear Film, Chafe 1980). Of particular interest are culturally bound aspects of interaction and narration that may help create a sense of interpersonal rapport. Our corpus of narrative discourses consisted of Mexican Spanish- and American English-speaking, female/male dyads. The females were assigned the role of Speaker. They watched the Pear Film and then recounted the story of it to the male Listener in as much detail as possible. Eight dyads were selected from a larger body of twenty-seven Mexican and thirty American dyadic narrations. First, we parsed the Pear Film itself, shot-by-shot, into cinematographic "levels of analysis" analogous to the scheme for analyzing levels of discourse: narrative, metanarrative, and paranarrative. The film comprises 43 shots. We determined shot length, shot type, and shot angle to establish character groupings, character and film-viewer perspectives, and potential cinematographic techniques designed to elicit certain reactions, perspectives, or sympathies from the viewer. Three scenes were then selected for analysis at the discursive level. We analyzed the intervals of spoken discourse corresponding to each of these scenes and all gestures that accompanied these intervals of speaking. We found that our Mexican and American Speakers' narrative discourses varied in several ways. For instance, scene descriptions in the Americans' narrations averaged 10.5 seconds, while in the Mexicans' averaged 8.0 seconds. The Americans were more loquacious. They elaborated more on narrative details. The Mexicans were more concise.

We discuss a further, prominent dimension of variation in terms of the construct "narreme". A narreme is the most fundamental element of a narrative. Culture-influenced narreme selection was the clearest differentiation. The four American Speakers were four times as likely to produce narremes expressive of meta-narrative content than were the four Mexican Speakers. The Mexican Speakers were much more likely to produce paranarrative narremes. Consistent with these differences in spoken discourse, we observe differences in the content of speech-co-produced gestures; notably, the abundant, meta-level discourse of the Americans is particularly rich in expressions of cinematographic notions (e.g., "long-shot", "pan", "shot frame") and their gestures manifest corresponding perspectives and frames. We will argue that such speech-and-gesture reflected perspectives and frames fundamentally shape culturally-distinctive narrative discourse. These data and our analysis suggest that there is a direct relationship between multimodal communication and discursive elements of narration in cinema (i.e. film language). We will discuss how this kind of study may lead to an understanding of the nature of semiotic devices that exist within cultures.

Selected references

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