



The management of cohesion in written narratives in students with specific language impairment: Differences between childhood and adolescence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 February 2016

Received in revised form 13 July 2016

Accepted 13 September 2016

Number of reviews completed is 2

Keywords:

Children and adolescents with SLI

Narrative writing

Communicative situation

Cohesion devices

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the management of cohesion by children and adolescents with specific language impairment (SLI) when writing a narrative in a communicative situation. Twelve children with SLI (from 7 to 11 years old) and 12 adolescents with SLI (from 12 to 18 years old) were chronological age-matched with 24 typically developing (TD) children and 24 TD adolescents. All participants attended mainstream classes: children in elementary schools and adolescents in middle and high schools. Analyses of cohesion focused on both density and diversity of connectives, punctuation marks and anaphors. Results attested that children with SLI were greatly impaired in their management of written cohesion and used specific forms previously observed in narrative speech such as left dislocations. By contrast, and not expected, the management of written cohesion by adolescents with SLI was close to that of their TD peers. The communicative writing situation we set up, which engaged participants to take into account the addressee, also made possible for adolescents with SLI to manage cohesion in writing.

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Specific language impairment (SLI) is a developmental disorder of language acquisition that occurs in the absence of mental retardation, neurological damage, hearing deficits, or environmental deprivation (Bishop, 1992a, 1992b; Leonard, 2014). Language difficulties are heterogeneous and appear essentially at the phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic levels. These difficulties generally remain through adolescence (Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000; van Weerdenburg, Verhoeven, Bosman, & van Balkom, 2011). Children with SLI also are at risk for developing problems with the acquisition of written language. For instance, children with SLI aged 9; 5 years old produce more spelling errors when composing a letter to their best friend than the TD age-matched participants (Williams, Larkin, & Blaggan, 2013; see also Cordewener, Bosman, & Verhoeven, 2012). Broc, Bernicot, Olive, Favart, and Quémart (2013) also pointed out the lexical spelling difficulties of participants with SLI aged from 7 to 18 years old. They however observed that these difficulties were lower in a narrative communicative situation than in an evaluative task, i.e. a dictation of isolated words. In this study, each participant composed a narrative with the presence of the experimenter throughout the entire writing process. The experimenter orally delivered the instruction: participants were asked to write a story about a personal event and to make it as precise as possible, so that she (the researcher) could really understand what happened. In such a situation, performances in the management of lexical spelling by adolescents with SLI (aged from 12 to 18 years old) were not significantly different from performances of their TD age-matched peers.

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The aim of the present study was to investigate the ability of children and adolescents with SLI to manage cohesion in written narratives. Cohesion ensures the structuration of the text as a whole and is carried out using specific linguistic devices: connectives, punctuation marks and anaphors. These devices play a major role in writing, drawing up relationships between ideas generated during text planning. In this way the devices enable the addressee to establish the representation of the text as a whole and contribute to textual coherence (see Apotheloz, 1989; Favart & Passerault, 1999 for connectives; Passerault, 1991 for punctuation marks; and Reichler- Beguelin, 1988 for anaphors).

1. The use of cohesion devices during writing acquisition of typically developing children

Connectives, punctuation marks and anaphors are linguistic devices that carry specific functions in discourse processing. As a syntactic function, they link together textual segments, and as semantic and procedural functions, they provide instructions to the addressee to accurately integrate textual content. Thus, the main role of cohesion devices is to operate as processing instructions. They carry a procedural core meaning, in that they instruct the addressee how to connect or separate discourse events and so helping him/her to draw up an accurate representation of the overall discourse (Louwerse & Mitchell, 2003). Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2003) pointed out the close connection between the achievement of textual coherence and the accurate management of cohesion in language acquisition.

The study of connectives in the course of writing acquisition requires specific focus on the word *and* (see Favart & Passerault, 1999 for a review). Using *and* is very convenient for young students as it can express single-handedly a substantial variety of relations. Its huge frequency in children's written stories attests to an immature local mode of planning, carried out according to step-by-step processing. The connective *and* is systematically repeated and triggered between two cycles of content generation to support the substantial burden caused within working memory by the writing activity. The chronological connectives: *puis, après, ensuite* (*after, then*) can be used the same way as *and* between two generated ideas to sustain the writing activity and to avoid children to express more sophisticated relationships.

From the age of 10 years, the decreasing load of handwriting and orthographic coding enables children to devote more cognitive resources to linguistic choices (Berninger & Swanson, 1994; McCutchen, 1996). At the same time, children gradually gain a structured knowledge of the system of connectives (Karmiloff-Smith, 1985, 1992). This enables them to diversify relationships using connectives which are more and more consistent with the textual structure.

Specific connectives can be selected to translate more appropriately narrative relationships and gradually increase coherence in written stories. Favart and Passerault (1995) showed that the density of *and* (related to the total number of used connectives) decreased across elementary school, mainly in grade five (i.e., in 10 years old children). The undifferentiated connective then gave way to more diversified ones: *mais* (*but*), *alors* (*then*); temporal connectives *quand, lorsque, soudain, tout à coup* (*when, while, suddenly*); and causal connectives *car, parce que* (*since, because*).

The punctuation marks used by children when writing stories are mostly, even exclusively, periods and commas. From the age of 7 years, children use the period predominantly to delimit blocks of information, just as the word *and* operates (Favart & Passerault, 2000). The period and the connective *and* function competitively, as well as in an additional way, to pace the repetition of cycles of content generation. The use of the comma emerges in third grade (i.e., at the ages between 8 and 9 years old). Such a diversification opens up new possibilities but simultaneously creates new problems (Fayol, 1997) because third graders concurrently use periods and commas, since they are not yet aware of the value of their respective break (period > comma). Finally, the use of the comma gradually increases during fourth and fifth grades, and it progressively becomes appropriate. Just as with connectives, the use of periods and commas changes at the age of 10 years old, i.e., in the last grade of elementary school. Periods, quasi-exclusive until fourth grade, were joined in fifth grade by increasing use of commas, particularly within the description of detailed information. It is not before the age of 14 years that children's use of punctuation marks can be determined at a textual level in order to appropriately clarify the textual content for the addressee (Schneuwly, 1988).

Specifically, anaphors are used to refer to a previously mentioned referent (Gernsbacher, 1989), predominantly as nominalizations paired with definite articles or pronouns. They enable the addressee to establish relations between textual sections, just as connectives (Fraser, 1999). Connectives additionally specify the nature of the relationships to the addressee (Stoye, 2013), and their interpretation is in a large part determined by the addressee's mental representation of events (Moeschler, 2002). Punctuation marks build up a hierarchical system according to the strength of the break they induce between textual units. They also serve to organize textual sections in order to enable the accurate construction of the whole text meaning.

Developmental studies conducted in typically developing children attested that at about the age of 10 years, children can manage accurately anaphors in written narratives (Bartlett & Scribner, 1982; Decool-Mercier & Akinci, 2010; Pellegrini, Galda, & Rubin, 1984). This skill develops both quantitatively (Hickmann, 2004) and qualitatively (Rutter & Raban, 1982) until the end of elementary school. Children then can accurately use various sorts of pronouns (e.g., personal, relative, demonstrative) and juggle with proper names, or nominal substitutions with definite articles, to maintain reference if necessary. At the age of 10 years, children also can accurately manage referential ambiguity when writing stories from pictures that displayed two characters of the same gender (Favart & Passerault, 1996). However, Lambert (2003) pointed out that the referential upholding by pronouns still could be problematic at the end of elementary grades. Thus, the acquisition and the management of cohesion devices in text composition is quite a laborious process, even in typically developing children (see Favart, 2005 for a review).

2. Narrative writing abilities in students with SLI

Only a few studies have investigated writing abilities in participants with SLI, and most of these studies were conducted with English native speakers. Moreover, no study has investigated participants' overall management of cohesion in writing. The few available results demonstrate that stories written by participants with SLI are shorter than those of chronologically age-matched participants (see Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007; Dockrell, Lindsay, & Connelly, 2009; Fey, Catts, Proctor-Williams, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2004; Mackie & Dockrell, 2004; Williams et al., 2013). According to Dockrell and Lindsay (2000), teachers report that linguistic coding is specifically difficult to manage during writing for students with SLI. Their selection of linguistic units appears to be hindered and reduced to a minimum. But these findings mainly focused on grammatical coding. So when writing stories, 9- to 12-year-old participants with SLI were attested to produce more grammatically unacceptable complex T-Units (i.e., including both a main and a subordinate clause) than age-matched children (Gillam & Johnston, 1992). The grammatical complexity or basic sentence structure also was lower, and/or they produced more grammatical errors than their chronological-age peers (Dockrell et al., 2007; Fey et al., 2004; Mackie & Dockrell, 2004; Scott & Windsor, 2000). The few research

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