Story-builder: A Language Tool for Documentation and Teaching
Katie Sardinha, UC Berkeley

What it is
Story-builder is a set of picture cards for language activities.

The cards are specially designed to facilitate creative story-telling and to get speakers producing natural speech on a wide range of topics.

Story-builder was developed with both language-learning communities and research linguists in mind. It can be adapted for many uses, from language-learning games, to linguistic fieldwork.

Because it is picture-based, Story-builder can be used with any language, or in multi-lingual contexts.

The Deck
The 62-card Story-builder deck contains 7 ‘character cards’ (and matching ‘character tokens’) and 55 ‘action cards’.

Character cards depict a character who is female or male, adult or child, or infeline. These are the protagonists of stories – the people that stories can be told about. In addition to using the character cards, speakers can tell stories from their own perspective (‘I…’), and can include their pears (‘you…’, ‘my friend Dory…’ etc.).

Character tokens are miniature versions of the character cards. These can be optionally placed on top of other cards and used as memory devices to help remember who did-what when telling longer stories.

Action cards represent ‘actions’ or ‘events’; they are the pieces of a story. Just like beads can be strung together on a sequence to create a necklace, action cards can be strung together in a sequence to visually and narrate a story. Each action card can be thought of as representing a verb or phrase. For instance, the following cards represent the verbs ‘to laugh’ and ‘to be angry’:

Example:

1. “The Story:” (1) “So there’s this man named Bill.” (2) “Now he really likes cookies. So he decides to go to the store to buy some.” (3) “When he got home he started to hide them in his closet, because he didn’t want to let anybody know he had them, or else he would have to share.” (4) “But just then, he heard someone coming.” (5) “It was his sister, and she was walking down the hall singing.” (6) “So he got out of there quick, and he brought the cookies with him so he could hide them somewhere else – maybe in the shed.” (7) “But his sister saw him sneaking out the window and started laughing at him, because she knew exactly what he was up to.”

Verbs Represented in the deck
The Story-builder deck has been designed to visually represent basic verbs from across the semantic spectrum. This means that the 55 verbal concepts depicted in the action cards represent a wide selection of meanings. The meanings depicted are also those that are likely to occur in many of the world’s languages, making the cards useful for cross-linguistic use and comparison.

• For language teachers, this means playing with the cards exposes students to a wide variety of verb types for efficient language learning.

• For linguists, this means the Story-builder deck is particularly well suited to studying verb classes and argument structure.

• For language documentation, Story-builder can be used to elicit speech on a wide range of topics, involving many sentence types.

“Story-building” explained
“Story-building” is the process of using character cards and action cards to create a visual story. It involves two types of moves:

1. First, a character card is chosen and placed down on the playing surface in order to represent the main character of the story-to-be.

2. Next, action cards are placed alongside the character card in sequence; stories are narrated by relating the events depicted in the action cards with the story’s character(s).

The only rule that speakers follow in telling their stories is that they must express a word or phrase that relates to what is depicted on each action card. Aside from this, speakers are free to improvise and embellish their stories as much as desired. Story-building works best if speakers are allowed to introduce additional characters at any point in their story. Character tokens can optionally be used to represent these new characters.

Example Activities

Pick-1

Speakers simply take turns picking an action card (either randomly or by choice) and making up a short story description, or narrative involving the verb or phrase represented on the card.

Examples:

- The Story: “Once upon a time there was a wild animal. It was a bear. It was living in the woods. It was very hungry. It was looking for food when it heard a noise. It was afraid. It was run away. It was so scared that it started to cry.”

- However, speakers can be encouraged to use other cards to embellish their story. Example: “The bear was very thirsty. It was looking for water. It was finding a stream. It was drinking. It was very happy.”

Pick-2

Speakers pick 3 action cards and use them to create short stories.

Variations:

- Challenge speakers to pick 2 action cards or flash cards with other speakers to create new stories.

- Have speakers pick their 3 action cards together to create longer stories.

Group Story-building

Have speakers work together in pairs, small groups, or on one large group to cooperatively build stories. Speakers take turns adding one action card to the card or cards of their choice. Each chosen card is then placed on the playing surface in sequence and 

Multi-player Competitive Game

There are many ways to combine creative story-telling with an element of competitive fun. Below are examples of 4-5 player (per deck) competitive games. Core Idea: A participant is able to keep a card in their hand, but only if they can quickly and accurately name the verb or phrase depicted on the card.

- Example Rule Set:

1. Pick 3 cards to match a verb or phrase. The cards may be from the picture or flash cards, or from the same group.

2. Players take turns picking a card from the deck. Each card has a verb or phrase depicted on it.

3. Players try to match the verb or phrase on the card to one of their 3 cards. At the same time, they must tell the story that the card represents.

4. If the card is matched (even though the story may not be accurate), the player must give up a card from their hand. If the card cannot be matched, the player gets to keep their cards.

Example:

- The Story: “Once upon a time there was a wild animal. It was a bear. It was living in the woods. It was very hungry. It was looking for food when it heard a noise. It was afraid. It was run away. It was so scared that it started to cry.”

Example:

- The bear was very thirsty. It was looking for water. It was finding a stream. It was drinking. It was very happy.”

- However, speakers can be encouraged to use other cards to embellish their story. Example: “The bear was very thirsty. It was looking for water. It was finding a stream. It was drinking. It was very happy.”

Tips for classroom use
1. Students may need to get used to acquiring the cards and associating vocabulary. For less advanced language learners, teachers may wish to introduce only a few cards per lesson. In this way, students may gradually build their vocabulary until they are able to use a word or phrase to describe each action card.

2. It may also be helpful for teachers and/or students to select just one or two specific translations to learn for each action card. These translations can be written on the back of cards (and erased later if the card is laminated) so that if a student forgets a translation, he or she can just turn the card over. When working with more advanced students, teachers can allow more freedom in interpreting the cards.

3. If desk space is limited, try making the cards into magnets.

Acknowledgments:
Story-builder began as a Cognitive Systems 402 research project in 2011 at the University of British Columbia. Special thanks to Henry Davis, for supervising the project, and to Eric Valenzuela-Bream and the Code 402 class for providing helpful feedback on the work. I am very grateful to the many volunteers who helped during research phases, especially my Kwak’wala language consultants, RDC, VB, JN, and MH. Kwak’wala fieldwork was supplied by a Jacobs Grant and an SSHRC grant awarded to Henry Davis.

For Teachers
The Story-builder card set can be adapted into many different games and activities conducive to language teaching. Games and activities can involve whole language classes, small groups of students, or individual students.

Story-builder is especially useful for intermediate-to-advanced language learners who are learning how to connect ideas and sentences into larger stories and discourses.

Beginners in a language can use Story-builder cards as flash cards for increasing their vocabulary.

Story-builder is well suited to conversation-based classes.

Game/Activity ideas:
flash-cards, small-groups story-telling, question-and-answer games, memory, picture charades, songs, narrated skills.

For Linguists
Story-builder is a useful and adaptable tool both for research linguists investigating the structure of a particular language and for language documenters collecting diverse sentence types, genres, and vocabulary.

Methodological advantages:
1. Story-builder cards can be used to create discourse contexts within which to elicit specific language data. Because discourse contexts are constructed visually, they delimit their own spatio-temporal framework. This means that language consultants are less likely to be confused or influenced by contexts introduced previously.

2. Language data can be elicited directly in the target language without interference from the model language.

3. Story-builder helps to elicit spontaneous, natural speech with one or more speakers.

4. Being picture-based, data elicited with Story-builder cards are amenable to cross-linguistic comparison.

5. Using Story-builder is a fun way to break up tedious elicitation sessions, and is a good resource to have on hand in case there is time to spare in a session.

6. Language consultants tend to enjoy working with the cards. The cards help consultants “think through” difficult constructions and allow them to be creative story-tellers.

For Researchers
Story-builder is a useful tool for research linguists investigating the structure of a particular language and for language documenters collecting diverse sentence types, genres, and vocabulary.

Using Story-builder is a fun way to break up tedious elicitation sessions, and is a good resource to have on hand in case there is time to spare in a session.

Language consultants tend to enjoy working with the cards. The cards help consultants “think through” difficult constructions and allow them to be creative story-tellers.

Acknowledgments:
Story-builder began as a Cognitive Systems 402 research project in 2011 at the University of British Columbia. Special thanks to Henry Davis, for supervising the project, and to Eric Valenzuela-Bream and the Code 402 class for providing helpful feedback on the work. I am very grateful to the many volunteers who helped during research phases, especially my Kwak’wala language consultants, RDC, VB, JN, and MH. Kwak’wala fieldwork was supported by a Jacobs Grant and an SSHRC grant awarded to Henry Davis.

www.story-builder.ca

Story-builder is distributed freely under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License. To download the cards and user manual, visit...