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# Assessing pre-schoolers' narrative skills

## Okul öncesi dönem çocuklarının anlatı becerilerinin değerlendirilmesi

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**Abstract:** This paper refers to a research conducted in the region of Patra, Achaia in Greece in spring 2016. Its purpose was a) the assessment of pre-schoolers' narrative skills and b) the examination of its possible correlation with family sociocultural background. The participants were 32 children of the higher level of age in preschool education (5-6 years old), picked up from 2 different public kindergartens, equally separated in terms of gender and social background. Children were called to produce oral retellings of a book that had previously been read to them. Their texts were recorded and analysed according to "The Story Pyramid Framework". The findings of the research seem to confirm that there is a strong and intense correlation between pre-schoolers' narrative skills and their sociocultural background. Children that come from more privileged social backgrounds produced more integrated narratives than their peers who come from less privileged family contexts, while no significant differences were observed between genders.

**Keywords**: Decontextualized language, retelling, narrative, early literacy, sociocultural background

**Öz:** Bu makale, 2016 yılı bahar döneminde Yunanistan'da Achaia Patra bölgesinde yapılan bir araştırma ile ilgilidir. Araştırmanın amacı a) okul öncesi çocuklarının anlatım becerilerinin değerlendirilmesi ve b) bu becerilerin ailevi sosyokültürel deneyim ile olası ilişkisinin incelenmesidir. Katılımcıları 5-6 yaş 32 okul öncesi çocuğu oluşturmaktadır ve çocuklar 2 farklı devlet anaokulundan cinsiyet ve sosyokültürel açıdan eşit olmasına dikkat edilerek seçilmiştir. Çocukların daha önce kendilerine okunan bir kitabı sözlü olarak tekrardan anlatmaları istenmiştir. Metinler ""The Story Pyramid Framework (Öykü Piramit Sistemi)" ne göre kaydedilmiş ve analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, anaokulunun anlatı becerileri ile sosyokültürel deneyimleri arasında güçlü ve yoğun bir ilişki olduğunu doğrulamaktadır. Üst sosyal sınıftan olan çocuklar alt sosyal sınıf aile bağlamlarından gelen akranları ile karşılaştırıldığında daha bütünleşmiş anlatımlar üretirken, cinsiyetler arasında anlamlı fark bulunmamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bağlamından arındırılmış dil, uyarlama, anlatı, erken okuryazarlık, sosyokültürel deneyimler

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## INTRODUCTION

### Theoretical Framework

From their very first days in life, infants try to understand their worlds and develop dispositions, attitudes and behaviours "*that precede and develop into conventional literacy*" (Sulzby, 1989: 84). They develop their understanding about print and nonconventional literacy behaviours that lead into conventional reading and writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). During this phase, usually referred as early, emergent or natural literacy, children are involved in various *literacy events* (Heath, 1982) and gradually, with the support of their environment, develop a range of understanding about print and how it is used in their societies. From a socio-constructivist perspective, literacy learning is seen as situated practices that are specific to their socio-cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). But the environmental circumstances, conditions and factors differ among children, resulting in large differentiations "*in onset time, and in rate of growth, for all of the critical components of the language system*" (Shiel et al., 2012: 70), which leads to the assumption that language does not develop in the same way for every child.

Research findings indicate that one of the factors that affect early language and literacy development is social background (Bernstein, 1973; Bernstein, 1974; Demie & Lewis, 2011; Rescorla & Alley, 2001). According to Bernstein (1975), the unsystematic learning that takes place within the family setting builds up the children's common sense knowledge, which contradicts to the uncommon sense knowledge, the knowledge that is usually obtained within school. According to Kondyli & Lykou (2008: 333), common sense knowledge "*is implicit, unconscious, unstructured and is learnt through casual conversation*", while uncommon sense knowledge is described as "*universal and abstract, distant from the everyday experience, based on semiotic representation and on written language, conscious, systematic and logically represented*" (see also, Painter, 1999). Taken for granted that children coming from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds enter school with different language skills (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2005; Shiel et al., 2012), the Greek Curriculum for Early Childhood (Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten, 2003) claims that school failure is primarily a result of the lack of familiarization with aspects of written language. This view is strongly supported by a large body of literature (ind. Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Archakis, 2005), among which Halliday (1996: 340) argues that "*in becoming literate, you take over the more elaborated forms of language that are used in writing*", and Painter (1999: 70) claims that educational knowledge is "*typically embodied in written monologic discourse, abstracted from any situational context*

*shared with the interlocutor*". With Elly's words: "*written language is itself decontextualized*" (Elly, 2004: 407).

Decontextualized language (also referred to as *disembedded*, *nontext-free*, *autonomous*, *non-context-bound*, *extended discourse*) is a type of discourse that "*occurs in situations in which shared knowledge or context is unavailable*" (Curenton & Justice, 2004: 240). In this type of discourse meaning "*is carried purely through the symbolic function of language*" (Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer, 2012: 92) and "*is conveyed through specific linguistic devices, primarily grammar and vocabulary*" (Curenton & Justice, 2004: 240), requiring "*use of a more precise vocabulary and formal syntactic marking of the temporal and causal nature of events*" (Curenton & Justice, 2004: 241). Furthermore, according to Shiel et al. (2012: 14),

> Decontextualised language was defined as language that is context-free, autonomous and disembedded. It is not rooted in any immediate context of time or situation, and does not rely on observation or immediate physical experience, but stands as an autonomous representation of meaning.

This kind of language is also distinguished by certain features, known as Literate Language Features (L.L.F.), which include elaborated noun phrases, adverbs, conjunctions and mental/ linguistic verbs (Curenton & Justice, 2004; Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Benson, 2009; Shiel et al., 2012).

Peterson, Jesso and McCabe (1999: 50) claim that "*decontextualized language has been identified as a critical link to successful school achievement*", while Curenton and Lucas (2007: 377) argue that "*the use of decontextualized language sets the foundation for literacy*". Thereafter, the effective utilization (both production/ construction and comprehension/ interpretation) of decontextualized language seems to be necessary for the acquisition of those linguistic skills that are prerequisite in educational settings and are referred to as "*academic*" or "*literate*" language (Bailey & Huang, 2011; Benson, 2009; Shiel et al., 2012). In addition, Shiel et al. (2012: 94) state that "*in the early school years, academic language is developed through children's use of decontextualised language in discourse*", since the academic language share many of the features of written discourse.

The above prerequisite familiarization with the conventions of decontextualized and academic language can be identified in and conquered through the sufficient use of narrative discourse (Shiel et al., 2012). Narrating is one of the five generic processes recommended by Knapp and Watkins (2005), and refers to the act of creating a text containing (at least) "*a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered*" (Labov, 1972: 359-362). The ability to apply narration's generic knowledge in handling relevant texts (either as a narrator or as a reader/listener) is

crucial for a number of reasons: through narrating people represent and make sense of their selves and their experiences (Ely, 2005; Shiel et al., 2012). Additionally, "*narrative is a cornerstone of school instruction*" (Peterson, 1994: 252) since it is widely exploited by educators in the teaching-learning practice. Especially in preschool age, "*creating a narrative requires a child to produce a decontextualized description of events*" (Curenton and Lucas, 2007: 377), ending up to build a bridge between oral and written language (Westby, 1991).

## METHOD

### Scope

Based on the above, it is apparent that there is an interrelation between written discourse, decontextualized language, academic language and narrative discourse. That is, the narrative skills are related to and, at the same time, provide strong evidence about the children's later literacy development (Aukerman, 2007; Benson, 2009; Bishop & Edmundson, 1987; Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Paul & Smith, 1993; Peterson, 1994; Shiel et al., 2012). However, "there is wide variation in narrative skills according to children's backgrounds" (Peterson, 1994: 252), depicting the differences in language skills required and appreciated by school instructors. Given narrative assessment's important advantages in comparison with standarized tests, such as its independence from socioeconomic bias and the few constraints it places on children's language (Curenton & Lucas, 2007), we decided to investigate socially differentiated preschoolers' (toddlers: age 5-6) ability to produce fully-formed narratives, their proficiency in using oral narrative discourse and, finally, the connection (and, moreover, its intensity) of their narrative skills' level with, on the one hand, their social group of origin, and on the other hand, their gender within the same social group.

The literature review brought to surface data that locate the beginning of children's proficiency in mental representation of objects and internal states of people or story characters that are absent from the immediate context around age 3 or 4 (Ely, 2005; Curenton & Justice, 2004). Since this skill is a presupposition for using decontextualized language and for producing narrative discourse (Curenton & Justice, 2004), we derived our informers from the upper class of kindergarten (toddlers: age 5-6). Our sample consisted of thirty two (32) children, who were pupils of two public kindergarten schools in the area of Patras, equally separated in terms of gender and social status. The first kindergarten was in a region distinguished by its residents' high social status and the second one in a working class area. All participants were native speakers of Greek and they were, according to their teachers' evaluation, of expected language

and communication development. As far as children's family background is concerned, it was defined based on parents' educational level and work. We reviewed and analyzed the contents of each kindergarten's official archives, following Bogdan and Bilken's (2007) notes. The tool that we used was derived from the suggestions of Hasan (1989), Hasan and Cloran (1990) και Williams (1999), whose basic admission was that profession/occupation, education and income are both closely interrelated and all together related with and determinative of the social level of their "owners". We also modified partly this tool, in order to adjust it to the needs of our survey, by taking under consideration both parents' profession, instead of the original approach that was depending only to the mothers' profession. The informers were classified in two categories, according to the reliance or autonomy of their parents' profession from material basis: in the category of High Social Status were put students of Kindergarten 1 whose parents' professions were characterized as High Autonomy Professions (HAP), because they don't demand manual work but require mainly production of mental work (e.g. doctors, lawyers, businessmen, educators-teachers, civil engineers). On the other hand, the category of Low Social Status included those children of Kindergarten 2 whose parents' professions were ranked as Low Autonomy Professions (LAP), because they demand manual or some other kind of physical work (e.g. farmers, technicians, cleaners, engineers).

Table 1. *Presentation of the survey's sample in terms of gender and school/social status*

| | **Kindergarten 1 - Higher Sociocultural background** | **Kindergarten 2 - Lower Sociocultural background** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Boys** | 8 | 8 | 16 |
| **Girls** | 8 | 8 | 16 |
| **Total** | 16 | 16 | 32 |

To achieve our goals, we decided to *assess* (Shiel et al., 2012) the children's narrative skills in retelling oral, fictional narratives. Fictional narratives were chosen because, according to Curenton and Lucas (2007: 382), they typically follow the -familiar to children- format of storybooks/fairy tales/myths/fables, showing the narrator's ability in efficiently weaving together "*a plot that is based on events that are psychologically relevant to the characters in the story*". The elicitation technique used was that of "*story retelling*", in which the researcher tells a story to a child and then asks the child to repeat it, allowing one to examine story comprehension, memory and sense of story structure (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

To do so, we adopted Curenton and Lucas's (2007) proposition of discourse analysis named "*The Story Pyramid Framework*" because it sets under consideration the majority of narrative

features, using a model of three levels adjusted to the needs and the particularities of Greek language:

***Language structure level:***

The bottom level of the pyramid, examining "*children's ability to coherently weave together grammatical features and to use precise and diverse lexicon*" (Curenton & Lucas, 2007: 388). It consists of two parts:

***a) Grammatical complexity:*** which is a measure of the story's vividness, clearness and coherence. It was assessed by three tools:

**i)** Number of Communication Units (C-units)

The final outcome of a method of segmenting a narrative into grammatical units, following Curenton and Lucas's (2007: 389, 430) guidelines. They are indicative of the narrator's command of the clausal structure. C-units usually adhere to a clausal structure (i.e., a subject-predicate clause), consisting of:

- an independent clause
- an independent clause along with its dependent clause(s)
- As C-units were also considered statements that did not adhere to a clausal structure, if they were
- part of dialogues
- responses to (rhetorical) questions

It must be noted that an utterance was conceived -and therefore counted- as C-unit only if it was grammatically correct, considering the young age of the narrators and the oral nature of the narratives, which not seldom results in producing syntactically incomplete utterances. Hence, a syntactically incomplete utterance was considered grammatically correct if it was able to transmit a message/meaning outright.

**ii)** Mean Length of C-unit (MLCU)

An index of the narrator's skill to modify clauses. It was calculated by dividing the total number of words per C-unit by the total number of C-units.

**iii)** Usage rate of Literate Language Features (LLF)

The usage rate of Literate Language Features demonstrates the specific devices (types of grammatical features) a narrator uses to modify clauses. It was calculated by dividing the

number of each feature by the total number of C-units. As Literate Language Features (L.L.F.) were considered the following (Curenton & Justice, 2004; Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Benson, 2009; Shiel et al., 2012):

- Elaborated noun phrases: Groups of words consisting of a noun at their heads and one or more modifiers, i.e. words that provide additional information about the noun and define more accurately the description of the character/object/event. Modifiers include articles, adjectives, possessives, demonstratives, quantifiers, pronouns and other devices in Greek language.
- As long as it concerns this study, we decided to calculate as elaborated noun phrases only the **complex** ones, i.e. those that consist of a noun and at least two modifiers.
- Adverbs: Verb modifiers that increase the explicitness of action and event descriptions by providing additional information about time, manner, degree, place, reason, affirmation or negation.
- Additionally, we considered as adverb every **prepositional adverbial phrase**, i.e. every phrase functioning as adverb, by modifying a verb or another adverb.
- Conjunctions (coordinating & subordinating): They organize (logically and chronologically) information and clarify relationships among elements.
- Mental/linguistic verbs: Verbs that refer to various acts of thinking and speaking, providing information about the psychological state of the narrative's characters.

***b) Lexical diversity***: A measure of someone's expression vocabulary size. It was assessed by calculating the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), i.e. by dividing the total number of different words by the total number of a narrative's words.

***Story structure level:***

The medium level of the pyramid, which correlates the story's events temporally, spatially and causally, assisting the listener's comprehension. It was assessed by the Labovian High-Point Analysis System, as it was extended and modified by McCabe and her colleagues and presented by Curenton and Lucas (2007). The above system includes the following structural patterns, presented in descending order of structural complexity:

- Classic Narrative: the story builds to a climax, evaluates the climax and resolves it.
- End-at-High-Point Narrative: the story builds up to and then ends at an unresolved climax.

- Leapfrog Narrative: the story jumps from one related event to the other, leaving out major events
- Chronological Narrative: the narrator simply describes a sequence of events related temporally but not spatially.
- Two-Event Narrative: it consists of only two events, not enough to build a climax.
- Disoriented Narrative: a story confusing and difficult to comprehend.
- Miscellaneous Narrative: any story that is not classified in the previous categories.

***Psychological structure level:***

The upper level of the pyramid, which *"demonstrates children's understanding of the characters' goals, thoughts and feelings*" (Curenton & Lucas, 2007: 398). It was assessed by a combination of two methods: On the one hand, by counting the total number of Internal State Terms of each narrative, i.e. "*words or phrases that relate to beliefs, desires, emotions, intentions or motives"* (Curenton & Lucas, 2007: 399). On the other hand, by a supplemental method proposed by Curenton & Lucas (2007) based on Bruner's assumption that all fully-formed narratives contain, weave together and articulate the Action and the Consciousness Landscapes, the first of which consists of information about the plot, the setting and events in the story and the second includes information about the characters' psychological/mental states, motives, emotions, desires, thoughts and goals. Essentially, this level was considered fulfilled when a story contained internal state terms, woven together coherently in order to create interpretations of primary importance for the characters' internal states, showing obviously the narrator's deep empathy.

**Data Collection and Procedure of Analysis**

The survey took place in two public kindergarten schools, operating in the region of Patra, Achaia in Greece in spring 2016. The researcher visited each kindergarten four (4) times, with the permission of the authorities. During the first visit, the researcher informed the teachers about the research, gained access to the school archives, picked up the place where he would conduct the interviews, picked up the participants (by drew among those who qualified the social criteria) and tried to create intimacy and trust between him and the participants by spending time with them. During the later visits, the researcher collected the data (i.e. the oral narratives) by conducting and recording (a digital voice recorder was used) ten-minute, personal, face to face, unstructured, in-depth interviews, always keeping in mind the ethical

commitments (British Educational Research Association, 2011; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

The tool used to elicit the narratives during the interviews was a made-up book we created. The book consisted of the hard (back and front) cover and eight (8) selected pictures from the illustration of the translated into Greek storybook "*Gros cochon: Ou un joli bouquet de papiers gras"* (author: Taï-Marc Le Thanh, Illustrator: Rebecca Dautremer), giving the impression of a "real" storybook. Below the pictures was put text, compatible with informers' expected developmental level of language skills. The text was a short narrative that included the creation of a problematic state, its main character's involvement and acting and, finally, a resolution, while at the same time the characters' actions were appropriate/ convenient for the production of internal state terms and psychological structure. Finally, after the child had finished its narrative retelling, the interviewer asked him/her the same question about the protagonist's internal state, as a verification of the psychological comprehension. The researcher was reading the story, while he was browsing the book along with the child and then he was asking him/her to browse the book and to repeat the story -if possible, without any changes- based on the illustration. The researcher's attitude during the child's narration was neutral, avoiding any verbal intervention in order not to influence the data, except from using predefined, general and neutral verbal prompts when the child asked for some help to proceed.

After the data collection, the researcher proceeded to the analysis, following the next steps for each of the 32 participants:

- Transcription of each narrative verbatim, including the interviewer's comments and/or interventions.
- Deletion of specific utterances using distinct deletion, following Curenton and Lucas's (2007) instructions.
- Segmentation of each narrative in C-units, and then count of C-units (including, but also counted separately, the incomplete C-units).

*Language Structure Level*

- Count of the total number of each narrative's words & deletion and count of the total number of different words among them.
- Detection, highlight (with use of specific marking for each one) and count of the realizations both of each Literate Language Feature (LLF) and of the Internal State Terms (IST).

- Insertion of the data in tables of Microsoft Excel worksheets & calculation of the usage rate of Literate Language Features (LLF) and the Lexical Diversity.

*Story structure level*

- Assessment and classification of each narrative's Story Structure Level.

*Psychological structure level*

- Examination of whether their Psychological Structure Level was fulfilled or not.
- Insertion of the elaborated data in tables of Microsoft Excel worksheets.
- Repetition of the procedure (1 ή more times), in order to ensure the correctness of the analysis & to find and correct mistakes or omissions.

*Final assessment*

Final assessment and categorization for each of the totally 32 narratives, according to its level of completeness, taken into account the above elements. Curenton και Lucas's (2007) proposition was followed, which includes the below categories (presented in ascending order of complexity/completeness):

- No Foundation Pyramid
- Basic Pyramid
- Intermediate Pyramid
- Complex Pyramid

## RESULTS

For the purpose of analysis, the data was transferred in numbers the results were inserted in tables and were summarized as follows (see Appendix A and B), in order to render the final analysis feasible:

*Comparative analysis between high & low social status informers (see Table 4)*

At the **Language Structure Level**, the findings suggest that, on the one hand, high social status informers outmatch their socially disadvantaged peers in all the investigated aspects of grammatical complexity, with the intensity of the diversification ranging among the categories, while on the other hand low social status participants seem to display higher lexical diversity.

As long as it concerns the **Story Structure Level**, there were detected additional indications supporting the conviction of high social status children's superiority. Specifically, their majority (10 out of 16) produced stories of the most structurally elaborated category (Classic narratives),

while 3 came close enough to complete their stories by producing End-At-High-Point narratives and the remaining 3 narrated stories of low structural completeness (Disoriented narratives). At the contrary, less than half of the low social status children (7 out of 16) created Classic narratives, while the rest (9 out of 16) failed to produce structurally complete narratives and their stories were categorized as follows: 3 Leapfrog narratives, 4 Disoriented narratives and 2 End-At-High-Point narratives.

In what has to do with the **Psychological Structure Level**, it seems like the high social status once again outdistance their low social status peers by using more internal state terms in their narratives. Furthermore, their difference was illustrated explicitly from the fact that Action and Consciousness Landscapes were woven together in 12 high social status children's narratives, showing deep empathy to the protagonists' internal/psychological states. At the same time, only 50% of low social status participants managed to fulfill the psychological structure level in their stories.

Lastly, **the final assessment** supports the assumption that all participants are capable of organizing their narratives in communication units, as long as none No Foundation Pyramid was found. Beyond this, most of high social status children's narratives reached the higher level of completeness (75%, or 12 out of 16) and were categorized as Complex Pyramid narratives, when at the same time only half of the socially deprived informers produced stories of the same category. In other words, there is a substantial difference in the number of children who have conquered the ability to produce narratives of the highest level of elaboration and completeness, which seems to be related to their social background and shows the predominance of those who originate from the high social status category.

*Comparative analysis between genders for high social status informers (see Table 3)*

**Language Structure Level**: The findings suggest that the differences among genders exist, but are not of essential importance. The most important difference is observed at the mean number of C-units and is in favor of females, who produce 5 C-units more than males on average. The remaining deviations are negligible.

**Story Structure Level**: The differences among genders at this level of structural elaboration are equally lank. The exact same number of males and females (5 out of 8) produced Classic narratives. The remaining narratives were positioned in 2 categories: 2 males' and 1 female's narratives in End-At-High-Point narrative category and 2 females' and 1 male's narratives in Disoriented narrative category.

**Psychological Structure Level**: Once again, an agreement emerged between the abilities of the participants of both genders. The exact same number of males and females (6 out of 8) succeeded in articulating coherently the Action and Consciousness Landscapes of their narratives, despite the fact that females used on average 1 internal state term more than males.

As a direct consequence of the above, **the final assessment** showed that 6 out of 8 children of each gender created Complex Pyramid stories.

*Comparative analysis between genders for low social status informers (see Table 2)*

At the **Language Structure Level**, the findings seem to uncover some differences between genders, although these are few and not significant. The wider divergence was in favor of females, who produced more than 1 C-units more than males. The results in the other categories under examination seemed confused, with males briefly surpassing females and vice versa.

As long as it concerns the **Story Structure Level**, there were indications supporting that variations between genders were more intense and in favor of females, whose majority (5 out of 8) produced Classic narratives. In contrast, only 2 out of 8 males composed stories of this level of structural completeness. The rest informers produced less coherent and structurally elaborated narratives.

The results of **Psychological Structure Level's** analysis provided evidence that once again support females' primacy. Females seemed to be more capable of addressing this level, since 5 out of 8 wove together the Action and Consciousness Landscapes, in opposition with 3 out of 8 males who managed the same, in spite of the fact that both genders used the exact same number of internal state terms in their narratives.

In conclusion, **the final assessment** indicates that most of females (5 out of 8) created narratives that were classified as Complex Pyramid narratives, while only 3 out of 8 males who achieved the same level of completeness.

## CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

The results derived from the data elaboration procedure provide evidence that seem to confirm that the majority of toddlers between their 5th-6th year of age are capable of constructing fully-formed narratives, assessed as Complex Pyramid Narratives. Specifically, all participants covered -more or less- successfully the Language Structure Level. Moreover, the majority of children (25 out of 32) achieved to address the Story Structure Level, even by composing low proficiency narratives. The Psychological Structure Level seemed more challenging, but was

covered successfully from 62,5% (20 out of 32) of the informers, an observation consistent with previous studies (e.g. Curenton, 2004). This observation functioned as the main criterion for the final assessment of the narratives' degree of completeness, as a result of which we concluded that most of the children (20 out of 32) seemed like they managed to compose complete narratives when asked to retell a story.

The overview of the previous analysis regarding the narrative skills of socially differentiated preschoolers in retelling oral narratives leads us to the assumption that there seems to be significant evidence confirming that there is a correlation between children's narrative skills and their social background status. Especially, it seems plausible to assume that children coming from the high social status category display more advanced developmental skills in the production of oral narratives of the highest level of elaboration and completeness, in comparison with their peers that originate from backgrounds of lower social status. This conclusion seems to confirm previous studies' reports that "*demonstrate clear differences by SES in relation to children's use of literate language features in the school context (Corson, 1983; Cregan 2007; Cregan, 2010)*" (Shiel et al., 2012: 193) and support disadvantaged children's difficulty with discourse-related tasks such as retelling stories and giving oral narratives (for instance, Shiel et al., 2012). Furthermore, the present findings seem to highlight an intense connection between children's narrative skills in retelling stories and their social class of origin in favor of those who come from the high social status category, as far as it was found that 75% of them (12 out of 16) created Complex Pyramid narratives, when at the same time only 50% (8 out of 16) of their peers from low social status backgrounds created stories of the same degree of completeness. The latter conclusion can be attributed to numerous causes that were not investigated in the present study, such as the ones detected by Finger (2007).

Finally, the findings of the study seem to advocate the conclusion that the differences between genders' narrative skills within the same social status group, either on the one hand seem to hardly exist in the case of high social status category, or on the other hand seem to exist in favor of females in the case of low social status group, but even then, their intensity seems to be quite low. In conclusion, the narrative skills of children coming from similar social backgrounds seem to share -almost- the same degree of complexity and integration, regardless of their gender.

At this point, it should be noted that our choice to assess lexical diversity by calculating the Type-Token Ratio (TTR) was ambiguous from the beginning. The results are obviously susceptible to the narrative length, since this ratio, as any other quotient, increases in inverse

proportion to the increase of the divider. Thus, the shorter narratives of socially disadvantaged children are more likely to provide increased TTR. The above, along with other limitations impose that additional measures of lexical diversity should be utilized to assess the ways in which children use their vocabulary (Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Our decision to overlook these limitations was based on the fact that the fulfillment of the Language Structure Level was expected, so our attention was focused on the Story and Structure Levels.

The small number of informers also sets limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from this research, although the sample could be considered typical of the social categories it stands for in Greek society. Furthermore, we argue that the technique used to derive and assess children's narrative skills seems realistic and applicable to pre-primary aged children.

In conclusion, with this survey we aspire to evince the major importance of social status's impact on preschoolers' narrative skills, as a precursor of their later literacy and academic proficiency and achievement. Hopefully, this could contribute to the efforts of upgrading the family literacy methods and practices through relevant programs, in order to assist children to develop their academic language skills and to succeed in formal education institutions. Equally important outcome is the primary school teachers' understanding that children enter school with different language skills. This understanding, in combination with the literature's claim that "*the construct of academic language must be viewed as another linguistic register, no more complex or more difficult to acquire than any other register*" (Shiel et al., 2012: 196), we hope will lead them to direct their efforts in helping all children succeed in school by exploiting everyone's abilities and skills. Finally, we anticipate that our survey will give rise to the educational authorities to realize the urgent need of providing in-service kindergarten teachers specialized educational programs about early literacy development (Stellakis, 2012), in order to support them in their effort to strengthen children's emergent literacy and preparation for their entrance in school.

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## APPENDIX A: TABLES OF RESULTS

Table 2. *Presentation of low social status informers' results per gender (students of Kindergarten 2)*

| TABLE OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN GENDERS FOR LOW SOCIAL STATUS INFORMERS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GENDER** | **LANGUAGE STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **STORY STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | **FINAL ASSESSMENT** | | | |
| | GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY | | | | | | LEXICAL DIVERSITY (T.T.R.) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N.C.U. | A.N.W.P.C.U. | U.R.E.N.P. | U.R.A./P.N.P. | U.R.C. | U.R.M.L.V. | | CL | E.H.P | L | CH | 2E | D | M | T.N.I.S.T. | A.C.L.W.T. | C | I | B | N.F. |
| **FEMALES** | 11,38 | 5,66 | 0,22 | 0,49 | 0,79 | 0,31 | 0,49 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2,38 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| **MALES** | 10,25 | 5,78 | 0,11 | 0,54 | 0,81 | 0,23 | 0,52 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2,38 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 |

Table 3. *Presentation of high social status informers' results per gender (students of Kindergarten 1)*

| TABLE OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN GENDERS FOR HIGH SOCIAL STATUS INFORMERS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GENDER** | **LANGUAGE STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **STORY STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | **FINAL ASSESSMENT** | | | |
| | GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY | | | | | | LEXICAL DIVERSITY (T.T.R.) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N.C.U. | A.N.W.P.C.U. | U.R.E.N.P. | U.R.A./P.N.P. | U.R.C. | U.R.M.L.V. | | CL | E.H.P | L | CH | 2E | D | M | T.N.I.S.T. | A.C.L.W.T. | C | I | B | N.F. |
| **FEMALES** | 15,25 | 6,48 | 0,27 | 0,72 | 1,12 | 0,34 | 0,45 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4,25 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| **MALES** | 10,25 | 7,69 | 0,28 | 0,75 | 0,96 | 0,41 | 0,47 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3,13 | 6 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 0 |

Table 4. *Comparative presentation of high and low social status informers' results*

| TABLE OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN HIGH & LOW SOCIAL STATUS INFORMERS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SOCIAL STATUS** | **LANGUAGE STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **STORY STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | | | | | | **PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE LEVEL** | | **FINAL ASSESSMENT** | | | |
| | GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY | | | | | | LEXICAL DIVERSITY (T.T.R.) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N.C.U. | A.N.W.P.C.U. | U.R.E.N.P. | U.R.A./P.N.P. | U.R.C. | U.R.M.L.V. | | CL | E.H.P. | L | CH | 2E | D | M | T.N.I.S.T. | A.C.L.W.T. | C | I | B | N.F. |
| **LOW** | 10,81 | 5,72 | 0,16 | 0,51 | 0,80 | 0,27 | 0,50 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 2,38 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 6 | 0 |
| **HIGH** | 12,75 | 7,08 | 0,27 | 0,74 | 1,04 | 0,38 | 0,46 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3,69 | 12 | 12 | 1 | 3 | 0 |

## APPENDIX B: AMPLIFICATION OF ACRONYMS

- **N.C.U.:** Number of C-units
- **A.N.W.P.C.U.:** Average Number of Words Per C-unit
- **U.R.E.N.P.:** Usage Rate of Elaborated Noun Phrases
- **U.R.A./P.N.P.:** Usage Rate of Adverbs / Prepositional Adverbial Phrases
- **U.R.C.:** Usage Rate of Conjunctions
- **U.R.M.L.V.:** Usage Rate of Mental-Linguistic Verbs
- **CL:** Classic Narrative
- **E.H.P.:** End-at-High-Point Narrative
- **L:** Leapfrog Narrative
- **CH:** Chronological Narrative
- **2E:** Two-Event Narrative
- **D:** Disoriented Narrative
- **M:** Miscellaneous Narrative
- **T.N.I.S.T.:** Total Number of Internal State Terms
- **A.C.L.W.T.:** Action-Consciousness Landscapes Woven Together
- **C :** Complex Pyramid
- **I :** Intermediate Pyramid
- **B :** Basic Pyramid
- **N.F. :** No Foundation Pyramid