Later Language Development: Syntactic Packaging in Written and Spoken French

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ABSTRACT. Producing a text requires planning at a number of different levels, among them being the choice of syntactic packaging for combining propositions. Syntactic links (juxtaposition, coordination and subordination) used by French-speaking children and adolescents in written and spoken texts will be examined. Our goal is to show how syntactic connectivity is affected by text genre (narrative and expository), modality of production (written and spoken discourse) and age.

1 Introduction

The analysis presented here focuses on syntactic connections in the written and spoken expository and written and spoken narrative productions of three different age groups of 40 subjects each (10- , 12-, and 15-year-olds). Previous studies on middle-class children facing no difficulties at school have demonstrated the existence of contextual variations in the use of linguistic forms according to type of text and modality of production (Jisa, and Viguié 2005 ; Jisa 2004 ; Jisa, and Strömqvist 2002 ; Ravid, and Tolchinsky 2002). The proposed study stands out in that it takes into account a lower-class French-speaking population. We have examined the different choices of syntactic links (coordination, juxtaposition and subordination) in the encoding of messages. Textual production involves an essential psycholinguistic notion: planning. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have defined two kinds of planning that are relevant to a developmental study: knowledge-telling and knowledge transforming. In the following section it will be argued that text type and planification are intricately related.

2 Text type

This study examines the syntactic links in two texts types, personal experience narrative and expository discussion. Both texts share the same theme: interpersonal conflict. Narrative production calls for personal memories and involves important personal implication of the speaker/writer in his text (Adam 1985; Coirier, Gaonac'h and Passerault 1996; Fayol 1984; Jisa 1998). In the narrative text subjects relate personal events chronologically and combine them using causal relations (Aksu-Koç and Küntay 2001; Coirier and *al.* 1996; Jisa and Mazur 2006). This text type is acquired early by children but undergoes continuous development over time (Adam 1985; Aksu-Koç et Küntay 2001;

Berman 1995, 2001; Coirier and *al*. 1996). Lastly, to produce a narration subjects must recover specific events. These characteristics of narrative text interact with the knowledge-telling planning defined by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). Expository text corresponds to the exposition of information with the goal of enriching knowledge of the listener/reader. One of the characteristics of expository texts is that they have a non linear macrostructure which is less familiar to children than are narrative schemas. Moreover this text imposes a distant discourse stance and a high level of cognitive development in speakers and writers. In contrast to narrative production, expository texts focus on and call for generic, impersonal ideas and concepts (Brewer 1980; Coirier and *al.* 1996). Because of these characteristics expository production can be seen to have an interaction with the knowledge-transforming planification of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987).

3 Modality

This research focuses on syntactic links in two texts types in two modalities, writing and speech. The essential differences between the two modalities are that written text implies relaxed temporal constraint and a longer planification time (Bonin 2003; Fayol 1997) whereas spoken text involves less planification time and conversational constraints. This leads to one principal prediction: written texts should show more complex syntactic links such as complex coordination or non-finite subordination than spoken texts.

4 Methodology

4.1 Populations

Our three age groups were selected in priority education schools of the Rhône department in France (Zone d'Enseignement Prioritaire or ZEP). ZEP refers to zones that group together several schools in areas where the socio-professional index is very low. The French state dedicates significant financial and human resources to these zones (more generous budget allowances, more teachers, more teacher assistants, *etc*.) All of the subjects are lower-class (according to INSEE, the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies of France) and speak French as a mother tongue. Our population is divided into three groups of 40 subjects each -10-, 12-, and 15-year-olds. In each age-group we have selected an equal number of male and female subjects.

4.2 Experimental protocol

Each subject has produced four texts – an oral and a written narrative, and an oral and a written expository text. Data collection was conducted in two sessions, with

a week-long interval between them in order to avoid the effects of fatigue. Between the written and spoken productions in each session, distraction tasks were organized to avoid word-by-word transfer. Subjects produced texts differing in type (narrative/expository), modality (oral/written) and order of production (Order A: during the first session, the individual first produces an oral narrative and then a written one; in the second session they produce an expository text first orally and then in writing; Order B: written then oral narrative, written then oral expository; Order C: oral then written expository, oral then written narrative; Order D: written then oral expository, written then oral narrative).

5 Categories of analysis

The present study focuses on syntactic connectivity to package information in written and spoken production. Each clause of each production was coded as a coordination (simple or complex (with subject ellipsis)), a juxtaposition (marked or unmarked) or a subordination (finite or non-finite). A clause coded as a simple coordination corresponds to a clause introduced by one of the follow coordinating connectors *mais, ou, et, or, ni, car* (1).

(1) *Un jour j'étais à l'école en train de jouer et une fille disait des choses mal sur moi.* (10-year-old 40 narrative written) "One day my friend talked behind my back and that did not please me."

Coordination with subject ellipsis appears under the following structure: a coordinating connector + a clause + ellipsis of the subject (2).

(2) *Quand une personne a les dernières baskets ou le dernier portable et_ fait envie à une personne.* (15-year-old 32 written exposition) "When a person has the latest tennis shoes or the latest cell phone and makes someone jealous."

Two types of juxtaposition are distinguished: unmarked juxtaposition (a clause without any conjunction (3)) and marked juxtaposition (a clause introduced by a conjunction (4)).

(3) *C'était la fête des pétards_ j'ai lancé des pétards.* (10-year-olds 45 narrative written) "It was a firecracker party. I threw some firecrackers."

(4) *Alors pendant le week-end j'étais punie.* (12-year-olds 39 narrative written) "So during the weekend I was punished."

Finally two types of subordination (implying dependent relation between a subordinate clause and a principal clause (Riegel, Pellat and Rioul 2002)) were distinguished: finite and non-finite subordination. The verb in the dependent clause is finite. Finite verbs are conjugated forms taking all values of French conjugation; they vary according to tense and person as indicative, imperative, subjunctive and conditional. This category of finite subordination includes clauses introduced by a subordinator ('that'), clauses introduced with a subordinating connector ('because'…) and relative clauses (5).

(5) *Un jour, dans mon ancien collège qui s'appelait Olivier de Serres, une fille est venue me chercher et commençait à me pousser.* (frj311fnwfdd) "One day in my old middle school which was called Olivier de Serres, a girl came to get me and started to push me."

The verb in the dependent non-finite clause show no mark of tense or person. These clauses are constructed using a gerund, an infinitive, a past or a present participle (6).

(6) *La bagarre est punie par la loi mais pas assez pour ne pas en déclencher une autre.* (frj324mewfcd) "Fighting is punished by the law but not enough so as not to trigger another."

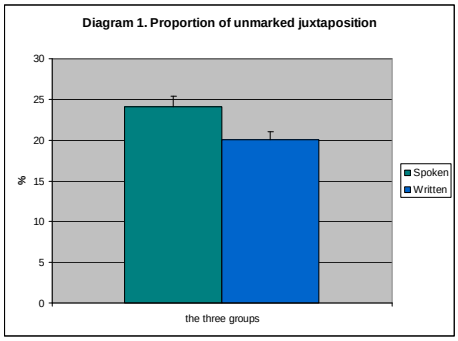
6 Results

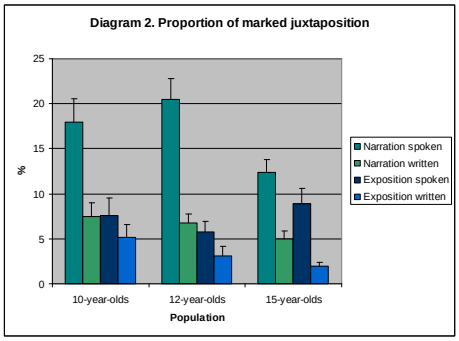
The results reveal that the variables of age-group, type of text and modality are responsible for significant differences in the speakers/writers' choice of syntactic links. Be it for coordination, juxtaposition, subordination (finite or non-finite), one independent variable is enough to create significant differences. In the remainder of this section we will detail our results.

6.1 Unmarked and marked juxtaposition

Diagram 1 shows the distribution of unmarked juxtaposition in written and spoken text for the whole population. Unmarked juxtaposition is more frequent in the spoken modality than in the written ($F_{(1,484)} = 6.276$, $p < .01$), and a higher frequency of unmarked juxtaposition in spoken productions is attested in the three groups.

Diagram 2 displays the proportion of marked juxtaposition in the two modalities and the two text types for all the populations. Age is a significant variable in the proportion of this type of syntactic link ($F_{(2,484)} = 2.873$, $p < .05$). Marked juxtaposition is a characteristic of the younger group: with an increasing age subjects use less marked juxtaposition. Moreover marked juxtaposition is more frequent in narrative text than in expository text ($F_{(1,484)} = 46.627$, $p < .0001$). Finally modality is a significant variable as well: the proportion of marked juxtaposition is higher in spoken text than in written text ($F_{(1,484)} = 66.09$, $p < .0001$).

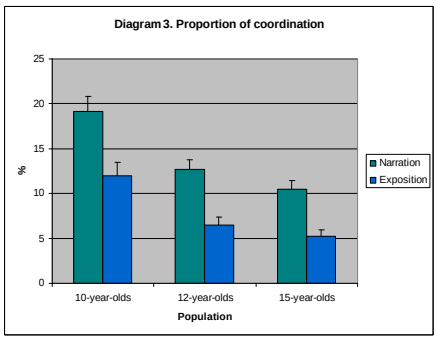


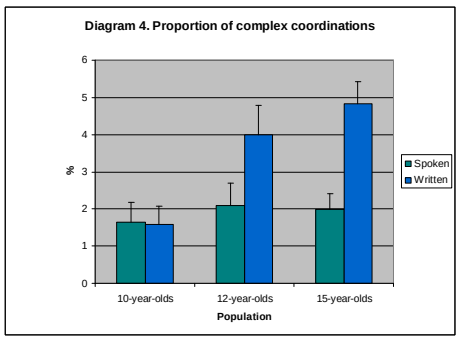


6.2 Simple coordination and coordination with subject ellipsis

Diagram 3 indicates the proportion of simple coordination in the two texts types for the three age groups of our study. The use of simple coordination decreases with age ($F_{(2,484)}$ = 23.795, p < .0001). Text type is a significant variable too ($F_{(1,484)}$ = 40.486, p < .0001): a higher proportion of simple coordination is attested in narrative production.

Diagram 4 presents the proportion of coordination with subject ellipsis in written and spoken texts. Overall this type connection is more frequent in written texts than in spoken ($F_{(1,484)}$ = 10.512, p < .0013). The effect of age is significant ($F_{(2,484)}$ = 5.10, p < .0064), suggesting that with development and over the course of schooling complex coordination increases in children's syntactic clause construction.

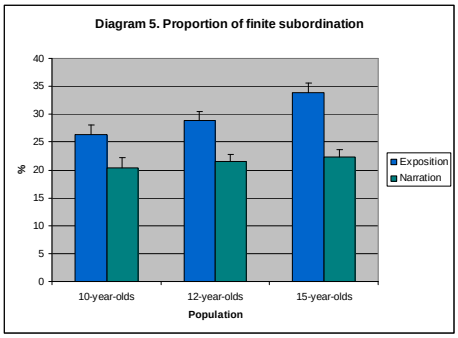


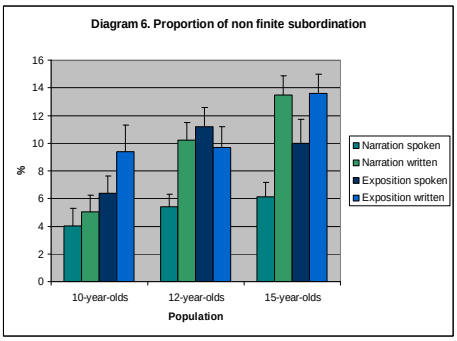


6.3 Finite and non-finite subordination

Diagram 5 indicates the proportion of finite subordination in expository and narrative texts for the entire population. Firstly, statistics reveal that text type is a significant variable ($F_{(1,484)}$ = 40.345, p < .0001): the use of finite subordination characterizes the expository text more than the narrative. Secondly, the effect of age is significant ($F_{(2,484)}$ = 4.828, p < .008) suggesting that with development and over the course of schooling, finite subordination increases in children's production.

Diagram 6 shows the proportion of non-finite subordination in the two modalities and the two text types for all three age groups. Age is a significant variable in the proportion of this type of syntactic link ($F_{(2,484)} = 11.551$, $p < .0001$). Non-finite subordination is a characteristic of the older group. Moreover, non-finite subordination is more frequent in expository texts than in narrative ($F_{(1,484)} = 10.509$, $p < .0016$). Finally, modality is a significant variable as well: the proportion of non-finite subordination is higher in written texts than in spoken ($F_{(1,484)} = 14.468$, $p < .0002$).





7 Discussion

Our study indicates that age, text type and modality imply significant differences in choices of syntactic links. Age implies important differences. Thus, the use of simple coordination and of marked juxtaposition decreases with age, whereas the effect of age turned out to be significant suggesting that by growing up and in the course of schooling coordination with ellipsis of subject, finite and non-finite subordination increases in children's production. Our results reveal that text type strongly influences choice of syntactic connections. Expository text, calling for a high degree of formality, tends to imply costlier cognitive syntactic links than narrative. Narrative text is characterized by the fact that personal events are organized by temporal sequences. If expository text, requiring abilities to develop ideas on a socially relevant topic, calls predominantly for knowledge-transforming planification (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987); narrative, according to its definition, calls principally for knowledge-telling planification (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). These differences of planification contribute to the fact that these two text type generate different syntactic links. Expository texts use more finite and non-finite subordination (7). In contrast, narrative texts employ more marked juxtaposition and coordination (8).

(7) *Ils ne peuvent plus discuter sans se jeter des projectiles dans la figure ou sans se tabasser*. (15-year-old 26 exposition) "They can't talk anymore without throwing things in each other's face without beating each other up."

(8) *Ils se faisaient pousser et les autres ils disaient aux surveillants et les surveillants ils disaient rien.* (12-year-old 03 narration) "They got pushed and

others said [told] to the teacher assistants and the teacher assistants they said nothing."

Modality also has a significant effect on the use of syntactic forms. Written and spoken production generates important differences principally because of planification time. Written production allows the use of syntactic connections for which the treatment is heavier. Thus, it is not surprising to find juxtaposition in spoken production and, in contrast, complex coordination and non-finite subordination in written text. To conclude, we can say that syntactic links constitute a good diagnostic tool for the analysis of syntactic development in written and spoken text production. Our work sheds light on how age, text type and modality can have an impact on syntactic choices and on linguistic variation.

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