Grammar and psycho-social cognition data elicitation
Picture-sequencing task: ‘Family problems’ story

This information last updated 23 February, 2011 (by Lila San Roque)

The main aim of the picture task is to record rich data about a wide range of categories relevant to psycho-social cognition, including both narrative and interactive material. A focus within this is to elicit data that includes a high amount of speech and thought reporting, reference to emotion, and/or is collected in situations of explicit knowledge symmetry and asymmetry (i.e., where it is clear to all that the speech event participants do/do not all have access to the same information simultaneously). Material from the picture task can contribute to a wide range of studies, for example concerning comparative narratology, information structure, cultural tropes, and the effects of rehearsal on performance, among many others.

THE PICTURES
The ‘family problems’ story materials consist of 16 picture cards. These illustrate events that can fit together as a narrative in which a man gets drunk and hits his wife, is arrested, goes to jail, and eventually returns home. Participants in the task talk about the pictures and arrange them (on a flat surface) to form a coherent story.

Although the story was originally planned with the pictures occurring in a particular sequence, many different arrangements of the pictures are possible. This is not a problem, as the main aims of the task are compatible with any activity where people talk about the pictures, regardless of any order that they put them in. In one trial of the task a participant spread the pictures out without any linear order, and described them as a group that together represented troubles and dramas that he (or his family members, etc.) had experienced. This kind of response is fine, too. However, participants should also be encouraged to describe the pictures as forming a narrative at some point in the session.

The pictures have a set presentation order (i.e., the order in which they should be handed to participants). Remember to make sure the pictures are in this order before you start the task.

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PARTICIPANTS
The pictures deal with situations of alcohol abuse and family violence that are extreme to some communities, but viewed as quite typical by others. Individual researchers and their language consultants should assess whether these themes are appropriate for viewing and discussion by all community members, and select participants accordingly.

It must be made clear to the participants that they are being audio- and video-recorded, and that, depending on the permissions they give, other people may have access to these recordings.

Ideally participants will:
- enjoy and get involved in the task.
- empathise with the characters and situations.
- understand the graphic conventions (speech and thought bubbles).
- understand the task specifications (breakdown into subtasks; ordering of pictures; distribution between monologic and dialogic subtasks).
- talk freely, vividly, and unselfconsciously.

As an absolute minimum, running any version of the picture task requires two participants, A and B. Running the full set-up requires at least one more person (C) who has not seen the pictures before.

If possible, pair up people that do not have typically asymmetrical roles in this kind of talking/presenting scenario. For example, in a Highland New Guinea context it will generally be better for A and B to be a same-sex peer pair, as in mixed-sex/age pairs it is more likely that one participant will dominate the session and talk much more than the other participant.

You may also need someone (e.g., a field consultant) to help you explain the task to the participants, and be in control of handing each card over. If so, make sure this person has a good understanding of the task procedure and understands the convention of speech/thought bubbles so that they can explain this as necessary.

TASK PROCEDURE
There are two different ways to run the picture task, Set-up 1 (the main method) and Set-up 2. If the number of possible participants is very small, run Set-up 1 only.

Set-up 1 (Main task)
Participants A and B are given the pictures one at a time and asked to describe what is in each and then arrange them as a narrative. After this participants are asked to (re)tell the story in various ways.

The four different steps of Set-up1 and wordings for suggested instructions are as follows.

1. Individual card descriptions
   ‘I’m giving you some pictures, one at a time, and I want you to tell me what they’re about. Please describe what’s happening.’
   Note: Don’t tell people at this point that the pictures make up a single story; let them figure this out as they go.
2. Arranging into order
‘Now please put these pictures in an order where it makes a story. There are lots of different possible stories - just choose whichever way you think works best.’

3. Conventional third person telling with the pictures to an (if possible, naïve) audience.
‘Now tell [participant C] the story in the pictures.’

4. First person tellings
‘Now (re)tell it, pretending you are one of the people in the story. Explain what’s been going on in your life.’
(If the speakers alternatively chose to tell a first person narrative at step 3, prompt a third-person telling now. Different speakers may also choose to take the point of view of different characters (e.g., the man, the woman, the child) and each present ‘their’ version of the story.)

Set-up 2 (‘Back-to-back’)
This set-up should be undertaken with participants other than those who have done set-up 1, and uses a much-reduced set of five pictures (5, 7, 9, 12, 15).

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Participant A holds the pictures in such a way that B cannot see them (e.g., the participants are sitting back-to-back). Participant A describes what is happening in the five pictures and B, based entirely on A’s description, must direct A how to lay out the pictures from first to fifth. After this B gets to look at the pictures and the pair can together retell the story as a whole.

1. Participant A describes the pictures
‘[Participant A], explain to [Participant B] what is happening in each of the five pictures.’

2. Participant B masterminds the arrangement of the pictures
‘[Participant B], tell [Participant A] what order the pictures go in order to make a story. Ask any questions you like.’

3. Telling the story
‘Now both of you look at the pictures and tell the whole story together.’

**RECORDING**
Where possible the task should be recorded with both video and audio equipment. Ideally the camera will be positioned so as to capture both participants and the surface that the pictures are laid out on. If two cameras are available then one can be used to film the picture arrangement (e.g., suspended above the pictures) and the other camera can cover the participants. Or, if following Set-up 2, one camera can film each participant.
A separate (pictorial or written) record should be made of the order the pictures end up in (e.g., by taking a photograph of the layout at the end of the session).

If you are recording in parallel remember to:
- wait until you have turned on all devices before slating the recording
- make a sharp noise/gesture (e.g. a clap or tap) to assist in synchronising the different recordings later.

ARCHIVING
Researchers who undertake the picture task will be expected to lodge their recordings in a central archive and encouraged to share their data with other researchers for the purposes of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison. Specific access rights are to be determined by the researcher and those who appear in the recordings (or their family members or executors), as per usual archiving practice.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACTS
The illustrations are the work of Alice Carroll (http://alicecarroll.net/) and the picture task should be cited as follows:

Carroll, Alice, Nicholas Evans, Darja Hoenigman and Lila San Roque. 2009. The family problems picture task. Designed for use by the Social Cognition and Language Project. A collaboration of The Australian National University, Griffith University, University of Melbourne and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.

If you are thinking of running the picture task, or have questions about it, please contact one of the following people:
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You may find that additional variations of the task are especially suitable for the community you are working with, or useful for investigating particular aspects of language or culture that you are interested in. If you develop a new way of running the task or using the pictures, please let us know about it! Thank you.