7
Gender, Age and Narrative Development

Age as a sociolinguistic variable

This chapter turns to another situation in which the role of gender as a variable in storytelling style continues to be debated and may be of significant social and political consequence. This is the storytelling of children, told in an educational context. Children’s storytelling is an important area, for, as of yet, feminist narratology has primarily analyzed stories by adult tellers or for an adult audience. However, research indicates that the stories told by children may vary considerably compared with those by adult tellers (Eaton Collis and Lewis, 1999; Lambrou, 2005). Therefore children’s stories provide an important area of contrast against which the assumptions and models of narratology may be explored from a feminist perspective. This analysis once again takes feminist narratology beyond the description of narrative form alone into questioning the reasons for and consequences of variation in narrative, for children’s storytelling is intertwined with matters of literacy, which in turn is crucially related to power. Various studies have shown that within educational settings, certain forms of discourse become privileged while others may be undervalued or even excluded (Scollon and Scollon, 1984; Michaels, 1991; McDonald and McNaughton, 1999). As narrative is an important resource for expressing cultural values and a means by which an individual may perform their identity (which incorporates aspects of gender, ethnicity, class and so on), this privileging or exclusion is by no means neutral and may be ideologically significant. The outcome of such distinctions may have long-term consequences not only for an individual’s sense of identity but also for their academic achievement. Whether this involves isolated individuals or wider groups of people distinguished on the
basis of their gender, race or cultural background, such variation deserves closer attention.

During the last two decades, there has been a wealth of research that has examined the various ways in which children acquire narrative skills, indicating a wide range of influential factors. This includes sociolinguistic parameters of gender (Barwood, 2001; Prochnow et al., 2001; Dutro, 2003) and cultural background (Michaels, 1981, 1991; Wang and Leichtman, 2000; Harkins and Ray, 2004). Narrative performance may also vary according to type of text (Rosen, 2001), the topic of the narrative (McCabe and Peterson, 1990; Tenenbaum et al., 2005) and the situation in which the narrative gets told (Aldridge and Wood, 1999; Eaton, Collis and Lewis, 1999). These studies readily demonstrate that narrative is not universal in its form, nor in the ways that it might be acquired. The place of gender in this picture is no less complex. Some of the now classic accounts of children’s narrative development do not differentiate the children’s narrative abilities according to gender at all (for example, Ker nan, 1977; Peterson and McCabe, 1991). Where gender is included as a variable, the literature indicates some debate as to whether or not this makes a significant difference, as summarized in Rosen (2001: 7–8). Some studies indicate more points of similarity than difference (Worthy, Moorman and Turner, 1999; Prochnow et al., 2001), while others point to important contrasts (Tenenbaum et al., 2005). As Rosen’s (2001) wide-ranging and thorough survey of literacy achievement indicates, the difference in narrative abilities according to gender varies from country to country. So while the role of gender remains of critical importance in studies of narrative and literacy (Dutro, 2003: 467), it is clear that it cannot be treated in an essentialist way and mapped onto linguistic behaviour in a one-to-one fashion. If feminist narratology is to explore the narratives told by young women and girls, it must do so in a way that remains sensitive to this multicultural variation.

**Literacy in New Zealand schools**

New Zealand is one country in which gender does seem to make a significant difference to the literacy achievements of its school students. Wilkinson (1998) reports on the International Association of Educational Achievement (IEA) survey of 1990–1991. He notes that among all the countries who participated, New Zealand ‘showed the second largest difference in achievement between girls and boys in primary school’ for their reading literacy (p. 145). Alongside this, New Zealand