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Same situation, different goals: Exploring how people construct stories from streams of experience

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Abstract

People tell stories to impose coherence on the continuous stream of everyday experience. But there are countless ways of narrativizing the same situation. How do we decide which features to gloss over, which features to elaborate on, and what order to recount them in? Here, we explore the hypothesis that people systematically adapt narratives with respect to their communicative goals. In one experiment (N=273), participants watched Heider-Simmel style animations and were asked to tell a story about what is happening in each video. They were randomly assigned to one of three goals: to tell a generic story, to chronicle the events like a reporter, or to share a juicy piece of gossip. We present a series of exploratory natural language analyses examining how these goals shape stories. Chronicles are more detailed relative to gossip, but gossip references more high-level social features. These findings underscore how Gricean principles of relevance drive storytelling.