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# A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While contemporary linguistics has a substantive theory of the structure of sentences, it has no comparable theory of discourse. This paper develops, through an analysis of a single example, a linguistic approach to one small part of discourse, namely, narrative. Narrative has been the subject of intensive research in a variety of disciplines, with work in contemporary literary theory leading the way (as represented in such "movements" as post-structuralism, reader-response criticism, deconstructionism, feminist theory, and neo-Marxist approaches to texts and society). Anyone attempting to develop a linguistic theory of narrative, as I am here, is sure to face from this interdisciplinary work on narrative a charge of "formalism": analyzing the structure and meaning of texts apart from their contexts (their social, cultural, political, and intertextual settings). I agree that formalism is wrong (Gee, 1990b; Gee, Michaels, & O'Connor, to appear), and, thus, I need at the outset to deflect such a charge.

It is commonplace in work on visual perception (Gregory, 1970; Osherson & Smith, 1990) to assert that what we perceive is a product of both structural properties of the light entering the eye (properties determined by the structure of the physical environment off of which the light has reflected) and of inferences constructed by our minds, inferences going far beyond the evidence actually available in the light. I believe that the charge of formalism in respect to textual analysis is merited if one claims (as I would not) that meaning is solely in the structure of a text. Nonetheless, I would argue that interpretation, like visual perception, is an amalgam of structural properties of texts and creative inferences drawn on the basis of context and previous experience. Contemporary work on narrative, particularly work influenced by literary theory, has greatly undersold how much meaning is, in fact, available in the structure of the language of a text. It is the job of linguistics,

and a goal of this paper, to make this clear. A complete theory of interpretation, I fully concede, will require an account of how this structure is put together with contextually driven inferencing, a theory that will require the joint labors of linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, social theorists, and literary theorists.

I will argue that the discourse structure of a text (in the current discussion, a narrative text), at a variety of different levels, functions to set up a series of cues or, better put, interpretive questions. These questions must be answered by any acceptable interpretation, but the answers given are constrained by the questions asked. There will, of course, usually be a number of acceptable answers, differing by the sorts of contextual knowledge the interpreter brings to the job of interpretation. But many answers are ruled out of court by the structure of the text.

## 2. THE TEXT

The text I will use as an example raises a number of key issues in the theory of narrative. The text is from a woman in her 20's suffering from schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup> As part of a battery of tests, this woman (like many schizophrenics, poor and not well educated) was placed in a small room with a doctor in a white coat and told to talk freely for a set amount of time, the doctor giving her no responses or "feedback cues" the whole time. This "language sample" was used to judge whether she showed any communication disorders connected with her mental state. Not surprisingly (given the limitations of collecting data in this way) the doctors (with little sophistication in linguistics) concluded the woman's text was "disturbed" and not fully coherent. In fact, I will argue that the text is a typical--if striking--example of human narrative sense making. The young woman's narrative does in a quite clear fashion what I will argue all narratives do.

The reader can gain a preliminary understanding of my approach to narrative by considering the example text printed below and the way in which it is marked up. The text is printed in terms of "lines and stanzas". Each line (which is numbered) is made up of one or more "idea units" (which are separated from each other within a line by a slash, "/"). Material that is "focused" (said with prominent pitch) is capitalized, and the "main-line" parts of the plot are underlined>. I will explain all these terms below.<sup>2</sup>

PART ONE (The sea)

STROPHE ONE (Storms)

STANZA 1 (Play in thunderstorms)

1. Well when I was little / the most exciting thing that we used to do is
2. There used to be thunderstorms on the beach that we lived on
3. And we walked down to meet the thunderstorms
4. And we'd turn around and run home / running away from the / running away from the thunderstorms

STANZA 2 (Play in waves from storms)

5. That was the most exciting / one of the most exciting times we ever had was doing things like that
6. Besides having like when there was hurricanes or storms out on the ocean
7. The waves / they would get really big
8. And we'd go down and play in the waves when they got big

STROPHE TWO (Waves)

STANZA 3 (Waves big: Up and down)

9. And one summer the waves were enormous
10. They were just about / they went straight up and down
11. So the surfers wouldn't enjoy them or anything like that
12. They'd just go straight up and down / the hugest hugest things in the world

STANZA 4 (Waves are powerful)

13. Then they would / they would / they went all the way over the top of the edge of the road /  
and went down the road TO our street
14. So that's how big the waves were / they were huge
15. It was so much fun just watching them
16. They made big pools on the edges of the beach / that lasted for maybe about a month / the  
waves were so so strong / and you'd get so much of a change in the beach that year

STANZA 5 (Coda to Part 1)

17. That was when I was really young / maybe about seven years old or something
18. That was uh that was really exciting

PART TWO (Horses)

STROPHE THREE (Entree to horses)

STANZA 6 (Starting to ride)

And what else? / Let's see

19. Uh the next exciting thing / was riding horses
20. Well we used to go SKIING and things like that / but I don't remember that as TOO exciting
21. Then I guess I was twelve years old / when we went to start to ride horses
22. The first time on the horse / we were up there

STANZA 7 (Work to ride free)

23. And we were working / we were working so that we could ride for free
24. We'd give people pony rides you know
25. We were like slaves almost / cleaning the stalls and everything
26. But it was good hard work / it was good for us

STROPHE FOUR (First horse)

STANZA 8 (Fear of horse)

27. Then finally / we got to ride one day
28. And maybe this was about a week or two later / and we got to ride some horses
29. And so we uh the first horse that I got on / he starts backing up on me / and gets on his hind legs you know
30. I'm scared out of my wits / I don't KNOW what / I don't know what's happening / it's unbelievable

STANZA 9 (Learn to ride by overcoming fear)

31. So I got off the horse / and I got / I got off THE HORSE
32. and I brought him back to the barn / because I was too scared to ride him
33. But it didn't scare me away
34. I got right back on the horse again / not too long afterwards / and started to learn to ride pretty fast

STROPHE FIVE (Growing mastery)

STANZA 10 (Thrown by small horse)

Then what?

35. Uh oh I rode a pony once / just a little you know / one of those little buggers / those teeny little things
36. And he threw me off

37. And I had a stiff neck for about two weeks / he did just a job on me
38. A teeny little pony

STANZA 11 (Learn to ride well)

39. Then not too long after that / we started to learn / REALLY LEARN to ride / in a way that we knew what we were doing / not fooling around
40. And I learned how to jump / jump over / jump over logs / high logs
41. That was exciting / I liked that
42. I was little / I was maybe around thirteen you know / when I learned that / I was not much older

PART THREE (Sea/horses/camp)

STROPHE SIX (Sea Horses)

STANZA 12 (Swim with horses in sea)

43. That was exciting too / being able to ride around and go swimming
44. That's another thing we did / we'd take horses into the ocean / and we'd swim on them
45. We'd be bareback you know / ride on them bareback
46. And we'd swim / we'd go out swimming

STANZA 13 (Horses: Up and down in sea)

47. And they felt like a seahorse / or a horse on a merry-go-round
48. They'd go up and down / and up and down
49. And that's the way they swim / They go like that / and it makes them go up and down
50. It was a lot of fun / I liked it / we really had a blast

STROPHE SEVEN (Camp)

STANZA 14 (Camp: Back and forth)

51. And then being able to ride down to the country store and everything
52. Ride my horse up on the tree / and then I'd go in and buy candy
53. And then go back to the camp again
54. Really had a lot of fun

STANZA 15 (Camp: Other girls)

55. That was at summer camp / Camp Quonsett / a girl's camp I worked at
56. And all the other girls my age / they were rich / They were all going to camp there
57. And they / uh most of them were sort of afraid of horses
58. So I couldn't get to be very friendly with them / where they wanted to come around / and hang around with me or anything / because they were more or less afraid

STROPHE EIGHT (Afraid/Unafraid)

STANZA 16 (Camp: Fear)

59. I remember going there the year after that too
60. And I became afraid
61. So I only stayed for about two weeks / because I became afraid of taking care of them
62. Sometimes they caused me some problems / by running away and things you know

STANZA 17 (Camp: Unafraid)

63. Anyways I really / I had a good time though
64. The year that I was / I was / I was really young and spunky you know / so I was afraid of nothing

### 3. IDEA UNITS

I will start with explaining "idea units" (Chafe, 1980; Gee, 1986). In order to understand idea units, it is necessary to understand how the English prosodic system, the system of stress and pitch, works (Brazil, Coulthard, & Johns, 1980; John-Lewis, 1986). If you ask speakers of English to say the sentence in 1 below quite slowly, they will "stress" (emphasize) the words in italics in 1b and will pause in such a way as to demarcate the units I have placed in parentheses (Gee & Grosjean, 1983):

1a. He denied the latest rumors from Argentina

1b. (He-denied) (the-latest-rumors) (from-Argentina)

Each string of words in parentheses in 1b is a prosodic phrase. Prosodic phrases are the basis of the characteristic rhythm of English. To actually utter the sentence in 1 at a normal rate, the speaker must choose one of the italicized words to bear the primary pitch disruption in the sentence (called a "pitch glide"), a movement in the pitch of the voice that (in English) falls, rises, rises-and-falls, or falls-and-rises in relation to the normal (base) pitch level of the sentence (Bolinger, 1986; Crystal, 1979; Ladd, 1980).

This pitch glide signals the focus of the sentence, the information that the speaker wants the hearer to take as new or asserted information. The focus is not necessarily just the word with the pitch glide, but rather all the words preceding this word (in the same sentence) which in context are

taken to be new or asserted information (Brazil, Coulthard, Johns, 1980; Jackendoff, 1972). Thus, in a sentence like "Surfers enjoy big waves" (line 11 in our text), with the pitch glide on "waves", the focus can be taken to be just "waves", or "big waves", or "enjoy big waves", or the whole sentence. We can only determine which is the focus by a consideration of the context in which the sentence was uttered and what in that context is new information (and, of course, the speaker and hearer might disagree on this). However, in a sentence like "Surfers enjoy big waves", with the pitch glide on "surfers", only "surfers" is the focus and this sentence is acceptable only in contexts in which "enjoy big waves" is old information.

Which pitch glide (falling, rising, rising-falling, or falling-rising) the speaker actually uses signals various additional perspectives on the information in the focus, beyond the mere perspective of marking the focus as focus (salient, new, asserted). Whatever the focus of the sentence, this does not change the literal meaning of the sentence--the claim being made about the world--but it does alter how the sentence fits with the context of interaction between speaker and hearer or with the surrounding linguistic material in the text (Brazil, Coulthard, Johns, 1980).

Any sentence with one pitch glide is called an "idea unit". However, a speaker can make one sentence into more than one idea unit by having more than one pitch glide, where each pitch glide signals a different focus and, thereby, a different idea unit. Thus, a sentence like "We'd run home away from the storms" could easily be said as two tone groups: We'd RUN HOME / away from the STORMS (where I have underlined the word with the pitch glide and capitalized the focus in each case), if the speaker wanted to treat both going home and getting away from the storms as separate focuses (separately salient ideas). Or a sentence like "We were really young back then" could be said as "We were REALLY YOUNG / back THEN, if one wanted to emphasize the past or signal a significant contrast with the present time.

An idea unit contains a single piece of new information (the focus); it has a unitary intonation contour made up of one major pitch disruption (glide) with the pitch in the rest of the unit leading up to and away from this disruption; and it is often separated from other idea units by a small pause or slight hesitation. The start of each idea unit is not only often signalled by a pause or slight hesitation, but also by various phonological junctural phenomena in the pronunciation of the initial word of the idea unit and by a slight bump up or down in the base pitch level of the first word of the new idea unit in relation to the base pitch level of the preceding idea unit. In the text above I have capitalized the focus of each idea unit (idea units are sometimes called "tone groups", see Halliday, 1985).

#### 4. LINES

In the text above, idea units are grouped into lines, each one of which is numbered, with idea units separated from each other by a slash ("/"). A line is something like what would show up as a sentence in writing (sometimes a complex sentence). Each line is about one central idea, or topic, though it is not helpful to use the word "topic", since this word has so many different meanings in linguistics, and because, as we will see, a narrative has many different sorts of topics in it. Thus, I will use the term "argument" for the central idea around which a line is syntactically and intonationally organized. It is easiest to see what I am talking about from a specific example. Consider the quite complex line in line 16 in the text above: "They made **BIG POOLS** on the edges of the beach / that lasted for maybe **ABOUT A MONTH** / the waves were **SO SO STRONG** / and you'd get **SO MUCH OF A CHANGE** in the beach that year." The argument (central idea) here is "big pools". The following idea unit with the focus "about a month" is syntactically connected to

the preceding one since it is a relative clause on the argument "big pools" (signalled by the word that). The next two idea units, with the focuses "so so strong" and "so much of a change", explain why the pools were so big and lasted so long; they are connected intonationally to what precedes since they were said with the low pitch that signals "backgrounded-connected" information, and they could have been connected by a syntactic marker like "since". The last idea unit in this line (namely, "and you'd get SO MUCH OF A CHANGE in the beach that year") could easily have been made a separate line had it started with a higher pitch and been intonationally disconnected from the preceding idea unit, or separated by a significant pause. In this case it would have been a separate statement and not part of the background information explaining the big pools.

What should be clear by now is that how a text is actually said is crucial to the structure we assign it in terms of idea units, focuses, and lines. Idea units, focuses, and lines are part of the structure of a text which cues interpretation (meaning, sense). Of course, how a text is said sets up many inferences about meaning that go well beyond the actual structure of the text. But, the structure of a text in terms of idea units, lines, and focuses is in the speech stream; this structure is not just created as a product of creative inferencing on the part of the hearer. Responsible hearers are expected (and usually do) pay attention to these cues.

## 5. STANZAS, STROPHES, AND PARTS

Lines pattern into various larger units across a narrative. First and foremost, they fall into stanzas (Gee, 1986, 1988; Hymes, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 1981), which are, I argue, the basic building blocks of extended pieces of discursive language (such as narratives, descriptions, expositions, arguments, etc.). Stanzas often, as in this story, fall into related pairs, which I call

strophes. And the strophes, in turn, fall into the larger units which make up the story as a whole, units which I call parts. In the text above, I have given each stanza, strophe, and part a short title to facilitate later discussion. Figure 1 below outlines the overall structure of the narrative in terms of its stanzas, strophes, and parts (using the titles from the text). This figure will enable me to explain what stanzas, strophes, and parts are, and eventually to explain how each of these functions to create meaning.

Figure 1.

Outline of the narrative in terms of stanzas, strophes, and parts. Each is labeled with the title given it in the reprinted text.

## PART 1. THE SEA

### STROPHE 1. STORMS

Stanza 1. Play in thunderstorms

Stanza 2. Play in waves from storms

### STROPHE 2. WAVES

Stanza 3. Waves big: Up and down

Stanza 4. Waves are powerful

Stanza 5. Coda to Part 1

## PART 2. HORSES

### STROPHE 3. ENTREE TO HORSES

Stanza 6. Starting to ride horses

Stanza 7. Work to ride free

### STROPHE 4. FIRST HORSE

Stanza 8. Fear of horse

Stanza 9. Learn to ride by overcoming fear

### STROPHE 5. GROWING MASTERY

Stanza 10. Thrown by small horse

Stanza 11. Learn to ride well

### PART 3. SEA/HORSES/CAMP

#### STROPHE 6. SEA HORSES

Stanza 12. Swim with horses in sea

Stanza 13. Horses: Up and down in sea

#### STROPHE 7. CAMP

Stanza 14. Camp: Back and forth

Stanza 15. Camp: Other girls

#### STROPHE 8. AFRAID/UNAFRAID

Stanza 16. Camp: Fear

Stanza 17. Camp: Unafraid (Serves as coda to Part 3 as well)

The young woman was asked to talk about exciting things that had happened to her. Thus, the overall discourse topic of the whole text is exciting happenings. The text falls into three parts: the first is about playing in the sea during storms, the second is about learning to ride horses at camp, and the third melds the sea, horses, and camp, combining all the previous elements of the narrative to reach a conclusion. While the third part superficially appears disunified, we will see later that it is no such thing.

A stanza is a group of lines about a single topic; each stanza captures a single "vignette". Each stanza is a particular "take" on a character, action, event, claim, or piece of information, and each involves a shift of focal participants, focal events, or a change in the time or framing of events from the preceding stanza. Each stanza represents a particular perspective, not in the sense of who is doing the seeing, but in terms of what is seen; it represents an image, what the "camera" is focused on, a "scene". For instance, we can imagine stanza 1 being filmed by showing a group of little girls running into and then away from a thunderstorm, and then for stanza 2 the scene switches to the little girls playing in big waves, and for stanza 3 it switches to shots of large waves going

straight up and down, then for stanza 4 it switches to the waves transforming a landscape, and so forth.

Stanza divisions are signalled by a variety of linguistic devices, different for different languages and different dialects of the same language, including "topic chaining" (the first line contains a noun phrase which is referred back to in each subsequent line by a pronoun), phonological, rhythmic, syntactic, and/or semantic patterning of words and phrases across the lines of the stanza, and patterns of pausing and rate.

In many narratives I have analyzed (Gee, 1985, 1989a, 1989c) there has been apparent a sort of "isochrony" among stanzas: they are often four lines long. I don't insist on "4" as any special number here (though it is intriguing how often stanzas in English formal poetry are four lines long, see Turco, 1968). Rather, what I do claim is that stanzas are relatively short and pretty evenly balanced across the text as a whole. Stanzas are a universal part of the human language production system for extended pieces of language. They are, I believe, the same units that psycholinguists have referred to as "encoding cycles" (Butterworth & Goldman-Eisler, 1979; Goldman-Eisler, 1968). I have shown elsewhere (Gee, 1989a, 1989b, 1990b), however, that English speakers from different social groups pattern language within stanzas differently, and that this is one of the most salient ways in which groups differ from each other in how they use language to make sense in extended forms of language like narrative.

To argue for a particular demarcation of a text in terms of stanzas takes converging linguistic (patterning, syntax, intonation, topic structure) and psycholinguistic (pausing, rate, disfluencies caused by planning) evidence. Linguistic research in this area is still fairly new, and psycholinguistic research newer yet. From a linguistic point of view, I argue that the overall pattern of a text, created out of a variety of different linguistic signals, is ultimately the best

grounds on which to argue for hypotheses about stanza structure. I turn to such an argument in the next several paragraphs. My argument is mainly for exemplificatory purposes: a full argument, drawing on all relevant aspects of the text, could easily take up the space of this whole article. To follow the argument, the reader will have to refer back to the text and the outline in Figure 1.

The demarcation of stanzas in this text is fairly clear; the titles I have assigned make clear what each stanza and strophe is about. The first strophe is about playing in storms: stanza 1 introduces thunderstorms, then stanza 2 switches perspective to the waves caused by the storms. Stanza 1 begins with the overall discourse topic ("exciting thing") and stanza 2 returns to this ("one of the most exciting times") as one way to signal the stanza change. Also typical here is the repetition/dysfluency beginning stanza 2--since stanzas are units of discourse planning, their beginnings often show disfluencies as the speaker switches to a new character, event, or piece of information.

Strophe 2 is about waves. The temporal phrases "and one summer" announces a switch from generic discussion ("when I was little") to discussion of a specific occasion, thus signalling the change of strophe and stanza. Stanza 3 is about the size of the waves (stressing "straight up and down"); stanza 4 switches perspective slightly to the power of the waves. The way "then" is said (preceded by a significant pause, and with a clear intonational break with what precedes), together with the disfluency beginning stanza 4, helps indicate a stanza break. Stanza 5 is a coda to Part 1, and returns once again to the overall discourse topic ("exciting").

Strophe 3, beginning Part 2, once again uses the overall discourse topic ("next exciting thing") to signal a border in the text. Stanza 6 introduces starting to ride, stressing that, unlike skiing, riding was exciting. Stanza 7 switches perspective from this general introduction to the

theme of working hard in order to ride for free. There is little else beside this perspective switch to mark the stanza division here.

Just as she had used reference to a specific occasion ("and one summer") to signal the switch from the first strophe in Part 1 to the second, so too the narrator now uses reference to a specific occasion ("then finally we got to ride", line 27) to signal the switch from the first strophe in Part 2 (strophe 3) to the second (strophe 4). Within strophe 4, stanza 8 is about being frightened by her first horse; stanza 9 switches perspective to the result: getting off the horse, but not giving up and thus learning to ride. Strophe 5--the last in Part 2--replicates the pattern in strophe 4: stanza 10 is about another problem with a horse, this time being thrown by a little horse (a pony); stanza 11 is the result, once again the result being learning to ride. Note too how this repeated pattern is signalled also by the repetition of "not too long after" in stanza 9 and stanza 11 (the two stanzas notating learning and mastery after problems).

Part 3 once again returns to the discourse topic ("exciting"). Its first strophe (12) is about horses in the sea. Stanza 12 is about riding horses bareback in the sea; stanza 13 switches perspective to the movement of the horses in the sea ("up and down"). This strophe is not only a powerful image, it also creates important echoes back to the first part of the story. Note that stanza 13 stresses the up and down motion of the horses, just as stanza 3 in Part 1 had stressed that the waves went straight up and down. Strophe 7 switches from horses in the sea to horses at camp. Its opening stanza (stanza 14) is about the narrator going alone back and forth between the country store and the camp (a horizontal contrast to the vertical up and down of the horses and the waves); stanza 15 switches to the other girls at the camp, rich girls, and their fear of horses. Strophe 7 (about camp) looks quite unconnected to Strophe 6 (about horses in the sea): this raises an

interpretive problem, the sort I argue is crucial to understanding the thematic development of narrative. We will discuss the matter below.

Strophe 8 closes Part 3 and the narrative as a whole. "The year after" in the first line of stanza 16 tells us we have switched stanzas (and here strophes too). Stanza 16 is about the narrator's fear causing her to leave camp. Stanza 17, which serves also as a coda to Part 3, sums up by claiming to have been young, spunky, and unafraid at camp. The progression from fear (in stanza 16) to non-fear (in stanza 17) echoes the same progression in stanzas 8 and 9 (strophe 4) and even the progression from lack of mastery to mastery in stanzas 10 and 11 (strophe 5).

This ends my rationale for the stanza and strophe divisions in the text. While there could certainly be disagreements here and there (to be settled only by further syntactic, intonational, and psycholinguistic evidence), I think the reader will agree that his or her parsing of the text would not be markedly different from the one I have given. And, of course, some differences are to be expected, since hearers and readers hear and read differently than each other, and differently than speakers and writers may intend. The overall patterning of the text, which is the framework within which thematic echoes and thematic development take place, is what is important, and I think this is fairly clear.

## 6. FIVE LEVELS OF STRUCTURE AND MEANING

Having now explained the structure of narrative (idea units, lines and stanzas, as well as larger units), I will turn to my general theory of meaning or interpretation as it relates to this structure. A narrative text is structured at five hierarchical levels, each of which is crucially tied to the line and stanza structure of the text. Each level makes its own contribution to meaning.

However, it is crucial to see that each level makes its own contribution by amalgamating this contribution with the contributions of all the levels below it. Thus, we have something not like one Russian doll inside another bigger one, but rather like the human body where the arm, for instance, makes its contribution to the body by amalgamating other parts (hand, wrist, forearm, elbow, etc.) together with its own separate identity as an arm. Table 1 below lists the five levels, and labels their contribution to meaning. It also indicates how each of these levels is linguistically signalled.

Table 1. Five levels of structure in a narrative text with their contribution to interpretation and how they are formally signalled.

	LEVEL	FORMAL MARKING	ROLE IN INTERPRETATION
1.	Line and Stanza Structure	patterning	ideas and perspectives on characters, events, states, information
2.	Syntax and Cohesion	word order and grammatical words	logic and connections
3.	Main line/Non-main line	verbal system and aspect	plot
4.	Psychological-Subjects	grammar	point of view
5.	Focusing System	pitch and stress	image/theme

## 6.1 LEVEL ONE: LINE AND STANZA STRUCTURE

The line, stanza, strophe, and part structure of the text (level 1) cuts a narrative into blocks of hierarchically related pieces of information, the ideas, events, characters, and states that make up the material of the narrative. This structure is the framework in terms of which the other levels in Table 1 do their work, mapping out relationships within and across the stanzas of the text.

## 6.2 LEVEL 2: SYNTAX AND COHESION

The syntactic system (Givon, 1979; 1984) of the language integrates material within lines, and cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) link lines to each other within stanzas, and link stanzas to each other across the whole narrative. Together they constitute level 2 and spell out the connections that the speaker claims to exist within the material of the story, and, in that sense, spell out the "logic" of the narrative. Cohesion is the way in which the lines and stanzas of a text are linked to or interrelated to each other (Gee, 1990b). Cohesion is achieved by a variety of linguistic devices, including conjunctions, pronouns, demonstratives, ellipsis, various sorts of adverbs, as well as repeated words and phrases. In fact, any word, phrase, or syntactic device that causes two lines to be related (linked together) makes for cohesion in the text. Such links are part of what stitches a text together into a meaningful whole; they are like threads that tie language, and, thus, also, sense together.

While this level is of equal importance to the others in Table 1, it would take too much space to spell out in any detail how it functions in this text in particular and in narrative in general. Thus, I will give but one small example, to make clear how syntax and cohesion are integrally tied to interpretation. Consider stanza 15. The stanza starts with a deictic "that" which links stanza 15

to the entire event described in stanza 14. The "left dislocation" in line 56 ("all the other girls my age, they were rich") is a syntactic device used to switch topics and to place often contrastive emphasis on the new topic. Thus, the rich girls are an emphasized topic, and they are contrasted to the narrator, not only in that she is not rich, but in their fear of horses, which contrasts with the narrator's easy mastery of horses in stanza 14. Indeed, the use of left dislocation in this stanza, calls for the interpreter of the story to relate the contrast between the rich girls and the narrator to the logic (sense) of the story as a whole. We will do so below when we get to higher levels of structure and interpretation. The "so" in line 58 is a cohesive device linking this line to line 57; this "so" also states the "logic" of this connection: "so" means it follows that the girls would not be friendly with the narrator "where they wanted to come around and hang around with me" (line 58) given that they were afraid of horses (line 57). The interpreter must thus render this connection senseful within the logic of the story--that is precisely the function of the cohesive marker "so" here (the interpretive job it specifies): Why should it follow from the other girls' fear of horses that they don't want to associate with the narrator? This can only be done in terms of higher levels (level 5, to be precise), but cohesion sets up the job to be done. I will suggest later that the logic here is that the narrator has come by this point in the narrative, through her earlier mastery of horses, to equate herself and the horses and, indeed, to equate herself and a powerful, possibly dangerous force represented by both the sea and the horses. Thus, the other girls' fear of horses translates quite naturally in the narrative logic into fear of the narrator. These are just some very small indications of the work syntax and cohesion are doing throughout the narrative to set up and constrain interpretive demands on the hearer.

### 6.3 LEVEL THREE: MAIN LINE/OFF MAIN LINE OF PLOT

The next level (level 3) of structure/meaning is the system for distinguishing the main line of the plot from material off the main line (Hopper & Thompson, 1980). In past tense narratives, the main line events of the plot are constituted by clauses that are main clauses (non-subordinate, non-embedded) and marked with perfective aspect (in English, usually the simple past tense, but sometimes signalled by the "historical present"). States, generic events, repeated events, and habitual events are all off the main line of the plot. To say they are off the main line in relation to the main line of the basic plot is not to say they are less important--indeed, the basic plot must be interpreted in light of, its significance is signalled by, this off line material. This "interpreting in light of" is carried out at levels 4 and 5.

In Figure 2 below, I list the main line material in the text. As can be seen, it is only a very small fraction of the text as a whole:<sup>3</sup>

#### Figure 2

The main line material signalling the basic plot of the narrative (main clauses with perfective aspect)

#### STANZA 1 (line 3)

1. We walked down to meet the thunderstorms

#### STANZA 8, 9 (lines 27, 29, 31, 32, 34)

2. Finally, we got to ride one day
3. The first horse that I got on, he starts backing up on me, and gets on his hind legs

4. I got off the horse
5. I brought him back to the barn
6. I got right back on the horse again and started to learn to ride pretty fast

STANZA 10, 11 (lines 35, 36, 40)

7. I rode a pony once
8. He threw me off
9. I learned how to jump, jump over, jump over logs, high logs

STANZA 16 (line 61)

10. I only stayed for about two weeks (= I left after two weeks)

If you look at the earlier Figure 1 (the overall structure of the story), you can see that the main-line material given here in Figure 2 occurs in a quite non-random way within the narrative as a whole. There is piece at the beginning of the narrative (stanza 1) and one piece right near the end (stanza 16), the rest is all smack in the middle of the narrative (stanzas 8, 9, 10, and 11). The job of level 3 is to ask the interpreter to answer the question: "So what?" or, put in other terms, "What's the point or significance of this plot?". While this question can be answered only by moving to the next higher levels (4 and 5), the above plot makes clear what exactly the question amounts to here: The narrator walks to meet thunderstorms, she then masters horse riding after several hard experiences, and then she leaves the very camp where she has succeeded. What have thunderstorms got to do with horses? Why leave camp after succeeding with horses after so much effort? We will eventually answer these questions (at level 5). Just as in the case of syntax and cohesion (level 2), the main line/off line system (level 3) sets up and constrains various interpretive demands.

#### 6.4 LEVEL FOUR: PSYCHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS

I mentioned above that word "topic" has many uses in linguistics and that, indeed, any narrative has "topics" of many different sorts. One of the many senses of "topic" is what I will refer to as "psychological subjects" (level 4). The grammatical subject of a main clause (not an embedded or subordinate clause), whether it is main line or off main line in the plot, counts as a psychological subject (Clark & Clark, 1977; Chafe, 1979). Such subjects are "psychological launching off" points in a stanza; they represent points of view from which the material in a stanza is viewed; they represent what the narrator is "empathizing" with (Kuno, 1976).

Since my interest here is in each stanza as a separate unit, and not the narrative as a whole, there are several sorts of grammatical subjects of main clauses that nonetheless do not count as psychological subjects: I don't count any subjects that name the overall discourse topic ("exciting things"), since this is germane not to the particular stanza, but to the narrative as a whole. I also do not count subjects of clauses commenting on how exciting or how much fun something was or how much the narrator liked it (as in "I liked it" or "I had a good time"), since these too are really not germane to the stanza, but extra-narrative comments on the overall discourse topic. Nor do I count "dummy" subjects (like "there" and "it" in "it's raining"), since they do not name anything, and, finally, I do not count extra-narrative comments like "I remember". These exclusions allow us to get a real feel for the point of view of each stanza in its own right.

Take stanza 1 for an example. In line 1, the when clause is a subordinate clause, followed by a main clause with the subject "the most exciting thing" which names the overall discourse topic of the whole text. In this line, the clause "that we used to do" is an embedded clause. In line 2,

"there" is used to avoid any subject (so "thunderstorms" can be in a more focused position). Thus, so far we have no psychological subjects. Only in line 3 do we get a main clause subject ("we") that is germane just to this stanza, and line 4 repeats this subject in another main clause. Thus, I will say that "we" is the psychological subject of this stanza, the entity from whose point of view the material in the stanza is viewed. Figure 3 below lists the psychological subjects that occur in each stanza:

Figure 3  
Psychological subjects in each stanza (line numbers are in parentheses)

STORY DIVISION	PSYCHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS
-----	
PART 1	
STANZA 1:	we (3), we (4)
STANZA 2:	they (= waves, 7), we (8)
STANZA 3:	the waves (9), they (= waves, 10), the surfers (11), they (= waves, 12)
STANZA 4:	they (= waves, 13), they (14) they (16), waves (16)
PART 2	
STANZA 6:	we (19), we (21)
STANZA 7:	we (23), we (24), we (25)
	-----
STANZA 8:	we (27), we (28), he (= the first horse that I got on, 29), I (30), I (30)

STANZA 9: I (31), I (32), I (34)

STANZA 10: I (35), he (= pony, 36), I (37), he (37)

STANZA 11: we (39), I (40), I (42), I (42), I (42)

-----

PART 3

STANZA 12: we (44), we (44), we (45), we (46)

STANZA 13: they (= horses, 47), they (48),  
they (49)

-----

STANZA 14: I (52)

STANZA 15: they (= other girls my age, 56),  
they (56), most of them (57), I (58)

STANZA 16: I (60), I (61), they (= horses, girls???, 62)

STANZA 17: I (64)

The psychological subject structure of a narrative tells us something about the narrator's stance and how she changes it across the narrative. Like the other levels, it makes interpretive demands and constrains how these demands are to be met. Figure 3 raises an interesting problem in regard to the interpretation of this narrative. Up until stanza 7 the psychological topics are basically we and they (= waves). Then at stanza 8 the psychological topic shifts midstream from we to I, after the intermediary use of horse as a psychological subject. The psychological subject stays I (mixed with he, for her first horse, and pony) until stanza 12, then at that stanza the psychological subject shifts again to we. At stanza 14, the narrator once again shifts back to I, which for the remainder of the narrative mixes with they (initially for the other girls). In stanza 16

there is a crucial ambiguity in psychological subject. We cannot tell whether the they in line 62 stands for horses or girls. In the preceding stanza, the girls are afraid of horses and will not hang around with the narrator, so it could be them that are causing problems for the narrator in stanza 16, though, of course, horses have been heretofore the trouble makers. I will argue below that this ambiguity is important.

The flow of psychological subjects in this narrative, then, is: WE-WAVES (stanzas 1-8); I-HORSES (stanzas 8-11); WE-HORSES (stanzas 12-13); I-HORSES/GIRLS (stanzas 14-17). If readers look through the narrative, they will very clearly feel these switches in point of view or stance; they give the narrative a distinctive character in which I melds with and emerges out of we. This patterning of psychological subjects shapes the narrative something as follows: "we" are together playing in the sea, then "I" master horses, leading to "we" playing together with the horses in the sea, and then "I" become feared by and newly frightened of horses/other girls. The I's mastery of horses at camp comes out of we playing in the sea and goes into we playing in the sea with the horses, only to have this integration of self/others/horses/sea dissolved by the intervention of the other girls who are "confused" with the horses. It is interesting to note, as well, that in stanza 14, where the narrator switches back to "I" and begins the part of her story where this "I" and its integration with others/horses/sea (achieved thus far in the story) is dissolved by the intervention of the other girls, the narrator heavily avoids the overt use of "I" (using it only once, and using four null subjects, as in line 52, "Ride my horse up on the tree", see note 2). It is as if the narrator anticipates and mimics the coming dissolution of the mastery and identity she has constructed earlier in the story and presumably in her earlier life. The patterning of psychological subjects becomes, then, an interpretive demand: Why does the narrator shift point of view this way? Once

again, this question can only be answered at the highest level (level 5) of the narrative's structure and meaning.

## 6.5 LEVEL FIVE: FOCUSING SYSTEM

In section 3 above I discussed how English uses pitch to signal the focus of an idea unit. The focus of each idea unit, capitalized in the reprinted text above, represents information that the speaker considers new, asserted, salient, important; it is the information she chooses to focus her attention and, thus, the information she wishes the hearer to focus on. In section 4, I discussed how the idea units in a line are organized around a central topic (which I called the argument) in the line, and, thus, there is hierarchical organization to the focused material in a line.

The focused material in and across the stanzas of the narrative are the key images or themes out of which we are invited to build an overall interpretation of the narrative. The focusing system sets up a series of questions--in regard to each piece of focused material, it asks: Why is this so important? For example, in stanza 1, why are thunderstorms, and meeting them, and running home, and running away from thunderstorms, so important? Our overall interpretation of a narrative is constrained by what is focused, and it is also constrained by the need to sensefully answer the interpretive questions that have been set by all the lower levels of structure in the narrative (the ones we have just surveyed). While this interpretation will most certainly draw on the contextual knowledge of the interpreter, it must also be grounded in the structure of the story in terms of idea units, lines, stanzas, strophes, and parts (as given in Figure 1 above), since the focused material is organized in terms of these units. Thus, at this level, interpretation is a "reading" of the focused

material (viewed as key images or themes) within the overall structure of the narrative. I will call this sort of reading thematic interpretation.

To give an example of what I mean, I will offer one "reading" of the themes in and across the stanzas in this story. While there are without doubt a number of other possible readings of this narrative, remember that the five levels of structure and the interpretive questions they set, constrain what counts as a senseful (appropriate, fair) reading. So there are also many impossible readings. In Figure 4 below I print for each stanza just the focused material (excluding references to the overall discourse topic--exciting things--and related references, like how much fun the narrator was having). Material from different lines within a stanza is separated by a cross hatch ("#"), while material from different idea units in the same line is separated by a comma:

FIGURE 4  
Focused material within each stanza

Part 1  
Strophe 1

Stanza 1: little # thunderstorms # meet # run home, away, thunderstorms

Stanza 2: hurricanes or storms # waves, big # play

Strophe 2

Stanza 3: enormous # straight up and down # surfers wouldn't enjoy straight # hugest hugest

Stanza 4: all the way over, to our street # how big, huge # so much fun # big pools, about a month, so so strong, so much of a change

Stanza 5: really young, seven years old

Part 2

Strophe 3

Stanza 6: riding horses # skiing, (not) too exciting # start to ride horses # first time, up there

Stanza 7: working, ride for free # people pony rides # like slaves, cleaning the stalls # good hard work, good

Strophe 4

Stanza 8: finally, ride # horses # first horse, backing up on me, on his hind legs # scared out of my wits, (not) know what, happening, unbelievable

Stanza 9: off the horse, off the horse # back to the barn, too scared # (not) scare away # right back on, not too long afterwards, learn to ride

Strophe 5

Stanza 10: I rode a pony, little, little buggers, teeny # threw off # stiff neck, a job # teeny

Stanza 11: too long after, learn, learn, knew, not fooling around # jump, jump over, logs, high logs # little, around thirteen, learned, (not) much older

Part 3

Strophe 6

Stanza 12: swimming # into the ocean, swim # bareback, bareback # swim, swimming

Stanza 13: felt like a seahorse, a horse on a merry-go-round # up and down, up and down # swim, like that, up and down

Strophe 7

Stanza 14: to the country store # up on the tree , buy candy # back to the camp

Stanza 15: summer camp, Camp Quonsett, girl's camp # other girls my age, rich, going to camp # afraid of horses # (not) very friendly, come around, hang around, afraid

## Strophe 8

Stanza 16: the year after # afraid # stayed for about two weeks, afraid of taking care # caused me some problems, running away

Stanza 17: young and spunky, afraid of nothing

In was in terms of the focus structure given in Figure 4 above that I constructed the titles for stanzas, strophes, and parts in Figure 1, the overall outline of the narrative. A full reading would have to consider all the focused elements, their repetitions and variations within and across stanzas, and their various relations to each other, integrated with all the other levels of structure and meaning I have discussed earlier. This reading could then be supplemented with more and more contextual information to deepen and enrich it. I have space here for only a very partial and schematic reading.

Part 1 focuses on images of playing in storms and the size and power of the waves caused by the storms. The psychological subjects of Part 1 are we and the waves. Thus, the narrator, integrated with other children, displays control or mastery over the power inherent in storms and the sea.

Part 2 opens, as we saw above, with we as the psychological subject, stressing the hard work that it took us to be able to ride horses. But, then, by stanza 8, the narrator stresses her own individual effort to learn to ride: her first horse backs up on her, scaring her "out of my wits", but she doesn't give up. Then a small horse attempts to throw her, but eventually she masters horses and learns to jump over high logs.

There are many direct contrasts between the images in Part 2 and those in Part 1. Part 2 is about work and effort, (note the "not fooling around" of line 39), Part 1 about play; Part 2 stresses

her individual effort and achievement, Part 1 stresses we. Part 2 ends with jumping over high logs, an image that reminds one of the "straight up and down waves" that the surfers couldn't enjoy (and thus ride). If Part 1 is an idyl about youth, Part 2 is about growing up, earning the mastery or control that was so effortlessly a part of the youth of Part 1. The danger and power inherent in storms, which so fascinated the young girl as a seven year old, becomes, in the guise of horses, something to master through her own effort when she is twelve.

Part 3 opens (in stanzas 12) with a return to we as the psychological subject, and in stanzas 12 and 13 the narrator melds together the images of Parts 1 and 2: the horses of Part 2 are placed in the sea of Part 1. The horses (like seahorses, like a merry-go-round) go "up and down" just like the waves in Part 1 which are "straight up and down" (stanza 3), and both images are repeated (thereby highlighted) in their respective stanzas. We are returned to the effortless, playful world of youth. The power of the sea and storms of Part 1, now equated with the horses, has been conquered by the narrator's own personal efforts to master horses in Part 2.

Part 3 continues with strophe 7, whose two stanzas seem to be quite unconnected. What has the narrator's riding her horse happily back and forth from camp in stanza 14 got to do with the rich girls and their fear of horses in stanza 15? Stanza 14 returns to I as the psychological subject; the narrator is now an autonomous individual living out her control or mastery, so beautifully signalled by the narrative so far. She is out in the world, riding her horse, controlling the power it denotes. The rich girls, unlike the earlier we, will erode this control.

Stanza 15 is crucial: the other girls are rich, unlike the narrator, and, unlike her, they have not overcome their fear of horses (power). The "so" of line 58 (a cohesive marker) signals a very important moment in the logic of the narrative. Line 57 says that most of the rich girls were afraid of horses, and then line 58 says "so I couldn't get to be very friendly with them, where they wanted

to come around, and hang around with me". To stress the logical connection here, the narrator concludes the line with "because they were more or less afraid" (Afraid of what? She leaves off the object.)

Why should the rich girls' fear of horses cause the narrator not to be able to get friendly with them, hang around with them, become a we with them as she was with the children in Part 1 or the kids riding horses in the sea at the opening of Part 3? Leaving off the object of "afraid" at the end of the line, the narrator equates the girls' fear of horses and their fear of her. The narrator, who equated the sea and horses at the opening of Part 3, has now equated the horses and herself. Since we took the sea/horses combination to represent some sort of powerful force, we can say here that the rich girls fear the very power the narrator has mastered, controlled, and internalized.

Strophe 8 concludes the narrative with what looks like a contradiction. In stanza 16, the narrator says "And I became afraid ... afraid of taking care of them ... they caused me problems by running away", leaving off the object of "afraid" again, and leaving it unclear what they and they stand for, horses or the other girls (remember the other girls won't "come around and hang around" with her, on the one hand, but that, on the other hand, heretofore she has cared for horses).

Whether it is horses or girls that are running away (from the narrator), note the similarity to the image of running from the thunderstorms in Part 1. The fear that the girls have displayed towards the horses/narrator (and the power they represent) is now projected by the narrator back at the horses/girls. The power is once again out in the world, uncontrolled and potentially threatening, like the storms and the horses of Parts 1 and 2. The narrator's mastery over the power of the horses/sea becomes undone and she leaves the camp, no longer a we, excluded now from others.

In the final stanza (stanza 17) the narrator claims that she was afraid of nothing, though it is unclear whether she is talking about the year she left camp or the year before. In any case, she

resolves narratively what she appears to have been unable to resolve in reality--a quite typical feature of narratives in general (Levi-Strauss, 1979).

The logic of the images of the narrative, then, is something like that shown in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5  
Progression of images in the narrative

we play with powerful sea

I work to master powerful horses

we play in sea with horses

(equate sea + horses + power + being member of the group)

rich girls afraid of horses/power/narrator

(equate horses + power + narrator)

I afraid of girls/horses/power/self, I separate from group

I unafraid then.

This reading also says what is so important about the basic main line of the plot (Figure 2): the narrator's struggle with horses represented control or mastery over the power inherent in storms (and perhaps, an overcoming of her fear of others), a control undone by the fear of others (the rich girls) toward her, causing her to leave camp, separating herself from these others, and leaving her "spunky" youth, when she was unafraid behind. Her world of innocence--running to meet thunderstorms, riding bareback in the sea--is gone.

While it is true that identities shift in this narrative (among self, others, the sea, and horses), as they do in myths as well, the narrative is perfectly and wonderfully senseful. Its structure quite clearly tells us the terms on which it requests to be interpreted.

## 7. CONCLUSION

My main goal in this paper has been to exemplify a linguistic approach to the structure and meaning of narratives. I argue that the narrative I have just discussed is typical of how narratives work in general. Elsewhere I have analyzed (collected in Gee, 1989c), in the same vein, narratives from a variety of different genres by children and adults belonging to diverse social groups. Indeed, this approach applies to other discursive genres as well (for example, arguments are analyzed in these terms in Gee, 1989b, 1990b).

The approach I have developed here cross-cuts genre distinctions within narrative and among narrative and other forms. However, we can make a distinction between two different uses of discursive language (extended pieces of language like narratives, reports, arguments, descriptions, and so forth). One type, like the narrative above, uses the organization of discourse to manipulate images or themes rooted in the life world or world view of the person using the language (Gee, 1990a). They are senseful in a deep way. The other type, such as purely descriptive, labeling, or reportative uses of language, use the five levels discussed above, but do not invite what I above called thematic interpretation. In these uses of language we do not "read" the focus system as a set of images or themes, but rather as mere "labels" for a particular model of a world or part of one (often the so-called "real" world). When these latter uses of language are successful, the hearer can reconstruct the model; when the former uses of language are successful,

the hearer can do more, the hearer can reconstruct a certain part of a philosophy of life from a particular point of view.

Of course, this dichotomy, like so many others in regard to language, is really a continuum; and one can choose to "read" one use of language as if it had been meant as the other, and we cannot always tell (and don't always care) what the speaker (or writer) intended. For example, one can read something even as "descriptive" as the warning on an aspirin bottle either as made up of labels for "reality" ("in case of accidental overdose contact a physician ... immediately" tells you what to do in a certain situation) or as setting up certain contrasting themes relevant to a world view (e.g., a mainstream world--partly signalled by the pseudo-latinate "overdose", instead of "overdose"--in which people only overdose on drugs "accidentally" is contrasted with one in which people abuse them on purpose, see Gee, 1989b). Nonetheless, I believe that this distinction is of more linguistic importance than typical genre distinctions within narrative and across discursive uses of language.

One reason I chose the above narrative as my example is that it makes clear that narratives can have global organization even when they are not being repeated from memory as stored wholes, even when the narrator does not necessarily know in advance where she is going and where she is going to end up. The global organization of the above narrative, like all deeply senseful uses of language, flows from the organization of the discourse system itself (line and stanzas) and from the lived and earned coherence of a person's life--a coherence that neither "mental illness" nor hospitalization could take from the woman whose story informs this paper.

## NOTES

1. I do not wish to compromise the identity of the woman whose text I will analyze, the institution where it was collected, nor the research assistant who collected it (as part of a project with which I was not involved). Suffice it to say that the great majority of schizophrenic patients in this institution, as in others like it, were poor, black, and poorly educated. I do not know the education level of the young woman whose text I use in this article. The patient was not, of course, diagnosed as a schizophrenic solely on the basis of this narrative, though it was given to me as an example of a text that made little overall coherent sense to those who had collected it. While I have in other cases studied the interrelations between sociocultural background and sense making (e.g., Gee, 1985, 1989a, 1989b, 1990b), that is not my major concern here, which is simply to exemplify one methodological approach to structure and meaning in narratives. How this approach relates to sociocultural differences in language is discussed in the papers just cited. I obtained this text from a colleague interested in the different expressions of, and attitudes toward, schizophrenia across various historical periods and cultures.

2. I do not know whether the phrase "ride my horse up on the tree" in stanza 14 is a speech error or, as Allyssa McCabe has pointed out to me, "the kind of 'getting loose' link" that is said to be indicative of (some) schizophrenic speech. Allyssa also points out the avoidance of subjects in this stanza; again, this could be simply colloquial "subject drop" ("topic chaining") or indicative of something deeper (I discuss the use of subjects in this narrative below and suggest that the avoidance of subjects in this stanza is perhaps meaningful; I thank Allyssa for bringing this fact to my attention). I am not at all competent to comment on "language and schizophrenia", a subject

about which I know little (see Rochester & Martin, 1979, but also Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). My interest here is in the ways in which this text is typical (I argue) of "deep" sense making (sense we make when we really need to), not in aspects of the language of the text that may be "disordered".

3. I have left line 39 out as a mainline event; its predicate ("started to learn to ride") is really in what might be called "inceptive" aspect, not perfective. The result of line 39's "we started to learn" is stated in line 40 ("I learned how to jump ... over ... high logs"), with the narrator now herself the subject. This is a mainline plot event. Line 61 has been included, even though its predicate ("stayed") is really "durative", since in the story it implies "left the camp", which is perfective and the last plot event of the story.

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